

NPS-86

MARIA ELZBIETA LEWIN

BIRTH DATE: 1940

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 4, 1975

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

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TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 5/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

POLAND, 1973

AGE 33

NASH: Today is March 4, 1975. I am speaking with a woman who came to the United States from Poland in 1973, and she arrived here at the age of thirty-three. Her name is Maria. Maria, tell me something about where you came from, what was the name of the town?

LEWIN: I am from Warsaw. I came to the United States more or less three years ago. I was graduated from Warsaw University. My occupation in my country was editor. Subject of my study was literature, history of literature. And my father and my mother are living in Poland now, in Warsaw. My sister too. My father is an engineer. My mother is a teacher.

NASH: Describe Warsaw to me? What are your good memories about Warsaw, what was (?) like?

LEWIN: Oh, I liked Warsaw. It was a private reason that I am here. It was my personal reason that I am here. Before I have never thought about immigration. I would like to stay in Poland, but now I am very happy because I am here. At the beginning, of course, it was a big shock for me, the United States. I was very afraid of the United States because I read about the United States in papers and they are not very good things, you know. At the beginning it was not very easy for me to to get used to live here. The most difficult problem was language. You know my English is very poor. I tried to learn English in school at (?) in school. I have a lot of problems. For example, it is very difficult for me to pronounce the h, the h. I mix pillows and take pills. I had an appointment with my doctor and I asked him about contraception pillows. It is fun for you, but it wasn't fun for me. I mix garbage and gorgeous. Now it is a little better because we have a lot of American friends. They taught me. American people are very good friends, really. They are very friendly toward us. They help me very much to be here and to stay here because at the beginning I would like to go back. But now, I don't know how to explain to you, at the beginning I thought in my country, but now I don't know

exactly what does it mean, my country, in Poland? In the United States?

NASH: You are confused about what is your country.

LEWIN: Yes, I don't know yet.

NASH: Could you describe something about, you know, how it happened that you came here? What the factors were that led to your coming? As much as you want to tell us.

LEWIN: Okay. My cousins invite me to be with them in New York, and I did it. In that time it was my future husband, my present husband, was in this country. He came to the United States five years ago because he is Jewish. Some years ago Jewish people had a little bit of trouble in Poland. They were in a very bad position, so my husband he leaves Poland, he is my boyfriend, he leaves Poland and came to this country. His father lived here, he's dead. I hadn't seen him for a long time, my husband, for three years missed. I stay in Warsaw, he was my boyfriend. I didn't know if I would like to stay in the United States. When he leave Poland there was a gentlemen's agreement between us. I promise him to visit my family there, and him, and to give him friends name in answer for his questions, if we can be

together or not. I was afraid to live in the United States, you know. And I came here to visit my family, but after five or six days I am living in this apartment with my husband. There was nothing, any armchairs, there's nothing. Only some carpet. What?

NASH: Carpet.

LEWIN: Carpet, yes. So, I decided to stay here.

NASH: To help him furnish his apartment?

LEWIN: Yes. That's all. I got him here. At the beginning it was very difficult for me and for him. He was a student in Hunter College. He had a lot of trouble with English, he is older than I am, about seven years. And now he was graduated. He is a social worker at the (?). I would like to be a career woman. I would like to work. And I think that at first I might improve my English. My English is not good enough to work like for the job as a social worker or work in Immigration Department, in nursing home, and something like this. I don't wonder yet what I would like to do. I know more or less, but I would like to work. I don't want to be supported by my husband. It is not a good position.

NASH: What about the difference between being a woman, let's say, in Warsaw and in New York City? Are women, on the question of liberated women, how liberated are women in Warsaw?

LEWIN: In Poland they have no problem with the women's liberation movement. Yes, because everyone is more or less in the same position.

NASH: You have the same opportunities for training and for work?

LEWIN: Yes, yes. But, sometimes the women are very unhappy in this situation because they must work harder than here. The woman has more trouble with buying something, shopping, and so--

NASH: You mean she has to work and she still has the responsibility of the home?

LEWIN: Yes, it is difficult to be a career, to be a good housewife and a good career woman, you know. In Poland more difficult than here, in this country. But, if you want to work, you can work. I don't know, but my friend, my girl friends were at the university, they were working. I didn't have friends, girl friends who didn't

work, you know. This position is new. It is something here for me. I don't want to stay on this way.

NASH: Well, are there any possibilities for you to go to work in let's say, in a Polish language newspaper or for publishers in New York City?

LEWIN: I don't want to work in an immigrants' institution. I would like to work as an ordinary American, you know. I want to improve my English and to be as you are, as everyone in this country. For me the problem is the language. I believe that only after improving my English everything will be okay.

NASH: I hope so. Well, in what way did you find New York, since that has been your only experience really, in the United States, to be most different from Warsaw?

LEWIN: Most different. Yes, at the beginning I was afraid of New York. New York was too big for me.

NASH: How big is Warsaw?

LEWIN: The population is about one million. But now I am used to living here. I like New

York, and especially I like the Bronx, my area. My neighbors, they helped me very much. For Example, on my floor is living a teacher. At the beginning of my being here I wasn't able to speak anything. He asked me about something in elevator and I wasn't able to answer him. So he told me, "Go to school. I tell, you know, where is the school for you, and I help you." And he did.

NASH: Just picking up on some other parts of being from another place, were you religious in Poland?

LEWIN: No.

NASH: No.

LEWIN: It is not a problem for me.

NASH: So, I mean you don't follow any particular--

LEWIN: I am Catholic, but I don't go to church. I don't used to go to church. I celebrate the holidays because it is tradition, you know, but now I celebrate Jewish holidays and Catholic holidays.

NASH: Do you? Do you belong to a Jewish organization or do you attend--

LEWIN: No, no, no.

NASH: Do you still have any communication with your family in Poland? Do you write them and so forth?

LEWIN: Yes, I send a letter to them and they send letter to me. I would like to visit them and when I will be citizen. You know, now it would be better for me to stay here now. After my citizenship exams. I would like to visit my family, my mother, my father.

NASH: What is your status now? Are you a permanent resident?

LEWIN: Yes, I am a permanent resident here.

NASH: And your husband is also?

LEWIN: Yes. But, I am still a Polish citizen, you know, but my husband is, how to call it in

English, stateless, he is stateless.

NASH: Was he originally a Polish citizen or has he always--

LEWIN: I am illegal here.

NASH: Well, nobody knows that.

LEWIN: Of course, I got married here. And the Poland government respects the situation, you know.

NASH: Is your husband not stateless, or is he a permanent resident of the United States?

LEWIN: Now he is stateless. Some years ago he was a Polish citizen. But, it was a very complicated political situation. As a result of this situation he is here (?) as stateless.

NASH: I understand, he has, in other words, he has a permanent residency here, but he doesn't have a citizenship with any other country.

LEWIN: Yes. I hope that in two years from now, two maybe one year from now, he will be a citizen, American citizen.

NASH: Well, do you make any effort to keep up with what is going on in Poland? Do you subscribe to any Polish newspapers?

LEWIN: yes, my mother sent me Polish newspapers, but you know, I have not enough time to read in English and in Polish. I try to read in English and Polish, but I must learn English. It is the most important thing for me now. I would like to return to Polish language later, not now. Now only English. Later I would like to (?) Polish and in English.

NASH: Do ever speak English with your husband at home?

LEWIN: No, it would be ridiculous. He would like, but I don't want to. I would like to speak with--

NASH: I would like to ask you about the reaction of your family to the fact that you came here, how do they fell about that?

LEWIN: My family is not happy about it, between you and me.

NASH: And the rest of everybody else who reads this.

LEWIN: But, now they are very interested in America. My father sent me a letter that he read a lot about America. He is very interested in this problem.

NASH: What problem?

LEWIN: This problem--they are speaking this problem in the United States, how people are living in this country? What happened here, and so on. They go to the movies to see American films. Now it is more interesting for him than before. They saw Broadway on film, on (?) in film. It was very interesting for him. I tried to describe to tell him in my letters everything about this country, you know. Everything is very interesting for them.

NASH: Do you think as a result of your coming here that other people who knew you might be interested in following you?

LEWIN: They before, they didn't like the United States. They thought that it is a big

country, they knew who is very bad for Vietnam and for other country. Very big and a very rich country, that's all. But, now I try to explain to them that the people who live in this country are free. That everyone can tell who she thinks about Nixon and about everything. About the war, Nixon, and so on.

NASH: I want to get back just a little bit to some of the other, you know, differences that you found between life here and life there. What other things struck you?

LEWIN: Everything is different. I don't what is similar. (?) Big shock, big shock for me was shopping in this country. I have never seen before a supermarket. It was difficult for me to drive a car in the United States, Yes, I can, but it is difficult for me now because of traffic. I didn't used to be in this traffic. I have never seen highways before. Everything is new for me. The papers are different, movies are different. I think sometimes Polish theater is more interesting than here, you know. But, opera is more interesting here. Here the theater and opera is more expensive than Poland. In Poland I go to the theater every month, but here I have no money. But, here I have a car. In Poland it was impossible for me to have my own car. Here the dresses are not too much expensive even bought. A woman's position in this country is worse than in Poland. For example, in Poland it is no problem are you married or not married, it it only my business. You can ask me about it, you

know. You can be alone, you can have a lot of friends, but it is puritan tradition here, you know. I don't know what is better, but I am talking to you what is different, you know. For me this problem of the women's liberation movement, it is a little bit funny because we had this problem--this problem was in Poland many, many years ago, you know.

NASH: Have you ever met any old Polish immigrants in this country? People who have been here for many years?

LEWIN: Our friends are other American people because my husband works with American people. Of course, we have some friends from Poland. I like them, but, you know, if we are living here our friends are from this country. I have more Polish friends in Poland. They send me letters and I like them. They visited me. I have visitors from Poland every month.

NASH: Visitors.

LEWIN: Yes. Now a lot of people are very interested in America in Poland. People in Poland like American liberator, Hemingway, Steinbeck. They are very popular in Poland, you know.

NASH: Why do you think so?

LEWIN: I think it is very good, of course. They are interested in American literature. I see this problem because my friends ask me in the letters about a lot of problems. How do live, what do you read? And so on.

NASH: Well, what do you think makes them so concerned at this particular point? Why is the grappling? It sounds like there's a new interest in America, what makes it--why do they have this interest at this point in time? Or is it just because you are living here and they are asking you?

LEWIN: What I see differently? I don't understand.

NASH: No, you mentioned that your friends ask you all these questions and they seem very interested in America. Is it a new interest for them or is it just that you are here and they can ask you?

LEWIN: They are interested in the social life in America. It is rather different than in Poland. What I mean, for example, in this country it is a custom that couples, married couples is a very serious institution. I agree, but it is a little bit, it is not my

point of view because in Poland a couple, one couple, woman, wife has her own friends, boys and girls. And the husband has his own friends. They have very good marriages, couples, you know. But, it is normal that everyone has his own friends. In his office, women can go to a party only without husband. It is not shocking. It is normal. My married friends had a lot of single friends, but here it is almost impossible. I must have friends who are married, I don't want. I want to have married and single friends. It is no problem for me, but here it is not convenient. I don't know how to explain to you. It is funny for me, why? In my house here, I have friends single and my husband too. He told me that one girl at his office is very nice and very sympathetic. I told him that I have some good friends in my (?) my school, that's okay. And we are a very good married couple, you know.

NASH: So, life is much freer in Poland in that respect, you're free.

LEWIN: You know, maybe it is interesting for you that in Poland when a girl is older than eighteen, nobody call her Miss everyone is, I don't know how to explain, in Poland it is funny. It is Miss and Mrs., it is not a problem it is the same.

NASH: You mean it is a term of respect and once it's clear that she is mature she gets a

lot of respect?

LEWIN: It is--here, for example, I was in a wedding. Everyone was dancing with her husband and with his wife. It (?) for me. I can dance with my husband at my apartment. I would like to dance with other boys, and my husband too, like with you. It's not guilty, it is normal for me. But, here it is not convenient, I don't know.

NASH: There's no jealousy. It sounds like their women don't feel jealousy.

LEWIN: No, no.

NASH: Well, that is interesting. I guess it seems like women there are a lot more secure, wouldn't you say so?

LEWIN: No. If my husband will be really interested in another girl, I wouldn't be able to tell him, stay with me. He stay with me if I will be okay for him, you know? It is the problem. But, not another girl. He likes Eva, he likes Mary in his office, but it is nothing, of course. I like Francesco, it is nothing, but I love my husband. I would like to dance with another boy on the wedding or another celebration, and so on, you know. A party. I don't like to keep my (?).

NASH: Well, I guess that must be very confining for you then.

LEWIN: Do you agree with me or not?

NASH: Well, I think it is a healthier way to feel, but I think when you grow up in this culture there is, somehow women feel much less secure and they hold on to their men a lot tighter than they may some other places. Have you lived in other countries as well as Poland?

LEWIN: No.

NASH: I wondered if you had experienced that in other places or just in Poland. Okay, well, it has been very interesting and thank you very much.

LEWIN: Thank you.