

Levine, Janet, interviewer

## JACOB (YANKEL) AUERBACH

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AGE 18

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with **Jacob Auerbach** at his home in Long Beach, Long Island, New York, on October 14, 1992. Mr. **Auerbach** came from Russian Poland in 190, no, in 1921.

**AUERBACH:** Right.

LEVINE: He was eighteen years old. We are going to do one tape of Mr. **Auerbach's** immigration experience and a separate tape when, nine years later, he became an Immigration Inspector at Ellis Island. Well, I'm very happy to be here, and I'm sure this is going to be a most interesting story. And I think maybe the place to start is for you to tell me your full name, complete with the Russian and Jewish pronunciations and spellings.

**AUERBACH:** Fine. There will be a few of them. My name here is **Jacob Auerbach**, or Auer"back" as they call it. **A-U-E-R-B-A-C-H**. In the little town where I was born, a little town by the name of **Shershev, S-H-E-R-S-H-E-V**, you'll probably not find it on any map. It was in what is known as the western part of the Russian Empire. At the time when I was born in 1903, there was no independent Polish government, because Poland had been divided by the three major powers ( there is a disturbance in the microphone causing momentary static ) and Russia.

LEVINE: Your names, as they were in Russian?

**AUERBACH:** And therefore, when I went to school, my name was Yakov, in Russian, Y-A-K-O-V. And the last name was not **Auerbach**, it was Averbuch, A-V-E-R-B-U-C-H or B-O-O-C-H, depending upon pronunciation. In Poland the last name was the same, but the first name became, was pronounced Jakob, J-A-K, K instead of C, O-B. But in Yiddish my name was Yankel. That's what they called me as a young boy, a child.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, the little town that you were born in, did you stay there the whole time until you left for the United States?

**AUERBACH:** I was there all my life, my eighteen years, with the exception of two-and-a-half that I went to another city to study. The city was a well-known town, Brest-Litovsk where there was a peace treaty at one time. It is a well-known big city. Because in our little town there were no public schools. All the kids in my town used to go to the Jewish school, called a cheder.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

**AUERBACH:** Well, it's probably spelled C-H-E-D-E-R. The C-H being pronounced like the German way, "cheder" not "chay-der" but "hay-der." Some people spell it H-A-D-E-R, just not to, to make it easier for, to get the proper sound.

LEVINE: Now, what was your birth date?

**AUERBACH:** June 26, 1903.

LEVINE: Okay. And when you were born there was your mother, your father, did you have sisters and brothers?

**AUERBACH:** I was the only, the oldest one of the family.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, then, how about giving me your mother's name and her maiden name?

**AUERBACH:** My mother's name was Esther, the usual spelling, E-S-T-H-E-R, Winograd, W-I-N-O-G-R-A-D.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

**AUERBACH:** My father's name was Solomon, it would be in English Schlomo or Scholomo in Yiddish or Hebrew. And the name, of course, was Averbuch, as I said before, the Russian spelling.

LEVINE: Now, did you have any brothers or sisters that were born in Russian Poland?

**AUERBACH:** Not only did I have but I have.

LEVINE: You have, good.

**AUERBACH:** I have. I have five brothers and one sister. Unfortunately there was one other sister who died. Otherwise we're all here.

LEVINE: And what are your brothers' names?

**AUERBACH:** The one following me is David, then comes Abraham, then comes Harold, in English. I cannot sometimes remember the Yiddish name, Harold. Then comes my sister, Rose, and another brother, Leon, and the youngest one is Eli. I think I counted for all of them.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have grandparents living in your town? No. In Russian Poland.

**AUERBACH:** Not only did I have grandparents, but I remember two great-grandparents, one on each side. My, my great-grandfather on my father's side, and my great-grandmother on my mother's side.

LEVINE: And do you remember their names?

**AUERBACH:** Yes. The great-grandfather was Note-Shepsel. In fact, I have a photograph of him. And the great-grandmother was I think Ite. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about her.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with them, either of them?

**AUERBACH:** With my great-grandfather? He is as vivid as if it happened yesterday. It so happens that he lived across from his daughter. A separate house, but across the street from my grandmother, and her name was Freide Leah in Yiddish. And, of course, he is, his name is Note-Shepsel Goldfarb. That was his, my grandmother's maiden name. And he had a garden that he tended. He was a pretty old man by then, I should think, in his eighties, but I may be off on that point. But I do remember him taking me into his garden and showing me how everything goes. And on one occasion pull out a young carrot from the ground, wipe it off carefully, and looking at me with a big smile how I was munching it. I must have been maybe about three or four years old, no more. But I do remember that particular incident.

LEVINE: And how about your grandparents? Do you remember them?

**AUERBACH:** I remember all of them well. My grandfather on my father's side was a very robust man with a nice trimmed beard. And his occupation was that of a shindel maker. I don't know if you know what shindels are. They used shingles, or shindels. Shingles is what I should have said. Long, thin pieces of wood to cover the roof with. And he used to work in the forest doing that type of work. He was a very strong, robust, a very jolly man, very good-natured. And I being the first grandson that they had, it was natural that I was the favorite.

LEVINE: Do you remember going anywhere with him or any particular experiences you remember with him?

**AUERBACH:** The only thing I remember from that point of view about him is that he let me "help" him, quote/unquote, to make shingles. He had a special clamp that he would put these things, thin slats of wood, say of about a yard in the length approximately, I cannot be sure of that. And you had to make it very smooth so we had a, I forgot what you would call this. A sharp, a sharp knife with two handles on each side. There was a name for this. I cannot think of it. "Let me try it." He hold my hands, my little hands, on the two there, the two handles, and I was going on with it. And the trickiest part was these shingles, they were thin on one side, very thin, and much thicker on the other side. And on the back of the thicker side was a groove where the next shingle, the same part of the next shingle would fit into it. This was a very tricky thing, because you had to make the groove just in the center without diverging even one tenth of an inch to the side, otherwise there would be a leak when the connection is made. That, of course, I spoiled quite a few shingles on that side. But these were probably already spoiled, he wouldn't let me do it in good ones, but I remember him.

LEVINE: Now, did most people, what was the name of the town again?

**AUERBACH:** Shershev.

LEVINE: Shershev.

**AUERBACH:** S-H-E-R-S-H-E-V.

LEVINE: Shershev. Did most of the homes in Shershev have wooden shingled roofs?

**AUERBACH:** I would say all of them. Some of the peasant houses, they were, the town has, about half of the town were Jews, and half were Gentiles, mostly peasants, who had their own fields and also had governers and so on. Some of their houses were covered with thatched straw. You may have seen certain movies in the island or old England, they have those things, thatched roofs, but most of them had shingles.

LEVINE: So was that considered a good, an occupation that was a skill, a very skilled kind of carpentry?

**AUERBACH:** It certainly was. It requires, first of all, a good, a lot of stamina. Because he had to go to, he didn't start with the pieces of wood that he worked on. The starting was to go into the forest and fell trees. It so happens our neighborhood had a, quite a lot of very straight pine trees that did not have any knots in them except way on the top. And when you cut them down you could easily split them into segments lengthwise that became shingles. So he started working, most of the work was done in the forest cutting the trees and sawing the stem of the trees into the proper length, then splitting it so as to produce as many and equal fitness of shingles as possible from each segment. That was a very highly-skilled job, and hard work, too.

LEVINE: Now, what was that grandfather's name?

**AUERBACH:** Grandfather was Leiser-Ber, L-E-I-S-E-R, dash, Ber, B-E-R. It's not spelled B-E-A-R,

but Ber, B-E-R. Ber is the large one for barrel. Jewish people usually call themselves Barrel, like a diminutive.

LEVINE: I see.

**AUERBACH:** It's a well-known Jewish name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about, now, his wife, your grandmother? What . . .

**AUERBACH:** That was, I mentioned, she was Freide Leah.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember her? Does she, what kind of a woman was she?

**AUERBACH:** Exceptionally well.

LEVINE: What was your relation to her?

**AUERBACH:** She was, I, incidentally I have a little story about her. But I'm not going to read it, naturally. She was a rather unusual person in the town.

LEVINE: How so?

**AUERBACH:** She was not born in **Shershev**. She was betrothed to my grandfather through a chatkan, a chatkan is a matchmaker, from some other town. And she came from a bigger town and kind of looked down upon the slovenly women, to her point of view, in **Shershev**. She had a little better education, and she always dressed immaculately, even when she went shopping in the marketplace. She would dress, I remember, I could see her right now, in a dark dress, going down to the heels, or maybe even to the shoes, all that. A nice kerchief on her head, and she always had a gold little watch pinned down to her left, to the left side of her breast on the dress, with a chain going to the right side. And when she walked through the marketplace she was really looked up to and nobody could say "no" to her when she wanted something. She commanded a lot of respect. But I do remember even more vividly, I told you she was a very strong-willed woman. When I was born, I was her first grandson. My parents had a store, and my mother was kind of busy. She helped in the store. My father didn't work in the stores too much. He traveled to other cities to buy wholesale merchandise and bring it for our own store and also for other stores. So my mother was busy in the store, and my grandmother, Freide Leah, decided that she is going to raise me, and she did. For the first three or four years I lived in her house, and I hope I'm not talking too much at length here.

LEVINE: No, this is very interesting.

**AUERBACH:** If you want these details, they are interesting.

LEVINE: Yes, very interesting.

**AUERBACH:** Our town did not have a, the houses in our little town did not have out, bathrooms, obviously, they had outhouses. So to take a bath you had to go to the public baths. There was one for women and one for men, naturally. Freide Leah was too much of a lady, in her point of view, anyway, and so respected by everybody, she would not go to a public bath because of the other women. So her husband, my grandfather, constructed a bathtub for her from wood. Now, I don't know how it was done, but I do know there was a bathtub in her house made of wood. Apparently he was quite skilled at it. He made it for her. In order to take a bath, the water, of course there was no such thing as running water. You had to go to a well quite a distance away. There were about four or five wells in the whole town. Take along one or two pails. If you're strong enough you took two pails. You filled the pail or pails at the well. You had to carry it home, then put it into a pot to heat it, to heat it, not with electricity, not with gas, but with, on a wooden fire, obviously, on what they call a tripetchok. You know the famous song, "Pripetchok burn the fire up." That's Yiddish. And the pripetchok is a space just before the big oven, a flat space where you could build a fire from wood or coal. And there's a very famous

Jewish song about that, a little fire burns there. And sometimes they had kindling burning there when they wanted to preserve the kerosene, not to use too much of it. That's the only illumination they had, this kerosene. So they used kindling on the pripetchok, on this place. So this is how you took a shower. You had to get the cold water, then heat it, then pour it into the tub in the proper mixture of cold and hot. Not, but I, what makes it so vivid in my mind is that I remember myself cuddling up naked to that tub and being taken inside to be washed together with her, so I'm sure I could not have been more than a year-and-a-half or two years old, because the, shall we say, the attitude was, what's the word I'm looking for, not promiscuity, but . . .

LEVINE: Modesty?

**AUERBACH:** Modesty. That's the word I'm looking for. It was very, very strong. But I must have been very young, so as the little child. And, incidentally, I was always healthy and that. With her daughter, who is my aunt. She had only one daughter. She had three sons and one daughter, this grandmother. And I remember her helping me get into the tub, because my grandmother could not help me. She was already in the tub. But those are the memories I have of my, my paternal grandparents.

LEVINE: How do you spell tripetchok?

**AUERBACH:** Pripetchok? P-R-I-P-E-T-C-H-O-K. Pripetchok, from the Russian, it's a combination of words. It means "near the stove" or "in front of the stove." That's what it means.

LEVINE: Well, how, what effect do you think it had on you in your lifetime of having been raised by this very respectable and looked-up-to grandmother for those first four years?

**AUERBACH:** I hate to say, but I think I inherited a good deal of the uppiness or the uppity-ness that she had. I do know that when I played with kids later on, I almost invariably was the leader. Now, I don't know why, but I must have inherited that from her, of getting my own way, so to say. (he laughs )

LEVINE: Now, how about your other grandparents, the ones on your mother's side?

**AUERBACH:** My other grandparents are a totally different breed. My grandmother was, also had a store of her own. But she, instead of having three sons and one daughter like my other grandmother, she had four grand, four daughters and one son. That made all the difference in the world. They had to be married off, and that took a lot of doing and a lot of money. And the son was the youngest, and unfortunately he was also sickly. So very early, even before my birth, I think, and probably about 1901 or 1902, and there was a history to that, too, which I'm not going into. There was a story about how they came to America, how I came to America, finally came here. He couldn't make a living. The girls, they couldn't, there was no work for them. They had to be fed, and you had to have a dowry, nadden. The Yiddish word for it is nadden, it's a dowry. You have to pay money. The bride had to pay to get a groom. That's the way it was. Anyway, he left for the United States at 1901, 1900 or 1901, I don't know exactly when. I know it is before I was born. And there is a very interesting story as to how he came to the United States, but we don't want to make it too long.

LEVINE: Well, this is so interesting, and it pertains to how you came. So why don't we . . .

**AUERBACH:** Right, right. He's the one who brought me here.

LEVINE: Now, who are you talking about now, your . . .

**AUERBACH:** That is my maternal, maternal grandparents. Now, I'll talk about the grandmother. She, as I said, had to tend the store and was very busy. And the girls, when they grew up, helped her, of course. But for a while, after my parents were married we lived, she had a larger house. My mother, who was her daughter, and my father lived in her house together with the other three girls and the son. It was a pretty good-sized house, but it was, there was no place to dance around there, I can assure you.

But she used to, had to come home, and some of the daughters would tend the store, or two of them. And she had to take care of the kids. By that time there were already two of us, later on three. And the only way she could control us was by telling us stories. And these were for the most wonderful literature I ever had and I ever heard, I can assure you. Whether she invented them or remembered them, but we used to stand near her fascinated and listen to every bit. And every time she used to catch her breath, actually, to stop to think maybe some more details, we would pull her long skirts and say, "Bubbe, nou, Bubbe, nou." Bubbe means grandma, nou, come on, give us some more. I remember it. ( he is moved )

LEVINE: That's wonderful, that's wonderful. Can you remember any of the flavor of the stories?

**AUERBACH:** I'm sorry, I'm so emotional.

LEVINE: Oh, no.

**AUERBACH:** I'm too emotional about it.

LEVINE: Well, it's a beautiful memory.

**AUERBACH:** Yes. I remember the stories. I remember some songs she taught us.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Can you, could you actually sing something of it?

**AUERBACH:** She used to take our wrist, the back of the hand, and hold onto it, like a pinch. Not pinch, hold onto it, and move it up and down. And this is what you sang. ( he sings in Yiddish ) I must translate it. It's very important. Hit, hit, little mallet. Come to me in my chalet, we'll say. I'll show you something, something made of isin, that has something in it. A team of horses are racing. The bride and groom are in a hurry. They are coming to the gate, which is open, and then they go to sleep. It rhymes, of course. ( Yiddish ) The bride and groom are sleeping. There were so many stories that she told us.

LEVINE: What can you say about her influence on you? Do you know how that affected you and your family?

**AUERBACH:** I, the only thing I can think of is my love of literature, love of stories. You know, from my past experience that I am, I write, I'm a writer. I've written a book, and I've written many stories about my experience, incidentally, as an immigration officer. I have about ten or fifteen stories based on actual immigration cases that should be very interesting to read, but I imagine it's not popular enough. Whatever it is, I sent them away to some publisher. I was not lucky enough to have it published.

LEVINE: Well, I don't know if you . . .

**AUERBACH:** They are available. If anybody is interested I would be glad (he laughs), I would be more than glad to submit them to any publisher. I'm not interested in the money for it, I can assure you, but they are worth reading, because the American public, now especially, doesn't know what immigrants had to go through. And my stories deal not only with immigrants but dealing with illegals. As an immigrant inspector, one of my jobs was at first to inspect the aliens coming in aboard ship. We used to go to the ship to meet aliens, inspect them over there, and also take some of them to Ellis Island and inspect them there.

LEVINE: I think that that would be well to save until we get to that aspect of . . .

**AUERBACH:** The only reason I'm mentioning is to say these stories that I'm talking about are all based on stories of immigrants who were illegally here and who were caught and how . . .

LEVINE: Oh, very interesting.

**AUERBACH:** They suffered, or either became legalized or had to be deported. It was very tragic, most

of them. But they actually are actual stories. In any event, they talk about the influence of my maternal grandmother. By the way, her name was Pessie. You would spell it Bessie here, like, but with a P. And ever since I can remember I loved reading, I never played ball as a kid. I used to run around and do all kinds of things. We used to play all kinds of games, hide and seek, and things of that sort. But any time we got a book, then everything was forgotten, including lunch. And from that day to the present time I am a voracious reader. And I think I inherited it from her stories. I think so. That's only guesswork.

LEVINE: Well, now, your grandfather, what was his name?

**AUERBACH:** You're talking about my maternal grandfather? His name was Moses, Maishe.

LEVINE: Were you close to him at all?

**AUERBACH:** I never really knew him. As I told you, he immigrated to the United States before I was born. And he came, there's a very interesting story about him if you, it's all right if you want to hear it.

LEVINE: Yes, I think that would be good.

**AUERBACH:** The way he, the reason he came is because, as I told you, he had four daughters later on to marry off. With my, after my mother was married he had three others to take care of, and he needed the money for that, so he went to America. But the second daughter had to be married, I think it was some years later, possibly about 1907 or 1908. He had been in the United States for a number of years, about six, seven or eight years. He came back home, traveled back home and, to marry off the second daughter. He brought some American dollars. That was helpful.

LEVINE: And you remember him coming back?

**AUERBACH:** No. That I don't remember at all. I don't remember it. He probably, he didn't stay long enough. Because he went to America a second time. After the money became depleted and he had to marry off, I told you, the other girls, he had to get back to America to get more dollars. ( he laughs ) And that's how it came that when time came for me to come to the United States after World War I, he is the one who sent me the affidavit and brought me to the United States. So he is the one, actually ( he pauses ), you see, it's interesting. He was not the first one in the family to go to the United States. The three sons of my other grandfather were the ones who came first to the United States, way before I was born, and there is a very interesting story to that, too. I don't know if you want me to go into it, if you have the time. To make a long story short, my father was in love with a girl whom this fancy grandmother of mine objected to. And when she objected to it there was no point. I mean, he couldn't marry her. The relatives of that girl were naturally very much offended, and they decided to take revenge against my mother. When my father became betrothed to my mother, they used to insult her in the marketplace and so on. They used to come at night and bang on the windows to keep them awake. So these, the two older brothers, my father's brothers, two took up the (?) and they organized a gang of their own and they beat the hell out of them in the middle of the night. And it became a police action, and it looks as if they have to go to jail. So they ran away and emigrated to the United States, and that was at the turn of the century. At the end, probably it must have been in '99 or 1900. So then they are the ones who brought him to the United States later on. Because you had to send, somebody had to send what you call a Schiffs Karte, a steamship ticket, and that cost money. The kind of money that the shetel didn't have. It had to come from America. So it was my three uncles who came.

LEVINE: On your father's side.

**AUERBACH:** On my father's side.

LEVINE: And your grandfather, and your father.

**AUERBACH:** And my, the first one. Incidentally, they send, both grandfathers came to America at the

turn of the century, because one came back, he didn't, well, there's a long story to that one. I wouldn't go into it. All kinds, it's all in my book, all this, in detail.

LEVINE: Yes. We make note of this book, in case anyone's interested.

**AUERBACH:** Anyway this, my maternal grandfather is the one who sends a steamship ticket for his only son. For the only son was sickly, as I said, and my grandmother didn't want to part with him. Why is he going to America to work in a shop? He's sick. So I was the oldest one, her oldest grandson, I took his steamship ticket, and I came in his place.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, well, let's finish with your family, your mother and father, before we start on the trip to America. What was your father like?

**AUERBACH:** My father was a very kind man, an unusually kind man, not very educated, but learned in the folk ways. He was a traveling merchant, traveled to the villages. He didn't like to stay in the store, to deal and haggle with customers. They used to come and bargain and all that. So he had a horse and wagon and he used to travel to villages, to buy from the peasants, grain and all kinds, fruits and things of that sort, and they would bring it to the small town and sell it to the wholesalers in the town and make a profit at it.

LEVINE: What was the store that your mother ran? What did they sell?

**AUERBACH:** The store was, they call it a general store, mostly for things that peasants used to buy, things that the peasants mostly needed. There was some salt, for instance, there was salt that they would buy. They would buy some type of food that they could not get. They ate very little of it. They would buy cloth for making clothes. Not ready-made. We didn't have any ready-made. They bought metal dishes, things that they, anything that they couldn't manufacture themselves, they had to buy.

LEVINE: Was your family considered sort of in the middle of the economic . . .

**AUERBACH:** We were economically of the upper strata. Below us were the tailors and the shoemakers and the peddlers and some other workers who worked, hard labor, building houses, for instance. They helped, they were the, what do you call a person who works on doyensbuilding a house?

LEVINE: Construction?

**AUERBACH:** Construction. They have the Yiddish word, yestoya. I cannot think of the English word. Carpenter. You see, the Yiddish word gave me the English word, carpenter, and things of that sort. But the merchants, most of them, they weren't, money-wise there wasn't much difference. Of course, the upper shift were the learned people, the rabbis and the (?), the assistant rabbis and the learned ones, the educated people, they were the top layer.

LEVINE: So the top layer was determined by education rather than money.

**AUERBACH:** By education, the intellectuals. That was the top layer. Money-wise they were not necessarily the top. Next came the merchants, and then came the workmen, we would call them.

LEVINE: I see. Now, what was the main occupation of people in that shetel?

**AUERBACH:** The main occupation of the Jewish people or the Gentiles?

LEVINE: Well, both.

**AUERBACH:** Well, the Gentiles, I'll tell you, most of them worked on the land. They had fields, and that was their, that was their income. They all had big gardens, too. Everyone had a tremendous garden with planted vegetables and things like that they used to sell. And some of them also used to work in wintertime, when there was nothing to do in the gardens or in the fields, they would hire themselves out, the peasants, I'm talking about, to work in the forests felling trees and helping to ship the, if there

was a lot in addition to the shingles, there was a lumber industry that whole trunks of trees used to be shipped to countries that didn't have forests, even to Germany. That's what I understand. But the trunks had to be brought. How do you bring them far away? Not, we had no railroads, we had no cars. An automobile I saw for the first time in 1917, and that was during the war. We didn't have any such things. So they lumbered these only in wintertime when there was snow down there. The Russian winter, when it comes, came in in November, October, November, stayed until March. There was snow on the ground and it was freezing, there was no such thing as a thaw, except on a rare occasion, and even then it lasted maybe a day or two. So they had sledges, sleighs. They would put the trunks on the sledges and pull them by horses out of the woods to the nearest river that was not frozen. And, you know, the largest, most of the small rivers were frozen. But the nearest one, not frozen, and then they would put it, tie it together and float it to Germany. That's what I understand. Because Germany was a highly industrial country, as we know, and they needed the lumber.

LEVINE: How about your father's affect on you? Do you feel that you were influenced in some way by him?

AUERBACH: My father? No. As a matter of fact I, in a way, I think, had an influence on Father, and I'll tell you why. Number one, I was the oldest one. The oldest of eight children. But that was not the most important thing. The most important thing is that I had an education. Our town, little town, in those days, had no school as such. They had a cheder where they taught you, they taught you the Torah. And that's about it. No, or they taught you to write, write Yiddish and Hebrew, the script. They didn't teach you to write Russian, which was the language of the land. There never was, in our town, a normal, a school to teach children arithmetic, grammar, Russian, anything else. My father, when, that was in 19, 1910, it must have been. How old was I? I was born in 1903. No, it must have been 1911. I was eight years old. When eight years old, my father decided that he doesn't want me to grow up. I have an idea that my fancy grandmother had something to do with it, who was his mother. That Yankel, the little dear Yankele, should get an education. And the word spread, and six more boys, myself and six other boys, were, who were prosperous, naturally it cost money in those days, decided that they would be sent to Brest-Litovsk which was a big city, to attend a formal school. And that is how I was taken, at the age of seven.

LEVINE: Will you spell the name of the town, Brest . . .

AUERBACH: Brest, B-R-E-S-T. There is a Brest in France.

LEVINE: Yes.

AUERBACH: Brest, dash, Litovsk, L-I-T-O-V-S-K, meaning the Brest because in Litho, in Lithuania, to distinguish it from the Brest, which is in France. Litovsk means Lithuanian. That means the Lithuanian Brest. And then Brest was on, I'm trying to remember the name of the river. I know it, but I can't think of it. A large river that has real boats going on it, and it was a big city with boulevards, with trees, with beautiful shops, with ladies who were dressed with hats, and used to walk the streets. It happened to be a garrison city for the Russian Army, so all the officers used to ride around in the beautiful carriages with the fancy ladies dressed in the latest Parisian styles, not Russian styles. They were a list of Russian aristocracy, the officers. And the soldiers used to go marching through the streets. It was a big city. So this is how I came to the school, and I attended it for two-and-a-half years until the First World War broke out.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the school?

AUERBACH: Oh, I could tell you a lot about it. If I start on school . . .

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, how . . .

**AUERBACH:** All I remember is that it gave me a basic sound, first of all, a love of learning, of literature. I had it before, we all had it. All the Jews, when I say all I mean at least ninety percent, okay. There were some ignoramuses too, naturally, it's bound to be. But education was the desire, the spiritual desire of every Jew. To become a rabbi was one of the highest achievements that they can think of. Or, of course, later on when they went, started going to school to become a doctor, to become a teacher, to become a philosopher or something like that, that was the highest. As a matter of fact, the highest title of honor in Yiddish and among the Jews is not "mister," which means, it's not "lord." It's not "meister," in German, it's not "herr" in German. It is "rabbi," teacher. That is the highest honor you can give. Anyway, so I, what I got in school, I was there only two-and-a-half years because the war broke out. I had a very strong basis of the Russian language, history of Russia and world history, German, science and music. That's if I remember. Arithmetic, of course, mathematics. It goes without saying. In two-and-a-half years.

**LEVINE:** So you got a taste of the outside world.

**AUERBACH:** I must tell you, since we talked about it, how I learned English. At the age of seventeen, without ever having heard an English word pronounced I spoke and wrote English all by myself by studying from a book called Allendorf's Method, printed in the United States. Books were something that we hungered for. We would give away our food, our, everything that we had for a book, we didn't have any. We used to scour the garrets to find old books that somebody threw out there a hundred years ago, or something like that. Anyway, one day I saw a neighbor of my father's store sitting and reading a book. I was, at that time I couldn't have been more than, wait a minute. That must have been after, that must have been after, when the war started. I was back, so I was already about twelve or thirteen years old, either twelve or thirteen years old, reading a book. So I came over to him, I said, "What kind of a book?" How much time have you had? It turned out he had been in the United States, knew a few words. He hadn't been there long enough. He didn't know any English at all. Forget it. But he had that book. So, naturally, I passed with him. "Let me have it! Lend me the book. I'll do anything you want." He had no use for it, so he gave it to me. I spent days and nights studying that book in front of a mirror. That book gave you not only a translation of the words, and told you not only how to form sentences, but how to pronounce the difficult sounds, like the T-H, for instance, doesn't exist. And it seemed so comical, you stick your tongue out and say a T, so that sounds duh, like a D-H, or the N-G. N-G you say "ng," but you don't say "ng," you say "ing." Now, nobody to teach me, nobody to tell me how it really sounds. I learned to write. My pronunciation was atrocious, I'm sure. But my written English was damn good for a self-taught young boy. I have a letter. It is part of my book, it's in my book, a photocopy, which I wrote in English to my grandfather before I ever heard an English word spoken. He, being in the United States so many years, he was twice in the United States, couldn't read a word of English. So he went to my uncle, my father's brother, who had come here, to read it over. My aunt, who was an American-born woman, a lovely woman, she couldn't believe it that somebody who was never taught could write such a letter. So this is our love of learning. It's with me to the present day.

**LEVINE:** So when you say you did it in front of a mirror, the book would tell you how to place . . .

**AUERBACH:** They tell you how to place the lips, how to do it, how to put your tongue in, and so on.

**LEVINE:** Uh-huh. And that's how you practiced.

**AUERBACH:** But most of the practice, of course, was at the table before a kerosene lamp when everybody was asleep, and translating. For this, I mean making the various, the possessive and the plurals and things of that sort.

**LEVINE:** Well, how about your mother? We really haven't spoken about her. What was her name?

**AUERBACH:** My mother was Esther Lieber.

LEVINE: What do you recall about her when you think about her? ( there is a disturbance in the microphone causing momentary static ). Well, I'll tell you something. When I was in Europe I remember her mostly being in the store. I was raised originally by a, not on a, I was raised by my grandmother, you know, the one, the fancy one, I will call her, the lady one. But there was also a maid to take care of the other children. There were other children in the house. And she, my mother, was, preferred to be in the store. So I really didn't have much to do with my mother. The only times I really had with her was Saturdays, Saturdays when she was home, and holidays, naturally. And even Saturdays she went to schul, and I went to schul with my father. Schul means to the synagogue. And I really didn't have much to do with her at all. For that matter I didn't have much to do with my father, except on occasion when he used to take me with him to the forest when he, I told you I had a carriage, when I did the lumbering, when I had a contract to lumber the trees, you know, to ship them to Germany. I had that for about two or three years. So I used to ride with him, and I used to, occasionally he would let me ride on top of the horse. That was, of course, quite an achievement for a youngster like me.

LEVINE: When you, let's see. So the war broke out, and you were still there. What do you remember first hand about that period of time?

**AUERBACH:** You're talking about the 1914?

LEVINE: Yes.

**AUERBACH:** Well, the first thing, of course, is that we had to give up school. The war broke out in summertime, and that was no school. And it didn't have any affect upon us. Some people were recruited into the army, some of the youngsters. That was, of course, quite a tragedy. Nobody wanted to go, but you had to. But we didn't know anything of the war until the Germans came in, and that was in 19, I think they came in in 1915, a year after the war started, I think. And I remember there were so many horrible things happened.

LEVINE: The Germans came into your town?

**AUERBACH:** The Germans came in and they, of course, issued some strict orders. First of all, there was curfew. You couldn't go out at night at all. And you had to observe certain regulations as far as cleanliness. And this was a good thing that they did. Sweeping the houses, keeping the outhouses clean, and things, you know, we had no doctor in our town. Believe it or not, there was no doctor in our town.

LEVINE: What would you do if someone were sick?

**AUERBACH:** You had to go to the nearest town, a four or five hour journey by horse and wagon. Anyway, then they requisitioned. They put a tax on every peasant to give so much potatoes and so much milk. They found out, they had taken a count. You know, when I talk about English, I forget my English when I talk about them.

LEVINE: A survey?

**AUERBACH:** Not a survey. There's a better word for it.

LEVINE: Statistics?

**AUERBACH:** In any event, they went from the peasant to peasant to find out what they have. How many cows, how many horses, and so on. A record, they made a record of it. A list is the best word. They made a list of the, everybody's possessions and how much land they had and how much it produces. And they had to give. You know, Germany was not an agricultural country. So everybody was taxed a certain amount. They would have to bring it in, and it was all shipped to Germany. Of course, it was all used for themselves as much as they can. And they also, whatever work they had to

do they just would catch people in the street. They took me. I was fifteen years old. No, I was fourteen years at that time, when it happened. They took me in the middle of the street in the marketplace, put me on truck, shipped me off to the forest. Luckily there was somebody with me, people around there, that told them, "Tell his mother that he is going to work." I worked as a slave laborer for them until they were driven out, until the end of the war.

LEVINE: You mean for a period of years you did?

**AUERBACH:** I was there for about a year-and-a-half.

LEVINE: And what was that like, being, what was that . . .

**AUERBACH:** Cutting down lumber. No, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It was not a year-and-a-half. It was less. It was less. I don't remember exactly. I know it was, we were felling trees in the forest, for them that, I told you that we used to ship it to Germany. And they also made rosin. They used the rosin in order to make some kind of chemicals from it, and things of that sort.

LEVINE: What were the conditions like as one of . . .

**AUERBACH:** Well, that's a long story. I would rather not go into it, because if I start on that there wouldn't be anything else. That is, it's general history. It's not something that has to do with my life. There were many others who went through it. Whatever the case is, that's the way they behaved, something they all did. Cleanliness in our town left much to be desired, that I'll admit. They didn't, and they were, they would catch women right in the middle of the marketplace and clip off their hair. They clipped the Jewish men's beards because there shouldn't be any lice. And there must have been lice in town. I must say that sanitation, under the conditions we had, we had no bathhouses. We had just one bathhouse. The outhouses and the way we were crowded, sleeping three or four people in one bed. So there are bound to be. And that was a good thing they did. But the way they did it, it was cruel. Instead of issuing an order that everybody should wash and so on and so forth they would catch them, you know, for like a Jewish, religious man to have his beard cut off it's a terrible sacrilege, because that's against the law. And to take a woman in the town, we didn't have any hairdressers. The girls, everybody had long hair, and the longer the hair the more beautiful they were. And they didn't have any curlers. Everybody had straight, long hair over the shoulder, or they would tie it into knots, braids. That was very important. They would braid it and have long braids and put ribbons in the braids. Like all women it was natural to want to be beautified. And here they take them right in the middle of the road with a pair of clippers and clip off their hair and let them go home. So these are some of the cruelties.

LEVINE: Without going into the enforced labor, do you think that being in that situation had an affect on you after that in the rest of your life?

**AUERBACH:** It had an affect on me only in the sense that I realized what war is. We saw what war is, what they were doing to the people in our place. We saw how they mistreated us. Now, I'll never forget a young whippersnapper, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old, probably a volunteer, who must have been some rich man's soldier to be sent there, not to be on the battlefield, because most of the men were older men, because the younger ones were on the battlefield. I and another, a partner of mine, a partner, another one of the laborers, were sawing a log in half. I told you they were making the logs to ship to Germany. We had no experience. And, you know, the saws were about at least six feet long, long saws. You may have seen pictures of them. I'm sure you never saw it. With a handle on each side, and you need two men, one pulling this way. And they were thin, so unless you had real experience on it you didn't, it was difficult to get it very straight. And then what happened, it would get stuck. You would saw it about a quarter of the way through, and then you just couldn't budge it because the sides were stuck. Anyway, we had it many times happen to us. And then the lumberer would try to take it out, start all over again. It was very difficult. This young whipper, I don't know what you call him, little

. . .

LEVINE: Whippersnapper.

**AUERBACH:** Whippersnapper. I call him a little bastard, in the fancy uniform, dressed to kill, in the forest, mind you, comes over and says, "I'm a policeman." And he slapped me in the head. "Verdammt Jude." "Damn Jew." I get angry even now. I would like, I felt like killing him, and I'll never forget it, the insult of this guy. I'm a damn Jew because I was all of seventeen years old. No, what am I talking about, seventeen. I was fourteen years old. And no experience with wood. I was taken out of school. It made me, I don't think I ever hated anybody as much as I hated this guy.

LEVINE: Well, then, the war was over by the time you left for America.

**AUERBACH:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. After the war was over, of course, the Germans went away and, incidentally, when the war started, before the Germans came in, you don't have much space, much time.

LEVINE: I think what we're going to do here is stop and I will change the tape before we start into something that I don't want to interrupt.

**AUERBACH:** Okay.

LEVINE: Okay? So we'll pause now and begin Tape Two.

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now with Tape Two, and I'm speaking with **Jacob Auerbach**. And we were talking about after the First World War in Russian Poland and what the situation was like at that time. So you were saying?

**AUERBACH:** I was saying that in 19, when the Germans first came in, before the Russians departed, the Russian troops departed, they burned everything. They burned the crops, they burned the villages, they burned some houses, so as not to leave anything for the Germans. So there was tremendous poverty. Some of it was built up during the years that the Germans had occupied. But once they moved away there was really a scarcity of almost everything. A scarcity of food, scarcity of clothing. Nobody bought any clothing. Nobody saw any clothing. Scarcity of medicine. We never had, whenever we had a drugstore, a druggist in town, but we, for years there was nothing to re-supply the medication. We didn't have a doctor in town.

LEVINE: How did the people . . .

**AUERBACH:** So, is that, I'm coming, I want to tell you what happened. Shortly after that some miracle happened to us from a country called the United States of America. The United States, that was, of course, after the war was over, after, new. They knew, after fighting, the GI's fighting in Europe and so on, what conditions were, so they, the United States organized ARA, American Relief Administration, to provide food for the devastated lands that suffered during the war. From nowhere trucks came into our little town laden with the kind of goods that we never had. We never had it in the peaceful time, all being given away free, all the things, that they had to bring things that could be preserved. So they brought beans and lentils, rice, flour, sugar, salt. Uh, herring, barrels of herring, something the Europeans Jews, the Europeans in general. Herring is a very important staple. So they had herring brought. I don't remember whether they brought any frozen things. I don't think. I don't remember. But anyway, whatever they were giving away, it was preserving us from starvation. You know, I cannot stop being moved emotionally talking about it. I am a softie.

LEVINE: I think that's a good thing.

**AUERBACH:** And they set up a town committee to supervise the distribution. The committee made a list of the whole town population. Not much. You know, it was only about, as I told you.

LEVINE: About what?

**AUERBACH:** Maybe, I would say, about twenty-five hundred. I don't remember, really. There were not much. I would say about two thousand at the most, at the most, in good times. I think after the war there were fewer, I think maybe about fifteen hundred. Anyway, they rented a big place, a building that had an inn which, of course, nobody used an inn since the war broke out, but it has a large room. And this committee made a list of the townspeople, how many children, how many adults, and what the conditions were, and decided by the volume available how much they can distribute to each one. Let's say they knew they had a thousand pounds, let's say, of rice. And if they had five hundred people to give to, five hundred families, whatever it is, they would give each one two pounds, things of that sort. And I was one, I was at that time a youngster. I was about seventeen years, no, I was fifteen years old. It was in 1919, so I was sixteen years old. I was one of the workers, because of my education, I knew how to write, how to keep records, having, I told you, only seven kids ever went, ever went to a formal school. So I, being one of the "educated" quote/unquote kids, so I worked for them, but I didn't get paid any money. There was no money, so the workers would get an extra, say, half a pound of this or that. It was a very big thing to take home. There were many mouths to feed.

LEVINE: Did the people in the town, the Gentiles and the Jewish people, did they get along well?

**AUERBACH:** Yes.

LEVINE: Both before the war and after?

**AUERBACH:** Both before and after. They depended upon each other. The peasants needed certain things. They needed articles of, for the work, shovels and rakes and ploughs and horseshoes and fixing wagons and clothing and nice things, too, kerchiefs to dress up, ribbons, hair ribbons. A very favorite for young girls in the peasants on Sundays when they went to church to have ribbons in their hair. And then they had to buy knives and forks for the house and dishes, even though some of them used to make dishes out of wood, you would be surprised, they had it. And cloth to make linen. So they needed the Jews for that. The Jews needed them for the, first of all, to sell their goods to, and also to buy their produce, to buy the apples and the potatoes and the pears and plums that they used to grow. So it was a mutual, a mutual trade.

LEVINE: Were the Jewish people in town all religious? I mean, was your family a religious family, would you say?

**AUERBACH:** Well, if you say "all religious," it depends what you mean by the word religious. They were many like myself, and some of my friends, who were not really religious, but we observed the rules because we didn't want to hurt our parents, and besides we would get slapped on the face if we didn't observe it. The father is that you went, when you have to do it, but we were already the educated, the modern life. We already, we read literature, we read Russian literature, and we sang Russian songs, and we knew about love from books, naturally. We were still kids. And we went with girls, and they had little groups where we would read together aloud and discuss things and all that. It was a different generation altogether. My father was very tolerant, and he was very proud. I mean, everybody was proud of the kids who could know Russia. It was a big achievement.

LEVINE: So you really, you really were considered important and kind of in the lead.

**AUERBACH:** Well, I was important, important, no. I didn't do anything for them. But I was the elitist. I taught my younger brothers and sisters Russian. I taught them, and taught them to read and to write. I used to tell them stories and tell them fables, and I used to re-tell them the stories that my grandmother used to tell me, when she was no longer available to tell them the stories.

LEVINE: Can you remember one of those stories?

**AUERBACH:** I remember some, some stories, not with all the details.

**LEVINE:** Just a rough idea. It would be nice to have one of those stories on the tape.

**AUERBACH:** Well, I would have to think about it. I couldn't just rattle it off the way it is. But I know they, they involved, put it this way, a merchant. I remember one story involved a merchant who was traveling. Like my father, I told you, he was traveling to sell and to buy. He was traveling on a winter day and he was attacked by wolves, and how he tried to defend himself. And by saying a certain sacred word he was saved. The wolves ran away. That's one of the stories. Stories about brides and grooms, how they met, and how the chatkan brought them together, and what happened then and so on and so forth. They were mostly girlie stories, women's stories. About, some of them were very pious men, very poor men who were very pious, and how the Providence brought them a living, because they didn't earn anything, they couldn't work. They were crippled, or whatever the case was. But somehow some miracle happened and it was all on the moral side. Every story had a little moral to it, that you should remember that things are not so bad. That you have to be good and have to help somebody and so on.

**LEVINE:** If you had to think of the, maybe the major moral lessons that you learned within your family before you came to this country, what . . .

**AUERBACH:** Well, the family, I must say, I must say it was that grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was the only one that told the stories. Morality you learned the cheder, you know, you have to do good, you have to be pious, you have to do this and that. I mean, you know that. That was the school. But as far as the other things, there's no, what I was saying is that you learn, you have to have good sedaka. Sedaka means give money to people who are poor. There is an English word for that. Uh, when you give money to poor people, what do you call it?

**LEVINE:** You call it . . .

**AUERBACH:** Alms. You see, when I speak about it it's my old, my old language, the Russian and the Yiddish come back to me, but the English disappears. That shows you the importance of what you learn as a child, how powerful it is. That you have to give, and not to put anybody to shame. If somebody makes a mistake or something or gets hurt or does something wrong you correct him and help him, but don't make fun of him. And, of course, learning. That was the most important thing. Learning was the acme of achievement, to learn naturally the Jewish laws and the Bible and (?), which are the higher echelon, and so on. It was all on the basis of morality. And we also heard stories of vicious things that were being done to Jews, partly through historically, partly imagined, I suppose. But everybody knows through history that Jews suffered plenty. Being burned at the stake and then the ghettos and things of the sort. So many of the stories involved unpleasant things, involved atrocities that were done to Jews.

**LEVINE:** Were you friendly with children, Gentile children of your age, when you were growing up?

**AUERBACH:** No. There was no friendship in that true sense of friendship. There was no animosity, but we had nothing to do with them. They lived in, the town was divided. The Jews lived in the center. The synagogues were over where the marketplace was, and the Gentiles were in the, you might call the perimeter, where the fields were, so they had access to the fields. And we really never got together with them. Oh, occasionally they would come to the marketplace and try to make fun of a Jewish boy, call him, "sheed, sheedas." Like they say, shilling, or, uh, what is a, uh . . .

**LEVINE:** Italian? Guinea?

**AUERBACH:** No, an American, a derogatory term for Jew? Kike, all right, like a kike or something like that. And we would answer in kind, call them dumbbells, or call them ignorant or something,

otherwise. But there really wasn't any kind of a thing. And my father, I told you, he traveled around the villages. He was actually not only respected but actually loved by many of the peasants because he was a very honest and straightforward man. He was a very poor businessman because of that, because to be a good businessman you have to know how to cheat a little bit and to lie. Over there, here, too, the same way. Let's not kid ourselves. He couldn't. He would tell you exactly what the thing was worth and what you have to pay and how much he can give, and not like to cheat, and they knew it. They knew it so well that when they have, many peasants would come to him when they had some kind of a confrontation between themselves, a dispute about something, they would come to him to resolve the dispute and they would accept his word for it.

LEVINE: Wow, that's quite an honor.

**AUERBACH:** He was, but my mother was not happy with it. He couldn't make a living. There were children. He was too honest. He never made, she really tended the store, and there was very little business came from him. He felt terrible about it, I know, but he couldn't be otherwise. He couldn't compete with the other tradespeople.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's move along to your decision to leave. What did you bring with you when you left for America? What did you take along?

**AUERBACH:** Can you, can you shut it for a minute, stop off.

LEVINE: Okay. We're stopping here briefly. ( break in tape ) Okay. We're resuming now, and the last question asked was what did you bring with you when you came to the United States.

**AUERBACH:** The most important thing that I brought with me to the United States was the English language that I taught. I explained before how I taught it. But it actually almost ruined my chances of coming to the United States. I'll answer first the physical part as to what I brought with me. We were after the war, we had nothing. We would have starved if not for the ARA, the ARA that I spoke about before, we probably would have died of hunger, many of us, become emaciated. So there was nothing to take. I will say that I think I mentioned that the steamship ticket for coming to the United States was made for my uncle, my mother's brother. He couldn't come, or his mother didn't, my grandmother didn't want him to come, and I was given the steamship ticket. I had to go, to send, I had to make about two dozen different kinds of these papers: Medical certificates, birth records, police records, statements from my parents that they have no objection to my travel, statements from the local authorities that I don't owe any money to anybody. That had to be gotten. These had to be sent away to the American consulate in Warsaw, which was quite a trip. In Europe in those days you didn't travel, so that was mailed to them. Then the consul sent you an appointment when to appear for the hearing, and presumably there you had to get the visa and go from there to America. I did all that, sent everything away and received the notice to appeal to the consulate. And it was I think some time in February if I'm not mistaken. Now, in order to go to Warsaw, I had never been on the, oh, I had been on the train only once when I traveled to my school in Brest-Litovsk. You had to go by horse and wagon and by train. It was a, first of all, you're going away forever because you knew that you'll never come back and you'll never see your parents, you'll never see your brothers and sisters, your friends, and so on and so forth. So it was quite an ordeal, the tears and the goodbyes and so on and so forth.

LEVINE: Was there a send-off? Was there some kind of a gathering?

**AUERBACH:** There was, I'll come to that. I'll come to that. There was no gathering. We didn't have parties. But I was put on a horse and wagon in order to get to the railroad station because, as I said before, it was several hours' trip. And literally the whole town came out to say goodbye, so to say. That was the custom. It was somebody going to America, to America, it was like going to heaven. And they all walked after it until the crying and blessing and all kinds of things. I'm not just talking about my

family. That was done before. Until the driver got tired of it and realized, whipped the horses, and off we went. But before this blessed event happened, there became a problem. Upon receipt of the notice from the consulate that I have a date, and they usually gave you at least about a month ahead. The problem is what am I going to wear? What I have, the sleeves were up to here, about almost to my elbows. I hadn't had a suit made for about five, four or five years. What I did is hand-me-downs from someone, from my uncle, who is about several years older than I am. You couldn't possibly think of traveling to America, traveling to Warsaw, in that outfit. Money wasn't available, cloth was not available. Everything was destroyed after the war. My mother came to the solution. She had a cape, a black cape, that was made for her at her wedding. Now, don't forget, I was already almost seventeen years old, seventeen years old. She may have probably wore the cape. If she wore it ten times in her life would be a big thing. What occasion was it to wear a cape, on a wedding. In a wedding if it happens to be winter, not in summertime, or other occasions like that. But anyway, she wanted to know whether that cape, we called the tailor and they took measurements of me and my length and width and everything else and the cape. And they made the big pronouncement, he can make a suit out for me, a pair of trousers and a small jacket. And that is what I wore on my way to America, nothing else. No top, nothing else. I had one shirt I wore. Not the kind of shirts we had here. One shirt I wore, one other shirt I took along for the road. ( he laughs ) I had one pair of shoes and one pair of socks to change, the shoes that I wore, and one cap. I think that's about all. Oh, I'm sorry, the most important thing, my books! Without the books I wouldn't budge. I could only take so many, the most important ones. I still, incidentally I still have the books which I brought with me. ( he is moved ) In 1921, I hope you'll excuse me for being so emotional about it.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Is one of the books the book that you learned English with? Was that one of yours?

AUERBACH: No. That one I had to give back. Don't forget, I borrowed it from the man. This one I gave back. But I do have some of the books which I had in school, from (?) my school. Anyway, this is my equipment, and even though I already have, by that time, the steamship ticket that my grandfather sent, I told you, for my uncle. And the steamship ticket was for a date much later than that. I couldn't get an earlier date, I don't remember. So the idea was I would come home to say the real goodbye. This was just a goodbye to go to Warsaw. But I made up my mind that I will not come back. That I will wait out as much time as I need in Warsaw, because the emotion, the emotion was too strong. And, besides, I wanted to be in the world to see, to see the big capital city of Warsaw. I was never in any big city except Brest-Litovsk, my little town. And I had a relative down there with whom I could stay in the meantime. I wouldn't talk about him, a very interesting episode with him, too. But whatever the case is, so this is my equipment for America, and I didn't intend to come back. I had an affidavit. In order to get the visa, you had to have an affidavit from a relative, a close relative, in the United States who promised to, that you will not become a public charge. My grandfather sent it to me. And I presented it, I came to the consulate. I had an appointment for a certain date. I come in, and I had my passport, all Polish passport. I had the passport ready with all the, as I said before, these little papers of medical certificates and permissions and so on and so forth. And I presented all that, and not a word is said. I can see it, like, now. A small room, like a little office. An officer, not in a uniform but apparently, obviously who is the officer, whether he was an assistant consul, whatever it is, I don't know, was sitting at the desk, and two chairs on the side. On one was an interpreter, and I was on the second chair. The officer, say, we'll call him the consul, okay, started asking me a question. "Is this the affidavit of your grandfather?" And the interpreter interprets immediately in Yiddish, "(Yiddish)" And I being a smart aleck and figuring that I know English show off, I says, "Yes. This is my grandfather's affidavit." I could see the officer stiffen as if somebody hit him with something. He pushed over the affidavit to me, in front of me. He says, "Did you change this?" I took a look. A word was changed. The affidavit was not made in his handwriting. Obviously the notary public made it. My grandfather didn't know

how to write English. So apparently he put down, instead of putting down grandfather he put down something, father, or whatever it is, and changed this later on to grandfather. It was obviously changed. The same handwriting, the same ink, it was changed. But the consul, seeing that I know a little English, thought that I made the change, that it may have been uncle instead of father or grandfather, whatever it is. In other words, the degree of relationship may not have been strong enough. It may have been cousin. I don't know. In any event, there was a change made. I think it was the biggest blow I ever had in my life. He refused to give me a visa. I explained to him how I learned English. I explained to him that it looks like the same ink, that I couldn't possibly have imitated it, and so on and so forth. It didn't help. I was refused the visa, but the only thing he did for me, he says, I said, "I am going to write back to my grandfather to send a new affidavit, but I don't now how long it will take." "Well," he says, "I'll give you a visa as long as we can, three months from now." He gave me a visa in May. That was the luckiest thing that, the luckiest. The other one was the hardest thing that happened. That was the luckiest thing, which I'll explain later. Anyway, I immediately walked to my relative's place, and you can imagine what my mood was. Beautiful bright snow, beautiful day, it was February. And here the accusation was hurting more even than not getting the visa, accusation of fraud. So I immediately, right then, the same afternoon, wrote a letter to my grandfather, explained what happened, and mailed it in Warsaw, right then and there, and then went back to the consulate and told him what I did. And I could see a change in their attitude, that they were already sorry what happened, but it was too late. Anyway, I'll make a long story short. I had to come back. I couldn't stay there for three months. It was from February to May. I couldn't stay in Warsaw. So I had to travel back to **Shershev**, undergo the departure business again, come back to Warsaw a second time, go to the consul. And this time they didn't even look at the affidavit. I got the visa pronto, in a matter of ten, fifteen minutes. And then, of course, I still had a day or two to visit and see around the city, and then made my trip to America. I will just enumerate the stages of the trip. By train to Danzig. Danzig was a free city at the time. It didn't belong neither to Germany nor to Austria. From Danzig we went, oh, in Danzig we underwent quarantine for fourteen days. We were put in quarantine, in isolation. We were inspected every day. We were given injections every day for fourteen days, everybody. And from there, from Danzig we went by small boat to Hull, England. From Hull we went by train to, Hull, and what other city? A different city. ( he blows his nose )

**AUERBACH:** I have it. ( sound of rustling papers is heard on tape )

LEVINE: A different English city?

**AUERBACH:** Yes, another English city. Well, you have my statement? It's right in here.

LEVINE: Oh, here we are. You went to Glasgow.

**AUERBACH:** Glasgow, Scotland. And then to Hull. I forgot which one first.

LEVINE: Hull, and then to . . .

**AUERBACH:** Hull, and then to Glasgow.

LEVINE: Yeah.

**AUERBACH:** And in Scotland we took the boat.

LEVINE: And the name of the boat?

**AUERBACH:** Algeria, I remember that. I think you have it in there. And we arrived in New York just about a day or two before a new quota act went into effect. If I came two days later I probably wouldn't have gotten in. Those were, those are the vagaries of fate.

LEVINE: Do you recall coming into the New York Harbor?

**AUERBACH:** I recall it very well.

**LEVINE:** What do you remember?

**AUERBACH:** You see, what happens, in those days the ship would drop anchor opposite Staten Island. There was a big hospital in Staten Island, that is a government hospital, a veterans hospital, whatever it is. And a United States Public Health Service doctor would come on board from the hospital. It was a center. And every boat had, of course, a ship doctor. A ship doctor had to have a report as to any sicknesses that occurred en route that he knows about, and any patients who were not well, whatever happened. That was very formal. It was very strict in those days. And the Public Health Service doctor would take his report. And on the basis of the ship doctor's report decide whether the ship itself would be put in quarantine. Suppose a contagious disease was reported, tuberculosis or something like that, or malaria. Then the whole ship would be quarantined. Anyway, this was the procedure. Then, oh, while this was going on, immigration officers like I used to do. Of course, I didn't do it when I came here, that I did later, used to go on that same boat to start inspecting the first class citizens, the American citizens, I'm sorry. There were lists of forty names on each one called the manifest, that was prepared by the steamship company listing in alphabetical order the passengers. And the passengers would line up in alphabetical order for the, there were the assistants on the boat, you know, some of the stewards and so on would line us up in front of the immigration officer. Let's say there were six officers, they were set up in the main dining hall, six tables, with lines in front of them and assist from the boat if necessary. And he would have, let's say, one would have from A to E. The other one would have from F to G and so on, depending upon the number, whatever it is. So we were, so we were already on board, the immigration officers. And what I was not inspected, I was steerage, naturally. So only the American citizens were inspected, and then they would arrive on the pier in the Hudson River. The, those who were already inspected would be discharged and they would get on the Manhattan and go wherever they had to go, American citizens. Many of us, most of us remained overnight. Those who could be inspected before were also, maybe some of the First Class people were also inspected if there was time to do it. But most of them were taken to Ellis Island by small boats. You see, the big boats could not dock at Ellis Island. So we had to get off on small boats. We were taken to Ellis Island, we spent the night there. The following day we were inspected at Ellis Island, and those who were admitted, which was either all or most of them, would be then ferried with the Ellis Island Ferry, which is called Ellis Island, there is a ferry called Ellis Island, to the Battery Park in Manhattan, and let off. I, being a steerage passenger, naturally was not privileged to be inspected on board ship the first day of arrival. So I proceeded on the boat to the Hudson River pier where it was tied up and spent the night there. I can assure you we did not sleep that night. We were free, then, to roam the deck, the upper deck, where the first class passengers used to go before. During the trip we were not allowed to go over there. And a new world opened up. A new night world to us. The mysterious Hudson River with lights blinking all over. Something that I never saw, a light, an electric light. The only light we had was a kerosene lamp. That was a big thing over there. And there are red lights and green lights blinking and bright lights and little boats. You didn't see the boats. It was a very dark night in June. Something, lights moving back and forth. But the most important thing, we couldn't get over it, there was flashings like a giant hand writing in the sky: Lipton's Coffee, Lipton's Tea, Lipton's, what's this other one? Coffee?

**LEVINE:** Soup?

**AUERBACH:** No, no, no. Lipton's Coffee, Lipton's Tea.

**LEVINE:** Cocoa, cocoa.

**AUERBACH:** Cocoa. I knew there were three things. Lipton's Coffee, Lipton's Tea and Lipton's Cocoa. That was a marvel that I never even dreamt of. Writing in the sky, of course, I was smart

enough to realize, incidentally I was with a chum, a pal, a shipboard pal who I met on the boat, and the two of us were all together. We couldn't get over it, tremendous signs. We understood it was an advertisement, but how does it get up there, and so on. Anyway, to finish the story, we were taken in the morning back to Ellis Island. I got on line with the number A, the line beneath my name. I was inspected within five minutes with my, I showed up in my English. This time I showed up with it, I wasn't bashful any more. And I was discharged. I was turned over to, my uncle had been, no, not, had been notified to come to the HIAS building. You know what HIAS is?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

**AUERBACH:** Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They had representatives to help Jewish immigrants. So one of them took me in tow, brought me to their building in lower Manhattan, telephoned to my uncle from there, or maybe they even telephoned from Ellis Island, this I don't know. But my uncle came to the place, and I was discharged to him, and I was in America.

LEVINE: And what did you do your first day or two in America? Do you remember that?

**AUERBACH:** Yes, I remember, and you'll be surprised ( he laughs ), or maybe not be surprised. I walked out on Longwood Avenue in the Bronx. That's where my uncle and aunt lived, Longwood Avenue. I went to see the marvels of New York that I only saw, I went by subway from the Battery Park. And the subway then in the Bronx was on, became an el. So that in itself was the greatest miracle that I ever saw. When I came down I saw trolley cars, something else I never saw in my life running on Westchester Avenue. There was three streets came together down there. So after, of course, greeting and getting acquainted with my aunt and my three cousins, youngsters, three youngsters, they were about, oh, seven years, the oldest one was about seven years younger than I am. He was about twelve years old, about eleven or so. I said, "I've got to get out and smell New York, see what it is." I walked out on Longwood Avenue by myself, since I trusted my English, and started looking at the shops and was wondering at the kind of things that they have. You know, it was not Fifth Avenue, I can assure you. Longwood Avenue had groceries and had a stationery store and so on and so forth. Then I came to, only a short block away was Westchester Avenue by the train, there was a train station, and they have a little newspaper stand underneath the train. And what do I see, a little red book that has a map of New York in it and the names of all the streets, twenty-five cents. I had twenty-five cents on me. That was my first purchase in the United States. I'm not sure if it was twenty-five or fifty cents. I think it was twenty-five cents. And the man was startled at the way I speak. I told him I just arrived. He couldn't get over it. He said, "You like books?" I said, "Do I like books? And how." He says, "You know there's a library here on Intervale Avenue, on 161st Street," and I showed my relatives. That was the first place I came to other than my aunt's house, and became a member. And believe me, that library was very popular as far as I was concerned. And, of course, I saw all these things that was on the street, the peddlers with the pushcarts. They still had horses in those days, in 1921, selling, peddlers selling with their horses. All in all it was a land of wonder.

LEVINE: Well, we're getting near the end of this tape. So let's, what did you do, what was your first job here?

**AUERBACH:** My first job was as a grocery clerk, and the only reason I could get the job is because I knew enough English. At fifteen dollars a week, on which I insisted on paying seven dollars to my aunt for room and board. I insisted on it. She didn't want to take it. I sent five dollars to my people every week. I didn't send it every week, but put it aside to my whole family in Poland, and three dollars I left to myself. Lunches I didn't have to eat, because in the grocery store I always, I made a sandwich and so on and so forth, but I needed things. I had to register for school as soon as possible, for evening school, and this was it.

LEVINE: And did you, okay. So your first job was the grocery store, and then what jobs did you have

before you became working for the Immigration Service.

**AUERBACH:** Before I did what?

**LEVINE:** Before you started working in the Immigration Service.

**AUERBACH:** Oh, I studied at night. Don't forget, I started going to public school, what you call for foreigners, and I said, "No, that's not for me. Too long." I said, "I want to go to prep school and I'll pay for it." You know, preparatory schools. To go to a public school they drag on. You have to go a semester and they drag on and all that. In public school what I did in one semester was what I couldn't do here in three semesters. I paid the money. It was very difficult. I'll make a long story short. I made, and I took Regents examinations. I came in in June of '21. In June, by December of '24 I had all my courses requisite for entering college. I entered City College in the evening in 1924 after passing examinations. And got a degree in accounting in 1927, also all at night. All for the love of learning. Then I worked as a bookkeeper for the City of New York for a little while. I tried to get a job as a bookkeeper with private people through an agency. They didn't advertise in those days like they do now. If they did, it was not for me. And the agency, this was an interesting, my first bitter experience in America. The agent told me that this company, and that was the company that published a magazine, a sports magazine. I forgot the name. I cannot think of it now. It's just a rough name. He said, "But there's one thing. Your name sounds German." I said, "Yes, it is of German origin, and I'm Jewish." He says, "When you go there, do you know any German?" I said, "Yes." "Tell them, and they'll give you an application to fill out. When it comes to the question of nationality, say German." I said, "Why should I say German?" He said, "You want the job? Say German." Well, I came down. I remember it like now. It was on the corner of Central Park and what, where Rockefeller Center is now. I went up one flight of stairs. A very beautiful office with a very pretty girl sitting at the desk. She, I presented her the application, she took one look. "Well, you know, Mr. **Auerbach**, you'll have to, you know, we have other applicants we have to consider, but I'll let you know." I went back to the . . .

**LEVINE:** Agency?

**AUERBACH:** Agency, and he was furious. He would have made a commission out of it. He said, "Didn't I tell you what to say?" I said, "Yes, you told me what to say, but I'm not selling ( he laughs ), selling my honor for a few dollars." So this was my first bitter experience, but I came to love it.

**LEVINE:** When did you meet your wife?

**AUERBACH:** In 1927.

**LEVINE:** So, and how did you meet her?

**AUERBACH:** Oh, through some other people. After all, I came in '21. In 1927 I had friends here. People were getting together, and this is a different, an entirely different chapter.

**LEVINE:** Okay. Well, what was your, just so we have it on record, your wife's name and maiden name?

**AUERBACH:** My wife's name was Rose. She was born in the Ukraine in Russia. Now the Ukraine is different, separate from Russia, but it was part of the Soviet Union then. And her last name was Lebedinsky. L-E-B-E-D-I-N-S-K-Y.

**LEVINE:** Okay. And you had . . .

**AUERBACH:** And we have two children.

**LEVINE:** And their names?

**AUERBACH:** I have a daughter, Adele, who is married. She has four children. She gave me three

granddaughters and one grandson, and two of my granddaughters presented me each with a great-grandson, recently.

LEVINE: Now, what is your daughter's married name?

**AUERBACH:** Married name is Otteinheimer. It's a German-sounding name, but he is also Jewish. O-T-T-E-I-N-H-E-I-M-E-R. His first name is Kurt, K-U-R-T.

LEVINE: And your other child?

**AUERBACH:** Who do you mean?

LEVINE: Your other child. You have two children?

**AUERBACH:** Oh, my other child is a son, Victor, Victor. He's got a wife and he's got a, he graduated as an electronics engineer. He worked for big companies, GE and RCA and some others. Lives in New Jersey, and is now retired. They have no children. He is a boat man. He has his own boat, belongs to a yacht club. They go sailing. And he's also interested in other sports. He goes skiing, he travels a lot, and so on. They're not tied up with children, so they take advantage of it.

LEVINE: Now, how did it come about that you came to work for the immigration service?

**AUERBACH:** Can you stop this for a minute again? I don't know what's the matter with me. ( break in tape )

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now for one really final question which, looking back over your life, starting out as you did in Russian Poland and coming to this country and making the rest of your life here, is there anything that you would say, looking back on that aspect of who you are?

**AUERBACH:** From what point of view? I don't quite know what.

LEVINE: Well, what has it meant to you, I mean we are, in a way, a nation of immigrants.

**AUERBACH:** Well, I think I know what you mean. You mean from a broad point of view.

LEVINE: Yes, as an immigrant.

**AUERBACH:** Well, I would say this. I have been a student, not only in school, but I did a lot of reading. I'm especially interested in history and how other people live. And I think that since the world existed there hasn't been a country as, shall we say, human and good and worthwhile to live in as the United States. I'm not saying that in order to flatter anybody. I have seen all the atrocities that have gone on thousands of years ago, hundreds of years ago. Wars being fought internally. I have seen how the basic population of Europe and of Asia also were being subdued and being mistreated by a few rulers, czars and emperors and the shahs, whatever they call them, where the people were downtrodden. And only in the United States did the people have a way of having their own government to decide who their ruler should be and do it in a peaceful way without fighting, with the exception of one civil war. And even that civil war had a moral point to it, even though I've heard some sneerers say that it was done because of economic reasons because the North did not want to compete with the slaves. But basically it was a moral war to free people, that people should not be slaves. And I still feel the same way now.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think this is a good point to end this tape. I've been talking with **Jacob Auerbach**, and it's October 14, 1992, and I am signing off. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.