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DR. BELLA NEMANOFF RAKLINE

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NASH: Today is February 5, 1974. I am speaking with Dr. Bella Nemanoff Rakline, who came to the United States in 1941 at the age of 41. Mrs. Rakline is going to describe for us some of the experiences that she had since the time she was born in Russia and later came to the United States to eventually teach at Columbia University and she is now semi-retired. Mrs. Rakline, what was it like to live through the NEP period?

RAKLINE: Well, the NEP period, it was a little bit easier to live than before because we could exchange things and the work was easier, then we could buy some things and the people start to breath a little bit easier. And the connection and so on, it was temporary, very temporary. The life became more or less normal. And I

write about this in my book. One of these experiences, when I, still was there it was a lot of hunger and the most profitable people just were the people who could make exchanges there like we said about this period. But we could go in the country and exchange things, but it doesn't mean that we couldn't be persecuted for it because if somebody wanted to do this, they would tell us that you are just one of the profiteers that thinks and so on. So I cannot tell you exactly what was the big difference. The NEP wasn't because finally the government understood on their own, they really couldn't give enough food to the whole enormous, to the whole enormous population of Russia. So they permitted the free market. It still was not quite the free market and I can tell you one of my experiences about this. It is one of my very perilous trips in order to provide food for the winter for my family in spite of NEP because you still, the salary that you receive for your work and the little portions that you receive every month was not even enough not to die from hunger. This was just the beginning of the NEP in the Soviet Union. You see, according even to the official statistics, about half a million people died from hunger during the first period, so

now we could, they started to try to find some kind of a meaning to feed the people. So the family of one of my aunts, fleeing the Bolsheviks, got as far as Nonikolaev, but the capture of the provinces of the Bolsheviks progressed much faster than the stream of carts of the refugees. And so they stopped running and settled in Nonikolaev and when all they looked about the, they decided finally, that it is time not to run anymore, but that one must come to terms with these new circumstances of living and working and as to live. And they began to work and live not too badly because at this time the Soviet government needed people in every way. The people who know how to work because there were no, no, no specialist in any field. So they give the work to anyone without looking for the time because later on they started again to arrest, for the time being they start to give any work to any specialist without looking in their background. But, I decided to go to Siberia because my relatives were there. It was not my easiest task because the type of speculators included not only the few who went there to bring a little bit a pound of flour or a pound of sugar for the family, but also all these people were risking our necks. You better cut it out because I am nervous now. Yes,

you'd better cut it out.

NASH: That's alright. We will cut it out later. Do you have to read it? I think it would be better if you just remember it.

RAKLINE: You see, no, remember it, I don't know if I told you. Let's go from here. I will make it very short. So one of these years my aunt come from Nonikolaev to visit us on her own. She had some own business to attend to in Petrograd because they left some things there which they didn't find because they were all stolen. But anyway, she told me that in Noniklaev, if only I can come to Nonikolaev, I could get food in exchange for some things that they don't have there. true, you run the risk to being shot because you see, in Soviet Russia, all the Russia was divided in area and some areas were not permitted to go in the other one. The hunger area were differently from the area where they had bread. Why was it different? I don't remember anymore. So anyway, I decided to go because my child was very sick and we had absolutely no provisions. Everything was exhausted and my aunt was returning home and i had to go with her. But there was a very big problem. I needed a special permission to travel to Siberia which was almost impossible to obtain for simple mortal. Railroad tickets were sold only until . This is the beginning of the Orel. And later on, you had to

have the permission to go from Yektenburg to Noniklaev. Well, I thought the whole night and I decided still to go. Throughout the whole trip of Nonikolaev, not one guard opened my suitcase to check it and this suitcase was full of forbidden merchandise which I intended to change for flour, for water, for sugar and so on. You see, they accepted my word when I said it and really my deceit was so right that I lied at both ends of trip like I would say a prayer. when I sat down in the train, I still had no specific plan as to how I would get to Nonikolaev or beyond Yektenburg, but, of course, I lied to my fellow travelers and thought that everything was quite in order. So several hundred was before Yektenburg and one of the medium station stops, I took the ticket from my aunt and I went to the            and I told them with tears in my eyes and they were really, real tears because I was so frightened that I have the ticket, but I lost my permission. I don't know how, maybe it was stolen, but I definitely need to go further, so what to do? They were very, very nice to me and they didn't ask anything and it didn't even come to their mind to tell me to stop in Yektenburg if I am not lying. maybe they just sympathized with me, but they gave me the permission, a written permission again and with this permission I went further, with this pass in my hand. So, of course, it was a very easy thing to obtain in the other station a ticket because then I come to the Yonk employer and i told them that I have the pass, but I lost my ticket and what to do.

And he very nicely told me that he is terribly sorry that I have to pay again my ticket, but, of course, he will do everything to get it for me. And he saw me to the train and he stayed at attention until the train left. Well, at this time I was very young and rather pretty and it never, never was regarded as a disadvantage. So this way everything went very smoothly. In Nonikolaev the life was really like in old times. everybody knew, like in every small town, and everybody took brides like in old good times. And for a little of alcohol, in suitable moments and in proper hands, you could open many possibilities. So I stayed there about two weeks and they were very nice and without any effort on my part, my uncle and my aunts brought me all the necessary food. And I started on the return trip with one of my cousins who returned to the family in Leningrad, in Petrograd. We settled in two place sleeping compartment in the coach which, of course, was again given to us for some kind of a bottle of liquor. And this coach, it was two bunks, one upper and one lower. needless to say, that all of my luggage was filled to capacity with food stuff and legally we were allowed only to take per person two pounds of sugar, five pounds of flour, one pound of coffee and so on. Just ten pounds all together. This we put in a wooden box and we put it all on our racks, but was had eighty pounds of melted frozen food in a wooden box which we hid in a special place and covered it with my black coat that it shouldn't attract attention. Then we

arranged this little private box for dresses and the suitcases full of coffee, flour, sugar, even eggs. Alright, the car was not heated so we thought that we were quite safe during the long trip. We thought so. I will say that it was not so. When the first guards come, it was the evening because two militia men with rifles all as it should be. And my cousin was so worried that I told her to stay on the lower bunk and just to smoke and to keep quiet and she should be in the shadow, the light shouldn't turn on her. One of the militia men asked us from where were we coming and what we were bringing. I told him that we were coming from Siberia and it was very nice there and very, so we bring just our rags and nothing else, just our dresses, lingerie, underwear and so on. So he wanted to see. I told him, "Alright, take it down because it is too heavy for me." There is nothing, just woman's clothes, but believe me my toes began to grow cold and it was a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, so scared I was. But luckily the other military man looked at us and said, "Look, two young beauties are coming from vacation, what do you want from them. Leave them alone. Don't lose your time. Stay well, beauties." So we survived and we went further. Now, since both of us, we were not nervous anymore. We had such confidence that everything will be alright, that just when anybody come, again, it was for the whole trip, I offered them cigarettes. I smiled. I joked with them and they offered us wine and nobody ever bothered us. On

the fifth day we were completely happy. It was only 24 hours before Petrograd. I always say Leningrad because Leningrad was much longer later, but it was still Petrograd at this time. So we joked with our neighbors and then we went to make to beautify us to the ladies room, whatever it was and when we come back and for the first minute we just couldn't imagine what was the matter. We were enveloped by worms and the smell of melted butter. It was clear that for some reason they had begun to heat the car, but melted butter. I looked up at the hidden and I set down on the bunk in numb desperation and horror. Steam pipes were just under the box and the food is beginning to come out and to ooze and the round spots start already spreading itself before my eyes. At first I thought that everything is lost. I just didn't know what to do. To jump out of the window or what else. Then it came to my mind the conductors, it could seem to you very strange why I thought about the conductor, but at this time the train conductors were the chief suppliers of the black market products. they transported the products from the grain provinces to the hungry ones, like Petrograd and Moscow and they organized their business so well, everyone talk about, no one could, or some would not, prove anything for certain. I was already in the corridor, paying no attention to that of my cousin, think what you are doing. If I had stopped and if I had would think for one moment, I would never, never dare or decide to take this step, but the next

minute I was already in the compartment on the train conductors. There were two of them and, of course, as every Russian people, they are drinking tea. I closed the door behind me and I began to speak immediately incoherently, frenzied, confused. I really was out of my mind. I told, "Comrades, I have a box of perishable food. You heated the car and everything will be lost. You surely have a cold storage. Hide it please." They looked at me in amazement, silent. "I especially went to Siberia for supplies for the winter. I have a year old child and I have a mother. I must get it home, I must." I had a lump in my throat, feeling that with one more word I will just burst into tears. But they understood. It's really very funny how the Russian people understand it's a very tragic moment without words. They and they start immediately to tell me , you know, in Russian like in German and the French, we have two. One is familiar and the other is for like you. So, he told me, "Well, you are desperate comrade. Well, if you would just meet a swine, you would not escape with your head," and this was the truth. "Don't grieve, child. We will hide your box and we will bring it to you in Petrograd and there you share a little with us."

"Alright." So they did. When the evening come, they come and I took them to my compartment. They took my box and they put in a storage. In Petrograd, they called their own porter, of their own organization and

then the car emptied. They led me through the back door of the station, minus all the inspection and through the backyards and delivered me with my precious loads to their own cab man who safely brought me home and took care of the report for all of them. I forgot to tell you that my cousin, of course, left the train by regular channels with the regular amount of supplies. The next day, telling my mother that the trials of my journey, I suddenly realized how easily this adventure might have ended for me at the best a few years a hard labor in some faraway concentration camp. So this is one part of the NEP. Now, the other part of the NEP, supposedly my husband get a job and I get a better job, but one night we come for some visit, at this time we could already visit each other and we were better dressed and we ate a little bit better. And at two o'clock a knock at the door and the militia come. I have to tell that I have, I don't exaggerate, about two thousand volumes of library. The whole corridor, the whole rooms, everything was because before my father left I had part of his library and then my own library and so on. What scared the most, that I had books in every languages, in French, in German, in Russian and some in English. I didn't know English at this time, but I could read,

I could read and translate. And they made a mess out of this and they took my husband. And they told me, "Citizen, you better give him some warm clothes," since it was not winter yet. And when he left I stayed there and I really didn't know what to do. It reminds me of some of the memories of Mrs. Mongilstom, the widow of the poet who was killed in one of the concentration camps. So NEP or no NEP, they and intellectual was still persecuted without warning or anything. So my husband was in the prison for three months for absolutely nothing. The next thing my mother was arrested and she was arrested. I'm laughing now because it was really funny. She was one of these great ladies who couldn't just understand that she cannot say the truth. So while she talked to a military man who didn't let her pass by, that he is an ignorant. It is something equally in Russian, a little bit more harsh. So, they order arrested her. He arrested her saying that she insulted a military man in due of his devoir, however you say it.

NASH: Duty.

RAKLINE: Of his duty. At this time I lost my child and a few months later I was paralyzed and I was in South of Russia and my

husband come to fetch me and he told me I have to come home and he didn't tell why because I was the youngest but i was the head of the family. And when I come and I find out that my mother was arrested, I tried to do something to free her because it was really stupid. Well, they give me a very good advise. They told me, "Look, you better don't do anything because we put her only for one month and other people staying three years of four years for the same offence." So you see, what can you say about NEP. There was no liberty of anything. It was just a little bit better life for the people who could profit and it is so hard to live morally that in spite of everything, exactly in the middle of the NEP in 1925, I decided to leave absolutely everything and go and try my luck in Europe. The only thing I want to explain why I have double name. The Nemanoff, Bella Nemanoff, I keep because my father was a famous writer, journalist and politician in Russia and later in France, Paris. So I kept this name all through my work and as a professional all over, even in the catalogue of Cologne where I am Bella Nemanoff and Rakline is my married name. So I sign everything Bella Nemanoff. i was born and brought up in Petersburg. I am Jewish and some of the Jewish people are very much surprised and always ask me, "How could you be in Petersburg?" But there was a law that some Jewish people who had a special diploma, first read, could be honorary citizen and had exactly the same rights like the Russian people. I mean not Russian people, how shall I

say, religious, I forget the name.

NASH: Russian Orthodox?

RAKLINE: No, the Jewish Orthodox could be Jewish orthodox too.

NASH: Slavs?

RAKLINE: Not Slaves, no. All the other religious. Anyway, so we had the right to be all over. As you know, there were special parts where the Jewish people in Russia couldn't live and they had to live in some kind of a ghetto part, but it didn't concern us. So I was brought up, I finished the gymnasium and even the university in Petersburg, which became later on Petrograd and after the Lenin's death, Leningrad. My life as a child and as a teenager was rather comfortable. I was in private school and had all the means for everything. I had private tutors in all languages. That's why I speak perfectly French and German and there is a very bad accent, English, which I could never master, maybe because I didn't want to because I didn't want to spoil my accent in Russian because this was my really bread and water. And in '17 when the first revolution broke, my father was, in Russian this party called Kadet. I think it is like a republican here and, of course, he belonged to all this

party Milyukov and Kievan and the other. And they were very excited to have a new Parliament. It didn't turn out like this, so I don't want to stay on this because this is historical events and probably most of you read about this and know this. So in '17, I started to write my thesis about folklore in Russia collecting songs, ballads, and so on from the first sources. And I couldn't come back to Leningrad. I mean, in this time it was Petrograd and I stayed there. So, during the Revolution, I was all over Russia. I was caught in Orel, which is the North of Russia, very interesting part, where I stayed and where I started to teach because at this time already everything what my father sent us, I had my mother with me, was confiscated. It belonged to--then was already the second Revolution and so forth and these were very hard times. I write about this, a long book, so it's no use to talk too much because it will take too much of our time. So only thing I can tell you that I was in Orel, I was in Sal'sk, i was in Siberia and finally I come back to Leningrad in 1923. There was terrific hunger and I was already married. I just read a little chapter of my book in the Katherine Angel Center. I was already married and I had my baby with me. My baby was very sick because this was a baby of wartime, of terrific hunger. And somehow the manager of the house, who became later on Bolshevik manager, kept our apartment. I don't know how he could do it. To have our former apartment with lots of collection of pictures,

porcelain and so on, which helped us because the things which cost about five, six hundred gold in rubles we could exchange for two pounds of flour and we were very, very happy to get this flour. So this is a part of the Russian life. Then I start to work, my husband became very sick. He had a nervous breakdown which was quite normal in all these circumstances and I was the only one breadwinner, but I had already my diploma and I was working in the Archives. Then later on, I will not stop on this because sometimes maybe when my book will be ready I hope it will be printed in English and translated in English. I am writing in Russian, then you will know this. One of these years my husband was arrested by mistake, but we couldn't know that it was by mistake because at this time there were a lot of process, military process and Zionist process and everything and the people were killed, believe me, so religion doesn't exaggerate in anything. The people were just--every night, everybody, a few of them, they were taken in the court of the prison and just shot there without any judgement or anything. So we never knew if the next time when we will stay in line to bring something to read to our prisoner, we will find them alive or the people will tell me that your husband, your brother, your mother, your sister, are not there anymore. So this meant if they are not there anymore or they are shot or they are sent to without anything, even in the bitter of winter, without any clothes that's warm or something, somewhere in the very far of Siberia

where you wouldn't find them. My husband, as it was found later, was arrested by mistake because there was one other name, one other man of the same name, but not the same.

NASH: Last name?

RAKLINE: No, was the same last name, but not the first name. but it took about three and a half months. In the meantime, I wanted to keep my second baby, but, of course, I had a miscarriage and when he come out--yes, and in the meantime, my mother was arrested too--so finally my husband became so neurotic that I couldn't stand it anymore. And this was during the NEP, NEP, it mean new Economical Policy. My father was already in Paris, had a very good situation and could send us a visa. And we applied and we had a temporary visa t France. I went there as a very capable teacher. The only thing that they couldn't forgive me, that I never joined the Party, but I went there as I knew perfectly French to write later on about the condition of the school in France. And we went from Leningrad via Germany to Paris. And we never came back, we became refugees. I have to tell the truth. When in the very beginning I was terribly lonely for Russia. With all the comfort of Paris, I just couldn't forget. This is probably a special characteristic of Russian people. We just are in love with the country itself, with the air, with the atmosphere, with

everything. As hard as it was to leave, I still had there my friends and so on. Well, I still was very young. I was only 25, it was in 1925. And as I knew perfectly French, I could find a job with the help of my father, a very good secretary and in the evening I start to start in Sorbonne. I had my degree later on and my husband learned French and played more checks than I learned French or worked, but I made enough for both of us. And I stayed in France until 1941. I have to say that I was very happy there, extremely happy later on. I had my friends, the students and my colleagues and I could teach already. And the life was extremely interesting, really extremely intrusting. Much easier than later in America to build it up again. Somehow the mentality was different and nobody was so much after the money. And with very little money, we really enjoyed the life extremely. Well, of course, we were young and this is a big part of it too. And lately, when I come to France as a tourist from America, I find it quite different. Then I was sick and I went to the South of France to Nice. I had some difficulty with my husband. He fell in love with one other woman, but he didn't want to give me a divorce. He wants to keep both of us, which I didn't, and I bought a villa in South of France and i separated from my husband and I was working in wintertime in Paris and living in spring and summer in South of France in Juan les Pins. My villa was called Villa Bella. It was very, very nice. I loved it dearly and it helped

a lot because when the Nazis occupied France, I went directly to live in Juan les Pins in the South of France which was free France. And I could give a special affidavit to my friends that I can give them house and board and they can come. I thought they could escape or they wouldn't be let out of Paris. The escape of Paris, everybody knows how it was in France and how terrible it was, and I have to say that the French people were not very noble. For five hundred Francs, which was really very little, they could show if some Jewish person was hiding somewhere and the German arrested and it was not much better than in Germany, except that there was no gas. Then finally it was even very, very dangerous to stay in France, so the people start to ask for permission to leave and, of course, leave mostly for America. I didn't think about it. I still had already my villa, I had the right to take with me only three hundred dollars and nothing else and some kind of personal jewelry and start all over again without know English because I didn't know English at all and to South France it frightened me terribly. So I called my father who was at this time in Vichy and he supposed to be in Vichy government, but what the people didn't know that he was in Vichy government, but at the same time, in spite of his age, he was working with the French Underground. And everything what he knew about the military secrets of Petain, he gave out, of course to French Underground. And when I called him and I asked him what shall I do, he

answered me, my father was remarried and had other family, so he told me that myself and my wife, of course, they will somehow smuggle us to Swiss, to Switzerland, but what will happen to you, I don't know, so you better go if you can. At this time had this special visa. We had here friends, political friends in New York, who insisted of Mrs. Roosevelt to give special permission for some intellectual who could not stay under Nazis in France. This is very, very well written in the "Franklin and Eleanor" book on one of the latest pages. Of course, if it wouldn't be so much bureaucracy, there would be much more people who could leave France in time and not die there. I was one of the Fortunate. I was with one Bisargis, my very close friend, Professor Delefsky, a man. At this time, he was about 78 and the people here, his colleagues for the Party, were very anxious to have him and I came in as his secretary. I had a visa right away because in Marseille the Consul, just in this particular "Eleanor and Franklin", the writer thought that the visa from America came much easier then the visa from Portugal and Spain. But, you could bribe, the bribe was taken very easily and even if you want a little anecdote, when I come to the Spanish Consul, I talk to him very nicely and there is a cost of about fifty Francs or something like this and it never could come to my stupid mind that a Consul will take money for giving something. So I put for him, I think it was a check or a bill, I don't remember what for, six hundred Francs, which was

enormous in this time. He closed the book in which he wrote my name and the name of my protege, this Professor Deleftsky. I should say that I was his protege, but still--and went into another room, then when he came back, he talked very nicely, "Well, Mrs. Rakline. Now you can pay me the visa." I thought "Mr. Consul, but I have just six hundred francs." "Oh, you never did." "How come?" And again, so stupid I was, I didn't mind the money, but I didn't want him to think that I want to cheat him. So I insisted, I say, "You better look. I don't want you to think that I am lying." "Oh, I don't think you are lying, but you just didn't notice that you thought about this, but it doesn't matter, just send me a check, just send me a check." Alright, of course, I kept my mouth shut and when I came home they laughed about me. They told me, "If you would give him from hand to hand hundred francs, it would be enough, but as you had no idea of this, it cost you six hundred francs." This was this. So, it is to tell you that it was easy to get it. So I get the portugal visa and I had already my own villa in Juan les pins, which, of course, was earned by my own hands. My father never helped me. I had to leave it as it was. Just go out. Everything what was there. What I could I send to all the concentration camps around in France where everybody who was supposedly against Petain or against the Nazis, of course. And I left.