

EI-131

SELMA STANISLAVSKY BAUMGARTEN

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RUSSIA, 1920

AGE: 5

RESIDENCES:

- **RUSSIA, UMAN**
- **THE US: BROOKLYN, NY**

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Baumgarten is the wife of Gabriel Baumgarten, EI-132. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 2/2/1993.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Selma Baumgarten, and we're here in New York City at the Howard Johnson Hotel on Eighth Avenue. And Selma came from

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

Russia in 1920 when she was five years old. So I'm very happy to be here.

BAUMGARTEN: So am I. I'm glad to meet you.

LEVINE: And to be able to talk with you. Why don't we start by my asking you your birth date.

BAUMGARTEN: August 15, 1915.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

BAUMGARTEN: I was born in Odessa, Russia. But my family is from Uman, Russia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And that's U-M-A-N?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, right.

LEVINE: And why was it that you were born in Odessa?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, the Ukraine. Because my mother had to go to Odessa to a specialist because she was having twins, my sister and myself. And so she went to Russia, to Odessa, to have us.

LEVINE: I see. Now, can you remember, I know you were five when you arrived. But what do you remember about your life in Russia?

BAUMGARTEN: I remember being in a beautiful big building. It was beige, and I

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

remember my friends and I playing on the hallway. There was a big beige balustrade, and a long mirror from ceiling to floor, and playing right there. I also remember the business my mother and father were in. It was a big building with a couple of steps going up into the building. It was a confectionery and paper, uh, stationery business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was this a retail business?

BAUMGARTEN: A what?

LEVINE: A retail business? Were they . . .

BAUMGARTEN: Retail? Uh, no. I believe it was wholesale. Yeah.

LEVINE: And was the business right near where you lived?

BAUMGARTEN: No. It was a little distance away. It wasn't right near where we lived.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, do you remember the actual living quarters where you lived?

BAUMGARTEN: No, not really. Just the hallway. Playing there with my friends.

LEVINE: Can you remember the kinds of games you played when you were little?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, not really. We just sat there, you know, fool around. (she laughs)

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: And what else do you remember about your family?

BAUMGARTEN: I remember the trip coming out to, from Russia to America. We had to go in the middle of the night. We sort of snuck out of Russia because it was during the pogrom, where . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about pogroms?

BAUMGARTEN: Not, well, this is what I remember. At the time, my father and mother, my father and my brother had to leave because of the trouble we had there. And my brother did come back, but my father got sick, and he didn't come home. By the time my mother went to see him, he was already gone, so she never saw him alive.

LEVINE: Well, now, what was the trouble? Why specifically did they leave?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, they were after the Jews, the Jews. And they were going, they were killing Jews. And so we had to leave, you know, to save our lives. And so we left in the middle of the night, and we went across the boundary line, in a small rowboat. Like my mother sitting with her legs apart, and then my brother with his legs apart, and my sister and my other sister. And that's the way we ran across, in the middle of the night. And I remember we stopped at one place, at my cousin's, sort of on the way, to rest. And then we went on ahead. And we went to the ship where we had to leave.

LEVINE: Let's go back to your mother in Russia. What was your mother's

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

maiden name?

BAUMGARTEN: Heika, Ada Stanislavsky, Ada. Her maiden name was, her maiden name was, hmm. (she pauses) I forgot her name. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, maybe it will come to you.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah, maybe it will.

LEVINE: Okay. But her first name was Ada.

BAUMGARTEN: Ada. Heika, in Yiddish.

LEVINE: Oh, Heika, uh-huh. And how about your father's name?

BAUMGARTEN: My father's name was Mordacai, Michael.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your sisters?

BAUMGARTEN: I had a sister Sara, Sylvia. My twin sister was Minnie, and my brother was Michael. He was named after my father.

LEVINE: I see. So when you came to America it was your mother, your three sisters and your brother and yourself.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. Yeah. And my, when we came to America my uncle took us over. Elias Roochvarg. Roochvarg.

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

BAUMGARTEN: Roochvarg. R-O-O-C-H-V-A-R-G. And he took us over, and it was my mother's only brother. She had no other relatives. So he was already in America. And he came to Ellis Island to pick us up. But at the time, I don't know what happened. His wife came instead, Anna Roochvarg, and we couldn't leave. And so we had to stay there for two weeks.

LEVINE: I see. Now, did your uncle send you the money to come to America? Do you remember that part?

BAUMGARTEN: I suppose so, if it was necessary. Or maybe not. Maybe we had money. You know what we did do in Europe, I remember my mother saying. We, my mother put money into our shirts, undershirts. She hid some of the money into our undershirts. She sewed it in in a pocket when we, so we could have money when we got to America. My mother also said she hid money in the brick. We had owned a brick building. We were the landlord. And we hid money in one of the bricks. She took out the brick, put the money in, and then put the brick back into the building.

LEVINE: She was hiding it there.

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah, she was hiding it.

LEVINE: Was this building you lived in, was it an apartment building? Were there other people living in it?

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, yes. It was a big apartment building.

LEVINE: I see. And so you were the, you owned the building, and you were the landlord.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: And like how many apartments, roughly, were there in the building?

BAUMGARTEN: The what?

LEVINE: About how many apartments were there?

BAUMGARTEN: How many, uh, I don't know. It was pretty big. I don't know exactly how many, but it was pretty big.

LEVINE: Was it something like ten?

BAUMGARTEN: It seemed big to me, maybe because I was so little. (she laughs)
That's possible.

LEVINE: So you had a comfortable life?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, yes. Yeah, we did. We were well-to-do. My mother and father owned a business, and we had a beautiful place to live. Yeah, we were well-to-do.

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: Do you remember anything like the kind of food you had there?

BAUMGARTEN: Uh, no. Well, if we were well-to-do we must have eaten good. Well, the kind of food is like when we came to America, we had the same type of Jewish food. Like herring and pumpernick bread and rye bread, and challah, you know, things like that that we were accustomed to.

LEVINE: Were you a religious family in Russia?

BAUMGARTEN: In Europe we were. In fact, my mother says she went into business, she was a very independent lady, my mother. She was in business with my father and had a housekeeper at home taking care of us. And so when she came to America she immediately went into business. And she had a dry goods and knitting store on Blake Avenue in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Okay. Before we deal with the part in America, tell me more about your mother. What kind of a person . . .

BAUMGARTEN: My mother was a wonderful woman. Very independent. She never got married, also, her life. She came to America in her early thirties, or close to forty, maybe. With five little ones and took care of us very well. She had a place, a little kitchen in back of the store on Blake Avenue where we could come home for lunch and she took good care of us. We used to go to bed at eight o'clock. And we really listened to my mother. She was a strong, self-willed woman. And when she said something we listened to her.

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: So she was strict.

BAUMGARTEN: She was very, yeah, she was strict, but she was good.

LEVINE: Yes. And how about your father? How do you remember him?

BAUMGARTEN: My father I remember very little. I remember my father, one time my mother said was that I didn't sleep very well, and I would crawl around the floor and pick up his cigarette butts and put it into a shoe when I was little. (she laughs) And so that's what I remember about my father, not much.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything your father told you?

BAUMGARTEN: Uh, no. I don't. I really don't.

LEVINE: You were very young.

BAUMGARTEN: I don't remember my father very well. But he was a very goodlooking man. My twin sister resembled my father more than I did. I probably resembled my mother. And he was a good-looking man. They were good to each other. I remember my mother saying that she met him on her own. She didn't, like, you know, years ago where they, where the parents picked the husband for the woman. But she picked her own. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Let's see. Well, let's go back to, then you took, in the middle of the

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

night, you took a rowboat and the whole family . . .

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. We went across the boundary line in the middle of the night. And that was called the granits, boundary line was granits in Jewish, and that's how we got across. And we stopped one time at my cousin's, and we stayed there overnight. I remember sitting like in a heated, it was like a place to sit down where it was warm, nice and warm. We sat there for a while and just, you know, waited.

LEVINE: Was it cold going across on the rowboat?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. It was cold. But I don't remember being uncomfortable.

LEVINE: And then where was your cousin's house located?

BAUMGARTEN: My cousin's, my uncle lived in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: No. I mean, when you took the rowboat you stopped at your cousin's before you took the ship. That cousin.

BAUMGARTEN: Uh, that was halfway across. I forget where it was. I really don't know where it was.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, then do you remember then approaching the ship that actually took you to America?

BAUMGARTEN: No, I don't remember that either, because I was so little.

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: And it was night.

BAUMGARTEN: I don't remember anything on the ship. But I remember we did go second class. We didn't go, you know . . .

LEVINE: Steerage. You didn't go steerage. Do you remember, like, what accommodations you had in second class on the ship, what the room was, or what the trip was like?

BAUMGARTEN: No, I don't, I don't remember the ship. I remember Ellis Island very well.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't you . . .

BAUMGARTEN: Well, we got to Ellis Island and we were all, we had to go through examinations and my eyes were very bad. I don't think I was examined in my eyes. I think I just got through without being examined somehow. Anyway, we had, my uncle came for us. My uncle didn't come for us. My aunt did instead. So we had to stay there, overstay, until he came for us. And we stayed overnight. And we stayed on the wrought iron beds that they had in Ellis Island. And I still remember they gave the children milk and those crackers, the white crackers, Uneeda Biscuits, with our milk. And I still remember the taste. It was real good. (she laughs) And then they gave us Octagon soap to wash. Remember that brown Octagon laundry soap, to wash ourselves with. That's what they gave, cubes of it. And that's where we were for two weeks, and somebody, uncle came for us. (phone rings)

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

LEVINE: I think maybe we should . . . (Break in tape.) Okay, we're resuming now after a telephone call and Mr. Baumgarten leaving the room. Okay. You were saying about Ellis Island.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. So that's the way it was. We had to stay on the wrought iron beds.

LEVINE: They were uncomfortable, I take it?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. Well, as a kid, it was comfortable. With other children, I didn't seem to mind it. It was no hardship. And then when my uncle finally got to pick us up, I remember we went on the little, in the little Ford, a '30 Ford, maybe. And we went all the way out to Plainfield. That's where he had a farm. And we stayed at Plainfield.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that you brought with you that you had in your luggage?

BAUMGARTEN: No, but I do remember wearing long underwear, and when we got to Plainfield my little cousins called us boys because our hair was cut off. We were baldy.

LEVINE: Why were you baldy? Why did you have your hair cut off?

BAUMGARTEN: Because in Ellis Island when they examined you, they wanted to make sure you didn't have any nits, they used to call those, and that your head was clean. So they used to, they cut our hair. And so

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

they called us baldy, little boys. And they gave us, I remember they gave us pink little panties, underwear. We were wearing long underwear at the time, so it seemed kind of strange. And my uncle had a very nice farm. We used to, we picked apples and we got sick, and my uncle gave us Ex-lax, that red Ex-lax, because we were sick from eating the green apples. And our little cousins were there. Ooh, it was a nice time. I remember enjoying that very much.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother's, how your mother was when she first arrived?

BAUMGARTEN: My mother was a very nice looking woman, and she had the business. Immediately she went . . .

LEVINE: She went from Plainfield, then, to Brooklyn?

BAUMGARTEN: We went from, yeah. My uncle went, no. We stayed in Plainfield for a while, and then we went to Brooklyn because my uncle had a drugstore in Brooklyn, on New Lots Avenue. And we took an apartment on Dumont Avenue, those railroad apartments with the iron windows, the wrought-iron on the windows. We had the back yard there. I remember that's where, the wooden floors that we had. 515 Dumont Avenue. And that's where we lived for a while, and then my mother got her store on Blake Avenue, 543 Blake Avenue.

LEVINE: Well, now, was it the same uncle who had the farm, who also had the drug store?

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Right. We only had one uncle. My mother had one brother, Elias Roochvarg. My son is named after him. And he was like a father to us. That's why I named my son after him, because I, you know, I lost my father when I was so young. But I have good feelings about my father. My mother was very much in love. She never remarried. All her life she just took care of us.

LEVINE: Well, now, was it your father who was the more religious person?

BAUMGARTEN: They were both religious. They used to close, in fact, she wanted, you know, to be religious on Saturday and have the store closed. But being she had to take care of the little ones, she had no other time but on Saturday to take care of us. And then she had to open the store. So she gave up some of her religion, because it was more important that she take care of us than have, that's the way she felt. High holidays, and Saturday. Not Saturday, high holidays, and important Jewish holiday. She went to show up at the synagogue. She stayed at synagogue during the high holidays. I remember going up there to see her and be with her. She was very good to us. She was a wonderful woman. Very, very independent and very self-sufficient. She just took care of us all the time.

LEVINE: And how about, were you closer to any one of your sisters or brothers?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, I felt, I was close with my sister, but closer to my twin sister than any of the others. We were very close. She lived in The Bronx and I lived in Brooklyn when we got married. She was married. She lived

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

in The Bronx. She married her husband. He lived in The Bronx, so that's where she lived.

LEVINE: When you were growing up, were you treated differently because you were a twin?

BAUMGARTEN: No, but she was completely different. We were not alike at all. I liked sports and swimming and she liked to play cards and run around with her friends. I was more, she was more friendly and I was more of a loner, although now I'm more with friends. (she laughs) But we were closer than, although my older sister, she took care of us when my mother was in business. My sister Sarah. And we used to go to Coney Island. I used to go to movies. See, she used to play cards, I used to go to movies. (she laughs) She was different than I am.

LEVINE: Do you remember your favorite movie star from when you were little?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, to this day I like the movie stars. I liked Irene Dunne and Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard was one of my favorites.

LEVINE: What was it, what was the movies like? Can you remember what it cost?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I used to pay. It used to be five cents or two for a nickel. Three cents for one person. Two for a nickel. And the movies, we used to go to Miller Theater, or to Sheffields Theater in Brooklyn. And I used to go to the movies. My sister Minnie, she didn't care for the movies. I was the one interested. I went to the

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

movies almost every weekend. And we used to go to Coney Island swimming.

LEVINE: What -- I'm sorry.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, go ahead.

LEVINE: What was school like? How did you like school?

BAUMGARTEN: I liked school. We used to go to 182nd Public School, 182nd. I think it was on Vermont, Blake and Vermont, around that area. And I liked school. And I never got demoted. My twin sister did. And I went to Jefferson High School. They're having trouble there now, Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn. And I went to night school. Then we worked when we were very young, to help out at home.

LEVINE: Did you work in the store?

BAUMGARTEN: No. I worked in a factory. I worked on the sewing machine. The marrows. I worked on 35th and Seventh Avenue, not too far from here, on a button machine, or overlocked marrow machine they used on call it, on ski suits, and on the button machine.

LEVINE: And was it a real sweatshop?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes, it was. Well, at the beginning, this marrow machine and overlock, on 35th, near Macy's, was a little better. But before that it was a sweat machine that I had worked at a couple of times. Like

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

one or two days, and then, on collars, like, at ten cents a collar for, we used to work like, what do you call it? The more you make, the . . .

LEVINE: Oh, piece work?

BAUMGARTEN: Piece work, yes. On piece work, I used to work for a while. And so, you know, we all helped out at home, as soon as we got old enough.

LEVINE: And how about, did your mother become a citizen then?

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, she became a citizen immediately, within a year or a year-and-a-half in America. She went to school to learn English because, you know, being in business she felt that she had to be able to speak to her customers. She had to learn English.

LEVINE: So did she go at night to school?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. I believe she did. Yeah.

LEVINE: So what was her attitude?

BAUMGARTEN: Because we didn't, we lost how to speak Yiddish, good Yiddish, because we immediately started speaking English, you know, to learn how.

LEVINE: So her attitude was to become American?

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Oh, immediately. Right, all of us felt that way.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any things that your mother taught you, just ideas about the kind of person you should be, or how you should live?

BAUMGARTEN: Well, we should be independent and we should go to school, and we should try to make a living, you know, yeah. And to listen, we always listened to her, what she told us. I remember getting a ten cent malted for the, like, two malteds for the four of us. So we shared it. Ten cents a malted at that time. (she laughs) Yeah. And we got along on whatever she made. We helped out later on.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then when did you meet your husband?

BAUMGARTEN: I met my husband in 19 . . . Uh, we got married in '37, in '33. My sister started going with my husband's brother. They went out for a while. And they got married four years before we did. I got married in '37 and they got married in '33.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, which sister was this?

BAUMGARTEN: My older sister is married to his younger brother. (comment off mike) (she laughs) And so we got two in the family of Baumgartens. The Baumgartens. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So did, how did you meet?

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: Well, we met, I met him through my sister. Right?

MR. BAUMGARTEN: At the wedding.

BAUMGARTEN: At the wedding. Well, we knew you before the wedding, no?

MR. BAUMGARTEN: No.

BAUMGARTEN: At the wedding I met him. We danced together, and we started going together. Both of us liked Coney Island, and we would meet there, even if we didn't make a date, we sort of got there at the same time. And then we used to also hang out at the Washington Baths, which was a real nice place for swimming and steam room and all that. We spent the day together. And he lived in Brooklyn also, and so did I. And so we went together for about four years before we got married.

MR. BAUMGARTEN: On and off.

BAUMGARTEN: On and off. (she laughs) Right.

LEVINE: Well, then you got married, and then, you have two children, did you say?

BAUMGARTEN: Yes.

LEVINE: And what are their names?

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

BAUMGARTEN: My son is Elias, and my daughter Rochelle.

LEVINE: And now do you have grandchildren?

BAUMGARTEN: No. I keep telling myself I'm too young to be a grandmother.

MR. BAUMGARTEN: I'm old enough to be a grandfather.

BAUMGARTEN: But they're both professors. Thank God they're okay.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you would like to mention about coming to this country, or really spending most of your life here?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah. Well, I enjoyed living in Brooklyn, and going to school here. And I remember, even though I didn't have a father, we had a good life. We didn't struggle. We always had enough to eat. We had enough to dress, enough clothes. And I had lots of friends. We lived on Blake Avenue and we were all in the same circumstances. And we enjoyed just playing out in the street. I never felt that I didn't have enough to live on to, you know, I wasn't jealous of anybody else, or felt that I needed anything more than what I already had. We were pretty happy in our circumstances.

LEVINE: Even though, actually you really lived under better circumstances in Russia than you did here?

BAUMGARTEN: Yeah, but we were satisfied with what we had, and my mother seemed to be okay. She worked hard, of course, but she never, you

EI-131/BAUMGARTEN

know, felt bad about it. She did what she had to do, and she was happy in what she was doing.

LEVINE: You feel as though she was happy that she came here.

BAUMGARTEN: Yes. Oh, yeah. She was happy, so her brother lived close by, and we used to see him often. The family lived just a few blocks from us, her brother and my aunt, and the children. They had five children also, and we got along very well. And we were happy in our circumstances.

LEVINE: Great. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

BAUMGARTEN: I can't think of anything else.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you so much.

BAUMGARTEN: You're welcome. It was nice talking to you.

LEVINE: For sharing your memories. I appreciate it. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I've been talking with Selma Baumgarten, and today, I believe, is April 4th, 1992, and we're here in New York City.

END OF INTERVIEW