

NPS-30/RAE LEVIN

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RUSSIA, 1914

AGE 9

PASSAGE ON "THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN"

LEVIN: I came to this country August 5th, 1914. I was nine years old then. My name is Rae Levin. I was born in Sokola, that's near Bialystok, during the Japanese-Russian War in 1905. My father was a travel agent and we had quite a hard time making (she laughs) a living and there were quite a number of children. So my father left us and went to America to make money so that he could bring us over. Well he stayed here for a while, he didn't feel too well and he came back home for a few months and he just couldn't make a go of living in Europe after having been in America for several years and so he left and six months later he sent tickets for my mother and for four sisters, no three sisters, no four sisters 'cause I was the fifth, yeah. We, he sent us tickets for second class because he knew it was very hard traveling with young children.

But when we got to Hamburg, we were supposed to go on the Hamburg-American Line second class, but when we got there my younger sister contracted a cough, I think it was whooping cough and they wouldn't let us on the ship. Well we have to wait for the ship to go to America and come back to Europe again but...

NASH: In what city did you wait?

LEVIN: We waited in Hamburg. But my mother had to pay for our hotel and our meals, and we didn't have that much money, so she decided that the very next ship that they would take us on we would go. Well we went on a very old, rickety ship, which was called the Abraham Lincoln and they wouldn't let us go on second class but they put us in steerage, which was a very bad trip, but aside from that, if we hadn't taken that ship we might have remained in Europe. And of course, we wouldn't be here today because the war broke out just then and we had to travel most of the way in darkness and as cargo not passengers or they would have sent us back. Well we arrived in America after thirteen days of very, very bad trip. All of us were very sick. And I don't remember what we ate or what we did on the ship because it was a very bad situation.

NASH: How old were you?

LEVIN: I was nine years old but I don't remember very much about it except that I know it was very hot and very crowded and while we did bring, my mother brought along a lot of food on the ship because we were kosher and she didn't want us to eat the food that was given on the ship. It seems that some of the people there came and just helped themselves. There was very little of it left for the children. My mother, the oldest sister didn't eat at all, but the sailors were very nice. They brought us down a little ice every now and then because my sister, especially the older one, she was about twenty three years old at the time, she was really very bad at the time and so was my mother. And we arrived in America.

NASH: Did you have much luggage?

LEVIN: I don't remember about the luggage but I suppose we did because I know there were several things that we brought over which were very beautiful, like Venetian glass, and of course, all our bedding, (she laughs) we don't travel without bedding, you know. Not furniture and

certainly not very much money. Oh yes, and I do remember on the ship, oh yes, when they vaccinated us I fainted because I couldn't imagine how anybody could be so cruel as to stick a needle into a person. We were all in line (she laughs) and I was terribly afraid of doctors all my life, at least when I was young, I'm not afraid of them now. And so when I fainted my mother thought oh, this is terrible, maybe they'll send us back to America (she laughs) to Europe. But of course, I was alright after awhile.

We arrived in Ellis Island, more dead than alive really, and I remember that they gave us hot dogs, didn't know how to eat them, but we were hungry and I guess we got on to that very soon and also, yes, something else, on the ship, I think, what we did eat was some sardines and prunes and when we arrived in America we just couldn't look at sardines and prunes (she laughs) for a long, long time. Anyway, we finally did arrive and they did something here they examined us or they asked the oldest sister some questions, but not the younger ones, and after a while my mother pointed across the ship, the little boat that took us over, and she said, "There's your father and your brother." I, even then I didn't remember my father, although he had been home to Europe for about six or eight months before, because I wasn't really accustomed to him. When he left I was very young and I didn't know him at all. And when he came home I guess he was busy for a while, I don't remember much. Well, anyway he took us to Cherry Street. His sister had an apartment on Cherry Street. Now what we did then I don't know because it was a Friday. We must have stayed over the weekend.

NASH: At Ellis Island?

LEVIN: No, at my aunt's house. No, we did not stay in Ellis Island very long, just until my father called for us, I guess he had to have a certain amount of money for each person or something, I don't remember that. And, well my aunt must have had a very small apartment but I guess in those days somehow you made room for everybody. (she laughs) And then we had an apartment already fixed up for us in Passaic, New Jersey where my older sister and brother had been living with my father in this apartment and we came there we were very comfortable, it was very nice. And we found some very lovely cousins, who were here for many years before, in fact some of them were born here, and I started going to school in Passaic, then we moved to Manhattan. (break in tape) Well, we were in Passaic for over a year and when I went down to play with the other children I immediately told, tell them that I don't speak English. And I don't know whether they understood me or whatever, but I was very shy as a child, anyway. But one time we were playing, it was before Easter, and we were playing with nuts on a board, and I was playing with my

cousin with whom I went to school, and he used to call me a "Greinekochka," and pull my braids because he sat right in back of me and I had very long braids. And one time in school I remember the teacher told me to go to the blackboard and she pointed, I had a pointer in my hand, and I pointed to the words "Rain, Rain go away, come again some other day." And when I finished I didn't know what to do. The teacher said, "That'll do, that'll do, Rachel, that'll do." And I didn't know what to do. Finally my cousin pulled my braids (she laughs) again and he said, "Alright Greinekochka." (speaks Yiddish)

NASH: What does that mean?

LEVIN: "Go sit down." But as I was walking towards my desk he tripped me and the teacher, instead of (she laughs) punishing him, she told me to go into the cloak room and stay in there the rest of the day. And I couldn't fight back, I didn't know what was going on there anyway. And then I remember, I think it was towards Christmas, they told us to bring a cup, they were going to give us cocoa. Well, we didn't have any cups in my house, we only had glasses, so I brought a very thin glass. (she laughs) And I guess they gave me cocoa anyway, I don't remember that. But I know that we didn't used to have...

NASH: Were you embarrassed?

LEVIN: I guess I was embarrassed a little but I couldn't understand why because we always used glasses for everything. (she laughs) But the teacher was very nice, a Miss MacCarthy, I remember her name. But then we came to live in New York, we lived on First Street, over Airschoutski's, and I couldn't stand the smell of the smoked meats. It used to make me very sick. And also we were on the third floor and there was too much for me to have to walk up. I used to have something, I don't know what, (she laughs) but I couldn't stand it so we had to move. We moved to Houston Street, which happened to be just back of, a little south of First Street, so we could still get Airschoutski's odors from the meats. But after a while we moved to a very nice street, Forsyth Street, at that time it was very, very nice. It has really deteriorated terribly now but it was the nicest street, I think, on the East side.

NASH: What did you like about it?

LEVIN: Well, I like about it, well, we lived in an apartment house and there were several high, highrises, like five or six floors, we were on the second floor then. But across the street from us, on Forsyth Street, there were little private houses. And even at that time I appreciate the looks of it. And mostly the doctors and lawyers lived there. And I remember that (she is moved) during the epidemic of the flu the doctor's wife died and left a little boy. And I think the whole neighborhood mourned, (she cries) that's how it was in those days. 'Course today we don't even know our neighbors, but it's a different world, a different way altogether, a different way of life. And we get accustomed to everything, I guess, that's what life is like. You just have to keep changing and changing with the times and going on with the tide. And so now... (break in tape) Well, I went to PS 91, and everyone there was nice, especially the teachers. I can never forget them, (she is moved) they treated me especially well. There was a Miss Goldberg, she thought I was going to be a writer, she'd be disappointed if she saw me now. And there was a Miss O'Keefe, she wanted us to have exercise and the windows open all the time so she told us to bring some

cloth and she'd make us little caps. Well, I suppose I didn't understand at the time and I didn't bring mine and when she finally asked me where is mine, and I said, "Oh, I'll bring a piece of rag tomorrow." Because to me a rag was a cloth and a cloth was a rag. But I finally did bring something and I guess they all wore the little Dutch caps and the windows were open and everyday we'd have some sort, some kind of exercise right there in the classroom, which I don't think we had in any other room, only in Miss O'Keefe's. And a lot of other things have happened, like they thought that I was, I shouldn't brag really 'cause, my compositions always went into the contests, like the Wannamaker Contest, or the city, or the some kind of contest, I don't know, for my group, my age group, or my class group.

NASH: What was the Wannamaker Contest?

LEVIN: I don't know I never won but I was told afterwards, I met one of the teachers and she asked me if I'm still so good in composition. And I said, "I don't know, you better ask Miss McQueen, she's my teacher now." And she said, "Well, I can tell you that your compositions used to

go into the contests all the time because we thought you were very good, especially the Flag Day even." I guess, I don't know, I, and also I can remember that I used to write compositions for my friends and for (she laughs) my sister and because one friend, particularly, Pearl Richmond, Pauline Richmond, she had an exceptionally good handwriting, I think she went to school in Europe, she was also an immigrant, because her handwriting was so much better than mine (she laughs) she got A+ for my composition, and I an A. I must have had a good imagination, I guess, because I used to make up all these things about, even about the families, which isn't something I wouldn't think about right now because it just turned out that well, the two girls (she laughs) sisters went to school in Europe, I got them together because of a certain picture that I saw in one girl's home, that she made in Austria. It so happened that the two girl's sisters went to school together in Austria but they didn't know it until, I guess, I took one up to the home, and she said, "Oh, my aunt has this picture." And one of them I'm still friendly with now, she lives in California and I just got a letter from her today, she's President of O.R.T. for the tenth year, very ambitious, and she's going to be in

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Washington in a few months and I hope to see her then. Although she was in New York last March, of course she came to visit us. Well, there are very few left of the old timers so that I can't say much about that. 'Course my family, most of them are gone. And I'm just married now and I don't have any children but I have a very good life, very good husband, a lovely apartment which is something that I wish we had more of. It's the Penn Station South Cooperative. It's just a pleasure to live there. Air conditioned rooms, and it's not expensive, in fact you can't be too rich to live there. And we're just enjoying our life right now and hope it will go on for another few years.

END OF INTERVIEW