

EI-139

ESTHER (ETL) SHEINMAN

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SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, April 25, 1992. I am in Manhattan at the home of Esther Sheinman, who came from Poland in 1905 when she was ten years old. Also present are Kevin Daley, who is running the audio equipment, and Mrs. Sheinman's nephew, Ron Sheinman. Good afternoon, Mrs. Sheinman.

SHEINMAN: So I say, good afternoon.

SIGRIST: May I first ask you what was your name in Poland?

SHEINMAN: E-T-L.

SIGRIST: How do you say that?

SHEINMAN: Etl.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

SHEINMAN: My maiden name.

SIGRIST: Your last name.

SHEINMAN: Sheinman.

SIGRIST: I see. That's, okay. I understand. Okay. And what is your birth date?

SHEINMAN: January 1st. (she laughs) 1898 is it?

RON SHEINMAN: I think 1895.

SIGRIST: 1895? Well, if you were ten in 1905, you would have been born in 1895. What was the name of the town you were born in?

SHEINMAN: Bialystok.

SIGRIST: You were born in a city.

SHEINMAN: (?)

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SHEINMAN: Chaim. But it was C-H-A-I-M, C-H-A-I-M.

SIGRIST: What did he do for a living in Poland?

SHEINMAN: What did he do? At one time he had wool looms.

SIGRIST: He was a weaver of some sort?

SHEINMAN: He wasn't, no. But that's, he had the looms, like the machines, he called them looms.

SIGRIST: I see. Did he own a factory of some sort or . . .

SHEINMAN: I don't remember. But it was a factory. But he wasn't happy because he came and went and went and came.

SIGRIST: You mean, he went back and forth from Poland to America.

SHEINMAN: From Poland to America.

SIGRIST: Why did he go back and forth so much?

SHEINMAN: Because he refused to work on the Sabbath.

SIGRIST: And where did they want him to work on the Sabbath?

SHEINMAN: I don't know that. It was a pre-requisite.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like?

SHEINMAN: You want to see?

SIGRIST: No, no. Describe him in your own words.

SHEINMAN: Well, he was medium height, gray hair, and he wasn't bald. He had his hair. And what else can I say? You can see, Ron, bring the little picture. The picture, that's it.

SIGRIST: And what was his temperament like? What was his personality like?

SHEINMAN: Well, he was very strict with us, and he always said, how shall I say it? The children were, he didn't believe in praising. That, what shall I say, spoils you when you praise.

SIGRIST: So he was a strict father.

SHEINMAN: Yes, he was.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

SHEINMAN: (?)

SIGRIST: Can you spell that? Can you spell her name?

SHEINMAN: A Jewish name. C-H-A-I-A, I guess.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

SHEINMAN: That's her maiden name.

SIGRIST: What was her first name?

SHEINMAN: Oh, oh, the, that's the first name. G-L-I-C-K.
That's the maiden, that's the name.

SIGRIST: And what was her temperament like? What was her
personality like?

SHEINMAN: Oh, she was a very soft person.

SIGRIST: Did she work in Poland? Did she have a job?

SHEINMAN: No, not that I know of. But we did have a, like
a grocery store there.

SIGRIST: In Poland.

SHEINMAN: In Poland.

SIGRIST: That your family ran?

SHEINMAN: How?

SIGRIST: Did your family run the grocery store?

SHEINMAN: Mostly she did.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about the house that you lived in in
Poland. What did it look like?

SHEINMAN: What did it look like? Oh, I don't remember.
But at one time they moved into a sort of an annex.

SIGRIST: An annex.

SHEINMAN: That's right. And it required walking up like
one flight.

SIGRIST: Did you have one room or did you have several
rooms?

SHEINMAN: As far as I can remember there were several.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity when you lived in
Poland?

SHEINMAN: Electricity? I don't recall. But we had, we had
light.

SIGRIST: The town that you were from in Poland, was that a
big town? Is it a city?

SHEINMAN: It was a city.

SIGRIST: And you lived right in the city.

SHEINMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like? Do you remember?

SHEINMAN: The name of the town?

SIGRIST: Yes, in the city that you grew up in, what was the name of it?

SHEINMAN: I should know. (she pauses) Let me think.

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

SHEINMAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was it noisy? Was it a crowded neighborhood?

SHEINMAN: No, no, it wasn't crowded. I guess I didn't realize it at the time.

SIGRIST: Were there stores, lots of stores in the neighborhood?

SHEINMAN: Oh, I don't recall that either.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school when you lived in Poland?

SHEINMAN: Did I go to school? Did I go to school?

RON SHEINMAN: Sometimes.

SIGRIST: Well, let me ask you this question, could your parents read and write?

SHEINMAN: How?

SIGRIST: Could your mother and father read and write?

SHEINMAN: Oh, yes, of course.

SIGRIST: Could you, as a child in Poland, could you read and write?

SHEINMAN: Did I read and did I write? (she pauses) I can't recall.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters?

SHEINMAN: Oh, there were six of us.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, good.

SHEINMAN: Oh, by the way, we arrived, we were a family of seven, but there was another young sister but she took sick. Well, when we landed, they took her to a hospital in Hoboken, that's in Jersey. And so we arrived on July Fourth. It was a holiday, right? And so the examiners didn't work, so we stayed overnight. So actually we got out on the fifth.

SIGRIST: Did you stay overnight on Ellis Island or on the boat?

SHEINMAN: No, on, in the building.

SIGRIST: In Ellis Island. Do you remember what that was like? What do you remember about that?

SHEINMAN: What I remember is on July Fourth they had fireworks, and I was a bit excited to see the exhibition, the fireworks. I slept on hard cots. It screeched. It scared me.

SIGRIST: Had you ever seen fireworks before?

SHEINMAN: I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Back in Poland for a second, can you give me the names of your brothers and sisters?

SHEINMAN: Oh, sure. My, as I say, we were six. So my oldest brother's name is Peter, then my, next came my sister, and she was called Jenny, and, oh, there was another sister, but I think she arrived before we did with a relative.

SIGRIST: She was older than you.

SHEINMAN: Yes, she was older.

SIGRIST: And she came to America first.

SHEINMAN: She came first. And then we came as a group, the six of us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of religious life when you were a little girl in Poland? Do you remember going to temple in Poland?

SHEINMAN: No, I didn't, because I'm opposed to religion. But the family was very religious. My father was.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about his religion in, for instance, did he, did he read a lot or . . .

SHEINMAN: He, well, he read a Jewish newspaper called The Forwards. It was a, the printing press was on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: This was in America.

SHEINMAN: New York City.

SIGRIST: I see. What do you remember about, when you think about being a little girl before you came to America, what do you think about in Poland? What stands out in your mind about living there.

SHEINMAN: To get out.

SIGRIST: Why? Why was it so bad?

SHEINMAN: Because of anti-Semitism.

SIGRIST: Even then.

SHEINMAN: Always.

SIGRIST: How were Jews persecuted in Russia? What do you remember about that?

SHEINMAN: About what?

SIGRIST: About Jews being persecuted in Poland, I'm sorry.

SHEINMAN: Well, I remember that out of a religious holiday like Christmas, for instance, they paraded the streets with, bearing the cross. And the Jews were always frightened because they had, what do you call those that you have on the outside of the windows.

SIGRIST: Like a screen?

SHEINMAN: Like a screen, but made tight.

SIGRIST: Shutters?

SHEINMAN: That's it, wooden. And they were closed tight. And the lights were out. We sat in the dark so they shouldn't throw stones, which they did.

SIGRIST: So this is physical violence you're talking about.

SHEINMAN: Of course.

SIGRIST: Was that a scary atmosphere to grow up in?

SHEINMAN: I think so.

SIGRIST: Were you ever, did you ever receive any of this kind of violence?

SHEINMAN: Yes, the children. I remember they threw a stone in my, I had a dent in my skull.

SIGRIST: So they hurt you.

SHEINMAN: It wasn't much. I don't know. Let me refresh myself. (she takes a drink) Go ahead.

SIGRIST: Take your time. I'll have some, too.
(he drinks) You said your sister Jenny came to America first.

SHEINMAN: No, Bessie.

SIGRIST: Bessie. Do you remember when she came, what date that she came?

SHEINMAN: She came with a relative, a family relative.

SIGRIST: Who was that? Who was the relative? Do you remember?

SHEINMAN: Who was it? I should know. Who was it? I think it was an uncle.

SIGRIST: Well, let me ask you this question. Were there other family members living in the city in Poland?

SIGRIST: Well, we all lived there.

SHEINMAN: Yes, I know. But were your parents from there?

SHEINMAN: Yes. I had a grandmother and a grandfather. They lived there.

SIGRIST: On whose side?

SHEINMAN: My, on whose side? I think my father's side.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandparents?

SHEINMAN: What do I remember. I remember my grandma was a little woman and she wore full skirts, long ones, down to the ankle. And she walked fast. What else? I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember Grandfather at all?

SHEINMAN: My father?

SIGRIST: Your grandfather. Do you remember him at all?

SHEINMAN: My grandfather? I know he had six toes.

SIGRIST: Six toes!

SHEINMAN: I don't know whether it was on both feet or one, but I know he had six toes.

SIGRIST: Well, that's something worth remembering. Was your grandmother, was she a good cook?

SHEINMAN: No.

SIGRIST: Who, was there a good cook in your family?

SHEINMAN: No.

SIGRIST: Did your mother, was your mother . . .

SHEINMAN: No. My mother wasn't interested when it came to food. She just did what she had to to feed the family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of foods that you ate when you were a little girl?

SHEINMAN: No, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Did your grandparents live near where you lived, or did they live somewhere else in that city?

SHEINMAN: We lived together.

SIGRIST: Oh, they lived with you. So you had kind of a crowded little household then.

SHEINMAN: I imagine.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, what did you do for fun when you were a little girl?

SHEINMAN: Fun wasn't allowed.

SIGRIST: Any kind of games that you played or a special toy that you might remember.

SHEINMAN: Holidays I think we used, what do you call those things, you know, you throw them.

RON SHEINMAN: Dice?

SHEINMAN: What?

RON SHEINMAN: Marbles or dice?

SHEINMAN: No. Metal.

RON SHEINMAN: Dreidel? Did you play with a dreidel?

SIGRIST: Jacks?

RON SHEINMAN: Jacks.

SHEINMAN: That's it.

SIGRIST: You said your father was very strict. How would he punish you if you did something bad?

SHEINMAN: Pull the ear, the boys.

SIGRIST: Was he tougher on the boys than on the girls? Was he more strict with the boys?

SHEINMAN: Not overly.

SIGRIST: If you wanted something, if there was something that you wanted would you go to your mother or your father?

SHEINMAN: My mother.

SIGRIST: Why?

SHEINMAN: It was easier. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Okay. Tell me a little bit about when your sister went to America.

SHEINMAN: She, the oldest one?

SIGRIST: Yeah, Bessie.

SHEINMAN: She came with my father's, my father's (she pauses), wait a minute, I knew that.

SIGRIST: Brother, wasn't it your uncle she came with?

SHEINMAN: Sister.

SIGRIST: Sister. When she came to America, where did she go?

SHEINMAN: Where did she, what do you mean where did she go?

SIGRIST: Where did she go to live when she first came.

SHEINMAN: Well, my father already had an apartment. When he came to Ellis Island to take us to the city, he had an apartment ready for us.

SIGRIST: But when your sister, because your sister came before you did.

SHEINMAN: She came with her.

SIGRIST: Right. Where did she live when she came to America?

SHEINMAN: Oh, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did she get a job?

SHEINMAN: Oh, they worked. Yes, she worked, and my other sister, too, was in. She was younger, but they both worked in a

factory hand-stitching handkerchiefs.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, what did you know about America before you came here?

SHEINMAN: That it's the land of gold.

SIGRIST: And you thought that that was true.

SHEINMAN: Yeah. I don't know what I thought, but anything was better than Poland. Right? (she drinks)

SIGRIST: Now, you said your father came before you did also, yes? Your father was already in America when you came. How long before you came did he come?

SHEINMAN: I don't know how long he stayed.

SIGRIST: You said he was going back and forth.

SHEINMAN: Twice.

SIGRIST: Do you remember him writing your family letters or sending money, anything like that, when he was in America?

SHEINMAN: Money? I remember something about money, but I don't know what.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, how did you, how did your mother

decide to finally come to be with him?

SHEINMAN: He sent for her.

SIGRIST: And she took all of you with her.

SHEINMAN: Of course.

SIGRIST: Where did you leave from?

SHEINMAN: On the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: Where did you leave Europe from?

SHEINMAN: Where? From Poland, the city was called Bialystok, which means white city. "Bial" is white.

SIGRIST: Where did you get the boat?

SHEINMAN: Hamburg.

SIGRIST: How did you get from your city to Hamburg?

SHEINMAN: How did I get? I don't recall. But we got there and what happened I remember sitting on the pier.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you had ever seen a big boat?

SHEINMAN: Of course.

SIGRIST: What did you think?

SHEINMAN: I don't know what I thought, but I didn't like it.

SIGRIST: You didn't like the boat.

SHEINMAN: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you, what luggage you took?

SHEINMAN: I suppose so, but we must have taken our clothes with us, I guess so.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat?

SHEINMAN: Rotterdam.

SIGRIST: The Rotterdam. And you didn't like it. Why didn't you like the boat? What about the boat didn't you like?

SHEINMAN: Because we were down in steerage.

SIGRIST: And what was that like?

SHEINMAN: Uh, I think I thought it was dirty. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember in your mind what that kind of

looked like in steerage, where you slept?

SHEINMAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of other people with you?

SHEINMAN: Oh, surely.

SIGRIST: How long was the boat ride?

SHEINMAN: I think it was six or seven days.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

SHEINMAN: No, I wasn't sick.

SIGRIST: Was anyone in your family sick?

SHEINMAN: I don't recall so.

SIGRIST: You think everyone was okay.

SHEINMAN: I think yes.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else that you remember about the boat that stands out in your mind? Maybe eating on the boat? Do you remember that?

SHEINMAN: It was hearsay that you took your own, brought your own food, because it wasn't kosher. But that's what I'll

tell you.

SIGRIST: Did your mother take food with her?

SHEINMAN: I believe yes. But I believe we ate a lot of potatoes.

SIGRIST: You mean on the boat.

SHEINMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where on the boat you ate?

SHEINMAN: Just a vague recollection that there were tables. I really can't say.

SIGRIST: So the boat ride lasted six or seven days. Do you remember, when you got to New York do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

SHEINMAN: Statue of Liberty? No, I only remember the fireworks.

SIGRIST: So you went to Ellis Island, and you had to stay over night because it was Labor Day, uh, Fourth of July.

SHEINMAN: The Fourth.

SIGRIST: The Fourth of July. Who came to meet you at

Ellis Island?

SHEINMAN: My father.

SIGRIST: And where did he take you?

SHEINMAN: He took us to an apartment on the Lower East Side which was four flights up. And I never could remember which was our floor, but they had the toilets out in the hall, and so there was a white knob and there was a yellow knob. That was the whole floor. (she drinks)

SIGRIST: Was that primarily a Jewish neighborhood?

SHEINMAN: All the immigrants came there.

SIGRIST: What was your father doing for work at that time?

SHEINMAN: At that time he was a presser. I think pants, boys' knickers.

SIGRIST: And did your mother get a job when you came here?

SHEINMAN: No, my mother never worked.

SIGRIST: Never.

SHEINMAN: No. She didn't even do the housework. We did it.

SIGRIST: Oh, well that's, I'll ask you that.

SHEINMAN: My mother was a lady.

SIGRIST: When . . .

SHEINMAN: And the apartment had cement washtubs, two. One for washing and one for rinsing, if that's of any interest.

SIGRIST: Yes. In fact, my next question was going to be what were some of your chores that you had to do as a girl?

SHEINMAN: Everything. Cleaning the house, scrubbing the floors, plain wooden floors, boards.

SIGRIST: Did you have any running water in the apartment?

SHEINMAN: What?

SIGRIST: Did you have a, did you have running water in the apartment?

SHEINMAN: Did we? Yes, I believe so.

SIGRIST: What were the, what did your brothers and sisters do?

SHEINMAN: The oldest brother swept the shop floors. My sisters both were taught to hand-stitch handkerchiefs. They

both worked at a machine.

SIGRIST: What was the first job that you got?

SHEINMAN: That I got? Did I have a job? (she laughs) I don't remember. I must have had something. No, I went to school.

SIGRIST: Oh. They enrolled you in school right away?

SHEINMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

SHEINMAN: Hearsay. I was able to read somehow or other. Don't ask me how, but I was able to stand up and read from the book that was distributed in the classroom.

SIGRIST: Was going to school very difficult for you?

SHEINMAN: No, I didn't think so.

SIGRIST: Your brother, who was sweeping the floors, and your sisters, did they have to contribute the money that they made to the household.

SHEINMAN: I think it was an arranged, oh, sure. We all gave the money to the, to my mother or my father or both, I don't remember. And they, believe me, I didn't have any money.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about what was different about America and where you had come from?

SHEINMAN: Everything was different and everything was better.

SIGRIST: What really struck you as being unusual? What really struck you about being unusual in America, different than how it had been in Poland?

SHEINMAN: I wasn't afraid. I was, mostly a feeling of freedom.

SIGRIST: How do you think, how did your mother like being in America?

SHEINMAN: How did I know?

SIGRIST: How did your mother like America?

SHEINMAN: Oh, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did she try to learn English?

SHEINMAN: No. We spoke Yiddish. And as she resented it because she wanted to learn English and we, my older sister went to night school.

SIGRIST: And your mother wanted to learn.

SHEINMAN: Yes. But we didn't have any patience to teach her.

SIGRIST: What about your dad? Did he ever learn English?

SHEINMAN: No. He had (?). I don't think he had to know English. Everybody was an immigrant. Everybody was from, mostly from Poland. I don't know if they came from other countries. I can't tell you that.

SIGRIST: What about, what did you do for fun when you were growing up in New York? If you had an afternoon to do something entertaining, what would you do?

SHEINMAN: (?) I don't remember anything.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go to the movies?

SHEINMAN: Movies?

SIGRIST: Or to the theater, the Yiddish theater, perhaps?

SHEINMAN: We did go to the Yiddish theater, yes. But then I was much older.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Did your parents pretty much keep company with people like themselves, with other Polish people?

SHEINMAN: Yes, because he became a member of the synagogue and they were friends.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in this neighborhood?

SHEINMAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in the neighborhood where you lived?

SHEINMAN: Oh, yes, of course.

SIGRIST: And were you all required to attend? Did you all have to go?

SHEINMAN: The girls didn't. The men.

SIGRIST: Did your brothers and sisters like America?

SHEINMAN: Well, I imagine so.

SIGRIST: The brother who swept floors, where did he sweep the floors?

SHEINMAN: My father provided the shop for him.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember in New York ever seeing, for instance, an automobile for the first time?

SHEINMAN: Oh, we used to call them carriages without horses.

SIGRIST: Was that something unusual for you to see?

SHEINMAN: That's the impression I still have.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the first time you ever rode on a subway?

SHEINMAN: Oh, yes. We got promoted. We moved from the Lower, uh, the East Side to the Bronx. And we moved up to the very top floor of the building because we couldn't stand the noise of the people walking above us. What else can I tell you.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you moved to the Bronx?

SHEINMAN: Oh, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Had you been in New York for a while? Had you been on the Lower East Side for a number of years before you moved?

SHEINMAN: I imagine so, but I couldn't tell you. I don't remember at all.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let me just ask a couple final questions. One is I wanted to ask about your dad. Was he comfortable in America, being so, you said he was a strict person and a very religious person. Was he happy in the environment in New York? Did he like being there?

SHEINMAN: I know what you're asking me, but I couldn't answer your question.

SIGRIST: He never talked about it.

SHEINMAN: No. It was his home.

SIGRIST: Did he ever want to go back to Poland?

SHEINMAN: Oh, heavens, no.

SIGRIST: It was the same thing with your mother?

SHEINMAN: I don't think the discussion ever came up. Who would ever want to go back to Poland? That's the impression I have.

SIGRIST: Are you happy that you came to America?

SHEINMAN: Inasmuch as I didn't have to go to work, I went to school.

SIGRIST: And that was a great opportunity for you?

SHEINMAN: I went to school on the Lower East Side. It was known as P.S. 62. And you know who graduated from there? I forget, uh, I forget what his name is. I used to know his name. There was an association, graduates, formed an association. We all belonged to it, and he was the head man.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite subject in school?

SHEINMAN: I liked everything.

SIGRIST: But nothing sticks out in your mind as what you really excelled in.

SHEINMAN: Not necessarily.

SIGRIST: Were your parents very supportive of the kids getting an education?

SHEINMAN: Oh, of course. Every orthodox Jew wanted his family to be educated.

SIGRIST: How about Americanized? How did your father feel about his children becoming American and maybe giving up some of the old ways?

SHEINMAN: He accepted everything that came along.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much for

having us over here, and for letting us report.

SHEINMAN: I answered all your questions.

SIGRIST: Yep, you answered all my questions, and I thank you. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.