

NPS-42/SINGER

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PASSAGE ON "THE CHAMPLAIN"

NASH: ...All right if you went to Ellis Island, what was it like, what were your experiences there? And let's say, how you got your first job? Where did you go to live when you first came?

SINGER: I came to this country in 1935. I did not go to Ellis Island because I came as a tourist, not like, not as an immigrant, so I had no connections with Ellis Island. I was born in Radzymin, a suburb of Warsaw at the end of 1904, and I came to this country as a tourist in 1935. I was brought up in an Orthodox pious house. My father was an Orthodox Rabbi and I would say that religion was, my education was all religious. In our home my father believed that religion is the most important thing a man has to learn, and this was true also about women. All the other things are secular and worldly and not really worthwhile wasting one's time for. But I

had an older brother, I. J. Singer, and he came to the United States a year or two before I came here. He came here as an immigrant. I don't think he went to Ellis Island either because he was already a famous writer and people waited for him. There was no sense of sending him to Ellis Island. I began to write in Yiddish when I was about eighteen or nineteen, and when I came to this country, I had already published one novel called Sataningoray, which was later translated into English. I have published a few stories in the Jewish Daily Forward even before I came here, so in a way, in a small way I was already known, at least in the circle of the Yiddish writers and people from the Forward as well as my brother, waited for me, so again, there was no chance of me going to Ellis Island. I came here with the idea to stay here. I mean I came as a tourist, but I was later told that I could get a visa to the United States, a permanent visa, if I go to Canada or to Cuba. In that time one could not, a tourist could never have gotten a visa in the country where he was a tourist. I had to go to another country. The Hitler epoch had begun and so it was understood that going back to Poland made no sense. First my tourist visa was prolonged once or twice, and after a while I had with great difficulties prepared all the papers which were necessary and I went to Toronto where the American Consul there gave me a permanent visa. And this is more or less, as far as my immigration to this country is concerned. After a while, I did not get a job immediately, but I worked for the Jewish Daily Forward where my brother was already on the staff for a number of years as a free-lancer, but after a while I got a job, and since then I am working for this

newspaper. A Yiddish newspaper is not like an English newspaper. It, I would say that the Yiddish newspaper is almost a daily magazine, the accent is not on the news, but mostly on articles, and also letters from our correspondents in various countries. I have published most of my novels and my short stories in this newspaper because this the Jewish Daily Forward has the tradition of the old newspapers in Russia and in England where writers used to publish novels and stories. We know that Dickens published all of his novels in newspapers and the magazines, and so did Tolstoy and so did many lesser writers. This still is going on today. I am still publishing all my stories, almost all of my stories and all my novels in the Jewish Daily Forward, although I publish, I translate them and I publish them in English and later they are translated into a number of other languages.

NASH: Could you describe a little bit what the town you came from is like?

SINGER: Well, I was brought up in Radzymin, which is right near Warsaw, I mean I was born there, but I was brought up in Warsaw. Warsaw is a big city and although there are great differences, it is not very much unlike New York. It is noisy, it is dirty. There is everything which a big city has, all the good sides and all the bad sides. So I wasn't really very much shocked when I came to this country, to New York, because we had the same thing there in a smaller, in a smaller way. But just the same, we all were brought up that America is almost like a different planet,

and in a way I was very confused when I came here. First of all, I did not know English. I hadn't studied any English there, so I was actually mute when I went to a bus or to a trolley car. I didn't know what to say. In addition, things looked to me very different. For example, when I looked into a drugstore and I saw that they served sandwiches there, I was bewildered because for us a drugstore was a most dignified place one took off one's hat when I went in there, and the idea that you people sit there on little benches and drink coffee and smoke looked to me almost sacrilege. Now I know that it was silly because there is nothing special about the drugstore. But, you know, you get accustomed to these things. Many things looked to me so different that I thought in my heart, I will never be able to write about this country. And the truth is for thirty years I never dared to write anything about this country, but lately I have been already in here in America longer than I had been in Poland and I would say that I have my deep roots also here. And I have learned, it is true that I don't write about people born in this country, I write mostly about immigrants, but at least I dare to write about America.

NASH: What kind of experiences did you have with anti-Semitism in Warsaw?

SINGER: There was anti-Semitism, but I personally did not have much of this kind of experience because I always lived among Jewish people, on the Jewish streets. First I went to the synagogue or to the

study house where I studied the Talmud, and there was no anti-Semitism there. Later I was connected with the Yiddish writers for the Yiddish Writers Club, so although I knew that it existed and I read about it in the newspapers, but personally I didn't have any trouble. However, what you read in the newspapers is very much real, and you know that what happened to another man can the next day happen to you, so we were all afraid, especially in the '30s. A pro-Fascist party, I was in Poland, they were almost pro-Nazi, and also Gables and such men came, and came to visit, maybe not Gables, maybe, I have forgotten the name of this other man, Garing, they visited Poland and we Jews knew that Poland was a very dangerous place for us. And this was one of the reasons or perhaps the main reason why I wanted to get away from there. Also, my brother was here who was a writer, many years older than I. I considered him with my master, my teacher, and I wanted to be together with him.

NASH: How did you come to this country? Did you come by boat? (microphone noise)

SINGER: I came by a boat, by a French boat called Champlain. I think I have forgotten the name of this, something like Champlain. I was told later that this boat was sunk in the time of the war. I think Champlain. It was quite an elegant, beautiful boat. As a matter of fact, my, the agent from whom I bought the ticket told me that if I would have waited another two weeks I could have gone with the Normandy, which

made its maiden voyage, and this was considered among many people as a great privilege to go on this first trip. But I felt that the ship would not add anything to my value whether I go with the Champlain. Yes, Champlain was the name, or the Normandy, and I went with the Champlain. I came here, as a matter of fact, in the first of May. (microphone noise)

NASH: What class did you travel? (microphone noise)

SINGER: I traveled tourist class, which was good enough for me. (microphone noise)

NASH: Do you remember what your first impressions of New York were? (microphone noise)

SINGER: I remember them quite well. A man from the Jewish Daily Forward waited for me and also my brother, and he took me in a car. And my first impression was, it is a city like all cities. It is not the planet Mars or Venus or Jupiter. It's just, it's just like, naturally, when I saw the skyscrapers, after a while I felt there was something unusual, but just the same we have already tried to build a skyscraper in Warsaw too, a lower skyscraper let's say. It had eighteen floors, but even this was big. Maybe it didn't even have eighteen. I don't remember how many. Oh, oh, many immigrants had this kind of feeling that America is so different that they really felt that they are coming into a different world, but I don't

have to tell you that the world is actually the same. It only takes time until when you learn the language and you get acquainted with people, you realize that human nature is everywhere the same. Although there are many differences, I would say that American people looked to me then, and they look to me now, more kind and more sincere and more ready to help people than the Europeans. But there is also a reason for this because American people are richer and they are accustomed to have immigrants. They are not clannish as the Europeans are where people have fought for every inch of earth for generations. There are great differences, but there are also many, many things which are common to all people. I don't have to tell you this.

NASH: Did you see the Statue of Liberty when you first came?

SINGER: Absolutely, the first thing we saw, this is we went out on the ship and saw the Statue of Liberty, and it always makes a great impression, immigrants, I guess until today. I heard even about the Statue of Liberty when I was a small boy in Warsaw, when I went to Cheder. They spoke about this because there were many people in our neighborhood who could not write, could not read or write and they had relatives in America, so they came to my mother that she should read their letters.

And they all wrote about it, how they came to America, they saw the Statue of Liberty, and they also wrote about Ellis Island which they called the Island of Tears, and about all the troubles some of the immigrants had when they came there. There was a great fear of this Island because people were told that if the doctors find that someone is sick or they think he is sick, they send him back. And actually these things did happen. So many, many immigrants, I remember, before they went to America, they went to doctors to cure their eyes and all kinds of sicknesses which they suspected might hinder them of entering the United States. In my case, when I came to this country they only asked me if (phone rings in background) I was a Communist, and I said, "God forbid."  
(microphone noise)

NASH: I would like to know a little bit more about why  
you found it so difficult to write about America.

SINGER: It is not easy for a writer to write about a country which he visits . It is true that there are people who will go, let's say to Spain, stay there four weeks and come back with a novel, but I don't believe in this kind of novels. I believe that a writer should be

deeply rooted in the soil of the country and know the people and the language and all their customs to be able to write of them. I mean to write of them like a writer, not like a traveler, a tourist who just writes impressions of traveling. And because of this, I know that the old masters only wrote about the places and about the people which they knew best. They never venture out of their little corner. It is only the dilettantes who think that they write about everything. In my case, I knew that, I knew the people of Poland, the Jewish people of the places where I lived, best. I knew their language, I knew their way of thinking. It took me thirty years to feel that I have roots here, but even so I still will not write about people born here because I feel that I don't know them enough, I don't know their language enough. And I'd rather write about the people whom I know best, in the language which I know best, than to try to do things where I am not completely at home. Writing is very much connected with being settled in a place. A wanderer is not really a writer. A man who would come from the planet Mars, he might have written very interesting impressions, but he wouldn't know the things which a man who has been living here for many years.

NASH: Do you think that a country of immigrants, that this affects the personality of the people living in that country, that it would be, that people who come from a country where they have been living for generations have a different kind of personality? (microphone noise)

SINGER: I would say that there is a difference, naturally.

A country where all the people are or the great majority are immigrants, is different than a country where people have been living for hundreds of years, but this doesn't mean that the difference makes a country of immigrants worse. It may be even the opposite because people who come to another country, who are torn out from their homes, learn that things are not just as they thought. When you stay long at home, where you never leave your own country, you have the illusion that everything which happens in your country is hard, this is human nature. If you are accustomed to eat for breakfast, let's say, a roll and coffee and not the (?), if you see them eat corn flakes you think that the world is going to pieces because when you travel you see that things can be so and they can be different. You learn in a way traveling is a lesson in, how would I say it, in tolerance. We learn by traveling and by immigrating that things are not, must not be just as we have seen it in our mother's home, they can be different. But as far as literature is concerned, it is necessary that a man who writes should have roots somewhere. If let's say, he has been traveling all his life, let's say like children of ambassadors, who one day they are in Spain, the next day in China, and the next year in Russian and so on, such children

writing would be very difficult, although we never know. If a person is really born with a talent he may overcome all kinds of difficulties and still write, but as far as we know from the history of literature and from experience, it is a fact that being rooted is very important for literature. A literature of (?) roots is almost no literature, it becomes journalism.

(phone rings and speech in background off mic)

NASH: Did your parents come to this country?

(microphone noise)

SINGER: No, my parents never came to this country. To my parents America was really more than another planet, you know. But my brother lived here and I have a son who lives in Israel, but he came to visit me twice here. Once he stayed three years, so I would say I feel like an American. I am a member now of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, so I feel that I am really, the Americans consider me one of them and I consider the Americans my people.

NASH: I just wanted to get back to that question of root writers and rootedness. Many people say they feel alienated living in New York, you think with this feeling, even though they may have lived there and been born here, do you think that it is possible to write and be

alienated?

SINGER: It is possible to write and be alienated, but I will tell you, in a way we are all alienated. Every human being feels that he is a stranger on this planet, he came here when the world was already there and he believes it will still be there, in a way we are all strangers. But that's just the same, I don't think that alienation is a problem more here than in any other country because people who have been born here should feel at home. The reason for this talk about alienation is people who try to deny themselves. A man who says, "I am Jewish, but I am not Jewish, I am a Frenchman, but I don't want to be a Frenchman." People who try to assimilate to deny their roots are alienated. But, if you are frank and sincere, you say, I am so and so, my name is so and so, I speak this and this language, I am not ashamed of anything, such a person is able to feel at home everywhere. In other words, spiritually at home. It's the man who likes to put a mask on his face who says that he is alienated, it is his own fault. I have heard this business about alienation from many Jewish writers who say, "I am not a Jew, I am not an American or I am only half an American and half a Jew." If you are have of everything you already, you don't belong, but if you do like I do, you say, "I'm hundred percent a Jew and I am also hundred percent an American, a naturalized American, but just the same an American," and you are not ashamed of anything, and you don't deny anything, and you don't change your name, and you don't change your language and your habits, then you are at home everywhere. It's only this fear, this



and not far from the Public Library on 42nd Street. I would say I still like the West Side because there are more of my kind of people, the people who read the Jewish Daily Forward on the West Side then on the East Side. But the East Side is also nice, I wouldn't mind having an apartment there too. (she laughs)

NASH: What was your happiest surprise about life in the United States? (microphone noise)

SINGER: I once went into the subway and I saw a sign in Yiddish, (Yiddish), it says, you are not allowed to smoke. And I said to myself, "here in this city," in Poland only the Jews had some signs in Yiddish, but the government never used the Yiddish language. And here I saw that people use the Yiddish language, that I mean the city used Yiddish. I saw a lot of tolerance in this country and I still keep on seeing it, when I read now, when I open the New York Times, I see that banks are advertising that they have now, just as they used to have, Christmas Savings Books, they have now Hanukkah Savings Books, I see Hanukkah candles all over. There's no question about it, that there is not and there cannot be another country, at least not that I know, which is so tolerant and has such a feeling for strangers and for strange cultures as this country. I would say that to feel as a stranger as this country is to me, I can't understand it, only because these people want to be strangers themselves, they want to deny themselves, but a person who does not deny himself, who loves his roots

finds great joy in this country seeing how people tolerate strangers and consider them their own. (microphone noise)

NASH: Well, is there anything that you like to say about your experiences as an immigrant? Any other...(microphone noise)

SINGER: I don't have to tell you, I mean, I was very happy for many years in this country, but in later years I feel that the wave of crime has taken such measures that it's just, it's just frightening. We have reached now a degree where we are afraid to walk in the street of New York, and if this will go on, this state of affairs will destroy everything good which America has ever had, but you can have a million of good qualities, but if one is afraid to enter your home, then all the qualities are nothing. And this is what is happening to this country. I cannot give any advice how to mend these things, how to correct them, but all I can say is that this state of affairs will destroy all the image of America. People will not dream anymore about entering America. They will only dream about running away from it. I am sorry to have to say this, but everybody feels now in the same way.

NASH: Well, thank you very much Mr. Singer.

SINGER: My pleasure talking to you.

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END OF INTERVIEW