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MEYER (MIKE) HARBUS

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RUSSIA, 1920

AGE 10

PASSAGE ON "THE ROTTERDAM"

NASH:This is February 13, 1975. I am in the office of Meyer Harbus, otherwise known as Mike, who is a certified public accountant practicing in New York City. Mr. Harbus came to the United States in 1920 at the age of ten. He was born in Pinsk in White Russia. What is White Russia?

HARBUS:White Russia is a republic, one of the many republics that make up the Soviet Union. It is a country I imagine with about forty to fifty million people in there. The capital of White Russia is Minsk.

NASH:And there were many Jews that lived there?

HARBUS:White Russia, as far as I know, had a great number of Jews. In the town where I was born I remember that there were

a number of synagogues and the Jews had a great number of people both working in the numerous factories around it and also as small shopkeepers and doing similar kind of work.

NASH: Tell me about your family's life there.

HARBUS: My early recollections are the following. My father was a teacher known as a Malomid. He conducted a class in, primarily I would say in the Bible and advanced Talmud students for children of various ages and the classes were conducted in the large dining room of our house that we lived in. My mother, besides being his helper in the house, also had a small candy store and what I remember of that is that I used to avail myself of the various goodies that were around without paying for them.

NASH: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

HARBUS: I had three brothers and one sister. My oldest brother and sister had immigrated to the United States probably in the years 1910 or '11 before World War I. and, as a matter of fact, it was my oldest brother who brought us over in 1920, that is my father and mother and my two other brothers and myself.

NASH:Well, what made the family first start to leave?

HARBUS:I guess we were typical of the many Jews who left either before World War I or directly the war. The history of Russia and Poland was not a glorious one for the Jewish people pogroms and anti-semitism and, of course, the promise of streets laden with gold and the general knowledge that America was a place of democracy for all peoples made us want to come to this country.

NASH:Were there bad things that actually happened to your family in particular?

HARBUS:I remember an incident where --that was during the war from 1917 until 1919 --we were shifted around from Pinsk which was the center of fighting going on between the Bolsheviks and the White Russians. As a result of the fighting around our area, we were sent to, practically the entire Jewish population was sent to a small town near warsaw and on the way to Warsaw I remember my father, who had a big flowing beard, was grabbed by a few Polish soldiers and they cut his beard off. Luckily they did it with scissors rather than, as some of them would do, with bayonets. Otherwise

I don't recollect any specific harm that was done to our family as such.

NASH:After you went to that town was your family able to return to Pinsk?

HARBUS:We were in that town for at least two years. My older brother, my oldest was in America, but next to my oldest brothers was sent to, was recruited by the Germans who were in that area at that time and he was recruited into the German Army in their labor force Alsace-Lorraine. My father and mother and my other brother, I was the youngest incidentally, were recruited by the Germans to dig trenches and they would leave each morning about five or six and return late at night, so that I was being only about nine years old, eight or nine years old, I was left at home in care of a rabbi in whose house we were put up for the two-year duration while we were there.

NASH:Actually who sent you there, the Russians sent you? Because you say they were working for the Germans.

HARBUS:I am not sure whether it was the Russians or the Germans or the Polish. Pinsk was in such a turbulent state that it

was not surprising for us to see one morning the Red flag of the bolshevik Army. Another morning we might see german troops marching down the streets, and another morning the Polish Army. I imagine it was the Germans that sent us to this town near Warsaw because they were the ones that recruited my brothers and my parents to do work for them.

NASH:And the reason that they sent you was just to have workers in that particular area?

HARBUS:I imagine that would be correct. It might also be that we were --the civilians in Pinsk were sort of in the way of their military operations because we as children, after some fighting we would go out on the street and seeing many dead soldiers laying on the ground, we would take unused bullets and the bayonets and pistols which we thought were great play things. I believe for the military operations they felt it would be better not to have civilians around.

NASH:So the Germans seemed to have treated you not too badly?

HARBUS:No. the Germans as well as any other of the soldiers that would come in, they generally dealt with the civilians with I would say no . I remember coming to our candy store

and help themselves with some merchandise without paying for it, but there was no real terror of violence used against us.

NASH:So then your family went back to Pinsk again.

HARBUS:Yes.

NASH:And everything was as you had left it?

HARBUS:We went back to Pinsk and that was about in the middle of 1919.

By then my oldest brother and sister who were in the United States sent the various immigration papers and we were waiting, of course, for the steamship tickets, and when they arrived we went to Warsaw and we stood there for about three months until the final papers came through or whatever other official papers, and then we left for Rotterdam and then on to New York.

NASH:Do you remember the day that you left Russia?

HARBUS:Since we arrived in the United states in July and we were about three months in Warsaw, we must have left Russia in about March or April of 1920.

NASH:I mean do you remember the experience of leaving?

HARBUS:Oh, the actual experience. Not really. the experience of spending three months in Warsaw was almost an unbelievable experience to us because Warsaw was at that time and I think it still is, a very beautiful city and its various parks and squares and statuary impressed us very much, and since we knew we were coming to America, it seemed that we were just enjoying as much as we could stay there. So all I remember is really we were all in very buoyant spirit just waiting to come to the United States.

NASH:Then you went to Rotterdam you say, and were you examined in Rotterdam or did you have to go through any particular procedure?

HARBUS:No, Rotterdam was just a place where we embarked upon the boat. I believe we got medical examinations either there or in Warsaw, I really don't --

NASH:From the ship company?

HARBUS:No, I think it was from the United States Consul or the Immigration Service. When we arrived at Ellis Island I

remember we were re-examined again and given a clean bill of health.

NASH:Well, let's go back to the trip. what do you remember about --what kind of a ship wa sit that you took?

HARBUS:It was called the Rotterdam, which was the old Rotterdam. It is not the new Rotterdam which is sailing the seas now. It was a great experience to me as a kid to sail the ocean and we were not herded in steerage or anything of the sort. We were, I know definitely, in the third class but it was not a bad trip at all, food wise or any other wise.

NASH:When you say you weren't in steerage, do you mean that your family had its own cabin?

HARBUS:Frankly, I don't remember whether we were sleeping in dormitory style or whether we had a room to ourselves. It is unlikely that we did.

NASH:What are the things that you do remember about the trip?

HARBUS:Good food as compared what we would generally eat before, especially during the war years when we were literally

starving. The only other thing that I remember about the trip is the excitement of just waiting to get to the United States.

NASH:Do you remember any of the other passengers or any of the crew members.

HARBUS:No, I really don't remember. There were many immigrants who arrived with us at the same time.

NASH:What about your family, how did your mother handle the trip?

HARBUS:My mother was always a comparatively strong, healthy person, but seasickness did get her. I think most of us at one time or another had, in varying degrees, some seasickness, but otherwise the trip was, as I stated before, rather exciting and I think that we were enjoying, glad to be coming to the United States.

NASH:Do you remember when you first approached land? Do you remember what you first saw?

HARBUS:Well, we remember that we were told we were nearing America and we all came out on the deck and we saw the Statue of

Liberty. We were really excited and started applauding and waving our hands because we noticed that there were many small boats that were along side our steamship and we also noticed after we were told by my parents where to look that my brother and sister were on one of these small boats and evidently they had recognized my parents and they were waving to us and we waved back. I did not remember them because when they left Russia either Was not born yet or I was an infant. And an Immigration official came on board ship and after looking through our various papers, we were all taken onto Ellis Island. I don't remember whether we spent a night in Ellis Island or not. The stay there either for the day or two consisted primarily of medical examinations and questioning and looking over the various visas and so on.

NASH:Do you remember anything about the medical examination?

HARBUS:I don't except that I remember it was a rather thorough examination and, of course, as a child I feared being stuck with needles and I think it must have been some inoculation against some diseases, but I remember the needles is the only thing I remember of it, but otherwise there was nothing that was particularly distasteful about the examination.

NASH:Do you remember the attitude of the examiners?

HARBUS:As much as I can remember, I would say that it was a courteous but friendly attitude. None of us were made to feel that we were unwelcome.

NASH:Do you have anything that stands out in your mind about Ellis Island, the way it looked or the atmosphere, the many different immigrants that were there at the time?

HARBUS:The only thing I remember about ellis Island was that it had a number of huge buildings and we were in one of them and we really did not pay much attention to it because for us we knew it was just a passing through place and we were interested in setting our foot on the solid streets. I don't think too many people pay attention to the Island as such.

NASH:Well, what happened when you were through? Do you remember taking a boat to New York?

HARBUS:We were ferried across to Manhattan and I vividly remember this My brother and sister, my sister was married

and my brother was just an ordinary worker and he probably did not have extra money after bringing us over to even take a taxi to my sister's house where we stood for a couple of weeks. So I do remember that we all went on the Second Avenue elevator which to me was just a wondrous thing, a railroad up in the air, and we took the el to Houston Street station and from there we walked over a few blocks to my sister's house which was on Essex Street near Houston Street.

NASH:Do you remember what South Ferry looked like in those days and what Essex Street looked like?

HARBUS:South ferry seemed to be a very bustling center, boats coming from the various islands, Ellis Island, Governors Island. It was also the southern terminal of the various els, the Second Avenue el, the Third Avenue el, and some of the suburbs of that. It impressed me as a very unusual, hectic kind of a place, especially compared to a town like Pinsk from where I had come from.

NASH:How did your family get established?

HARBUS:My father and mother and my two brothers and myself, we all managed to stay at my sister and brother's-in-law house which consisted of three rooms, a bedroom, a dining room, and a kitchen. How about eight or nine of us managed to get along there, I don't know, but we did. And after staying there about a month or so, we found an apartment on Orchard Street, which is also on the lower east side. There we had a luxurious four-room apartment with two bedrooms so that we lived in comparative roomy luxury.

NASH:So what did your father the Malamad do?

HARBUS:You hit it on the head. My father, being a Malamad, did not speak english, of course, and he was rather advanced in years and he became, of course, immediately attached to his congregation which was a center of the same Arcetic Jews whose Rabbi had originated in Russia and whose son here had set up the congregation and my father being a follower of that particular sect, immediately --

NASH:What Rabbi was it?

HARBUS:It was the stalinera Rabbi. He was supposedly a very wise Rabbi whose sons in time became Rabbis and their sons became Rabbis too, and they evidential had the complete fealty or backing of all the Jews who belonged to that particular area in Russia. They had a fairly large congregation in New York and, as I stated before, my father became immediately active and after a while he was I believe the secretary or treasurer, and since he was not able to get children, he had spoken to some people about it but they told him that in order to get a school, a number of children attending a school that he would have had to set up, he would have to learn English. My father was not overly pleased in starting to learn English at his age so he became an active participant in the congregation's affairs in various capacities.

NASH:How old was he?

HARBUS:My father was about over sixty years.

NASH:Did he ever work?

HARBUS:He tried. He felt that he should do something since he felt

guilty at being only a man who attends to synagogue affairs and his children, my two other brothers, were working. I was going, of course, to elementary school. He attempted to get a job and he did for a couple of years. He worked for a firm that sorted out either old clothes or remnants into various categories such as wools, silks, cottons, etc. It seemed that that particular firm, known as Lamport which later became a very large firm in New York, hired many immigrants, older Jews. My father said that it reminded him of being a real machols kamin, or a house for the aged, because they would all be there and in the process of sorting out the various kinds of textiles, would have Talmud discussions and wait for their eight or ten dollars that they received for a weeks work.

NASH:Did your mother work?

HARBUS:No, my mother did not work. She was busy keeping house for my father and my two brothers and myself. However, my two other brothers married within about say a couple of years after we arrived so that I was the only one that remained with my parents.

NASH:Did they marry Jewish women?

HARBUS:Yes. My other two brothers married Jewish women and they had a very happy marriage until one of my brothers, the older one, died in 1958 and my other brother died last year. My oldest brother, he was happily married, but his wife died at an early age from a heart ailment and he left for California.

NASH:It seemed like another world? Well, just briefly, what was your experience when you first --do you remember first going to elementary school? How were you received?

HARBUS:Since I arrived in July, I had about approximately six weeks to pick up some English, especially some street language which I imagine was not much different that it is nowadays. After Labor Day I registered in a public school On Delancy and Ludlow Streets and I was put into a special class for foreigners. They called it, I think, the C class. After being there for about two months, they put me into 4B which I think was the class corresponding to my age level. From there on I went through the fifth year and the sixth year

and then I entered Junior High School 20 on Vivington and forsythe Streets and I was I guess a good student because I was put into a rapid advance classes called RA, RB, RC, and RD, which meant that I made the seventh and eighth year in one year and the ninth year in the second year.

NASH:What were the ethnic groups of the people that you went to school with in those years?

HARBUSThe school that I attended was primarily Jewish. The junior high school had also a large number of Italian children because it took in the neighborhood from the streets west of Allen Street such as Forsythe, Eldridge, Christy, which had a more Italian people living than Jewish people. I graduated from junior high school, I was fourteen and a half years old and since I was the only one at home who left with my parents, I proceeded to get a job and my working life started at that time. However, I continued with high school.

I went to Steward Park Evening High School and I completed the three years in the three years and then I enrolled for the City College and I completed my degree in seven years. I call them usually the seven

long, lean years because it was not an easy thing to work from eight a.m. until about six p.m. and then going to school generally about four evenings a week.

The jobs that I had usually were in the ladies show industry. All my brothers were in that industry and after trying various kinds of jobs as an errand boy, a shipping clerk, where the average salary was about fifteen to twenty dollars a week, my brothers told me to forget about what they called a white collar job and come to work in the factory where I would be making real money. I followed their advice and within about a half a year or so I learned the skills rather rapidly and i would be making usually between forty or fifty dollars a week whereas all my friends, my eighteen nineteen-yea-old friends. were making about twenty dollars per week. Of course, a great help in getting these high wages for that period was the fact that a union was organized in the shoe industry and I became a member and I was very much impressed with what a labor organization can do for its members.

NASH:Well, as far as your coming from another country is concerned, has it touched you, do you think, in your life as an adult?

HARBUS:I am glad that I was born in Europe because it has started me on a road of travels which I have done recently. since my early immigration from Europe to this country at the age of ten, I was not at that age able to comprehend the various cultures, different people and ideologies that make up our planet. However, in the last seventeen years or so when my financial situation has been able to provide me with travels, we have made various trips to different countries and areas in Europe, Mexico, south America, and I have found that it is only by mingling and visiting other countries can we become tolerant of others and to me tolerance is a very important factor in our life and in our existence because it is only through tolerance of other people's views and politics can we learn that we must live together and that there is not any one country or any one people that is superior to anyone else. and perhaps my desire for travel and search for trying to help in my own way to make our existence and life for everybody a happier one is due to the fact that my early childhood in Russia was a hard and rather, perhaps I should say unpleasant portion of my life.

NPS-83/HARBUS