**Edward:** This is Edward Applebaum and I’m speaking with Mr. Charles … Monday September 9th 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10:25 in the morning. We are about to interview Mr. Lehrer about his immigration experience from Austria-Hungary in 1913.

Mr. Lehrer could you tell me where and when you were born?

**Charles:** Yeah, was born in Clochwo as I told you before and what else?

**Edward:** Where you just told me, could you spell the name of the city?

**Charles:** Yeah, it’s C-L-O-C-H-W-O.

**Edward:** Okay and that was in Austria-Hungary?

**Charles:** That’s right.

**Edward:** What year were you born?

**Charles:** 1892.

**Edward:** 1892. What was life like in your native country?

**Charles:** Well, it was a little town, near a big city like Lemberg they call it, it used to Lemberg. Now it’s Lviv Lwow with a Polish. It’s a very small town but they had a station there, a big army down there in the town.

Most of the people were ... in the city itself was most of them Jewish people. Outside of the city, there was Gentile. I don’t know what else. It was just very, very ... they had no electric in the house and stuff, lived on kerosene.

**Edward:** What kind of house did you live in? What kind of house did you live in?

**Charles:** I lived in a little house, which is next to a little creek, a very small house. They had one bedroom and a living room and a kitchen. That was the whole house. Of course, we slept in the kitchen, I had a brother, we slept in the kitchen. My father and my stepmother was in the bedroom.

My mother died when I was practically born, maybe right after she gave birth. My father used to be like an egg handler. He would handle eggs and look them over. Then after he quit, he couldn’t make enough money in that to support a family, which he didn’t, so the family didn’t have too much.

He used to be like ... every week the farmers used to come into a section down there with a horse wagon, no cars that time. Bring the horses and bring the ... some of them bring in some eggs and some of them bring in cherries or fruits or tomatoes, stuff like that. They used have ... they all lined up with their merchandise.

My father used to try to catch the farmers before they come into the city and buy ... if they had a chicken, so he bought a chicken from them and he bought some eggs and stuff like that. Then he delivered them to certain people, made maybe 10 cents in a trip or something like that. It wasn’t easy.

**Edward:** He would examine the eggs for the farmers to see if there were imperfections?

**Charles:** No, he didn’t examine them at all. He know they were fresh because they didn’t have much. They brought in two dozen eggs, maybe one dozen each farmer. They didn’t have too much to sell. He used to buy the chicken when they’re brought in and we went over to the [inaudible 00:04:19] and slaughtered the chicken for them and brought them over to people that are used to buying from him and get a little profit out of that.

Then on ... on like on a weekend, they used to ship the ... then there was a big place where all the farmers used to bring ... the merchants used to bring their eggs there and then packed them and sent them to Germany. They had a big factory. He used to work at that once a week and made a few slaughters, you know, what they call them.

But it was a quiet little town. Religious people who used to go to Schul. He went to ... five o'clock in the morning he used to go and double and then they went out to make a few a cents for his family.

**Edward:** Would you and your brothers go to Schul with him?

**Charles:** No, no, I didn’t go to Schul with him on weekdays but on Saturdays I used to go. Then of course, after that, I grow up and I went and learn to be a carpenter. I had to serve four years to learn the trade. Of course, they don’t give you nothing. You just work for the mill. I used to sleep in the shop. I didn’t have no room in the house, so I slept in the shop on the bench, shaving there and you sleep that way.

Not only I, the other boys did the same thing. I worked there for four years. After I got my classification, like passed the exams...

**Edward:** How was it arranged for you to apprentice? How was it arranged for you to apprentice as a carpenter?

**Charles:** How?

**Edward:** Yes, did your father arrange for that?

**Charles:** No, my uncle was a boss carpenter. They had their own business. His wife was my aunt, my mother’s sister and I learnt the trade over there. I must say, I was one of the best there. I start to work four years after I passed the three years but after that was a scarce of [inaudible 00:07:21] like carpenters. so the little towns used to come in and pick out the...

After I passed and had my papers, my uncle said, “You go out to work someplace else and learn a little more about the business.” I worked in a little town down there not far from there. The guy used to work here, five o'clock in the morning. We didn’t get no breakfast until about 10 o'clock and you worked until it gets to dark. There was no hours.

But I didn’t care. I was young, I didn’t mind. But then after when I grew up and then I says, “I want to go to the United States.” I didn’t want to work here because they didn’t pay anything. Themselves, they didn’t have anything. It isn’t a question, they didn’t want to pay you but they didn’t have it.

I worked there and then I decided to go the United States. My father didn’t have too much money to ... so you got an agent and I think it was about $30 to cross to come to the United States, I mean on the boat. The George Washington was the boat that I came.

**Edward:** What did your father and stepmother say when you told them you wanted to leave for the United States?

**Charles:** Well, my stepmother said I shouldn’t go, they wouldn’t take you in the army and so on, you little skinny boy but I didn’t care about that. My father didn’t say nothing. He figured ... Of course, my brother was in the United States already. He came here in 1907.

**Edward:** Your brother was older?

**Charles:** Yeah, yeah, he was older.

**Edward:** Was he writing to the family and letting you know what things were like?

**Charles:** No, he wasn’t too much ... rubbed out. He didn’t paying too much attention of the family after he got to United States but I was a little different. My heart and soul was for the family in Clochwo, in [inaudible 00:09:40] whatever it was.

**Edward:** What had you heard about the United States then?

**Charles:** Well, the only thing I really left for the United States because I didn’t want to serve in the army. I was ... I never forget when I was on the George Washington, when I have to get on the boat, that’s the day they called me for examination in Clochow, you know. I had a cousin of mine, about the same age, we come together but the first time I went by myself and I got turned back because I was ready to serve the army so...

**Edward:** Where had you gotten to...?

**Charles:** I went to Maslowicz where there is a border between Germany and ... I mean, that’s where you ... you leave there with a boat. That’s where you’re go. They can’t do nothing no more. But the police come down before to let me go, they found out that I was ... serve the army, so they took me off the train and I had to go back. They brought me back to Lemberg, which was a big city and they dropped me and let me go. I decided we have to do something else.

My father got in touch with an agent to get me through the border. The agent, I think ... I don’t know how much. We had to buy a ticket from him. I don’t know what it was altogether but he got me through. When I got on the train to get on the boat before, that’s when they examined you.

What we do, he gave me a [inaudible 00:11:45] and he know my cousin and that’s how the agent passed me so to get out. So [inaudible 00:11:57] to get on the boat, on the George Washington boat and we really couldn’t eat nothing. We were seasick from the day we got on until we got there.

The funny part, there was a Jewish chef, it was a German boat. It was a Jewish ... was a traitor to the Jewish people.

**Edward:** What was the name of the boat?

**Charles:** George Washington.

**Edward:** It left from which harbor?

**Charles:** From Maslowicz. I don’t know, I forgot. I think it was Maslowicz, at the border from ... between Austria and port. We didn’t eat nothing. The two us didn’t eat nothing until we got the United States. When we got to the United States...

**Edward:** Can you tell me anything else about the boat trip over? Did you meet any people?

**Charles:** Yeah, we meet a lot of people. Most of them were from Russia. They were ... on that border of Maslowicz, they were there for weeks before they got some papers, sleeping on the floor. Maybe children and the old people, the people from the children and a lot of old Jewish people were that were ... most of them were all Jewish. Some gentile but most of them were all Jewish and they were there for weeks.

They wouldn’t let them go until they had to have certain papers. Had to wait till they get the papers from Russia you know how hard it was to get anything from Russia then? It was a pity the way these people laid there on the floor, no mattress or nothing. We didn’t have to wait. Once we had gotten past the border then we have no problem.

**Edward:** Did you travel steerage?

**Charles:** Steerage, yeah, we went there way down about where the cattle was, way down.

**Edward:** There was actually cattle on the boat with you? There was actually cattle on the boat with you?

**Charles:** Who? What do you mean?

**Edward:** I misunderstood you then. Were there cattle on the boat?

**Charles:** There was cattle on the boat. Oh, yes, that’s why they call it steerage. That’s why they had the name steerage because there was cattle on the same floor that we lived.

**Edward:** What did you and your cousin do on the trip over besides not eat?

**Charles:** When we got to ... the boat got to Ellis Island. The boat itself, the George Washington got to Ellis Island to let everybody off and then we have to wait in Ellis Island until you got examined.

**Edward:** What was it like when you came into New York Harbor? Do you remember the buildings you saw or how you were feeling?

**Charles:** I was very impressed the way the ... but the thing was when I got off after they examined me, when we got off, we got off to south ferry, with a ferry, not with the big boat, didn’t come into south ferry. They let us off and I saw a big stand with pies. So I asked in Jewish because of them were Jewish people, I said, “How much is this?” they said, “10 cents.” I couldn’t get over that. A big apple pie for 10 cents that was the best meal I had.

Then these boys down there in the south ferry working for the immigrants, there they go. They take you for a few cents, whatever it was. They’d take you where you want to go. My cousin was here in the United States about the same time as my brother, about 1907. He was in the stair building business. We got me a job the next day with his ... had a partner by the name of [inaudible 00:16:13] and they got me there to the job.

But the funny part of it, I was young and they don’t work on Saturday over there at that time. It was a Jewish outfit so they worked Sundays. Well, I got up a little late and his partner [inaudible 00:16:35] say, “You’re fired.” I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, I couldn’t understand English.

He says, “You’re fired,” because I was a half an hour late. They said to me seven o'clock in the morning, that was 7:30. First time [inaudible 00:16:52] you get together.

Then after I got a job in Green Point [inaudible 00:17:02], I got $7 a week for 44 hours. I worked there quite about ... a few week and then after that, I got another ... I had a union card then already because over there they have these wage [inaudible 00:17:26] your profession, you get a union card because over there you’ve got to be 24 years until you get your papers then they gave you from Lemberg, an agent comes and gives you a union card.

That union card was good here. [Inaudible 00:17:43] on 86th Street, I think it was 86th Street, there was [inaudible 00:17:49] and you got to pay a [inaudible 00:17:56] that and a couple of bucks or something, it didn’t cost much. The first job I got and after that, I got a job, it was a union shop and with the shop still in there. The union wages will stand $12 a week.

But the boss ... I couldn’t get $12 because I was a young kid and people there were children, they got their union wages, the [inaudible 00:18:29]. But I had to bring back $3 every week because I ... but they says if you say anything, the [inaudible 00:18:41] the boss say anything, you say anything how much you got, don’t tell him. In Yiddish, I couldn’t understand English then. He was a Jewish boss.

But I had work and I was just as good as the other guys because I had a full ... I knew the carpenter work pretty well. Then...

**Edward:** Who were you living with at this time? Where did you live?

**Charles:** I lived with some woman, some couple down in Brooklyn in Bushwick Avenue. I paid $3 a month for the room and she gave me breakfast. She gave me coffee and a roll and butter for free with the ... and at night, then that was 15 cents.

**Edward:** Were there other immigrants who were boarding with them?

**Charles:** No, because they didn’t have ... they only had ... could spare that one. Saturday was 25 cents.

**Edward:** Where did you stay in the house?

**Charles:** I stayed ... they had a ... it was an apartment house [inaudible 00:19:53] flats. I was like in the middle, no windows or nothing, just a place to sleep and I was happy.

**Edward:** Had you gotten in touch with your brother.

**Charles:** Yeah, I had known my brother but he wasn’t married then and he lived some other place, you know. But I don’t know, I didn’t follow him around too much. I want to be on my own.

**Edward:** When the ship came into New York Harbor and your cousin and yourself went to Ellis Island, what happened there?

**Charles:** Well, over there, I see I had to have $25 to show the board, board of directors whatever they was, the people down in Ellis Island where they had the big long desk maybe 100 foot long. All the immigrants lined up and they asked them different things. He didn’t have to, he had a brother. His brother came and take him off the boat.

But I couldn’t depend on my brother because I know he was working, he couldn’t do it. My father didn’t have the money, the $25 so he asked his brother to lend him the $25 so I can show the inspector down there that I got mine then they let you off. Otherwise, you couldn’t get off the boat.

When I was here a week or so, I never touched that money. I took that money and sent it right home. I didn’t have nothing in my pocket to live on or nothing but I was on faith. I know I can get a loan or I would them the money back because I feel he borrowed the money and I didn’t want to feel bad. So I sent the money right back to him and everybody thought I was crazy.

They said, “Why do you want to do that [inaudible 00:21:57]?” I say to myself, I say, “I don’t care. “ He didn’t have anything and he was a poor man and I says, “I don’t want him to feel bad and have to do a lot of explaining to his brother because his brother wasn’t rich either but they had a few dollars. Probably that’s all they had.

**Edward:** Had an inspector actually asked to see the $25?

**Charles:** Oh, yes, you had to show him. You had to show the desk that you got it. Oh, yes, no if’s and ands, that’s the way...

**Edward:** Can you remember any other questions they asked you and what language?

**Charles:** Well, they have interpreters. You speak Yiddish and they had interpreter ... Yiddish and then explain to me what they asked and that’s how they go around. Then after that, they take you over to a room. The doctor look you over if you were all right, otherwise they keep you there. There was a hospital down there they put you in and keep you there till you’re in good shape.

They didn’t have no problem, no problem. They were very nice all around. They know immigrants. They know they can’t speak a word of English and had to go to an interpreter to explain everything.

**Edward:** Did you see some people who didn’t pass the medical test?

**Charles:** Well, I didn’t know, they don’t tell you. See, they don’t tell you what’s wrong or what. You go in there and if you don’t pass, they keep you there. You don’t see them no more. They had a place where they keep all these people.

**Edward:** Were you worried about not passing?

**Charles:** Oh, no, I wasn’t worried. I was in good shape- a carpenter is always in good shape. I mean, they do hard work and I wasn’t worrying about at all.

**Edward:** If we can go back a little bit.

**Charles:** Go ahead.

**Edward:** When you were leaving Austria-Hungary, I understand that you wore an interesting disguise. Could you tell us a little bit about what that was like getting out of the country?

**Charles:** As I told you, as you got to the end of the line, before they release you on your own, the agent, they say they gave you a [inaudible 00:24:39] and a face [inaudible 00:24:43] and that’s how they pass. Otherwise, you’ll never be able to leave the country at that age.

**Edward:** Were they doing that with other boys also?

**Charles:** I don’t know. I know my cousin and I did that. I don’t know what the ... there wasn’t too many young folks down there but I think it was more elderly people that went to the United States to see their children or something like that.

**Edward:** Did the border guards ask you any questions?

**Charles:** No, they don’t ask you nothing. Once you are off the agent, the police release you then they don’t ask you nothing at all.

**Edward:** The agent would speak to the policeman for you?

**Charles:** No, the agent had the [inaudible 00:25:28] but they got to come over way up to I don’t know where, but Lemberg or some other place, which they work through that. The agent wasn’t there at all. See otherwise, they’d probably lock up the agent.

**Edward:** That part when you get to the border, you’re travelling by yourself?

**Charles:** Yeah, you were by yourself. Nobody bother you, nobody ask you any question after you are on the boat.

**Edward:** But when you travelled to the boat, was it by train or by coach?

**Charles:** No, the train, the train goes up to the border and then they stop and then nobody gets off until the police come and question you. Of course, they all work together down there to release you with the agent.

**Edward:** Were you worried on the train when the police came on?

**Charles:** No, I wasn’t worried at all, [inaudible 00:26:31] took me off the train one time and so I know it was safe because when I went there, I didn’t do that what they do. I didn’t put no [inaudible 00:26:45] or something like that. Yeah, I didn’t know that but they know, this is a sign that it’s all right as far as I’m concerned that they’re going to take me off the train to go.

The train came in and the border was right there. People, they have weeks down there to before they get released. But I found after you’ve got pay if you want to give ... At that age, you’ve got to pay, you can’t get through.

**Edward:** Were you carrying money with you to pay?

**Charles:** I had that 25 ... no, no, no, I didn’t pay anybody. That was for the ticket. When you bought the ticket that was included. They guarantee you they’re going to take you ... they guarantee that to you because they know the agents over there. They work together I suppose.

**Edward:** Okay, I think I understand. On the boat trip over, you didn’t really eat any food?

**Charles:** I didn’t eat because I was sick from the day I got on the boat until I got off the boat.

**Edward:** People around you were sick?

**Charles:** Yeah, yeah, but they say if you eat [inaudible 00:28:16], you’ll be all right. You tasted a little stuff but I couldn’t get rid of the seasick.

**Edward:** What was it like seeing people from other countries?

**Charles:** Well, everybody ... some of them would speak Russian, some of them speak polish, some of them ... they speak different languages over there. Most of them were Jewish people on the boat.

**Edward:** Did you talk to any of them?

**Charles:** Well, to me, everybody is a little afraid to say anything but we would talk to people. Yeah, there were a lot of people we talked to. When we come on the deck, we would talk to people from different places, in [inaudible 00:29:02] or Poland or some other place, Russia. Well, the Russian people were sitting by themselves. But they spoke to is the Austrian people.

**Edward:** What did you take with you when you lived at home?

**Charles:** What did I took with me?

**Edward:** Right, what were you travelling with?

**Charles:** Nothing, just ... you didn’t have much clothes so you ... I think I had just an overcoat and I don’t think I had much more. No, just the one suit that I had I was wearing and some underwear or something. I had overcoat that I was wearing.

**Edward:** Your family didn’t give you anything else to take with you? Did you travel with any food?

**Charles:** They didn’t ... no, no, you didn’t travel with any food at all. You board on a train. They had this ... they were selling on the train sandwiches, stuff like that, so you bought it on the train. I don’t remember taking anything from home.

**Edward:** This is the end of side one of tape one.

This is side two of tape one. Mr. Lehrer, can you tell us anything else about when you arrived in New York in Ellis Island? Did anybody meet you at the island?

**Charles:** No, nobody. I just sat there. A boy came over to me, he asked me where I got to go and I told him where I’m going to go.

**Edward:** How did you know where to go?

**Charles:** Well, I told them. They look up the name. They looked it up, American boys. They looked it up and...

**Edward:** What name was it that you were giving them?

**Charles:** I gave them to go on to my cousin, which was here a long time and they took me down there. I don’t know how much I gave them at that time, maybe a dollar or something like that.

**Edward:** When you were on Ellis Island, there was the medical examination and then they asked you some questions. Did you have any food while you were on the island?

**Charles:** Yeah, while I was on the island, no. I didn’t eat nothing until I get off the island. Then I start to feel alright, I wasn’t dizzy, I wasn’t...

**Edward:** You weren’t feeling well when you were on the island?

**Charles:** No, on the island, I was all right. Once you get off the boat, I was all right. No more...

**Edward:** After the boat pulled into New York Harbor, how did you get to Ellis Island?

**Charles:** Well, they had the boat. The boat takes you right to Ellis Island. From there, you get a ferry to go to ... south ferry after they release you. But the boat goes in to ... went into Ellis Island and all the immigrants, everybody gets off there. Then over there, they get examined. They ask you whatever question they got to ask you.

**Edward:** What did the island look like when you were getting off the boat?

**Charles:** It wasn’t like a hospital or something like that. Ellis Island, I mean, the building on Ellis Island where the immigrants gets off was a nice high ceiling. They had a long desk, maybe 100-foot long. Not a desk but it was like a counter, like the old fashion. You stand up and write. You don’t sit down on a stool or stuff like that. But everybody was lined up on that desk and different types of questions**.**

**Edward:** How did you know what line to go stand on?

**Charles:** They tell you. They will tell you what to do. I didn’t know.

**Edward:** Were there people from other boats on Ellis Island that day?

**Charles:** I think they could only take one boat at a time because they haven’t got that much space for all the immigrants coming out a boat, one boat at a time.

**Edward:** Your father and stepmother who you had left in Austria-Hungary, did you communicate with them after you got to the United States?

**Charles:** Oh, yeah, I wrote to them. Of course no telephone that time to call. Then I couldn’t afford it to call [inaudible 00:34:12].

**Edward:** What did you tell them about the United States? How did it compare with what you had expected?

**Charles:** Well, I really was happy when I got there right away because everything was so free. Food was free, plenty and no problem. I liked it. Right away, I liked the United States. People were different than over there. Over there [inaudible 00:34:52] to live on. [Inaudible 00:35:03] you get one a week, there you’re lucky.

**Edward:** Did you go back to your home country?

**Charles:** Yes, I went back in 1931. I was in business for myself then after a while. I worked for somebody then I went in business but I didn’t know anything else but carpenter work. But as you go along, you learn a lot about other so I start to do my own contracting business. But I went back that time. My father wouldn’t let me go. My daughter was with me and my wife. Of course, my wife passed away 10 years ago. My daughter is still alive.

My daughter was about seven years that time when I went back to see the old people. The first night I stayed in my father’s house. The rainwater come right in to the back. So I went out the next day, I got some carpenters over there and took off the whole roof and the beams, they were all rotten and everything. I put a new roof, new rafters, new metal covering.

I was there for about three weeks and then I went back. We went back, we stopped over in Vienna and we stayed there, I don’t know, a week or so. I took around $3,000 with me and I practically spent it all when I got home. When I got home, oh yeah, we built the whole roof and put a porch in the front of the house. We circled the outside.

**Edward:** This was the house you had been living in as a boy?

**Charles:** Yeah, as a boy. I wanted to put electric in there, he wouldn’t let me. There weren’t no electric in that ... to pay the bill, [inaudible 00:37:33]. So well, we didn’t put it in, he didn’t want it. I couldn’t force him, that’s what he want. We got ... the funny part of it, the first day, all the people who found out I came from the United States, one come along with one shoe. He hadn’t got no money for the other shoe, a woman.

Then we had a woman come along, she wants to get a horse and she can’t afford to buy. I had to give a little money to buy the horse. A lot of people come down from different little towns, poor people. We gave each one 10 cents or something, it was a lot of money for them. But ... and of course the friends that knew from before came over and stuff like that.

When I come back, we come back here and Europe and [inaudible 00:38:40]. We went down Europe, we come back [inaudible 00:38:43]. We come back, the agent, the immigration agent says to me, “Charlie, your bank is broke.” It’s a good thing I took the money out. I wouldn’t have any money anymore there. So it did go broke, I lived in Long Beach that time.

**Edward:** And the bank had collapsed?

**Charles:** Collapsed, they didn’t pay nobody, they didn’t have any money. But I was trying to see my father for a long time and I was pretty busy that time during the depression. A fellow offered me to pay the whole trip if I do his job. I says, “I can’t do that job for you because I’ve disappointed my father three times already. That I couldn’t leave other people [inaudible 00:39:43] didn’t took his job and I went, come here and see my father. It was about 22 years the first time I saw him.

**Edward:** Then you went back to the United States and you didn’t return again.

**Charles:** Oh, no, I didn’t return, I couldn’t. My wife was crying. The other time we went, she had trouble with her arm. We went to different doctors. Nobody knew what to do about it. They did this and [inaudible 00:40:19] from her back.

When we come back to the United States, her sister says, “Go to the Bellevue Hospital, they’ll give you an injection and everything,” and they did. The Bellevue, they gave her an injection and that sickness disappeared.

**Edward:** Okay, thank you very much Mr. Lehrer.

**Charles:** Well, I did all I can, I’ll be honest about it. I gave you everything I know.

**Edward:** Right, thank you very much.

**Charles:** You’re welcome. Okay, I’ll let you people talk.

**Edward:** This is the end of side two of interview number 24 with Mr. Charles Lehrer.