NPS-148
LYDIA NIEDER
BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 6, 1984
RUNNING TIME: 45:11
INTERVIEWER: LISA CONYERS, BRIAN FEENEY AND VARIOUS UNIDENTIFIED VOICES
RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND, NY
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: LYDIA HANHARDT, 6/1995

RUSSIA, 1907
AGE 9

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: The first section of this interview was conducted by NPS staff while giving a tour of the abandoned Ellis Island building. There is a great deal of extraneous noise including foghorns in New York Harbor. Several unidentified staff members offer information or ask Mrs. Nieder questions. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 6/28/1995.

FEENEY . . . two and three designations. The idea, of course, was to keep a physical barrier in between Island 2, which was the hospital ward, and Island 3, which was the contagious disease ward. But then eventually all that . . . (break in tape)

MALE VOICE: This room, would you like to wait up in the Great Hall, or . . .

NIEDER: Well, when we, when we came over here it was my

mother and two sisters and a younger brother. When my sister was, left her husband which was, she came into the country illegally, but we had to stay here a week because we were all females and the brother was only four years old, until we had bondsmen, until we had relatives in Windsor, Colorado, to sign a bond for us that they would be responsible for us. We didn't come in here as a charge of the government that we were going to be a problem, and we never have. (she laughs)

MALE VOICE: Did, uh . . .

NIEDER: We paid taxes and made our way all these seventy years.

MALE VOICE: This is a problem for many women who came in by themselves. They didn't have a male escort.

NIEDER: They didn't have a male.

MALE VOICE: Or a sponsor. They were detained here for . . .

NIEDER: You had to have somebody that would, it wasn't the government that say, "Just come on, we'll take care of you."

MALE VOICE: They didn't have to come all the way to New York to . . .

NIEDER: No, they could do it by . . .

MALE VOICE: By telegram.

NIEDER: . . . by telephone and correspondence, that they would be responsible for us, that they had work for us. And we went and worked in the beets to pay for our passage and to get started, which . . .

MALE VOICE: What year did you come over?

NIEDER: In 1907.

MALE VOICE: 1907. That, 1907 was the peak year of Ellis Island. Over a million people passed through this station.

NIEDER: Yes. They were coming in, a lot of them were coming from my part of the country.

MALE VOICE: The year that this lady passed through, the man who was commissioner here at the time was named Watchhorn, who was this assistant commissioner to William Williams.

NIEDER: There was always somebody looking out for us that we got on the right train and that we didn't, that nobody made any connection with us or any deals or anything.

MALE VOICE: That's good. What was your stay like here?

NIEDER: Huh?

MALE VOICE: Do you remember what your stay was like here, the week that you were kept here? Do you remember anything?

NIEDER: Well, we just sat on benches all day long until it was time to go and eat. We went and eat. And when it was time to go upstairs to go to bed we went.

MALE VOICE: Did they treat you very well here?

NIEDER: Oh, they treat you all right. They gave you a pillow and a blanket, and they were double bunks upstairs. And we just sat in benches and looked out the window and waited for all the deals that had to be made for us to be released here. And they were very particular about the eyes.

MALE VOICE: Yes, that . . .

NIEDER: I know we were examined maybe by two or three doctors for eyes. Now, we just happened to be all healthy and had nothing wrong with us. So the only reason we had to wait here a week was until we had all the legal things made, you know, that these relatives of ours were absolutely responsible for us. (microphone noise)

MALE VOICE: Ellis Island was in operation, this station was in operation from 1900 till 1954. Most of the immigrants passed through during the peak years before World War One. The last year of full operation was 1914, and the only reason that the numbers dropped in 1914 was because of World War One, or the numbers would be close to a million all the way at the time, until the time when they passed the quota laws. Now, there are a few things in the baggage room here that don't belong here from the days of immigration. And the first of those in the lockers back there. Ellis Island was used for many different things, and it was also used by the military for different purposes. The lockers come from the Coast Guard era, and they were here from 1939 to 1946, and the wire caging

comes from years when Ellis Island was used as a deportation station, and also when enemy aliens and prisoners of war were kept out here during different periods of both World Wars, during several, during the two Red Scares that this country has gone through. Right now, does anyone have any questions before we go into the Great Hall?

FEMALE VOICE OFF-MIKE: That picture over there, that house.

MALE VOICE: Yes, ma'am?

FEMALE VOICE OFF-MIKE: What is it?

MALE VOICE: It's a picture of a man who helped get Ellis Island open for tours. (break in tape)

NIEDER: I came through here (she laughs) at one time.

MALE VOICE: Do you still remember what the building looked like, coming in?

NIEDER: Well, somehow, I, there's been some changes here. There used to be a big door that we went through.

MALE VOICE: Uh-huh.

FEMALE VOICE: A big door that you went through?

NIEDER: Yeah.

FEMALE VOICE: That was here.

NIEDER: Yeah, that was here. But when we went to the dining room.

FEMALE VOICE: Well, wait till we go upstairs. Maybe you'll see.

NIEDER: Oh, that's upstairs. (footsteps heard on tape) (break in tape) Ways and means for you, and it works, and it works. (break in tape)

NIEDER: I don't remember. It all looks so different.

MALE VOICE: That was a long time ago. Well, if you had to go for further medical inspection . . . (break in tape) What country did you come from?

NIEDER: I came from Russia.

MALE VOICE: Russia. Russia was one of the countries that was on a very low quota. (break in tape)

NIEDER: Some of my relatives came over here in 1890 and '96, you know. We had relatives over here. And as

relatives came over here and had enough money so they could send for another relative. I mean, here. I bought them a ticket to come over here.

MALE VOICE: Yeah. They were just wanting to come over here and try a new life in the United States, or . . .

NIEDER: Try a new life, now we mostly came to agriculture part of the country. We came to Colorado where there was plenty of work for everybody. If you wanted to work on the farm, or you wanted to work in the beets, in the sugar factories and all those things. There was more than enough work there. And those are, from those countries people came over here, they were willing to work.

MALE VOICE: Very intereseting. People from those countries were . . .

NIEDER: People are getting less and less willing to work. I have had it with the, our farmers, and they can't do it with a tractor, they can't get it done, because people are not going to work on the farms any more. They're not going to go out and pick apples. They're not going to go out and work in the beets. Everything has to be done with

conveyors or

MALE VOICE: That's the reason that people came . . . (break in tape) We have a book that actually has a picture . . . (break in tape)

NIEDER: Nice building.

FEMALE VOICE: Do you remember strange foods?

NIEDER: Yes. The strange food, is right. We wondered why, how people could eat butter with salt in it. (male laughter) I remember that. We ate unsalted butter.

MALE VOICE: Do you remember the tables being set up here?

NIEDER: Yes. They had long tables set up here, and benches we sat on. (break in tape) I remember, you know, they talked to us, and tell us where we were supposed to go and what we were supposed to have, and we had to have some money sent to us. You have to have some money. But we, this interpreter talked German. He did all that for us through, whether telephone or by telegram or whatever connections we made. So we got that money that we were supposed to have, and had our railroad tickets

here to Colorado. You know, when you come to a country and you can't speak the language, it's pretty bad.

MALE VOICE: Yes, it is. All the inspectors, all the papers . . .

NIEDER: Even when you go on tours in Europe, it isn't so good when you run up to somebody . . . (break in tape, pause) And they were just, there were no springs, they were just kind of single springs there, and they gave you a pillow and a blanket.

MALE VOICE: But no mattresses.

NIEDER: But there was no mattresses on there, and they were double bunks. (break in tape)

MALE VOICE: Thank you for . . . (break in tape)

NIEDER: Just a part of my life. And a very good seventy years I've had since I came here.

MALE VOICE: Sure, sure, sure.

NIEDER: And we didn't really have any problems in Russia as far as having any particular problems. Just it was, this was a better country, more opportunities.

And we did a lot better here than we would have if we stayed over there.

MRS. NIEDER'S DAUGHTER: Mom, you should explain to them that you were Germans living in Russia.

NIEDER: Oh, yes, yes.

MRS. NIEDER'S DAUGHTER: I think some people might have gotten confused when you said you came from Russia and the interpreter was . . .

NIEDER: Some people, I know, yes, yes. When you come to this country there's some, everybody thinks that everybody that comes from Russia is a Russian. Well, that's not true. The people in Russia are perhaps the purest of the German race there is. They did not mix with the Russians. They didn't, in Germany they mix with the French and they mixed with the Polish, but in Russia we did not, absolutely not. No German would marry a Russian, or a Russian would marry a German. (a boat horn can be heard in the background) We all had our own schools and our own church, and you just didn't, you left everybody alone. You did . . .

MALE VOICE: Well, villages were all, just like you were in Germany when they came a hundred years ago.

NIEDER: Yes, villages were all the same. But in town where I went to school now, I went to school where it was all German, but we did have to learn to read Russian as far as I know. That was part of the lesson. But there wasn't any problem with any religion. The Russians are Greek Catholics, and some of the Germans were Roman Catholics, but most of them were Lutherans.

MALE VOICE: But those villages all disappeared during the Revolution, right?

NIEDER: They all disappeared. The Bolsheviks came along and took everything that those people had and killed them all, just simply killed them all in there in 1917 and in '20.

MALE VOICE: How old were you when you came through Ellis Island?

NIEDER: Hmm?

MALE VOICE: How old were you when you . . .

NIEDER: Came through here?

MALE VOICE: Yes.

NIEDER: I was nine years old.

MALE VOICE: Uh-huh.

MALE VOICE: Must be scary for a little kid. (they laugh)

FEMALE VOICE: Did they keep your family together?

NIEDER: Huh?

FEMALE VOICE: Did they keep your family together? (microphone noise) When your family came, were you together? Did you sleep together and eat together, or were you separated?

NIEDER: Yes, yes, we were all together.

FEMALE VOICE: Oh, you slept together in the same room.

NIEDER: Because my brother was only four years old, he could stay with us.

FEMALE VOICE: So you all stayed together.

NIEDER: And he was the only male. (they laugh) (break in tape) The men in the immigrants were in one

part, and the women in another in the same part.

MALE VOICE: Even families were separated?

NIEDER: Huh?

MALE VOICE: Even families? Even husbands and wives were separated?

NIEDER: Yes. Even the families, they were all, because they were all halls, you know, with bunks, you know. So the men were in part with those than had men, and . . . (break in tape)

CONYERS: Do you want to follow me?

MALE VOICE: Brian, do you want to take them over here and I'll meet you?

FEMALE VOICE: Wait, I'll go with them. You're going to stay with us.

MALE VOICE: You're going to stay with us.

MALE VOICE: Right.

MALE VOICE: Yeah, I'll take her around. (voices off mike)

MRS. NIEDER'S DAUGHTER: Okay. He's going to go on a tour with

the others, and it's too rough for you.

MOVE INTO STUDIO

CONYERS: My name is Lisa Conyers, and this morning, June 6, 1984, I'm talking with Lydia Neider, a German woman who immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1907 when she was nine years old. Today, here at Ellis Island, she's going to give us some information about her immigration experience. Do you remember what port you departed from?

NIEDER: When we came over here?

CONYERS: Yeah.

NIEDER: Hamburg.

CONYERS: Hamburg.

NIEDER: Hamburg, Germany. We came on the, on the train from Russia to Hamburg.

CONYERS: Do you remember what the train ride was like, for how long it took?

NIEDER: Well, I think it took a couple of days.

CONYERS: How long did you have to wait in Hamburg before you could get . . .

NIEDER: Yes, we had to wait two weeks before the ship that our tickets were for, before the ship was ready to sail.

CONYERS: And when did you buy your ticket for the steamship?

NIEDER: Well, it was sent to us from our relatives in Windsor. They send us the tickets, and it was for the ship and also for the train.

CONYERS: When you were in a . . .

NIEDER: We were in Hamburg two weeks waiting for the ship.

CONYERS: Uh-huh. And where did you stay?

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: Where did you stay when you were in Hamburg?

NIEDER: Oh, they had a big place there were the immigrants, where immigrants stayed, you know, waiting for their steamships to leave. There were a lot of immigrants there, you know.

CONYERS: Were the conditions pleasant there?

NIEDER: Well, they were, yes, they were all right.

CONYERS: Do you remember which steamship you came over on?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: Do you remember how long the voyage was?

NIEDER: It was eighteen days.

CONYERS: And what were the conditions?

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: What were the conditions?

NIEDER: Well, the conditions, I think we were about the only, it was a freighter, I'm sure, because there were other people on there, but we were the only ones that were, that could talk German. And it happened that they, it wasn't a German ship, but anyway the doctor on that ship could talk German. So that's how we got along on the ship, because everybody else on that ship didn't speak German. They spoke some other language. So it was some kind of a freighter, because we were about the only people on that ship.

CONYERS: Did ev . . .

NIEDER: And there was nobody in the room, in the, they had a room there, a hospital room. There was a doctor on there, and there was nobody in there, so this was a German doctor. He let us stay in there, instead of staying in where they had double bunks and everything in steerage, so we had a pretty good trip over, but it was eighteen days crossing the ocean.

CONYERS: So most of the people were in steerage, but you got to stay in that hospital room?

NIEDER: Yeah, yeah.

CONYERS: So you were comfortable?

NIEDER: We were comfortable.

CONYERS: Do you remember how . . .

NIEDER: But there wasn't too many people on that. It was really a freighter. I'm sure that's what it was, because there weren't too many, there weren't too many people on there. Now, some of the people there were in second class or first class. We

never got to see those.

CONYERS: Although you didn't buy the ticket, do you know how much it cost?

NIEDER: No. I have no idea how much the tickets, the railroad tickets were or the steamship.

CONYERS: Were you fed on the steamships?

NIEDER: Yes.

CONYERS: Do you remember the food, what kind of food?

NIEDER: Well, I don't remember too much what we had, but we had meat and potatoes, I'm sure, and fish and bread.

CONYERS: Were many people getting seasick?

NIEDER: Well, yes. There was quite a few that got seasick. We did, too. You only do it the first time. The second time you're on the ocean, you don't get seasick, for some reason or other.

CONYERS: Did you travel alone?

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: Did you travel alone?

NIEDER: No. My two sisters and my mother, and my little brother.

CONYERS: Did you have any problem, problems because you were all women?

NIEDER: No, we never had any problems, or any problems when we were here at Ellis Island. Anybody trying to contact us or, illegally or anything. Nothing like that ever happened. We, I don't know, there were German interpreters here that we could talk to and could tell us what was going on and what we were waiting for and what we had. Of course, we were examined by doctors I don't know how many times, and especially the eyes. They were very particular about the eyes. We were examined by different doctors for eye trouble, but none of us had anything wrong with the eyes.

CONYERS: Were you examined before you got on the steamship, before leaving Hamburg?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: Were you examined on the steamship?

NIEDER: Hmm?

CONYERS: On the steamship, or you were examined at Ellis Island.

NIEDER: At Ellis Island.

CONYERS: Why did you come to the United States.

NIEDER: Hmm? Because we had relatives over here, and they were doing better than we were doing over there. We didn't have any reason for staying. My father was, had passed away, so, and we had relatives. My mother had a sister and a brother in Windsor, and we had other relatives, I had cousins there. And that was the reason we came over here. They were doing better than we were doing over there.

CONYERS: Can you remember coming into the New York port?

NIEDER: Well, I kind of remember the, coming in here, what it looked like, but I don't know if I could recognize it, no.

CONYERS: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

NIEDER: Yes.

CONYERS: Did you have any feelings when you saw the Statue of Liberty or when you knew you were in America?

NIEDER: Oh, we knew we were in America and we were happy that the voyage was over. (she laughs) I'm sure we were all happy, and wondered what the next step would be. We just went wherever they told us to go, and as I say we didn't have any problems, although we had to wait a week here on account of the bondsmen that had two, people that had to sign up, you know, that they were responsible for us, and not the government.

CONYERS: Do you remember getting off the steamship?

NIEDER: Yes, and getting on the train, but I don't know if I'd recognize any part of it any more, now. We got on the train, and it took five days.

CONYERS: That was after you left Ellis Island.

NIEDER: Yes, to get to Colorado. And once we were on the wrong train, and had to get off and sit there all night and wait for the train that we were supposed to be on. The conductor evidently made a mistake. All we could do was show them our ticket.

CONYERS: You said you had some problems with your bonds on Ellis Island?

NIEDER: Hmm?

CONYERS: You had problems with getting a bond on Ellis Island.

NIEDER: Yeah. Well . . .

CONYERS: How long were you detained for?

NIEDER: It just, we were there a week until the legal things were made out. People that were going to be responsible. There was relatives there, cousins, and my mother's sister was there, and they were, they're the ones that were going to be responsible for us.

CONYERS: Can you remember where you slept when you were here?

NIEDER: Oh, yes, it was upstairs.

CONYERS: In the Great Hall?

NIEDER: In the Hall there.

CONYERS: Above the Great Hall?

NIEDER: Yes. And they were bunk beds, I remember that. Because I went curled up (she laughs) in the top bunk, to sleep. And they gave us a pillow and a blanket, and that's all you had to sleep on.

CONYERS: Did they have mattresses?

NIEDER: No, they didn't have any mattresses on them. They were just the springs there. Kind of like a hammock, like, kind of a spring. It wasn't the kind of springs we have in mattresses now.

CONYERS: Was the dorm room crowded?

NIEDER: Oh, yeah. They were, every bunk, I'm sure, was taken. It was a lot, there was a lot of people going through here, I guess, all the time. And I know what somebody came back into the place where we were all sitting. If they came back crying, we knew that they had something wrong with their eyes, or there was something illegal, and they were being sent back.

CONYERS: Can you remember any particular stories about the people you met while you were here at Ellis Island?

NIEDER: No, because so many people, they all spoke different languages, it seemed like. And it seems to me in all our travel we were about the only Germans in the group.

CONYERS: How did you feel while you were waiting to see if your problems would be solved?

NIEDER: Oh, we were, we were sure they were going to be solved, especially my mother was.

CONYERS: Do you remember where you ate?

NIEDER: In the big dining room there, benches on each side of the table, yes.

CONYERS: About how many people ate in the room at one time, would you guess?

NIEDER: Oh, I wouldn't remember how many, but the tables were full.

CONYERS: Can you remember what you ate, what kind of food?

NIEDER: We had meat and potatoes and vegetables, and salted butter that we didn't like. Otherwise the food wasn't bad, wasn't too bad. It was different. You always wonder how people can eat certain things. I

think they served us pie one time, and we just couldn't figure out how people liked pie. Because we had different, we had coffee cakes instead of pie. We never made pies like they're making pies here.

CONYERS: Do you remember the uniforms, what the uniforms looked like of the people who worked here?

NIEDER: No, I don't.

CONYERS: You talked a little bit before about having a medical exam.

NIEDER: Yes.

CONYERS: Did you ever go over to the hospital?

NIEDER: No. We never had anything wrong with us, but we were examined several times.

CONYERS: What was the examination like?

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: What was the examination like?

NIEDER: Well, they examined your eyes, and they examined you physically, and your eyes and your hair.

CONYERS: Did you ever hear of anybody getting into the country illegally?

NIEDER: (she pauses) My sister did. (they laugh)

CONYERS: Can you tell us that story?

NIEDER: Huh? Well, I guess it's all right to tell you the story. Now, they'd, she didn't have a passport, so when we came to Ellis Island, and here she was with a six-month-old baby who had left her husband in Russia, and so she said, "Well, I, I, my husband is in Windsor." Well, when they were contacted, they caught on to it and knew what it was, and they said yes, her husband was there. See how you can come into the country illegally? There are different ways. And it was no harm done.

CONYERS: So then your relatives in Windsor said that they would . . .

NIEDER: Yes. Then they, they all, they signed up the sisters, and the relatives signed up and said they would be responsible for all of us. Because there was work there for us. They worked in the beets. You never saw a beet field, I don't suppose.

CONYERS: No, I haven't. Can you tell us about that?

NIEDER: Hmm?

CONYERS: What is a beet field?

NIEDER: A beet field? They were raising sugar beets in Colorado. It was just, when they were going, it was a rather new business. They were building sugar factories in Colorado. That's why the people came there so much, because there was work there. We worked in the sugar beets. The Great Western had packing factories around there, and the farms planted beets, and you had to go out in the field and thin them. Somebody went along with a hoe and chopped out what they want, and then another one came along and just made that a single plant. You can only leave a single plant. You couldn't leave them double. And they had to be about a foot apart, the sugar beets. And that's what we did all day.

CONYERS: Do you remember how much you got paid?

NIEDER: Twenty dollars an acre. You do it by the acre. You didn't get paid by the hour.

CONYERS: About how long would it take you to do an acre?

NIEDER: Well, we had twenty acres. That took about three weeks to thin them and then you had to hoe them twice, you had to weed them twice during the summer, and then you had to chop the beets in the fall. Now they've got all kinds of equipment that does that, but the farmer used to go along with a plow and loosen up the sugar beets, and then you pulled them up and you hit them together to get the dirt off, put them on a pile, and then you had a big, a big knife, and you chopped the tops off, and you threw them in a pile, and then the farmer came along and shoveled them in the truck and hauled them to the sugar factory. Simple, wasn't it? (they laugh) But a lot of hard work. They don't do it any more.

CONYERS: Can you remember anything that you had heard about America or Ellis Island before you left?

NIEDER: Oh, yes. We heard about Ellis Island, people having trouble to get into the country, and that's about the worst thing that could happen to you, that you were rejected. But we knew that people

working in the fields here, so we had to do it, too, because we had to pay for our passage until we learned to speak the language. And after we learned to speak the language we could do other things. My sister was a very fine dressmaker, and soon as she could speak English, well, she could go and sew for people. In those days why they had dressmakers come to the house for a week or two to do up all their sewing. You didn't buy ready-made things like we do in our days. So in no time she made a very good living for herself and her child. And then, oh, we worked, we worked in the beets two years. And I think my sister, the one that was a dressmaker, only worked one year to pay for her, for her ticket over here, and then she, she could go and do sewing for people, you know, and support herself and her child.

CONYERS: You say you worked to pay for your ticket. Was that to pay back the people who . . .

NIEDER: Yes, who sent us the tickets, yes. Who sent us the tickets to come over here.

CONYERS: Did your sister ever have a sewing machine?

NIEDER: Yes. She had a Singer sewing machine. We carried it along to this country, nearly broke our backs carrying the thing! It came, it was a portable one. You've seen portable ones. It was a Singer sewing machine.

CONYERS: Oh, so she brought it with her from Russia.

NIEDER: She brought it with, we brought it with us to this country. And we also carried our samovar [ph] along. And what happened to it, I don't know. Somebody got that away from my mother some time or other, which I'm very unhappy about it, why I didn't latch on to that.

CONYERS: Can you remember any other things you brought with you?

NIEDER: Oh, we brought a featherbed or two.

CONYERS: You brought a bed with you?

NIEDER: No, just featherbeds. Feathers in the ticking. Everybody slept on featherbeds. You saved all the feathers from the ducks and the geese.

CONYERS: Did you bring any other objects?

NIEDER: No, we didn't bring anything else. We brought our featherbeds, and bedding, and shawls and some blankets, and that's about all we brought. We didn't bring any dishes or anything.

CONYERS: And clothing?

NIEDER: And some clothes.

CONYERS: Do you remember what papers you needed before you got on the steamship, or documents? You needed your passport, did you, before you left?

NIEDER: Well, we needed the passport to cross the border in Russia, and that's all.

CONYERS: Oh, I see. And did you leave Ellis Island with any papers or documents?

NIEDER: No. They never asked for our passport again after we crossed, crossed the Russian border. They never asked for the passport again.

CONYERS: Do you remember if you had any tag put on your clothing?

NIEDER: Oh, yes, for the train.

CONYERS: So, for the train? Can you tell us something about that?

NIEDER: For the train, and then we just always showed our railroad tickets to the conductor, and he would tell us whether it was the right train to go on or not, or maybe we'd have to wait for another train. So it was five days from New York to Colorado on the train, and once we sat all night, we sat up at a railroad station, waiting for the right train. We missed the train, I guess. So after, when we got to Windsor, then all our problems were ended, except work, and learning to speak English, which was very important.

CONYERS: Can you remember what the train ride was like? Were there other immigrants on that train?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: Were you on the train . . .

NIEDER: We were, most of the time we were the only ones, the only immigrants on the train. There was never anybody to talk to. The conductors couldn't speak German, and so as a rule we, we were a group

traveling by ourselves. We didn't come . . .

CONYERS: Did you, oh, sorry.

NIEDER: There was nobody else going to Windsor at that particular time, just us.

CONYERS: Do you know anybody that got sent back from America?

NIEDER: No. There were people that were sent back, but we didn't know them. Because they would come in to this big hall where we were sitting, and when they were in tears, well, we knew that something had gone wrong.

CONYERS: Did any other relatives join you in America after you got here?

NIEDER: Oh, my brother came over later.

CONYERS: And did he come through Ellis as well?

NIEDER: He came through Ellis Island, too. He came over in 1912, I think, or '13. 1912? I have to put on my thinking cap, because in 1911 my mother and I (microphone noise) and my brother, we went back.

CONYERS: Excuse me? In 1911 you went back?

NIEDER: In 1911 we went back to Russia again.

CONYERS: And why did you do that?

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: Why did you go back?

NIEDER: Oh, just like retiring. (she laughs) My mother thought it would be better. When it comes to exchange of money, you get twice as much for your money when you exchange it for Russian rubles, and she couldn't see why we, by putting it out on interest, why we couldn't live on it. But we lived all right. But she got up one morning and she said, "You know, I think we better go back to America again." It just came out of a clear sky. And she did, she went after our passports and got ready, and it was a good thing, because the war broke out. We just came over here in time. We came there in 1913, and in 1914 the war broke out, and nobody left there any more. And the Revolution started.

CONYERS: Did you have any problems in Russia, political

problems?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: You saw basically your main concern was the economy and economics, getting a better life?

NIEDER: Yes, getting a better place to live in the United States. Because everybody that came over here wrote back, and some of them came back to visit, and they all decided, well, that's the place to go there, if you can get there. (break in tape)

CONYERS: Do you remember any stories about families being separated?

NIEDER: Yes. My sister was separated from her husband, and we just happened to have an extra ticket, so my mother just said, "You come and go with us, and we'll find some way to cross the border." We knew that she had to have a passport to cross the border, and my mother said, "We'll find somebody. There'll be a passenger there that, whose wife had to stay behind, and you can, he'll say that you were his wife." And we did.

CONYERS: This is the Russian border you're talking about.

NIEDER: Huh?

CONYERS: The Russian border?

NIEDER: The Russian border, and that's all the questions we were ever asked until we got to Ellis Island.

CONYERS: So how did she end up getting past the Russian border without her passport?

NIEDER: Because we met this man who had a passport. My mother talked to him, and he said, "Yes, she can sit with me." When, the conductors come through and ask everybody for their passport. Now we had a legal, my mother had a legal passport for us, but not for my sister. So she, she just went and sat down with that man, and the man showed his passport and said, "That's my wife," and that's all there is to it.

CONYERS: Can you . . .

NIEDER: It was never, the passport was never, ever questioned again. Then at Ellis Island she had to say she had a husband in Windsor.

CONYERS: Can you remember any other families being separated

at Ellis Island?

NIEDER: No, we never, I don't think there was anybody we hardly talked to, because people are there from all different countries, speaking different languages.

CONYERS: Did you ever hear of anybody in the immigrant aid societies?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: Were there ever social workers there to help you?

NIEDER: Oh, there were, there must have been social workers because there were people there that talked German to us, that found out that we were German. And we were about the only ones. There was hardly anybody at Ellis Island that we could talk to. They were all from different countries speaking different languages.

CONYERS: What did you talk with them about? What did you talk to the social workers about?

NIEDER: Well, we told them where we were going, where we were from and what we were waiting for, you know.

CONYERS: Did they help you in any way?

NIEDER: Oh, yes. They give you advice.

CONYERS: Can you remember specifically any of the advice they gave you?

NIEDER: No.

CONYERS: They were just very friendly?

NIEDER: They were just very friendly. They talked to my mother. I was nine years old, and I didn't pay any attention. I just went along with the group.

CONYERS: Did you have to go through the legal exam?

NIEDER: Yes.

CONYERS: Can you tell me something about that?

NIEDER: When they examine your eyes?

CONYERS: That's the medical exam.

NIEDER: Yes.

CONYERS: Do you remember a legal exam, where they ask you other questions?

NIEDER: I don't remember.

CONYERS: Do you remember, perhaps, if your mother had a legal exam?

NIEDER: Well, I don't know. She might have.

CONYERS: Did you have to stay in the Great Hall for any period of time? Do you remember the Great Hall?

NIEDER: Oh, we were all sitting around?

CONYERS: Yes.

NIEDER: A week. We stayed there a week.

CONYERS: So as you were waiting, you waited in the . . .

NIEDER: Yes. We were waiting for, to hear from our relatives in Windsor. I'm sure there were legal things to be made out, you know as, because we didn't come here, you know, for the government to be responsible for us. We had, somebody had to be responsible for us. It wasn't so easy to come into the country, it seems like it was there for a while. And, of course, after the war, they made it even worse for people to come in here, which was probably all right. We got people enough here.

(she laughs)

CONYERS: What did you do while you waited?

NIEDER: We just sat on the benches and looked out the window. (break in tape)

CONYERS: How many children and grandchildren do you have?

NIEDER: I had ten grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

CONYERS: Oh, my goodness.

NIEDER: What a family! What I started. (Mr. Conyers laughs) And they're all doing very well. They're all self-supporting and going to college, or having jobs and doing very well for themselves.

CONYERS: How do you feel about America today?

NIEDER: Wonderful. There are some faults that I take on, but it's still the best country in the world. And it was even better than it is now.

CONYERS: When you first came here?

NIEDER: When we first came here. Well, there were opportunities for people that they never had

before, which makes a big difference. But all my children are all very well. They've all got jobs. My son here in New Jersey working for the telephone company. Is he working for the telephone company yet? Now things are getting confused for a ninety-year-old lady with all these changes and breakups in the country that I don't understand any more, of what's going on.

CONYERS: Well, I'd like to thank you very much for sharing the information that you did with us.

NIEDER: So, my grandchildren are the youngest. The youngest one is seventeen years old, just graduated. (end of tape)