

NPS-144

MIRIAM GETHER KRASNOW

BIRTH DATE: 1910

INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 29, 1983

RUNNING TIME: 43:52

INTERVIEWER: DENNIS CLOUTIER

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: LYDIA HANHARDT and STACEY MENAKER,
6/1995

RUSSIA VIA POLAND, 1921

AGE 11

CLOUTIER: . . . November 29, 1983. Dennis Cloutier with the
Ellis Island Oral History Program [sic]. Hello.

KRASNOW: Hello.

CLOUTIER: Could you tell me your name, please?

KRASNOW: Miriam Krasnow.

CLOUTIER: And, Miriam, where were you born?

KRASNOW: In Russia.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember what part?

KRASNOW: Uh, yes. Nemov [ph], it really was White Russia, and
Nemov [ph] was the name of the town.

CLOUTIER: What section is that in?

KRASNOW: I said White Russia.

CLOUTIER: Oh, White Russia.

KRASNOW: Yeah, around there, Ukraine.

CLOUTIER: Oh. And when were you born?

KRASNOW: 1910.

CLOUTIER: Now, do you remember what port you left from to come to America?

KRASNOW: Antwerp. From Antwerp we left for America.

CLOUTIER: And how old were you then?

KRASNOW: Eleven years old.

CLOUTIER: Were you traveling alone, or with anyone?

KRASNOW: No. I was traveling, my father and two sisters and a grandmother.

CLOUTIER: Your mother didn't come.

KRASNOW: My mother was left in Antwerp because one of my younger sister got sick there. So she was left in

Antwerp, and we went on our journey.

CLOUTIER: Did she ever come to America?

KRASNOW: Yes. About four months later she came to America, to Ellis Island. And then my sister again was sick in Ellis Island. My mother didn't want to get off without her, so she stayed there about four weeks, and then they both got off from Ellis Island. My sister was in the hospital, and my mother was in Ellis Island.

CLOUTIER: What was wrong with your sister?

KRASNOW: She had eczema, which is not a sickness, but they told her it was a sickness and until it cleared up they wouldn't let her off.

CLOUTIER: Hmm.

KRASNOW: Right.

CLOUTIER: Okay. Do you remember the ship's line that you came in on?

KRASNOW: Red Star Line.

CLOUTIER: Red Star Line.

KRASNOW: Right.

CLOUTIER: But you don't remember the name of the ship?

KRASNOW: No, I do not remember the name of the ship.

CLOUTIER: It's been a long time ago.

KRASNOW: Yeah.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember how much it cost you?

KRASNOW: That I wouldn't know because, you see, my father has been in America for seven years and he came back for us, so he took care of everything, and I don't remember the cost or anything.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember much about the trip?

KRASNOW: The trip was terrible. We were a day, about a day-and-a-half on the boat when I, when we all got very sick. Not my father, but the three of us, the three sisters. And funny as it may seem to you, when I went down to my cabin I already couldn't find it, and somehow I got into a cabin of the crew. And the funniest part is, when I got into that cabin and all the luxuries that was there, I said, "Gee, whiz, it's good to be in with an American. Look all the things

he's getting." And they really looked for me and couldn't find me. I went to bed and slept quite a bit, and they were worried about it. But meanwhile I saw nobody showing up. Somehow I got out of the cabin, and I saw them standing, my two sisters crying, and my father said, "Where were you? Why were you in there?" I said, I told him, "It was my cabin." (Mr. Cloutier laughs) And then, of course, we were sick. The whole trip, my father had traveled with us. In fact, we couldn't even eat at all. But he, we couldn't even get out on the deck. He used to pay off the help to take us up on the deck for at least a few hours until we got to America.

CLOUTIER: Did you travel in second class, you think? You had a private cabin, it seems.

KRASNOW: (she clears her throat) Well, we, I think we were traveling as second class, but when we got to the Ellis Island my grandmother, they all said, said that she got trachoma in her eyes and wouldn't let her off, so my father wouldn't get off without her. But somehow we stayed three days on the boat, and then we got off. And my grandmother came through, whether we paid off or what, but my grandmother died ninety-nine

years old and never had trachoma or wore glasses, no less. And they thought that she had trachoma.

CLOUTIER: Hmm. So how long did it take you to get to America?

KRASNOW: It took eleven days. (she clears her throat)

CLOUTIER: Eleven days.

KRASNOW: Eleven days, and the three days on the boat.

CLOUTIER: Did they serve you food?

KRASNOW: Yes. We couldn't eat it, but they served very nice food. You know, we actually sat at a dining room table, and very nice food. But I think it was due to my father, yeah.

CLOUTIER: What did your father do for a living in Europe?

KRASNOW: In Europe? He was a businessman selling boots, shoes. In America he was selling fish and, a businessman selling fish, yeah, in the fish business.

CLOUTIER: So you spent three days on Ellis Island.

KRASNOW: Right. NO, on the boat.

CLOUTIER: Oh, on the boat before getting . . .

KRASNOW: Getting to Ellis Island.

CLOUTIER: So you were anchored three days.

KRASNOW: Anchored three days, right.

CLOUTIER: And how was Ellis Island?

KRASNOW: When we got in?

CLOUTIER: Uh-huh.

KRASNOW: Crowded with people, beautiful. It looked beautiful. Of course, we were anxious to look around, you know. And I don't think we were very long. They just called us over to the desk, and they asked us to read. And each one of us knew how to read Russian. We read a line, and they let us go. And when we came out, we start to look at the people. They looked a little queer to us. I mean, not queer, but the customs they had, chewing gum, and we thought it was terrible. And, uh . . .

CLOUTIER: You had never seen chewing gum before?

KRASNOW: Never.

CLOUTIER: (he laughs) What did you think it was?

KRASNOW: We didn't, we said, "Gee, they chew like cows.
(Mr. Cloutier laughs) What could they be chewing?"
So when my father heard us say to one another what
we said, they said, he said, "Oh, no, in America,
they chew gum, it's gum." And he bought some and
showed it to us. And the funniest part is in Antwerp
we never saw black people, never. But in Antwerp we
saw two men walking. My father and my mother was in
front of us, and we were in back, and we go to each
other, "Look at the dummy walking." And then we see
them talking to one another, and we get in front, and
my father said, "Do you want to see those two dummies
talking?" He turned around and he sees the two
blacks. He said like this, "No, these are black
people. In America you'll find a lot of black people.
But here they're only in Antwerp because they're
working on the boats, and that's why you only see
men. But there are women black, too." It was funny.

CLOUTIER: You thought they were dummies?

KRASNOW: Yeah!

CLOUTIER: Like dolls.

KRASNOW: Yeah, mannequins.

CLOUTIER: Mannequins, oh.

KRASNOW: Yeah. That's what we thought they were. Strange.
(they laugh)

CLOUTIER: Did you go through any medical inspection? On Ellis Island?

KRASNOW: In Antwerp we went through, not on Ellis Island. In Antwerp we went. That's why my sister was stopped there. In Antwerp we went through medical, but we were all well. And even my mother, my grandmother went through, but on Ellis Island they told her, she got trachoma. So she probably went too, but I don't remember going through a medical inspections.

CLOUTIER: And you didn't eat any meals there, I guess?

KRASNOW: No. We were sick. We couldn't eat at all, no.

CLOUTIER: How were the inspectors? Were they friendly, or rude?

KRASNOW: The inspectors, well, the funniest part too, with the inspectors, they wanted to sterilize our luggage. And, of course, the luggage was made out of these straw weeds, you know. And we were pretty aware of

what's going to happen to the inside. So we told my father we don't want to give our luggage. He said, "You must, or you're not going to get off." So we said, "Okay, we'll give you the luggage." And what we did, I don't know whether I should say what I'm going to say, we went and we emptied out one piece of luggage, put in our stuff and went down and we had it sterilized, they stamped it. After they stamped it, we went down and put our luggage in there and sent up the second one, and that's how we put it through. And then we told my father. He wanted to kill us. (Mr. Cloutier laughs) He said, "What an idea!" I said, "What do you think? They'll burn our clothes." And that's what we did.

CLOUTIER: What did you bring with you?

KRASNOW: Like dresses, you know, our clothes that meant a lot to us, you know. And some books, which I guess wasn't of any important, but we had, my mother had a Bible and things like that, and we didn't want it to be burned.

CLOUTIER: Any heirlooms?

KRASNOW: (she sighs) No, it was all right.

CLOUTIER: No, family heirlooms, you know?

KRASNOW: Oh, no. Not much, no. Because they robbed us on our way to Antwerp.

CLOUTIER: Did they?

KRASNOW: Yeah. On the way from Russia, they robbed us. We were lucky we got there.

CLOUTIER: Who's "they?"

KRASNOW: Uh, robbers.

CLOUTIER: Just thieves.

KRASNOW: Thieves, yeah. Actually, yeah, they were thieves.

CLOUTIER: Do you still have the family Bible?

KRASNOW: Uh, I haven't got it. I don't know where, who's got it. It's true. I don't know who's got it. No, in fact, I have beautiful silver candles, uh, I gave it to a niece of mine because I felt she should have it, you know. They're about, over two hundred years old. I gave it to her. She's in California now.

CLOUTIER: So why did you come to America? How was it in Russia

in those days?

KRASNOW: Well, we came right after the war. It wasn't any honey at all. You know, it was pogroms and every day there was a different government, and you had to have ten different kinds of money to know what, to go out to shop with. And you really were in danger if you didn't know who was in the power that day. But money was (?), Kerenska [ph], Nicholai, you know, the czar's money. And, of course, they all preferred the czar's money. So we really, were really in trouble when we went out shopping. We didn't know what government was ruling that day. Very bad. And we came to America because my mother had nobody left in Europe. My father was in America. The whole family was in America. And when he came for us, we went. But the trip wasn't a easy trip. Went through a lot.

CLOUTIER: So from Ellis Island you went on to New York?

KRASNOW: To New York, right, waiting for my mother. We were supposed to really go to Chicago, but when my mother got to New York she had her family here, and she wasn't, didn't want to leave for Chicago. So my father settled in New York. Originally, I got papers

that we came over with, if you want to see it. I got it on top. I'll show, do you want it now? I'll show it to you later, that he came with those papers. And we settled in America. Of course, we didn't like it right away. We missed our friends, and we didn't know the language, so it was a little hard. And this is, then we settled, we liked it.

CLOUTIER: How did you learn English?

KRASNOW: Going to school. We went to . . .

CLOUTIER: To night school?

KRASNOW: No. I was eleven years old. I had to go to public school.

CLOUTIER: How about your father though?

KRASNOW: My father spoke English. Yeah, very well.

CLOUTIER: He started a business here?

KRASNOW: Yes. He started a business in New York.

CLOUTIER: Where did you live?

KRASNOW: When we first came we lived, till my mother came we lived with one sister. My father lived with one aunt

of mine, and, I'm a twin, I lived with my sister and another aunt, till my mother came, and then he took an apartment.

CLOUTIER: In Manhattan?

KRASNOW: We lived on, uh, on 124th Street, Harlem. Then we lived 115th Street. Then on Fifth Avenue, classy. (she laughs) Then we moved to Brooklyn.

CLOUTIER: Were you impressed by America?

KRASNOW: Impressed? Yes, very much so.

CLOUTIER: All the bustling and the business.

KRASNOW: Right. And the funniest part is I, when I got to America, I was two weeks here and I got scarlet fever, and they took me to the hospital. And when they took me on the ambulance and the ambulance was going from 109th Street to Governor's Island and I saw all those beautiful lights, when the ambulance was going I sat up. The doctor said, "Sit down." And I sat up, just admiring those lights, those cars and everything, you know. Yes. It was beautiful. We liked it very much.

CLOUTIER: Was it what you expected in Russia?

KRASNOW: Actually, we didn't know what to expect, you know. But when we got used to it, we liked it. But it took quite a while until we actually got used to it. It took about a year-and-a-half. You know, we missed our, our friends, childhood. How bad it was, we missed it. But then when we started go to school and make friends, we got adopted to it and we liked, we used to like it, right.

CLOUTIER: The streets weren't paved with gold, though.

KRASNOW: No, no, no. Not for us.

CLOUTIER: Had you heard that?

KRASNOW: Yeah, we heard about it, you know. But my father worked out. Thank God, he did very well. I mean, he supported a family. Not in luxury, but comfortable.

CLOUTIER: Did you have any relatives in the United States?

KRASNOW: Yes, we had aunts and uncles. My mother's family.

CLOUTIER: They were well-established?

KRASNOW: Pretty well. Well, some were comfortable, some were

established.

CLOUTIER: Did they help you out?

KRASNOW: They needn't help us out, because my father took care of everything, yeah. We didn't need help from relatives.

CLOUTIER: Did you have any exit papers when you came from Russia?

KRASNOW: What kind of, what do you mean?

CLOUTIER: Uh, papers saying that you were permitted to leave the country to come into America? Any type of passport?

KRASNOW: Well, we came from Russia to Poland. But, actually, my father had papers to Russia, to take us from Russia, so we didn't have any papers. So he had to establish papers, and we stayed a year in Poland in order to establish papers in Poland that we're Polish citizens, and that's how we come in.

CLOUTIER: How was Poland in those days?

KRASNOW: We stayed there a year. It was pretty good, yeah, pretty good. (a telephone rings) I was at my

aunt's house, and I looked out of the window, and I saw the clotheslines from the ground floor all the way up to the fourth floor. I look, I look, I say, "How does the people get to these clotheslines." And I called, my twin sister was with me, but she says, "I wouldn't ask questions if I were you." Because whatever we asked was ridiculous. I said, "I'm going to ask. I got to find out. How do they get up there to put the clothes out?" And I called to the window and I asked her. She started to laugh, and she said to me, "You didn't show me how the clothesline works." Well, I was very embarrassed, but at least I found out how clotheslines work. (they laugh)

CLOUTIER: She didn't want to be laughed at, though, your sister.

KRASNOW: No, she wasn't gonna ask, but I did. I always asked questions, because I wanted to know.

CLOUTIER: You never know unless you ask.

KRASNOW: That's right.

CLOUTIER: That's right. So you went to school when you first got here.

KRASNOW: Yes.

CLOUTIER: And did you have a job, also?

KRASNOW: After we got through, oh, yes, we worked in department stores as stock girls. We wanted to make money. So we worked in department stores, and they liked us, even though we didn't talk good English. But we were lucky enough to get the job Saturdays, holidays.

CLOUTIER: Plus if any Russians came in, you could speak to them in Russian.

KRASNOW: But at that time in the department store you found very few foreigners. I don't know why. Like now you find a lot of Russians in the department stores, all over. And at that time, we somehow didn't find any Russian people coming in to buy or anything, immigrants, like now.

CLOUTIER: Maybe no money.

KRASNOW: Maybe. Could be that. Actually we never found any Russians in the department stores at that time.

CLOUTIER: Do you still speak Russian?

KRASNOW: Very little. But I'm trying, I'm picking it up because I have a lot of Russian neighbors. Most of the house is Russian, very nice. Some I understand, some I don't. I guess it's what part of the country they come from.

CLOUTIER: Dialect.

KRASNOW: Yeah.

CLOUTIER: Had you heard about America, or Ellis Island, back in your homeland?

KRASNOW: Well, we heard because my dad was in America, so my mother was talking all the time, "He's in America." And at that time we couldn't get mail from him either, because of the war. We couldn't get any mail from him. Of course she was disturbed, she was left with five children, and she had to make a living for us. So the only thing we heard is, "Sure, your daddy's in America, your daddy's in America." But he suffered, because he felt his family suffering.

CLOUTIER: What was he doing there?

KRASNOW: Where? In . . .

CLOUTIER: In America.

KRASNOW: He was in business.

CLOUTIER: Oh, just a business trip.

KRASNOW: Yeah. When he came to America, he got away because he tried to help out some people. They caught him with liquor in Europe, those people.

CLOUTIER: Your father?

KRASNOW: No, these people were selling liquor.

CLOUTIER: Oh, I see.

KRASNOW: So the government caught them. And that means treason, Siberia. And he wanted to save them, not to have evidence. He went in and tried to help the people, and he pushed the people out, so they locked him up. And, of course, a trial was going against my father for that. But he wasn't worried. He said he tried to help them, that's all. But not in, and not at that time, in Russia, were you able to say that. So my grandmother lived in another town, not far from us, and the jury used to sleep in our house. And when the trial went on, she used to find out from

them what do they say. They said, "Well, they'll send them away to Siberia." So they told my father about it, and she said, "You'd better get away." That's how he got into, got away to come to America. He actually, this is what happened, really.

CLOUTIER: Your grandmother, was she happy in America?

KRASNOW: Oh, very much so. My grandmother was the happiest person in America. She used to go all over. She loved America. Many times we'd say, "Grandma, aren't you afraid? You're so old, and you don't know the language. You'll get lost." She says, "As long as I can speak any language and I remain in America, it doesn't bother me where I get lost." She loved it.

CLOUTIER: Did she pick up English?

KRASNOW: Very little, but she did. But she loved America. She was a very brilliant woman, very brilliant. She was an educated woman, and brilliant.

CLOUTIER: Had you known anyone who was sent back from America, sent away from America?

KRASNOW: Not that I know of, no.

CLOUTIER: Did you see it happening on Ellis Island, people being rejected?

KRASNOW: Well, actually, as I said to you, we didn't stay very long, maybe an hour or two. By the time we got here, we were finished. So actually we didn't see. We saw a lot of crying there, or what. We don't know whether, because they was anxious to see the relatives or what, I can't tell you. But as far as knowing whether they're sent back, I don't know.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember the Great Hall?

KRASNOW: Oh, it was beautiful, beautiful, those chandeliers. Even when we came to visit my mother, it was just beautiful, you know. They treat it all nice. And my father used to visit my mother. After all, he knew very little about my kid sister because she was three weeks old when he left for America. So he was anxious to see my mother, not my sister. And I was anxious to see my younger sister. So he overstayed his visit, and I said, "I want to see my sister." When we got there, of course, they said, "Visiting hours are over." I said, "I am going to see my sister." They said, "No, you're not." I said, "Yes,

I am. I want to see my sister." I made such a riot, I was such, so hysterical, how little I was, they brought my sister.

CLOUTIER: (he laughs) Did you get married? Here in America?

KRASNOW: Yes, in America.

CLOUTIER: How many children did you have?

KRASNOW: One, one son.

CLOUTIER: And he came out with you to Ellis, didn't he?

KRASNOW: Huh? No, no. He was there before, and that's how he told me to go to see it.

CLOUTIER: I see.

KRASNOW: He said, "Go, you'll find it interesting to see it."
So I went.

CLOUTIER: Did your husband immigrate also?

KRASNOW: Yes, also from Russia, but right before me, right.
In 1913.

CLOUTIER: How do you compare America of today with America of back then?

KRASNOW: Very disappointed.

CLOUTIER: Oh, yeah?

KRASNOW: It was much better then than now, really. You know, the freedom we had, I used to walk four o'clock in the morning all alone. I was never afraid. Now at six o'clock you're afraid to go out of your house. America is wonderful. Only the, the crimes here are terrible now, and that's the only thing they really find not right.

CLOUTIER: Do you think your life would have been a lot different in Russia, growing up?

KRASNOW: I guess so. I don't know. I guess so. But yet I see these Russian people that are here today that even now we couldn't go to school at that time. We had private teachers home.

CLOUTIER: Because you were a woman, a girl?

KRASNOW: No, because we were Jews. We couldn't go to school. And we had, my mother had private teachers to teach us how to read and write. And then when, what do you call it, the Communists took over, they opened the schools to everybody. And that's why these people

that come over are very educated people now, very educated, most of them. I left a sister, we left a sister in Poland because she fell in love with some chap, and she remained there, and she became a victim of Hitler with three children. She was a victim of Hitler. Never got to America.

CLOUTIER: Do you have anything else you'd like to say about immigration in general? You're certainly glad to be here, I'm sure.

KRASNOW: Oh, sure I am, definitely. I sure am glad to be here, and I'm comfortable. I'm not a millionaire, but thank God I always made a living.

CLOUTIER: Ellis Island looks a lot different today.

KRASNOW: Oh, yes it does, very much so. I didn't recognize it, you know. It looks like a bomb.

CLOUTIER: Right. How about food items? You were talking about bananas. Had you seen bananas before?

KRASNOW: Yes, in Antwerp. That's where, I told you, my father showed us, "These are bananas, and when you get to America, don't, so you'll know how to eat them, because most of the immigrants eat them with the skin

on." So that was quite funny. But we didn't like them right away, but now I like them, the bananas. It was funny then.

CLOUTIER: Had you ever seen a watermelon before?

KRASNOW: Oh, yes. In Russia, in Russia the food, we had a lot, watermelon, cantaloupes, honeydews, yes. That we had.

CLOUTIER: Corn?

KRASNOW: Corn. What else didn't we see that we saw here? Actually, we had the fruits there, yeah.

CLOUTIER: Except for tropical fruits. No tropical fruits, right?

KRASNOW: No tropical fruits, right.

CLOUTIER: Well, that's all the questions I have. Thank you very much.

KRASNOW: You're welcome.