

NPS-33/JENNY BOHSUNG

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PASSAGE ON "THE WESTPHALIA"

NASH: Today I am speaking with Jenny Bohsung, who was born in Westhausen, Germany. She came to this country when she was twenty two years old, and she is going to tell us the story of what led up to this trip to America and what it was like to come to America and what it was like to adjust to her new country. Mrs. Bohsung, tell us a little bit about Westhausen.

BOHSUNG: Well, Westhausen is a tiny little town and it is quite, how will I say this. Well, I used to go to the little kindergarten. Everybody knows each other there and it was quiet then we moved later onto another little town which called Reichenbach, and that is

still in existence. What will I say? And when I was about seventeen, eighteen, I went to work early in my life. I always wanted to accomplish so much, make money. (she laughs) So, I say I went through the kindergarten. I learned kindergarten teacher and my first job I had in a big hotel in West Germany, I didn't care too much for it so I see another way to go and go away from Germany to Switzerland, Sankt Gallen.

In Sankt Gallen I had also nice jobs. I lived in a girls' home, a beautiful girls' home, what they called Marienheim Wilsensrasse Sieben, and that's today yet there. Which from there when I went to business I could easy afford it to live there and go to business and learn embroidery business. That is what I worked in. I had also a hard job, which from there, what shall I say? I had a sister, of my sister Mary coming here to Switzerland, but sorry to say I happened to be right up with sickness for fifteen weeks from there on I had to leave Switzerland and I would say I had to go home for recuperating. Six months later I had the courage to make on my own a trip to Holland, get myself a job, which I did. The Hague, Amsterdam, Scheveningen. The last job was Hotel Chula, [PH] Kolverstrad, Rembrandtsplain. [PH] That was up to

1922. There my passport ran out. They advised me I would have to renew my passport. From now on I can travel all over the world, which I took this opportunity. I always wished someone would take me to America. I be so happy. And without fail, I says, well, I look into this. I told the gentleman at the, oh, where the passport supposed to be made out, and I get my, I like to go to America and I can produce someone who will care for me, which I hope to, and had my visa in ten days ready to go, which I didn't expect. And naturally my money wasn't, the money that I had, had to go home and I had a little money to pay down on my ticket for the steamship. It was for the 25th of October, 1923. I was supposed to embark from Hamburg, Germany. I could not say to this day how much my ticket cost in millions and billions of marks, which I naturally had to gather up. When I got back to Germany my father had no more money. He sent my Hollandish money back to me to Holland, which I already had to leave. Therefore, the German Government seized that money and I says I'm determined I'm not gonna, I must go. And he says, well, he had to had one choice of selling some of the cattles which gave me then oh, what to you call, the necessary money

till I got her up in a tin box of billions and millions that I came here. Left from Hamburg. But to go to Hamburg, it was before leaving, what they call these places before you embark to the ship you got to have all these strict examinations. Very strict. They strip you from top to bottom because from people from all over. There was womens, you know. I had my hair done in a beauty parlor. They says, nothing doing, I have to go to a special solution. They go through everything. It's very strict. Every day something else you go through. Also with the papers. Never know what the next moment brings. I says, "Well, I'm firm enough to, until we go." The ship was Westphalia. The trip was very rough. I had my room, my cabin right down the steerage where you have the machines going day and night. That was nothing. I did not matter for me. I only worried how I get there. We'd after my ticket is paid we'd no more money. I didn't have five cents of fare or anything. I hope they would be merciful when I get here to let me come here. When we come here it took about twelve days till we got here, and I didn't, I didn't get seasick. I could stand the trip very well. A lot of people did get very sick, but I managed it very well.

When I came here, naturally, the first thing we were shipped over to Ellis Island and that was not very pleasant. That was rough, very rough. Years ago they called it a cattle, the cattle country, I mean it. I know I was in a farm brought up where we feed cattle, where they feed the pigs, where we kill cattles, kill the chickens. We were working hard on the farm. And there you just, was like a number. You was, over five thousand a day were arriving from all over, Russia, Roumania, Poland, from Germany, from France and naturally I couldn't speak one word English. I could not find when one of the Legal Aid Society or the from the Sisters from the Leo House. It still exists on 23rd Street, the girls' home. It is called the Leo House. They had, what do you call, sometimes some of these assist people, but you couldn't expect they could listen to everybody, you know. That they could help out in the languages. And naturally you come through all these examinations over there and when they marked you off in the back with an initial you didn't know what you were marked up for. There were no beds to sleep in. Either you hang on a wall or sit on a bench. I was detained for two weeks and naturally nobody. I was everyday for a to, what they

call their directors to give me a talk and I couldn't explain anything.

NASH: Why were you detained for two weeks?

BOHSUNG: Why I was detained, because somebody, nobody got off except they had to be called for on who stand good for it.

NASH: I don't understand.

BOHSUNG: Somebody had to stay good for my being here. They have to come up to sign. After two weeks the Leo House, they finally, they uh, the director, whoever was, his name I don't remember, I would not recall. He, they took me to this girls' home, but they said whatever happened they take over the money till I have a job and then we pay off. And that's what all the people in the private houses come there and get the girls, see. But to last that long, it is really horrifying.

NASH: What was Ellis Island like?

BOHSUNG: Just like, oh, just like a barn you walk into with

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millions of people standing around with their bundles.

NASH: What did you do there for two weeks?

BOHSUNG: Yah, they wouldn't let me go. They wanted to send me back to Germany.

NASH: What did you do with your time? What room did you stay in?

BOHSUNG: There was no rooms. You was with a big herd. Everybody just either leaned against the wall or sit like on a bench like you sit in a park.

NASH: Where did you sleep?

BOHSUNG: There is no place to sleep. You just ah, you just don't, just don't, just nod off and you sit there. And they feed us like this with a wagon full of sort of cattle food. You know what I mean? Just slap it on our plates like that.

NASH: Do you have any pleasant memories of Ellis Island?

BOHSUNG: Oh, no. This island was shocking. I don't think I gonna live that long. I think, well, you know, sometimes maybe it is not advisable to have this tape. Do you know what I mean? Did you know what I mean?

NASH: Well, those were the facts. That's how you remember it. It's true. And you lived through it and it is part of history.

BOHSUNG: Oh, believe me it was, I never thought I would live that long that I can stay healthy and go back, you know. But I thought I'd take a chance, you know. And in the meantime I got a job like in the ladies come to the Leo House, the girls' home, 23rd Street, which still exists, and there they could send mail to me and keep in touch with me from home, and I could send out and go there. I am Catholic, see, and there they save the mail till I come there. If I am working somewheres and I am off once a month, I could come and pick up the mail, see.

NASH: Well, what was your first job?

BOHSUNG: They took me out, I don't know what I was. It was Bronxville. It was a tough job too.

NASH: Bronxville.

BOHSUNG: Yes, Bronxville. I was working in a villa, I don't know how many children, you had to do everything, the washing, the cleaning. You was everything. Even if you can speak English. Worker don't need to know a language. And sometimes I was, sometimes they don't, people don't realize you are really hungry, you know. And the madam wants two pieces of toast, I could eat a loaf of bread that time. And when I come to New York. I go into a bakery, I couldn't speak in a restaurant, and take a plate and eat for a whole week that I have enough to eat for a while until I come back again. Donuts, crullers, three for five. You used to get three for five. And six months later I just, just thought, I'm not going to stay here any longer, you know.

NASH: (microphone noise)... Leo House.

BOHSUNG: ... then went back to the Leo House. From there I got again some jobs. I had many jobs in New York, many jobs. And in the last thirty years I work in restaurants. I started out in bakery and restaurants where they could understand German.

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NASH: Was that in Yorkville?

BOHSUNG: It was not in Yorkville. I can tell you where it was.

It was right down at the 919 3rd Avenue, was a German bakery and restaurant. I think I worked almost ten years or twelve years there. And we had nice customers, and we had to do everything. You had to clean vegetables, you had to scrub floors, you had to clean, have to clean pots and pans, you had to scrub everything for little money. Maybe not even a dollar a day that time at the beginning. And naturally the tips. That was the most important thing I suppose. You know, if you get a nickel or dime. Even if you don't get that, you were satisfied. You lived cheaper.

NASH: Where were you living all this time?

BOHSUNG: Well, I was living in 80th Street. In the beginning I took a finished room in around 28th Street, but most of the time I lived in Yorkville. I live right now thirty years in one house. That is 421 East 84th Street. My husband passed away twelve years ago, and he was born in 84th Street.

NASH: Was he was also German?

BOHSUNG: He was born here but his father was German. He was a very prominent man as a musician. He worked for Damrosch, he worked for the Ziegfield Show, he played many inaugurations in Washington.

NASH: What was his instrument?

BOHSUNG: His instrument? Well, when he played in Washington, the inauguration, he played the bugle on horses with Squadron A. And he played, I still got stationary, he played for all these societies, the German, the Irish. The, ah he played years ago what he traveled with the Ziegfield Show. There he played the violin. He played on them all with Damrosch, Cardenborn. [PH] He was quite a man. He died when he was ninety one. I still have his stationary. He played many societies. You know, like the singing societies and all that. It's, ah, quite a story.

NASH: Are you still working?

BOHSUNG: No, I retired five years ago, 1968. I thought it's time to take it easy because I worked very hard for all these

years. These jobs were very nervous wrecking. I worked in the biggest rushes. I worked many places on Broadway. I belonged to a Local 1, Waiter and Waitress Union. I was initiated in 1936.

NASH: When did you become a citizen?

BOHSUNG: I became a citizen about 1936 also.

NASH: How long did that take to become a citizen?

BOHSUNG: Well, it took me, I put papers in soon I arrived here the first six months to attention for, ah, citizenship paper. Then I thought because I am married, my husband was born here and I thought I become automatic a citizen. But it didn't work out that way. And he wasn't around much and he was not well. I almost supported a home. And, ah, then on my own I really struggled to get my citizenship paper, about 1936. I says, no other way at it, I want my citizenship paper, and was also a good thing that I joined the union. I worked in most union shops. C&L was on 74th Street Broadway.

NASH: What is C&L?

BOHSUNG: C&L was a very high class restaurant. Tiptoe Inn on 86th Street. I don't know if you remember. Do you know New York?

NASH: Yes.

BOHSUNG: For how long?

NASH: All my life.

BOHSUNG: Well, the Tiptoe Inn was a very high class place. That time I don't know how people got the food I could hardly speak English. I wasn't here very long and there were maybe fifty waiter and waitresses. It was quite difficult. Somehow I wonder how they got their food, you know?

NASH: Everyone spoke a different language?

BOHSUNG: Yes. And I done a lot of, hot cafeterias. In the beginning I also worked like a busgirl. I worked as a busgirl in the, what do you call it? The Automats, but I didn't get much money and I had to live out see, and pay for the food and

everything, so I also had a job as check hats and coats in the beginning down in Chinatown every night. There was a place on 42nd Street, an office where they said there was a group of people. The girls used to get a box to put the tips in there and you bring in back the next day. And this was also a tough job. Couldn't do that at nights now because I used to work till twelve, one o'clock. And then I went naturally, thought in restaurant business I could do better. Then I worked many places on Broadway. Through the war I worked. On the Great White Way was a little restaurant, bar and grill, the Great White Way. You know Tuffy Square? Tuffy Square? No? You know 42nd Street, right? It is further up. And I worked for Marine Grill, a spaghetti house. I worked for 34th Street Smith's Restaurant, Rod's Restaurant, the Marine Grill. Oh, I had plenty of jobs.

NASH: Do you think being a waitress is a good job?

BOHSUNG: You really want to work hard. I didn't have an easy job. I also had cash and carry when you have to get the food and you have to stop at the register and you have to pay right away and then collect from your customers, see. And when there is a rush hour like on 34th Street, that was a tough job.

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NASH: So you have worked very hard all your life?

BOHSUNG: I worked very hard, very hard. Smith's Restaurant closed up. That was right there where the main post office is and Madison Square Garden. The Bowery Savings Bank is there. I stayed there till it closed. I think I was there twelve years. And I was further up. You know opposite the New Yorker Hotel? There was a bar and grill there, Martin's Bar. I worked there for three years and that's when I quit. That was my last job.

NASH: That was enough. (she laughs) Well, is there anything you would like to say before we close about your experience in America?

BOHSUNG: Well, it was just hard work. That's all I can say. Just hard work.

NASH: Thank you very, very much.

BOHSUNG: Well, anyway, thank you too. (she laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW