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LOUISE BRANDEIS POPPER
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AUSTRIA, 1938
AGE UNKNOWN
PASSAGE ON "THE EUROPA"

POPPER: ... came from Vienna in 1938 when Hitler invaded Austria. I was fortunate in obtaining an affidavit through my relative Justice Louie D. Brandeis, and that helped me getting out of Austria, which at that time wasn't easy. I came here in July on the S.S. Europa, and July being a summer month, the trip was quite pleasant, and arriving here I encountered difficulties that I had not expected because I came over with my sister's two unaccompanied girls and, as you know, this is somehow against the law or something. One has to be met by somebody. Nobody was here to meet me. Being summer months the Justice and the whole family was in the country and Justice had sent me a telegram and a letter greeting me here and wishing me well. But still it didn't help me getting off the boat.

And I saw everybody leave including the waiters, the cooks, and the cleaning women, and I was just detained and we both didn't know why that was, we couldn't explain it. And finally a social worker from the National Council of Jewish Women came and explained the situation to us and straightened things out for us and brought us to Congress House which was under the auspices of the National Jewish Congress, and Rabbi Stephen Wise was the founder and Mrs. Wise was, of course, also very engaged in the work helping refugees. So I was quite lucky being helped by them in the arrival and the difficulties were fairly soon forgotten. Then the difficulty arose to finding a job. That was very, very difficult. I had worked with an Austrian travel office in Vienna and my sister was connected with the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and we were accustomed to travelling, but here again it was very difficult to find a job. Actually, it took me seventeen months to find a job. I went to employment agencies, I looked at the papers, I went to various meetings in which newcomers were advised how to apply for a job and how to present and to look for a job and I just couldn't find one. In fact, I thought that to put lipstick on was very indecent at that time for a European girl, so I would conquer America by not using lipstick. Now,

after seventeen months I found out (Ms. Nash laughs) that this isn't so. And I had to look like all the other girls and I did find a job with the National Refugee Service.

NASH: What year was that?

POPPER: In 1940. For seventeen months I had no job. And I became a receptionist. I knew English before I came, but my English had improved a lot and I got scholarships through my agency to study at Columbia University. See, I was fortunate in many ways. And I studied for two years and I worked for the agency for eight years.

NASH: What did you study?

POPPER: Social work and refugee work. The program was called International Administration and it was preparing workers for social work after the war in European countries. So that's why I got the scholarship to do that, of a European background. I was hoping to move on then to other jobs.

NASH: Could you tell me a little bit about your experiences in Vienna before you came to the United States?

POPPER: I came from a middle-class family, but my parents had

passed away and both my sister and I worked to support us and as I said, I worked with the Austrian Travel Office, which was a government office, and my sister worked with the Kunsthistoriches Museum and so we supported ourselves before coming to this country and we thought we just would arrive here and work again and support ourselves again, but it wasn't that easy in 1938, '39, and 1940 wasn't easy for Americans either so it was very difficult for us get a job, but again we were fortunate in having the help of Justice Brandeis and his family throughout these years. And, in fact, they are very kind to us even now even though we don't need their help financially, they are helping us socially and in other areas. Well, it is good to know people here and have relatives who care. Any other questions?

NASH: What were your experiences of Hitler that made you decide to leave? How did you feel?

POPPER: Well, you know that everybody who could had to move away in order to avoid being sent to concentration camp and killed.

NASH: Did you know people...

POPPER: But since we left early, he had come in March and we were over here in July, we did not suffer physically. But, of course,

we had to leave everything, most everything there. We came here with three trunks. It was permitted to take three trunks out at the time, which we did.

NASH: Did you have friends who had suffered?

POPPER: Oh, yes, of course. And the rest of my family perished because they were older than we are and more by didn't see what Hitler meant to them. They thought they were law-abiding citizens and they were old and nothing would happen to them for the little span of life that was left for them, but they were mistaken and they were sent to Theresiensstadt and Auschwitz and they were killed.

NASH: Could you tell me a little bit about the trip on the boat, things that you enjoyed?

POPPER: I know, I told you was during the summer months, it was a pleasant, quite trip.

NASH: Were there many Jews on the boat?

POPPER: Ii could have been, I don't know because we didn't have contact with other people, we stayed by ourselves, sister

and I. I don't know about others on the boat. We definitely didn't meet anybody, only we would have meet them afterwards we didn't make any friendships there. It was only a five day trip.

NASH: What were your other first impressions of the United States? (background noise) You arrived in New York?

POPPER: I arrived in New York midst of the summer heat, but at Congress House they tried to make everything as pleasant as possible and we found a furnished room near the Metropolitan Museum so that my sister, who was very much very depressed at that time, got a lift by going to the museum and that's how we picked up or learned to improve our English because we went to the lectures and even if you didn't understand everything that was said, by pointing at the paintings we understood what the lecturer said. And it was the same thing with first aid. I took a first aid course and again I didn't understand everything the teacher said, but (she clears her throat) by showing how the bed was made and I understood, of course, what she was doing and picked up English that way. So actually I went to very few English classes. There was WPA still at that time and they still had free English classes, but

I didn't go very often to them because I felt that I knew more that the rest of the group and it was just, wasn't necessary for me to go to these classes. And that's the way I learned English, by going to the Metropolitan Museum, by going to lectures even if I didn't understand everything, by going to the Red Cross and learning care of patients. It was much more interesting way of picking up the language.

NASH: What contact did you make? Were you able to maintain contact with your relatives in Europe?

POPPER: I tried to, but it was only in the very beginning, in '38 when we arrived, we still got mail from overseas, but then since my relatives were going to concentration camps, there was no possibility of writing anymore, and we had tried to get them affidavits, but we, affidavits were never good enough because I myself gave affidavits, after I got a job in 1940, but since my yearly salary at that time was eight hundred sixty dollars, of course, my affidavit wasn't considered good enough. And I found other people, strangers, who gave supporting affidavits to mine, but because they were such strangers to me as well, again the affidavits were not considered strong enough.

NASH: What had to be in an affidavit?

POPPER: I beg your pardon?

NASH: What had to be in the affidavit?

POPPER: You had to divulge your income and capital and, of course, strangers wouldn't want to give that information. I could give it. I just had a small savings account and I had my eight hundred eighty dollar salary. I had no feelings about it, but strangers, of course, did have.

NASH: Did Justice Brandeis have to divulge his income?

POPPER: I'm sure he had to divulge his income for me, yes, but to my knowledge he didn't give other affidavits, only for me and my sister. (break in tape) One of the shortcomings in our immigration was the fact that we weren't told, while still in Vienna, what to take along and what to leave. We knew what we had to leave. This we knew through Hitler regulations, but we weren't told by the consul for instance at our examination. You know there is a medical examination when the passport is being examined, the affidavits is being examined, so you have

interviews at the consulate, and I think...

NASH: American Consulate?

POPPER: American Consulate, sure. And it would have been good if information sheet would have been handed to say such things are not necessary to bring along and others are. So, for instance, we brought here sheets, pillows, blankets, mattresses galore, you know, and now, still now, in '73 I'm stuck with linen that I cannot use because the size is different and the material is different. This would have helped a great deal if I had been told to leave these things behind and perhaps even take a piece of furniture that I liked or something, which we did not do. We did not come with a van. Some people came with vans and had their European furniture with them, but we thought, we two girls, we won't need much apartment as we had in Europe and so we thought it was much better to leave these things (she chuckles) behind and come over with our mattresses so that we know where to put our tired head, and which turned out to be not good at all. So that is one of the things that I would suggest that one could and should do.

NASH: Did you take over any special mementos?

POPPER: It so happens that I did not, but I do know, of course, that others did. An uncle, he put some of my things in storage and after the war I did find a few things. They had the receipt that the Germans had taken away suitcases with material or papers, papers which, of course, meant shares in stocks, but they called it papers so I could not ask for anything else to be returned to me because what kind of paper would she return to me. The stocks and bonds were, of course, taken by the Germans. But I found a few things which you see here in my atrium.

NASH: What were the regulation that the Germans would not allow you to take? What couldn't you take?

POPPER: Well, of course, you couldn't take any money to begin with. You couldn't take anything of value, you know, like paintings and antiques. That was quite difficult. You had to get permission for each and every piece and we just wanted to get out as soon as possible. And that is why we didn't even, when we saw the beginning difficulties in getting this permission, we just gave up and came over to be sure we'd come over alive and not have all our things here and be sent to concentration camps ourselves.

NASH: Did you find many difficulties in getting out?

POPPER: Yes, (she clears her throat) we found it difficult because we had to pay our tax, which I could understand, but they didn't let me know how much the tax was so I knew, they told me I owed them the tax for the year, was July, so that means for the half year that I was there, even though I had lost my job on April 13th when Hitler invaded Austria, because it was a government job so, of course, I was let off immediately. But I could not get the exit permit because I didn't know how much the tax would be that I would have to pay, and until they finally told me in July, I was able to pay it and get the exit permit.

NASH: And what was the tax?

POPPER: It was an Austrian sum. I don't (she chuckles) recall it anymore. You mean how much it was?

NASH: Uhm.

POPPER: No, I don't recall it anymore. (break in tape) One of the lucky incidents that I can report to you was the fact that I was sent as a representative by the agency I worked

for, and it was the National Refugee Service, to Oswego to the Emergency Refugee Shelter that President Roosevelt intended to start. And I and other representatives of, my agencies as well as other agencies, the Catholic, the Protestants, the Quakers, were also sent to Oswego to advise the government and help in the beginning the running of the operation. And it was a difficult problem because there were fourteen nationalities and five or six religions starting with the very orthodox, Conservative, Reform Jews to one Mohammedan, I believe, and, of course, many Protestants, Catholics, Russian Orthodox. There were difficulties with the food because some of the Orthodox Jews felt that since there was no rabbi on the premises, food was not good enough for them. (she clears her throat) We tried to interpret, not I, of course, but a rabbi who was brought in tried to interpret the Talmud which allowed different foods at times of stress and times of travel. But it was to no avail and there were quite some difficulties not only with the food but the also language problem. There was a large group of Yugoslavs and smaller group of Germans, still smaller group of East Germans. One Russian prince was among them who thought that he was much better than the other crowd which was about nine hundred sixty eight people who had come over

from Italy because they had blocked the roads of Southern Italy when the Americans and Palestinian Jews tried to land. It was Roosevelt's idea that it was much better to feed them here than send food over there. Also to clear the roads and clear the camps, and so they were brought here and I met my husband there. He was one of the nine hundred and eighty six refugees who had come over. He was a banker in Europe and had lost his mother and two sisters in concentration camps. One brother was able to flee to Switzerland and another to Australia. My husband was in Italy during the war in various camps and five prisons because there was a law in Italy that in the northern part where they did not have concentration camps yet, that they had to be detained in prisons, and he was chained to other people being brought from one camp to another as the Germans advanced and the fights went on in France and Italy. So he was chained to an epileptic who had fits during this transport and threw all those chains to him, with him falling, getting up, falling, getting up. So he had really quite some experiences. But he had wonderful spirit and grew by this experience. Other people just broke down. And I remember there was a family, or was it only a mother. The father had perished because he had thought that it would be good for him to

flee over the Alps by foot and the family stayed, and they had seventeen children and the oldest was already nineteen or something, and when I interviewed her as to her needs, they needed just everything because they couldn't bring things along, the small ones couldn't carry anything. Only the little ones did carry a few torn underwear and such things. So she said, "My mother is just getting the children but I am bringing them up." And that was really some experience and we, of course, felt that the ones ten years old to have to bring up and help in the bringing up of the smaller ones was already taking quite some advantage of and I don't know as to what happened to them now, whether these experiences lingered on and shaped their whole life. (she pauses) That's all I have to say about.

NASH: What was the reaction of the town's people in Oswego?

POPPER: Oh, that's really something. They were very upset and they had a Negro regiment before at the fort because it was a real fort, as you know, Fort Oswego is a very important place where battles were had with the Indians and the town's people were upset in a way I can't describe it. They complained that they had Negro regiments before in the barracks and now they get these dirty refugees. In

the end, I should say that they should had been very glad to have them because with the small money, they got eighteen dollars a month from the government, and they were able to make few purchases in town, whereas when they finally left, they stayed there for two years, and then they were released by a Christmas message by President Truman. And then the town really went under. They still had the teacher's college in Oswego, which is a beautiful area and they get students there. But otherwise the whole mainstay, we went there back to visit with them, my husband and I, in fact we went there twice because my husband struck up many friendships with families. They came to the gate, actually that was an unfortunate thing, there was a gate around the fort so that these refugees who had come over couldn't flee, could not get out and separate around America, because they were here detained only for the duration of the war. But these people came to the gate and through the gate they struck up friendships and then when they were permitted to go out on a pass, they visited some of the families in Oswego. So, I should not say that the whole town was up, but on Main Street and so you could here their complaint. Anyway, when we went back it was a dead city. And the Main Street was dilapidated, and later on a rehabilitation program for Main Street and it could be that there are now new buildings, but when we visited ten years after the release of my husband, that was in '56, the camp was there from '44 to '46, and the houses were boarded up and the street was very poor, I think.

Everybody complained that they had left.

NASH: And how did your husband find work when he left?

POPPER: Well, he had been a banker in Europe and he knew accounting and so he worked here as an assistant accountant. In '46 the situation was easier than it was in perhaps '38 when I came, you see. So, it wasn't difficult for him to find a job.

END OF INTERVIEW