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IDA PEARL
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FEENEY: This is Brain Feeney. Today is May 10, 1988, and I'm interviewing Ida Pearl. Okay. We're talking today with Ida Pearl. And, Ida, the first thing I'd like to talk to you about is what it was like in your native country, and when and where were you born?

PEARL: I was born April 20, 1922. Now that's -- I'll tell you, there's a little discrepancy there. It's either '21 or '22. They had to switch my brother's date. I wasn't, ah, I wasn't registered, and you had to pay money to register each baby that was born. So they had to get witnesses to say that I was the first born. But my true date is '22, 1922. My passport says '21. My citizenship papers say '22. So I think it's in there. (she laughs)

FEENEY: And where were you born?

PEARL: I was born in Deredhin a little town in the eastern part of Poland, which is Russia now. The population was about three or four thousand. We were surrounded by five villages, mostly farmland.

FEENEY: Tell me what your town was like.

PEARL: My town was very primitive. It was like going back 200 years. Everything stood still, no businesses. I had not seen a car until I arrived in Warsaw. It was very quiet. Nothing exciting ever happened there. They had one school, one elementary school, and one high school. They had one Hebrew school. And they had two churches, one Russian church, one Polish church, and they had four synagogues and a square. And the streets were not paved at all. When it rained it was just mud all over everywhere, except the main street where the market took place, -- the market -- market square -- cobblestones. That was the only street that was paved. Everything was primitive. It was just, no

progress. Nothing ever changed. It was the same. Very bleak, very unexciting place to live. (she laughs)

FEENEY: Were you happy, though, as a child, in that town?

PEARL: As a child, yes. We didn't do anything else. I mean, we went to school, we played, we helped our parents, we worked in -- on the little farms or the gardens, and fetched water. Just like the people who lived here in the year, in the early 1800's. That's how we lived over there. Of course, we didn't go hunting. We weren't allowed to have guns like people here. You were allowed to go and hunt for your food. What else? What else?

FEENEY: What about school? Do you remember attending school?

PEARL: Oh, yes. I attended school till I was -- I only went as far as elementary school. And past that you had to pay for schooling, and not everyone had a chance to go beyond elementary school.

FEENEY: So you didn't go beyond because you had to pay for school?

PEARL: Right. The age of twelve or thirteen, you were ready for higher education, but those that were able to do so sent their children to get a higher education, but I stayed at home mostly to help my mother with the youngsters. They were all younger than I. And, uh . . .

FEENEY: Are you the oldest?

PEARL: No, I'm the second oldest. I'm the oldest of the girls. We were four girls and three boys.

FEENEY: Did your brothers attend school beyond elementary level?

PEARL: No. My brother did not, and the younger ones, I don't remember, because I was here already, and the war already started in '39 and, uh, what the children did -- at age of thirteen, the parents usually took them to l-to learn a trade, like a seamstress or a shoemaker or a - a-- .My brother, my parents thought he would become a cantor because he had such a beautiful voice. So they sent him to live in another town with a family to get lessons, cantorial lessons. And my brother was very unhappy about that. He ran away from there. (laughs) He was gone for a week. Nobody knew where he was. And finally showed up at our house, at home, with tears in his eyes. He was only about fourteen at that time and he begged my parents, he says, "Don't. Don't do that to me. I don't want to be a cantor. I'm, it's not in me." You know. But at age thirteen I was learning over there to become a seamstress, and I was also helping my parents at home.

FEENEY: When you say you were learning to become a seamstress, were you being taught in the home, or were you in the workplace?

PEARL: Ii - in someone else's home, where they had, like, two other girls working with the owner of the little business, a private home. She usually lived there, and the girls used to come, four or five or six

hours, you know. Sit and work for nothing (just to learn the trade for about three or six months at a stretch. And you worked on making buttonholes for three months. That's what I did -- buttonholes by hand. Then you learned to hem for another three months. But I only got as far as making buttonholes, because -- I left for America (she laughs) when I turned fourteen.

FEENEY: You were fourteen when you left for the United States, then?

PEARL: Yes.

FEENEY: What year was that?

PEARL: 1936.

FEENEY: And tell me what led up to your decision to leave, and did you leave alone?

PEARL: Yes. I was alone. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: Tell me about how you decided to leave.

PEARL: I didn't decide. I had - I had nothing to say about it. My parents made that decision for me. Uh, we were a large family, seven children, and my father just couldn't provide for all seven. We were kind of poor. And our relatives here in Cleveland, they were very close to us. They always supported us. Clothing, money for the holidays. And they, we kept in touch with them. We wrote to them quite often. They wrote us back. And, uh, actually the people who brought me here was my grandmother's sister and my grandfather's brother. So the relationship was very close. Like two sisters married two brothers, you know? And, uh, they wanted my older brother, but because of all the red tape, when you get to be eighteen, you have to serve in the Polish Army, and, uh, it just wouldn't work out. It would have taken years to get him over here.

And since things were getting kind of bad over there with all the, well, anti-Semitism and the Russian, the German pamphlets would come flying from the airplanes, small planes would come flying by, and it was really bad conditions. I can't describe it to you how bad it was down there. I really was very fortunate. I can't believe it that of all the people in my family, I should have been picked. I wasn't exactly picked. They wanted my brother. But then my parents decided to send me over instead of him. But it, just the same, it took two years for me to get here and for the papers to process, all the red tape and everything. And all that time I, I didn't believe I was really leaving home.

FEENEY: But it was your relatives here in the United States who were able to make the arrangements for you. And did they pay for your passage?

PEARL: Yes, they paid for the passage. They paid for -- they had a son who was a lawyer. He worked all the papers. And I had already two uncles here. My mother's two brothers were here, in Cleveland, too. But they weren't as close as the people who brought me over. They always

took an interest in our family in Europe. In fact, if they would have had the funds, they probably would have brought over the rest of the family. And their idea was for me to get a job and to save money and to bring my sisters over, my mother and father, you know. But, for one thing, I was too young. I wanted to go to school. And that's another conflict I had to work out with them. I don't know if I want to get into that. (referring to a sound on the tape) What's that? Sounds like a train.

FEENEY: Were you the only one, then, who came to the United States, from your family?

PEARL: From my immediate.

FEENEY: From your immediate family?

PEARL: Yes, yes. Yes. (pause)

FEENEY: Tell me how you felt, though, about leaving your family? Leaving your country.

PEARL: Very sad. I was very sad, sure. Of not ever being able, the possibility of not seeing them again. And the way things were brewing, we knew something terrible was going to happen in Poland. It was a sad affair. It was very sad. I -- my father broke down when he placed me on the boat. He says, "I know I'll never see you again. I'd give anything if I could just see you ten, fifteen years from now through the crack in the wall, how you look." And I tried not to cry, and he cried. He cried like a baby, but I try not to cry. And I thought about them for many years after that. I used to, until a few years ago I had dreams of them, seeing them the way I left them -- little, you know. They were sill-- so much younger than I.

And they always hoped that I would bring them here. They, uh, I used to babysit for my cousins here. I'd send them the money. And each one of them wrote me a page. The first time I saved up ten dollars. It took me six months to save up ten dollars, babysitting money. And I sent it to them. And each one of my brothers and sisters wrote me a page, and described. What they did, what they bought, what they ate, and how they danced around my photograph -- praising me for saving up all that money so they could have a party and they could have a good food for a week. And that my younger brother, brother number two, well, my big brother, me and sister, then I had two other brothers. He got himself a Scout's uniform. He always wanted a Boy Scout's uniform. Over there they didn't call it Boy Scouts, but it was a khaki outfit. And my sister was able to get a dress, and shoes for my other sisters. All for the ten dollars. It was like ninety dollars over there. Ninety zlotys, one American dollar was nine zlotys at that time. I don't know what it's worth now, but they sure did a lot with the American dollar over there.

FEENEY: Had others from your town left to come to America?

PEARL: No, not that I know of, no. I'm the only one. I mean, that year. And, of course, a lot of other people came from Poland from

different parts. But we had not known of each other until after we arrived here; we formed a little foreign club. We had a social worker as our leader and she acquainted us with the American way of life, with the languages and with -- we, she would take us on picnics. We would organize little meetings, meet to the libraries and this and that. That was in the old neighborhood here in Cleveland, off 105th Street. And, uh, not too many people arrived here the year I came here.

In fact, I was a novelty when I first arrived here. Because a - a - a lot of young people came from my street just to see what I look like. They asked my aunt, "Can I -- can you have her come outside? I want to see what she looks like." You know. And I couldn't - I couldn't speak English at that time, and they'd look at me and say, "Oh." You know, and then they go away. But then few -- a few weeks later I would walk to school with them, come home with them, and they would help me with the English language. And they would correct me in every which way, and they would help me with my homework. And they would want to know all about to Europe, how is it down there.

And, of course, no matter how much you told them, the -- it - it just wouldn't relate to them, because you would really have to go over there and see how things are, you know. And I thought, when I first came here, oh, my God, all that food and all the furniture people have, and such beautiful houses, and the streets were so clean and the schools had windows. (she laughs) And it was just marvelous. And books! All the books that you wanted to read, and over there you had to wait weeks for a book. Shoes, you were lucky. You got one pair of shoes a year, even though my father was a shoemaker. And then if you outgrew it, at the end of the year if there was anything left in the bottom to walk on, you gave it to your brother or sister. Clothes were the same way. (she clears her throat)

FEENEY: When you, do you remember your voyage? What port did you leave from?

PEARL: Gdansk.

FEENEY: And do you remember what the voyage was like?

PEARL: The first three days was fine. After that, I got seasick. And it was like a party every night, because I had never seen so much food in my life. And after I got seasick I couldn't eat it, and I'd just look at it and say, "Oh, my God, I wish I could send it over to Europe." You know, for my family to have some of it. And it was very pleasant on the boat, very nice. People were very friendly. I made friends with two girls, they were sisters, twins. They were traveling to New York with their mother. That's about it. I kept in touch with those. And my roommate, I think you would call her a roommate, was an old lady. She was a grandmother traveling to her husband, to New York, and that's about all, I remember.

FEENEY: How long was the voyage?

PEARL: Two weeks, fourteen days, fourteen days.

FEENEY: Do you remember coming into New York Harbor?

PEARL: Oh, yes.

FEENEY: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you came in?

PEARL: Oh, yes. They announced it on the loudspeaker. Or, I don't know if it was a loudspeaker, but there was a lot of noise and people were saying, you know, "Statue of Liberty." And I didn't know what it was. I had no idea. Nobody - nobody told me about it before I got on the boat. I saw it was a great big statue of a lady. But, uh, it was so huge, you know, and everything. But I was very unaware of what it was all about. And later on I realized -- when I left Ellis Island, in fact. About ten minutes later or so, I was in the street with my cousin, my aunt and uncle walking while he was carrying my suitcase. He turned and said to me, "You know what that is?" I said, "It must be important, because everybody turn and looked at it, and there was a man talking about it, and I couldn't understand what it was." You know. And, uh, so he explained to me what it was all about. Of course, as years went on, I learned the importance of it, what it meant.

FEENEY: Why were you processed through Ellis Island?

PEARL: Why? Well, what do you mean by processed? It didn't take a long time to process me. I -- they knew I had everything, all the papers. So they had to check, check the papers through, I guess, to see if I was the person traveling with those papers.

FEENEY: Can you tell me what it was like to be processed on Ellis Island?

PEARL: Uh . . .

FEENEY: Do you remember the whole procedure, what you . . .

PEARL: No, I don't. I don't remember being examined or anything like that. Some people say they were examined, you know. This is before my arrival. Years back. They were held back for so many days or sometimes weeks. They had to be quarantined, for some reason. But I don't remember ever being held back. I was just, I went through the regular routine of "Give me your passport, your name, and who's picking you up, who are you going to, or where are you coming from." You know, and this and that, "Your age". And that's about it.

FEENEY: Did you have an interpreter who helped you at the time?

PEARL: Uh. N-- yes, yes. There was somebody there, yes. I don't know if it was a lady or a man, but there was somebody there. I couldn't speak English. They had to, uh -- in fact, in Warsaw, when I saw the American consulate, there was an interpreter, too. And -- but not when I got on the boat, I was on my own. There was no, uh, I don't, I didn't need anybody. The stewards, they spoke German. They didn't speak Polish. A few words, not too - too much. They spoke German, Yiddish. I

spoke Yiddish very well at that time. But I didn't know a word of English. I didn't know anything.

FEENEY: At Ellis Island, what was your impression when you first went into the great buildings of Ellis Island?

PEARL: Um, my impression was, "Look at all these people. There were so many people there." I didn't realize, there were so many people got off the boat. I was very quiet. I just held onto my suitcase and my papers and (she laughs) waited for my relatives to pick me up. And I think I stayed put. I didn't go walking around or looking around or anything. I knew it was a huge building from where I sat. I looked and I saw all these people. My God, you know. And I just kept to myself.

FEENEY: Was it the first time you were in a building as large as the main registry room at Ellis Island?

PEARL: What do you mean by main registry?

FEENEY: You say you went into a very large hall where there were many people.

PEARL: Right.

FEENEY: The name of that is called, is the Registry Room, some people call it the Great Hall of Ellis Island.

PEARL: Oh, I see.

FEENEY: And do you remember your impression when you walked in there?

PEARL: I really don't know how I felt, except I must have thought about my relatives. Will they accept me? For one thing, they wanted somebody older. They wanted somebody older. When they saw me, I'll tell you. Especially my aunt, she pointed at me and she said to my uncle, "Are you sure we sent for her? She's so little, so green." I must have been green from being seasick or something. But she was a little disappointed. She wanted somebody older. (she laughs)

FEENEY: Were the inspectors concerned in any way that you were a young girl traveling alone?

PEARL: No. Nobody ever questioned me. The stewards used to keep an eye on me. I mean, they would, every day, you know, breakfast time is now. But . . .

FEENEY: At Ellis Island were they at all concerned, like who was going to pick you up and where you were going?

PEARL: When I checked in and checked out, oh, yes, yes. Sure, they wanted to be sure that I knew who was going to pick me up. Okay? And I knew their names, my relatives' names, and I had a photograph of them with me always, at all times. And, but there was no extra concern and I wasn't worried or concerned about it. I mean, I knew they were going to

pick me up. I felt safe, I felt safe with all the people on the boat. I - I was safe, yes.

FEENEY: Did your relatives come and pick you up at Ellis Island?

PEARL: Yes, yes.

FEENEY: Had you known them before?

PEARL: No, had no idea. Only the little photograph. No idea what they'd be like, or how it would be with them or --. They were a lot older than I was. He was seventy-two, and she was about seventy, and I was fourteen. So there was quite a big gap and a lot of understanding had to be on both sides.

FEENEY: When you left Ellis Island, where did you go? What was your destination?

PEARL: Well, New York, Cleveland. I got off Ellis Island, New York, and Cleveland was my destination.

FEENEY: Did you go, you went directly to New York City?

PEARL: Ellis Island was New York.

FEENEY: Well, after Ellis Island.

PEARL: Right.

FEENEY: Did you go to New York City, or did you go to New Jersey?

PEARL: I went to Brooklyn -- my other aunt and uncle, my father's sister and her husband and my cousin. With the aunt and uncle from Cleveland, picked me up at Ellis Island. Went to Brooklyn, New York. We had a big dinner there. My two relatives, my -- the two sides met for the first time. And from there we took a train to Cleveland from Brooklyn.

FEENEY: What were your first impressions of New York?

PEARL: Everything was so big, the buildings. I really was scared. I was more scared of the building than being on the boat. I couldn't imagine how you can walk near a tall building without having something fall out on you from a window or from the building. And then the cars used to drive by you, and I used to stand there for ten minutes until I got myself together and have nerve to cross the street. Because I was afraid the car would be faster than I, you know. And I had no idea about lights or anything. My cousin explained to me about lights. And then when I got to Cleveland they explained to me about traffic lights and cars and street cars.

FEENEY: So you went to Cleveland right after that?

PEARL: Right after Brooklyn, the dinner, we got on a train, came to Cleveland, Ohio.

FEENEY: Was it a long trip?

PEARL: By train I think it was about twelve hours, twelve, thirteen hours, something like that. It was a long, yes. When you think of it nowadays, I don't think it takes that long now by train. Maybe seven hours, right? They have faster trains now. (she laughs) In those days trains were slow.

FEENEY: And what was it like when you settled in Cleveland?

PEARL: I had a nice home, a nice place to live, but I missed my family. I was homesick for a while. I thought of them a lot. Because I had so much here. They had nothing. And I, my main objective was to finish school or get out of school and get to work, leave school early, get to work and save up money and try and get somebody over here before anything happens over there. But it didn't work out that way.

FEENEY: Tell me about your education after you came here?

PEARL: My education was limited. I had to do it all on my own. (she laughs) Elementary school, junior high and high school, I went to night school. I worked, and I went to night school.

FEENEY: Was it difficult to learn the language?

PEARL: At first, yes. But I'm very grateful to -- to the youngsters, the elementary school children. They taught me more than the teachers. On the way to school and on the way home they would point to the sidewalk and the trees and the leaves and the birds, and they would show me how to pronounce everything. You know, you have trouble pronouncing the T-H-E. Right away, that's the biggest problem people have when foreign people come over. They say, "Da." Everything is "Da" instead of "the." And they even used to come over to the house and help me with my homework.

Once in a while I bump into them now. They're younger than I am, of course, and they're amazed, "You have no accent." I says, "I have you to thank. (she laughs) to thank you for". Uh, it was fun. Those kids were so nice. They were so good to me. Then, of course, I had American girl friends -- my age. We used to go to the library a lot, get books out. And read, they would read with me, and I - I enjoyed life. I - I had a nice teenage life here. Used to go out. I had dates. The normal life, you know. I wasn't backwards, I don't think. (she laughs) I had a good life.

FEENEY: So you worked. Where did you work?

PEARL: Oh, I had so many jobs. Oh, where do I begin? My first job was in a dime store when I was sixteen. That was for a short while. And then when I -- then I got a job in a dress factory. I was there for about three years on and off. And in between the jobs at the dress

factory, which was seasonal work, I had to look for other jobs. I was a waitress. Do you - do you remember Clark's, no, this was before your time. Okay. Clark's restaurant. I was a waitress. I was a, um, bakery store clerk. I worked in several restaurants. I also worked in several bakeries in the neighborhood. Then I saved up enough money to go to beauty school. I became a beauty operator.

And that's when I met my husband, where I was rooming. (she laughs) I met him, I was waiting for my State Board license. I went to Columbus to take my exam, and he had -- [aside] Is it okay? -- he had just gotten out of the army. And where I lived, I didn't know anything about him. He came on a Sunday morning ringing the bell. And where I lived, the bak- the lady's husband, he was a baker. He slept all day and worked all night. And this was Sunday, my laundry time. I was doing laundry down in the basement. And the bell rings, and this lady said to me, "Hurry up, run upstairs before my husband wakes up. Some nut is ringing the bell and it's Sunday morning." So I get to the door and I says to him, he looked -- he had army fatigue clothes on -- and a little briefcase under his -- I thought he was a salesman.

Just as I get to the do-do-the door, he still has his finger on the bell. I said to him, "Are you crazy? For one thing, it's Sunday morning. It's ten o'clock in the morning." I says, "Can't you wait? Do you have to lean on the bell?" And he says to me, "Are these the Lazniks [ph]? Do they live here?" I says, "Yes." And I said, "Did you want to see Mrs. Laznik or Mr. Laznik?" He says, "Well, either one, if they're home." I says, "Well, I'll get you Mrs. Laznik." So she gets to the door, and I ignore them, and I go back downstairs to do my laundry. And I hear her scream out, and I run back up, and she says, "That's my son, number five."

She had four sons. I didn't know them. They were all in the service. And from that time on, it took three months for him to get a date with me. (she laughs) How did we get on that? You were asking me about the [not understood] . (she laughs) Well, I was a beauty operator for four years before I gave it up. And, that time, I went with him for about a year. We decided to get married. He was waiting to go to art school. I worked, he was going to art school. And, uh, we've been - we've been married for forty-one years. It'll be. Uh-huh.

FEENEY: Did it take you a while to feel at home here in America?

PEARL: Um, not with my friends. With my relatives, yes. They were very over-protective over me, very over-protective. Should I tell you about my personal life? I don't like to talk about it but, since -- uh, well. The people who brought me over here, for one thing, they were much older than I, and she said, "You know how to read? You know how to write? You can tell the scale in the store?" She couldn't read or read, or write. She raised ten children, that's why. She never had the opportunity. "I don't want you to go back to school in September." I was fifteen years old at that time.

And that's when the trouble begin. So, when I was sixteen -- when I was sixteen, I decided to leave them. I told them about it, and I

told their children. They all had families. Had a little meeting. They knew I was teary-eyed about the whole thing. My uncle wanted me to go to school, my aunt didn't. There was a big fight about it all the time. And so I told their children that I have to look for a place to live. I have to, get out of here and I have to continue going to school and -- even if it means going to work -- in school part of the time, you know. So that's when I broke up with them, and, of course, they were beginning to have their own problems, age-wise, you know, and this and that. And I lost contact with their children, too, for a number of years, until after I married and had my own family.

FEENEY: So at age sixteen you were on your own, then?

PEARL: Yes. I was on my own at age sixteen, uh-huh. But I had friends and I had, they were all nice to me. Their mothers were like my mother, and they all took me in. I mean, they, I didn't live with them in their houses, but we'd get together holidays and things like that, and maybe they felt sorry for me. I don't know, because I was alone, but I never showed it. I was never. I always kept busy going to night school and working all the time, and learning things and striving ahead and making friends. And I wrote to my family. Not about the episode with my relatives that I never --

FEENEY: Did you eventually lose contact with your family in Poland?

PEARL: Yes, yes.

FEENEY: When was the last you heard from any of them?

PEARL: The last I heard from them was 1941. And my father wrote me and told me that my brother is getting ready to leave for Russia. My sister will try and follow him, my younger sister. And she was just a kid, a teenager, a standard teenager. And, "Don't worry about us, we're all fine, we're all in good health. And we're being treated--" how did he put it? - (I think the Russians were just beginning to move in slowly on that part of Poland). -- "We're being treated okay." -- or something to that matter. And, "write to us." And I did, and I never got any more letters. 1941 was the last time. I heard from my brother 1942 and '43. My brother was in Russia in 1942, okay. He was in Siberia. He was glad that he got into the Russian part, because Germany was squeezing Poland, tearing them apart. So those who lived near the Russian border were able to, those who were able to run through the woods and hide and things like that. They were taken in by the Russians -- if you were able to work.

And he was telling me in the postcard that he was being treated well and that he's healthy, and he was in a mining town, and there were so many addresses on it, his number and the number where he was, the barrack number, and his own personal number. So many numbers. And I could not decipher anything, and I don't write Russian, I don't read Russian. But I wrote him in my own language, in Yiddish, and I had somebody write the Russian address on the letter for me. I have not heard from him since. I believe he's alive, yes. Because he was never affiliated with anything political, and he was sort of an expert in

sewing clothing, men's clothing. He learned that trade while I was here. He learned it over there.

And I - I believe, well, you know, as children you always have fights. (she laughs) We used to fight a lot, he and I, because my parents used to favor me over him. I realize it's a bad thing to do. But I used to beg him to write to me, even when the times were quiet, like from the year of 1936 to '39, you know, to 1940. I think during those three years he wrote me maybe twice. He finally wrote me a half a page. But from Russia he wrote me in 1943. That was the last card. And he told me to keep on writing him, to -- to write to my parents but mail it to him, and he will send it on to them. I did that a few times, too, but I never, I never got an answer back.

FEENEY: Did America meet your expectations? Was, it everything you thought it would be, America, living here?

PEARL: Oh, plus, even more, even more. Everything was so, it was like a dream. It hurt me because I couldn't have my family to join, to enjoyed it - dream. Really. I mean, they were so much younger than I, those children, except for my brother. And, uh, they were such a beautiful family. They were just gorgeous. Oh, it was everything. (pause) Uh, now? Okay. My aunt and I used to go to the movies a lot. That was her best pastime. Sunday we'd see a double feature. The first Sunday she took me she took the lunch along, because we would sit there for four-and-a-half hours. She took two bananas and some other fruit, and she did not explain to me that you have to peel a banana. And I ate the skin, and I was chewing it. (she laughs) Half of the banana, and the skin and everything. And that filled me up, and she says, "Finish the rest." And I says, "I'm full." I brought it home, and my uncle asked me what did I do with the peeling, to the half a banana. Because he had an idea that I might have eaten that. (she laughs) I tell to my kids. They don't believe me. (she laughs)

FEENEY: Ida, thank you very much.

PEARL: You're welcome. It was my pleasure. Oh, God. (end of tape)

NPS-158/PEARL