

NPS-51

CAROLE BERNSTEIN

BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 25, 1974

RUNNING TIME: 35:38

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE KEYLOR, 5/1979

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 2/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: JANET LEVINE, Ph.D, 6/1995

PRESIDENT OF THE NEW YORK CHAPTER

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JEWISH WOMEN

CIRCA 1974

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: There are a number of interruptions on the tape. Apparently Ms. Bernstein was speaking from notes from the start of the interview. Additionally, there are sporadic microphone noises throughout the interview. Janet Levine, Ph.D, 6/1995

NASH: Today is February 25, 1974, and I am speaking with Mrs. Sidney A. Bernstein, who is the President of the New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women. Mrs. Bernstein is going to describe for us the history and the functions of the Council and also with special attention to the role of the organization in the history of American immigration. Mrs. Bernstein.

BERNSTEIN: Thank you. The National Council of Jewish Women was

established in 1893. New York Section came into being in 1894. We are now celebrating our eightieth anniversary.

In the year 1902, our Service for Foreign Born project started. In 1903 President Grover Cleveland, on the strength of our program, of New York Section's program, asked the National Council of Jewish Women to inaugurate a program of this type throughout the country at all ports of entry. At that time it was called Port and Dock Services, and New York Section had a group of volunteers with one social worker stationed at Ellis Island on a daily basis to meet the incoming young women particularly, to in the first place, one of the great concerns was that many of these young women were led astray. White slavers were rampant at that time. Also, many of them came here and had no conception of the idea that the country was so enormous and they felt that because they had a relative someplace in the United States that they would be met and taken care of, so that they had to be directed to the, and their fare frequently had to be paid to take them to the city in which their relatives were living. This, incidentally, was and is the only sectarian program of New York Section. (she pauses, laughs) Can you hold it while I (break in tape). In 1903 the Lexow Committee,

a congressional subcommittee, made a study of white slave traffic among immigrant girls and women. They studied the sweat shops and the dreadful living conditions generally of recently arrived immigrant women, which were contributing factors to the alarming increase of prostitution. And it was at that time that President Grover Cleveland helped to tackle this problem by coming to Council. As far as Jewish immigration to New York had been concerned, the first group had been Sephardic Jews who came around 1654. The German Jews came in the 1800s.

In 1870 there were 80,000 Jews in New York City, almost 9 percent of the population. Then the massacres in Russia started in 1903, and by 1907 Jewish immigration in New York, mostly from Russia and Poland, reached almost a million. And the tide of Jewish immigration mounted steadily in the years 1900 to 1914. The original work of New York Section had been port service. Volunteers greeted immigrants as they arrived in New York. They helped smooth over many of the inevitable difficulties that arose in the detention room and the special inquiry room. They also met trains and steamers bringing immigrants from other ports of entry destined for New York. (break in tape) During that period because of the real concern about these

girls, there were posters put up in many of the foreign country ports warning the girls of what might follow and the problems that they could look forward to, I mean that might exist. (she says parenthetically) I had marked some things out. I have a perfectly marvelous warning that existed in here. (break in tape) If you would like me to, these were posted in the year 1911 in the foreign ports.

(she reads) "The National Council of Jewish Women greets and welcomes all Jewish girls and women and stands ready to give them friendly help, advice, or information in whatever way is needed. For this purpose, a woman is stationed in every port of landing. We beg those who wish or need advice, information or help, to inquire immediately upon landing for the Council of Jewish Women in New York at Ellis Island. After landing the Council will be glad to assist girls to classes in English or in industrial training to work, board, and lodging, to pleasant social evenings, amusement and recreations as well as to give aid and advice in sickness, trouble or danger." And then the notice concluded with a warning, "Beware of those who give you addresses, offer you easy, well-paid work or even marriage. There are many evil men and women who have in this way led girls to destruction. Always inquire in regard

to these persons of the Council of Jewish Women, which will find out the truth for you and advise you."

NASH:                               That is wonderful.    (she laughs)

BERNSTEIN:                        Over the years, of course, there have been different waves of immigration, and during the Holocaust, this was a particularly active time for New York Section. Many of the women who arrived from Germany and Austria had never worked in their lives so that New York Section undertook a program of training these women for types of work that would not compete with Americans in need of employment. One of the programs we had was to teach women to be professional waitresses, and this was very uncommon at that time. These women learned to make very outstanding Hors d'oeuvres. There is a perfectly delicious story about it because volunteers were running the program and one of the things that they advised these professional waitresses on was what to do in case of emergency, and they said, "If you are serving a Thanksgiving dinner and the turkey slips off the platter (they laugh) when you are bringing it into the dining room, don't be too flustered, just take it back into the kitchen and bring the other turkey in."

(they laugh)

NASH:                               I had heard that Henry Kissinger's parents are caterers. I don't know if you know that. I was wondering if...

BERNSTEIN: I would rather leave that out of it. I just feel that is imposing upon, if you turn it off. (break in tape) Well, of course, there are all kinds of stories about people who came to this country, and because of their lack of English had great difficulty in expressing themselves, and one woman kept asking for Barrone Street, B-A-R-R-O-N-E, and the social worker had absolutely no idea of where Barrone Street was and she turned to somebody else and she said, "Do you know where Barrone Street is?" And the other woman said, "Brown Street?" It was only (they laugh) then that she realized that it was on the basis of the accent.

NASH: What other types of jobs did they train women for?

BERNSTEIN: It was primarily the professional waitress. There were other programs at New York Section, but I frankly can't tell you at this moment. As I say, they were non-competitive types of jobs, however.

NASH: What other services did they offer the women? I know you did cover many. Well, what about during the time when they come over after the Holocaust?

BERNSTEIN:

Oh, when they came over, well they always had English for foreign born because the first thing that was essential was that these people learn the language so that they could get jobs, and that they could function within the American community. In addition to that, back in the early days, many of these girls came over filthy dirty. They had been on the boats for long periods of time, they had been waiting at the European ports, and then they got here in their one outfit, frequently their baggage had been lost, and so centers were established for these girls where they could be scrubbed and cleaned up and taught the American way of life. Also, these centers served a social areas for them so that they could meet other young women in the same position, and they were taught how to shop and how to Americanize themselves in every possible way. (break in tape) Today our Service for Foreign Born is feeling the results of these waves on immigration because we now concentrate on immigrants, on post immigration services, and many of the people, in order to save their lives in the concentration camps, had to lie about their age because over a certain age they were exterminated, so that many people came to this country and used the age that they had assumed in the concentration camps. Now that they

are eligible for Social Security, it becomes terribly important that they establish their true age. And I was looking at one of our reports today. Some woman from Poland had absolutely no means of establishing her age and our social service workers went through everything that she had done, and early in the 1930s she had visited relatives in Paris. The town that she had lived in in Poland no longer exists. None of the records there exist, but she had left Poland with a passport. In France they make a very accurate record of any visitors and they had the record of her passport and of her age.

NASH: Well, what were the special problems, would you say, of Jewish women? Would you say that they had special problems that other immigrants might not have had?

BERNSTEIN: I am sure that they did have many special problems because most of the Jewish women who came to America came because of terrible persecution in their countries of origin and so many of them had very real psychological problems. And in the early days there was a considerable amount of Anti-Semitism. In fact, if you look through early records, they were tremendously resented, although they were living on the Lower Eastside in the main part during those early years. This was considered a horrible neighborhood and people were afraid

of walking through the area, they were afraid of being attacked by these immigrants only because they couldn't understand what the immigrants were saying and the immigrants didn't know what the Americans were saying.

NASH:                            You are saying, who was afraid?

BERNSTEIN:                    The American non-Jewish person. So that there were many, many problems that existed, and as far as housing was concerned in those days, we didn't have civil rights so that a great many areas of the city were not open to Jewish people.

NASH:                            Did the organization only help women?

BERNSTEIN:                    Well, of course, through women they were, no, the organization went considerably further because many of these women had small children and so the first day care centers were established to take care of the children while the women were being trained for work, while they were at work. This also became a tremendous project of New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, and of the National Council of Jewish Women as a whole. We still have day care centers throughout the country that we either sponsor or where we bring special services. New York Section has a most marvelous peripheral service to day care centers. We have libraries in many of them and we have a book-go-round that goes to other centers. Oh, this is one of our

prize projects. So that much of this though originated with immigration and, of course, today we are serving the children of, many of the children of the Puerto Rican and the Black populations in New York.

NASH: Do you work with immigrants that aren't Jewish?

BERNSTEIN: No. On the whole, our Service to Foreign Born works only with Jewish immigrants. As far as our day care program is concerned, we now call it, in New York Section, our Children's Library Program. There are no Jewish children in our program. The majority of the youngsters are Puerto Rican or Black. But as in our Service to Foreign Born, our immigration work, we are working with Jewish people. Today our work involves immigrants who want to leave the country to visit their homelands, who may lose their status if they go out of the country.

NASH: Could you give me an example of what groups have that particular problem.

BERNSTEIN: Well, Israelis to a great extent because they aren't, we've done a great deal of work with Israelis who are either students in the United States or who have come here to be reunited with their families and they want to go back for a period of time, but it's necessary for them to be educated to the dangers of returning to Israel for any prolonged period. (break in tape)

I can give you an example of the types of things that we are doing at the moment.

A client of the Service for Foreign Born achieved permanent status with the assistance of our Service to Foreign Born and has acquired the necessary period of residence, is now eligible for citizenship. We help them with their citizenship. There are also people who had come to the Service of Foreign Born at a time when it was difficult for us to help them because they were ineligible, however, the circumstances have changed. A client has married a United States citizen who can petition for him or her, or a client's brother who was formerly a permanent resident has since become a United States citizen so that he may now petition for his brother.

NASH:           If a person goes back to Israel, in what way does that threaten his American citizenship?

BERNSTEIN:   It doesn't threaten his citizenship, but many of the people who have come from Israel are not yet citizens here and, apparently, if they are away from the country for too long a period it would threaten their citizenship. (break in tape) Although most of the work that is done in the Service for Foreign Born requires professionals, we do have a corps of volunteers working with them. We carefully train the volunteers who are working. We have social service aides and we also use volunteers as translators, interpreters, and teachers of English. There are countless foreign documents which need to be translated. They run the gamut of all languages so that we have a particular

need at New York Section for bilingual people who can help us in that program.

As I say, the actual work of establishing immigrants in the country must be done by trained social workers, but any volunteer who has any specific skills with language or who is able to teach English is very, very valuable to us.

NASH:                               Where do you find that the Jewish immigrants that you work with today come from, what countries?

BERNSTEIN:                       Well, of course, the majority of them are coming from behind the Iron Curtain and most of our, we are now getting new immigrants in, but most of the work of our Service for Foreign Born is done as post immigration work. That is why there never has been a real slackening off of our job because after the influxes, there are always the problems that affect not only the actual immigrants, but their entire families. For years and years after, as I told you, I mean today with Social Security problems, we are kept extremely busy. (break in tape) In the very early days of Service for Foreign Born port and dock work, women from the most luxurious homes in New York, really the lushest, plushest, would go down, meet the girls at the docks, take them to the clubs that had been established for them, scrub them, bathe them, and then try to teach

them the niceties of life and the American way of life.

(break in tape) These women would go on a very regular basis and they would leave their homes bright and early in the morning and work with the girls the entire day.

(break in tape)

NASH: One man that I met told me that through the National Council of Jewish Women he was given furniture for his home. His home was completely furnished. Do you recall any stories like that?

BERNSTEIN: I believe that that was part of the program after the Holocaust because people did come to this country literally with the clothes on their back and they had to be helped in every possible way so that a story like that would not be in any way unique.

NASH: What are some of the other functions of the Council aside from immigration?

BERNSTEIN: The New York Section of the National Council of Jewish Women has a number of projects. We really serve the people of New York from the pre-school child right through to the lonely aged. We have a marvelous senior citizens club, the Katherine Engall Center, and Mr. Brenig, (Mr. Brenig was interviewed for this collection-NPS-49) incidentally, is

president of the members of the Katherine Engall Center, and there, in addition to the outstanding programs, art courses, sculpture, ceramics, enameling, etc., music, we serve a marvelous hot lunch every day. This lunch is so sufficient that many of the aged who either are unable or unwilling to prepare food for themselves needn't worry about another meal. Frequently, they will wrap their roll in a napkin and you know that that will be tomorrow's breakfast. We also find that we have people who are a different strata there so that right within the Katherine Engall Center a retired professionals club has been started and these people have lectures and seminars dealing with subjects that might be of interest to them. On the other hand, there are people who want to sit down and play cards and the card tables are busy every afternoon. In addition to that, they have social dancing, they have entertainment frequently, they have music classes and music appreciation classes there. It's a great project.

NASH: I was a volunteer there on New Years Eve.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, you were. Oh, you are one of our adorable girls.  
That's great. Was it exciting?

NASH: Yes, it was lovely.

BERNSTEIN: I was a volunteer there for a seder, so that I know that it can be a very exciting time. Also, we have a workshop for senior citizens.

We've just moved it to 915 Broadway, and there people on in years who are physically unable to do any heavy work or any sustained work do limited work, both as far as physical needs are concerned and also hours, and they are paid.

It really gives dignity to men, or to man, because these people are all living on very minimal incomes. Many of them live with their children and they can earn enough money so that they don't have to go to their children for their personal needs. Others of necessity must supplement their incomes, and this is a marvelous way of doing it. And this project is absolutely unique. There are other workshops in the city and the area, but this is the only one that has been labeled a terminal workshop. In other words, people aren't just trained to work and then sent into the job market. These people couldn't work in the job market. They are able to remain at the workshop as long as they possibly can. There's no limit as far as time is concerned. That project you really should see. And, of course, many people who came to this country as immigrants are employed there.

NASH:                           Men and women?

BERNSTEIN:                   Men and women.

NASH:                           Roughly how many people are in the workshop at any one time?

BERNSTEIN: At any one time, well we can accommodate 125 people at a time. Because we've just moved. Our caseload is a little bit lower than that, but we do hope within a short period of time to have 125 people at all times. That means that our roster has to be considerably higher than that. And, if in the future we find that we have more than those numbers, then we can go on a two-shift day because nobody works eight hours a day there.

NASH: What sort of work do they do?

BERNSTEIN: Well, they carve buttons, they work with IBM labels, they package many of the things that you'll find in the five and ten that are packaged in either these plastic bubbles or in cellophane envelopes. That is primarily the type of work they do.

END SIDE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE TWO

NASH: Are there any other projects that you would like to describe?

BERNSTEIN: Well, earlier I described our children's library program.

In addition to that, we have a program that might be very much of interest to you in Immigration. It's called our Shipper Box, and we send toys, mainly educational, and certain items of clothing, all new, to Jewish children in Israel, Yugoslavia, France, Morocco. These things go directly to their children's centers and we've been very fortunate that throughout the period we have been able to continue to ship our boxes over. When I say boxes, they are huge drums and we will send seventeen at a time. It's unbelievable the amount of merchandise that we can send. (she coughs) In Israel, I believe it goes directly to the Minister of Education and then is distributed to the children's centers throughout.

NASH: Do you have any corporations that give you free merchandise for this program or do you pay for it?

BERNSTEIN: We are very discriminating about the merchandise that we use. Of course, we are delighted when we get contributions, but because we know exactly what we need, frequently we have to buy it. Of course, we purchase it wholesale and often with very major discounts in addition. Incidentally, in our library program, the same thing pertains because we want to use only the books that are most or best suited to the children, so that we can't accept contributions willy-nilly. If a publisher will give us books that we have on our list, we are delighted to receive them. Otherwise, we do get very good discounts from the publishers. One of these days I would love to show you some

of these books because they are really great.

NASH:                               What are the standards that you use in choosing, let's  
  say toys?

BERNSTEIN:                       Well, first of all they can't require reading in English  
because many of the children who receive them don't speak or understand English,  
so that, and also they have to have certain educational values. Of course,  
dolls are always educational. They have to be enjoyable as well as educational  
and they have to fit into the schools and nurseries in which they're used.  
We very often get direct requests from the countries where we send our Ship-A-Box.

NASH:                               Are there any other programs that you would like to  
  describe? You have covered quite a few.

BERNSTEIN:                       Well, of course, for our members we have very active public  
affairs programs, and this is a service to our members. Oh, in addition to  
that, to both of these, because we have had trained volunteers, and I emphasize  
trained, every volunteer who works for New York Section goes through a rather  
rigorous training program. But because of that we have developed a great deal  
of expertise in certain directions so that we cooperate with many other agencies.  
And in 1970, I believe it was, all sections of the National Council of Jewish  
Women who had been working in day care collaborated and an outstanding book

was published called "Windows on Day Care." Mary Coserling put the facts together. And it has since been used throughout the country and in many of the universities as a training project. At this moment, we are very much involved with justice for children and New York Section has a very active committee who has visited detention homes throughout the area, and at this moment we are busy publishing the findings and are now ready to go into a project based on the survey of justice for children.

NASH: Well, it has been very interesting speaking with you.  
(she laughs)

BERNSTEIN: I really appreciate this opportunity, particularly in our eightieth year.

NASH: Well, happy birthday. (she laughs) Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW