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LEAH DRACHMAN
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- **RUSSIA: BIALYSTOK**
- **US:**

NASH: Today is October 17, 1973 and I have the pleasure of speaking with Mrs. Leah Tannenbaum Drachman who was born in Bialystok, Russia in 19—

DRACHMAN: ---hundred.

NASH: and came to this country when she was sixteen years old. Mrs. Drachman is going to tell us the story of why she came, what it was like, and what her adjustment was later on. Mrs. Drachman, would you like to begin?

DRACHMAN: Surely. We were under German occupation for about a year and three

months when I left home, Bialystok, and there was little food and a great many illnesses. Most of the young people either had tuberculosis or typhoid fever. My oldest sister, who was three years older than myself, was very ill with tuberculosis and was not expected to live. I had a sister a year and three months older than myself who learned about people going to America and being we had relatives here, she wanted to go. And when I heard about it, I wanted to go too. My parents were thinking very seriously because while it was expensive to go and there wasn't much money as all the banks were closed and there wasn't any business at all. And whatever money they hid and saved, we had to buy food on the black-market which was very expensive. But they felt that somebody should be saved, because they didn't want everyone to get sick.

My oldest sister was not as strong a person as I was. I was the strongest of the children and after a great deal of debate, they decided that they would permit me to go and I was to go with a person who was a friend of ours and had been visiting in Europe and married my mother's best friend. And he wanted to go back and then get his wife to America. And they -- the Germans said that he could leave and we all were going through examinations and a great many forms to make up and doctor's visits and just two days before we were supposed to leave, the Germans did not permit him to leave because he was only forty-one or forty-two years old. So I wanted to go anyway and my parents decided to let me do so. I left home shortly after my sixteenth birthday.

My mother was too upset to see me off, my father alone took me to the railroad station where I met the group I was to travel with to the United States [Aside: Because I want to give the international] under the sponsorship of the International Red Cross. The train took us to Kovno. We arrived there in the evening in a pouring rain. Early next morning, I

woke up by the sound of terrible swearing and awful language that came from above my bunk from a mother and daughter. And when I turned around, next to me in the bunk was a lady with a goiter. It upset me very much and I sat there crying. My -- when I was planning to go to America my father heard of someone he was doing business with whose daughter, who was about twenty years old, was also going to be in the same group. And he asked him that his daughter look me up.

She evidently was across the way from me in the bunk and she and a friend came over to ask me why I was crying, whether I was lonesome after home. And I said, "No, I just cannot stand that language as I never heard anything like that at home." And she found out my name and said, "Ooh, your father told my father about you and don't worry, we will be together and you don't have to pay any attention to anybody else." So then breakfast was served and being there was so little food in Bialystok, and everybody was hungry, everyone rushed to grab as much as they could from the table. And being I could not push myself, I went without breakfast.

The -- my friends and also a lady in the thirties who was a Jewish singer on visit in Europe and was not an American citizen, was coming also joined them. And they went to the manager on my behalf to see how I could get some food. The manager decided that we, the group of us, the small group of us, should eat after the other people have finished. We were in Kovno for four days for complete physical examinations and when we were escorted to the doctors, we were marched in the middle of the street with German soldiers with open bayonets. The --- when we left for Rotterdam on the train, the management assigned a car to the -- for the small group of ours and we had a broom and could keep the place clean. The other car -- cars were more crowded and was particularly hard on the people in the cars who had children and babies

on account of the sanitary condition.

Going through on the train to Rotterdam, we were in locked cars going through Germany with soldiers with open bayonets guarding us. In Rotterdam we were eleven days waiting for another contingent to come. There the sleeping quarters were closed for the day and we were all assembled in one large room which was noisy, smokey, and not pleasant. On nice days when it wasn't raining, we went around seeing sights in Rotterdam and were outdoors most all the time. Our food --- the food for the Jewish immigrants was served not too far away and I believe it was paid for by the Joint Distribution Committee. I also understand that they contributed some money towards our food on the boat. We embarked on the steamship Amsterdam -- New Amsterdam in the evening and I think it was in the dark.

Being it was Fall, the ocean was rough and everyone was seasick. Early in the morning they asked us to come up on the deck to go through our documents. Most people were too sick to come up and those that came up were not fully dressed, including myself. The doctor came on the deck and suggested that everyone go and eat breakfast, go to the dining room and eat breakfast and also stay on the deck and not go to the bunks. I took his advice and I felt fine for the rest of the trip which took seventeen days, and most of the people were too seasick to come and eat in the dining room. Of the 250 or 300 people in third class where we were, less than 20 people ate in the dining room.

NASH: Was there steerage on that ship?

DRACHMAN: I don't think so. It was a beautiful boat, the New Amsterdam, including, and I was the one that could eat in the dining room. I felt fine. We stopped in England someplace, I do not know where, for Scotland Yard

to go through the boat. They examined each passenger and also everything that was on the boat. One of my friends who was so seasick in third class and being her brother had sent her money to come, she transferred to the second class. And they gave her the third degree wanting to know--they thought maybe she was a spy or something, you know. And when we were in England stationary, everybody felt fine. They were eating in the dining room and dancing and having a good time. And the minute we started out again and they was on the ocean, they were seasick. And the same people were the only ones eating in the dining room.

When we arrived in Ellis Island everyone was very nervous. And we passed through the lines and there were men on either side and on some of the people those men put chalk marks on their back. Of course, the people themselves did not know it, but the people in back of them could see it and were worried and wondering what it was all about. Only later we learned that those men noticed something unusual either physical or something else and they wanted to examine those people more thoroughly. Being my address was to go to Evanston to my cousin, Evanston. Illinois, the Travelers some --- one of the Travelers Aid Society person came over and helped me purchase a ticket for -- to go to Evanston and also suggested I send a telegram to my cousin.

NASH: Did the price of the ticket seem reasonable to you at the time?

DRACHMAN: No. I still had ten rubles left when I came to Evanston.

NASH: What did Ellis Island look like? Do you remember?

DRACHMAN: It was a large--Ellis Island was a large place and quite --- wasn't too crowded --- and spacious, and being I was being helped everywhere; I

didn't have to look for anything. And I found it very convenient. I didn't find it at all oppressive. And I had no trouble at all because I was in perfect health and young and, as I say, from the Travelers Aid Society were a great help. And I was only a few hours in Ellis Island and when I embarked on the train --- and I remember passing through the Palisades or seeing something --- it was still daylight evidently, that I could see the shore. It was very pretty. And as further I went away from New York, the more upset and worried I was getting, not knowing whether my cousins would meet me as we haven't heard from them in two years or so on account of the war and no mail was coming, and, of course, my folks could not let them know I was coming.

NASH: Did you have any trouble at Ellis Island because you were a single woman?

DRACHMAN: No, I had no trouble at all. It was very simple. At that time there wasn't any quota when I came. . You know. So it was --- was very simple, it was very easy. I had no trouble, and when I got on the train and I was all by myself, I began to worry. And being I ate so good on the ship and gained the weight, I found I couldn't eat anything on the train, although I think I was more than a day --- maybe a day, maybe two days on it. And they were selling sandwiches and milk and I bought one but I couldn't eat anything. And I was just worried. You know, what would I do if I come there all by myself and I didn't know the language. So, but I was so surprised. They ---when we came --- got off in Chicago and they said I need to change to another train; I was so surprised to hear my name called out. I did have a tag with my name on it, pinned on me.

NASH: Who pinned it on you?

DRACHMAN: The Travelers Aid Society in Ellis Island. And, oh, I had a new blouse to

change when I get to -- near Evanston, but I didn't know I was near there. And a lady said, "Your relatives are here to meet you," and she ushered me over to them. And she also was an Evanstonian and knew my cousin and his sister, but they were not permitted to meet me themselves because I was a minor. The Travelers Aid Society had to take care of me to see that I meet the right people, which I thought was wonderful. And, of course, we had a bite to eat and my cousin had a ca-- automobile and we drove out to Evanston, which was to be my home for the next six years. The fi-- it was lucky I came then because ours was the second and the last boat to go through for the duration of the war.

NASH: [You know what they s—?]

DRACHMAN: When I was in Ellis Island the fellow that sent the telegram and we conversed in German and I don't know whether it was helpful or not, he hadn't mentioned what train or what railroad I was coming on and my cousin was telling me what time they had for two days calling every railroad and finding out if I was on it.

NASH: You mentioned something about the Nickel Plate. Could you explain what the Nickel Plate Train is?

DRACHMAN: Because I was on the Nickel Plate Train which took such a long time. It's being sidetracked all the time for every regular plane. I understood it was a plane – a train that immigrants were sent on. And, of course, he -- my cousin didn't know about it. He was thinking I was coming on one of the regular trains.

NASH: Do you know why they call it Nickel Plate?

DRACHMAN: That I do not know. I do not know why they call it Nickel Plate.

NASH: Were there only immigrants on the train that you know of?

DRACHMAN: I didn't know any of those people that were on it, so I mean I wouldn't know what -- who--they must have been just immigrants because that was considered the immigrants train. But finally I arrived so that was the important thing, and I certainly was very lucky to have come then and my cousins gave me a beautiful home. And being he had a fine photography studio in Evanston and he photographed very many of the important people around the North Shore. He knew the reporter in the Tribune and the first day when I was taken to the studio to meet the people, who work there, I also met the reporter. And when he saw me. he said, "Oh, Joe, please give me a picture of your little cousin." [Laughs] And, of course, I didn't know that he took --- when the picture was ready he took it and I appeared on the front page of the Chicago Tribune and the whole story of my coming. And being there was no real, regular immigration and no mail coming on account of the war, the first week I think there were at least 46 to 50 people coming to see me in the studio to get regards from their folks. And many of the people, some of the people were from my own town, Bialystok, but many were just from the entire area around where we lived under German occupation.

NASH: Were these people mostly Jewish?

DRACHMAN: Most people were Jewish. And one man came from St. Louis and his parents lived across the street from us and I did not know them to speak to, but I could tell him that I saw them and they were perfectly all right, which was good.

NASH: Why did so many people come to Evanston?

DRACHMAN: Because it was in the Chicago Tribune telling who --- where I was.

NASH: No, no. I mean why do you think all these people settled in Evanston?

DRACHMAN: They weren't settled in Evanston. They came from all over to see me, from Chicago. None of them from Evanston. There were very few Jewish people in Evanston.

NASH: And what did the newspaper article say?

DRACHMAN: The newspaper article said about me. I don't know whether the Tribune because I don't have it, but the Jewish article said where I came from, that I knew quite a bit about politics and I could tell them about the conditions, that there was no food, you know, and all the conditions around, you know, and they came to hear about it.

NASH: It must have been remarkable hearing it from a sixteen-year-old girl.

DRACHMAN: Yes, I guess it was. And after all, everybody was hungry for news from the folks and to know what things were like. You know, we were just completely cut off. So. And one man came from Detroit to see me, and I had letters, received a lot of mail, some from Boston, several from Boston, and from other cities. And, of course, everyone was hungry for anything to hear about how conditions were.

NASH: How many people lived in Bialystok?

DRACHMAN: Originally in Bialystok, we were one hundred thousand people, and it was a manufacturing town of heavy cloth, which, of course, it was all at a standstill. There was nothing going on when we were under German occupation.

NASH: How many Jews lived in Bialystok?

DRACHMAN: Oh, I think eighty-some percent of them were Jews.

NASH: Eighty percent, that many?

DRACHMAN: Or at least. The rest were Poles, Germans, mostly Poles. But the majority were Jewish people. It was a ghetto town. You know, what was in the pale of the ghetto, and there was mostly Jewish people. It was a lively town and at one time they called it --- people dressed well in good times and they called it Little Paris. [Laughs] Now-a-day --- But, of course, during German occupation or during the war, and so many people had left the town thinking it is not going to last for a long time. They left their homes with all their belongings and the Germans confiscated all those apartments and all those houses that were left and took everything out of them, you know, for themselves. We had beautiful woods and the Germans cut all the trees out from those woods to ship it to Germany. Also, a landlord could not put anyone out that didn't pay the rent, but the landlords had to pay big taxes to the Germans when they --- you know -- people had property, were large buildings, and they went to jail if they couldn't meet the taxes.

NASH: Did the bialy get its name from Bialystok?

DRACHMAN: Yes.

NASH: Did you eat bialys in Bialystok?

DRACHMAN: Oh, but they were entirely different than here. I once tried one here and I never saw anything so terrible. I mean at home they really were very

good. They were entirely different.

NASH: In what way were they different?

DRACHMAN: Well, the centers were very thin and very well done and their rounds were sort of solid, you know, not--no, nothing like it really. They just have the name and similar in shape, but doesn't have the same taste. Or it's maybe they did it by hand there and did everything -- it was entirely different. You know. I wouldn't know, but it is entirely different.

NASH: Well, let's get back to Evanston. Did you look for a job?

DRACHMAN: No, I did not because my cousin was very busy. They -- those days they did terrific business around Christmas time, you know. And from Thanksgiving to Christmas, they even worked overtime and Sunday. And so I was ---- they couldn't leave me alone in the house, so they brought me to the studio. And while I was in the studio I was very helpful. I tried -- I was very willing to try everything, whatever I could. And I learned the language at the same time because as most of --- some of the people there spoke nothing but English and some of the people spoke Russian. And actually only my cousin spoke Jewish there. And so I was helpful.

So I remained in the studio and I was working in the studio after a while. I didn't have to look for a job, but I did go to --- I had a private teacher for English. And then being I was very anxious to learn quickly, I didn't have the patience to learn really nicely like she wanted me to. And I went to evening high school to take English after I had this private teacher for a while. And I did speak the language in six months, not perfectly and not much of a vocabulary, but I used to use any language I knew that those people would understand in my English. And so I worked in the studio

and after a while my cousin joined the Navy and I decided, after the war was over, that I wanted to be by myself and not sheltered. They treated me like a child and I was grown up, I felt. So I moved from there, but I also worked in the photography studio.

NASH: When you were eighteen you became a citizen.

DRACHMAN: I took out my first papers. And I – I promised my parents when I became an American citizen -- as soon as I become an American citizen --- I will come to visit them. And right after my eighteenth birthday, I applied for my first citizen papers and it took nearly six years before I came through. I mean I was six years in this country before it came through. And in 1924, in January 1924, I went to see my parents. I visited them in Bialystok, and at that time it was Poland.

NASH: The reason you waited to visit your parents, was it that you couldn't leave the country until you took out your papers?

DRACHMAN: I didn't want to leave the country before I took out my papers. I wanted to be a citizen before I traveled, and as long as I was going to become-- also, I had to save some money. [Laughs] It took all those years to save money to go.

NASH: How long did you stay in Poland when you visited?

DRACHMAN: Six months, and I found conditions entirely different than all the stories I heard after I left. They -- you see, the first time when the Germans took Bialystok, we didn't have any fighting in the city. They were running from some other city to take -- come in because there were big fires and they thought that everything was getting burned up by the Russians. But after that they had a great deal of fighting. The Bolshevik would come in, the

Polish, the Germans, and they were coming in and out all the time and it was very bad.

NASH: Did any of your family come over to the United States?

DRACHMAN: No, my parents would not--didn't want to come over and settle someplace else. They thought it was--and my oldest sister, after she was married, was thinking of coming here and she was the only one left home. My youngest sister had gone to Israel, Palestine at that time, and my mother was sort of reluctant to see her go, having no one around. But later times she regretted very much that she didn't let her go because my sister had citizen – had a visa to come to this country but never could get out. By that time she was a nurse and worked in a Russian military hospital, and when the Russians left they didn't take her along. They left her in the ghetto for the Germans to come in and you know what happened. It was the finish. And so that is how it is. And my sister from Israel came her after a while, so I have my sister here in this country.

NASH: you have a s—

Drachman: And when I was here we -- I realized that we had other cousins, more family, in New York and in Pittsburgh. You see, I didn't remem--- I didn't know much about it. You see, my other cousins, they lived in our town and we knew them, although I didn't remember them being I was younger. But I saw their pictures and some of them I did remember because actually there were two brothers and a sister here. And so I learned I had more family in New York, a very fine cousin, and I had family in Pittsburgh, so when I came from my visit, my mother was anxious for me to remain in New York and my cousin was anxious for me into remain in New York and they talked me into remaining here. So I

have lived in New York ever since.

END SIDE A. BEGIN SIDE B

NASH: When you came back, did just as many people ask you what was going on in Bialystok?

DRACHMAN: No. No, no. People were coming and going and there was mail and everything. No, that was a very usual, outside of my having a good time; it was a very usual trip. [Laughs]

NASH: Well, in what ways do you think that your having been an immigrant has affected your life till this day?

DRACHMAN: I don't think I felt like an immigrant after I was here a few years. I lived amongst American people and I was like one of them. I liked everything, I like – I mean I was just integrated very quickly and I never felt much like an immigrant. I would say that. I still don't feel like one. I think I'm --in only one thing I think I would feel I am because I'm more 100 percent American than some of the born Americans. I resent some losses of freedom more quickly, or I mean I want my country; I want to be proud of my country. I think more than a born American does. In that way I think -- I feel that I am an immigrant. Otherwise, I have never felt like one. It is in my nature to try and remember all the good things and to forget the unpleasant ones.

I would like to tell you of the most unhappy episode in my life. It was when I tried to arrange for my sister, who was a trained nurse and lived in Bialystok, Poland to immigrate here with her husband and their young child. The time was about 1938. My husband and I worked on it for over a year. So many obstacles were put in our way. We consulted with

HIAS, also with a private agency. We tried everything. We made out forms and forms. Every time we were told something new was required by the government. We were told that we did not have enough money to show to bring over three people.

My husband and I both worked and had steady jobs. In conclusion, we put up a bond with Thomas Cook and Company on Fifth Avenue, New York. We were permitted to bring over one person. I wanted my sister to come first. They said only the men could come, although it would have been easier for my sister to get adjusted here and bring him over. My brother-in-law arrived in 1939 and my sister and the child perished in Bialystok during the holocaust. That's it.

END OF INTERVIEW