

**EI-1355**

**MIRIAM CALICA FINESMITH**

**BIRTHDATE: JUNE 20, 1919**

**INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 26, 2004**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 85**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**RUSSIA, 1923**

**AGE: 4**

**SHIP:**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

**NOTE: Interviewee speaks very fast and slurs her words, so is difficult to understand.**

LEVINE: Let's just reiterate the highlights, okay?

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: I'm talking with Miriam Finesmith who came here as Miriam Calica from Russia in 1923 when she was four years of age, and the family escaped from Russia and went to Romania, where they remained for a period of time before coming to America. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm sorry to say that I messed up on the beginning of this tape, so I'm just going to say some of the things that we have already established.

Mrs. Finesmith's birthday is June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1919 and that was an estimate, based on the calendar where things were figured from how many days before or after a major Jewish holiday. Okay, and Mrs. Finesmith's mother's last name, maiden name was Pellich, which is P-E-L-L-I-C-H, and that family is believed to have come from Spain. Her father's Jewish name was Shoma, S-H-O-

M-A, and that translates to Sam in this country. And I think the said maiden name was Calica. Um, okay. Why don't you say how your father was warned and why you left when you did?

FINESMITH: My father was friendly with one of the soldiers that was in barracks. They had a barracks stationed there and the soldier came and told him on the sly that there were going to be a pogrom and if he were wise, he would leave. So they decided they would escape because we had no passports or anything to get out of the country. Nor would they have allowed it, even if we had it. So during the night, we—I guess my father got all the things that he could together. We had to separate. We couldn't all go together because there's no way to hide if we all went together. My father took one of my brothers and sister, and my mother took one brother and myself. Because I was the baby, I had to stay with her and this was brother was going to help her take care of me. My oldest brother went on his own because he was old enough to do it on his own.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: And we had plans to meet in Romania. Well, on the way—the stories I've heard of course, that we were caught many times. We had to bribe some of the people. Some of the people hid us and then ones exposed us. We even—this is just my mother and brother and myself, we landed in jail a couple of times. We would hide in haystacks. It got so bad that at one time my mother said to my brother that he should take me and go off and she'd kill herself. Maybe somebody would have pity on us, on the two children. Thank God she didn't.

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: My brother did tell me once, when I—of course, I was a baby. I wanted tea in the middle of the night. He said to me if I didn't stop crying he was going to kill me. I think at that moment he meant it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you would give them away, too, by crying, right?

FINESMITH: Sure, that was the whole thing.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: He [unclear] because I was crying.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: And in due time, after many—it was quite awhile. We probably got—it probably took us at least a year before we got together, anyway. Before we all got together and then of course there was no money left because my father had probably had gone through the same thing. Whatever money he had, he had to pay bribes to get across and he—they earned some money. They earned—we have a picture of some of—of some of the people that were there. Before we left, there were photo taken, but unfortunately I don't have it. I—my daughter has it.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: And if you would like a copy, I'll have her make a copy and send it to you.

LEVINE: I would love a copy. We'll put it in a file with your name on it.

FINESMITH: And you can see how young we were.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, which brother was it that was with you and your mother?

FINESMITH: Leo.

LEVINE: Leo. And how old a child was he?

FINESMITH: Leo was six years older than I was.

LEVINE: So you were about three when you left?

FINESMITH: Right, so he was—

LEVINE: Nine. Oh, yeah.

FINESMITH: He was the big brother who was supposed to—

LEVINE: To help you, right.

FINESMITH: Nothing he could do about it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: This is how it was. But we did manage, we got there and—

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LEVINE: Now, did you know any people in Romania or did—that—when you—

FINESMITH: I wouldn't have remembered there and there's nobody left for me to ask anymore.

LEVINE: To ask, yeah. But you did have a plan to meet, I guess, in a particular place.

FINESMITH: Yes, because my father didn't just take by ourselves. He told some of the people that we knew to—to make it business to try and get out. So they—they did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: They did.

LEVINE: So—so there were probably other people from your town that left.

FINESMITH: That must be—those must be the people in the picture is what I imagine.

LEVINE: Yes. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did your family ever stay in contact with any of those people after you got to America? That you know of?

FINESMITH: There probably were. There probably were because my father had a lot of friends and they had all come from Russia. So I imagine they probably came from the same part.

LEVINE: [unclear] Yeah.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Where—where did you settle when—when you got here?

FINESMITH: Well, we settled in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Across the street from my father's sister.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Who had come first.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and—and some of these people, you—you presume were also in Brooklyn? That—that came—

FINESMITH: Yes, because I remember the names and I remember—of course, I don't—yeah. [unclear], which meant the tall Harry and why I remember is that when he came with his wife to visit us, she always—she had no children. She always gave me a little bit of candy. So I remember her. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. [Laughing] Okay. Well, I'm jumping ahead there. Let's just—so what did your father do for work when he was in Russia?

FINESMITH: He owned businesses. He was in the furniture business and then he was in the wholesale—well, in other words, they did whatever they could to make money. And then, example, Easter he would make sure to have a fish that he would sell the soldiers. That's how he got friendly with them because there was a time when that they weren't allowed to have meat. They were without it, so he had that for them and all—whatever they could, too. But they were not farmers. That's the one thing. There was another family that came with us that were farmers.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. A Jewish family?

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Yeah. And—and—

FINESMITH: And we were—we were kept friend—we were friendly with them all through the years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: [unclear] still friends with the children.

LEVINE: Wow.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah, right. So—so your father—what was he able to do in Romania when he needed to make money?

FINESMITH: I—I imagine he worked for somebody, probably in the furniture business or whatever. But they did raise enough money for all of us to come.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, that was quite a [unclear] yeah.

FINESMITH: so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, let's see.

FINESMITH: We were on—you want to know what ship we were on?

LEVINE: Yeah. What port did you leave from?

FINESMITH: I don't know the name of the port. Whatever port is on the Black Sea, I guess, because I think that's the one between Russia and Romania. If I remember my map correctly.

LEVINE: Yeah, I'm not sure what port that would be. Yeah, okay.

FINESMITH: But it was the—the Queen Alexandria. The only reason I really remember it is it's on our immigration papers. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. You—well, I'll tell you something after we finish this, but, okay, so you said your first memories were aboard the ship?

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: And what do you remember?

FINESMITH: Everybody was sick except my—the brother who's next to me. That's—his name was Isadore. So he was the one that was hungry and I was the one that was crying, and there was a steward of some kind, who evidently took a liking to me because he would carry me around. And I always thought he was Chinese and when I mentioned it to my sister one time, she didn't remember it. She said, "How could you remember?" I said, "I don't know how I remember. I just remember there was a Chinese man carrying me around and I remember he had whiskey on his breath and to this day I don't like the smell of whiskey." And she said, "No, he was probably from Urbishan."  
[PH]

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: In Russia. Was a sailor from there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, interesting.

FINESMITH: Or that he was [unclear] born because there are, you know, people who look Chinese there.

LEVINE: Look Chinese, right. Oh, interesting.

FINESMITH: So that was what I remember and the stories they told me. Once we got to—before we got on the ship, I developed a very high fever and they were all afraid that I wasn't going to be allowed to go on the ship and—but it broke just before we had to go on and we all went.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Very difficult journey.

LEVINE: Were—were you in steerage, do you know?

FINESMITH: Probably.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: I'm sure.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: To bring so many across at one time.

LEVINE: Many people, right. Right. Yeah. So do you remember, by any chance, when the ship came into the New York Harbor? Like the Statue of Liberty or—

FINESMITH: No, but I remember that when we came it was such a beautiful sight because evidently something must have been going on because I remember pretty—pretty flowers, and so then my sister had said it was July 4<sup>th</sup>.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: And so they must have been doing—having some kind of celebration.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: My uncle met us at the boat and I don't—the next few days, who remembers what was happening, but then the next thing I knew, we were living across the street from my aunt.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn.

FINESMITH: My husband's sister—my—my father's sister.

LEVINE: Sister. In Brooklyn?

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: Well, it was with his—my father's mother and my aunt's children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow. So then—do—well, I guess you wouldn't remember impressions, things that impressed you about this whole new place when you first—the first weeks, months.

FINESMITH: it was very strange.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: It was very strange. I do know, because it left a very big impression, that even there where there were so many Jews, we were not quite that welcome.

LEVINE: Ah.

FINESMITH: And on a Friday night, somebody set fire to the place. That's how I remember [unclear]. I mean, to this day I'm afraid to have candles in the house.

LEVINE: Really?

FINESMITH: But I don't think it was, because they—it said it wasn't a candle. Somebody set fire to it, which they put out right away.

LEVINE: Do you remember like the other children calling you "greenhorns," that kind of thing?

FINESMITH: I didn't really have many things to do with them.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: You know, because I was so strange. My brothers were always very protective of me. They didn't let me cross the street myself and I couldn't go around the block.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: So I had no chance. I knew finally on the side of where my—oh, no, we did move finally, on the same side as my aunt and I met a couple of little girls there.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: That—one of the little girls took me to the—her mother took her and myself to a bath house because where we lived, there was only one bathroom for four families on the—

LEVINE: On the floor?

FINESMITH: On the floor.

LEVINE: In the hall? Was it in—uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And we had a bathtub in the house. When I say a bathtub, I mean a washtub and my sister and I would wash, bath in the same tub so we could have enough water. And there weren't enough beds for me. I slept on two chairs.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Pillows and two chairs.

LEVINE: And how about the bathhouse, do you have—do you recall what that was like?

FINESMITH: The only thing I recall, which is a terrible memory, really, I remember how all the women looked with the—of course, they all had—with their breasts hanging down. [Laughs] That stayed in my mind. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay. Well, so—so if you—let's just say you did come July 4<sup>th</sup>, so probably in September the children went to school.

FINESMITH: [unclear] school right away. [unclear]

LEVINE: Not you but the others.

FINESMITH: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: I remember how surprised I was when it rained on one side of the street and not on the other, and I ran upstairs. One time there was evidently a Black Jew came into the drugstore. We had a drugstore on each corner of the street, and the corner that I lived on, a Black man came in with a white robe. He was a—a Hebrew Black person. I forget what they're called, but—and he spoke Hebrew fluently and [unclear] I had to tell my mother this. This phenomenon.

LEVINE: Phenomenon. In other words, you hadn't seen a Black person before that you knew of?

FINESMITH: I knew [unclear] he was different than we were.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: So.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

FINESMITH: But I don't—I think I was more impressed that he spoke Hebrew.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: Than anything else.

LEVINE: Well, you talked about the drugstore on each other. Did you—do you remember anything about the pharmacist in the list of a—of a—

FINESMITH: Of course.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about—

FINESMITH: Well, nobody was a doctor. First of all, who had a money for a doctor, but if you had an ear ache, you went to the druggist. If you had something in your eye, you went to the druggist. Even if you had a headache, you went to the druggist. You didn't go to a doctor unless it was something really wrong with you. Every—everybody did that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: I don't know how those druggists stayed in business, come to think of it. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Now, how about your older brothers, did any of them become newsboys? That seems to be like the first job that children got.

FINESMITH: No, because they worked.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: They worked. I don't know where they worked at the beginning, but then my—my father learned a trade.

LEVINE: Oh, what did he do?

FINESMITH: Glass—glazier.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: He learned a trade and the first—so I don't know what the boys are doing, but I guess they were going to school. My sister must have been going to school and then he would have a horse and wagon and he would go around for house to house, see if anybody had broken windows. And I remember the horse kicked him one time and we ran to the druggist. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And he fixed it up and got—and after awhile, with the help of my uncles that brought us here, the Pelach [PH] family, he opened up a sash and glass place, a business. Then the boys came and worked with him. My brother, [unclear], he went to high school at night. My other brother finished gymnasia, which means high school and college in Russia. [unclear] when he went, was able to go on his own.

LEVINE: Ah.

FINESMITH: So he went to work there. He had finished his schooling and of course my sister went to school and I went. The first time I went to school, I had a cousin who was the same age as I was that came with the aunt, and I was taken to school. She—the girl took

me to school. Her name was Minnie, and she was supposed to pick me up lunchtime and take me home. I came out lunchtime and nobody was there and I really wasn't sure about how to find my way home. It was really only around the corner.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: But fortunately I made it, and after that I realized this girl was never going to be a friend of mine. [Laughs] And she wasn't.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, let's see, what section of Brooklyn were you in, do you know?

FINESMITH: It was called the East New York.

LEVINE: East New York.

FINESMITH: On Ardmore Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay. And—

FINESMITH: It has been razed since then and it's a—they have public housing there now.

LEVINE: Huh, yeah.

FINESMITH: We went to look where old places were.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh. So was your family religious? Were they religious in—in Russia and were they religious here?

FINESMITH: Yeah, they were more religious in Russia than they were here. And at the beginning here, too, they were very religious, but as the years went by, and it was a long time before they weren't, except my oldest brother was really a free thinker. He was a Zionist and [unclear] my father was, too. And originally I guess he would have liked to have gone to Israel, to Palestine at the time, but he had to come to New York. The family had to all come together. Like I say, the business built up and that was it. Everybody who worked there was a relative.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: My—my aunt's sons worked there. My father's brother's sons worked there. You know, everybody who worked there was—and—and we grew up.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Don't ask me how. Worst part was that my mother died when I was very young.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did she—was it something that she contracted, a disease?

FINESMITH: A disease, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: She—just when things were really wonderful.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Just when things were really wonderful. Finally, the business was doing well. My father bought a house because he knew all the builders and there was one builder who was building these houses and he got one of them and everything was fine and she found that she had cancer.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: So—that—that was the rough part.

LEVINE: So how many years was she here then before she—that happened.

FINESMITH: She died in 1933.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so she was ten years. Yeah. Oh. Oh, and was the house in East New York, too?

FINESMITH: No, that was in East [unclear]. We had moved up.

LEVINE: Oh. So that was upward mobility, I suppose, in those times.

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So—

FINESMITH: I still remember her taking [unclear] religious. I still remember my mother taking the trolley car to shop for Shaebus. [PH]Eastern New York that time did not have—East [unclear] didn't have that many Jewish stores.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: So she went all the way down to East New York again to the kosher butcher. She come home on the trolley car carrying packages.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow.

FINESMITH: And the cat—we had a white cat with blue eyes, would be at the stop waiting for her to come off.

LEVINE: Oh. Wow. Anything else about Brooklyn, the neighborhoods, either East New York or—or—or Flatbush, whatever? What do you remember?

FINESMITH: I remember there was a lot of Jewish theater.

LEVINE: Oh, in Brooklyn?

FINESMITH: I don't know where it was, but—yes.

LEVINE: Well, Second Avenue in Manhattan.

FINESMITH: It was Brooklyn. They had the—avenue—it was off Second Avenue.

LEVINE: Second Avenue, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Right, so it was in Brooklyn, and they went to a lot of [unclear] and they always sang Jewish songs.

LEVINE: Oh, did they?

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And—

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: Well, my whole family sang.

LEVINE: Really?

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember having a victrola and records?

FINESMITH: Sure.

LEVINE: And—and were some of the records—

FINESMITH: Definitely from [unclear].

LEVINE: They were—and they were like—there's—there's a—there's a whole sort of genre of immigrant music. People—music that people who came here really listened to. Do you remember any of that?

FINESMITH: Well, no. I know that they—it was the Jewish songs that was all sung.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So you were a singing a family?

FINESMITH: We always sang. We always sang together.

LEVINE: Isn't that wonderful. Yeah. Did anybody play—play an instrument?

FINESMITH: They got a piano for my sister, who hated it.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: And I had the measles—it wasn't the measles. It was the polio season and I—my—one of my cousins got sick and she was in the hospital. She had polio and my mother came in to see how I was doing, she said to me, "I'll give you anything if you really want. Get well. What do you want?" and I said, "I want to play the piano." And she said, "You'll play the piano," because we kept the piano.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So then did you—

FINESMITH: [Laughs] I love it to this day.

LEVINE: Isn't that nice, yeah. So would you play and the family would sing? I mean, did you get to that point?

FINESMITH: No, no, no. No, because she died shortly after that, so—

LEVINE: Yeah. Right, right. So you—you were only like fourteen or something when—when your mother died. Yeah. So you were—

FINESMITH: And she was ill for a few years before.

LEVINE: Oh, before that. So you were still—how long did you stay in school before you—

FINESMITH: I finished high school.

LEVINE: You finished high school. So you were in high school.

FINESMITH: I refused to get married before I finish high school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: When my husband asked me to get married—I knew him since I was eleven years old.

LEVINE: Oh, how did you know him?

FINESMITH: I met him at the first party I ever went to, a Halloween party.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, had he come from the old—

FINESMITH: No, he was born in America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: His family had come from Poland.

LEVINE: Poland, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: So-but—

LEVINE: So he was your first boyfriend in this country and—and—

FINESMITH: I was like—the first friend as a boy and then eventually—

LEVINE: Yeah. So when you graduated from high school, did you marry soon after?

FINESMITH: Yes, I married about—I graduated in June. I married in December.

LEVINE: And did you work at all?

FINESMITH: Well, no, I didn't because we were trying to have a child. Took me nine and a half years to have my son.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: But, beside that, there was no work.

LEVINE: Oh, so you were right in the Depression when you—

FINESMITH: I stayed home. My sister was going to—finishing high school. I stayed home and I cooked for the—whoever was left in the house and kept the house.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: After I got married, I was still in the house for a while until my father remarried for a third time.

LEVINE: Hmm. Uh-hmm. So how did your brothers and sisters fare? Did they—

FINESMITH: They fared better because they had more time with my mother.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Emotionally, I'm talking about.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Wow.

FINESMITH: See, they had time with her and they had all these memories that were built up and I had just a few.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's a hard time.

FINESMITH: And then they did a very bad thing to me. They never told me that my mother was dying and my sister woke me up one

morning. I was going to get up and go to school. She said to me, "Get dressed. Momma died." [unclear]

LEVINE: Hmm. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Whole world caved in.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: [unclear] sad and it was hard after that, but life went on.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: For everybody.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Only, I—

LEVINE: Can you think of your mother like—were there certain attitudes she had or certain values—

FINESMITH: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Or sayings that she would say to you to try to teach you?

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Can you remember any of that?

FINESMITH: Yes, because evidently I had a little bit of a temper and I guess I walked out of the house one day, must have slammed the door. And she opened it or she called me and said to me, "In our house, we do not slam doors." [unclear] forget it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Yeah. They were strict parents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: They were strict parents and not that they forbade us to do anything, but we knew that this was wrong. If it was wrong, we didn't do it because we were from the Calica family.

LEVINE: Oh.

- FINESMITH: See, and the Calica family didn't do any such things.
- LEVINE: Interesting. What would they be strict about? What kinds of things?
- FINESMITH: They were strict with all of us except my oldest brother. They could not contain him.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, he was a little man. I mean, if he made that trip by himself—yeah. Yeah.
- FINESMITH: [Laughs] Yeah, he was—he went to college at night just because he wanted to. He went to the New School in New York
- LEVINE: Oh, New School of Social Services?
- FINESMITH: Social Services.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- FINESMITH: And he always kept up, and I tried to go to—[unclear] after I was [unclear], I would take a course here in college, a course there. I never could really spend the whole time that I wanted to.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm.
- FINESMITH: But all through the years I did that, too, and we were always—on the weekends we were—that Saturday you listened to the opera.
- LEVINE: Oh.
- FINESMITH: And Sunday you listened to the symphony. The New York Philharmonic.
- LEVINE: So you would sit around the radio and—uh-huh.
- FINESMITH: And then papa would read us stories and he would read us [unclear] stories and other stories, and—
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Hmm. Is there anything you can remember about your father, about his sort of values, attitudes that he tried to instill? Or any instances?
- FINESMITH: I wasn't as close to my father as with my mother because they were that different and that different was just at the age where

you attach yourself to a parent. So I was always a little bit afraid of him.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And like I say, I must have had a little temper because I remember getting underneath the bed and my father [unclear] saying to me, "I'll take my strap off to you." Of course, he never put a finger on us. "I'll take off my"—I told that to my sister. She couldn't believe it. I said, "Why don't you believe it? You weren't in the house. I was the one." [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Uh-huh. Wow. So—

FINESMITH: It wasn't really until much later on that I got very close to my father.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Yeah. Yeah. Did you stay close to that brother, was it Leo, the one that—was—was with you and your mother?

FINESMITH: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: We were always very close. We were all close, the whole family. We'd all go out together. We'd all go to the theater tighter and we'd all go to—to dinner, you know, to restaurants together. Whatever was new, if it came in from [unclear], whatever [unclear] came in, we'd go to—all of us.

LEVINE: How nice.

FINESMITH: We were very close-knit after my mother died. It was like we felt that we could not separate ourselves. We had to stay that way.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: So all through life we were that way.

LEVINE: Oh.

[END OF SIDE A]  
[BEGIN SIDE B]

LEVINE: --like that [unclear].

FINESMITH: Oh, yes. Yes, that was the one thing that—there was never jealousy between any one of us. Never.

LEVINE: Hmm, nice. So do you remember going to Second Avenue to the Jewish Theater?

FINESMITH: I must have because I seem to know all about the—the Jewish Theater.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: But I don't remember specifically.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And by now, of course, I've forgotten.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

FINESMITH: But, as I say—but they sang the songs from the theater, Jewish theater.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: And of course by the time we had radios, we all listened to the Jewish Hour.

LEVINE: Oh, tell, about the Jewish Hour. What—what was that like?

FINESMITH: It was an advertisement for someone that sold clothing. That was the—the company that sponsored it, and I remember that you—you got a suit with two pair of pants. [Laughs] And then they would have the music.

LEVINE: It was music? Mostly all music?

FINESMITH: Yes, mostly music.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow. Yeah. Let's see. So then you married and—and—

FINESMITH: I married, I was eighteen.

LEVINE: Eighteen, and did you have like a big wedding or—

FINESMITH: No, my sister got married the year before I did and my—my sister's husband's father wanted a big wedding. So he had a very big wedding for her and she had gotten married during the year and I got married in December. So it was not even a year. So my father said to me, "I can't make you a big wedding. We have a choice. Either I'll make you a big wedding or I'll give you a very substantial dowry."

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: So he did that. He—I got a fur coat for my honeymoon, to go on my honeymoon with a—with a muff, with a princess hat and it was a princess coat.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: And he bought me my furniture when I moved into my own place. Yeah, all my linens. I had linens for twenty-five years. I mean, he really—and I didn't want a wedding.

LEVINE: You didn't want a wedding?

FINESMITH: I didn't want it. As it is, I cried underneath the [unclear] because my mother wasn't there to see me get married.

LEVINE: Ah.

FINESMITH: I said, "You know, go in front of only papa. Papa, I'm only going to cry." So, I did that.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. So—so then what did your husband do when you—after you got married?

FINESMITH: He went to work for my father. He finished school.

LEVINE: [unclear]

FINESMITH: He finished high school and go find a job during the Depression.

LEVINE: Right.

FINESMITH: Couldn't find anything. So I—and I knew that he—he had gone to—there was no Brooklyn Tech. What was—there was another school out in Bronx that—he wanted to be an architectural blueprint—but of course he couldn't go to college. So he started to work for my father and then he went to school at night and then

my father got married and his wife had two children. The first wife was a disaster. He got married and then he—he had it annulled, and the second time he got married, she came with two children and I was very uncomfortable in the house with her. The only why I could happen to go to school was if I stayed in the house. I didn't have to pay rent. Once we had to pay rent, you couldn't go to school. So he worked there all his life, but he was a photographer.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: You mean he—he took jobs—

FINESMITH: We did it on—we did it on the side.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Yeah. [unclear] When we're through, I'll show you some of his works.

LEVINE: Oh, nice. Yeah. So—so, your brothers and your husband then worked—everybody.

FINESMITH: I told you it was a—a full family affair.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: My sister was in the office.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: After she finished, before she got married and everybody was there.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Except me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

FINESMITH: That was it.

LEVINE: Can you say anything about the Depression and how it affected you and your family?

FINESMITH: Yes. When they closed the banks it was a very horrifying omen there, you know, but we were pretty safe for some reason or other. But as I say, my father always had good contacts wherever he was. We were pretty safe, but I remember my father having packages made and leaving it at the doorstep of people that we knew, and we were all—and then of course he belonged to a Zionist group and they were always sending money to—to Israel, which was Palestine at the time. But always, always, so that the family remained a family.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Do you remember the build up to World War II? Can you remember anything that, you know, either affected you or your family?

FINESMITH: Sure. My husband was drafted. I already had my son. My son was just a year old when he was drafted.

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: And there was nobody that I could stay with, and it was rough. My sister and I made up if her husband went into the service, she'd come to live with me and if my husband went into the service, I'd—she lived in Boston, and I went up and I lived in Boston with my son until he came out of the service.

LEVINE: Was he in—in—did he see action?

FINESMITH: In fact, his stuff is in—is—which museum is it in? It's in—in Israel I think it is, all this stuff, the pictures that he took while he was there. He was also, besides being an engineer there, he was the official photographer for this battalion there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And he took pictures where he wasn't supposed to take pictures because he was with a group with Eisenhower that had opened up the first [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: And he was devastated. Never the same.

LEVINE: Really?

FINESMITH: Never the same after that. And always he—he would get the names, things that he was not really supposed to be doing. He got the names of the people that he saw and he went to look up the people that they said they had somewheres, and got them in touch with each other.

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: So always—always doing—

LEVINE: Hmm.

FINESMITH: And he made a tape to teach at school here in Florida, the—down in Miami, the college. The nun there, I forgot her name, that was the head of the college there, the dean. She had made—she saw to it that they started a program to discuss the Holocaust.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: And they had asked for volunteers to come down there, so he called and was interviewed and then he went down. He had never talked about the—the war with anybody.

LEVINE: Really?

FINESMITH: Just because that's why he was so sick, and he went and I went with him, and he made the tape and they used it for—

LEVINE: Good.

FINESMITH: Yeah, and there's a picture that he took that I think that it's his picture that my sister—my daughter, they got in touch with my daughter about it. It's also in one of the museums. Probably in New York. I don't know which museum. Jewish museum.

LEVINE: Well, there is the Holocaust—well the Jewish Museum is in New York.

FINESMITH: Jewish Museum. Yeah.

LEVINE: And there's also the Holocaust Museum.

FINESMITH: Yeah, Holocaust. Probably in the Holocaust Museum. They—so that's what we were involved with all this.

LEVINE: Wow.

FINESMITH: Always.

LEVINE: So he came back and he—he—really had a lasting affect on him and—

FINESMITH: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: [unclear] Yeah.

FINESMITH: Refused to go for any help, so that was that.

LEVINE: So did you have any other children besides that son?

FINESMITH: Yes, nine and a half years later after my son was born, I had a little girl named for my mother.

LEVINE: Oh. Good.

FINESMITH: So.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, well, let's see. Is there anything—do you think—well, you were so young. I was going to say do you think having come from—from Russia, made a difference in your—in your—your life, in your personality?

FINESMITH: Of course.

LEVINE: How do you think that man—manifested itself?

FINESMITH: It was even just growing up as a child, I felt that I was a stranger there. I mean, [unclear] the background was so different from all these other children who were born in the United States. When I went to high school, it was the same thing. You go to a large high school, how many foreign born children were there in those years? Very few.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: So it was always felt—though I had, you know, my little bunch of friends, but—

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: There was—

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LEVINE: So you felt different than—

FINESMITH: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Then like the general run of the mill—yeah.

FINESMITH: Oh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: And then because I was brought up so differently, to this day I'm interested in a lot of things that most people are not interested in.

LEVINE: Like what?

FINESMITH: I'm always reading. I'm always looking for interesting things, not to play cards. Not that there's anything wrong with playing cards or anything like that.

LEVINE: Right, I understand.

FINESMITH: It's wonderful. Whatever goes for you, that's what you do. But I—and I hold myself apart a little bit.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: I do.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: I do that. I don't want to sit around and gab, you know, with the women.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Not because I'm smarter or anything, it's just—

LEVINE: It's just a way of being, I guess, in the world.

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: This is the way I was taught I should be in the world and this is the way I—I am always looking to learn something new.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now, do you—did your mother and father hold onto a lot of their ways from the old country or did they have the attitude they wanted their children to be Americanized or did they have an attitude of keeping the culture of what they were coming from?

FINESMITH: They—I think they were just glad that we were alive.

LEVINE: Alive. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Probably.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Did they become citizens, your mother and father?

FINESMITH: My mother never got to it. My father did, of course. My father—we were all citizens.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: All citizens. We all voted.

LEVINE: Yeah, hmm. Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Big thing to go to vote. See, people nowadays they take it like it's nothing.

LEVINE: Oh, that's interesting.

FINESMITH: It was a big thing to be able to go and vote.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

FINESMITH: It was really. Tried to be good citizens and good Jews. Just never to forget that we're Jews.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Not so much that you have to have the—the religious training.

LEVINE: Right.

FINESMITH: No, you can be a good Jew without—

LEVINE: It's—it's kind of the culture of Jewish rather than the religion of Jewishness.

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FINESMITH: Still the religion is there. We always celebrated all the holidays and, you know, went to synagogue and all that, but our lives weren't involved in the synagogue.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Our lives were outside synagogue. So.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: That was the story.

LEVINE: How about what do you feel very proud of that—that when you look back on your life so far, what makes you feel a lot of satisfaction that you've done or—

FINESMITH: I don't know if this really has anything—I don't think it has anything to do with being Jewish. Oh, maybe it does. Maybe because I'm a survivor.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: Willingly or unwillingly, I'm a survivor.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I guess actually—

FINESMITH: That I think comes from—

LEVINE: I was just going to say that. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Yes, that comes from the background.

LEVINE: Yeah. Right, and so—so you think like throughout your life you sort of knew that about yourself, that you're a survivor?

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, that's—yeah, that's quite something. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Not that there haven't been very rough times, but even very rough times, you go ahead.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: You do what you have to do. [unclear] strength.

LEVINE: Well, there's a strength in that. Yeah, sure.

FINESMITH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Let's see, and so you have two children.

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: And their names?

FINESMITH: Jared, whose name is Sincla. [PH]His English name is Jared and my daughter, Libby, whose Jewish name is Leahbayla [PH] after my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Sincla is the name of my aunt's husband.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: My father's sister.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: They were very close. He called her every day.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

FINESMITH: I remember my daughter saying to me, after she left the house—you know, she was in that rebellious stage and of course she called me every day. Then one day she called me, she says, "Mom, is there something wrong with me that I talk to you every day?" I said, "Why?" She said, "My friends all seem to think I'm crazy because I call you." I said, "You know what? If my mother were alive and here, I would call her every day. If my sister didn't live so far away, I would talk to her every day. So I'm fine with you calling me every day." [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, that's cute. [Laughs] Well, now, do you have grandchildren?

FINESMITH: Yes, my son has two sons and I have a—my daughter has one, a granddaughter. You know her [unclear].

LEVINE: So that's a great for you? A great granddaughter?

FINESMITH: No. No, I don't have that. Granddaughter.

LEVINE: Granddaughter, okay.

FINESMITH: My daughter married late in life.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay. Nice.

FINESMITH: She comes from our side of the family. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Okay, let's see. Is there anything else that you can think of that has to do with coming here, your family establishing itself and—

FINESMITH: I think that I passed onto my daughter this part that you were—you were always part of being Jewish, no matter what.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: So even though she's married to a Christian, they brought up my granddaughter to be Jewish.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: They celebrate all the Jewish holidays. She subscribes to everything and everything and works—you know, like they always used to say the Jewish people go into social work?

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: Every time there's a need, she's there and that comes from—from the family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: The strength of the family coming from Europe.

LEVINE: Yeah. So how is your life now? Here in—

FINESMITH: I'm contented.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: I'm contented. I will not go to live with the children. They want me to and as they said, if I live to be a hundred and three, they're not going to ask me anymore. They're just going to come and take me. I said, "God forbid I should live to be a hundred and three."

LEVINE: A hundred and three. A long time.

FINESMITH: And look, I'm eighty-four. I—I have my aches and pains and things are wrong, but my son must left. He came down to see me for a few days. My daughter's supposed to come January 2<sup>nd</sup>. They come to see me twice a year. It's a big trip from where they are.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: An expensive trip. And we talk on the phone and this is what I always say. My mother never talked to her mother again. She never saw her mother. She never—I said, [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. Was that hard on your mother, leaving her own mother?

FINESMITH: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

FINESMITH: It must have been very hard.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. And so you have one brother. Now, which brother is that?

FINESMITH: Yeah. That's the one that's the nearest my—he's only three years older than I am.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Yeah.

FINESMITH: If you see the picture from Romania.

LEVINE: Yeah.

FINESMITH: He's holding a little horse and I'm holding a little doll and we both have no hair because we were getting ready to go on the ship.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: Evidently at that point.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, wow. Uh-huh. Now, do you talk to him? I mean—

FINESMITH: Oh, sure. Sure. He is—when he was well, he used to come down here to—we had to move down to Florida because my husband had a bad heart.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

FINESMITH: Besides everything else.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

FINESMITH: So they would take their vacation and come down to Florida and we would see them then anyway. Now, since he can't come here and I can't go up there any more, we—we speak on the phone.

LEVINE: Good. Yeah.

FINESMITH: Yeah. We didn't lose track. I didn't lose track of his children and—only my oldest—my brother Leo's children, he had two boys. One boy lives down here, I can keep track of. The other son I can't.

LEVINE: Oh.

FINESMITH: I guess somehow or other he—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah.

FINESMITH: But otherwise—

LEVINE: It's a close family.

FINESMITH: It's a close family.

LEVINE: Yeah, very.

FINESMITH: Close family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay.

FINESMITH: Let me tell you, my husband died, I never thought all these children would come. They came from California. They came

from Arizona. They came from Chicago. I mean—so family means something.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Yes. Yeah. Okay, is there anything else that you can think of? Anything you'd like to say in closing? It's been a lovely interview.

FINESMITH: I really don't know what to say. I really don't know what to say.

LEVINE: Well.

FINESMITH: Everybody has to live their life, whatever's given them and hopefully some things there are good, so that you can remember them when the times aren't so good.

LEVINE: Hmm. Oh, that's a beautiful statement. Okay, we're going to close here and I've been speaking with Miriam Calica Finesmith and she was only four years old when she came to America in 1923. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]