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SIDNEY KATZ
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INS HEARING STENOGRAPHER AT ELLIS ISLAND 1946-1954 (continued with
INS until 1957)

PHILLIPS: Let me just ask you, Sidney, just for identification purposes, just what did you do at ellis Island.

KATZ: I started out in the Hearing Department; I take shorthand, or at that time I did, and I would have to take hearings in pencil shorthand, it's called Gregg in America, and I worked there ten years before I went on to Social Security, but the first ten years of government was with Immigration, and we took hearings on, it was a Deportation Section; not everybody who came here was admissible, either because of health or of moral turpitude, or came here illegally, and everyone had to--even after Ellis Island was no longer in existence, if someone came here as an immigrant, he had

to go through an immigration inspection, and later on after Ellis Island was closed, they would be brought to--we were at that time at 70 Columbus Avenue which is where Lincoln Center is now, the building is no longer there--and we did the same thing as we did when Ellis Island; in fact we had a temporary shelter on the roof of that building, and if they were political, they were held on West Street in the Detention Center.

PHILLIPS: Let me perhaps just set the scene, or have you set the scene a little bit by telling me how many of you were doing the work you were doing; what years were we specifically talking about?

KATZ: Well, I was there from 1946 to 1957. and in the Deportation Section, there were about thirty hearing reporters. We kept busy very long taking hearings.

PHILLIPS: No you--gibe us initially, just again, to set the scene, the run down of what you did from the beginning of the day to the end. What time did you start work? How did you get to Ellis Island--you got there on a boat obviously--

KATZ: Well, at that time, I lived in the Bronx, and it was a real safari. I lived near the Eighth Avenue subway, and I would take the local--I lived at a local stop on 167th Street--I would take the local to 59th Street where I'd change--excuse me, to 125th Street, where I would change for the express to 59th Street, then go downstairs and take the Seventh Avenue local to 42nd Street, and then take the express to Chambers Street, change for the local, which would take me to South Ferry, and if I was minute late, the boat which then took you to Ellis Island--I had to make that boat at a quarter to nine, and if I came at 8:46, I was docked an hour, because there was a boat every hour, and that went on for years. And I never thought there was anything unusual about that trip. It took nearly an hour and a half each way, but you know, when your young and you have to work, you accept that.

PHILLIPS: So you got to the Island after how long? What kind of boat was it?

KATZ: It was like a ferry boat, a small ferry boat--

PHILLIPS: About how many people at a time?

KATZ: Oh I would say, 200 people. Of course it was staggered. Some people came later. And also, people who were living in America but who were called for hearing, they would come too.

PHILLIPS: So you got to the Island in the morning, and then what happened? What was the sense of your day?

KATZ: Well, there were two kinds of hearings; there were hearings where there was a definite appointment, someone was told to come for a hearing to be there at 10:00 or 1:00 or something like that. But the other hearings were illegal aliens who had jumped ship, were seized from the boat, brought to Ellis Island, and then put in the detention section. At that time, Ellis Island still had detention quarters and living quarters, a kitchen, and they were kept there, and at that time--they later became Administrative Law Judges, but at that time they were Hearing Examiners. They assigned a hearing to various judges, and as soon as they finished one, they took another one. It was a constant flow of

hearings. And they were all the same thing. You have to understand that in those years, there was no way that anyone could come here unless he had, you know met the quota from European countries, and came here legally. Then the other alternative was to come here illegally, and so there were a lot of those. There were a lot of Italians, and Greeks, and Indians from India, who were starving where they came from, and the only way they could support their family was to try to stay here as long as they could, and sometimes they could stay here quite a while, because the computers had not come in yet, and there wasn't that--there were the green cards that the aliens had, but if he was not working under Social Security, there was really very little way that they could be tracked down, so sometimes they stayed at large a long time--

PHILLIPS: How long--years?

KATZ: Oh yes, and fact, you see now, under the new Amnesty Act, if you could say that you were here a number of years, and were not doing something too illegal, you could ask to stay on. But there was no

such thing then. If they caught you, you had the option--they could offer you voluntary departure, if there wasn't anything too wrong about it, so that you could then come back legally, try to come back on quota--

PHILLIPS: You'd have to apply--

KATZ: Oh yes, yes. You'd have to go back to your country and then try again. And you could do it that way.

PHILLIPS: Did that happen frequently?

KATZ: They gave, as a rule, they gave voluntary departure. If a man was willing to go back, they would give hi voluntary departure. But if he, you know, if there was something--not quite--if he became obstreperous, or had done some, had committed a crime while he was here, he would be deported. But you know, if it were a first time, they usually gave voluntary departure. They weren't that--but of course, it was so well organized, that they would--some of their countrymen, or their friend would find them a lawyer. And at that time there

were lawyers, and there still are, lawyers who handle only deportation cases, they only worked in immigration. And they would try all kinds of delaying tactics. They wanted to have a hearing, and they would get a stay of deportation. In the meantime, the alien could work, and make a great deal more than he could in his own country, pay the attorney a retainer each week, and--but eventually, he was deported or, if he was lucky, got voluntary departure.

PHILLIPS: I think what I'd like to have you do, is perhaps to have you read into our oral history tape your letter; I think you wanted to do that also--

KATZ: Well, yeah--

PHILLIPS: and then we can advance from there, take specific points, and if you would like to stop, and extrapolate on some things, you should go ahead. Do you want to do that?

KATZ: My association with Ellis Island is twofold. My parents and all their brothers and sisters emigrated

to the United States between the years 1910 to 1915. I was born in New York City in 1918, but all during the time that my parents were alive, they would often reminisce of their first encounters in the United States. But most vividly, about Ellis Island, they came in steerage class, and their time on those boats must have seemed endless. The inconveniences they suffered were nothing compared to the deep anxieties they must have endured. The fear of being rejected before they even put their foot on American soil. The fear also of what was in store for them in the strange land where they know on one and could not speak the language of the country. How would they make themselves understood? How would they support themselves? And would they manage to bring the rest of their family here. My other association with Ellis Island is the fact that in 1946 I started to work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and was assigned to the Island as a hearing stenographer. My job then was to take shorthand notes of deportation hearings of aliens who came here illegally. Or, if they had arrived legally, investigations of why they should not admitted here. These hearings usually concerned the health of an alien,

or a charge of moral turpitude that had been unearthed on arrival. Ellis Island is quite small, and there is not much one could do at lunch time. In good weather, we would sit outside and look at the skyline of New York; but in cold weather, we'd linger over our lunch in the cafeteria. Many times I would walk through the halls and try to imagine what it must have been like for my parents when they came here. My father came first, and when he had saved enough money he sent for my mother and my oldest sister, the only one of his children that was born in Europe. As a result of the Immigration Act of 1924, immigration to the United States had almost come to full halt. At that time, quotas were set up and some countries were given larger quotas; other countries were given smaller quotas, and if someone wanted to here legally, it could be a long, drawn out process of applying for permission, waiting for your number to be called, and eventually people had to resort to illegal means to get here. At that time immigration to the United States had dwindled considerably. Ellis Island was used primarily as a detention center for seamen who jumped ship, and others who came here illegally. A large pool of investigators and shorthand recorders were

kept busy day after day recording hearings. The best that these aliens could hope for was an order of voluntary departure, which would not preclude them from returning here legally at a later date. There were a few unscrupulous lawyers who took the cases of some of these aliens on a retainer basis. They would try all sorts of delaying tactics, and get their clients out of detention while the cases were being decided on appeal. In this way, the aliens could work, pay a weekly fee to their attorneys, and still be able to send money home to their families. It took me a long time to become hardened to the plight of these poor people. I began to appreciate what it meant to live in our country. One particularly sad episode of my time on Ellis Island was in the fall of 1950, just 37 years ago. This was the time of the McCarthy era. A wave of repression had hit the nation. The McCarren Act had been passed over President Truman's veto. It was also at this time that more people were given permission to come to the United States legally. There was an act called the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 which allowed certain people to come in. You have to remember that during the war and the Holocaust and the fact that the United States had been

less than hospitable to the victims of Nazi repression, that attempts were made to allow more people to come in. They also allowed Talmudic students, students for the Rabbinate, to come to study. Of course, these people were--they had to be sure they did not become public charges, and there were organizations in America, which included the National Council of Jewish Women, the UJA, (United Jewish Appeal), the HIAS, which was the Hebrew Immigrants Aid Society, these were Jewish organizations. And there were other organizations, there were the Catholic charities. It's not quite the way it is today, where welfare has taken over the Russian emigres. There was no such thing at that time. These people had to be--the government had to be assured that they would not become public charges within five years of entry. So that more people were coming in. Now, getting back to the McCarren Act, this bill was designed to exclude subversives. But it was so loosely drawn that it excluded desirable aliens as well. People who's only crime was membership in the Hitler or Mussolini youth corps, at the age of nine, or enrollment in a fascist labor union, when joining was a prerequisite to eating, when Congress re-passed the bill over President Truman's

veto, Truman set out to enforce the law with zeal, in an effort to prove that his veto had been correct. One Friday afternoon we were told that we would all have to work Saturday and Sunday of that weekend. The McCarren Act was now in effect, and a large number of newly arrived immigrants and visitors who had arrived that day were to be held on the Island for questioning. It was the weekend, and it was difficult for the authorities to get a definitive ruling of what actually was going to be the criteria for these people to enter the United States. Confusion reigned supreme on that weekend. Among all those people, I remember the pianist Friedreich Gulda from Germany, who was to give a concert in Carnegie Hall in a few days. He, poor fellow, was practicing on a table, just a plain wooden table, to keep his fingers supple. And the opera singer, Fedora Barbieri, who was to sing at the Metropolitan House shortly. But these were the lucky ones; they were celebrities, and were given a little quicker treatment.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about that, perhaps, that day when the celebrities arrived. You saw them, of course.

KATZ: Yes. And really--they were all questioned, and invariably most people, especially among the Germans and the Italians, you must remember that these people that at time must have been maybe forty, well no, they were probably in their twenties. They may have been about eight or nine years old at the time of Hitler's--at the outbreak of war. You see, they had something like our Boy Scouts, and it was the Hitler Youth organization, and in Italy also there were fascist youth organizations. And as far as the letter of the law, as the Director of Immigration in New York could decide on Friday afternoon, these people were deportable, and should be held for questioning. I believe Gulda and Barbieri were admitted on some kind of a special proviso, because they did have contracts to fulfill here. They had concerts to give. However, the other people, what they really wanted to do, I think--I mean, this is off the record perhaps--they wanted to keep them until Monday or Tuesday, when Washington could give them a better handle as to what they were to do. Really, it was all confusion. What we did, and I'll show you some pictures later, we took the hearing and confirmed the fact that at an early age, they did in

fact belong to the Hitler Youth.

PHILLIPS: How did you find that out?

KATZ: This was part of the questioning.

PHILLIPS: But they didn't have to tell you that, did they?

KATZ: For the most part, they were children when all this happened, and as far as I could see, it was guilt by association that's all. There was nothing tangible to show that they had killed anybody, or had benefited from it. Perhaps they benefited to the fact that they could get a square meal, but that's all it was.

PHILLIPS: They were very forthcoming, it sounds like--

KATZ: Oh yes, yes. I will go into that too, later, if I may.

Mostly I remember the large group of frightened and confused immigrants; this is different from the celebrities, who were only coming here for a short stay. Gulda and Barbieri were just coming here to perform their artistic duties, so there was difference, you see. And their children. They had waited so long

to come to the United States and now they were being threatened with rejection. It was then that I finally realized what my parents had gone through so many years before. Everyone who had even a smattering of a foreign language was conscripted to translate at the many hearings that had to take place. We worked around the clock, and all I could think about is if something happened to me, who would transcribe my notes. However, within a short time, it became apparent that this law was impractical, and it was eventually repealed. But getting back--

PHILLIPS: Which law was that?

KATZ: The McCarren Act.

PHILLIPS: What year was it repealed?

KATZ: The same year; '51, I believe. Actually, aside from--a ruling was made that week--all these people were admitted. This was--the incident I was talking about was a short period of people who were in the wrong place in the wrong time, or that sort of thing. And this was a sad occurrence. Life Magazine came, it must have been the following Monday,

because by this time it got quite a deal of publicity, with their doing a picture essay of the drama that was going on. The famous photographer Alfred Eisenstadt took some remarkable photographs the following--one day right after this, it was the following week.

PHILLIPS: Which year was this?

KATZ: 1950. It must have been--they appeared in the issue of November 13, 1950, so this must have been the end of October, in Life Magazine. And these pictures appear in the issue of--off the record, the cost of the magazine at that time was twenty cents, and I suppose this is worth a lot more today. This--I've had this magazine for many years and I've treasured it, but I believe that this oral record would be meaningless without having this magazine alongside of it, so I'm donating it to wherever these are going to be kept. And I'd merely like to say that Eisenstadt's photographs were placed side by side in the article, with some of Lewis Heinz' photographs that were taken in the year 1905 in the very same place. The magazine includes a picture of myself, as a young man, taking notes at a hearing.

PHILLIPS: What page--the photograph of yourself is on what page?

KATZ: That appears on page 125, the upper right hand corner.

Like many of Life Magazine's articles, it was beautifully handled. On the first page, on page 123, there are two photographs, one in 1905 and the other in 1950. And it shows three immigrants--on the left hand side is 1905--three immigrant women with a little baby swathed in blankets and a bundle on one of the women's heads, and alongside, the picture of 1950, of a father with two young boys coming through the same building holding a fat briefcase with his entry papers in preparation of being questioned as a result of this period on Ellis Island. On the next page, 124, there's a heading, "The Arrival," and there's a picture of a family, a husband and wife and two children in 1905 with apprehensive looks on their faces as they are waiting to get off the boat to come to the Island, and on the same page, a group of Italian immigrants in 1950, with a little boy. And this is the arrival, and they seem bewildered, and they're looking, "Well, what's going to happen to me next?" Then under another heading, "Waiting," again two pictures, one of 1905, of a group of male immigrants of various ages from about 12 to 40, with bundles. not valises, but cartons wrapped with rope, and always the--not bars, but metal gates that kept the aliens in the detention section as opposed to the outside. You always seemed to be aware, even to the day, the period of 1950, and right next to it, again a group of people waiting, and the same heading, with tired expressions, and again apprehensive. And I remember this room so well, a large holding station. On the next page, "Interrogation."

PHILLIPS: Now what room was specifically--

KATZ: It was a large area of just benches, where people sat waiting to be called.

PHILLIPS: How long would they have to sit for?

KATZ: From hours to days.

PHILLIPS: Where did they sleep, if they had to sleep?

KATZ: Oh, there were dormitories. But unfortunately, at the time that we're talking about, in 1950, a lot of these rooms had been closed off, and there wasn't that much room, so sometimes families had to be separated. They would put the men in dormitories and the children and women in another one, which also added to the confusion and the apprehension and the worry: "What's going to happen?" you see; and as it turned out, this was all for naught, because I don't know if anybody was deported as a result of this particular--this was just a matter that went on for several weeks, and thank goodness it came to an end when they decided it was

ridiculous. And Truman was right from the beginning, you see.

PHILLIPS: Just again, what specific dates were we talking about, just to make sure we've got that down.

KATZ: October 1950.

PHILLIPS: Through--just during October 1950--

KATZ: And by November--by the middle of November, it was all a thing of the past. And we go on to the next page, and this heading is "Interrogation." And again, 1905, with the two stern inspectors looking at an alien, probably looking at a manifest and asking him questions, and again apprehension. And right alongside is a table with an inspector, an interpreter, and myself taking the hearing, with a young woman and her son and again the interpreter is translating the questions, and I don't remember exactly, but again it invariably started, "Where were you born?" and "How old are you?" and "What is your trade?" "Who are you coming to in america?" "May I see your papers?" and Did you ever belong to the

Communist Party or the Nazi or Fascist?" And then usually without even pressuring them, they said, "Well, I belonged to the Boy Scouts" or the Young--but, everyone did. And then we were at an impasse, you see. But as I say--

PHILLIPS: When you say Boy Scouts, you mean--

KATZ: Well, their Boy Scouts, their Young Fascists or the Jugen, the Hitler Jugen, which is the Hitler Youth, yes. And the next heading is "Exhaustion" and you see a little girl in 1950 lying on a bench with a coat as a pillow, wrapped around, and exhausted, and again, 1905, an immigrant woman with a shawl around her head, and she's resting her head against a bundle tied to a shawl, probably her bedding, and waiting and waiting for the questioning. And then on the next page, 126, the lady in 1950 sitting on a cot, and this was the sad part of it. She was merely coming here on a six-month visit to her family, and she was given the same treatment. It didn't matter whether you came here as an immigrant or as a visitor, and again, a picture is worth a thousand words. I cannot convey the utter exhaustion

on this woman's face. And right alongside of her is another picture of 1950 of two young parents who are beside themselves with their little daughter who is hyperactive and who is running around and their endless piggyback rides to keep her quiet, and you wonder how much more they can take of this. And there are two tired children at the table in 1950 who are probably having a cup of milk, but the fear and the exhaustion on their faces. I think Eisenstadt proved the mastery of his skill with the camera. And finally there is a young couple. They don't look young; they are in fact. The girl is 20, and the young man is 24, but they look like they're in their sixties. she's sitting at the table. They're Orthodox Jews who are probably coming--he's probably coming as Rabbinate student. and she is wearing a hat, and dressed in the black and the long sleeves, and utter exhaustion and confusion on her face, and he is facing the wall, doing his daily prayers, hoping for some way out of this awful solution and again waiting. And so, all I can say is that, as I look back, I am grateful that I was part of it, and that I saw it, but I'm also grateful that it didn't last too long and that there was a happy ending for most of the people who

were involved.

PHILLIPS: Let me just pick up on a few things.

KATZ: Surely, please.

PHILLIPS: You started in 1946, which was obviously right after the Second World War.

KATZ: Yes, right after I got out of the Army.

PHILLIPS: Yes, can you perhaps give us a sense of the atmosphere of those days. They must have been extremely exciting days as the war finished and people from war torn Europe with extraordinary stories came into the United States. Do you have any specific stories?

KATZ: Oh, yes. But again, there was never--things were done on a much more relaxed basis. the only people that were detained were people that jumped ship. Most of the people that came in were coming in legally. The only problem was, for these people, like--I'll just give you isolated experiences. On the boat, or on the plane,

a young person may have had an epileptic seizure, and naturally, there may not have been any warning of this on their application papers. But now it was a fact of life. And so they were held for examination, and what the history of this was, whatever. Then, I remember, I won't go into who these people were, but it was the wife of a well-known composer in Europe. She had been divorced from this composer.

PHILLIPS: You can't say who this was?

KATZ: No, it's not really--well, just to give you an idea of the type of cases. The people were questioned as they got off the boat about their background, and some friend of their's had said that this woman was sleeping around with someone who wasn't her husband. Well, this became something called "moral turpitude." This was 1940s not 1980s. So, they were admitted, but they were admitted on proviso, and there were exclusion proceedings, because this was a grounds for deportation, moral turpitude. Also, there were people who had been in America for many years, but who never became citizens. They may have even had green cards, you know,

I'm not sure. But they were not citizens. And finally, I remember one couple, they had lived an exemplary life, they had been married many years, they had grown children, they had grandchildren, and he applied for citizenship. And in the investigation, it turns out that he had been married before and never gotten a divorce. And, I believe his wife knew this. But she never felt that--she felt that she was legally married. They had lived an exemplary life, but eventually this came out, and again, you can't have two wives. And I tell you, these cases dragged on so long that I can't even tell you what the outcome was, because they were still pending when I left, in 1957, some of these cases. But I'm giving you an idea of the type of cases we had. But the bulk of the cases were deportation cases, people who jumped ship, and that was going on all the time.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us perhaps about some--you might describe them as political cases that might have--

KATZ: Yes, there were, there were.

PHILLIPS: This was part of the McCarthyism you described.

KATZ: Well, even before then, certainly even before McCarthy, membership in a subversive organization was always grounds for deportation. There were cases like that. But again, these were cases, and they're a matter of record, but again, not in the volume that the illegal entries were. There was a case of a man who jumped ship, and he was picked up finally, at the YMCA, which-- I don't how familiar you are with New York, but it's on 34th Street near Ninth avenue.

PHILLIPS: What year?

KATZ: This would be somewhere between 1950 and 1956. and he was- -when he was picked up, he was in his underwear, and he was brought to, at this time, we were not on the Island then. Ellis Island, you see, was closed in 1954. And when he was brought into deportation, when he was brought for hearing, they asked him how did he get from the East River, he was somewhere on the East side, all the way on the other end of town, and he said he walked in his underwear. And it gives you some idea of New York. That, well, if he wants to

walk around in his underwear--well, it struck me as very funny. You know, I don't know how funny it is now--

PHILLIPS: New York was just as crazy in those days as it is today.

KATZ: Yeah. And I remember, at a deportation hearing, some of the, you know, in the early days, the hearing examiners were not all lawyers. It wasn't necessary that they be a lawyer. Some of them had been deportations examiners. But anyway, he held a hearing and he was quite aggressive in his questioning. and he was getting so irritated and exasperated with all the questioning, that he jumped up and banged the window and broke the glass and cut himself. And he had to be taken, you know, to be bandaged. But the examiner, well he may have been a lawyer, but that's about all he was, I mean, but--he said, "Wait a minute, I have one more question to ask him." again, you know, I don't know how funny that is, but these were all things that were--but again, they were--I remember hearings of--where, you know, when we finally admitted the people, inwardly I was very happy. They had suffered so much, and they had gone through so much.

PHILLIPS: Were the workers generally--did you find--you said there were about 40 stenographers and yourself, was there a general feeling of empathy with the people?

KATZ: Oh yes, yes. You couldn't help it, you couldn't help it. Because you have to understand that in the period when I was there, I was getting people who had somehow survived the Holocaust. They may have been children, and they were the lucky ones. And listening to their stories of remaining in hiding, and you know, things that are still gripping to people, it was there, it was all there. and you know, there were also a great many cases of people who had been admitted, but who were CPI. Now that means, Constitutional Psychopathic Inferiority, at the time of entry. They had survived the war, the detention in the concentration camps. They had gone through all that, and had remained marvelously strong, and when the pressure was off them and they came to America, they just went to pieces. And they did in fact--they had survived so much, and then came to the United States, and faced with a new environment, and no family, and they were people who had promised not to

become public charges, but the difficulty of finding employment, and the adjustment that they had to make, they just cracked up. And when that happened, and it came to our attention, they were deportable. Some of them were in, you know, at that time, the asylums were open, and now they've closed down, a lot of the state hospitals. But these people were being hospitalized at a tremendous expense, you see.

PHILLIPS: How many people are we talking about?

KATZ: A great many, a great many. I can't give you figures. I mean, I don't think that is my function here. But a great many. I had a number of hearings of that kind. And you talk about empathy--there was a great deal of empathy. You couldn't sit through and listen to what these people--As a male, I had to go to the hospitals to take these hearings; they didn't let the girls go.

PHILLIPS: So these people would have been already hospitalized in the asylum.

KATZ: Oh yes, yes. And it then came to--when it came to light that they were not citizens, they automatically came up for deportation. and this was a heartache to sit through that. I wouldn't know what happened. some of them dragged on for years, and they're probably still here. Because, where were they going to deport them back to in many cases, you see. There were no countries. And of course, I suppose, a lot of people did get through. I had one case; this was the most--it's so many years ago and it sill haunts me, sometimes. There's a place called Letchworth Village, in upstate New York, where they--imbeciles, you know, just to go through those wards is something you can never forget. Well, there were two idiots, a mother and a daughter. And the mother got here somehow, and may have married an American citizen and got here, and gave birth to an imbecile child. I mean, it was--