

**EI-188**

**SADIE GUTTMAN KAPLAN**

**BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 26, 1892**

**INTERVIEW DATE: 7/2/1992**

**RUNNING TIME: 54:34**

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

**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: TEANECK, NEW JERSEY**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1993**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 12/1993**

**RUSSIA, CIRCA 1905 RESIDENCE: BARAFKA, NEAR ODESSA**

**APPROXIMATELY AGE 12 US: LOWER EAST SIDE, NYC**

**SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED**

**HEBREW IMMIGRANT AID SOCIETY (HIAS) EMPLOYEE AT ELLIS ISLAND CIRCA 1920**

**Oral Historian's Note: Prior to the interview, Mrs. Kaplan stated her age as 94, but her daughter-in-law later produced the naturalization certificate, which stated that Mrs. Kaplan was born on December 26, 1892, thereby making her 99 at the time of the interview. One will notice a clever avoidance of specific dates during the interview and the immigration year and age are simply guesses. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Ellis Island Oral History Project, 2/18/1993.**

**SIGRIST:** Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, July 2, 1992. I'm here in Teaneck, New Jersey, with Sadie Kaplan, who came from Russia in 1905 when she was approximately seven years old, and who later worked for the HIAS for seventeen years, during which time she worked at Ellis Island. Mrs. Kaplan believes she is ninety-four at the present time. Anyway, good afternoon.

**KAPLAN:** Good afternoon.

**SIGRIST:** Can I ask you, Mrs. Kaplan, what was the name of the town where you

were born?

KAPLAN: I think they used to call it Barafka.

SIGRIST: Do you know how to spell that? Barafka?

KAPLAN: I don't know. It's near Odessa or something, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Near Odessa. What do you remember about that town? Do you remember anything about that town?

KAPLAN: Well, it was a nice town.

SIGRIST: What did it look like?

KAPLAN: It had nice streets kept nice and clean and . . .

SIGRIST: Was it a big town or a small town?

KAPLAN: No. It's a small town.

SIGRIST: What did most people . . .

KAPLAN: A lot of Gentiles, a lot of Jews, got along very nicely.

SIGRIST: So there wasn't much anti-Semitism there.

KAPLAN: No. Nothing.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the center of town looked like?

KAPLAN: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your house looked like?

KAPLAN: Which house?

SIGRIST: Your house, the house you lived in.

KAPLAN: Well, I had a nice home, a nice house. Bedrooms, living room, you know, the usual they had in Europe at that time.

SIGRIST: What was the house made out of?

KAPLAN: Brick. Not made out of wood. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: So you had lots of rooms?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have animals?

KAPLAN: Animals? I think we had a cat. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: But you didn't keep cows or anything like that?

KAPLAN: Oh, no. It wasn't that kind of a town.

SIGRIST: What did your father do for a living in Russia?

KAPLAN: He was a scholar. He didn't do anything.

SIGRIST: Scholar. What was his name?

KAPLAN: Max.

SIGRIST: And what was your father like as a person? What was his personality like?

KAPLAN: Well, he was tall, good-looking, scholarly, observed his religion very good. In fact, the whole family, you know, from sort of a rabbinical on both sides.

SIGRIST: So your father's father was like this also?

KAPLAN: Yeah. (?) I don't know what, you know what a Yeshiva means?

SIGRIST: It's a school, isn't it?

KAPLAN: A school.

SIGRIST: What, then how did your family make money in Russia? How did you support yourself?

KAPLAN: Well, my grandmother had a store, and what did she, I think through that store we lived very nicely.

SIGRIST: What kind of a store was this?

KAPLAN: I'm just trying to think. ( she pauses ) I don't know. A little of this, a little of that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember visiting your grandmother's store?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what it looked like on the inside?

KAPLAN: Just, like a store, like in Europe, like all stores, you know, in that year.

SIGRIST: What's the difference between a store in Europe and a store in America?

KAPLAN: Well, they are different. They are smaller and, after all, don't forget, I'm already eighty-something years.

SIGRIST: Were you close to your grandmother?

KAPLAN: Very close.

SIGRIST: Is this your mother's father, I mean your father's mother?

KAPLAN: No, my father's mother. But . . .

SIGRIST: What was her name?

KAPLAN: Let's see. I'll tell you, she was a very, very clever woman, very

intellectual. And people used to come to her for advice. Then she was bedridden.

SIGRIST: What happened to her?

KAPLAN: She, I don't remember what happened to her, but she was bedridden, she was sick. She couldn't do anything. But people used to come to her for advice. She was very, very clever, very bright. And at that time, I don't know how income came. You have no idea about the income.

SIGRIST: Where did your grandmother live? Did she live . . .

KAPLAN: With us.

SIGRIST: Oh, she lived with you.

KAPLAN: Yeah, she lived with us. We all lived together.

SIGRIST: So how many people are living in your house?

KAPLAN: Our own house?

SIGRIST: Who in your family is living in your house?

KAPLAN: Well, my brothers.

SIGRIST: Can you name them?

KAPLAN: Sure. The oldest was Louie, Joe, Nat, Charlie, and myself.

SIGRIST: So you're the youngest.

KAPLAN: I was the youngest.

SIGRIST: And the only girl.

KAPLAN: The only girl.

SIGRIST: What was that like growing up as a little girl being the only girl?

KAPLAN: Spoiled.

SIGRIST: Yes, how did they spoil you?

KAPLAN: I was a spoiled brat. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What did you do that was so bratty?

KAPLAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: What did you do that was so bratty? What . . .

KAPLAN: Well, I had to have my way. A little stubbornness.

SIGRIST: Did you usually get your way?

KAPLAN: Sometime. Most of the time, from my father.

SIGRIST: Were you Daddy's little girl?

KAPLAN: Uh-huh. I was well-attached to my father. My mother, too. Very much attached. We were an attached family.

SIGRIST: When you were in Russia, your father being an intellectual person, did he send you to school or try to teach you things?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What did he teach you?

KAPLAN: In the house. He teach you how to read, how to write, you know, Jewish, Hebrew.

SIGRIST: Was that unusual for a little girl at that time to be able to read and write Hebrew?

KAPLAN: Why not? And I remember when I went to school, when I came home, my friends came with me and we sat down on the floor and played jacks in those days.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

KAPLAN: Her Jewish name was Petsi. Her English name was Pauline.

SIGRIST: Pauline. Do you remember what her maiden name was?

KAPLAN: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Was she from that town also?

KAPLAN: No. She came from Constantine, and her brothers were in the wine business. She, that's where she came from.

SIGRIST: You said Constantine?

KAPLAN: Constantine.

SIGRIST: Is that in Russia?

KAPLAN: In Russia.

SIGRIST: Constantine. How did she meet . . .

KAPLAN: It was in Russia at that time, I don't know where it is now. Maybe they changed the name altogether. After all, it's eighty, almost eighty-five years that I'm here.

SIGRIST: A long time. How did she and your father meet?

KAPLAN: That I don't know. ( she laughs ) In those days, you know, like in the old days it's arranged, especially with the Orthodox people. They met. I assure you they didn't know each other from before.

SIGRIST: What was your mother like as a person?

KAPLAN: Oh, she was lovely. She was nice, kind of stout, and very devoted to all of

us. She was a wonderful woman.

SIGRIST: Did she do the cooking in the house?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember something that she used to make that you liked?  
( Mrs. Kaplan laughs )

KAPLAN: She used to make delicious fish, stews, you know. She used to make a lot. She used to bake. And she came here, too. After all, we all came here together.

SIGRIST: Can we pause just for a moment, please? ( break in tape ) I'm resuming the interview with Sadie Kaplan. Well, who wanted to come to America?

KAPLAN: Well, at that time the boys were growing up, and they were afraid of the army. Some decided, oh, they had some cousins here at that time, and they told us to come.

SIGRIST: Where were they living in America?

KAPLAN: My cousins?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

KAPLAN: I don't know. I really don't know. And we came through Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Wait, we're not there yet. ( Mrs. Kaplan laughs ) Do you remember how you felt about leaving Russia? Did you . . .

KAPLAN: Well, you know, the place you're born, you're growing up. We didn't think about it. We had to get away. The sooner we got away the better we felt.

SIGRIST: You said that the arrangement, the relationship between the Gentiles and the Jews in this town was a good one.

KAPLAN: A good one.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about religious life in Russia?

KAPLAN: As far as the whole religious life?

SIGRIST: That you remember.

KAPLAN: Oh, we had the synagogues.

SIGRIST: There was a synagogue in town?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. Synagogue. And the observance was there, the religion was there.

SIGRIST: In your own house, what are some of the ways you practiced your religion in your house?

KAPLAN: In my own house?

SIGRIST: In the house.

KAPLAN: Kept a kosher home. You know what that means? At first the boys would go with my father to the synagogue here, nearby.

SIGRIST: But in Russia did they do that, too?

KAPLAN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to go to the synagogue?

KAPLAN: Of course.

SIGRIST: Who was more religious, your mother or your father?

KAPLAN: My father.

SIGRIST: Did you . . .

KAPLAN: You know, my brothers, when they came here they went to temple, liked the service.

SIGRIST: Did you, when you were in Russia did you actually attend school?

KAPLAN: No.

SIGRIST: No.

KAPLAN: Like I said, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: So whatever you learned you were taught at home.

KAPLAN: That's right. At home.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl in Russia, what did you know about America?

KAPLAN: What did I know about America? Well, to be frank with you, at that time they started there to talk. So I remember, you know, about America. Nobody thought about it, think about America, or thought about it, until they started about the army, about going, you know, to be drafted.

SIGRIST: And that was really what made your family decide.

KAPLAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing?

KAPLAN: What?

SIGRIST: Packing. Do you remember packing to come?

KAPLAN: Packing?

SIGRIST: Yes.

KAPLAN: Our things, you mean? Well, we all packed as well as we could, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you actually brought?

KAPLAN: That I can't remember. We brought the things that we needed right away. And then when we came here the boys were lucky enough to get jobs and we got a nice apartment.

SIGRIST: What port did you leave from?

KAPLAN: That I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to the boat?

KAPLAN: Of course. The port in Russia, you mean?

SIGRIST: Yeah, where you left from.

KAPLAN: Where I left from.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to meet the boat?

KAPLAN: Going to meet the boat?

SIGRIST: Yes. What do you remember about actually going to get the boat?

KAPLAN: Well, I'll tell you, we didn't know. We just went. You know, very, we were sad, upset. It wasn't a picnic, I assure you.

SIGRIST: Upset because you were leaving?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Upset because you were . . .

KAPLAN: Leaving.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about leaving Russia?

KAPLAN: We all felt the same way, it was a must, so we made the best of it, that's all.

SIGRIST: So it's your mother, your father . . .

KAPLAN: The boys.

SIGRIST: There are, what, three brothers?

KAPLAN: Three brothers.

SIGRIST: Three brothers, you, and anybody else?

KAPLAN: Wait a minute, four brothers.

SIGRIST: Four brothers, yourself. And did your grandmother go with you, too?

KAPLAN: Oh, no. She passed away a long time before.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember the name of the boat that you went on?

KAPLAN: Are you kidding? ( she laughs ) I don't. Ask me about Ellis Island. I can tell you about it.

SIGRIST: Well, we're getting there. We're getting there slowly. Do you remember anything about the boat trip, about actually being on the boat?

KAPLAN: It was awful.

SIGRIST: Why was it awful?

KAPLAN: The steerage. And, you know, crowded, immigrants. Like it was in those days, after all. Eighty-five years ago.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

KAPLAN: Well, I don't remember getting sick. My mother didn't feel well. The boys made the best of it, my father. So we got here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it looked like where you stayed on the boat? Do you remember what it looked like where you stayed, where you slept?

KAPLAN: Like a boat?

SIGRIST: Were you in one big room with lots of people?

KAPLAN: A lot of people.

SIGRIST: Or were you in . . .

KAPLAN: A lot of people, the bunks. Didn't have nice beds.

SIGRIST: How long, do you know how long the trip took?

KAPLAN: That I don't remember. It took long. In those days it was about four weeks, I don't know.

SIGRIST: It could have been. Do you remember coming into New York?

KAPLAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

KAPLAN: Well, at that time we were so anxious that we got here that everybody, you know, crowded up, that you couldn't see what's that. They would talk about the Statue of Liberty. We didn't know what it was. The Statue, a big deal, you know. So what? But our cousins were there. He was a doctor . . .

SIGRIST: Did they go to Ellis Island to meet you?

KAPLAN: And the sister was a teacher, and the other one lived with them. And we came to their home and stayed there for about a month. Then they got us an apartment.

SIGRIST: Who's, how are they related to you, these cousins?

KAPLAN: They related on my father's side. I think they were cousins.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about being at Ellis Island that first time, about being processed as an immigrant at Ellis Island?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about that.

KAPLAN: Well, they take you into a room. They examine you. Your eyes, especially, and they ask you questions. Have you had any disease? Were you sick? Were you this, were you that? And if you're all right, they put you in another room until we were all ready, if everything is all right. Our cousins were there to accept us. So we had no difficulty.

SIGRIST: When you saw your cousins for the first time, how did you feel about seeing them? Did they look different to you?

KAPLAN: Of course they looked different in those days. I could see Rhoda. She's tall, nice looking, and the sisters were nice looking, dressed well.

SIGRIST: How were they dressed differently than you were dressed?

KAPLAN: They were dressed ( she laughs ), I was dressed in a little dress, and the boys were dressed the way, dress that we wore in Europe.

SIGRIST: What was that? How did you dress in Europe?

KAPLAN: Ah, in those days, I don't remember really how.

SIGRIST: But it was different than how people dressed here?

KAPLAN: Of course.

SIGRIST: So your cousins came and they took you to . . .

KAPLAN: Their home.

SIGRIST: Their home, which was where? Where was their home?

KAPLAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was it in New York City?

KAPLAN: I think it was in New York.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your first impressions of New York City?

KAPLAN: Oh, don't ask. All of us, when we first came, we couldn't imagine anything like this exists, you know. And people, all we saw was people, people, people.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you saw that were really different than what you were used to?

KAPLAN: Well, the buildings at that time were different. They were high rises. They were beautiful buildings, big office buildings. And, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you ride on a subway for the first time?

KAPLAN: Oh, everybody rides on the subway the first time.

SIGRIST: What did that feel like to you?

KAPLAN: Well, we were frightened, but you got used to it.

SIGRIST: Now, you said you stayed with your cousins for how long?

KAPLAN: About a month.

SIGRIST: And then where did you go?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Then where did you go?

KAPLAN: They got us an apartment.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where that apartment was?

KAPLAN: Oh, I don't know. Ludlow Street, Delancey Street. New York, on the East Side.

SIGRIST: Somewhere on the Lower East Side. Tell me about the jobs that your brothers got. What kinds of jobs did they get?

KAPLAN: The oldest one was more like a broker.

SIGRIST: That was the first job he got?

KAPLAN: Well, he got in with some firm that gave him a chance to get the feel of the English language. After all, you know, we didn't speak English. And my younger brother, he got, he started with a very small restaurant. And they did very well. It got bigger and bigger. My brother Charlie, he liked to (?) ( she laughs ) He would try anything you rode, so he already got a job, he was there.

SIGRIST: Did your father get a job?

KAPLAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Did your father get a job?

KAPLAN: Later on, much later he got a job.

SIGRIST: So he didn't work. He didn't work right . . .

KAPLAN: Not right away. He got a job rolling cigars.

SIGRIST: How did he feel about having to take a job like that?

KAPLAN: Well, he couldn't help it. He wasn't going to sit in the synagogue all day like he did in Europe.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have to get a job?

KAPLAN: Nah. My mother never worked.

SIGRIST: Well, we're going to pause here so Kevin can flip the tape, and we'll continue with the interview.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: How did you learn English, Mrs. Kaplan?

KAPLAN: How did I learn English? I went to school. So the teacher knew that I was an immigrant. She was very, very nice. And little by little I conquered it, like anybody else. All immigrants did the same thing.

SIGRIST: Was it difficult? Was school hard for you?

KAPLAN: Well, it wasn't easy, but when you look back you don't think about it. It's, well, too bad.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of immigrant children in the schools?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes. In those days, my God, immigrants were coming from all over. It was the height of immigration.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your playmates at all? ( a telephone rings ) Do you have a friend that sticks out in your mind?

KAPLAN: I had someone, but they're not here any more.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, can you describe the neighborhood where you lived for me a little bit? What was the neighborhood like?

KAPLAN: In New York?

SIGRIST: Where you lived, yes.

KAPLAN: Where I lived? Well, like the East Side. You know anything about the East Side of New York?

SIGRIST: But can you describe it for me in words?

KAPLAN: Can I describe? What is there to describe? Houses and houses, and of course we didn't have the conveniences there, you know, and all that. But as time went on things got better, income became better. So you move somewhere where you had the things that you want to.

SIGRIST: Did you move from that first apartment?

KAPLAN: Oh, of course. We moved, and we stayed there quite a number of years.

SIGRIST: It's still in the same neighborhood?

KAPLAN: Almost, but a different street. The school was nearby, and we stayed there for a number of years. Then we moved to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you moved to Brooklyn?

KAPLAN: I don't remember. Brooklyn, wait a minute. I think when we moved to Brooklyn I was going to business school already.

SIGRIST: So you were a young lady. Is that before or after your father got his first papers?

KAPLAN: He got it in 1910.

SIGRIST: Were you in Brooklyn already?

KAPLAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Were you in Brooklyn when he got those papers?

KAPLAN: I don't think so. Maybe he was. I don't know, to be frank with you.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what your father had to go through to get those first papers.

KAPLAN: Well, he got some brochures to look through, study it. The questions that they would ask him, so you could answer it correctly. He went through quite a time.

SIGRIST: Did he learn English?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Did he learn English?

KAPLAN: Well, he spoke English. Not fluently, but . . .

SIGRIST: How did he learn the language?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: How did learn English?

KAPLAN: If you want to learn you learn. From hearing this one, people that knew English, you know, spoke English. He spoke a little bit. Not much.

SIGRIST: Who liked America more, your mother or your father?

KAPLAN: ( she laughs ) We all liked it. We were all glad we were here.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk a little bit about how you got the job with the HIAS.

KAPLAN: I fell into it.

SIGRIST: Yes. How did that happen?

KAPLAN: ( she laughs ) Well, I was ready for it. I went to business school, and I learned, I became a stenographer.

SIGRIST: A stenographer.

KAPLAN: A typist. And somebody knew, in the HIAS, you know, the right people, something like that. Maybe, and they told them to send me in for an interview. So I went and I got the job.

SIGRIST: Was that exciting?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Was that exciting for you, getting this job?

KAPLAN: Oh, and how. Get out of business school, got my job with lovely people. And I stayed with them till during the end of the first World War.

SIGRIST: You began at the end of the first World War? You started at the end of the war, or you stayed with them until the end of the war.

KAPLAN: I stayed with them.

SIGRIST: Until the end of the war.

KAPLAN: Yeah. Then they asked me, of course I knew all about Ellis Island because the organization that I worked for, the HIAS, is the Hebrew Sheltering Immigration Society. They took care of all the Jewish immigrants, and we had an office on Ellis Island. And my boss asked me if I would like a little change, would I like to go to Ellis Island to work there for a while, see how I like it. So I said, "I'll try it." I went, and it was bedlam there. It was like a madhouse. But we had our office there, we had our manager there. And I saw that they really need somebody there to help them. They have to make out affidavits and type things and so on and so forth. So I stayed in Ellis Island a few years. Then I got tired. I

didn't like the idea of getting on the boat in the morning, coming back in the evening by boat. Hello, the Statue of Liberty, goodbye. So I told my boss I want to come back. He says, "All right, come right back." And I was there till the very end.

SIGRIST: Where was the office in Manhattan?

KAPLAN: In Manhattan? On East Broadway we had our building, the whole building. Now, our work was, the immigrant that came here, they didn't have anybody to take care of them. And the officials, some of them, wanted to send them back. Our work was to intervene and take the responsibility. So we used to take the immigrants to our building. We had a whole building on East Broadway and shelter them and feed them, of course, and try to locate some jobs for them, which we did, in those days. So that was the work of the HIAS. It's still in existence.

SIGRIST: What were your duties, specifically?

KAPLAN: Specifically? At first I used to come there as a stenographer.

SIGRIST: And this is at the East Broadway office.

KAPLAN: Then in later years I became like a secretary, took care of the mail, answered. I had a nice boss. He liked me, I liked him, and I got along very nicely. And, like I said, Ellis Island was a madhouse when I was there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember, what sticks out in your mind the strongest about Ellis Island when you think about working there? Do you remember a certain incident that sticks out in your mind?

KAPLAN: Oh, I got a lot of incidents. People used to come in crying and crying. Your heart would break. Some of them had some trouble with their eyes and they wanted to send them back, and they did. They couldn't do anything for them. And it was rather dull, glamour, you know. The immigrants that came here, they all had their share of heartache and naturally you tried to do the best you can for them, that's all.

SIGRIST: When you were working at Ellis Island, was that after World War I?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the approximate dates of when you were actually on the island?

KAPLAN: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: But it was after World War I?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. ( she pauses ) After World War. Hmm. How long does it take, the World War? '44?

SIGRIST: Yeah, that doesn't start till '41, actually. And World War I ends in 1918.

KAPLAN: Ninety-eight. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Where did you get the ferry to go out to Ellis Island every day?

KAPLAN: In the Battery.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the boat for me?

KAPLAN: The boat? The ship? You know, it had a deck. It was always full, going there and coming back.

SIGRIST: You mean, with other people who were working there?

KAPLAN: Oh, sure. There were a lot of organizations there that had offices there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the names of some of the other organizations?

KAPLAN: Well, there was one, the Council of Jewish Women, that all connected with us. But the Italian organization that had their offices there. A lot of the different countries had their offices there. At that time we had offices all over the United States, even in Japan.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what time you had to be at work, what time you had to be on the boat?

KAPLAN: Oh, yes. On the boat you had to be eight-thirty. It took about a half an hour to get over to the island. And we used to say, "Good morning," to the Statue of Liberty. She wasn't nearby. She was quite a distance. ( she

laughs ) But a couple of years ago, about three years ago, I come from Florida. I was in New York, and we went for an evening out for dinner on the boat, and see the Statue of Liberty. But, you know, all the years that I worked at Ellis Island, I saw the Statue of Liberty. So, you know, you got used to it, it didn't mean anything. But let me tell you, I got such a feeling, such a kick, when I saw her right near me, because like my grandson at that time said, "Grandma, all your life you saw her." I said, "At the same time, but when you see it right near you you get such a kick and such a feeling you have no idea."

SIGRIST: Do you remember where your office was on Ellis Island?

KAPLAN: ( she laughs ) Are you kidding? Ellis Island's a big, it was a very big, big building, big. So many offices, huh. It was a madhouse.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own desk? Did you have your own desk?

KAPLAN: Did I have my own desk? Yes, I had a small desk. Our room wasn't very big, our office, on Ellis Island. I couldn't afford it, the space.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what, when you first worked for the HIAS, do you remember how much you got paid a week?

KAPLAN: ( she pauses ) I think they started me, at that time, about twenty-five dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have to give your mother and father some of this money?

KAPLAN: All of it.

SIGRIST: All of it.

KAPLAN: What did I want money for? I was sixteen-and-a-half, seventeen years old. I was still Daddy's little girl. Well, that's true.

SIGRIST: How did your parents, your father, feel about you having to work, or wanting to work?

KAPLAN: Well, he didn't feel so good about it, but there was nothing he could do. We needed the money, and I didn't know where to go. I went to this bureau, we were a safe little clique of friends, that we all made up our minds. When we graduate school we are going to business school and take up either bookkeeping or stenography, typing, and get out in the business world. That's what we did.

SIGRIST: That was very progressive for women at that time.

KAPLAN: Very progressive. And believe me, by the time I left I got a very big salary.

SIGRIST: Well, you worked there how many years?

KAPLAN: Seventeen.

SIGRIST: What, when you were stationed at Ellis Island, what exactly were your duties when you were there?

KAPLAN: What was I doing? Every day we had immigrants coming in the different line, the Cunard Line, this one, that one. Immigrants that didn't have anybody came into our office. We had to take their name, address and what they could do. And we were responsible for them. And then we had people from the HIAS take them there to East Broadway.

SIGRIST: So your job was to just sort of register them.

KAPLAN: Register them, typing, make up their affidavits, if they needed it. There was a lot of affidavits there.

SIGRIST: Did you have to speak Yiddish or Russian or some other language?

KAPLAN: I was able to speak a little Yiddish at that time. I can't speak it now, but . . .

SIGRIST: It would have come in handy.

KAPLAN: That's right, but I spoke.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you at Ellis Island? Was there a dining hall for the employees?

KAPLAN: I think they had a cafeteria there for the people that had the offices there.

I don't know. We used to send down a boy to get something, sandwiches and so on, coffee.

SIGRIST: How did you feel as an immigrant yourself dealing with these other immigrants?

KAPLAN: I felt very good. I knew what they're going through. I felt it. I had, I was very considerate, tried to be more considerate, and have sympathy, tell them not to worry. We tried to do the best we can for them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any specific cases that stand out in your mind, or just . . .

KAPLAN: There were so many, it's impossible.

SIGRIST: Do you remember one, one that really sticks out in your mind that you remember? You said so much of it was sad.

KAPLAN: When they send people back, they wouldn't allow them to come in. That was sad. And that happened very often. There was always one or two that came over, because they had glaucoma in their eyes, or they had some other kind of a disease. They were put in a different room, and it was sad. They had a lot of that.

SIGRIST: Were any of your other co-workers, had they been immigrants like yourself, that you know of? People that you worked with in the HIAS.

KAPLAN: I think there was one or two. Among the men there was about two or three of them that came over. We had a big staff.

SIGRIST: Do you have any unpleasant memories about the HIAS?

KAPLAN: No.

SIGRIST: It was a good . . .

KAPLAN: Sometimes it was too good, too good.

SIGRIST: Well, you're sort of like the American dream in a way, you know.

KAPLAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: You know, you came as a little kid from Russia.

KAPLAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And here you are helping other people to come through. That's a tremendous sense of power, in a way, for you.

KAPLAN: Yeah. Can't complain about the HIAS.

SIGRIST: Are you proud of . . .

KAPLAN: I think they're still in existence.

SIGRIST: I think they are.

KAPLAN: They live on, don't they have that building on Broadway, the Cooper Union.

SIGRIST: That I don't know. Didn't they have a branch at Lafayette Street?

KAPLAN: On Lafayette?

SIGRIST: That you remember. Do you remember there being a branch on Lafayette Street?

KAPLAN: Lafayette Street? No.

SIGRIST: Just East Broadway.

KAPLAN: No.

SIGRIST: Well, let's, just let me ask you a couple quick questions in conclusion. Tell me a little bit about what happened to your mother and father in America. Your father was working making cigars.

KAPLAN: Not very long. See, the boys got jobs, and then one of them got married, and they contributed to the, to home. And I kept on increasing my salary, a big salary, in those days. And my father stopped working a long time. He didn't work very long. And then my mother took sick.

SIGRIST: What was she sick with?

KAPLAN: Well, they wanted to operate on her. She might have had cancer. But she absolutely refused to be operated. That's all she was against it. My father wouldn't even consent. Neither would the children give consent. She was seventy-four when she passed away.

SIGRIST: What year was that? Do you remember?

KAPLAN: It's a long time. And my father was seventy-seven when he passed away.

SIGRIST: He passed on a long time after she did, or . . .

KAPLAN: Four years after, five years.

SIGRIST: When did you marry?

KAPLAN: What?

SIGRIST: When did you get married?

KAPLAN: What year?

SIGRIST: Well, were you still working for the HIAS?

KAPLAN: I was married for fifty-eight years.

SIGRIST: What was the name of your husband?

KAPLAN: Irving. Irving Kaplan. A wonderful, wonderful man. I was a very lucky girl.

SIGRIST: How did you meet him?

KAPLAN: I met him through his sister. She worked in our office, and she invited me for lunch to her house. They lived on East Broadway, too. And he happened to be there. He was with her, with a friend of his. So naturally we were introduced. And from then on it sort of, every now and then, calling up, on a date. I belonged to an organization, and he belonged to the same organization, The Boys and Girls. And as time went on, that's it.

SIGRIST: What year were you married?

KAPLAN: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember. I was married fifty-eight years.

SIGRIST: What are the names of your children?

KAPLAN: The name of my children? Paul and his wife Lorraine. They're most wonderful. I have the most wonderful children in the world. I mean it. They are just wonderful. And two grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Great-grandchildren?

KAPLAN: Mac and Marshall.

SIGRIST: And any great-grandchildren?

KAPLAN: No. I can't.

SIGRIST: Not yet. Let me ask you two questions, to finish up. One is what was your

maiden name?

KAPLAN: Guttman.

SIGRIST: G-O-O-D . . .

KAPLAN: No, it wasn't. Guttman.

SIGRIST: G-U . . .

KAPLAN: With a T, but they changed it to Guttman.

SIGRIST: Is it one T or two?

KAPLAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: Is it G-U-T-T, or G-U-T?

KAPLAN: That's right. (?)

SIGRIST: G-U-T-T-M-A-N.

KAPLAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: The other thing I wanted to ask you is what is the month and the day that you celebrate your birthday? Like April 12th, or what?

KAPLAN: What is what?

SIGRIST: What is the month and the day that you celebrate your birthday?

KAPLAN: In December.

SIGRIST: December . . .

KAPLAN: Hanukkah. You know what Hanukkah means?

SIGRIST: Yes, so what is that, December 10th, or . . .

KAPLAN: It's like Christmas, you know. I was born on the second candle. See, Hanukkah has eight candles. I was born on the second. It always comes in December, the same time, like, as Christmas.

SIGRIST: So it's not just, it's a different day every year, then.

KAPLAN: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: My final question for you is are you happy that you came to America, that your parents made that decision to get out of Russia?

KAPLAN: Are what?

SIGRIST: Are you happy that your parents made that decision?

KAPLAN: Do you have to ask? ( she laughs ) Oh, boy.

SIGRIST: How would your life have been different if you had stayed in Russia?

KAPLAN: How would I what?

SIGRIST: How would your life have been different if you had stayed in Russia?

KAPLAN: I don't know. But why? If I didn't see America, how should I know? I'm glad we're here. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Kaplan, I want to thank you very much for allowing us to come out.

KAPLAN: You're quite welcome.

SIGRIST: And to do this interview with you. It's been a pleasure.

KAPLAN: You're a very handsome young man. What is your name?

SIGRIST: My name is Paul.

KAPLAN: Paul?

KAPLAN: Yes, and this is Kevin. I'm Paul, and that's Kevin. Anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with the National Park Service with Sadie Kaplan.