

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Immigration & the Great Depression

Personal Experiences

O. H. 404

TERESA MINOGUE

Interviewed

by

Hugh Earnhart

on

October 16, 1978

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: TERESA MINOGUE

INTERVIEWER: Hugh Earnhart

SUBJECT: Depression, Ellis Island, Immigration Procedures

DATE: October 16, 1978

E: This is an interview with Teresa Minogue, 7410 Ridge Boulevard, in Brooklyn, New York. The interview is being conducted on the campus of Youngstown State University on October 16, 1978.

Mrs. Minogue, tell us something about your family, the schooling that you've had and so forth, and your experiences prior to coming to the United States.

M: Prior to coming to the United States I attended the National School of Education up to the eighth grade. I came to the United States in 1923 on USS President Polk. I arrived at Ellis Island on April 6, 1923. It was a long voyage. It was a rough voyage during that period of time. I was taken off of the big liner onto a ferryboat to Ellis Island where we had to stop to be examined by immigration authorities and then we were claimed by an aunt of mine. That was the procedure.

E: What did your family do?

M: My father was a small farmer and we had a large family consisting of six girls and three boys.

E: Did all of them come to the United States?

M: There are five girls here and two boys. One is passed away and one sister is in England.

At that period of time there was nothing in Ireland for boys or girls, especially girls.

E: Did you find the decision rather difficult to leave the homeland, or were conditions so bad that . . .

M: Conditions weren't so bad. We were comfortable. With a large family you really had to immigrate to America. My sister came with me; the two of us immigrated together.

E: How old were you?

M: Eighteen. She was seventeen. She is going to celebrate her fiftieth jubilee at the Sisters of St. Joseph in Erie, Pennsylvania. She became a nurse. She moved with another aunt who took her in and put her through training at St. Vincent's Hospital in Erie, Pennsylvania.

In Ireland at that time, times were very slim. There was no work for anybody just about.

E: In other words, it was kind of subsistence living?

M: Yes, at that time.

E: Had the Depression already hit the economy of Ireland?

M: Not at that time. We didn't have a depression until around 1929 in this country. I was able to go to Ireland in 1932. I saved enough money here to be able to visit my parents and brothers and sisters in Ireland. I stayed for thirty months. I didn't return again until 1964.

E: What were the conditions like on the luxury liner USS Polk? It was hardly a luxury liner.

M: No, you wouldn't call it a luxury liner. You got three meals a day. There were bunk beds. You had to get up on a ladder to get in them. There were three of us in a room, three girls in a room. The beds were clean. I know they talked at that time of terrible conditions, but as far as I can remember . . . We got here. You wouldn't be allowed to get off that boat if any infection was found or any disease was found.

E: Were you aware of this?

M: I was aware of it as a passenger.

E: Was there any fear amongst the passengers that they might not make it through immigration?

M: Yes.

- E: Was there a lot of talk about it?
- M: Not too much. I think you had that before you left Ireland. If you got through the consulates in Ireland you were almost sure to get through.
- E: Was there a rather rigid examination there?
- M: In Ireland, yes. They inspected very, very closely. Also, here at Ellis Island in embarkation, we were inspected.
- E: What was the cost of the passage over?
- M: I think it was around one hundred dollars. That included our meals and the boat, which lasted from March 12 to April 6, which was a long voyage on a liner.
- E: You weren't required to do any work or anything of that sort?
- M: No, we were served and our rooms were taken care of. There was nothing like that. Passengers weren't expected to do it.
- E: How long did the voyage take?
- M: From March 21 to April 6. That was in 1923. Then I went home in 1934 and I think I got home in about eight days.
- E: What were your first impressions of Ellis Island?
- M: The passengers sat on benches until they were claimed. When you were claimed that was it.
- E: How long did you have to wait?
- M: Maybe two hours. Your family had to come and claim you. You definitely were not let out otherwise.
- E: Did you know of anyone who had not been able to leave?
- M: No, not at that time.
- E: You had papers with the auditors and the consulates?
- M: Yes. We had two or three of them. Your family here who claimed you had to prove that they were able to find work for you and provide for you for a period of time.
- E: We heard so many times stories of Ellis Island being

a rather degrading experience. Did you find it that way?

M: How can an eighteen year old youngster find anything degrading coming from the country. You were railroaded into this room and you just stayed there. Nobody used any violence or anything like that. You were shown where to sit and stay and that was it.

E: Obviously the language was English.

M: Oh yes.

E: You had no trouble. Did you know of anyone who was having trouble with the language in the first initial experience?

M: No, because we were all able to speak English. The liner sailed from Cobh, or as they called it before that Queenstown.

E: How would you describe the conditions at Ellis Island?

M: Really kind of bare.

E: Overpowering?

M: No, I didn't think so.

E: The type of building didn't bother you at all?

M: No. You got into this big room off this little boat and you sat there. You had to show papers and different things, a certain amount of money; in that period of time I think you had to have about twenty pounds. You had to show that that you brought with you, besides your relatives taking care of you. They had to show that they could provide for you besides this money.

E: How did they make contact with your relatives?

M: I had an aunt here and she was the one who brought me to this country, and my sister.

E: Did you contact her by letter saying that you were coming?

M: Yes, and that we were arriving on a certain day. She was right there.

E: If she hadn't been there would the officials have contacted her?

M: The officials, as I understand, would contact her and would not let you off the island until you were cleared.

- E: Then you went to New York. Did you look back at Ellis Island as you left?
- M: Yes. It was a very dreary day, that I remember. It was raining, one of those spring days. It was neither spring or summer yet. We got acquainted, found work.
- E: For a person who had left their family behind and missed them, who had just had a long ocean voyage and no doubt was kind of panic-stricken as to what was going to happen next at Ellis Island, but made it through it, your aunt, sister and yourself had been cleared to come to the land of opportunity, what did you look forward to?
- M: Finding work.
- E: What was it that you found?
- M: I was doing housework, looking after the children, and other things.
- E: What was the pay at that time?
- M: I remember the pay at my first job was thirty dollars a month?
- E: Seven days a week?
- M: Sundays we got off and it would be half a day every other week.
- E: Was there any automatic stuff to do the housework with?
- M: Nothing. No vacuum cleaners. Even in the best homes they wouldn't have them. You were very lucky if you got in a home where they had a carpet beater. That was the extent of the appliances in the home up until about the late 1930's. When I got married in 1939, I got a vacuum cleaner.
- E: What do you recall about the first family that you worked for? Do you remember that family?
- M: Yes. They had a very large home and I had to work very hard.
- E: Did they contact you or did you hear about employment at their home?
- M: I heard about the employment at the residence.

- E: Do you recall how many other people applied for that job?
- M: That I don't know. I was contacted through a friend.
- E: Did you live at home?
- M: No, I lived in the house.
- E: What about your sister?
- M: My sister did something along the same line. Then another aunt who lived in Erie took her to her home and she got nurses training at St. Vincent's Hospital.
- E: What do you remember about the 1920's?
- M: In this country?
- E: Yes.
- M: It was prosperous.
- E: Do you recall anything about your neighbors?
- M: We had friends.
- E: What about speakeasies?
- M: I don't know too much about speakeasies. I heard about them. Every other store had a speakeasy. People would brew in their homes.
- E: It was like outlawing smoking, you just couldn't do it.
- M: I don't know what it tasted like; I never tasted it. I never knew anything about it. I remember my father's uncle made beer.
- E: The people running the bootleg business on the street, were these people in their twenties or thirties?
- M: I would say in their thirties and forties.
- E: Do you recall when they raided a speakeasy?
- M: Yes.
- E: Was there sympathy for the police?
- M: There was more sympathy for the party they caught. They were fined heavily.

E: Was there a demand for it?

M: A big demand. They were supplied; if you couldn't get it here you got it there; somebody else supplied you.

E: In the 1920's did people have news of the Depression that was already starting to hit some sections of Europe?

M: No.

E: Do you recall the word panic? In 1930 we coined a new word, we called it depression. We wouldn't dare use that word today because in your mind it would bring back images that would be difficult to handle. We call it a recession, which isn't quite as bad. Do you recall anything about the Depression?

M: Yes, I do. I saw the food lines. They issued stamps for food. We had bread lines too.

I worked in a very rich home for Mrs. Butrick. She gave me seventy dollars a month.

E: Did she contact you or did you hear about the job?

M: I heard about the job. She employed a cook and I was able to do cooking when the cook was out.

E: Did she interview you?

M: Yes.

E: What type of questions did she ask you?

M: What I was able to do.

E: Were there many callers in those days?

M: In some homes, yes.

E: What types of meals did she have?

M: They were very good. She had everything.

E: You obviously ate the same?

M: Yes, there was no difference. I cooked leg of lamb, roast beef.

E: How long were you employed there?

M: I went there in 1933.



- E: Did she talk much about the Depression days to you or anyone?
- M: The Depression didn't bother those people, but the working-class people it did.
- E: What about when banks closed, did she take any steps to insure that her money would be protected?
- M: I don't think so.
- E: What was this about her not wanting you to get married?
- M: I got married and worked on.
- E: How did you keep that from her?
- M: We both kept it from her, otherwise I wouldn't work. If I was married I couldn't work. I wanted to work as long as I could. I worked for over a year after I got married.
- E: Were you required to stay in the house all of the time?
- M: Yes. Not all the time; I had my free time.
- E: What was your husband's name?
- M: Christopher.
- E: What type of work was Christopher in?
- M: He worked for the railroad. That was what most Irishmen did when they came over. In fact, the Irishmen ran the railroad.
- E: Was he in construction or part of the train crew?
- M: Part of the train crew.
- E: How did the people see the PWA [Public Works Administration] and WPA [Works Progress Administration]? Historians will characterize those as being wasteful, but the fact that they never argued against was that it provided employment and kept people busy. Did you have the same feeling in the 1930's about it?
- M: Yes.
- E: You lived through a decade of one man being president when the decade practically started and he was still in when it went out. That was something we had never experienced before in American history, two terms and you were finished.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt not only ran in 1932, but in 1936, 1940, and in 1944. Did that bother you as an immigrant?

M: No. I was a United States citizen at that time. He did talk about getting your citizenship taken care of.

E: Do you recall any neighborly togetherness as a result of the Depression?

M: Yes, I remember that. Everybody had the same trouble.

E: You were married in 1939 and you had a steady paycheck.

M: He and his brother always had money. They worked on the railroad and were always sure of a day's pay.

E: Then came the war. Do you remember what you were doing December 7, 1941?

M: I had a baby almost a year old. It was on a Sunday. It was a sad day.

E: Do you recall any time in 1937, 1938, 1939 of Roosevelt talking about the possibility of war?

M: It was talked about quite a bit.

E: Then came the election in 1940 and everything was shoved under the table.

M: Germany was at war already.

E: Did you have any mixed emotions about this Second World War? The Irish certainly were not helping the English cause or American cause. Did you have any mixed emotions about that?

M: No. I didn't have any mixed emotions about it. I do know that in that period the United States was doing a great business in scrap iron. Where was it going? It was going over to England. Many of the U.S. ships were loading up.

E: You had no sons old enough for the war?

M: No, but my husband had to register.

E: He would have been about forty at the time?

M: Thirty-seven or thirty-eight. I think he just got over.

E: By being with the transit company that was considered

defense work. He had to go take a physical when he was deferred.

M: He had to take a physical and besides he was married and we had a child. Quite a few of our friends were drafted that were maybe a shade younger.

I couldn't complain at that time because I had food stamps and rationing. I did all right. With three children and a husband I could always survive on the quantity of meat that I got. Their shoes were a little problem.

E: Did you do any trading in food stamps?

M: Many times I gave neighbors of mine food stamps, a man and wife who barely survived. I did give them quite a few food stamps, rationing stamps, which they could use for cheese. If you had the stamps you could get the cheese. My family was big enough to eat hunks of cheese.

E: Did you own a car at the time?

M: No.

E: That meant you missed out on getting an A, B, or C sticker for your car window.

M: Right. We didn't have a car. In fact, my husband never owned a car. We had transportation under our foot. We had a bus on the corner and the subway almost right under our home. We only had around the corner to walk.

E: The family grew up on mass transportation.

M: Yes.

E: What type of house did you have in the 1940's, the first decade of your marriage?

M: We had a two-family house. The first floor consisted of five rooms and the second floor consisted of six rooms, which we rented out.

E: Was this a typical, New York, stone front right on the sidewalk?

M: Yes. We lived in a nice section. It was very convenient for transportation, which was the big thing. When the children were growing up, I was never afraid when they were traveling home day or night. They traveled to high

school by subway for four years. I thought nothing of it.

E: It is not the same fear you have today?

M: No.

E: Do you still live in that same house?

M: No. I sold the house in 1972. I think the house was built in 1909. The neighborhood is not safe now though. When we were there it was a very excellent neighborhood to live and bring up children.

E: In 1920 there was a movement put against bringing immigrants into this country.

M: I remember a little about it, but not too much.

E: It was geared primarily against Southern Europe. They had no skills and spoke a different language, but they were still Catholic. The organization which spearheaded that was the KKK. Do you remember that organization?

M: Yes. I remember the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's.

E: You don't ever recall rallies in New York?

M: No. I don't remember KKK in New York.

E: One last question. Obviously this country has gone through a tremendous change and the world has as well. Your parents had to stay behind and you had to leave in the latter years of your teens and got back twice. Did you ever have any misgivings in terms of not wanting to give up your family and not wanting to give up your many friends? Would you have liked to have brought your parents over or the whole family?

M: No. We sent money home and helped them as we could.

E: Did you save each week to send money home, or did you just do it occasionally?

M: You were payed by the month.

E: You sent so much of that home each month?

M: Yes, and you budgeted until the next month's pay.

E: Was this the cookie jar thesis?

M: Right. You really didn't have that much freedom to

spend the money when you were living in those people's homes. You were there seven days and seven nights, and you had to accept that if you wanted the job.

E: How much did you send home each month?

M: Maybe ten or fifteen dollars, maybe more. It depended upon how your wages were going to be.

E: Did you bring anyone from your family over?

M: Yes.

E: You sponsored them?

M: Yes, along with another cousin. At least they had a home to come to. You bring them over, pay for them. I brought over two sisters.

E: Younger than you?

M: Yes. You didn't have enough money to keep an apartment yourself.

E: Is your family big on family get-togethers, reunions, or is it pretty much each member of the family respects the others and looks after them and is concerned about them?

M: Yes, we're concerned about each other. I wouldn't think we have too many family reunions; once in a while we do.

E: Did you go to Ellis Island to get your brother and sister?

M: No, that had changed.

E: They did away with Ellis Island in 1930, didn't they?

M: Before that, I think.

E: I know during the Depression they did away with it.

M: Yes. I remember meeting my sisters on the boat in the harbor, not on Ellis Island.

E: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW