

EI-1245

SYLVIA [SABRINA] ABRAHAM [SHRITSKY] SCHREIBMAN

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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RUSSIA, 1923

AGE: 6

SHIP: POLOMINA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is May 30th, the year 2002 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Sylvia Schreibman, who came here as Sabina Sabritsky [PH] from Russia in 1923 when she was six years of age. She came on the Polonia [PH] and I want to mention that Mrs.—Mrs. Schreibman's brother, Sy Abrams, is in our interview collection and will be re-interviewed again today, so that the family is represented by two of its members. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if you would start, please, by saying your name as it would have appeared on the ship's manifest when you came over.

SCHREIBMAN: Sabina Spritsky [PH].

LEVINE: Okay. And where in Russia were you born?

SCHREIBMAN: Elisivagrad [PH].

LEVINE: Do you know the—could you possibly spell it?

SCHREIBMAN: Elisivagrad. No, I can't spell it. [laughter]

LEVINE: S—just say it slowly again.

SCHREIBMAN: Elisivagrad.

LEVINE: Elsivagrad [PH].

SCHREIBMAN: Sort of named after Queen Elizabeth. Elisivagrad.

LEVINE: Okay. And were you in Elsivagrad up until you left?

SCHREIBMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you have memories of—

SCHREIBMAN: Very few, very few. About arriving here and being on the ship and having fun on the ship, just running up and down the steps. I don't [chuckles] see anything else but stairs. I don't see people [chuckles] in my mind. I just see myself and another little boy and my brother. And then I do remember being examined by the doctor here. My eyes were red so we had to—we couldn't leave when my uncle came to pick us up. We had to stay here for a week or so till it cleared up, and it wasn't anything dangerous, I guess, or anything that would be carried over to the country.

LEVINE: Were you put in the hospital here, do you remember?

SCHREIBMAN: I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: I don't know if it was the hospital. No, I think it was just medication that they gave us. And what else—I—I really don't remember anything about this place too much, other than there was a lot of people and that particular incident and the incident on a ship when I came across the ocean with a friend of the family's. And I had a little doll and he got angry at me so he threw the doll out, an—and that was the end of my life. [laughs] And that was the tremendous—that was traumatic. And then we went to—what happened after that? Well, when we got better we all left and we went to Bayonne, New Jersey where we stayed with my uncle. And then he adopted us and a lot of the family came to visit and to look at the greenhorns that were here. And—

LEVINE: Do you remember that? Being considered a greenhorn?

SCHREIBMAN: Yeah, big party and everybody had presents of some kind. I don't recall what they are. They got me another little doll and a carriage so that I would have that instead of the other. And I insisted it wasn't the same one. They [chuckles] said they couldn't get the same one. And then—

LEVINE: Do you remember that doll?

SCHREIBMAN: —our name was changed by the people that came to the house. They said, "You don't use the Russian name in America. You use English name, which would be Sylvia." That's how they—Sylvia came about. And the—of course, the last name was never used. Abraham was used right away. And we didn't speak Russian too much. I think we spoke Yiddish—

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: —in the family until I went to school.

LEVINE: Well, just to backtrack. Do you have any memories of life in Russia?

SCHREIBMAN: Oh, that's a big story. I don't think I want to go into it. It's all poverty.

LEVINE: Oh.

SCHREIBMAN: It's all poverty and famine. And it's where my—I think Sy must have given—my brother must have given that history.

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: I really can't add to that history. He knows what happened and so on.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. And how about the doll? Do you remember when you got that doll that—that got thrown overboard?

SCHREIBMAN: I think I must have gotten it when I was in another town with an uncle before we went to America. We had to board somewhere else and I think he might have gotten it for me. And the man that we came across with was his wife's brother. They were coming to America so he kept his eye on us. We—four of us that came across.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: And back home, two of them died. Yeah, two of them died, and my parents during the famine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: During the poverty that was so—going on at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you—so you traveled with three other siblings.

SCHREIBMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: Uh-hmm. I don't remember too much about them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: What they were doing on the boat—

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: —and so on. I don't know how they took it.

LEVINE: Okay. And so then you went to your uncle in Bayonne, New Jersey. And then did you—do you remember those first impressions of this country? Do you remember anything that struck you right off as—

SCHREIBMAN: If I do, it's only what they said. I don't actually. I just know we got into a two-family house and everything was, of course, different. We had to get used to life in America and we didn't know what a lot of the items were, or we wouldn't eat a lot of the foods that were handed to us because we didn't know about them. We didn't know what they were. And we thought that salad was grass so we wouldn't touch that. That's about—anything much more.

LEVINE: How about the language? How was learning English for you?

SCHREIBMAN: I learned it in school, I guess, as soon as I started school.

LEVINE: So it wasn't—it did—it seemed like it—it happened quickly or—

SCHREIBMAN: I have no idea, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: It just sort of falls into place.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Now, your uncle and your aunt, were—were they—were they—

SCHREIBMAN: They were my mother's sister.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So—and they—did they speak English at home when you—when—or do they—were they speaking Yiddish?

SCHREIBMAN: I think they spoke English to their two children but they spoke Yiddish to us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: I think the two children didn't know English—Yiddish. I think they were speaking English to them.

LEVINE: And how was life for you in this new country, new family? Everything new.

SCHREIBMAN: Well, you just accept everything as it comes along because you don't know anything else. There's no comparison.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: And I don't think you stop to think. You just live.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: You do what you're told and you just live.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: And it was a matter of getting used to all these people, you know, new people that you had to get used to. And I was very adaptable, I think, so I was able to get by.

LEVINE: And how about in school? Did the kids tease you at first for being a greenhorn? Or do you remember any—

SCHREIBMAN: I don't remember that. No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: I think I just fell in with the kids in school. Maybe I didn't speak right away but I don't remember any incidents. I don't remember being pointed out—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHREIBMAN: —in any way. We just sat and listened to the teacher. I—I don't know how we learned.

LEVINE: Do—

SCHREIBMAN: You know, now they have the other language and so on but I don't know. I don't know. We just blended in—

LEVINE: You just did.

SCHREIBMAN: —day by day. I guess we learned words and knew how to express it. Sometimes, we'd speak fancy Yiddish where it got us nowhere.
[laughter]

LEVINE: Well, now, were you in a community? Was Bayonne a community? Were there a lot of Yiddish-speaking people in your neighborhood?

SCHREIBMAN: No.

LEVINE: No.

SCHREIBMAN: No. It was a gentile neighborhood.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: We lived across the street from a church, church there, Catholic school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: And I think Sy has all that in his—

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: School.

LEVINE: Let's see. So [clears throat] you—you st—you went—how long—how long did you stay in school then?

SCHREIBMAN: How long did I stay in school?

LEVINE: Did you stay in school? How l—how much schooling did you—

SCHREIBMAN: Well, we—throughout your high school and—

LEVINE: Through high school.

SCHREIBMAN: —throughout—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: —your educational period. And then we had to work and I got my degree when I was about 65. I went back to school and got my de—got a degree.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: A college degree in psychology. That's about how it went. Then I got married earlier. That's the whole story. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So—so what—what prompted you to go back and get a degree at such a—

SCHREIBMAN: I always wanted to go to school but I wasn't able to because of the Depression. And that was pretty—

LEVINE: Yeah. Could you say anything about the Depression and its effect on you, your family?

SCHREIBMAN: Well, there's a lot of anti-Semi—Semitism at that time. You couldn't get a job for were Jewish and especially if they knew you were Jewish. They'd say there's no opening for you. And since there was a Depression, they didn't have too many jobs. So the well-educated ones where you'd get the lowest-paid jobs, was a choice between them and you. And that went on and I lived through that and then I was working, finally as a salesperson. And then I got married and then I had my children. And then I did a lot of traveling and then everything worked okay.

LEVINE: Ah. [laughs] Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: All right?

LEVINE: Is there anything else about coming here as a—as an immigrant? You—you were only six years old. But do you think that experience left a mark on you as far as your personality is concerned? The fact of, you know, picking up roots and setting down in a new place and living—

SCHREIBMAN: I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't—you know, as a child, you just accept life the way it is. When it's real bad you just live it. When it's—gets a little better, you just live it. I don't think there's too much analysis unless it's had some really traumatic effect on you. And I don't know whether it did or it didn't. You know, perhaps my personality's formed by my past, of course.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHREIBMAN: But just, well, a part of it and so on. I didn't analyze it too much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SCHREIBMAN: And nothing was real bad at that time.

LEVINE: Well, I guess for you, life was—was better here—

SCHREIBMAN: It was easier for me here.

LEVINE: —than—

SCHREIBMAN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: Of course. I mean, if you don't have any food you don't have a life. You have food—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHREIBMAN: —and clothes and you go to school and you have a normal life, sort of.

LEVINE: And how about your uncle and your aunt? Were they—did you find that that was a—a comfortable family arrangement for you once you got here?

SCHREIBMAN: Yeah, yeah. They weren't loving but they were humane and they did the best they could with four kids coming into a house and a— during the Depression and two of their own children to cope with. So I think, considering all that—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SCHREIBMAN: —it went along quite well.

LEVINE: Mmm.

SCHREIBMAN: It was okay.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: I know a lot of the details, Sy has.

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: He filled it in.

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: Okay?

LEVINE: Well, I want to—

SCHREIBMAN: Well—

LEVINE: —to thank you very much. Is there anything else you want to say before we close?

SCHREIBMAN: Before—

LEVINE: Anything about coming—Ellis Island today or—

SCHREIBMAN: Well, it's lucky that we're here because, otherwise, we might not be here.

LEVINE: That's true.

SCHREIBMAN: That might have been the saving grace.

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: As to whether you're an orphan or whether you're—advance in life or whether you stand still and perish.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you. I've been speaking with—

SCHREIBMAN: You're welcome. [chuckles]

LEVINE: —Sylvia Schreibman and—

SCHREIBMAN: You can see my heart isn't into going backwards.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Okay. Well, I'm glad to have on—

SCHREIBMAN: It is—

LEVINE: —record what you can remem—

SCHREIBMAN: Yeah. It is. I mean, that happened and that's it. And it's the past. You live through it.

LEVINE: And you go on.

SCHREIBMAN: And you're going on to another road, which may be a short road at this—[chuckles] at this point.

LEVINE: I should—just before we close, let me ask you, what you are looking forward to now?

SCHREIBMAN: Now?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SCHREIBMAN: Good health. Good health. Being able to walk and travel.

LEVINE: Okay. O—

SCHREIBMAN: I just came back from Vietnam and Cr—Cambodia and Thailand.

LEVINE: Oh, you are a traveler.

SCHREIBMAN: So [unclear] I was able to do it.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

SCHREIBMAN: Yeah. I've—

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LEVINE: Good for you.

SCHREIBMAN: —done a lot of traveling.

LEVINE: Oh, that's great.

SCHREIBMAN: So that was a good part of life.

LEVINE: Okay.

SCHREIBMAN: All right.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm closing now with Sylvia Schreibman and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]