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MICHAEL E. HASPEL

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ROUMANIA, 1920

AGE 5

CLOUTIER: This is the Ellis Island Oral History Program. We're speaking with an immigrant today. What is your name, sir?

HASPEL: Michael E. Haspel.

CLOUTIER: And when were you born?

HASPEL: December 17, 1915 in Chernavitz [ph], the capital of the province of Bocavina in Roumania.

CLOUTIER: And what port did you depart from?

HASPEL: We left through the port of Le Havre in France, but it was a lengthy trip from Bocavina, from Chernavitz, until we got to Le Havre. It took approximately

seven months to get there. We traveled over a good bit of the face of Europe. We left the Bocavina. From there we went to Bucharest, and from Bucharest we went to a port on the Black Sea in Roumania. We stayed, we had to stay there a while because there seemed to be some difficulty with our papers. From there we went across to, we went to Trieste, and Fiume, which was the Italianate Adanta [ph] at that time. And from there we went to Genoa. We stayed in Genoa for a while, and we took ship to Marseille. From Marseille we went to, up to Grenoble, which was a university town, and we spent a little time there. From there we went across to Paris, and we spent a complete week in Paris, a week or ten days in Paris, and from Paris to Le Havre, where we boarded the La Savoie, and onto America.

CLOUTIER: Now, was this in the same ship?

HASPEL: Uh, well, it was, the La Savoie was the ship that we took to Le Havre. Previous to that it was mostly land traveling, with the exception of crossing over from Trieste into Italy, which we did go by ship. You could go by land, but you have to go through the Tyrol, through the Pass Brennero, and that was a very

difficult trip because it was, particularly in the wintertime when we made most of the trip. But the only real ocean travel that we did was when we boarded the ship in Le Havre for New York.

CLOUTIER: So this was quite an ordeal to get to the port.

HASPEL: Yes. It's, it's something that people find difficult to understand. First you carried all your belongings with you. There was your bedding, the pots and pans, all the clothing that you felt that you would need. It was particularly difficult, and I keep on saying this, for Jewish people who were kosher, because you had to carry your food with you. There was no way that you could buy food en route other than buying raw potatoes or herring or garlic or onions. So my mother prepared food. In every city that we came to, she cooked. And we carried all this with us. Now, every time we came to a border, we were inspected by the country's customs agents, and they were, if you talk about ripoffs, that was ripoff, because they would take everything that wasn't nailed down. As a matter of fact, I was almost five years old, and I wore knickers. And every time we came to one of those borders, we had these sacramental cups that we

used for making a certain prayer over wine. Also something that looked like a tower, that you used to put incense in and smell the incense. It's a process, it's a ritual that's done Saturday evening known as habdallah. And because we knew that this, my mother knew that this would be confiscated, that they would steal it, she would put it into my knickers and just tell me to walk away. And I would walk away as though I didn't belong to anybody until they went through the examination. And then back I came, and we managed to bring all of this stuff to the United States, which my older sister still has.

CLOUTIER: So how large a family did you travel with?

HASPEL: Well, we came, there was my mother, my oldest sister and, who was pregnant at that time, and the brother-in-law, that's three. My brother Herman was four, Helen five, Sarah six, Leon seven and myself, that made eight of us.

CLOUTIER: And your father?

HASPEL: My father passed away in Europe, and that was the reason why we left and decided to come over. My oldest brother came to the United States in 1910, and

he had sent the proper papers with a passage, money for passage, and then World War One started over in Europe, in 1914, in our section. It actually began in 1913, when the Grand Duke of Sarajevo was killed, and so the trouble started and my family couldn't leave. During that time, my father died, between 1914 and 1920 when we left, my father died and two sisters died. That created the new difficulty, because the papers that we had received from the United States had my father and two sisters included in it, and I hadn't been born yet, so I wasn't in those papers. So it started another deal of trying to get the bureaucracy to straighten all this out, which at its best is always a problem.

CLOUTIER: What did you say the name of the ship was?

HASPEL: La Savoie.

CLOUTIER: La Savoie. How was your voyage over here?

HASPEL: Well, it's difficult to explain. It's like nothing you can imagine. There were at least eight or ten people in the cabin, and we slept in bunks. There weren't enough bunks for the eight or ten people, so that some had to sleep in the daytime and leave the

bunks at night, and others occupied the bunks at night. There was no going to a dining room for food.

If you carried a sufficient amount of food with you, you were in luck. If not, you were left to the mercies of the merchant seamen, who brought aboard a sufficient amount of stuff to sell, very, very cheap in quality, and they exacted as much money as they possibly could for it. I remember my family speaking about it afterwards, that they were paying a dollar - and-a-half for an onion, so that was pretty rough. And that, I want you to know, was 1920, when a dollar-and-a-half was a lot of money.

CLOUTIER: Yes, it was.

HASPEL: It was difficult, but when you realize what we left, what we went away from, no matter how difficult it was, no matter how bad it could have been had, when we arrived in this country, it couldn't be one-tenth as bad as what we left, so everybody was really thankful when they saw the Statue of Liberty, when they saw the shores of America, because it was just something brand new for everybody. It was a start.

CLOUTIER: An exciting day, the day you . . .

HASPEL: I would say so. I, I remember a little incident that my brother was waiting for us on Ellis Island for us to go through, and when we went through all the necessary things and all the papers were signed and okayed, we were allowed to leave. We got into, my brother had a 1919 Hudson, and we got into the car once we got across to the Manhattan side, you know, at the ferry. We got into the car, and my mother said to my brother, "The children are hungry. Let's get something to eat." He says, "Oh, no, let's get out of here!" ( he laughs ) He was afraid that somehow or other we would be called back. ( Mr. Cloutier laughs ) So he said, "Let's get as far away from this place as we possibly can." And I remember he drove probably maybe about a half hour or so, and then he stopped off somewhere, and he got containers of coffee, which also was a novelty.

CLOUTIER: How long did it take you to go through the whole facility?

HASPEL: Well, the, the, we stayed, this I remember precisely. We stayed three days in the narrows, and then once we were brought over into, it was over the year, on Ellis Island, we were off it, and maybe, I don't

know, an afternoon, a whole afternoon, four, five, six hours, and we went through all the procedures and, as I told you, we went through this procedure which still is very, very clear in my memory. My mother was called up and it was like you were in a courtroom. There was a place where the judge sat. I don't know whether he was a judge. He may have been an examiner or somebody.

CLOUTIER: This is in the Great Hall now.

HASPEL: Yes. And if you ask my mother her name and how many children she was coming over with, and who she was going to, and if there was anybody here, you know, to take care of us when we got here, and then he asked her to show financial responsibility, and we were, when we were in Le Havre, my mother changed Italian lire, because he had changed Roumanian Lays [ph] to Italian lire, and she had to change the Italian lire to French francs, and then she had to change the French francs to American dollars. And she took all of them, and she changed everything to American dollars. And when the examiner asked her to show financial responsibility, she kept all the money in her bosom, and she began to pull all these dollar

bills and five-dollar bills out, until there was  
thankfully quite a mound on the table, and he said,  
"Enough." ( Mr. Cloutier laughs ) There's enough  
there. But it was a, I imagine for me, as a child,  
of course, if I didn't really realize what was  
happening at that time. But when I think back of  
what my mother had to go through to shepherd this  
crew across strange borders and different languages.  
And I say that after her the die was lost.  
( they laugh )

CLOUTIER: A strong woman.

HASPEL: Strong, yes. They had to be. They were the  
survivors. It was no wonder. Those who couldn't be  
as strong as she didn't survive. They remained there  
and, but thankfully she was a very strong woman. She  
brought us over. She worked very hard. She gave us  
all a college education. And America is still the  
land where there is gold in the streets. The only  
thing is your back has to be good. You have to be  
able to bend down and pick it up.

CLOUTIER: Right. Now, in the baggage room, you mentioned what  
was going on there, the first room there.

HASPEL: Well, the, as far as the baggage was concerned, as we crossed borders, of course, there became less and less of it. Anything of real value, if we couldn't hide it, it was confiscated. For no apparent, for no legal reason, there was nothing involved that we were carrying, contraband across borders. It was just the avarice, the greed of the people who were at the border who stole it, so it became a game. Try and hide as much as you can, and keep it from being stolen. As far as in Ellis Island was concerned, I don't know that we had any difficulty with our baggage here. Of course, we were very, very fortunate that my brother came over. He had been here since 1910, which was, he had already been in the United States ten years, and he was in business, and he came over and he sort of sheperded us in through here, it sort of eased things up. Everybody felt a little better because the older brother was here and he knew what the score was. But I can imagine that there were people who came here all alone to families, probably, that were maybe in Wisconsin or Minnesota, with nobody to greet them here. It could have been a very hairy proposition. I remember one incident on the boat which, of course,

this may seem strange to you coming from somebody who was five years old when he came over. But I have a very graphic picture of that trip. I was very impressed with it, and I remember clearly a lot of things that happened that even my older brothers and sisters didn't remember. I recalled it for them. I remember the La Savoie stopped in the middle of the ocean. There was something wrong and the motor stopped, and there was a German woman in the same cabin with us, and she kept on repeating and repeating, "(German)" "Oh, we are lost." And this played heck with the kids, you know. I mean, it created a panic for us. And the ship had stopped for two days on the ocean until they repaired whatever they had to repair, and we continued on. Incidentally, this ship sunk on the return trip. So it doesn't say much for the type of ship we traveled on. ( Mr. Cloutier laughs ) But then you didn't know. You see, it was, we were people who lived inland, and we were very provincial. The ship was something my mother probably had seen a picture of, and didn't really understand what it was, but you just had to get away from where you were. The prognosis for your remaining there was zero. There

was only one thing to do, let's go. And this was not the Haspel family. This was hundreds of thousands of people who were on the road traveling to the United States, and all manner and all fashions with all languages, all different backgrounds coming from all different places, who converged in places like Trieste, which was a crossroads. And there you had thousands of immigrants, all going to the United States, all with different problems. And you could understand the rumors that traveled around. People would hear a story and then magnify it. "They were sending back people." "The borders are closed." "You can't get into the United States." Uh, "You need X amount of money to get into the United States." And then there was this business, "Well, I don't have it. What's going to happen? Shall we stop here, or shall we continue going?" And it was a question of the survival of the fittest, as always. Those who were able to survive it, made it. Who knows how many people didn't make it. Who knows how many people stopped on the way. Who knows how many people were ripped off on the way, didn't have with what to go on. So then, as I said, I am very, very thankful that my mother took the initiative to go,

and I'm thankful that we made the trip and that I'm here. It was a long time, this was sixty-three years ago.

CLOUTIER: I'm glad you made it, too.

HASPEL: Thank you. ( they laugh )

CLOUTIER: Rumors or not though, they still came.

HASPEL: Yes, yes. Because there was no alternative, really there was no, a native American could never understand this. We take, I say we, because I came here at an early enough age to consider myself an American. You can't conceive of what went on there. You cannot conceive that if a postman went by you had to bow or salute him, only because he wore a uniform. You cannot conceive the liberty that you have in this country. You cannot conceive that you can say that the president is no damn good, and nobody's going to think any of the worse for it, and there's no way that anybody's going to put you in jail for it, or penalize you for it. So that a native American could never, he could never understand this. It's only somebody who went through it, who's lived there, who can appreciate the

freedom, the liberty in this country. Yeah, we have a lot of faults, of course. A lot of angels in this country. But when you think of what there is there, there's no comparison. I have traveled over, I would say, two-thirds of the world since then, both with the army, I was with the 82nd Airborne Division, both with the army, and then for business, and all the cities that I've been in, and all the countries that I've been to, there is none, and I don't say this, I'm not waving the American flag now, but there is none that can anywhere compare to the United States. The opportunities that you have here are absolutely tremendous.

CLOUTIER: Well worth steerage, right?

HASPEL: It sure was it worth it. It sure was worth it.

CLOUTIER: So when you came into America, what was the first thing you did, find jobs?

HASPEL: Well, uh, my oldest brother who brought us over was in business. He was a furrier. And the only one who was of working age was my brother Herman, who was seventeen years old at the time, and he went to work in the fur business, and the rest of us went to

school. They put us through school. My mother saw to it that we went through school with, of course, the help of my oldest brother who was very generous.

And, until we got on our own. Now, getting on your own in those years was different than what it is now.

Kids, the family didn't subsidize their children till the age of twenty, twenty-one to go through college until they went out on their own. I went out and started working after school at the age of twelve. I graduated college. At the age of sixteen my mother pushed me into business, and everybody on his own, everybody made it his way. My sisters made it their way, and all my brothers went through the same thing that I did. It's a different psyche than what we have today. It's completely different. It's a different life. But it was a good life. There was nothing wrong with it. It was relevant at the time.

What my kids are doing now is relevant to 1983. What I did at that time was relevant to the mid-'20s to the early '30s. We were, I would say, the unfortunate generation that we were caught up in the Depression, but in a way I would say we were the fortunate generation because it molded our character.

CLOUTIER: Did you stay in the New York City area?

HASPEL: We stayed in the New York City area. I'll tell you I spent all my life in America in the metropolitan area. Oh, I lived for a while in Englewood, New Jersey from about 1947 through 1955, (correcting himself) 1952. I came back to the city of New York, a dyed-in-the-wool Brooklynite. And then went back to Englewood a couple of years ago.

CLOUTIER: Did you know anyone who had been sent back from America?

HASPEL: Yes. We had a cousin who was sent back, who was sent back from this facility because she had, I don't know what you would call, scruffles, it was a skin disease. I don't know what it is. I'll tell you what the English word for it is, or exactly what it amounted to. It was some sort of an eczema, a peeling of her hands. Her skin would peel. And they sent her back because of that. About fifteen years later, she was cured of it, and she entered, she came back to the United States. That's the only one that I know of who was ever sent back.

CLOUTIER: How many children, or grandchildren do you have now?

HASPEL: I have, uh, eight grandchildren. I have, this requires a little explanation. I guess I'm on a second marriage. So my first wife passed away and my present wife has two daughters and a son, and seven grandchildren. I have a son and a daughter and one grandson. So they're all my children now, so I would say that I have five children and eight grandchildren.

CLOUTIER: Hmm. Lots of stories to relate to them.

HASPEL: Yes. And I do. ( they laugh ) I do, because it's, it's nice for them to know where we came from and how we came here, and why we came here, which is the most important thing.

CLOUTIER: When you came did you have any papers or documents with you, or maybe exit papers?

HASPEL: Yes. We had the visas that were sent, my brother affected the visas in the United States and sent them to us, and it was a great help because it was one of the carte blanche across the borders. We had, our tickets were sent to us. Our passage tickets were sent to us. Our brother sent those. I guess that's

about all that I can think of. There may have been necessary some other papers too, but I don't know about them.

CLOUTIER: We have stories of people coming to Battery Park and being surrounded by thieves. Do you remember anything like this?

HASPEL: Well, not only in Battery Park. ( a boat horn is heard on the tape ) You were prone to this stuff all the way across, because people recognized, particularly in the time that I came over, it was right after World War One and Europe was in a state of chaos. There were changes in government, new governments had come up. Places that were Roumania, that were Austria. And the Austrian-Hungarian Empire fell. Now, they covered Hungary, they covered parts of Roumania, parts of Poland. Suddenly these people found themselves, there was a confusion, found themselves in different countries, different nationals. And people were, at the borders, knew that the whole of Europe seemed to be on the go, going somewhere, and there were these wiseguys, these very, very adroit crooks, who took advantage of them. Well, you had them in the United States here, too.

They were no angels here, either. People came over here, and there were people who understood that you didn't know too much, that you weren't accustomed with our, with the American ways, and they could tell you, well, like this incident with sign for three packages or declare three pieces of luggage, and then take away the rest and tell you, "Well, you never had any more. That's all you declared were the three pieces of luggage." Very understandable. I imagine it's happening in 1983 now.

CLOUTIER: Certainly.

HASPEL: There are people ripped off, visitors who come to New York and take a taxi at Kennedy Airport to come to Manhattan, and the taxi driver rips him off for a couple of hundred dollars, and they don't know the difference. They don't know the difference. Yes.

CLOUTIER: Well, I'd like to thank you for sharing your experiences with us.

HASPEL: You're most welcome. I'm glad to do it. I hope it adds something.

CLOUTIER: It certainly will. ( tape ends )