

**EI-152**

**IDA (CHAYA) SCHUR OZEROFF**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**RUSSIA, 1911    PORT: LIBAU**

**AGE 13            RESIDENCES: RUSSIA: YASINOC**

**US: BRONX, NY**

SIGRIST:    Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, May 9th, 1992. I'm here at Ellis Island with Ida Ozeroff, who came from Russia in 1911 when she was thirteen. Good afternoon, Mrs. Ozeroff.

OZEROFF:    Good afternoon.

SIGRIST:    Can we start by you giving me what your name was in Russia?

OZEROFF:    Chaya Schur.

SIGRIST:    Can you spell all that for me?

OZEROFF:    Oh, Chaya is C-H-A-Y-A. Schur is S-C-H-U-R.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, please?

OZEROFF: January 3, 1898.

SIGRIST: I see. Where were you born?

OZEROFF: I was born in, uh, Yasinoc. It's a place where my parents started farming.

Y-A-S-I-N-O-C, I guess.

SIGRIST: And your father was a farmer?

OZEROFF: Well, he was farming, and he was doing other work besides, like some kind of, wintertime they used to sell, you know, cut down the trees.

SIGRIST: Trees?

OZEROFF: Yes. And they sent it by water, you know. I can't exactly explain.

SIGRIST: Like lumbering.

OZEROFF: Lumbering, yes.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

OZEROFF: His name was, American is Max Schur. M-A-X S-C-H-U-R.

SIGRIST: What was your father like? What was his temperament like?

OZEROFF: I think he was great. He was a nice man. He was good-looking, handsome, tall, blonde, blue eyes and he was a nice man, but he had no skill, like, to work. He had to get, the last time when he worked was for Borden's Milk. Milk . . .

SIGRIST: When you came here?

OZEROFF: When we came here, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what the town looked like that you grew up in. What was this town like?

OZEROFF: Well, first I grew, till eight years-and-a-half, let's say, I grew up in Yasinoc. We had a farm, like we had cattle. We had two horses. We had chickens, turkeys, and so on. Everything was nice. And they used to, my mother used to sell butter and cheese and eggs and so on. Whatever we had produced on the farm.

SIGRIST: What were your chores on the farm? What did you have to do?

OZEROFF: Well, I was eight-and-a-half when I left the farm, but till eight-and-a-half I was helping to take care of the cows when they were on pasture, and I would watch for the, I really loved the life there. But suddenly my mother decided she didn't want to be a

farm lady any more, and she decided she wanted my father, they talked it over. Of course, I was too young to understand. They talked it over, that he should go to America, and in 1906 he left for America, and he left us living in the city of Mglin, M-G-L-I-N, and that was (?). So we lived in a city for five years, until we left to join my father.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

OZEROFF: Her name was Sarah, you know, S-A-R-A-H.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

OZEROFF: Uh, Arister, A-R-I-S-T-E-R.

SIGRIST: Was she from this town originally?

OZEROFF: Well, the neighboring town thirty-five miles away. Her name, I imagine she came from (?). That's where I remember my grandfather lived. (?). And his name, and he had his home in (?).

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandfather?

OZEROFF: Well, this grandfather, he was also a very nice man. And he owned a nice home in middle, in center of town. And nothing much, I don't really remember much.

SIGRIST: Is this your mother's father?

OZEROFF: My mother's father.

SIGRIST: Was there a grandmother, too?

OZEROFF: No, no. I don't remember any grandmothers. Even step-grandmothers I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about, what's a fond memory of being a girl in Russia? What do you remember that is a very fond memory for you?

OZEROFF: Well, I liked, I was studying, I had private teachers coming into my house and teaching me Russian and German, and I had also a Hebrew teacher teaching me Jewish and Hebrew. So I started off very well, you know. I didn't go to schools because the Russian, we weren't, we were Jewish, and they only had ten percent of Jewish children and ninety percent Russians. So I didn't have a chance because we weren't rich enough to get, to pay off to get in.

SIGRIST: When your father came to America, did your mother have to get a job to support you?

OZEROFF: No, she didn't get it. She didn't get a job. She could have, but she didn't.

We needed the money. We could have used the money, but she didn't. But we went to school. I was thirteen, and yet I went to school.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters at that time?

OZEROFF: I had two, at the time I had two brothers and one sister.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

OZEROFF: Eh, Aaron Schur, Ben Schur and Anna Schur.

SIGRIST: Are they older than you, younger?

OZEROFF: I'm the oldest.

SIGRIST: You're the oldest.

OZEROFF: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, what was it like growing up in a house, say, after your father left, the four kids and your mother, what was that like for you?

OZEROFF: Well, it was difficult. We had to wait till my father sent us money to live on. And there were bad times while my father, we had, they had, they called it, like, what do they call, they actually couldn't get any jobs and couldn't get . . .

SIGRIST: So it was a very hard economic . . .

OZEROFF: Hard for him, yes.

SIGRIST: When your father came to America, what job did he get?

OZEROFF: He was, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: But he was sending money back to you.

OZEROFF: Yes. Every time he earned money he sent. If he couldn't earn money, then we were out of luck.

SIGRIST: What kind of foods did you eat in Russia?

OZEROFF: Oh, we had good food. We had, I thought we had good food. We had, potatoes was the main thing, and bread. And then we had, I don't, uh, vegetables, like borscht out of cabbage and borscht out of schav, and borscht, and then we had a lot of vegetables, like.

SIGRIST: Did you grow these on the farm yourself?

OZEROFF: Yes, on the farm we grew it, but in the city we had to buy it.

SIGRIST: Was there something that your mother made that was your favorite food that you remember?

OZEROFF: I'm such a big, I liked everything. So everything seemed to me good. Whatever my mother cooked was good to me. She made nice chicken broth and timmus.

SIGRIST: So she was a good cook?

OZEROFF: She was a good cook, yes.

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little girl?

OZEROFF: I was pretty, they told me. And that's all I know. I was growing up. I went to school. I went to school, before I moved to the city I was young. Five years I started to go to the village school, and I did pretty well.

SIGRIST: What kind of things did they teach you in the village school?

OZEROFF: Just writing and math and spelling, and they also took us to the Greek Orthodox church every morning to pray.

SIGRIST: How did your mother and father feel about you going to the Greek Orthodox church?

OZEROFF: They didn't feel bad about it. It's, I liked it. I liked the way they were doing the praying. I liked the Greek. I used to be able to read the Greek prayers, and now I forgot about it.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write?

OZEROFF: Yes, my father did very well, but my mother not so.

SIGRIST: After your father went to America in 1906, and he's writing back to you and sending money . . .

OZEROFF: Oh, yes, writing back.

SIGRIST: What's he telling you about America?

OZEROFF: Oh, the things that he goes through. Sometimes he has good times, and then he called it crisis. "That's a crisis, and we can't get a job and we can't earn any money." And that's why he was sending us little bits of money. But when he got a job and the crisis was over he would get a job and he would be able to send us more money. And then he saved up money for the tickets to get us over here. He wanted his family, and it took five years for him to decide, save up enough money to take us over.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about leaving Russia?

OZEROFF: She was happy. She didn't like Russia. She didn't like all the happenings that were, we didn't live through, I didn't live through pogrom because the pogroms were twenty miles away from one side and north side and a south side, thirty-five miles. The pogroms happened, they used to kill, especially Jews, and rob and everything they did wasn't very good.

SIGRIST: It was a dangerous atmosphere.

OZEROFF: Dangerous, dangerous. They used to kill a lot of, mainly Jews. Young men, especially. They would go to businesses, they would get after businesses. Loot, get all the nice things out of them.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun in this town? What games did you play, or what did you do for entertainment when you were growing up?

OZEROFF: We didn't. We didn't have any fun outside of going to religious synagogue on holidays.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue near where you lived?

OZEROFF: Oh, yes. Where we were, we had a synagogue.

SIGRIST: Describe what Passover was like in Russia?

OZEROFF: Very good. It was taken, it was very, I enjoyed that. Passover I enjoyed. We had games, certain games, you know, playing with walnuts and all kinds of nuts. And we had wine and everything that was necessary for the, to perform the seder, you know.

SIGRIST: So that was kind of a festive time.

OZEROFF: A festive time, yes. All the holidays. That was Passover. Then we have the fall. In the fall we had succoth we liked.

SIGRIST: What did you do for that?

OZEROFF: Well, they built sort of a tent with green leaves over it, and they, we were eating a lot. That means like it was a punishment that the Jews, they were suffering. They didn't have any homes or something. So we, that's the way. I remember, I don't remember exactly. My grandson, he's here. He's a rabbi.

SIGRIST: He would know, for sure.

OZEROFF: He could give you all the details why people have those festivals.

SIGRIST: But you do remember it, as a little girl.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: That was something you looked forward to doing.

OZEROFF: Yes. We looked forward, yes.

SIGRIST: All right. So Dad is sending you money, and he's writing you about what his life is going on.

OZEROFF: Yes. We used to write letters back and forth, and I used to write. He was very proud of me because I was able to write the American address because I took German and I was able to read the address. And then we corresponded in Yiddish, you know, Yiddish writings.

SIGRIST: It sounds like you were a very intelligent little kid.

OZEROFF: Yeah, I hope so. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: You said how much you enjoyed school and you were able to write back to your dad. Well, it took him five years to get enough money to send you over.

OZEROFF: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: As a little eleven-year-old, what did you know about America? What did

America mean to you?

OZEROFF: I wanted to go back to Russia. I didn't like it.

SIGRIST: No, but while you were in Russia. What did you know about America?

OZEROFF: I thought it was wonderful, you know, to be in America. But when I came there, to America, I didn't like it. I wanted to go back to Russia and stay with my grandparents. So my father was ready to send me back, but it broke, the war broke out. In 1913 the war started. You remember? I was there, ( she laughs ) so I remember. So I couldn't go, and then we were separated and forgot all about it. It took a long time, and I didn't want to go back already. My grandmother died, and . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you when you came in 1911? What did you pack?

OZEROFF: I took my Russian books that I studied, but I don't know what happened to them. I moved around a lot, you know. And most of it, my mother sold everything.

SIGRIST: Did your mother take anything with her?

OZEROFF: Nothing that I could remember that we should keep. She has some towels and sheets and tablecloths made especially to take along, but I don't have any of those.

One of my sisters got it. I got, being in America we got, I got an additional sister and two brothers.

SIGRIST: I see. What port did you leave from?

OZEROFF: What port did I leave? Oh, from Russia.

SIGRIST: From Russia.

OZEROFF: Lebow.

SIGRIST: And how did you get there?

OZEROFF: We got, from our place we had to take a horse and wagon, a man to drive us to a place, to railroad where, the name of it was the Netchen, Un Netch. There we took the railroad to Gomel, because we had to stop to examine our eyes before we got to the port. So we went, we went, the doctor found out that one of my brothers and I had something wrong with my eyes. We usually, when we cried, and we had something to cry about. ( she laughs ) So our eyes turned pinkish or reddish, and he said that's no good. So we kept going and curing, trying to get the eyes cured. And the other two children were fine. So after a while my mother got disgusted and said, "Well, I'm going anyway. If they want to send you back, I'll take the two children to America, and you go back to your grandparents." And that was good, but they passed us. There was

nothing wrong with the eyes.

SIGRIST: And that was in Gomel that the doctor . . .

OZEROFF: No, from Lebow.

SIGRIST: I see.

OZEROFF: They checked our eyes, and it was fine.

SIGRIST: So you were all right.

OZEROFF: So we were on the boat for twenty-one days.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

OZEROFF: It was Lithuania.

SIGRIST: And what was it like for a little girl in Russia to see a boat? What was your reaction?

OZEROFF: I thought it was a novelty, you know. And, but I didn't like it because we got seasick. We didn't enjoy it.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep? What were your . . .

OZEROFF: Also on bunks. In the third class we came in, so we had, I guess on the main floor or downstairs. I don't know where it was. It must have been downstairs. And, because we had to go up to the, we had to walk up steps to go to the first class of the boat. They were supposed to be the rich class. We were, my father just sent us third class tickets.

SIGRIST: Did you have any interaction with the first class passengers?

OZEROFF: Oh, yes. We talked. They were nice. Some children my age, we thought we'd correspond, but we lost each other.

SIGRIST: Did, where did they feed you on the boat?

OZEROFF: Oh, it was on the same area. They had tables for eating, and they'd serve us all kind of food. But we couldn't eat it because we've got to keep up, we kept, well, I'll say, "Throwing up."

SIGRIST: Throwing up. Sure, that's what it was. ( they laugh ) Did you take any kind of medicine or eat any kind of food to help you . . .

OZEROFF: Nothing, nothing. No, they didn't give us any medicine. They didn't even give us any eggs. Just some kind of meat and soups. I don't even know because if I

ate it I threw up, and I don't know.

SIGRIST: Now, your mother, of course, has got four children with her.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was she sick also?

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: So what was this experience like for her with four kids?

OZEROFF: She was glad she was on the boat. She didn't care. She just wanted to get to America.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being up on the deck of the boat?

OZEROFF: Yes, I remember.

SIGRIST: What would you do if you were up on deck?

OZEROFF: Oh, we'd just walk around a little bit and try to see the waves, to look over the waves. I picked up my little sister. She wanted to see. I picked her up on the railing and then the boat turned and I almost lost her, and that was a terrible feeling after, you know. Thank God I held her tight, you know. ( she laughs ) She's here.

She's still here.

SIGRIST: You can always remind her of this. ( they laugh )

OZEROFF: Yes. Sometimes she tells me that she wishes I dropped her in. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: How long was the boat trip?

OZEROFF: Twenty-one days.

SIGRIST: Twenty-one days. That's a long time.

OZEROFF: A long time, yes. Before the twenty-one days, they stopped a little bit at the port. I think it was England, or London, whatever they call. And they came on, some people got off there and some people got on. I don't know. I don't, but I remember the boat, water was coming up through the, and everybody got excited and said that the boat is drowning. And my mother got excited. You know, she started, and a lot of people started to pray. I don't know. And I remember a sailor took a sheet, that's what I remember, and stuffed it into the hole where the water was coming up, and the water stopped coming up, and I don't know what else they did to make the ship keep going for five more days.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of other immigrants on the boat?

OZEROFF: Yes, full. As a matter of fact, they picked up some immigrants that the boat, when they started out from the port in Lebow, after a few days they brought on, they got stuck on a sand bar. So we had to, our boat had to pick up those passengers from the other boat because they couldn't, somehow they couldn't let them, so we had double. It was really crowded.

SIGRIST: Ah, very crowded, it sounds. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came into New York?

OZEROFF: When we came into, no, I saw the Statue of Liberty when I came in. Yes, I've seen the Statue of Liberty, but I never visited it.

SIGRIST: I mean, when you came in on the boat do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

OZEROFF: Oh, yes. I remember seeing it. And everybody got excited, the Statue of Liberty. But I never, we, once we went to visit the Statue of Liberty and it was closed. It was too late.

SIGRIST: But you did see it as the boat was coming into the harbor.

OZEROFF: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Then what happened? After you got to New York, then what happened? You came to Ellis Island?

OZEROFF: To Ellis Island, and from Ellis Island, after my father picked us up three days later.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about Ellis Island. What happened to your mother and you kids when you were at Ellis Island?

OZEROFF: We were having, just doing nothing there. We had to wait for the dinners and breakfasts, or whatever they gave us, and sleep and look for, till they call us. On the fourth day they called us, Max Schur is here, and so my mother got happy, and we all got happy, and that kept. And when he joined us we really, they looked us over again, and one of my brothers, that was a funny thing. My brother didn't have a winter coat somehow, whether he lost it, or I don't know what happened. So he was wearing my mother's winter coat. My mother had a shawl, so she wore it. And we all had winter coats. So the sleeves were too long on my brother's, so the only, he made him take it off to make sure he has arms. They thought maybe they were hiding something. So they took off the coat and they saw that he had arms, and they let him through.

SIGRIST: That's very interesting. Why did you have to stay overnight at Ellis Island?

OZEROFF: Because my father said he was there even when the boat landed. But they didn't call his name. They had to wait for his name to be called. And I guess it's because his name was Schur, with an "S". Maybe they had to wait till the, till his name came up, till his turn came up to be called.

SIGRIST: Tell me about where you slept on Ellis Island? What did it look like?

OZEROFF: It was, I felt comfortable. I fell asleep. I slept, so I don't know about, but it was a nice place. They had a mattress and they had a nice pillow. They had a blanket. The blankets are still there, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have to eat here?

OZEROFF: Yes. They served us food, better than, well, we enjoyed the food better than on the boat. We at least ate. Three times a day they gave us food. I don't remember exactly what I ate.

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island crowded in 1911? Were there a lot of people here?

OZEROFF: Quite a few, yeah, it was crowded because it took a long time, it finally took my father a long time to get us, you know, to be called.

SIGRIST: What was it like for you seeing your father again?

OZEROFF: I couldn't recognize him. I kept looking at him and looking at him if this is, if I remember him correctly. But I, eventually I realized that it was he, you know. Five years faded away, faded away the, I couldn't imagine that, you know, he was dressed differently, too. He was dressed like an American. When he left he left with boots. They wore boots in Russia. Very seldom he had regular shoes, you know. Only to a party or to a wedding, otherwise they used to, wherever they went they wear, they wore boots.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your mother greeted your father?

OZEROFF: Oh, yes. She was so happy to see him. She grabbed him around, put her arms around him, and they were talking, and I don't know what they were. My father was telling why he was late, you know. She asked why, and it was doing, it was all right. It was a nice, we didn't have a chance to talk to my father. My mother did all the talking.

SIGRIST: Where did your father take you when you left Ellis Island?

OZEROFF: He took us to the Bronx, 146th Street. The number of the house was 460 East 146th Street, Bronx, New York. Then what else?

SIGRIST: Do you remember that apartment, or . . .

OZEROFF: Three room apartment, well-furnished. One bedroom, a big kitchen, and a nice, they called it front room. That was the living room, like. And we had, and that was it.

SIGRIST: What job did he have at that time?

OZEROFF: I, uh, what job did he have? Oh, he worked in some kind of factory, a silk factory. But it wasn't well-paid. He was looking for other. Finally he found a job at Borden's Milk Company. That's what he found, and he was working there for a long time until he, they found out that he had high blood pressure, and they thought that he was too old or too sick to work and they fired him.

SIGRIST: Oh. Well, we're going to pause and flip the tape over, and then we're going to talk about what it was like to get adjusted to America.

OZEROFF: Yes.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. Tell me what it was like for you that first year, say, in America.

What was different about America that was hard to get used to?

OZEROFF: Well, the language I couldn't get, and otherwise everything was simple, you know.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

OZEROFF: Well, little by little we learned English. I don't know how I learned English, but I read. I read English papers. I read, and then I had dictionaries that used to tell me the. And what else?

SIGRIST: How about, were there things that were different living in the Bronx than where you had come from in Russia?

OZEROFF: Yes, it was different.

SIGRIST: What? What was different?

OZEROFF: Well, where I lived in Russia we had, well, the first thing was the different air. I didn't like the smell of the coal smoke. It didn't, I don't know, it didn't appeal to me. That's the reason, that was the one reason that I wanted to go back. The air was much fresher in Russia where I was.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have electricity and a telephone and that sort of thing?

OZEROFF: No. We had gas light, and we had a coal stove to cook on, and just gas light. We didn't have a telephone. There were telephones, but we didn't have any.

SIGRIST: Were you put immediately into school when you got here?

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was that like for you?

OZEROFF: Well, it was difficult. They used to talk, and I didn't know what they were talking about. But, eventually, I was reading the book, you know, and little by little I got into it. And then when I got married, my children were going to school. I was, I could say that I was studying with them. You know, I used to listen to them. I thought I knew a lot, and I used to help my children. I was very good in math and spelling. And English, even English I was good, in English grammar. I was better than the American children.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother and how your mother adjusted to America. It must have been difficult for her.

OZEROFF: It was difficult and she liked it. She liked it better than being in Russia. She was happy to be in America.

SIGRIST: What things were difficult for her?

OZEROFF: Well, she had to do, the cooking was difficult, you know, and the cleaning, and she had a newborn child. But she used to get help from her own children. Her children used to help a lot. My brother used to do shopping, and one brother did something else, and I did, I was the oldest. I used to do a lot of cleaning for her.

SIGRIST: Did she ever get a job?

OZEROFF: No, never. I was the one, I got work.

SIGRIST: What was your first job?

OZEROFF: I also worked in the silk factory for a while, but then I got sick. Unfortunately, I got sick a lot. I had surgery on my neck, and then I was, I wasn't, in other words, I was unable to work and help them for a long time. Then when I started to work, shortly after that I met my husband and we got married.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you got married?

OZEROFF: How old, I was twenty, almost twenty-two, I think.

SIGRIST: Was your husband American-born, or . . .

OZEROFF: No, he was born in Gomel, and he was also about the same age. We got married, and . . .

SIGRIST: And had children?

OZEROFF: And then we had children, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, let me ask you a couple of final questions. One is were your parents happy that they came here?

OZEROFF: Yes, they were happy. They didn't like, they absolutely didn't like to remain in Russia. And my father was a hard-working man and a good support, as much as he could. They don't make too much money, but he supported his children, looked out. They wanted to, they should get educated.

SIGRIST: It was a hard life for him.

OZEROFF: A hard life, yes.

SIGRIST: And, now, earlier you told us that initially you wanted to go back to Russia.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: You didn't like America.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: Ultimately, are you glad that they came and that you stayed?

OZEROFF: Well, I'm glad because all the things that have happened. I was glad that I had three wonderful children, but after my son, I worked hard and sent my children to school. I wanted them to get a good education. My, my older daughter is here. Then I had a son, a genius. He was not quite nineteen years old when he graduated from college as a physicist, cum laude and what else. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Well, I think, we have to get you back on a boat. I want to thank you, Mrs. Ozeroff, for taking a few minutes out from your visit here.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: To just come up and add your immigration story to our Oral History Project.

OZEROFF: Yes.

SIGRIST: I'm glad I bumped into you in the hallway.

OZEROFF: Well, I didn't feel, I didn't finish the story about my grand, my son.

SIGRIST: Well, go ahead.

OZEROFF: My son, ten weeks later, after he graduated from college with, as a physicist, he had an automobile accident, and he died in the automobile accident, so that was unfortunate for me.

SIGRIST: I'm sorry to hear that.

OZEROFF: He was very brilliant. He was smart. He was, I don't know. That was the only stupid thing he did, he made a mistake in his automobile.

SIGRIST: Do you have grandchildren?

OZEROFF: Yes, I have, this is my grandson, and I have, he has a daughter, twenty-one years old, and she's graduating from Columbia University, Barnard. And then I have two, three more grandchildren. I have four grandchildren. Then I have great-grandchildren, five, I think I have. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Well, it sounds like you've had a very full life, certainly.

OZEROFF: Yes, yes.

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SIGRIST: Well, again, I want to thank you for coming here and letting us do this.

OZEROFF: Yes. I'm glad I did, and I hope I did well.

SIGRIST: You did very well. This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Ida Ozeroff at Ellis Island.