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Pearl Spencer

Oral History Project

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by Elizabeth Balanoff by	the Roosevelt Univ	ersity Oral
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Interview - June 8, 1976 Respondent - Mrs. Pearl Spencer Interviewer - Elizabeth Balanoff

- I. Now Mrs. Spencer, you told me that you were one of those fortunate people who knew your family history for several generations. Why don't you just begin at the beginning and tell me what you know about your family.
- R. Well, that would be a long story and I don't think people would be even interested in it.
- I. Oh yes they would.
- R. You see, let them read now the book, The World of our Fathers, by Irving Howe. Did you read about it? It's a marvelous book. In fact I bought it for one of my sons as a birthday gift.
- I. And that tells much of the story that you could tell?
- R. The same story.
- I. Well, let's repeat a little bit anyway. Tell me where your parents and your grandparents lived and what little bit you can.
- R. You see, we came from the Ukraine, and from a little town called Nemirov. At the age of 12 I left and I went to Odessa, so all my personal experiences are mostly from there.
- I. I see, but before we go to Odessa tell us what it was like where you were born. What was the twon like?
- R. It was a small town in the Pale with a lot of trouble, poverty.
- I. What kind of trouble?
- R. Well, being Jewish, the Jews in the Pale didn't have any rights, you know. A Jewish person could not live where they wanted, they couldn't buy land, they couldn't own load. They couldn't go into

certain professions because if you went to gymnasia, if you had 90 non-Jews you could have 10 Jews. But the Jews were more advanced than non-Jews, because they are people of the book. There was no person, especially male, that couldn't read. He may not be able to write but hey could read his prayers. So naturally you know the Jewsish people, a mother when she sings a child a lullabye she always sings that knowledge is the best ware and she always wishes that her son should grow up a Talmudist. That is his lullabye.

- I. So that's impressed from infancy.
- R. From infancy--that you have to learn, you have to know, you have to read because this is something if you're driven out, where ever you go, that cannot be taken away from you. They can take away your money, your jewels, your property, but they cannot take away your knowledge.
- I. How many of the women could read?
- R. Not so many, because they lived in the grace of their husband. When they go to heaven what good they did to their husband it will be repaid to them. But that was before my generation.
- I. Do you remember your grandparents?
- R. Oh yes.
- I. What did your grandparents do?
- $\ensuremath{\mathtt{R}}$. They were merchants. Most of them were learned people, Talmudists.
- I come from a family that that was the most important thing. Every mother wished that someday when her little boy frew up that some day he would be a rabbi.
- I. How many were there in your family altogether?
- R . In my immediate family, you see my mother died. I was the oldest of five children, I was 9 years old.

- I. You had to be a kind of second mama then?
- R. No, my father remarried soon after that because he was a young man, too. My mother wasn't even 32 years old, so he remarried. married a very nice woman. But life was not a picnic, I can tell you, because there at that time children of 10 years were grown up more than I think now children of 20. The circumstances made them to know what was all around them. Do you know that Jews could not live outside of the Pale? The only one could live was a tailor or a shoemaker or one with a trade or profession. But in order to be a professional, you had to have an opportunity to go to university, but you didn't have that opportunity. So my time when I was a child, a women's movement began then. Then already they wanted to have an education. So if a Jewish girl went to Kiev or St. Petersburg; she has no right to live, but you know who could live there? A prostitute. prostitute had to take out a yellow passport. If she did not practice her profession and they caught her she would be sent back where she came from. Many people don't know that. They cannot even conceive that those were the things. Naturally, later people began to move. The United States was opened up and then there were progroms. That was in the 80's and people began to go to America.
- I. Did your granparents stay in this village when you moved to Odessa?
- R. Yes, my parents were still there. I had an opportunity to go and I worked. I started work when I was 12 years old: I was fortunate enough that a neighbor where I lived saw some potent in me and without being able to go to school--I couldn't pay even id the school had a teacher--and she was my teacher. She taught me

I would say, an education there through junior high school year.

- I. All private?
- R. All private without paying her.
- I. And she just did it because she liked you?
- R. Because she thought that I am capable. And I took to it like a thirsty person to water.
- I. What subjects did she teach you?
- R. Every subject--arithmetic, reading, writing, French, georgraphy. When you go in Russia to gymnasia, you have to take up languages and she taught me. I didn't know much French, but I knew enough when I was on the boat everybody came to me I should write their English addresses.
- I. This lady who taught you, was she a housewife?
- R. No, she was a young girl. She was what you would call today a "libber." Maybe she didn't even know it but she believed that a woman should have equal education and equal opportunities. And she had it because her parents were wealthier. She graduated the gymnasia and then she took higher courses. She didn't get credit for them, but she took them anyhow.
- I. Did she teach other children beside you?
- R. I wouldn't know. At that time it was that a woman, like in this country, was not supposed to work. The parents would be shamed If the daughter had to go out and work.
- I. So she did this for a hobby?
- R. Yes, she did it and I'm forever thankful to her.
- I. Were you the only child in your family to get that much education?
- R. More than the rest of them. Then, when my family came here in 1907, there were little children yet. They went to school here and

they got an American education.

- I. Did you come here with your family?
- R. My father was here already. He brought me and my sister here in 1907.
- I. He came first alone?
- R. He came alone. That was the way of doing then. Some friends sent a ticket for him. Then he came here, he paid out his ticket, he bought tickets, he brought us to this country.
- I. How did the family survive In Europe while he was over here?
- R. Well he started working here and he would send the money to live on.
- I. How many more children were there?
- R. There were two more boys and then one was born here. He graduated from the University of Chicago.
- I. Your youngest brother?
- R. Yes, my youngest brother. In that first group of 5, how many were boys and how many were girls?
- I. We were 4 girls and 2 boys, we were six. All the girls were from my mother. The boys were already from the second mother.
- I. And then another boy was born here.
- R. Yes
- I. How long did your father stay here before he could send for you?
- R. He was here about a year, he came in 1906. He worked, made maybe 10 dollars a week, had to send 3 dollars a week home and pay a dollar a week to pay out this passage.
- I. That must have been really difficult.
- R. It was very difficult! We had a very hard life. That's why when I tell to people and they tell me it's bad, you know maybe they don't

want to remember. I like to remember, to me it's history. $_{\rm I\ want}$ to know who am I.

- I. Now tell me what you did before you left home to go away and work. What did you do at home, what kind of household chores?
- R. No, you know like a child at home because I was 12 years old when I left so what could I do? I helped with light chores and played like a child does.
- I. What kind of things did you play?
- R . The same things that they play here. Hop scotch—we called it a different name. And we played house and I would make dolls, We didn't have any dolls, we couldn't afford to buy dolls so we improvised. We were great improvisors.
- I. What did you make them out of?
- R. It wasn't a problem. You took a bottle and you wrapped it around and you played it was your baby.
- I. Did the boys and girls play together?
- R. No
- I. Just girls together and boys together.
- R. Girls separately. Even when we went to Jewish school,
 It's called a Hadar. That's a Hebrew word for school. And what
 they taught us was a little writing, only Jewish and Hebrew.
- I. So you did have some schooling in addition to the private tutor.
- R. Yes
- I. HOW much of this?
- R. About five or six years, but you see it wasn't like here. It wasn't the same schooling. It was mostly a religious school, like you go to a religious school, but it wasn't under a rabbi, it was a private teacher. There was one teacher that had children from

- 5 to 8. Then they went higher. The boys usually went higher, the girls didn't.
- I. I see, how much more did the boys get than the girls?
- R. It depends on the ability of the parents to pay. It wasn't free. And believe me there were many parents that didn't have bread in the house, these few copeks they paid to the teacher in order that their boy should go to hadar.
- I. So then when you were 12 you went to Odessa.
- R. That's right. I started working, I got into a tea factory. They packaged the tea there and I worked. And then at that time, that was 1903, then the movement spread out in Russia, the revolutionary movement. It started In the 80's yet but it was more prevalent, it became a mass movement. And I was thrown in it. You see I'm a rebel from way back.
- I. Tell me what you did in it.
- R. Well, you know, what could I do? I went to meetings where they agitated us, told us how bad it is. We felt it but we didn't realize it. We didn't know.
- I. Were these mostly factory workers together?
- R. The intelligentsia, the students, girls like you came to the workers and talked to them, It wasn't only for Jewish, it was an all-Russia movement. And I happened to be under the influence of a Jewish group though I didn't speak Yiddish, I spoke Russian.
- I. Did they speak Russian?
- R. Oh yes. Now in the little town we spoke--I know a little bit of Ukrainian. I don't know too much of it. I speak quite well Russian. The people that come here, the new Russian immigrants

that you have now In Chicago, I meet them in my neighborhood and they're surprised at the way I still talk Russian. When I tell them how long I am here and how young I was when I came here they can't believe it. To a young woman--I say, look I left Russia before your mother was born.

- I. How many of the people you worked with were involved in the revolutionary movement?
- R. You see, we were drawn in as children. We didn't **know** what it was actually; We realized that things were bad, working 8 hours a day and getting 7 roubles a month. Do you realize how little it is?
- I. How did you live?
- R. You see I stayed with an aunt. And don't ask, you live on what you have. There was no relief and we didn't go out to demonstrations demanding more relief. Just use your imagination how the poverty was great.
- I. You couldn't help your family with what you earned, could you?

 If you helped feed yourself that was helping your family.
- Somebody helped me, you know. I stayed with an aunt that was better off and I paid her so little. But the factory where I worked they also supplied us with a mid-day warm meal.
- I. And you worked 8 hours a day?
- R. 8 hours. That was the most liberal.
- I. It was better than most?
- R. Yes. Maybe you've heard of it in this V, the name of a big tea establishment of Russia, Visotsky. That was a Jewish firm.

- A. Well you could talk to Reverand Ball and he would know about it at the Union Avenue Methodist Church and if you want his telephone number -- it's BO 8-3900.
 - Q. What about the famous Stockyard smell?
 - Well they always considered it a healthy smell here because Α. it was part of their livelihood, I think. Without yard and without the Stockyard smell the men in this neighborhood wouldn't have any bread and butter on their table, you know, years ago. Well I think most of the people in this area were Irish imigrants; they worked in the Yards, Stockyard smell never bothered them really, it wasn't the most pleasant thing on earth but it was, I know many years when we were younger, we would say it was a good healthy smell. I think, it's true, most of the people were good and healthy, whether that smell had anything to do with it or not. At any rate, I don't think it really bothered the people living here but people that would come into this area complained about it, used to look down upon it, and a lot of them would say "well,. how could you live down there and have that Stockyard smell?" Well it didn't seem to bother the people here but it bothered the people that came into the area, you know.
 - Q. I suppose the people coming through on the Streetcar -- Halsted Street, were reaching for their handkerchiefs to cover their noses.

- You know the non-Jewish firms, Popov and others, did not employ

 Jewish labor. You see they accused the, Jews of not wanting to work,

 but they didn't even give them jobs to work.
 - I. So if you couldn't find work with a Jewish firm you just wouldn't have any work?
 - R. That's what I did, but I worked only from about 1902 till 1907 I came here. But I worked all that time. They didn't spy on you. What I did outside wasn't, their business.
 - I. Did you get In any trouble with your revolutionary movement?
 - R. No, I was too young, don't you see. I used to read a lot. I knew what it's all about, but maybe they didn't even want to involve me too much, being so young. But I'm acquainted. I read about It, I read a lot of Russian books. Tolstoy and Turgenev and others were like friends.
 - I. Now, your father came here and were you the first child that he sent for?
 - R. Myself and my sister. She was 15 months younger than I was, so I took care of her when we came.
 - I. Did the two of you travel alone?
- R. That's right. He sent tickets and if I would tell you what we lived through on the boat! You know what kind of boat we came in? It was old Russian battleship. It was already discarded as a battleship and they used it for passengers.
 - I. Tell me about it. Tell me how the conditions were.
 - R. I can't talk so much. I don't want to talk about it.
 - I. Alright, you and your sister arrived here and I suppose you were put to work right away here.

- R. Oh yes, We got into a tailor shop and I became a finisher.

 And there, too, I worked 54 hours for seven and a half dollars a week. That was good money.
- I. What did your father do?
- R. He didn't have a trade in Europe, as I told you. He was a merchant. So he became a presser.
- I. So now there are three of you working here and 'I suppose you saved enough money to send for the rest.
- R. You know, my sister and I landed at Ellis Island on Decoration Day. I remember that. We had to stay overnight in that wonderful place. They began to process us the next day, that happened on Friday. When we got on the train it was twilight already on the big train. It took us to Chicago till Sunday morning, June 2, 10 o'clock.
- I. Then your father met you here?
- R. Yes, my father met us.
- I. Had he had other relatives here before he came?
- R. No, it was a friend of ours sent a ticket for him, but he had to repay. You must come from immigrants, too. Balaooff--it must be Bulgarian.
- R. I kind of thought so. It was the same with all people, you ask your people. They'll tell you the same story.
- I. Now, did your sister get the same kind of job you did, or did she get a different job?
- R. I went into men's clothes and somebody took her into ladies clothes-- cloak making.
- I. So you went into two different places.

- R. Yes and I worked down town. I still remember the shop where it was. At that time it was on the west side of us, Adams Jefferson. First I got in the shop where my father worked. That was on the northwest side.
- I. Were most of the people. who worked there Jewish or was there a variety?
- R. Poles, Germans, all kinds.
- I. All new immigrants?
- R. Mostly. Mostly were immigrants. You see, one took in the other.
- I. Now what kind of neighborhood did you live in here?
- R. It was mixed. There were a lot of Poles, Germans, all kinds.
- I lived at that time on Milwaukee Avenue and Damen. Then it was called Robbe street and that's where our first apartment was.
- I. How many people lived in the same building?
- R. Oh I don't know. We had a five room apartment; but two bed rooms were without windows.
- I . And how long was it before the rest of the family came?
 - R. The rest of the family came in December 18, the same year 1907.
 - I started work, my sister also, we bought tickets for all of them.
 - I. Then they could come faster. They had three of you working.
 - R. Yes and then the big depression started, the depression of 1908. That was before your time. You read your books, you'll find out about it.
 - I. Were you employed during that period?
 - R. You know I was never unemployed. I don't know whether it was because I was a good worker and could go from one place to another and get a Job. I had recommendations. I had friends and they told me where I could get work.

They were some of my father's friends, but there wasn't no work. But we managed through it without any help from anybody.

- I. Your father was partly unemployed?
- R. We were all partly. Some were completely unemployed, we were only partly. We worked part time.
- I. There was always somebody working?
- R. Part time.
- I. When things were at the worst how much would you get--a day, or two a week?
- R. That would be alright but you know they made us come every day. We might work two hours, three hours and then go home. See, when the unions came in then it was different. But there weren't no unions then, the employer did what he wanted to do.
- I. I see. Now your grandparents never came. They stayed in the old country.
- R. Most of them were dead already by that time, I remember two great grandmothers, one great grandfather and two grandmothers.
- I. When you were small.
- R. Yes, I remember them all.
- I. And when the rest of your immediate family came, were any of these grandparents still alive?
- R They remained there. Some were alive.
- I. Did your parents and your grandparents ever get to see each other again?
- R. No, who had money to make a trip? Are you kidding? Because we had to send them, too, as little as we had. Each one gave a quarter a week to be sent to our grandmother.

- I. As long as they lived you sent money?
- R. We did send. It was during the first world war she died.
- I. How long did this early depression last?
- R. Don't ask me, ask the book.
- I. Alright. Can you tell me a little bit about how people managed to survive? You said some families were clear out of work. What did they do?
- R. You know there were soup kitchens. There were some organizations that were organized and they would give them bread. It was a very very bad. situation.
- I. Can you remember what organizations were helpful?
- R. No, I don't. I remember the Jewish organizations, their social service. The east European Jews were mostly poor. It was the German Jews that worked up, but they never let down the people. They would always provide bread.
- I. So the Jews always had some place to go. Some other Jewish people would help.
- R. Oh, I wouldn't say that others didn't organize.
- I. Were there any settlement houses near you?
- R. Oh yeah.
- I. Were they helpful?
- R. I don't know.
- I. You didn't have any contact with them?
- R. No.
- I. What kind of social life was there in the neighborhood? Were there clubs or was there just visiting?
- R. Oh yea. First of all, as soon as they came together they organized what they called lundsmanshaft. The Italians called It

paisan organizations--every nationality that came here the first thing they would come on Sunday together and talk. You know one would get a letter from home and they would tell them what is going on there. There always was a communication.

- I. Did this Involve the women and the whole family?
- R. Yes.
- I. Did they have official meeting places?
- R. Of course.
- I. Did they have halls?
- R. They had halls and they had a president and a vice president and the whole business.
- I. Did most of your social life center around these national groups?
- R. Mostly, because you see, people at that time they came, they couldn't afford anything else. They weren't recognized, you see. The upper class looked down upon them, they exploited them, they take the profits over. But they were only immigrants, common peasants coming from villages, that couldn't read or write.
- I.. Did the 'Jews who'd been here longer look down on them?
- R. Oh yes, they came down earlier, because the immigration was from. I think it was 1849 when they began to come. They went through plenty too but they worked up like all the immigrants today. Maybe your grandfather came here and worked in a mine. I don't know but I say maybe he was a miner or maybe he worked in the fields for somebody, a farmer and you attained a college education being a college teacher. So did all the minority groups.
- I. What was family life like now? It seems that everybody must be working all the time.

- R. Oh, we had a nice family life, you know. There was Saturdays and Sundays we didn't, work. Religious observers didn't work Saturdays, so they got themselves jobs where they get less pay. You see, everybody took advantage.
- I. So, they worked two jobs?
- R. No, no, no, they got themselves jobs where they worked Sunday but they didn't work Saturday. Those were the Orthodox. So they had the Sabbath. And the others that weren't so strict worked Saturday and so they had Sunday.
- I Was there any kind of special social life for young people?

 R. We had balls, you came together. The young people organized their clubs, too. They had young people's clubs, you know. In New York they had from my landsmanshaft a young men's organization—and a religious one. They had everything, like now, like today.
- I. I should have asked you, what about that 1905 revolution that failed in Russia. Did that create any particular problems for you?

 R. Oh yes, they had the biggest problems then.
- I. Did that have anything to do with your family leaving or not?
- R. There was that part, too. First of all my father realized that we will not land anywhere, we wouldn't attain anything, we had no way of progressing. See, this is what it is—the Pale. And there were little businessmen and a tailor and other trades who could barely make a living because if he had a poor clientele. You know, everybody was in the soup, as they say.
- I. Can you remember when unions first began to try to organize in the industry where you and your family were working?

- R. I thought I told you. Oh, I'm sick and tired of talking.
- I. Remember, this tape is the one your grandchildren are going to listen to, so tell it once more.
- R. They know it be heart already. See, that's where I came in, when I started working. Conditions were very bad. Do you know what people did? Not because of meanness and not because of ignorance, because of poverty. If a mother and father had a little girl or boy and they were already in sixth grade or seventh and they were only twelve years old, they'd get them an affidavit that they were fourteen and they'd send them in the shops. They wanted their children to get an education but it was impossible.
 - I. They had to eat.
- R. That's right, they had to feed them first. You-know you'll find now people my age that practically were born In this country and they can barely read, not because they didn't have the capability, they didn't have the opportunity. Not only Jewish, all the immigrants. I remember we went in the shop working. I was a big girl already, but we expected that you couldn't start working till you were 14. So they had those little kids there, whatever they did there, pulling basting threads or bringing out the bundles to the operators or something like that that a child can do. So when the Inspector came they told them to send the girls to the girls wash room because they knew the Inspector wouldn't go along with it.
- I. So they really kept them sort of hidden.
- R. When the inspector left they went out.
- I. What kind of work did you do here, now? You said you had a good job.

- R. It wasn't a good job, it was a job. I did the finishing on men's clothes. At that time, you see, there was a union in Chicago. It was the Custom Tailors of America, but at the end of the century they began to divide the jobs. That's why they could take in any immigrant. When the Germans and the Swedes were there before they were the tailors. A man had to make the whole garment. It was custom made and it was expensive. Then when they began to make ready-made they began to divide the word., One made a sleeve, one made a collar, one made a pocket. One wag to sew in the lining. So It was easier to train people for small parts. My job was to just sew. What woman cannot hold a needle?
 - I. So you did hand sewing?
 - R. I did hand sewing. And if I worked piece work--then I worked piece work, so I made a dollar a week more.
 - I. And I bet you worked, very fast.
 - R. I must have. I couldn't do It now.
 - I. Were there mostly women working in the area where you worked or was it mixed?
 - R. You know the finishing, even that was divided. The operators were mostly men, the cutters, that was the elite of the industry.
 - I. They made more money?
 - R. Not only that, those were people who when they came here--mostly the cutters were already more educated. Then the trimmers were men, because after the cutter cuts you have to adjust it. Pocket makers were mostly men. Button-hole makers were women because it was all by hand.

- I. Hand work especially was women's work?
- R. Yes.
- I. Was it easier or harder?
- R. I don't know. I didn't try the other work, so how could. I tell? I'm getting tired of talking.
- I. Then let's stop and rest.
- I. Now I wanted to ask you one question and that's how you learned English because you speak marvelous English.
- Well, when I came to this country I spoke Russian well and R. Yiddish pretty fair. You see, in Russia, you know like here whatever nationality you are the first thing they try to learn their language. They want to speak their own language. So we spoke Russian mostly. I knew Yiddish. I could read and write. As I told you before I got some education. But I was amongst Immigrants and most of them didn't even have the education I had in Europe. I'll give you an When I came to the shop the bookkeeper came over to ask instance. me my name. I remember her name today. Goldie was her name, I still remember. I don't know what she's telling me, so I ask the girl what is she saying. She told me, then she asked me how I spell it. I said let them put me the pencil, I'll write it out . I told you I took a little bit of French so I knew--and I wrote out She thought I'm a professor incomparison with all the my name. Some couldn't even sign their names. And believe me they were all nice people, it was just because of lack of opportunity. So I knew that those people don't speak correct English. Even if they

spoke I couldn't judge their vocabulary, but I knew that It's impossible to be correct. And I made up my mind that I'm doing to learn the language no matter how hard it is. I'm going to be here and I want to know the language. So I bought a dictionary, tri-lingual, English, Russian, and Yiddish. Then I bought a paper. At that time there were little stories in the Dally News, and don't forget the paper cost 1 cent so I could afford it. I didn't buy a paper every day but it didn't make any difference to me. I couldn't read the news anyhow then, but I tried on that little story. And if I did not know the word, I'd look it up in Russian and translate It into English or take the English and translate it into the language that So I learned it. I knew the words but I didn't know how to pronounce them. I remember one day I came on the word "vital" with the accent on the i. I didn't know whether it's vital or vital, because you see the Yiddish and the Russian reads like it's spelled. It doesn't speak like, you know, it's harder to speak Russian than English but the writing. There are no extra letters in there. So I didn't know it. I didn't use that word until I came to a lecture and I heard the lecturer and he said vital. Then I began to use that word. At that time there used to be Sunday lectures down town. I would go Sunday morning to the lectures and just listen how the words are pronounced and this is how I learned the English language.

- I. Did you ever go to school in America?
- R. No, I started to go to night school, but when I came there I heard every language but English, so I stopped it. Oh no, I wouldn't say that. I went once to a teacher. I thought that I didn't know how to read well, and we lived on the northwest aide. The children were little then and there was a settlement there. It was called

the Eleanor House. Mostly teachers used to live there and then they had beside a settlement and I went in and I asked for a teacher.

They gave me a teacher and it was very expensive. I paid \$10 for ten lessons.

- I. That was a lot in those days?
- R. No, it wasn't a lot. I'm just joking. I told them I don't want anything for nothing, so they took a dollar from me. That woman gave me a primer, then she gave me a third grade book. I read and she looked at me and she said, did you never go to school? I said no, I want to know if I know how to read. You see, I didn't believe that I know how to read. Then she gave me a sixth grade book. I still read. Then she took out a George Washington Irving book, Rip Van Winkle, and I read it. She said, My G-d, that's a first year high school book. My eighth grade students don't read as well. How did you learn? I said, I don't know.
- I. Just practice. Did they teach reading free to people who couldn't pay?
- R. Yes. There was a settlement if you went in there and asked for a teacher. I encouraged my husband, he should go. So he went there and he got a teacher. Then he, being a Socialist, he tried to educate her to vote the Socialist ticket. And she did vote. She used to pride herself that she's a yankee. Her forefathers came on the Mayflower. And she asked him where he's from, like you ask questions, so he should be able to talk. And she said who recommended you to come here. And he said my wife. He would go one evening a week and I would go the other, we had children in the house. We couldn't afford a baby sitter. So she said I would like to meet

to meet your wife and so I said invite her. She came and you know
I invite her for dinner and we became very good friends until she
became so sick and old that she retired. She doesn't live in Chicago
any more, but we used to correspond. We became very good friends.

- I. You know you didn't tell me about your marriage. Go back and tell me how you met your husband.
- R. He was a landsman . You know what a landsman means? A countryman.
- I. Did he live in the neighborhood?
- R. You see I told you before, that being landsmen, they would see each other. At that, time there were more men than women. And apparently I must have been a good looking girl.
- I. I'm sure you, were because you still are.
- R. I don't know how it was. Anyhow it happened so that we came of the same caliber family.
- I. Did he come from the same area?
- R. From the same town, but he as a youngster fourteen years old went away to Poland, Lodz, and I as a twelve year old went away to Odessa. There was nothing to do for your own people in that little town. There was nothing. Lou couldn't go out to work. Your parents, they couldn't keep you. He was in Lodz and he got into the textile industry. He worked for an all-silk place there. Then when he had to go to military service, being without rights in Russia, why should he serve? So he left for America and he came here.
- I. Did he come on his own?
- R. Yes because he had a little money saved so he came here. He had country people here In Chicago. I had my father. And believe it or not the first day I just came and my father took us off the street car. We didn't take a cab. At that time there were no cabs.

There were carriages and for a carriage you had to pay \$4. Otherwise you know there were like trucks like. They would take all the immigrants and stop them at each place. So that fellow and others passed by and my father-told them--he called him by name--William, he said, my children are here, would you come over in the evening? It's the custom if you brought over somebody from Europe, and they came, you invited your country people to come and meet them because they wanted to have regards, did they see somebody from home, how was life there. We always had a yearning, as bad as it was there, but it was the place that had cradled us. Naturally in the evening my father called some other people, and he made a little party and that way we met. As far as that, at that time I didn't have no problem because there were more young men coming. Many of them came here In the Russian-Japanese War in 1903 and I came in '07, so there were many young men. I was maybe younger than them.

- I. So you must have married when you were pretty young. Did you marry pretty soon after you came?
 - R. Well, I was 17 when I came, I married two years later. I was 19.
 - I. What about your sister? Did she marry early, too.
 - R. She, too, she married. She was even younger. I think she wasn't even 18.
 - I. Now what did your husband do? Was he in the clothing business?
 - R. No--what I told you leather goods. He was a very nice fellow and he was well read. He didn't have very much education in Europe but he wasn't a linguist.
 - I. Was he Jewish, also?
 - R. Yes. At that time there wasn't prevalent intermarriages like there is now.

- I. Then you had two children?
- R. Two sons.
- I. How far apart?
- R. Four and a half years. apart.
- I. Did you work when they were small?
- R. No. When I was married, you. see, it wasn't customary. You didn't have no help to make a living. And whatever he made, we got along.

 We did the best we could.
- I. I see. So once the children were born you stayed home. How long did you stay home before you went back to work?
- R. You know that was when my children were married already then. $M_{\rm Y}$ children couldn't help me. They were married but they weren't in a position to help me. Today they could but at that time they couldn't. And I was told enough, I was in my 50's. As you see me, I'm an independent person.
- I. Alright, now tell me about life after you got married and had children. What can you remember about Chicago? Where did you live then?

 R. When I was married? I always lived on the northwest side in the same vicinity. When I was married first I got an apartment on Claremont and Division. It was closer to Humboldt Park already.

 Before I was married I lived, as I told you, on Milwaukee Avenue.

 It was closer to a little park there called Wicker Park, It Was just a neighborhood park. And we paid \$12 a month rent.

Did you have an apartment?

- R. Oh. yes. I was already up. I had toilet facilities in my own apartment.
- I. Your husband must have made pretty good money.

- R. Oh yes, he made \$12 a week. And I paid rent. I had to buy my own stove and ice box so I went without one room. I did like all the Immigrants.
 - I. You rented out. Who to?
 - R. Did you ever read The Jungle?
 - I. Sure
 - R. so you know how people lived. Mine wasn't so bad. I rented out one bedroom and got \$6 a month. I didn't have electricity. That paid my gas bill and my coal.
 - I. Did you rent to a single man or a family?
 - R. Single man. There were a lot of single men then.
 - I Did you feed him?
 - R. No
 - I. He didn't board. Did you do his laundry?
 - R. No, just the room. I changed their linen once a week, but that was all.
 - I. That was pretty good.
 - R. Yeah, like I'm telling you I was already up. But it was a hard life. If you think that we lived like we live today, I assure that people on relief today live 75% better than we lived at that time. Do you know--after all \$12 a week, meat was 15\$ a pound. But figure out if you pay rent and all the clothing, carfare, and the man buys a cigarette. How can you live. Even if it is cheap you couldn't afford it then. There weren't so many things to buy like we have today.
 - I. What did you do to make ends meet? Did you sew at home.
 - R. No, I just economized. I knew this I can do and no more. I lived within my means. A lot of people made \$20 or \$18 a week.

My sister married a man, he made \$20 a week.

- I. So she had more than you.
- R. But she didn't because her husband was more of a spender than mine.
- I. You had a better husband, then.
- R. I had a nice husband.
- I. What kind of school did your children go to? To Hebrew school?
- R. No, me went to the Workmen's Circle School. He went to grammar school.
- I. What's the Workmen's Circle School?
- R. It isn't here, It was at that time organized a Jewish organization of socialists, you know, and they had like a lodge. It's even today a big lodge because the originators are dead a long time ago. It was like a mutual aid society.
- I. Was this a regular school they had or was it In addition?
- R. They had it after school. They taught them Yiddish. You know we're a bilingual people. We have two languages and people make mistakes. Hebrew is Jewish and Yiddish is Jewish but they're, two different. I make a difference between the two.
- I. Did they learn both or did they just learn Yiddish
- R. No, I don't speak Hebrew. I can read it but I don't speak it. No, they are bi-lingual. They speak. Yiddish and English.
- I. Did they learn Russian?
- R. No, my husband wasn't Russian, he was from Poland.
- I. So you spoke English in the family?
- R. No, when they were little I tried to speak Yiddish to them. because I knew when they started to school, they will speak English.

- I. And when they started to school could they already. speak English?
- R. No, they learned there. But when they began to learn then I -- you know, that my children should never be, ashamed of their mother.
- I. Is that when you began, too?
- R. No, I went before, but you see I want them to learn the language. I'm the kind of a person I didn't think of myself below because I'm an immigrant. On the contrary I consider myself tri-lingual.
- I. Russian, English, and Yiddish.
- R. That's right.
- I. Now can you remember much about the labor struggles in this early period, when you were here?
- R. Sure, my husband had it, too, you know. They worked, they didn't have a union either. But he was a good worker, he was never out of work.
 - I. Did you belong to the union? Was the union organized before you left the industry?
 - R. I told you when I was in the shop and I was working, we organized a little union. I think you know about it. Conditions were very bad, you see, and we knew it was very bad. A group of us, maybe 20 or 30 people, youngsters, we were all youngsters, we tried to organize a union because the Custom Tailors they did not take us in. They did not recognize us. We tried to organize the union and we gave ourselves a big name.

What name?

R. International Ready-made Tailors. And out of that nucleus later-the ACW. I got married. We didn't have any money. Nobody knew about us. Here we were just youngsters, I don't know if the oldest was 25 years. You could find there 16, 18 years old. And we organized ourself. We didn't have any money. My father used to give me 25 cents on a Sunday, spending money. I spent 10 cents on carfare back and forth and the 15 cents I donated to hire a hall and print leaflets.

- I. When you worked before you married, did your wages go to your family? You just got an allowance.
- R. I got an allowance, a whole quarter.
- I. But you did support your union out of that.
- R. Oh yes.
- I. 'Now what became of that little union? Did it ever Join up with a larger one?
- R. You see, then ours was larger. Then In 1910 I was already married then. I wasn't in then, You know that was the nucleus of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and today they united also with the textile workers.
- I. So your little group went into that I suppose?
- R . I was out then, but this was my contribution, my 15 cents.
 - I. You did your bit before you left.
 - R. Yes
 - I. Now what about your husband?
 - R. I want you to know one thing. The women, even If they did not belong in the union, they struggled in the union because of their husbands, and if the women didn't want their husbands, probably they couldn't go on with the strike so long. It was the women that had to have all the struggle. They didn't have enough milk for their

children when they were on strike, they hardly had enough bread, they didn't have money to pay rent.

- I. So their attitude made a lot of difference.
- R. Absolutely.
- I. How did the women react to the strike in the leather industry. Were they helpful?
- R. They didn't have to go. I was the kind when my children were little, I was the kind of a person that when I saw a strike, when I saw people picketing I helped them. We were always involved in the trade union movement.
- I. When your husband's union went on strike did they ever have women run the soup kitchen or do anything like that.
- R. There were some women that worked in the trade union that were on strike, you see.
- I. So it was the women workers who helped?
- R. There were the women-- but even I'm telling you I was not working, my husband was working but I had to go through the struggle together with them.
- I. And you gave them moral support.
- R. You had to, you Bee.
- I. Did most of the wives give their husbands support?
- R. I suppose SO. Otherwise they couldn't. Maybe they were angry but they stood my their husbands through the struggle. I remember 1910. My father was on strike then in the Amalgamated when they called that big a strike. My sister—they didn't have anything. At that time when they asked for the strikers they would have to go there and they gave them out bread and milk for the children. My father wouldn't go there, my sister, they were ashamed. So they struggled, but their credit was good. They landlord told him,

don't worry, Mr. Wolfson, you'll pay It. And he said, you know I wouldn't be able to pay the \$10 rent. So you'll pay as you pay 12, you'll pay \$14 until you're paid up. The milkman told him, don't worry when the strike will be up, because they were not deadbeats. They paid so those people had compassion for them.

- I. So they had good credit and they never accepted help even from. the union?
- R. There wasn't enough but they wouldn't go. My father said he'd rather die than go with the basket.
- I. So that was hard.
 - R. It was hard.
 - I. Is that how you managed when your husband went on strike.
- R. No, I had. a different attitude. There was a bank on Milwaukee Avenue, Krause Rank. Every Saturday I'd deposit \$2.00 I said it's hard on \$12.00 and it's hard on \$10.
 - I. But you always prepared in advance.
 - R. That's right, so I never had to buy on the book.
 - I. Then you were even ahead of your father in that respect.
 - R. Maybe that was already better pay than my father had. y_{OU} see I had only two children, my father had four children.
 - I. Did you decide you didn't want to have too many children because you couldn't support them?
 - R. Of course. What do you suppose? Don't you think we knew the game at that time?
 - I. Different people had different reactions. Some people would limit their families and some people wouldn't.
 - R. That's right, we had friends they had five or six children. we made up our mind that we want to give our children education. My children had to struggle, you know. They got education. If

- they worked during the day they went to school in the evening.

 That was after high school. If they had to go to school in the evening they had to work in the afternoon, but they always worked.
 - I. Even when they were in high school?
 - R. Of course, they got themselves jobs Saturdays and after school. I couldn't help them much. My older son had scholarships in Northwestern, made Phi Beta Kappa working part time and going to school.
 - I. That's amazing. I know you're proud of your sons. Now your first husband died. How far along were your sons, were they out of college yet?
- R. They were married already. It was in '48 my first husband died, but he was sick for about 10 years. I had to go to work. I worked in the Ladies Garment Workers trade.
 - I So you went back to work in the late '30's?
- R. Well, it must have been. No--
- I. Was it before World War II?
- R. I think during the war I worked already.
- I. And was your husband able to stay at home or did he have to be hospitalized?
- R. He stayed at home. He had very high blood pressure. He couldn't keep his head up. He had kidney trouble, he was a sick man.
 - I. Was his sickness in any way related to the fact that he'd had a hard life?
 - R. His sickness was related as a child he had--what was it? In Europe yet he had typhoid fever and that affected his kidneys. He didn't know it until later and then when he was sick he couldn't work.
 - I. How did you feel, having to go back to work at middle age?

That must have been a little bit of a shock, wasn't it?

- R. No
- I. Had you planned to do that anyway?
- R. You know for about three months we had enough to live on. My husband didn't want me to go to work. How would it look for the landsmen? What would people say? They'll come in once and they'll help you out and then they'll say it's a pity Milgram's sick. And then the next time they wouldn't. I says I don't want pity and I went to work. I went to, the union, I had friends, so they would recommend me, you know. I went to clocks, in the clock trade, and they thought it was temporary. They made more money and it was seasonal, so I went there. I'm a clock maker and I didn't know what to do. I did it one day and the boss came up, the foreman, and he told me I'm not doing a good job. He showed me how to do it. So next day he told me he can't employ me. So I went to another shop. I had already a little experience from this one until I came to the third shop. And I worked there till it got bad and I got another job.
 - I. What was this job? Clock making, too?
- R. Then I did selling.
- I . In a store?
- R. No, in a dress shop I became a sales lady. I had a countryman that had one salesgirl. It's a long story. So he called me for a day. Then he liked the way I sold, so when that girl quit he came and he said why do you have to go to the shop? You come here and you've got \$25 a week.
- I Which was pretty good.
- R. It wasn't too good. Don't forget it was already in the 30's. It wasn't like in 1910.
- I . So it wasn't very good but it was better than the clocks.

- R. It was better than it was before. This was little by little. Then my husband got better and started working again. That was way before, when the children were little. I did it right along. Then he got better. But the last he got sick and he didn't work any more.
- I. So you had worked off and on when the children were still at home?
- R. Yes when they were little. I used to go with my little boy, you know, when I worked In the store. I'd take him to school, then I'd go to the store. Then I'd come home and I'd take him back.
- I. I see. That was before your husband got really sick and couldn't work at all?
- R. That's when they were grown up already.
- I. Mow when you worked earlier, was that when your husband had sick spells?
- R. He was sick for only a few months. Then he went back to work and worked for about 18 years and he got sick again. At that tine I was a very young woman when the children were little. The oldest was maybe 12 and the little one was 8.
- I. Was there a union In that clock place?
- R. Yes. I think they organized already then. Then I would have to join the union if I worked long, but then I was called to sell. Then the second time when I went, I went In the dressmaking and there was a union. I joined the union.
- I. This is when you go back to work to stay.
 - R. Yes
 - I. And which shop did you go to?

- R. In a dress shop.
- I. And this was the Amalgamated Clothing Workers?
- R. The reason I was able to go is because my husband was an active union man in his line so that union gave me a recommendation because he was an active union member.
- I . So you might not have even, had a job?
 - R. Yes. In the Ladies I got a job and then they told me that I have to join the union. I went to the union and they gave me the permit.
 - I. Was that the Ladies Garment Workers Union?
 - R. Yes
 - I. So that's where you worked for the rest of the time?
 - R. It was in the dressmakers, you know, of the International Ladies Garment Workers.
 - I. Now tell me what conditions were like there when you went back to work.
 - R. They had a union there, don't you see? It was much better, certainly.
 - I. Was it a better Job that the selling job that you had had?
 - R. See, I lost the selling job. That was later. That man was out of business.
 - I. I see. So conditions were pretty good.
 - R. Well, it wasn't as good as later but they were alright. First of all, the boss couldn't tell me. In fact, I'll tell you something. I come in, I was dressed up and he salad to me you don't belong to a shop.
- I. Why, because you looked too good?
 - R. (laughed) I said, Why? Don't you think that a poor man has to have a nice dress, too? Anyway, it was a small shop, about 10

machines or so.

- I. Were they all women that you worked with?
- R. Yes dressmaking. Let's forget it.
- I. Do you want to rest a while? Want to stop for now?
- I. Let me ask you if you have ever held any position in the union?
- 'R. No, I never held any position.
- I. Didn't you tell me that you were about to be groomed for -one?
- R. Yes, because I got good recommendations. That was in the Ladies Garment Workers, Local 100. They knew about It. I didn't know that they knew but somebody did. In fact I was elected already in the executive board in order to become president of the local. But meanwhile I just ditched them. I got married a second time and I didn't even serve in the executive board.
- I. So you never actually got around to serving.
- R. No, I didn't. -But it isn't that I wanted to cheat them. It just happened so.
- I. And who was your second husband? What did he do?
- R. He was in the tailoring business. He had his own business. He was well known in Chicago as I, Spencer and Co.
- I. So then you quit work. Was that the end of your working experience?
- R. That's right.
- I. Now you told me that you had a little bit of experience in politics.
- R. Oh yes, that was way before. That was in 1930 or '29. I ran on the Socialist ticket. You know those are non-partisan elections, aldermanic, but I was supported by the Socialist Party for alderman and I was not elected, I want you to know.
- I. What ward was that?
- R. I think it was the 39th if I'm not mistaken. I remember it was

- the 56th Congressional District in Albany Park. There may be some people that still remember me. I hope they're still alive.
- I. How did you do? Were there many independents? Were there very many people running?
- R. Yes. there were five others in the city of Chicago, but I got the most votes. I got 2300 votes and the other four or five altogether didn't get as many votes as I.
- I. That's pretty good. Who talked you into running? Did somebody have to talk you into it?
- R. Listen, I was a member of the Socialist Party as soon as I came to this country. In 1932 I was a delegate to the national convention of the Socialist Party. I helped to nominate Norman Thomas.
- I. Oh you did? That's pretty exciting. Can you remember anything else about your Socialist activities?
- R. I don't know. I always was active, you know, in the Party.

 I helped to distribute leaflets. I used to be sometimes chairman at a meeting. I would talk on the street corner.
 - I. How long after you were here did you join the Party?
- R. Probably a year later, maybe not even a year. I joined it, you know. There was a Jewish local. I couldn't speak English then, so I joined that. Then as soon as I learned, 1 believed that political. parties should be together as an American, so I joined. I don't remember whether It was the 66th Congressional District and from that district I went as a delegate to the convention, too.
- I. How long did you stay active in it?
- R. As long as there was a party. I'm still convinced that we have to have a planned economy, otherwise we'll go under. You cannot have

machinery development and then have an 8-hour day. You know, we'll have to cut the day in order to give the other people work. There are no jobs. Maybe there are some jobs, some people say well, a man, if he wants a job he can get it. That's if he's going to work for one third what the other man does. But that is not a healthy situation.

- I. So socialism is really one of the main parts of your life?
- R. I hope so.
- I. How do you feel about the current Women's Movement?
- R, I was always a libber. I'll tell you something, I had a grandmother, she was a libber and didn't know it. One day she said, you
 know all the laws that are written in the Bible are all for men,
 nothing for women. She said if the women would write those laws
 they would write a different law. She didn't know she was a libber
 but she was, so apparently I inherited that idea.
 - I. Were you ever active in the Suffrage Movement?
 - R. No, I didn't have to, don't you see. The Socialist Party has the same program so why go to another party.
 - I. What do you think about the Equal Rights Amendment?
 - R. Well, it's alright. Nobody is gone to lose anything anyhow. Let's try it. Though I remember when there was a law in California during the depression that women when they are employed should, not get less than \$16 a week. At that time it probably was a good wage for a woman but when the depression came in what happened? The men went to work for \$15. So that ERA Amendment would be alright, then the men couldn't go to work for less.
 - I. You mean the protection actually turned out to harm the women
 In that case. Would you like to add to the tape something that you
 told me at lunch about how you felt about the importance of raising

children as compared to work.

- R. I'm telling you I was a, libber but a different libber. I didn't want men's rights, you know, I want human rights. I think that the job of the woman is just as important as the man's job. Why should I minimize it? Why should I think that to pound a typewriter is more important than raising a family? I think on the contrary raising a right human being is more Important. Anybody can pound but not everyone is capable to bring up a good person. Whoever is capable to do, one thing, let them do one thing well rather than do three things not well. My sons did well, the younger one went to the University of Chicago, too.

 I. If you could live your life over is there any part of it that you'd change?
 - R. I don't think so. I think my life, as I told you before, is a very hard life but an interesting life. I enjoyed all the things that I did, otherwise I wouldn't have done them.
 - I. Is there any part that you would like to have made easier for yourself?
 - R. Well, anybody would, but at that time that was the easiest thing to do. You know I couldn't do otherwise and would I be the same, living in the same circumstances, I'd probably do the same thing.
 - I. And you have two children and how many grandchildren?
 - R. I have two children, four grandchildren and one grandchild-in-law. My granddaughter is married.
 - I. And what about great grandchildren?
 - R. Two great grandchildren,
 - I. So you feel like you've done quite a bit.
 - R. I think my contribution to this country, I have nothing to be ashamed of. If anything I'm proud.
 - I. Well we thank you very much for your contribution to our Oral History Collection.