

# **The Complete Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview Collection**

## **Description of Individual Interview Series that Comprise the Ellis Island Oral History Project Interview Collection**

By Paul Sigrist and Janet Levine, Ph.D.

**EI SERIES (Ellis Island Series, 6/21/1990 to present [(i.e. 6/2005))]:** This on-going series of nearly 1400 interviews encompasses all those interviews conducted by the in-house staff since the initial use of the permanent recording studio in the museum and the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in September of 1990. Interviews in the EI Series altered the "immigration experience only" format of the prior interviews to a more all encompassing "life narrative" format. This interview series is distinguished by the first interviewees located and interviewed using the questionnaire, called the Oral History Form (EF Form). This series is also distinguished by the superior sound quality of the recorded interviews due to the permanent recording studio in the museum as well as the portable digital recorders first used in November of 1990. Janet Levine and Paul Sigrist conduct most of these interviews, with Brian Feeney, Kevin Daley and Peter Hom as recording engineers. Various student interns and volunteers over the years have conducted and recorded the remaining interviews, both on and off site. The majority of these interviews have been conducted in the museum recording studio or in locations in New England, New York State, the metropolitan New York City area, New Jersey and Florida. The remainder of the interviews has been conducted in various other locations, including the West Coast and Mid West regions. All EI series interviews are numbered in strict chronological sequence. This series contains the largest number of interviews, comprising over two-thirds of the total number of interviews in the Ellis Island Oral History Project Collection. The greatest contribution made by the EI series interviews is the extensive information about the interviewee's life before and after the immigration experience, offering a complete picture of why a person leaves his/her native land and what the adaptation process entails in the new country. During the period of the EI Series interviews, the first computer data base was installed in the Oral History Library in the museum (1996). Paid for by the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation, the computer system offers the public easy access to audio recordings and transcripts for 1200 interviews from the EI, KM, DP, KECK and NPS interview series. All audio recordings for the EI Series interviews are available but transcripts do not exist for some interviews.

Paul Sigrist headed the program from 1989 – 1999. From 1991 on Janet Levine was the only oral historian and responsible for day-to-day activities. Kevin Daley was the museum technician responsible for audio recording and duplication. Peter Hom was initially an intern and then, in 1990 a Park Service museum technician working on the audio recordings. His position was eliminated in 1997 and since then Kevin Daley has worked on the recording of some interviews and on tape duplication.

**KM SERIES (Kate Moore Series, 6/2/1993 through 7/31/1994):** This interview series, done on two separate contracts (West Coast and mid West), is comprised of 79 interviews conducted by Kate Moore, faculty member in the Department of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki in Finland. These contracts were paid for by the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation.

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Ms. Moore conducted interviews in Michigan, Ohio, California, Nevada, Illinois, Washington State, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Pennsylvania. Most interviews were conducted with people for whom there existed a completed Oral History Form, with the exception of the Washington State and Wyoming interviewees. All KM interviews follow a "life narrative" format similar to the EI Series. Ms. Moore was in Northridge CA to conduct interviews when the 1994 earthquake hit the region. All KM Series interviews are numbered in strict chronological sequence. The greatest contribution made by the KM Series is the addition of several interviews conducted with people from Finland, previous a country poorly represented in the collection. Audio recordings are available but several transcripts were not provided by the contractor; and currently do not exist.

### **DP SERIES (Nancy Dallett/Andrew Phillips Series, 3/22/1989 through 11/17/1989):**

This series contains 60 interviews conducted by contracted interviewers Nancy Dallett and Andrew Phillips in various mid West and West Coast locations. The contract was paid for by the National Park Service. Interviews were done in Illinois, California, Washington State, Colorado, Wisconsin and Arizona. Ms. Dallett had previously been an interviewer for the KECK Interview Series. Andrew Phillips had conducted three interviews for the Oral History Project in 1987 and early 1988. In general, these interviews follow an "immigration experience only" format similar to the KECK Series interviews. All DP Series interviews are numbered in strict chronological sequence. Audio recordings and transcripts exist for all interviews in this series.

**TFH SERIES (Treasures From Home Series, 1989):** These 9 interviews, conducted by Murray Hill Enterprises during the final states of exhibit design and installation for the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, were conducted to provide information about artifacts displayed in the family cases in the "Treasures From Home" gallery on the third floor of the museum. Each case was planned to contain artifacts donated by specific families. The artifact donor was contacted and interviewed about the objects and related family information. Then a transcript was produced to aid in locating information for extraction to create an audio loop tape for each exhibition case. The transcripts, created as finding tools for information, were not intended to be accurate representations of the interviews. These interviews follow no discernible format beyond extracting artifact information, but many contain excellent information. The final sound loop can be heard in the "Treasures From Home" exhibit and transcripts exist for all the interviews.

**GPI SERIES (Guggenheim Productions Incorporated Series, 9/9/1985 through 11/15/1987):** This series consists of 27 interviews, each presumably conducted by Charles Guggenheim (the interviewer is only occasionally identified) for the purpose of extracting pertinent audio quotations with which to construct a narrative voice-over for

his documentary film, "Island of Hope, Island of Tears." The completed 60 minute film was edited to a 27 minute version which focused exclusively on the immigration

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experience and would eventually be shown daily at the museum. These interviews tend to follow the "immigration experience only" format, the interviews often persistent at getting a useable audio quote from his interviewee. Several of the interviewees had initially been interviewed for the KECK Series. The transcripts were used in a way similar to the Treasures From Home transcripts—to facilitate the locating of information for extraction to use as audio quotations. Transcripts retain Guggenheim's original marks isolating potential audio quotes by subject matter. These interviews are not numbered in chronological sequence. While no audio recordings are available, transcripts exist for all the interviews in this series.

**KECK SERIES (Allee, King, Rosen and Fleming Incorporated Series, 1/16/1985 through 6/26/1986):** These 200 interviews were intended to provide suitable audio quotations to supplement various exhibits throughout the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Conducted by an urban planning firm specifically for this purpose, the contract was paid for by the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Foundation. Using advertisements in periodicals and magazines, potential interviewees (as well as potential donors of artifacts) were located and interviewed in the greater New York City area, New York State, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Florida, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Illinois and California. These interviews stick closely to the "immigration experience only" format, with little consistent attention given to other aspects of the interviewee's life. Several KECK interviewees were later re-interviewed by Charles Guggenheim for his documentary film "Island of Hope, Island of Tears." KECK interviewer Nancy Dallett went on to conduct her own set of interviews together with Andrew Phillips on contract in 1989. KECK transcriber Nancy Vega went on to transcribe interviews for the DP series (1989) and the EI series (Ms. Vega began in 1992). The greatest contribution made by the KECK interviews is the specific information about what happened at Ellis Island; interviewees were often chosen based on their extended detentions on the island and the depth of information they were able to relay in letters about being detained. Because the KECK interviews were conducted simultaneously by several interviewers in different geographical locations, the interviews were not numbered in strict chronological order. Audio recordings and transcripts exist for all interviews in this series.

**MZ SERIES (Joan Morrison/Charlotte Zabusky Series, 1974-1978):** This interview series consists of 130 interviews conducted by Ms. Morrison and Ms. Zabusky for use in their ground breaking oral history book **The American Mosaic**, which incorporated immigration narratives derived from these interviews. The authors donated the original transcripts and a few recordings to the Ellis Island Oral History Project in 1991. These interviews encompass a broad selection of different types of immigrants, including people who recently entered the country. In general the interviews deal very little with the

interviewee's life prior to the immigration experience, but often include information about the adaptation to the United States. The transcripts are of variable quality, often difficult to read and sometimes leaving out entire segments of the interviews.

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Handwritten notes from the transcriber to the authors occasionally appear. The most frequently read interview in this series is MZ-1, conducted with a man who was a Russian Cossack and therefore a tremendous contrast to the large number of interviews in the collected conducted with people (mostly Jews and some Protestants) who were persecuted by the Cossacks. As previously mentioned, all interviews exist as transcripts with only a few available recordings.

**AO SERIES (All Other Series, beginning circa 1975):** This group of 68 interviews is a catch-all collection of material which does not fall into any of the various organized sets of interviews. Most of these were produced as homemade tapes with family members interviewing other family members and donated to the Ellis Island Oral History Project over a period of many years. Other types of tapes in this series include radio broadcasts using selections from Project interviews, commercially prepared tapes featuring Project interviewees, music associated with interviewees or immigration in general, additional interviews conducted by family members with Project interviewees and various recorded events. Needless to say, the overall quality varies greatly in terms of content, tape and sound. The present staff as attempted to secure as many signed release forms for this material as possible, although this has not always been possible. Because interviews were often conducted many years prior to tape donation, the tapes are not numbered in a chronological sequence. Instead, they have been numbered as they have been located or donated. Despite the varying quality of the recordings, many contain worthwhile information and deserve to be more carefully examined in the future. All AO Series interviews exist as audio recordings with only one available transcript.

It should be noted that a small number of video tapes are also available; interviewees filmed by Project staff at Ellis Island or commercially prepared tape of various media projects using Project interviewees. At present, all interviewees on video tape are from the EI Series interviews.

**NPS SERIES (National Park Service Series, 8/15/1973 through 5/11/1988):** This series is made up of 161 interviews conducted by National Park Service staff (Statue of Liberty National Monument) or paid for with NPS money prior to the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. The bulk of these interviews reflect the work of Margo Nash, who was the first person hired to head up the Ellis Island Oral History Project in the summer of 1973. Between August 1973 and January 1976, Ms. Nash conducted the core interviews of the NPS Series, interviewing all types of immigrants (not just those processed at Ellis Island), famous people who had resettled in the United States and former employees. After Ms. Nash left the position, interviewing continued sporadically between 1976 and 1985. Harvey Dixon and Amelia Green were the primary interviewers at this time, with occasional participation by other STLI staff members. Often the interviews during this period were conducted with visitors who had been immigrants while touring the abandoned Ellis Island buildings or in the staff offices at the Statue of Liberty directly after a tour. Beginning in 1986, Marcy Cohen took over the Oral History Project, organizing the in-coming KECK interviews (which had begun on contract in 1985) as well as conducting a couple of interviews herself. Andrew Phillips, not a STLI staff member, was hired with National Park Service money to conduct 3 interviews in

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1987 and early 1988 (he would later be contracted for the DP interviews with Nancy Dallett in 1989) and STLI staff member Brian Feeney conducted 4 interviews during an off site interviewing trip to Cleveland, Ohio in May, 1988. For the most part, the majority of the NPS Series interviews were forgotten after being overshadowed in 1986 but the addition of the well organized and documented KECK Series interviews and were not resurrected until the mid 1990's. The NPS interviews have undergone several numbering changes over the years and were not assigned chronologically consecutive numbers until 1994, when all NPS Series release forms, original tapes, interviewee information and existing transcripts were finally located and organized to identify missing material. The NPS interviews can be characterized by shorted running times, adherence to the "immigration experience only" format and extremely variable sound quality (many of them poorly recorded). With the exception of Ms. Nash, most of the interviewers are inexperienced. The most important contribution made by the NPS Series is the large number of interviews conducted with former Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty employees. At present, all known interviews are available as audio recordings and transcripts.