Ellis Island Park Service
Oral History Excerpt
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edited by
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My name in Russia was *Osna Chaya Goldart*. My father came here [to America] in 1913, before the First World War. My mother's family was already here – her mother, sisters and brothers. One brother came to pick my father up in New York. People that came from Russia at the time – we came [Ida and her mother in 1921] – didn't bring any papers. They didn't have any birth certificates. Everything was burned down, the house and everything. My mother always used to tell me: "Your birth I know for sure. When you were born, it was New Year's. The church bells were ringing." That's why I knew that I was born January first, because the church bells were ringing, bringing in the New Year.

The church was right in the middle of the little town. The joke of the town was if you drive in with a wagon one way, you're out already the other way. It was a nice, clean town, mostly Jews around us. But my mother really lived out of town. In Russia the forests belonged to rich people. They owned the forest and my mother's father took care of it. He lived in a little house in the forest, just a little ways out [from] the town of *Piater*. My father came there to teach the children. He used to teach the children a little bit of Russian, but mostly Hebrew. But he had an eye on my mother. And they fell in love and got married, and then they moved to *Piater* and that's where we were born and lived until my father left for America in 1913, because he would have to go to the Russian army and didn't want to.

The Jews lived on one side of the town and the gentiles on the other side. The church was right in the center. The synagogue was down a little hill. One synagogue we had in *Piater*. For stores and businesses, there was a little bit of everything – dry goods. In fact, the aunt we lived with, after my father left for America, had a store where she sold bags of flour and sugar and lima beans and things like that. There were all kinds of businesses. There were, you know, a few rich people, but I don't know what they did. We were poor. My father left my mother with four children.

My aunt had a beautiful house. It had two bedrooms, a kitchen and a little living room. She only had one daughter, and her husband was in America, too. My mother at that time only had three children because my little brother died. It was a very nice house. It had a little porch with two benches. There was a little stove, you put logs in it and it was in the middle of the house and the heat went on both sides. The bedrooms were on one side, the kitchen on the other side. It was always nice and warm. There was a little ladder there. As children, we used to climb up and sit on top. On Saturday my mother didn't cook, so whatever she made on Friday, she could put right into this heating place and warm it up. We had kerosene lamps for light.

We had what you would call here a china closet, with the best of what my mother owned. Silver wine goblets I remember. I remember those things because during the pogroms, all these things were hidden. The house had floors made out of wood, but in the back there was a storage room and that floor was earth. During the pogroms, my mother and my aunt dug a hole, a great big hole, and put a barrel in there. Everything that was in that beautiful china closet, my mother's and my aunt's, I remember taking things out of the china closet and handing it to them, and they put it in the barrel and then they covered it up and that's how we left it. We never took anything from there. For all I know, maybe it's still there.

Sometimes there was no warning before the pogroms. One day, my mother was washing my hair in the kitchen, and there was a window onto an alley down to the river, where the men's bath house was. All of a sudden, we

saw people running down the alley, and we heard shooting. We didn't know what happened. So with wet hair and all, we ran with everybody else. And everybody was running into [?], opened up the door, into the [?] they were piled in there. They didn't even want to let us in, and then my mother yelled, "Please, please, let us in. I got three small children."

So they open up the door, and let us in. We were packed in like sardines. I couldn't take it. I said to my mother, "I'm going to faint." There wasn't even any room to fall on the floor. So she started to yell, "Open the door. If my child is going to die, I'll take her." The minute we came out and the air hit me, I felt better, but they wouldn't open up the door to let us back in. Besides, I don't think my mother would go in because I would only get sick again. But you still want to live. You could see these young guys on the horses who wanted to kill the Jews. If you were old enough to ride a horse and have a gun, you had a permit to kill a Jew. That's the way it was in Russia then.

Around the corner there was another door, and it was locked. The man that takes care of the bath house swore that the lock was locked. But my mother ran over and she started to go like this, back and forth, and the lock opened. Now, whether the lock was not locked or whether it gives you the strength to open it, I don't know. But we went into a beautiful big room. It was nice and airy there, and we stayed until it got quiet and then we went home.

These young guys were Cossacks, or Bolsheviks, or could even be a neighbor. They could be somebody that we probably knew. There were gangs that used to travel from city to city, and they were well known. They could be anybody - anybody that had a horse and a gun. It was fine to have a little fun, to kill a few Jews or to rob their houses or burn them.

Of course, those boys that wanted to rob the Jews or even kill, always went to the nice houses, thinking, which was not always true, that there would be more things to take. They always tried to do things on a Saturday, because they knew that that was a special day for us, and people were home. It wasn't so good in our town; it was getting dark one Saturday, and right next door to us we heard a commotion there and we heard screams. We were in the house and my aunt and her daughter went out through the back door. We didn't know where, but my mother said, "Where will I run? How do I know another house is going to be better than here? We'll stay and God will take care of us." But when we heard that they were almost near our door, my mother says, "Let's run." So we ran out through the back door. There was a little alley and then there was this little house that belonged to my uncle, and they were on the lookout for us. My aunt and my cousin were there. They were watching for us, and they opened up the door and we ran in there.

After a while, my cousin was crying. She had a baby that was maybe four weeks old, five weeks old. She didn't pick up the baby. The baby was left home. I can see it right in front of me. Later, when we thought that our house was quiet, my mother said she's going back for the baby and she did. She walked into the house. It was a mess and the baby was sleeping in the crib, and she picked up the baby with the blanket and brought her [back to my uncle's house]. If that baby had started to cry, they would have killed it. What they used to do to infants, is they used to put it on the spear, you know. That's what they did to infants. But the baby never woke up. It slept right through and she brought the baby to the mother.

Like I said, Saturday wasn't a very good day for the Jews. [The next week] my uncle said we should stay in his house. And that night they came into his house. We were in the bedroom, my mother and the three children. One of them came in and said to my mother he wanted money. She said she didn't have any money. She had a wedding ring. She took that off. He didn't believe that she didn't have any money, and he put her against the wall. He was going to kill her. Then he was called by the other guy. They raped one of the [other] women and that's what saved my mother. That's how my mother wasn't killed that day.

I'm reading Golda Meir now. She comes from Pinsk, and mentions murderous mobs — this is how she spells them, *"Petlyris"* [Symon Petliura]. Now, the minute I came to that, I saw the image of what we went through

because of him. He used to go from little town to little town with a gang, ten, twelve, and the sister used to travel with him. Wherever he came into a town, that town didn't have too many Jews left, if any, when he got through with them.

One Saturday, he was supposed to be in our town. People were talking that he was going to be in a little town on this side, a little town on that side, and we were in the middle. Well, he used to send his sister on ahead of him to the town where he was going to be. What she was looking for, I don't know, but she was, like, on the lookout. A few of the Jewish rich people treated her with kid gloves. They did everything. They invited her to the house and they treated her right, and then she went back to the other town where her brother was with the mob. Saturday morning he was supposed to be in our town [but] he just went by on the outskirts. Never came into our town. We didn't know whether we were going to live by the time the day was over. But he never came in. Just on the outskirts, and went to the next town and just wiped them out there, but never came into our town.

We always had [something ready if we had to run away], especially me. My brother was older than I, but because I was a girl, I knew these things more and my mother had to go out to make a little money somehow. I always had a bag ready with bread and things that don't perish, in case we had to run away. But lots of times we didn't have any warning.

We would have had to leave the town a lot. As I said, my mother was born in the forest, and she knew a lot of Christian people. Everybody around knew her. This is how she used to make money. She used to go from farm to farm and teach the girls, the children, a little bit, and then maybe do a little work for them, maybe a little sewing. And she always came home with food that the farmers would give her. Everybody knew her, all gentiles. On Mondays, we used to have a fair in our town, and all these farmers from around used to come in with a horse and wagon and park right near one another, and the Jews would go out and buy from them.

One farmer gave my mother a pail full of big black cherries and that night she said to me, "I'm going to wash the cherries and you'll help me to take the pits out." After a long time she said to me, "You're not a help. One cherry goes in the pail, the other one goes in your mouth." I remember to this day what she said to me, because I ate a lot of them, they were so big and so beautiful. She would use the cherries to make different things. She made wine and jelly out of it.

Often there was a pogrom [on market day]. Everybody hated it and was afraid, but how we were saved is because my mother knew all these people. Our house had a little porch and it had a bench and a few steps. They used to come and sit on the steps and said to my mother, "You stay in the back. Don't come out. We're going to stay here until it gets quiet. Nobody's going to touch you." And that's how we were saved a lot of times. That's why we didn't have to really go away from the house, because she knew all these people and they all liked her, and that's what they used to do.

One day, while we were in back, we saw all these men that we knew go by the house. In fact, one of them was an uncle of mine. We knew that they were going to the synagogue. I mean, little by little you know already when there is going to be a pogrom. And they got all the men in the synagogue and they threw in a bomb, but not too many people got killed. They hid under the benches. My uncle wasn't killed then. He was killed during one of the pogroms later on, but [not] then.

One day I do remember we had to go away, because everybody said we were going to have a big pogrom in our town. So we went to a Christian family that we knew, and she hid us. But otherwise, we stayed there [?] until the town was burning from one end to the other, and we couldn't take out anything. We just left it [?] there, you know, and we went to another city.

Once I had oranges. I was very sick, and there was a rich man who used to get oranges brought in from another big city, and they gave my mother a couple of oranges for me because we never had them. But otherwise, we ate carrots, cabbage, cucumbers, onions, you know. She always had enough food because she used to go onto

the farms. I remember one farmer said to my mother, it was in the summertime and he was going to cut the wheat and he said to my mother, "If you want to, as I cut the wheat, I'll leave some and you can pick it yourself, and you bring it to the mill." Whether the mill was his, I don't know. That I don't remember. "And we'll mill it for you, make flour." And that's what we did, my brother and I. It must have been maybe August, because I remember the sun was very hot. We picked the wheat by hand and then she took it over to the mill, and they ground it and made flour. She had it for a long time to bake bread and whatever else she baked. Every Friday she made challah and bread for the week. We had food because she used to go every day to the farms.

We kept a kosher home. We ate beef, chicken. Chicken, the farmers would give her. They would give her a live chicken. And she would take it to the *shoyket* [ritual slaughterer]. I remember that if you buy beef, you put it in a pail for half an hour with cold water because you can't eat blood. And then you take that out, and you put it on a tray, and you put salt on it, and drain it. That takes all the blood out.

During Passover, well, there were no men, so we'd read the bible and we'd have matzo. There was a place where they made matzo for the whole town. We had the same food as here, but there were no men, you know, so we didn't have too much of a big deal going on. The man is the one that reads the bible and the women sit around and maybe ask a question or maybe just listen to him, and that's the way it is.

My father left in 1913 and we were supposed to come just as soon as he could get enough money and he saved every penny and he had made out papers. They're called visas, and he sent it to us and we were getting ready to come to America. By that time, it was the end of 1913 [or early] 1914 and we even went to one of the towns that was right near us, because you had to make sure that you didn't have glaucoma. That was the worst thing that would keep you out of going into America. We didn't have a doctor. So we went there, and we had our eyes examined and it was fine and we were getting ready to go, and the First World War broke out. From 1914 to 1921, we never heard from my father. He never heard from us – all those years.

What I remember of World War One is that's when the pogroms started. I think it was 1917 when the Czar was killed, and that's when all the pogroms and all the trouble started for the Jews, and we had to leave after a while. I came here when I was ten, but it took at least maybe three years or so to get to where we were going. Our goal was to try and go to America, but it took a long time. My mother had a big family here. She was one of fourteen children, and my grandmother was here; she [her grandmother] had five sons and four daughters here, and then my father came to America.

We knew that mail didn't go through because of the war. And because of Russia, there was no mail that we could send. My mother wrote to my father, but she never heard back. We knew that my father wanted us, because we had all the papers, and he sent us money. We were ready to go. There wasn't anything that he could do. It was just that we didn't hear from him until we got to Romania. In Romania there was an organization that was called the HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society]. They got in touch with my father, and he sent us money. But we had to cross the Dnieper River to get to Romania. From our town we went to a big city, a real big city compared to *Piater*. It was called *Uman*, and my mother had a sister there, and her husband was the manager of a place where you could rent a room or something. So we were headed there and we stayed there for a while.

We were leaving our town because it was burning. We couldn't bring anything because we ran out of the house when it was burning, and the better things were buried in the ground, anyway. But we were going from town to town, trying to get to *Uman*, and we had to walk from place to place. We just didn't have any money. There were other people, too, walking. My mother carried my little sister. My brother was fine. A wagon went by with some people that my mother knew. So she waved to them and they stopped. She said, "Please, take my little girl. She doesn't feel good." They were going to the same place we were, to *Uman*. They had to go by an uncle of mine that lived there, my father's brother, and she said, "I'm sure that he knows what's going on. That people are trying to get to *Uman*, and he'll be on the lookout. Take my little girl and leave her there." There was enough room so they said, "Fine."

My mother said to me, "This is all the money I have." It was in a little purse and the purse was in a handkerchief. She said, "You take it with you. We have to walk and who knows what can happen." Sure enough, my aunt and uncle knew that maybe we'd be coming, and they stopped. I jumped off the wagon and I ran. I was only, what, five, six years, maybe seven at that time. I started to play with my cousins, and they gave me something to eat. I was hungry and fell asleep. A while later they woke me up because another wagon went by with my mother and my little sister and my brother. She said to the driver, "I will pay you when we get to my brother-in-law's house. I don't have any money, but I will pay you when we get there." So when they came, they woke me. Why did they wake me up? – because my mother wanted the money. I didn't have the money. There was no money. I didn't know what happened. Then we realized that when I jumped off the wagon, it must have fallen out. What happened, nobody saw. We just didn't have the money. My uncle paid the driver and we went to *Uman*.

When we got to *Uman* there was a rumor that a man on the wagon picked up the money. He got in touch with my mother. [He heard] a story that there's this woman with three children, and she lost some money. He came over and he asked my mother what was in there, how much money, what it looked like, what else she had in there, and it was her money and he gave it to her – gave her every penny back, never kept anything.

We stayed there maybe for a few months. My mother had the whooping cough. She used to cough very bad. We had one room. My brother and I decided we need money. There was a big factory that made candy. A lot of children used to go there, and they would pick up a box, a big box of chocolate, wholesale, and then they'd walk around on the main streets to sell it and make a little money.

We went out to sell the candy. I made more than anybody else because people used to pity me. I was just a little girl. This was after the Czar was killed and you couldn't use money that was the Czar's. We couldn't use it because the Bolsheviks took over. While we were walking around, a soldier came over to me and he said to me, "How much is the candy?" and I told him. He says, "I have a five dollar"—let's say five dollars, rubles. Rubles – the Czar's. I said, "Oh, no, we don't take that," because you could be put in jail if you did. "Oh," he said to me, "don't be afraid." I said, "No," I wouldn't take it. He took the five dollars and put it on my box, took a handful of candy and walked away, and I ran home. I can see my little legs running, and I ran into the room and I said to my mother, "Look what I got. The soldier said to me 'Take it,' and he took some candy." That was worth a lot of money, and that's how we stayed there until my mother got better.

In order to cross the Dnieper River, there were two men that would take people over. You have to pay them, and you have to go in the middle of the night. This was in December, and we were about fifteen or twenty people. All of us had to cross the Dnieper. He would take a family of five, maybe one more, over. We were the last ones, because we probably didn't pay him as much as the others. One family that went before us, they were five, and they could use another one, and he said to my mother, "We could use one more person," and he points at me. He says, "I could take the little girl." My mother said, "No." She's not going to let any of her children go by themselves. Whenever she goes, that's when the children are going. So he went with the five, and we were left, just us, my mother and three children. We were the last ones to go over, and then he comes back for us. This was in the middle of the night, and as we were walking, he went like this to us with his hand – to be quiet.

My sister was carried. She was a good little girl and didn't cry. We were walking to get into the boat. And all of a sudden, there were guns shooting and he said we had to run. He just said, "Go back!" And we had to go back. There was a barn, and we ran into the barn and hid. Then he whispered to us, "You stay here until I come back for you. Don't move from here." And we were standing there and we heard this noise like [makes snoring sound] and we were so scared. Mother said, "I think it's a cow. But to make sure, let me go and check it." So she went. She comes back and says, "Don't be afraid, it's a cow and the cow is sleeping." So we stayed there until the man came back for us.

And then we got into the boat, and don't forget that this is December, and pieces of ice every so often would push the boat. We thought we were going to drown, but we didn't. We got across to the other side. And then we had to walk for miles and miles. Everybody just walked. My mother carried my sister, and it was so cold out.

This is Romania, and we didn't know where we were walking, or where he was taking us. We walked until it was daylight and I can see bushes and he told us to go down near the bushes. It was very cold. A man came out, and to this day I think he was Moses. I can just see him, a tall man with a white beard, dressed in black, and he pointed to my mother and he said, "That woman with the children, come with me." And we went with him and his house wasn't too far [away]. This man had a wife and children. They gave us food, and we rested there. We stayed there a couple of days until we got in touch with HIAS. We knew that my father was in America, and they got in touch with my father.

At that time people did trust more than now. Now you don't. But years ago it wasn't really like that. Years ago you did trust people. But the man that had found the money - he didn't have to give it back. We didn't know who picked it up. So you had to trust. You had to, and that was the only way my mother could get where she was going. It wasn't easy for her.

My father wrote to us and sent us money. I think the first town that we stopped was called *Kishinev*, and then we went to *Bucharest*. After that, things were not too bad for us. After we got the money, and after we knew that my father knows we're alive, and that he would do his best to bring us to America, it wasn't too bad. It took a few months until we got to Amsterdam and that's where we took the boat to America.