

NPS-59/NIZER

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LOUIS NIZER

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NASH: Today is May 15, 1974 and I'm visiting with Mr. Louis Nizer who is a lawyer and writer in New York City. Mr. Nizer came to the United States in the year 1905 at the age of three years old. (break in tape)

NIZER: Well, you have asked me about how I came to the United States and my forebears and background and since this is perhaps a little typical of other immigrants who have come to this country I will tell you my background. I hardly consider myself an immigrant since I came as an infant and have lived here all my life and therefore find my London birth a very remote and almost accident so far as my citizenship is concerned. Nevertheless, technically I am an

immigrant. But what is much more important is how my parents came here. That is a much more characteristic story of the greatness of this country which attracts people from abroad. My mother and father both came from Poland near the Russian border and met in London where they lived. And I was born in London and those were working conditions of which were are strange to the United States even in those days when our unions hadn't yet created the wonderful conditions which now exist for workers. But in England it was much worse.

My father used to say that he never saw me awake. He'd leave in the morning long before I was up and when he came home it was much too late for me still to be awake. So he always saw me asleep as an infant because in those days they literally worked eighteen hours a day. And it was a very happy life they tell me, nevertheless, but it was the kind of life that my father later referred to as only possible in Europe and that this country afforded him opportunities which were so unique and improved that he was a patriot to all excesses, I might say, but very sincerely so. He loved this country, loved it with a passion which is difficult to describe. Today it would seem mauling and we're almost ashamed of patriotism. But he was

not. To his last days, he insisted in putting the American flag outside of the house everyday and taking it down himself lovingly from the pole at twilight. In our New Hampshire home where he had a home during the summer, he would go through this ritual with almost tears in his eyes, that's how deeply he felt about it. Even when he had a heart condition at the end and he was told not to climb ladders or lift his arms and pull things, which was necessary to take the flag down , he nevertheless disregarded doctor's orders. That flag had to go up, and he had to put it up and he had to take it down. Everything he said and did was with gratitude towards this country which gave him the wonderful opportunities and later to me, his son. The great opportunities which he felt couldn't have been obtained in any other country in the world.

I wasn't as conscious of it because reared as a child in this country it came naturally. We take our great gifts here in the United States for granted. But those who have lived abroad know better and it has been said, of course, that immigration is great flattery to this country. Much more so than when a man is born here, he doesn't appreciate very much the natural advantages of being an American. But someone

who chooses, I think Lincoln said it, "Anyone who chooses to emigrate to the United States has made a choice which is the highest tribute to the United States cause he has voluntarily uprooted himself to come here." My mother felt the same way. For that reason, incidentally, and very early, they detested Communism with similar passion because they felt it was antagonistic to the American ideals. So much so that when my father died I found a will, I didn't draw it even though I was his son, it was drawn by another partner in my office who didn't tell me about it. In his will was a remarkable provision that if anyone in my family married a Communist they were not to be buried in the mausoleum he built. That's how strongly he felt about it. That sense of patriotism I share, but not for the same reasons as he did. To him it was a contrast of the old and the new. The terrible conditions and the paradise, but just as valid, the freedom, the opportunity, even though I feel as an indigenous American and not an immigrant due to my early arrival here. I nevertheless have felt very deeply about my obligations, every citizens' obligation to the wonders of this country. Only a few weeks ago I addressed West Point, the cadets and the

Colonel Lowe, who was in charge, had me stand out on the parade grounds and watch the cadets march. And before they came out in groups of eight hundred from concave entrances to their barracks, a band came out and when they had emerged the band played the Star Spangled Banner as they stood at rigid attention in their beautiful uniforms, straight backs. And I just must confess that my wife and I had tears in our eyes and we commented on the fact that such patriotic feeling and fervor is no longer common to the people in this country. We feel depressed about Watergate and other things but only in this great country could there have been a revelation such as Watergate. No other country in the world could have revealed misdoings in such high places despite the resistance of the head of the government. It's part of the wonders of our government that this has come out, and come out so healthily and as a purge so that we increase our idealism. I don't find Watergate depressing at all. I find it a wonderful demonstration of how democracy works in a crisis to purify itself. Now as to my own career, very early in my life I have always wanted to be a lawyer and my first case went up to the Court of Appeals where sat

Judge Cordoza. In my judgement the greatest judge this country has produced with the possible exception of Holmes and Brandeis. And I got to know him in that very early period. He was kind enough to talk to me about my argument and we got to know each other and he has been my hero ever since. Hero as a legal authority, as a great philosopher, but not a hero in his personal life because he was so dedicated to the law that he lived only for the law. He never had any social contacts, he didn't marry, he didn't go to the theater. (break in tape) While I believe in versatility and the full expression of talents in all directions so that I wouldn't emulate his life for anything. I think a man should be well rounded and he was one-sided, but brilliantly one-sided only for the law. But I do feel that every talent can be expressed in many ways if we'll only try to do so. Versatility should be the rule, not the exception. And therefore without bragging about it and really not as a disguise of modesty I write books and I paint and I write music and I practice law and I speak and I don't consider that in any way extraordinary. I think whatever talent a person has, big or small, can be expressed in many ways if they will explore their inner countenance

and bring up their talents in other directions.

NASH: Do you think that your family contributed to that point of view?

NIZER: I'm not sure of that. While my father was lusty and liked all sort of things in life, I don't know that he had quite that philosophy. I feel that to put it in an epigram, life is not a puzzle to be solved or a mystery to be struggled with. It's an adventure to be lived and we all can live it more fully if we'll try. Psychologists tell us that we only use five or ten percent of our talents, those who use fifteen or twenty percent are brilliant. And if we ever get somebody to be able to explore twenty-five or thirty percent of his ability, he'll be a genius. And we haven't begun to tap our inner resources and the reason I stress this is that I think the day is coming very fast when, because of technological improvement and achievements, we will have three and four hour work weeks. In the many industries, machines will take over, computers will take over. And then human beings will find that they have time on their hands and today we spend about forty-five billion dollars for entertainment in the United States and we're bored. We'll have to learn what to do with ourselves when we have eighteen hours a day on our hands. And unless we learn that

we're going to be in a terrible crisis. Not the atom bomb, not Communism, leisure is our greatest threat and therefore we ought to begin early. Today is not too early to dig deeply within ourselves to bring up the ore to learn to use our enormous capacities, whatever they are, small or large, in many directions. You, who are interviewing me now, may be wonderful at the piano, if you tried it, or in archeology, or in teaching, I don't know. But if you've tried to find out you'd know because you'd like what you are doing. As I've said, "Nothing is work unless you'd rather be doing something else." And if you're doing what you want to do then you're not working. So you quickly realize it, you have enthusiasm for it, hours mean nothing. I see it in my law practice. The lawyer who is here Saturdays and Sunday and works nights isn't doing it because anybody has asked him to do it. He's excited about it, he enjoys it, and that makes him a great lawyer. Now the, you represent the immigrant society in some way and that brings us to the international aspect of today's strange conglomeration of conflicts. Of course, we're learning that as distance shrinks and technological improvements occur that the so-called foreigner is only the neighbor we don't know of. We just don't know his name, but he's not a foreigner anymore. And the homogeneity of the human race ought to propel us to a more human understanding of improvement. There is the tragedy, that's the

essence of the matter. Scientifically we have improved more in the last fifty years than of the preceding one million years of man supposed existence on this earth. If you made a list of all the scientists who ever lived, ninety percent would be alive today. Now, while science has been creating these absolute wonders, has human nature improved similarly? I'm afraid not. If it has improved, and it has, it's been imperceptible movement. We still are beset by the same jealousy and greed and above all, belligerence, belligerence. We're ready to fight at the drop of a hat. It's part of the human animalistic instinct. And as long as human nature hasn't improved, nothing else will improve. That's why you're going to have corruption in business and politics, in the law, in medicine, priests, rabbis, and ministers are convicted of crimes because human nature hasn't kept pace with our scientific improvements. Therefore, our great struggle, and unfortunately it's going to be a long one, but I'm very optimistic about it, it can be done, but in our short life span we've got to contribute what we can. Our great project in life is to see if we can't make human beings a little less belligerent and more understanding and better. There is an epigram that it does no good for the sheep to pass resolutions for vegetarianism when the wolves think otherwise. It does no good at all to say, "Let's have peace and we won't fight," because the wolves on the outside are ready to devour us.

Therefore we must have armies and we must waste our assets on huge war expenditures and in our homes we must build locks and even then we're not safe because as long as the human being hasn't improved unilateral resolutions won't achieve it for us.

So that leads us to another precept, that we must have a great new educational system. I don't mean new buildings or new teachers. I mean education for the adults as well as the young, a new concept of man's position in the world and his contribution to world betterment. And this isn't some abstract idealism. It's the realist thing in the world. Unless we work at this, we're going to have just what we're experiencing; turmoil, revolution, killings, drug addiction and all the rest.

It is all part of the same pattern of human beings bored or frustrated turning to all devices. Tangentially, I might say that I consider the great crime in the streets which so besets us as drug addiction crime, I don't think it's the general increase of crime as we used to know it. There are two hundred thousand drug addicts in the United States, in the city of New York. And when you catch them they tell you that they steal seven to eight times a day, snatch pocket books and mug people and grab a typewriter from an office, sell it for five dollars in order to get together the seventy-five dollars or a hundred dollars for the shot that they need that day. Well, if you multiply not two hundred thousand, but let's say, only one

hundred thousand, by seven to eight thefts a day, that's three-quarters of a million crimes on the streets in the city of New York in each day. There is your crime problem. And there's no use talking about capital punishment or anything like that, that won't stop it. A man driven by inner devils isn't going to stop because of capital punishment. He'll kill his mother at that moment to get the shot. So I suggest on that, that we give free heroin, under careful government auspices with psychiatrists present to all addicts free, only cost two cents a shot, you know, to the government of the United States. It's the racketeers who charge seventy-five and a hundred dollars. And that I think would stop ninety percent of the crime we're experiencing today. Because that's purely drug addict crime. Now that's tangential aspect on the periphery of what I'm talking about, namely people's frustration, their attempt to escape from the realities of life, their unhappiness with themselves, some because of injustices, others because they're inadequate. And that's such a profound problem that we need a whole new educational system psychiatrically to make us self-sufficient and to be our own psychiatrists. Now what has that got to do with immigration? Merely that the combination of cultures and learning and tradition that comes from other peoples is by nature a great healing constructive force. This is simply a truth of nature. If you want magnificent flowers of

different colors, you've got to crossbreed them from all the different kinds of flowers. You won't get it by just using American flowers in Massachusetts. And if you want to breed the fastest horse, we know that you can't do by it just interbreeding Kentucky horses, you go to Arabian horses and African horses. It's a rule of nature, and I always trust nature because you can't, you just cannot trust her, it won't work. And we know that the combination of bloodstreams and inheritances from different cultures and races and creeds can make a great contribution to a nobler kind of society and a better result. It can also sometimes create your bad result, that's true, you can get a bad breed of animals or flowers too.

But most of the time your most brilliant achievements in nature come from contributions that are varied. Nature seems to glory in that variance. That's why we have millions of different of kinds of species of each kind. There are literally, of flowers for example, over four hundred thousand kinds of flowers and colors of the same kind of flowers. This is true of animals, of cattle, it's true of human beings. And another great thing that we are learning is that these genes and chromosomes which come through as traditional sources from abroad. And melt, this word melting pot is a happy phrase, melt in to our own great genes and chromosomes, which also comes from abroad, give us a hope of a finer kind of human being. And we must depend upon that

natural resource for progress. That is why one of the reasons this country has produced such greatness.

NASH: How do you feel about immigration policy? Do you think that immigration should be closed or should be more open?

NIZER: I think it should be more open. And I could cite statistical studies. I once wrote an article on this, that during those periods when we had open immigration, our prosperity went forward with leaps and bounds, our cultural progress was great, our great leaders emerged from it. The Lincolns and others. The great scientists emerged from it. You take a list of the great contributors in medicine, the Nobel Prize winners, they're either foreigners themselves or come directly from foreign parents. There only may be a generation separating them at most, and some two generations only. This doesn't mean that the American scientist who comes from the early revolution isn't able but there's only a limited number of those, and the more you mix Czechoslovaks and Poles and English and German and Russian, the more chance you have. I find that the mixture of peoples is a healthy thing for any country and whatever the disadvantages are particularly if you do it unscientifically, and just crowd people into a ghetto and create

a ghetto by overcrowding a certain section, we've done that in the past. That's bad management. It had nothing to do with immigration, it's simply badly managed. You don't want all Puerto Ricans to be, come in and have one little section of the city and thus create almost an artificial ghetto for them. They are great people and should just become Americans. Let their talents flow out. And the same with Italians and Poles and Jews in all from all countries. Our great cultural assets, the violinists, the musicians, the painters, the writers, you can trace eighty-ninety percent of them to cultivated soil let's say from abroad as well as here. So the greatness of America has been that we have, as the Statue of Liberty that you're so interested in says, "We welcome your teeming masses." I'm all for it and I don't think it would create unemployment. On the contrary, these people also have to live and they grow up and they live well. They progress, they're industrious, they're loyal, and I just talked about my father's patriotism. They are often the most patriotic because they know the difference from where they came and what they have here. You find less rubble, so to speak, among the foreigners than you do among the indigent Americans because they know what a paradise this is to despite all faults. And it is compared to others, and you must make a comparison because that's what the world is built on. It isn't what you have yourself. We have inflation, everybody's talking

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about inflation. The inflation that this country is supposed to have reached six percent or eight percent. The inflation in other countries is twenty-six percent, thirty percent, twenty-eight percent, nineteen percent. Ours is the lowest in the world, yet we're the biggest groaners about it because we're not accustomed to suffering as other peoples do. We're such a wonderful country here with all advantages. But we've got to learn to expect our advantages at times to be diminished. Well, haven't I told you enough?

NASH: I have enjoyed it very much, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW