

NPS-54/JACOB POTOFSKY

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THE UKRAINE, 1908

AGE 13

PASSAGE ON "THE ESTONIA"

NASH: Today is March 20, 1974. I am visiting in the office of Mr. Jacob Potofsky, President Emeritus of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Mr. Potofsky's office is dotted with photographs of past presidents, union leaders, and he also has an award, a Statue of Liberty on a plaque given to him by the United HIAS Service in 1973, and I would like to read that before beginning the interview. It says, "Presented to Jacob S. Potofsky, President Emeritus of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, outstanding and revered labor leader dedicated to the task of improving the living standards of working men and women, the vast majority of them immigrants." He played an active role for many years in the HIAS efforts to rescue and resettle Jewish refugees and migrants, particularly after World War One when he helped establish a HIAS office in Bucharest. Through his deep compassion and brilliant leadership, he has

enabled countless thousands of newcomers to our country to lead productive lives in freedom and security. Mr. Potofsky was born in Russia in the Ukraine. He came to this country in 1908 at the age of thirteen. And now Mr. Potofsky is going to tell us the story of his immigration.

POTOFSKY: The story of the migration of my family begins with the year 1905 when my eldest brother Nathan, after a consultation with my father, decided that he should be the first one to leave for the United States. He did not particularly relish to join the Czar's army for six years and so the decision was that he was to go to Chicago, and he did. He crossed the border illegally because he could not get a passport since he was eligible for the army, and he settled in Chicago with landsleute, which means people that came from the old, from our region. After he was there, he got a job as a presser in Hart Schaffner and Marx and before long he sent for my father. That was in 1906, and after my father arrived, he too landed in the same company, Hart Schaffner and Marx, and Shop twenty-one, and he was a button cutter. After my father arrived to Chicago, a year later he sent for my next eldest brother, Felix, and he was the professor in the family

and he was going to night school and he too landed in Hart Schaffner and Marx. He had an easier job than my other brother. He was marking where pockets were to be made, but that's another story. In nineteen hundred and, he arrived in 1907 and one year later my father sent for my mother, two sisters, one older and one younger, myself, and a younger brother.

NASH: Could you name the city that you came from and describe what you remember of it?

POTOFSKY: I was born in the city of Radomyshl, the state of Kiev. My grandfather had a sort of an inn and he was a book binder in addition, and my grandfather's house and so-called estate was probably about five acres, and it was part of the city of Radomyshl. I have very fond memories of my grandmother and my grandfather and the life they lived and the time when and the time came we were to schedule to leave for the United States, we left from what they called my grandfather's place, the Novingca. [PH]

NASH: What does Novingca [PH] mean?

POTOFSKY: Well, the actual translation probably means new, nove [PH] is new, and this is what they called this inn and this place which was surrounded by fences and trees and gardens and so forth.

NASH: Could you share some of your memories with us of your grandparents?

POTOFSKY: The time that we left for this (break in tape) roughly a couple of months before (break in tape) I was sick and my mother decided to send me to my grandparents. We hadn't, I hadn't seen them for some years, and I have decided to, out of respect for them, to perform all the rituals as far as prayers were concerned and so forth so that out of respect for them, not because I was extremely religious, but I have decided that that is the way to honor my grandparents, and as long as I was there, I was putting on the tefillin every morning and performed every prayer that had to be done and I remember when I first came in and my grandmother lifted her eye glasses and she recognized me and she asked me whether I was hungry and I said, "Well, I have to wash my hands first," and so forth. And for as long as I was there, and that was I think a couple

of months, I was very observant of all my religious obligations.

NASH: Could you describe a little bit about the city that you lived in?

POTOFSKY: The city of Radomyshl was quite a substantial city with many, many stores. When I was a kid I remember having gone to seder there and having gone to public school there for a short while. This was before my father has undertaken this job in the hoota. [PH]

NASH: What is a hoota?

POTOFSKY: A hoota [PH] is a glass factory where my father worked as a sort of a deputy superintendent. And the hoota [PH] was, this was, a new, a new hoota. [PH] He had worked for another one in Lepion, [PH] a different state of the Ukraine, but this was a new hoota [PH] which capitalists from Kiev supplied the money and was built on the outskirts of a village called Obuchov, and my father had hired a teacher who gave us lessons, who lived with us and educated the whole family. This is how we got to be, to learn because there was no

school nearby so we had a private tutor. (phone rings)  
And after a year or so I became a teacher myself.  
(break in tape)

NASH: For what reason did your father leave Russia?

POTOFSKY: It was evidently, that decision was made when my first brother left and that was a decision which was really for the entire family. Now there must have been a number of reasons. My two brothers were both teachers and they were what they call sternikas, [PH] they were preparing themselves for the university and they were in a city called Giatomia, [PH] Volynskiy Gabernia, and they belonged to two different organizations. One was social revolutionary, the other one was a nationalist that had to do with the Zionist movement. But, at any rate, they were in the movement. As far as my father is concerned, once the decision was made, that was a binding decision to migrate to the United States and settle to a new mode of life. And my father was not a revolutionary. He was an ordinary man who looked for a better life for his family, and he thought that the family will be better off to be safer. At that time the idea of pogroms, it was right

after the Kishinev pogrom and there was gossip even of pogroms around Kiev and around our own city. The peasants were in revolt and there was a feeling that there was no safety, and that is probably one of the reasons that my father made the decision that we should move to the United States.

NASH: How did your mother feel about going?

POTOFSKY: She left that to the men in the family.

NASH: Do you remember your preparations for leaving?

POTOFSKY: Well, I certainly do. It was, we left by coach and grandmother came out to give us some vegetables from the garden and we all piled into the coach and off we went from good old Novingca [PH] into the unknown world. We traveled by coach and train until we got to the port of Riga in Estonia, and there after waiting several days, we got on board a ship called Estonia and it took some seventeen days to get to the port of New York.

NASH: What do you remember about the trip?

POTOFSKY: What?

NASH: The trip.

POTOFSKY: The trip? I was a sensitive kid and I was sick most of the time. Maybe I was a very bad sailor, but I was certainly seasick from the food, from the environment, and I was throwing everything up. So it took several days before we got to another port from Riga to Rotterdam. In Rotterdam I think we stayed for about a day and my mother gave us some change and gave my elder sister and myself, since we stopped over in Rotterdam, to go down the, see the town and buy some lemon drops, maybe that would help for the seasickness. But the seasickness was something to be remembered. I still recall it. The herring and potatoes, which may be a delicacy now, was no delicacy in those days, and I can still sense the steerage atmosphere on the Estonia for the seventeen days that we were on it. I still remember that distinctly.

NASH: Can you describe the steerage?

POTOFSKY: Describe steerage. Well, I remember the bench and the table and the double beds, and it was anything but comfortable place to live in.

NASH: Were the men divided, men and women divided?

POTOFSKY: Yes, I think they were.

NASH: Is there anything else about the trip that you recall?

POTOFSKY: Well, mainly the seasickness.

NASH: Is there any good thing that you recall?

POTOFSKY: Well, the lemon drops for one thing.

NASH: So you arrived in New York. Do you remember when you first came into port, the first thing that you saw?

POTOFSKY: Well, we came to the port of what they called at that time, Ellis Island, and our case was processed pretty well. Evidently, we had all the necessary money to exhibit and we had labeled and earmarked to go to Hoboken and from Hoboken to go to Chicago.

NASH: There was nothing memorable to you about Ellis Island?

POTOFSKY: No. I remember it was a nice clear day and our processing was in order and I remember getting a package from the HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

NASH: What was in the package?

POTOFSKY: Which we opened only when we got to Hoboken and we got on the Lehigh Valley train and we opened the package and found bananas, which I had never seen before, and blueberry pie, which I had never seen before, and we really opened the package while we were on the train and then we had a stopover in Buffalo. It was one of those slow trains from Hoboken to Chicago.

NASH: Was it a special immigrant train?

POTOFSKY: I really couldn't recall, but I remember there was, I had seen Negroes for the first time on the train, probably porters. When we came to Buffalo my mother gave me a dollar and asked, and told me to go and get

some bread and I walked for quite a few blocks until I found a store, a grocery store, and I came in and put the dollar on the table and I said, "Give me bread." I had learned that from one of the books that we had and the lady gave me a bread plus the change and I came back to the train a hero. I bought bread which we ate together with the blueberry pie and the bananas.

NASH: So where were you destined for?

POTOFSKY: We were destined for Chicago, and when we arrived finally, we had my father waiting with a horse and wagon to carry our baggage, and he had already prepared an apartment and we came straight in to our own apartment on 13th Street in Chicago.

NASH: How did you feel when you saw your brothers and your father after that time?

POTOFSKY: Well, families were very close and very devoted and we were no exception. I suppose it was an emotional attachment. And the thought was, well, what can we do to help the family and, of course, the first thing is

thinking about going to work. It was in the month of June, or the latter part of June, or maybe it was the beginning of July, I can't recall. And the suggestion was made that we go to work, and since in the summer there was no requirement to have working papers, I went to work the following Monday. I assume that we spent the weekend together and then on the following Monday I went to work for Hart Schaffner and Marx. I didn't know whether I was working for Hart Schaffner and Marx or for landsmann, but I knew that what my job was, to receive three dollars a week, I was supposed to fetch a bundle to a very fast operator who was know as a corner maker or joiner, joiner and corner maker.

And to save him the time of fetching the bundle from a certain place in the shop and recording the lot number, for that he paid me three dollars. I don't know at that time whether the money came from him or the money came from the company. But I continued to work this way until September when the schools opened and then we had to go and get working papers. And I went to the Madill High School and registered at fifteen point nine so that within three months I could get my working papers. So I was in Madill High and never graduated the high school or never graduated a

school, but I got my working papers after in the month of December of 1908, and then I could go back to Hart Schaffner and Marx, and this time I was on the, I think I was on the regular payroll of the company at three dollars a week, and ultimately worked myself up to get five dollars, and ultimately my foreman gave me an opportunity to become an operator and I worked on rags for a couple of weeks to learn how to operate the machine and then I went on piece work and made seven dollars and twenty-one cents.

NASH: Did your family continue to work there?

POTOFSKY: My father continued to work for a while and then he went out and became a customer peddler. My brother, my eldest brother, who was a presser, when the pressing machine was introduced he stayed for a while and then went out and became a small businessman by working for the Kraft cheese people and delivering the Kraft cheese together with some other materials, some other delicatessens to delicatessen stores. And my second brother continued his studies first in Lewis Institute and later in Chicago University. He was what we called the professor and ultimately he kept on

studying and finally got his Ph.D. degrees and accepted some kind of a job in a small community as a director of a community and he didn't like it and he went back and went back to school again to become, to be certified as a teacher, and he spent all of his life in the Chicago school system, and he enjoyed his life, he enjoyed the vacation summers where he used to go to lecture on Zionism, Po'alei particularly.

NASH: What about your sisters? Was it one sister?

POTOFSKY: One sister.

NASH: One sister.

POTOFSKY: One sister went to work, the other one was too young.

NASH: Where did your sister work?

POTOFSKY: I don't recall, but she did not go into Hart Schaffner and Marx. We had enough people in Hart Schaffner and Marx. But she worked separately and, of course, we turned in our pay checks and whatever the calculations were, my mother would give us fifty cents for spending

money a week and the rest went into the family.

NASH: Would you say that your family situation progressed after some years? I don't know if you can define what progressed means.

POTOFSKY: Oh yes, yes. Ultimately, my father bought a house on 1342 Washburn Avenue, and when I ran for office as treasurer of my local, and this is after the union came in and after the big strike in Hart Schaffner and Marx in 1910, for which the strike lasted several months, and when I ran for treasurer, I got the bulk of the votes because my father owned his house and they thought they could trust me with the small treasury that there was at that time.

NASH: Well, how did it happen that you joined the union, became involved with the union?

POTOFSKY: The most workers in Hart Schaffner and Marx were immigrants. They were immigrants from different nationalities. They were Poles and Bohemians, Lithuanians and Jews and Italians, and one day, at that time the supreme command was in the hands of a

foreman and the foreman and the manager and the company did whatever they wished, and there were a lot of abuses and there were cuts in wages. One day fourteen girls were fired because they objected the cut in wage, and so they started campaigning against, protesting this terrible thing that happened to them, and in the course of time they reached Hull House which was presided over by Jane Adams, and finally they succeeded in getting a meeting in the Hull House of several hundred people. And that's how the strike in Hart Schaffner and Marx began to be organized. I was at one of those meetings and from my shop there was about two others. The next morning we came in and we decided that we are going to take everybody out to join the strike, and the foreman for whom I had a great deal of respect, came up to me and said, "Jake, why don't you go back to work?" And I said, "No, Mr. Homan, I can't." He said, "Did I mistreat you?" And I said, "No, you were very nice to me all the time. You gave me the opportunity to become an operator, but I must go." And whether they liked it or not, they closed the doors and, but we went down anyway, and that was the beginning in the month of September of 1910 and the strike lasted for several months. There

was a great deal of starvation and there was a great deal of help from the community, and the company was ready for a settlement, but it wasn't a genuine settlement because they wanted to penalize those who were arrested and those who were active in the strike, and the strikers turned that down. Ultimately, the strike was settled on the premise of arbitration and all the strikers to be taken back. And that was the beginning of collective bargaining with Hart Schaffner and Marx only in the city of Chicago. I went back to work in January and later on became secretary of the shop in which I worked in and later on was elected chairman of the shop. And that was my, and for several years I was active as a union officer without pay, and I was, and I didn't become, I was a local treasurer, but I didn't become an officer until 1913.

NASH: What kind of personality do you think it takes to become an organizer? Or I shouldn't say an organizer, to become, were you an organizer?

POTOFSKY: No, I was not an organizer in the sense that I had a specific assignment. I would say it's a way of life and everyone according to his own conscience and

according to his own wishes and desires and ideals. My brothers went off into the business world. My eldest brother had the wanderlust and he went ultimately to California, and before long he became, continuing in the same field as a representative of the Kraft in the city of Los Angeles. He became a big businessman insofar as he was supplying delicatessens with not only Kraft cheese, but kosher corned beef and later on he employed more and more people and ultimately began to buy cattle on the hoof and became an independent packer, and to make the long story short, he had been offered several million dollars by one of the big food companies to sell his business, but he wouldn't sell. He wants to keep it for his sons.

NASH: Well, to return to my question, to be perfectly honest, I guess the reason why I asked that is I have a picture of labor organizers as being kind of aggressive and you seem like a very gentle person to me, but again, you said you weren't an organizer. (she laughs) What do you have to say about that?

POTOFSKY: I came one Saturday to a meeting of the executive

board of my local and something had snapped. The representative of the union who was representing my local resigned, and the question was who was to succeed him, and they all asked me whether I wouldn't take the assignment, and I said, "I'll have to ask my father, consult with my father and ask him." I had some ideas about going out and see the world, perhaps hoboing and see the world, and lo and behold, I came to my father on this Saturday afternoon and asked him and he said, "You are old enough to make your decision." So I went back and I took the job. I was going to go out vacationing and I had already saved up with my father a hundred and fifty dollars, so I took the job on a temporary basis for the summer months to merge two locals together and I did that job, I was encouraged to take it. I was offered fifteen dollars a week and I said twelve dollars was enough because that was more than my average pay, and so I took it and I worked with a man by the name of A.D. Marianpetri [PH], one of the Italian leaders of the organization, and we moved and merged the two locals and the two organization. That was the pants makers with the coat makers, and then came Labor Day, 1913, and after the merger I went for a weekend in the

dunes, in the Indiana dunes. Do you know where it is?

NASH: No.

POTOFSKY: Near Chicago. It was a nice place for this Labor Day weekend, and while I was there I received a special delivery letter from Mr. Marianpetri [PH] to come back at once, that I had been chosen as office manager of both the coat makers and the pants makers of the Heart Carries Hall Building and that I was the unanimous choice and that Sidney Hillman was president of the meeting. Sidney Hillman was also the leader of the coat makers under the agreement with Hart Schaffner and Marx. And so that was the beginning of my entry as a office manager for the coat makers and the pants makers and that was the beginning of my career as a paid officer. I couldn't call myself an organizer. I could hardly speak, and one day somebody came to see me and the shop chairman would come and bring me the union books to enter their dues and they saw me standing before empty chairs. I was trying to learn how to speak in public by standing before the empty chairs and trying to learn how to do some public speaking. It is a long story. It didn't come to me

for quite some time, but that's my story and that's what it was. At any rate, this was the job. I became secretary-treasurer of the Chicago Joint Board of Hart Schaffner and Marx employees, and that was the real beginning of my participation in the development of the clothing organization. The big man in the picture was, of course, Sidney Hillman because Sidney Hillman was the deputy under the contract who handled the whole works.

NASH: Well, I know that you covered your whole career in the other oral history tapes that you did. I just thought maybe you could discuss something about how you helped German or other immigrant refugees to come to this country.

POTOFSKY: Well, I didn't do so much. When I was twenty-one I was abroad and I went there primarily to bring some members of the family from the other side who were in the Soviet Union. I ran into Mr. Adolph Held who was the representative of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in Warsaw and he was fussing around in Roumania where a lot of refugees were in the thousands in practically every community between Yasnyy and Bucharest and

Kishinev, and Kishinev was at that time in the hands of the Roumanians, so I ran into Mr. Held and Held said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "I have to spend here a few months." He said, "You get on my team." And so we were helping the refugees get settled or get some schooling in English and get visas, as much as was feasible to get, into the United States. And I spent a very pleasant few months time as a voluntary aide to Mr. Held at that time. The other time that I recall I was asked, this was quite a few years later, when I was asked to go to see the president of Mexico about getting a thousand visas for refugees. Mr. Debinski and a number of other people in the movement thought that I was the best one fit because I had known Mr. Lombardo Tolidono, who was one of the leaders of the Left in the Mexican Labor Movement, and that if anybody could, and at that time Lombardo Tolidono was very close with the president Aleman, so they asked me to go down to Mexico and see what I could do to get the thousand visas. This was after the Litichi affair, and I had success with both. Tolidono was very cooperative and he arranged for a conference with Aleman, and Aleman promised and I had to wait a couple of weeks to remind him again and

again, but we finally got what we wanted. So in a limited way, that was my activities as far as the refugees were concerned.

NASH: Mr. Potofsky, do you feel like an immigrant?

POTOFSKY: No, I feel like an American. I feel that this is a great country, it is a land of opportunity, and it was certainly a great opportunity for me to be of service to my country, and I feel very much at home and I feel that as immigrants we have to do double duty because this is a land of opportunity where an immigrant boy like me can come and then help to create new institutions and help to work it out with presidents of the United States who worked with you and helped you. It is almost unbelievable and only in this country it could happen. And I had the good fortune of being tied up with the Labor Movement, both locally and nationally and internationally, and I have had an opportunity to observe it from all angles, and maybe I'm it's a cliché, but I love this country and I think it is a great country and has afforded immigrants a real opportunity to be of service.

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NASH: Thank you very much, Mr. Potofsky.