

NPS-22/HELEN ROSEN

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INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

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TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE KEYLOR, 3/1979

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TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: JANET LEVINE, Ph.D AND PETER HOM, 5/1995

POLAND, 1930

AGE 6

PASSAGE ON "THE PRESIDENT HARDING"

ROSEN:... by saying that we left Warsaw in the year 1930. We had to take a train to go to the Port of Danzig where we embarked on a smaller boat to take us to Southampton where we took the President Harding. This was one of the big ships that were being used at that time by the President Line. And we stayed on this ship for about seven days, of which time my mother experienced a great deal of seasickness and stayed in the cabin for the entire time while I had a ball playing games with the attendant and having had my birthday celebration on the boat. When we arrived we went to a large room which was an immigration clearing place and at that time we had two very large trunks made out of straw and these were examined thoroughly by the immigration

official. It took quite a bit of time to get through the Immigrations and Customs, I guess it would be, and my father who had great difficulty in finding us, was very upset.

NASH:Your father had arrived before your family?

ROSEN:Yes. In order for use to come to this country my father had to be a citizen and had been in this country for five years. And so he had been waiting for us at one part of the building and we had been in another part of the building, and the first thing I heard was a great big commotion between my father and mother. My father finally secured a taxi that was willing to take the two straw trunks to Brooklyn where he had been living with an aunt of ours, and we went through the Lincoln Tunnel, which was newly opened at the time and was considered one of the great feats of accomplishment, and all I can remember was seeing the white tile walls as we were riding through.

NASH:Do you know what port you arrived at?

ROSEN:We arrived in Hoboken.

NASH:And where did you begin to live, in Brooklyn?

ROSEN:Yes, we began to live in Brooklyn. After a few days I was enrolled in an elementary school and I went to PS-164 in Brooklyn, and I didn't speak a word of English. My mother had been speaking Polish to me as a child. I understood a little bit of Yiddish. And when I was enrolled I was a figure of curiosity because I couldn't communicate in any way with any of the children. The teacher didn't pay any particular attention to me. I sat in the classroom for six months not uttering a sound and not having anything directed to me in the way of questions or being paid pay any particular attention. The only attention I was paid was by my fellow classmates. And what they did was subject me to cruel childish indignities, and one of them being when I went into the bathroom they proceeded to pull down my panties, and I came home in tears and I was very upset and I really didn't want to go back to school, but this was something that was unheard in our home because education was the prime concern, of my mother particularly. And there was nothing to be done but I had to go back to school and I had to be in school, and just by sitting and listening I learned to speak English. I repeated the first grade. I became a very good student,

(she laughs) and because I had repeated first grade I was accelerated in third grade so that I was on grade level throughout my stay in the school system. But I am rather amused now as an employee of the New York City School System, the school I work in, there are many children who are newly arrived immigrants from such countries as Yugoslavia and Italy and they speak in their native tongue to each other and there is an ongoing communication in many foreign tongues in the school in which I work, and I always smile and think of my own childhood where I spoke to no one until I learned how to speak English so that the process of immigration as far as the area that I am working in now has changed considerably. I have been asked about how I related to the children who lived in the apartment house where we had moved to after coming to Brooklyn, and I told the interviewer that I had always been somewhat of a snob as a little child where we lived in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw, which is really the ghetto, as has been widely established. It was the Jewish enclave in the city. I personally chose to be friends with only the people who, the children whose people were in a somewhat better professional or business circumstance than the general class of people that we were neighborly with. What I am referring to specifically is in Warsaw

there was a class of people called "feldshers." Now, a feldsher is an assistant doctor, and my playmates were the children of the feldsher, and when I came to Brooklyn, from all that my mother told me, I didn't choose to play with the neighbors' children. They were not really of any great interest to me because they seemed to be very rough and very lacking in the manners to which I had gotten accustomed to seeing in other children. So then my mother always would say to me, "Well, you were a snob in Warsaw and you are a snob in Brooklyn," and the extent of my playing with other children was therefore very limited.

I continued to do a great deal of reading and really became very proficient in my studies and excelled in school, and I was very school orientated. And didn't really have very many playmates until I was about ten where I guess my American socialization had really taken hold, and that was four years and that is when I started to have more of the so-called neighbors' children as my friends.

END OF INTERVIEW