

NPS-151

NELLIS KALASH (NECHI CULANDER)

BIRTH DATE:

INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 17, 1984

RUNNING TIME: 29:20

INTERVIEWER: D. CLOUTIER

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION:

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA 6/1995 (RETYPE BY:
NICOLE STOTZ 8/2008)**

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

RUSSIA, 1914

AGE 18

PORT: BREMEN

SHIP: KRONEPRINZ WILHELM

RESIDENCES: BUCHKA, RUSSIAN POLAND

US: BROOKLYN, BRONX, NYC

CLOUTIER: This is Dennis Cloutier with the Oral History Program, October 17th, 1984. And with us here we have an immigrant. What's your name, ma'am?

KALASH: Yes. My name is Nellie. It was Nechi Culander.

CLOUTIER: And...

KALASH: And my age at that time was eighteen years old.

CLOUTIER: Eighteen years old.

KALASH: I was, I came here eighteen years because to come to America you need, you had to go to work. I was eighteen years old.

CLOUTIER: And what is your home town?

KALASH: My home town is in Russia-Poland. The name is Buchka, a very small town. My grandfather died and left me with eighty dollars, and my father died, and left my mother with six small children. She

didn't know what to do. So she had a brother here in America, so the brother, said, "All right." He gave money to come to America. So I got eighty dollars, you get an agent, and agent (?).

CLOUTIER: Through a travel agent.

KALASH: Yeah, through a travel agent. And we, we had to steal the border, because I couldn't get a passport. I spent twenty-five dollars, but the governor, the government, they didn't want it, since I was too young to go alone, I need somebody to take me. You can't go alone, young girl. But I was eighteen years old. I mean, younger, but I put myself eighteen years.

CLOUTIER: Did the rest of your family want to come to America also?

KALASH: No. My rest couldn't come. They didn't have the, they couldn't come. The child of a poor (?). And my father died, and the day my father died, it was on a Friday. And the Jewish people, are you Jewish? The Jewish people bury the next day. But the next day was Saturday, and they couldn't bury him Sunday because Sunday was a town that's a lot of churches, and they march with all the Jesus and all the parcels, they march, you know. And you go to pass through the street. At that time they didn't bury you in a coffin. They put in a bag in the body. So we went to the rabbi, and the rabbi said, "Well, you do it Saturday night." Saturday night, after they washed him and dressed him and all that, it was about two o'clock. And we came back from shul, it was about five or six o'clock in the morning. You know, it takes time till we get there, it's far away, in order to bury him in the Jewish religion. So it happened like that. We came home, we find our house empty. They stole everything they had. They knew that we are away. The Polish people knew that my father died, a small town, it was only two hundred people, Jewish. They took everything away. My father used to make coats for the peasants, and he had storage room. They took everything away. And my mother gave birth a month before my father died, unfortunately. My mother had ten children, but four died. In Europe, at that time, they didn't have no doctors, nothing.

CLOUTIER: So you though you had to come to America.

KALASH: We had to come to America. You're (?). I had a sister here already. One came four years before me. And so we made arrangements with the agent that took us there. When we passed the border they arrested us, everybody.

CLOUTIER: They arrested you?

KALASH: it was night.

CLOUTIER: (?)

KALASH: I'm sorry, they stole everything from here. We didn't have a blanket to cover. We came back from shul. It was very sad. My mother had to send us to America just, six children. One got married, and one went to America before us. What are you doing to do? No way of making a living. She sent a letter to the brother. They send her fifty dollars. And then I, when I went to the border they arrested me.

CLOUTIER: That's the border of Poland.

KALASH: The Polish border. Everybody was locked up. And then we were a couple a days and they bailed us out, and we went again, and he passed the border, and I came to Bremen. And in Bremen they told me, I went to the doctor, he told me you can't go to America because you eyes are bad.

CLOUTIER: What was wrong with your eyes?

KALASH: He said (?), trachoma.

CLOUTIER: Trachoma?

KALASH: Something like that.

CLOUTIER: Trachoma.

KALASH: And he says, "It's curable, we'll cure you if you stay here." I stayed there. I stayed there, I didn't, people standing there talking, you know, they said, "Don't cry, don't cry. Because if you on second class, they'll pass you." And the doctor said every time that your eyes are getting better, better, and get a second class and they'll pass you by, you know. I came here, they first let off the first class passengers, then the second class. And I didn't go through Ellis Island.

CLOUTIER: So the doctor suggested...

KALASH: Yeah. The doctor said, "Your eyes is good, but before you, before they examine, before you go to the doctor, when you get off the boat, here's a drop in your eyes. So it doesn't show." And I did it,

but they didn't ask me, then I realized second class. So I got here, and when I had to take my social security (?), I forgot all about it. So I, they wanted to know how I came to America, you know that. So they send me a letter. See? [she shows the letter]

CLOUTIER: This letter tells that you...

KALASH: This letter tells me that the date I came to America.

CLOUTIER: March 17, 1914.

KALASH: Yeah.

CLOUTIER: On the S.S. Crone Prince, Wilhelm.

KALASH: Yeah. That's, this boat was a very fast boat. I was only on the boat about seven or eight days. But I was sick, I was all the time, we were, all six days that I was on the boat, eight days, but six days I was so sick I was in bed. I kept vomiting because the boat was very fast, you know, I couldn't take it. And when I, when I came off the boat and I also came, my mother's brother came to meet me, but they said, "We cannot give a man a girl. We don't know." Because I wasn't born when they went away. They showed me, "Is that your uncle?" I says "Yeah." "How did you know? You wasn't born at that time when they came here." I says, "My mother used to get pictures. I recognize him." "We don't give, no." So they took me over here, and my, they called up my sister on the job where she worked. And when she came, she said, (?), and that's the whole story.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember getting any kind of inspection on the boat?

KALASH: Special what?

CLOUTIER: Inspection, any sort of inspection? Did they check your eyes, or...

KALASH: Oh, on the boat? No.

CLOUTIER: No?

KALASH: No. When I came, on the first class they do check, but in second class people go for, the night was the two days that I was well, I went down, such beautiful tablecloths and such beautiful food. On the third class, and they let you off. People only go for (?) most of the time, you know. And they thought I'm (?), you know, that I came here a rich girl on second class. It was at that time twenty-

five dollars, not like now.

CLOUTIER: For second class.

KALASH: It's like five hundred dollars. A girl of eighteen years comes second class. Just pass by. I didn't see nothing the...

CLOUTIER: Inspection.

KALASH: Didn't pass. They took me right off.

CLOUTIER: So for twenty-five dollars did you have a private cabin?

KALASH: Private. It was to be two, but one didn't come. It was private. Of course, the Germans didn't treat me so nice because, they, I was, excuse me, I got vomiting in bed all the time. I did everything in my bed, I couldn't go down. I was very sick, so the German man came, and he said, "Miss (?), why didn't you go to the bathroom? It's such a beautiful place. Why did you vomit all over?" Because I couldn't go down, I couldn't go down. (?) to me, he was very, very, very mean. And that's...

CLOUTIER: Did you get to see the steerage?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Did you see the steerage compartment where the people were underneath the, uh...

KALASH: I was never down. I was so excited. Look, I went to wash out, afraid. I was so afraid that they'd look at my eyes and send my back to New York. You were very poor. And my mother was left nothing. She was waiting that I should come here. When I came here I didn't know how to work on a machine. I didn't know what to do. Somebody took me up, and I worked for two dollars and seventy-five cents a week.

CLOUTIER: Here.

KALASH: Here. Forty-eight hours they taught me how to work. Later on I worked myself up three seventy-five, you know. But I worked forty-eight hours. We used to work overtime, two hours, we used to get fifteen cents more, extra. Whatever you made. It was piece work. But you get no union, nothing. So it was tough.

C What had you heard about the U.S. before you came here?

KALASH: Well, my uncle was here, that he came here. He opened up, he went away from, he didn't want to serve the Russian government, so he went away to my, he went to, without a passport. He ran away from Europe, you know. So he opened up here a candy store and made a living. He bought the candy store, bought a bigger house on 18th avenue in Bensonhurst and made a living. He wasn't a rich man, but he made a living. And he was anxious to run away from Poland, because in Poland it was a very bad place for the Jews. You know, you never knew if you can stay. All of a sudden, the police decided that the (?), they tell you to move. (?) on the roof, that's the way we went, too, you know. We tried to be good girl, you know. You had to be very good in order to stay there, so it was a very hard life. In Poland at that time the Jews in a different section, the Catholics in a different section. We're supposed to go, we want, we need water to pass by the Catholics, you know, to play, to get water for tea because the water from the well was murky, it didn't look good. For tea we used to go to Catholic place we had to pass. And they used to take out their dogs and say, you know, they should bark on us, and all that. We had a very hard life in Poland. The Polish people weren't very nice to us. And that's what happened.

CLOUTIER: What was your first job here in America?

KALASH: I worked in ladies' underwear.

CLOUTIER: Making it? Or selling it?

KALASH: I mean making it. I was working in a shop, they took me up, somebody that my uncle knew, a man, that he was a designer there in a factory, Macy's, across from Macy's on 34th Street, and the name of the factory was Dreyfuss. And I can remember the manager. He showed, he told the girls, teach her how to work. And they taught us to work little by little.

CLOUTIER: How long did you work there for?

KALASH: Eh?

CLOUTIER: How long did you work there?

KALASH: A couple of years, still. I worked myself up, and I got a better job. I mean, the same, a different place.

CLOUTIER: Were you happy to be here?

KALASH: I was very happy. What we had there, everything was wonderful here accordingly. It was really very poor. After I stayed with my uncle for six months. Then I moved to Essex Street with my sister together. A room for seven-and-a-half dollars for two people. It was a cold...

CLOUTIER: Per month?

KALASH: It was a cold apartment. You know, at that time there was no steam. The oven was all in the kitchen. And it was, we used to go off on the outside, you know, from, we didn't have to go to the ladies, to the woman's there was a door outside, the toilet was outside. And (?) apartment, half the size, like from here to there [she gestures]. And we put the cloth on the wall, two people in one room. And then (?) your supper at night. A quarter, (?). Nice, like in a restaurant, a regular good meal. A quarter. It was six meals. It was, seven meals was a dollar seventy-five each. I only made three-and-a-half dollars. You had to put every day, every week a couple of pennies to send my mother because she depended on us, so it was, it wasn't easy. We didn't buy the clothes, you know. The family, the family doesn't get a coat or a dress, you know. After a couple of years, they've been working stuff out.

CLOUTIER: Do you ever want your mother to come over to America?

KALASH: Yes. My mother had one daughter that didn't want to come. She was married. I mean, she didn't want to come. I came here, was, I came here in March, and the war broke out, the First World War broke out.

CLOUTIER: There was a what?

KALASH: In June, in July, the First World War.

CLOUTIER: Oh, right.

KALASH: ...broke out in July. They couldn't come. For years we didn't hear from them. Then we were, first I told (?) that Hitler came, in 1942, and there were all killed. All my...[disturbance to the microphone]

CLOUTIER: What are you looking for? [break in tape] So how old were you in that picture?

KALASH: In that picture I was two years. Accordingly to this, to this I was twenty years.

CLOUTIER: Uh-huh.

KALASH: And my mother, I've got pictures here, beautiful as (?). And find out, they were, my mother, buried alive, with all her grandchildren. My sister had four children. There were all buried alive. We had a friend, a Gentile man, who was very friendly to us, Catholic. The Polish people, too, very friendly. And he was in the concentration camp, too. He saw the way they buried my mother, and they were screaming, they were screaming so. They were screaming, before they died, it was terrible. They put them all in one place and buried them, just alive.

CLOUTIER: Have you always lived in New York?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Have you always lived in New York?

KALASH: Well, I lived in New York. I lived all over, Brooklyn, in New York, in the Bronx.

CLOUTIER: Did you ever want to go elsewhere?

KALASH: No.

CLOUTIER: No? You were happy here once you got here.

KALASH: I'm happy here. You know, (?) is very hard. My English wasn't so good. You know, I didn't go to school. In Europe the Jewish people, they wouldn't let go to school neither, at that time. The Gentile wouldn't let the Jewish, we didn't have no school. We had only, we used, my mother took in a teacher for six children for the narrow (?). What could you learn? You had to know a couple of languages. Speak Russian, they used to speak Russian, Polish, Ukrainian. It was learned that you speak that like I picked up English. English I went to school, you know, I went to night school, I went to the other school to educate myself. When I came here I didn't know, I just figured up a little, a few things what you learn for one hour a week, six people. Very hard life. I came here, thank God for America.

CLOUTIER: Did you ever get married?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Did you ever get married?

KALASH: Sure, sure, I'm married. I have a son, a doctor. I have a daughter-in-law, professor. My son...[break in tape]

CLOUTIER: Ah, that's your son, eh? Yeah. [break in tape]

KALASH: And that's my daughter-in-law.

CLOUTIER: Oh.

KALASH: My daughter-in-law's a professor. She teaches in Manhattan College. My son has an office in Brooklyn. When the (?) became very bad, and he was working for fifteen years, and they became so bad that he sold the, he came (?), University, only on the Medicaid, you know, it was hard. So he got a job in, in that college. He's chief medical doctor there.

CLOUTIER: When your first...

KALASH: I made it, my husband was sick a long time. My husband died of cancer, and I had to work. And my son wanted to become a doctor. First he went to podiatry school for four years and he didn't like it. And he wants to be, he went to Chicago, and (?) a doctor. I have two beautiful grandchildren.

CLOUTIER: When you first came to America, did you find it was a lot different and a lot harder?

KALASH: Of course it was different. I didn't know how to speak a work of English. It was very hard. I came in the objective where girls were, a lot of Gentile girls spoke their language, and knew how to speak. They were very kind to me. They tried to help me, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. It was hard, you know. But you learn, you know, little by little.

CLOUTIER: Did your eyes ever give you any more trouble?

KALASH: My eyes didn't give me the trouble. I read now without glasses. But, I mean, they tell me I have cataracts now, but my eyes didn't bother me. But people, they (?). I went a couple of months to a different city in Europe, the doctor, but he says, "It's okay, it's okay, you can go." But when I came, on the way it got worse.

CLOUTIER: This is your, a passport?

KALASH: This is not a passport. This is just the envelope where they had my tickets.

CLOUTIER: I see. And it has the name of the boat.

KALASH: The boat said on there. And it says over here the name of the boat. It's a German name. It's (?). Yeah.

CLOUTIER: But on the boat you didn't see any sort of officials from the U.S.?

KALASH: What?

CLOUTIER: When you came to America, you didn't see any officials?

KALASH: Officials?

CLOUTIER: You know, inspectors coming onto the boat?

KALASH: No. The boat doesn't, when I was working my boss used to say, "Go to (?), because you're a young girl. You have eighteen years." He used to tell me to go out. The inspector came into the place. Because I was very young. I think I was a little younger than that.

CLOUTIER: Do you remember coming into New York harbor and seeing New York?

KALASH: Yeah, sure. I came in, went right away, from some society, they came, because my uncle, the called him up to come and take me. So it took time, because in Bensonhurst, the Sea Beach train, 18th Avenue. When they came they wouldn't, they took me in the office, and says wait for your sister. Because they wouldn't give any girl, a young girl...

CLOUTIER: Now, where was this at?

KALASH: My sister worked on 34th Street.

CLOUTIER: Yeah, but...

KALASH: And (?) in New York, some New York. In New York somewhere...

CLOUTIER: Along the pier there. [they pause]

KALASH: Yes. It was in the, yes. The Jewish...

CLOUTIER: HIAS. HIAS was helping you?

KALASH: Yeah. I think they took me to an office, and I was sitting there waiting for my sister to come. And she came, she took me home. She took me to my (?), and I was there for six months. And then I paid them twenty-seven dollars. They wouldn't take me from me money. And I had a few dollars. And I rented a room for seven, eight dollars a month with my sister. Forget it. And the lady used to charge me five cents for breakfast. She would give me a roll and butter, and a cup of coffee. And lunch we used to get to for five, six cents she used to make coffee, and the peddler used to come in with bread, butter, which I'm having, for five cents. She used to send them bread, pay for the herring, and (?).

CLOUTIER: Do you know of anyone who tried to come to America and were sent back?

KALASH: On the boat I saw many go back in the boat. But friends, I never say anybody. But you see people crying, they'd send them back because there's something wrong with their (?) or whatever, and they couldn't get in.

CLOUTIER: So you must have been pretty nervous.

KALASH: And I, a lot of tears. When I was in, the twelve weeks that I wasn't traveling, I met a lot of people. I had to go back and say I'm lucky, but I don't know how lucky I am. I didn't arrive there. Maybe they'll send me back, too. But the doctor says, "You're all right." And, you know, the doctor comes, put a drop in your eye, and it will help.

CLOUTIER: It took you twelve weeks, you said?

KALASH: It took about twelve weeks. What day did I left, I left Europe...Where did I put it? [she pauses] I left Europe, it was about twelve days, twelve weeks. When I came to, my sister came, she was yelling at me. She says, "Why did id take three months to get here?" My sister, she was very upset at me. She says, "I was waiting. You should send me twenty-five dollars you need. When you come to America, you've got to show them that you've got twenty-five dollars." And twenty-five dollars I had to pay for the, to change my ticket.

CLOUTIER: To exchange a ticket.

KALASH: I changed from a third class to a second class, it was twenty-five dollars extra.

CLOUTIER: That was what the doctors told you.

KALASH: Yeah. That they recommended me there. They said, "Go on second class, you won't have no trouble." If you're very sick, they wouldn't let you. But my sick, what I had, it wasn't so dangerous.

CLOUTIER: Did you ever see the third class people?

KALASH: Yeah. I never saw them, because I wouldn't go down there. I was sick all the time there. I was laying in bed. So I saw, the last two days, why I should I go in third class? I wanted to see first class.

CLOUTIER: Right. Was it daylight when you into New York?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Was it light when you came into New York?

KALASH: Yeah. I came in the morning. It was light. And I saw all the peddlers, you know. (?) when I came in. I really (?). I saw the peddlers with the fruit, and I was very sick on the boat. I came here, if I want something. I says, "I would like a piece of fruit." And the waiter brought me up a banana, and I never saw that in my life. And I was afraid to eat it, and I felt nauseous. So I was hungry, I'll eat it, and I loved it [laughs].

CLOUTIER: You knew how to...

KALASH: I didn't, in Europe I never saw that.

CLOUTIER: So how did you know how to open it up?

KALASH: Oh, you could see it.

CLOUTIER: You figured it out.

KALASH: It was like a potato, peel it.

CLOUTIER: Right. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time?

KALASH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I saw the Statue of Liberty. Everything was under, I came from a very small town. Once a carpet to buy in

Europe. At that time I was about ten years old, and everybody was afraid, standing on the sidewalk and shivering, and the car passed by, you know (?). And also when the Kaiser passed by our city, we used to clean our windows and we used to clean our sidewalks, and we were afraid to go out, because the police were, we were frightened. We looked out through the window. Every summer he had to pass by my city. It was such commotion to clean and wash the walls, and they build the house and everything. The (?).

CLOUTIER: It's a lot different over here, huh?

KALASH: Huh?

CLOUTIER: Yeah. You can say anything. Over there every Jewish person has got to, they (?), and all the children, and God forbid if you fell (?), you make (?). Boy, you could get arrested. And they pray for the king and the queen. A wonderful country.

KALASH: Well, I thank you, Nellie.

KALASH: You're welcome.