

NPS-88/MEYEROWITZ

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JULIUS MEYEROWITZ

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NASH: Today is March 11, 1975 and I am speaking with Mr. Julius Meyerowitz who immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine in Russia in the year 1924 at the age of eighteen. Mr. Meyerowitz, what was the name of the town that you came from?

MEYEROWITZ: The name of the town was called Popovitz. It was a small community with a Jewish population of about 60 families. The town was laid out in an L shape. The Jewish population lives like in a square. The next street was the rest of the L. It is about twenty-five miles from a larger railroad junction, about twenty-five miles away from that town.

NASH: And what were the people there, farmers?

MEYEROWITZ:The Jewish population was mostly engaged in very small businesses. Some sort of bartering with the peasants and buying orchards.

NASH:How long had your family lived there?

MEYEROWITZ:My father and mother were born there, and so were all the children born there.

NASH:And what about their family? How far back had they lived there?

MEYEROWITZ:I assume that even their parents were born in that town. My father left for the United States in 1913, and he came to join all the sons who were already in the United States. And we have been there through the war, first World War, through the Revolutionary War, up to 1924. And I and an older brother of mine, who was about five years older than I, started out to go to the United States, and an older sister of mine with her family which consisted of a husband and two children, so that we can join our father in the United States.

NASH:I would like to know something about what life was like without your father during the first World War and then during the revolution. what happened in that town at that time?

MEYEROWITZ:Of course, life was very hard. There was no industry to work in, and it was a custom among the Jewish poor to send their children away to work at about age 13. Two of my elder brothers were sent away to a city known as Odessa, which everybody knows in the United States, and they worked what we would call here a teahouse and they might have been what you call here bus boys. And when the war broke out we had no communication with our father and we had no means of living. since the older two brothers lived in Odessa, we too eventually moved to Odessa with the idea of perhaps being next to them or with them. They would be able to help support the rest of the family which consisted of two younger brothers and myself. Myself, two younger brothers, my mother. And my sister already managed to do some work for herself, doing what we would call an operator on underwear. Now we moved to Odessa

approximately 1918 and we started to going to school there.

NASH:Was the school a Jewish school?

MEYEROWITZ:At that time in the big cities there were public schools, but I went to a Jewish school, but we would call here sponsored by the Jewish Charities, Jewish Charities organizations. Because there in that school where I went to originally, we were given instruction even in Yiddish and Hebrew. And after the revolution in the intermittent fights between the White Guards and the Bolshevik forces, and the Bolshevik forces came and established power, they had changed the school system so that at all schools were a seven-year school with abolishing what they had years ago, the gymnasium, which was for rich children. And the school that I went to, I had transferred from because I am unable to go to school near my house, where I did not receive anymore Jewish education because it was all public schools were then already established in the Ukrainian language. I lived through the civil war in the city. And

I can recall as a child, went to school one morning and before classes started we heard some noise that was like shooting. And the child inquisitive, I went to the window to see what was happening and the principal of the school pulled me away from the window and we were taken to rooms that were not facing the street. Of course, our school was facing the main railroad station. And when I looked out I could see people running and I could hear the clatter of machine guns and small arms, what I know now as small arms, and we could not go home anymore that day. We stayed in the school with our Teachers taking care of us. And in that house there was a bakery in the basement, in the cellar, and the bakery provided for the bread overnight. And I can recall that for the next couple of weeks there was continuous fire from, well, they decided it was from the Black Sea, and the revolutionary armies had responded from land. And the railroad station up at my school was mounted with a machine gun placed in the place of the clock of the railroad. I can also remember the fighting in the streets where the

White Guards, and you could distinguish them with their uniforms, and the Revolutionary Armies, if you can call them that, just workers and no uniform, fighting against each other, you could only see it in the street. I remember where one of the bakers who looked out of the gate and he was killed that day when we could hear the fighting in the streets.

NASH:What kind of an impact did that have on you?

MEYEROWITZ:I don't know what you mean by an impact. I was still young.

And we began, of course, to read the newspapers. I might have been about the age twelve or thirteen. And I can remember the newspaper was called at that time Soviet Power. And I read the slogans of the revolutionaries for freedom for all people jobs. And I remember that many of the people supported them, in a way same reason because of the slogans and program that they had been advocating. As the civil war was going on, I can remember the French Army being in the city of Odessa after they occupied the city, and I can remember there weren't any white Frenchmen.

They must have been the black troops, I suppose from the French colonies. At that time my two older brothers who had worked at that teahouse had lost their jobs and we had bought a stand that is similar to, a little larger than the newsstands here, and we were selling fruit, bread by the pound, some cigarettes, in order to support ourselves. And I can remember when I helped at that stand French troops, or would they be the colonial troops which were somewhat black, light-skinned black, and on one occasion they were very fond of the white figs and they came and they brought some figs and they offered my brother some false money. There was an awful lot of false money at that time being circulated and money issued by, at that time, the Kerenski regime, and issued by the Soviet government and still the Czarist money was accepted. So we had three different kinds of money and a good deal of it was false, and the population knew which was false and which wasn't and they bartered with it. And these troops wanted to give my brother some of that false money and he refused to take it, so one of the soldiers walked away a few paces

and aimed with a rifle and shot him. Luckily he missed him. I can remember in one period where the armies of the bandit Petlyura, which whoever has read something about the civil war in Russia, would know that this bandit had a program of annihilating the Jews. Odessa was a very big city and it had a big Jewish population and the story is that the Jewish population and the underworld had kept Petlyura out of the city and he could never come in. He was at the outskirts, on the outskirts, and he occupied the other side of the railroad, but he never could come into the city of Odessa. And due to this, we have never been under his heel. We have been already under the government of the Bolsheviks.

O course, the industry was ruined, all of it, and there was nothing much to do and we supported ourselves from that stand until about 1921 where the starvation period, '20, '21, was very severe in Soviet Union or Russia, and the cities were worse than in the small communities. Food was hard to get and there was nothing to earn a living from, and we moved back to the town where we originally came from because there you could

manage to work on the fields and we went back there to sort of, what else we could do? And we lived there for quite some time, dreaming of going from there to the United States to join our father. And already at that time many people who wanted to immigrate to the United States were smuggling the border, the Roumanian border, which was in the province of, they called then Esoralian, and we too had been planning to eventually get in contact with our father and see whether he can do anything for us to reunite the family. In about 1924 we have arranged with some smugglers to take us across the border so we can start on our way to the United States.

Now it was a very risky business and we could not go the whole family at once because my father here in the United States did not have the money to send for us so we decided to split the family and an older brother of mine, I, my sister with the family consisting of two kids and a husband, decided to leave. And we made arrangements with the smuggler on a market day to start out for the border. And when we did, it was a very severe snow storm and they didn't know the way and the

horses could not find their way either, so we stopped in the town where these smugglers came from, which was on the border of to rest for awhile, and the smuggler was informed that they know that he is trying to smuggle somebody.

So, they have taken us, and instead of driving us to the border as they promised they will do us, with us, they have walked us through the fields to the border. They went first, and a brother of mine and I followed them, and my sister with her two children and her husband were taken by sleigh. And when we came to the road, the guard just happened to come towards us, and we spotted him, or the smugglers who were in the front had spotted them, and we ran away and we were hiding in a shed on some peasant property and we didn't know. My sister and our family were arrested and they were taken from town to town until finally they were released. We were not smuggled anymore that night, but a few weeks later we tried again and we were smuggled across to the territory, and from there we made our way to Bucharest, which was the capitol of Roumania. And there the refugees were not

bothered. There was already functioning the
that had some sort of accommodation in our
hotel where the community rooms were provided
for everybody together. And we had managed to
find a room for ourselves with the help of some
other acquaintances, or friends, and we stayed
there until we were able to go to the United
States.

NASH:How long did you stay there and how did you make contact with
your family?

MEYEROWITZ:Well, we did not have contact with the rest of the family
we have left in the Soviet Union. We did
establish contact with my father here in the
United States.

NASH:Did you have his address? You knew where he was.

MEYEROWITZ:Yes, I knew the address and we were writing to him and
he had sent us what you would call an application
for admittance to the United States. And then
1924 the laws were changed that children were
allowed to come in up to July 1st, 1924 without

a quota and children over eighteen were no more allowed to come in without a quota. When we received our visas to come into the United States, we planned to make that deadline of July 1. And my brother who went to work as a, my older brother, who went to work as a youngster at the age of thirteen, became ruptured in the process of working, so he had to be operated on first.

This delayed him a little bit and after we had our visas and on the way home from the consulate, very happy, somebody either stole or stole all our visas and we had no more opportunity to go.

Finally, the consul issued to us new visas, but it was already too late for my brother to go to the United States because he was already over eighteen, but I still reached the United States before July 1 deadline, and I was the first of the family to come here. My brother could not come in anymore and he went to Canada. My sister was arrested and after she was freed --w had crossed a river on foot because it freezes in the winter, during the winter it freezes and you can go across to the borderline. We could walk across from the Soviet Union to .

And since my sister was arrested, she could not go across anymore. She has reached in the month of April when the ice starts to melt, so they took her by some canvas boat, they put her in a canvas boat and gave her a piece of wood to peddle and her husband and one child were put into a different canvas boat. Her husband went across and while she was trying to row across, her piece of wood broke and she couldn't get to shore. She was near shore, but didn't know whether she would be able to make it. So she decided to throw the child out to shore because if she drowns she figured perhaps the child will remain alive. And finally she pushed the boat a little bit, that canvas a little closer to the shore, and she herself tried to climb ashore and instead she fell in the water and eventually managed to get on shore. There she couldn't speak the Roumanian language and in the morning the Roumanian shore patrol came and they arrested her and the eventually, after several weeks going back and forth from one town to another, they have sent her back to Russia. And after some months, some months after they again tried to

smuggle and they smuggled to Roumania again and they could not come into the United States anymore, they went to Canada. The reason why this may be interesting to some in the future to know and understand, that immigration for present Americans has not been an easy job. Many Jews who tried to go to the United States have drowned in the river, some were robbed by the smugglers. And I eventually came here and when I came here I went to work a short time after that. My first job was in the five and ten-cent store.

NASH:Well, let me go back to your trip. What kind of a boat did you take? Did you go to Ellis Island?

MEYEROWITZ:Very good question. I taking a big boat because if I would have gone, originally our intentions was, we didn't have any money, that I go with a small boat as long as I can reach the United States by July, but since we had the trouble with the visas, as I related before, we could not make that deadline anymore and instead I went with a very big ship called the Rotania [PH,

transcriber's spelling of ship name] which was at that time a very big ship, and I came to the United States, I think at that time it was about five and a half or six days travel by boat. When I came, I landed in Ellis Island. My father and a sister-in-law of mine came to meet me. I remember the first time that I ever saw a black man. He came to take me to my father. I didn't know my father because when he left I was very small, and mode of dress was different. I would have not known him otherwise. After that, when they took me off the boat I can recall my father was one o Jews without money and his profession was a peddler, a pushcart peddler, which today are very few. He was bemoaning the fact that it happened on a Saturday because Saturday was the biggest day business and if you didn't take in that Saturday day's business you were way behind the whole week. And I went to live with my father, took a room together, and I immediately went to work because the rest of the family needed our help and my father did not have the money to send them any money to help them and you could not already send anymore money

there.

NASH:Was it a relief to come to the United States or what were your feelings? Did you have a lot of mixed feelings?

MEYEROWITZ:I don't know if it was a relief, a relief in the sense that I was united with my father whom I didn't see for eleven years. He wasn't with the family for eleven years. And I started to work. My first job was in the five and ten-cent store and I got seven dollars a week, seven dollars.

NASH:Let me ask you a question. Why would you say you came to the United States? Because your family was here, because economically you thought you would do better? What was the real reason?

MEYEROWITZ:Of course, we all are motivated by the economic problem. As I said before, it was a starvation period and even in the farm communities there wasn't enough food. We had no land and the only work we could do is that we used to rent what would be approximately here a half an acre of land and plant tobacco on it. Work on that tobacco

and then eventually in the winter sell it and perhaps out of that get along for food. So naturally, the first thing was to go where many people thought that you get to the United States and it is going to be a dream world, you can always get work, you can get rich perhaps and so on, but when I came here, the basic thing was to unite with our father and the father is always the provider of the family. And that was the basic aim. I came, I started working, I said it was seven dollars a week before and, of course, even then seven dollars, if you had to pay for a room plus your own food, you weren't left with too much. I gave up that job and I got a job with a relative that gave me instead of seven, fifteen in the construction industry and I was a rich man. started to save some money and I borrowed some money on the basis that I'm earning now money and I will repay it and we sent for our mother that remained in russia with two of my younger brothers. As my younger brothers were quite young, they had left Russia legally. They didn't have the problem of smuggling. And she joined us a little over a year, my mother and

the two brothers joined us a little over a year after I came here. I can remember that when I came here, took us out from Ellis Island, my father and sister-in-law took me to some place downtown I assume, where they outfitted me with a suit and showed me the wonders of New York, and we travelled on what might have been the Third Avenue elevator, which is not existing now, and came home to my brother's house and they were already in, they had small dry goods store, two of my oldest brothers had a dry good store. I never knew them before, I got acquainted with them. They treated me pretty good as far as food. And when I started working I was on my own living with my father until our mother came and we had a home, some sort of furniture. I can remember that we moved in, our first apartment was on Park Avenue and 111th Street.

It was the area where my father worked. He was peddling in the open market where it was provided for pushcarts under the Grand Central Railroad on Park Avenue. The apartment we took was I think on the fifth floor, cold flat, not heat, and in the wintertime when it got cold we had

the water coming down the walls sweating. The reason why I am saying this on this tape is because we speak today of the ghettos and there is not enough heat. I assume that today the laws have required that they have central heating, but in those days it wasn't necessary and we just . . .

NASH:Were you religious in Russia? When I say religious, I mean conventionally religious, and what happened to that when you came to the United States?

MEYEROWITZ:Well, the community in the small town where we were born, you can say that all Jews were religious. There was one synagogue, there was a turkish bath which was kept up by the Jews, where you could go on Fridays. It was usually being operated so people could go bathing. And everybody, we were given a religious upbringing to about, let's say, when I was about thirteen or perhaps even younger. But, when we moved to the city of Odessa, i the big city religion did not play the same role as in the small communities because in the small community if you did not show up

at the synagogue on Saturday, well they knew that you weren't there, it would mean that you were someplace else. but in the city, much the same as in New York, let's say now, if one wants to go to a synagogue he went and when one doesn't want to go he doesn't go. And I can remember that we haven't practiced the religion the way we did in the small community. We didn't go every day to the synagogue the way the people do in the small communities or on Saturdays even, we worked on Saturdays. But I do remember that my younger two brothers, who when we came to Odessa they went, they were too young for public school, and they went to a cheder, which is a school for children that they were taught Hebrew and Yiddish.

NASH: In Odessa?

MEYEROWITZ: Yes. now since you asked me about the question of religion, I might as well add something about literacy among the Jewish population. we all know that before the revolution the illiteracy in Russia was very big. They have abolished it

now, but among the Jews practically nobody was illiterate. If he was illiterate in Yiddish or Hebrew. All of them could read the prayer book, could write numbers. My mother, for instance, was you could say illiterate, she did not know Russian, but she did know to read a prayer book and she could even read it in Yiddish, the translation. They tell my father's family, they were five sons and the only one that could write in the Russian was my father. None of his other four brothers could write in Russian, neither could his father. And his father at one time was even the president of the Jewish community in that town, without writing, just by making symbols and then when he met with the representatives from the State or what other order came to town, he would just from the symbols see, would know what to relate to the government representatives.

NASH:Did you ever go to school in the United States?

MEYEROWITZ:Yes, I went to evening school. I went to high school and I made my business to learn English. I worked

among people that spoke the English language instead of Yiddish, and I immediately started reading the English newspapers. And I was still young, you can say, so that I mastered, I learned sufficiently to get along.

NASH:Well, how did you become a baker?

MEYEROWITZ:That is a very good question. I told you before that I worked in the construction trade. In the construction trade during the period '24 to '29, there was quite some work, but even then during the winter months well, you could not work on construction. I had to find a job someplace else, but in 1929 after the crash, construction was almost at a standstill, and I managed to work in that trade until about 1932. In 1929, during the period when I had no work in construction, I looked for a job, we were already in the Depression after the Wall Street crash, and I went around just like thousands of other young boys and I found a job in a bakery not far from the house where I lived, and the employer offered me seven dollars a week. That was for six day's

work and a day's work was about twelve hours.

And I learned a little bit of the trade and eventually I went back to that because it was I already had some experience and eventually I remained in that trade. And while working as a baker, I became a union man and I involved myself in the affairs of the union and I was elected to what you would say the executive board of the union. At that time our union was small.

We had about one hundred and seventy members.

NASH:Baker's local union?

MEYEROWITZ:Yes, in my local union. the baker's union is an old union which was found around 1876, I think. but the local unions were small because the average bakery employed one, two, or three people and only the skilled people were taken into the unions. ANd I was a member of the union from '32. December '32 I joined the union and about April '36 I was elected as the Secretary of Finance, Secretary of that union. I would like to include this because I think perhaps somebody will listen and maybe years from now will find

this a bit of amusing. The wages that they paid me when I was elected was thirty dollars a week as the Secretary of the union. Many people today read about union officials who are getting fifteen, twenty and forty and sixty thousand dollars a year. Now if you multiply thirty dollars a week, you will come to the sum total of about fifteen hundred dollars a year because the consensus of many people, or the talk on the part of many people who know nothing about unions, they link it with corruption and dishonesty and everybody there is a crook and so on, but actually the unions have been built and during this time of my membership, during the period that I was a member in the union, I can even see where the secretary of my local union that I belong to now, he received approximately twenty thousand a year. So if one seriously can think back, he will know that this thing has been a process where it took forty years for the workers to advance themselves, including the officials. And many of the officials at the time that I joined the union, we had officials that a member had to contribute a dollar a day from

a day's work that they worked so that at the end of the week you can pay the official, the business agent.

NASH:A dollar a day.

MEYEROWITZ:Yes.

NASH;That's a lot of money.

MEYEROWITZ:If he worked. No, my interviewer thinks that it was a lot of money, a dollar a day, but it wasn't because bakers at that time had a system of sharing the work and the average baker worked only three days a week or four. One man would work one week three and the other one would work four. The next week they would change around. The other man worked four and you worked three. And this way, since it was a very small organization, it did not amount to a lot of money. It was a lot of money when you needed it in the house, but it wasn't a lot of money as far as being able to pay him his thirty or forty dollars a week.

NASH:Were you involved in many strikes?

MEYEROWITZ:I joined the union in 1932, and our contracts used to expire on May 1. May 1 was traditional laborers' holiday, day of struggle, and we had about thirty bakeries under our contract. Most of them signed up individually with the union. We had no relationship with the association then, and the place I worked, he decided to strike. In the City of New York there was a general strike in the Jewish bakeries. At that time the trade was divided among Jewish and German. These were the two groups that were predominate in the industry. And the strike lasted then for twenty-six weeks. So, we had some strikes after that because in my experience every time that we wanted an increase in wages, whether it was fifty or a dollar a day, nine out of ten times we did not reach an accord to get this without a strike so that strikes became part of my trade especially, and I think all trades the same because no matter when we went out and asked for an increase, whether to catch up with the cost

of living or anything else, the employers have always complained that they can't afford to give us an increase. But, eventually today, our scale of wages is nowhere near the money that we earned then and it is a lot different than it was in 1932.

NASH:What was your local?

MEYEROWITZ:My local union was part of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers Union and the local number then was 79. It is no more in existence because we have gone through the years a process of merging the local unions into one unit. It took us, we have merged in 1943, about three locals into one. And the City of New York, there are approximately about ten local unions, each one small, and not only did we have to fight with the employers, but we also fought about ourselves, about petty things, and as a result of that the workers do not benefit from it. Eventually, there was about forty years to accomplish this and today in the City of new york we have about three local unions. The one local I am now a member is about

forty-five hundred working people. And the result of the merges, and we have merged about ten locals into this one to have that membership.

So it is a continuous process of change, just like growing up. You're a youngster, you get older, you raise a family, and you learn little by little. And we learn little by little too and merged and to gather our strength and today, while the baking industry in comparison to other trades like construction, we are way blow them in wages, but we have a much better contract and wage than we did many years ago.

NASH:Well, today you are doing volunteer work at the Jewish Currents.

How did you happen to start reading the Jewish Currents magazine?

MEYEROWITZ:It's a publication that is not new, and when you are in the labor movement and the union you meet all sorts of people and they introduce you to one thing or another and they explain to me about the Currents and I bought it and I liked it and then eventually I subscribed to it. And now that I have the time, as a retiree, I tried other

places. I tried, for instance, I went to the senior citizens centers and I found that some older people, in order to spend the time, are engaged in card playing or checker playing or chess playing or some other things. The women naturally knit and some handicraft, and I thought that I can do something creative. And I think my contribution by being a volunteer with the magazine, whatever way I will do, whatever I'll do, is I'm more creative than just sitting and playing cards. That's my way of thinking. Of course, some people have hobbies, they indulge in music, art. I don't have that so I found myself a very good substitute. It is a very good magazine

NASH:Okay, well, I have enjoyed talking to you very much. Thank you.

MEYEROWITZ:I appreciate the time you gave me for the interview and I hope that the future generations may find it interesting to listen to our old-timers who maybe when they listen to us will think we were crazy, and maybe by the time they get to it they will be old people and they will not be so crazy

either.