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Author

Oral History Project, Angel Island

Publication Date

2004-12-07

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December 7, 2004

Interview: Alice Steiner

Poonam: I'd like to hear your story first. So let's begin with your life before immigration. Would you like to tell me about your life before you came to America?

Alice: Well, I was an only child. I guess I was a little spoiled. I went to school like most children. I had a very comfortable life. Then of course it all started. My father left to go to San Domingo and my mother and I stayed and eventually we were able to come to the United States. By that time the war had broken out and we were not allowed to go to Italy because that was an Axis country...but you know all these things...you know the history.

Poonam: So you had to go somewhere else before coming to America?

Alice: Ships were not allowed to land because they belonged to the Axis so we had to go to Russia. We went on the Siberian Express...it was a very tedious journey but I was so glad to get out of there.

Poonam: Can you describe the journey a little bit?

Alice: Not really, we were in a train for ten days I guess.

Poonam: Ten days...?

Alice: Uh huh. Once we stopped in Habin but all these things make a different impression when you travel and when you are without a country. You know that don't you?

Poonam: Yes, it's different when you travel.

Alice: But you have your parents to fall back on.

Poonam: Were you traveling alone?

Alice: With my mother. We had absolutely no money. We were allowed to take three dollars each...

Poonam: Three dollars...?

Alice: Yes, and we were allowed a suitcase, a certain size and there were certain things we weren't allowed to take...weren't allowed to take pictures...photos...because we went to Russia and they thought we were spies...so we brought all the wrong things!

[We both laugh]

Poonam: What did you bring, if I may ask?

Alice: Just household things...we could have done with very little and we left things we could have used...of course we were not allowed to take any jewelry out...just our three dollars...and then we went to Japan where we took a ship. It was a Japanese ship and it was horrible. They gave us fish at every meal and I was seasick every minute and I lost twenty pounds in one month. And we had a wonderful break in Hawaii because my mother had a cousin there and they came to the ship...we weren't allowed to get off the ship. They came to the ship and brought us fruit, bananas and all kinds of things. And then when the ship started to move my cousin gave my mother an envelope...

Poonam: An envelope...?

Alice: Yes, and there were five dollars in there. Now they had just come to this country too, with two kids and they couldn't afford these five dollars, but to us it was a fortune! If we have six dollars between the two of us and you get five dollars you double your money, so that was great!

Poonam: That was very generous of them.

Alice: Very generous.

Poonam: And how many days were you able to stay in Hawaii with them?

Alice: We didn't. We weren't allowed to get off the boat.

Poonam: Oh, I see! So they just came to see you.

Alice: They came to see us. [...] Anyway eventually we got to Angel Island and they were very nice. There were women working there. I don't know if they were volunteers or if they were paid people but they were very nice.

Poonam: They were nice to you?

Alice: Very nice...

Poonam: The officials who were helping?

Alice: I guess they were officials. They were shocked because all my clothes hung on me [laughs] after I lost twenty pounds...so they saw to it that I ate and I didn't like anything. I don't drink milk and every breakfast I got oatmeal with milk. They tried to tell me I had to eat. Absolutely horrible. I don't know what I eventually ate, but I didn't eat that oatmeal. [pause] That's all I remember. We were there for a week because we were going to move to Milwaukee. Finally they let us out ... we needed a ticket to Milwaukee because our sponsor lived in Milwaukee and we didn't have money to buy the ticket...so eventually he sent us the money for the ticket and we were released from Angel Island which was really a very nice place except for the milk! [...] That's all I know. It's terrible. I should remember...But I know they were extremely kind. Looking back I think they were volunteers...or maybe they weren't...

Poonam: So you didn't have to go through any kind of interrogation process? They didn't ask you questions like "why are you here?" and things like that?

Alice: If they did I don't remember...so it was nothing traumatic, it was anything but.

Poonam: So it was nothing traumatic? They were kind.

Alice: No, they were very kind... very sweet.

Poonam: Because Angel Island has a history of being an interrogation place for Chinese immigrants who were coming at that time and they had to go through some very rigorous kinds of interrogation and had a different experience. But for you it was good ...kind and friendly.

Alice: I don't remember either ways so I'm sure it was nothing traumatic. They just saw a seventeen year old...here they say a seventeen year old is a grown up but I wasn't... I was a child ... you probably were too...

Poonam: Exactly... I mean ... before you're married you're with your parents and you are a child ... that's how it was when I was growing up.

Alice: Yes, yes, just about the same. Did you go to school?

Poonam: I? I went to school in India ... school and college but when I came here I had to start everything over again.

Alice: Different language?

Poonam: Well not in India because you know we had British rule so I grew up speaking English...I went to a British school in India ... [laughs]...

Alice: Oh I see, so it was easy for you?

Poonam: It was easier for me language wise but when I had to go to college here I had to start everything over again. But I'd like to hear more about your story...[laughs]

Alice: But you interest me more...[laughs]

Poonam: I'll tell you my story after I shut off the tape...[laughs]

Alice: Eventually we took the train which was beautiful...I had never seen a train like that because they aren't as luxurious in Austria as they are here...at least not at that time...I don't know how they are now. I was in Budapest last year. I took the train and it was pretty much the way it was before...but I enjoyed the train ride...it was very nice.

Poonam: So then you took a train from San Francisco to Milwaukee where your sponsor was.

Alice: Yes.

Poonam: So, was that the procedure; that someone in America had to sponsor you to leave your country?

Alice: Yes. Yes, so we wouldn't become public charges.

Poonam: I see.

Alice: So we never got any money. Which wasn't easy because my mother never had a job. Nothing. She had never worked.

Poonam: Then how did you ... survive?

Alice: Our sponsor got me job in a bakery. So I worked in a bakery. It was very nice. I was a salesgirl. But it paid very little. They took advantage of me. But it was very nice...very pleasant and my mother got a job as a housekeeper which was not the easiest but after three days these people found out that she could sew and they had four girls and they said never mind the housekeeping ... here's the sewing machine...you sew [laughs]. So that was alright.

Poonam: She liked that better probably because she liked sewing and probably did a very good job at it?

Alice: So that was it. Eventually I got a better job. Eventually I worked in a factory. And then I had a very nice job in an office...that was a paper they made bags and containers for k-rations. You don't know what k-rations are?

Poonam: No.

Alice: That's what the fighting soldiers get ... everything is compressed so they can carry it.

Poonam: Oh! ...*care* rations...I see...I 'm not familiar with that term.

Alice: K-rations. Write down K and rations. So we made that and we made containers... we made wrappers for candy bars and I worked in the office and I learned how to keep book which was very nice and then I got married and then I moved away from Milwaukee and my husband had just come back from the war he went back to school. He went to Ann Arbor...the University...

Poonam: In Michigan...?

Alice: We stayed there a year and a half and I worked and I found a job and worked which was not the most pleasant job...

Poonam: What did you do there?

Alice: Office work ... but the people were not the friendliest. Then when he graduated we moved to Detroit and I had a desk job and we tried to find an apartment but we couldn't find an

apartment so we bought a house believe it or not. Five hundred dollars down...the house was 8200 dollars...a brand new one...two bedrooms, living room, dining room, a kitchen, a big basement, a big attic...I wonder how much it sells now? It was not a very good neighborhood. And then my brother-in-law became a doctor and he went to his internship in Kaiser hospital. You know Kaiser hospital?

Poonam: Yes, I know Kaiser hospital.

Alice: In Oakland. So we went to see him and I just loved Oakland and my husband went out to get a job the very next day [laughs]. And then we moved and they waited for us because we had a house to sell. In the meantime we had a baby.

Poonam: Is that your daughter Nora who I spoke to before ...

Alice: Oh no, that's my son Peter. She's the youngest. He's the oldest. She was born in Oakland. My other daughter was born in Oakland also. We bought a house in Oakland ...a very nice house for 18250 dollars. Would you like to buy it for \$80000? [we both laugh]. I don't think I'm going to lose any money...

Poonam: Did you say 18 thousand or 80?

Alice: 18

Poonam: one eight. Wow.

Alice: I still have it.

Poonam: Wow that's amazing.

Alice: I lived there for fifty one...fifty three years. Then I came here. My daughter Nora is my third child. I have another daughter she's a musician...she's a violinist, so is her husband. She has two girls they play the violin too...very well. They don't eat much but they play the violin [we both laugh]. But that's alright. And Nora...have you met Nora or just talked to her on the phone?

Poonam: I just talked to her on the phone.

Alice: She's my youngest and she went to college. Have you heard of Carlton College?

Poonam: Carlton College...? No, I haven't. I'm not familiar with the mid-West.

Alice: In Minnesota. It's a small college. It's quite well known. That's what she wanted to do and then she graduated in biology and then she went to the Peace Corps. She was in the Peace Corps for three years and then she decided to go to medical school and she was accepted. She applied to a lot of places...in the meantime she had a boyfriend and she wanted to stay around here so she went to Davis and he found himself a job. Then she didn't finish medical school...she went three years and then she had a baby and she was supposed to start her rotations

... you know how they do that? ... and she couldn't do it with the baby. She couldn't leave him alone.

Poonam: Umm. It's hard.

Alice: She thought her husband could work out something...that he could stay... but he couldn't. So she quit. Now she writes medical articles. She's a *ghost* writer. She's the ghost for quite a few very prominent doctors! [we both laugh] And of course she has the background and she learns a lot! Because she's been out of school for fifteen years but she learns a lot. She keeps absolutely up to date.

Poonam: Wonderful.

Alice: And getting paid for it. So...such is my story.

Poonam: Well, you have a very interesting story.

Alice: Thank you.

Poonam: I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about your growing up time in Austria and the conditions there that made you leave. And did you think that you were going to come straight to America or...

Alice: I didn't think anything because my mother never wanted to leave. She was born in Vienna, her mother was born in Vienna, her father was born on the outskirts there. They considered themselves Austrians...they thought Hitler would go away. He didn't.

Poonam: He didn't.

Alice: So, such were the circumstances. We had to leave. It wasn't easy because we didn't have relatives anywhere. They were all in Austria. Same boat.

Poonam: It's hard when you feel you are part of a certain place and that place is your *home* and then to be forced out...

Alice: Yes, especially if you are a teenager because you want to be like everybody else...you know that don't you?

Poonam: Yes... so then it must have been very traumatic for you to leave.

Alice: Yes, it was. It was...But then later I was so glad to be out. Especially in Milwaukee they were so nice to me...wherever I was people were exceedingly kind. I was lucky all along, I am lucky here too. People are very nice here. Have you ever been here before?

Poonam: No, this is my first time.

Alice: It's very nice. I've only been here three months....and Nora lives around the corner.

Poonam: That's nice, that she lives close by.

Alice: Yes. You know the green belt? You cross the green belt and she's right there. It's just three minutes...its easier to walk than to take the car because you have to go around. Where do you live?

Poonam: I live in South Davis. It's also nice...backs up to the green belt. I like that about Davis how they have a green belt in every neighborhood...lots of open space...

Alice:so they must have built it new...its wonderful because my grandchildren ride their bikes to school always on the green belt.

Poonam: Can I ask you a little bit about Angel Island? I know you said that your experience was good and that you were treated well. Do you remember anything about the people around you...who you were with...?

Alice: The people who came on the same transport as we did, they were there. But they were all older and then there was a young girl who was highly pregnant and she was due any minute and her husband picked her up. So that was the end. But of course I lost count. It didn't mean a thing.

Poonam: So they had all left with you from Austria or were they already on the train from different places...?

Alice: No they were all from the same time. It was regular transport.

Poonam: Okay... So, there was a well organized transportation system to take immigrants out of Austria into America across the Siberian railroad?

Alice: Yes, yes.

Poonam: Did you have to go through any kind of procedures...did you have to apply for paperwork to leave...did you have to go through some kind of immigration process?

Alice: Oh, yes. But I had nothing to do with it.

Poonam: Your mother must have taken care of those things because you were only a young girl. It was not your responsibility.

Alice: Yes, yes. I couldn't have.....I wish I could have taken pictures. As a matter of fact Nora has one picture of when we arrived. If you would like to go to her house and take a look...?

Poonam: I would love to. In fact we were going to request you for a photograph to keep with our record of your story, so if you allow me to have a photograph which I can copy and give back to her we would really appreciate that very much.

Alice: Yes, she lives just around the corner.

Poonam: Okay, I'll give her a call and ask her about that.

Alice: Do you have a radio?

Poonam: A radio? A telephone? I have one in my car; I can go and bring it.

Alice: No, I can use the phone here.

Poonam: I just didn't bring it in with me because I didn't want it to ring while we were talking.

Alice: Of course.

Poonam: So your first impressions of landing in America were good ones...? Happy ones...?

Alice: We landed in San Francisco and they had a push-cart there with grapes. They were 5 cents a pound! I couldn't believe it....Not that I especially liked grapes but there were so many grapes for 5 cents a pound and my mother said yes, we can spend 5 cents and we bought grapes. In fact, I don't know where we stayed here. I think the Hyatt or the tourist center, somebody put us up, some hotel and there we had to buy our own meals. But, I remember we went down to the cafeteria and had to buy breakfast and I didn't know what to buy for breakfast and it was all so expensive... and then at the bottom I saw "hamburger 5 cents". I had no idea what a hamburger was [laughs] so I ordered a hamburger. Funny!

Poonam: [shares laughter] Funny. I had never heard of hamburger either when I came to America.

Alice: I knew what hamburger was but its not what they call it here. Everybody has that because it's cheap.

Poonam: Was there something in particular that you missed about your home...I know you have explained that you had quite a good life, but was there something in particular that you missed about your home, about having left Vienna...

Alice: A great part of my family who were older and of course who all died in the holocaust. I missed them. And I missed the theater. Because I used to go quite often, but I go quite often here too, so ... nothing really. No. But I miss school because I never went to school after fifteen.

Poonam: Because you had to start working after coming to America?

Alice: No, because I had to stop going to school in Vienna too. After Hitler came I wasn't allowed to go to school.

Poonam: Could you tell me a little more about that? Once he came he just said you weren't allowed to go to school anymore?

Alice: That's right.

Poonam: Could you speak about that because I'd like to know more about your experiences.

Alice: My father had a very nice office and he lost that. They just took it away from him. And then he left. It was sad because my mother was not prepared for life. She was a housewife. They went out quite a lot. She too liked to go to the theater. So they went out a lot and I was left with my grandmother and they lived in the same house in the apartment downstairs. I had a comfortable life for a child. And I was a good student. I didn't like not going to school. But, you know that's the way it is. So I had no schooling what so ever. [...] Have you ever seen so many Christmas decorations?

Poonam: In the malls here.

Alice: In Here. So many music boxes...since the day after Thanksgiving!

Poonam: Yes, it looks quite cheerful.

Alice: But I'm getting tired of the music.

Poonam: Do they play the same music over and over?

Alice: Christmas songs.

Poonam: Maybe we can request them to give you a little change.

Alice: No it's alright. Yesterday, we had a very nice reception. They invited the Bach society. Have you ever heard of that?

Poonam: Yes I have heard of that.

Alice: Only folk music which I'm not too fond of but anyway it's a long story...I went to the reception and it was very nice. I get out quite a bit.

Poonam: That's nice. Does Nora come and take you or do they have transportation available.

Alice: They have transportation and Nora takes me. She's a good daughter. She found this place for me.

Poonam: It looks like a very nice place.

Alice: It's easy to find, she lives round the corner! Now tell me about yourself.

Poonam: Well, I hope I'm not tiring you.

Alice: No you're not.

Poonam: Well, I'm going to turn off the tape when I tell you stories about myself.

