

EI-020

IRENA (IRINA ALEXAVNA) LEONIDOFF SPROSS

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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: There is a prominent hissing sound throughout the recording of this interview caused by the ventilation system inside the recording studio at the Ellis Island Museum. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 8/17/1994.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It's Wednesday, January 9, 1991. We are here with Irena Spross, who was born in Russia and came to America via France in 1929 when she was eight-and-a-half. Mrs. Spross, could you please give us your full name

and your date of birth, please?

SPROSS: All right. My name is Irina Alexavna Leonidova Spross, born June 15, 1920 in Simferopol in the Crimea, Russia.

SIGRIST: And what was your father's name?

SPROSS: He was Aleksei Alexandrovich Leonidoff. He was a colonel in the Russian White Army, a medical officer, a surgeon.

SIGRIST: I see. And what was your mother's name, please?

SPROSS: Mira Smirnova, Smirnoff. I don't know her middle name. It was too complicated. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What wonderful names, though. Let's talk a little bit about your parents' life. For instance, how did they meet each other?

SPROSS: Well, she was a volunteer nurse. She came from an aristocratic family in the Ukraine. And when the Revolution started she joined the Red Cross as a volunteer nurse, and my father was an officer in the white army fighting for the czar. And they met and fell in love and married, and then I came along, during the retreat of the White Army. Half of the White Army retreated north, and his regiment retreated south to the Black Sea.

SIGRIST: Could you explain a little bit, I don't know my Russian history very well, just why the White Army was persecuted so, or what was the problem?

SPROSS: They were the, they were fighting for the czar.

SIGRIST: Right.

SPROSS: Against the Communists. And so it was pretty rough on my father. He had some pretty hairy experiences where he was captured and almost shot and escaped and really harried adventures.

SIGRIST: Was there not a large massacre, actually, of members of the White Army?

SPROSS: Oh, yes, yes. At one point my father was lined up with eleven other officers in this railroad station and they were just shot. And then they came to my father, and the Red soldiers decided they needed a cup of tea, so they said, "Well, should we shoot him now or later?" And so they decided they would put him in a closet, a broom closet, and go and have some tea. So my father said to the one who was left to take care of him, said, "But why don't you go and have your cup of tea? I can't escape." And the soldier, I don't think he was very smart, he said, "Well, all right. I'll lock the door." So my father was left in this little broom closet, but there was a window. And he tried to get through, but he had one of those great big army coats on, and that wouldn't fit through the window, so he threw the coat through the window and followed. Meanwhile, someone had taken his coat. And this was in the middle of winter, so he stole somebody else's coat and managed to escape.

SPROSS: Escape. And he sort of underwent a series of these kinds of . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, yes, yes. Several.

SIGRIST: . . . encounters.

SPROSS: Yes, yes, he did.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like physically? Describe your father.

SPROSS: Oh, he was very good-looking. Tall, black hair, curl. He had a curl on his forehead and a little moustache and brown eyes and extremely good-looking. And, as a matter of fact, his picture is in the Kodak exhibit. I sent in a picture of us.

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis.

SPROSS: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Wow.

SPROSS: We're in there. We can punch a number, and there we are.

SIGRIST: As a child, we'll sort of skip ahead a little bit, as a child what do you remember about your father? What, you described what he looked like. What was he like in person?

SPROSS: Well, I really didn't know him as a little girl. I couldn't remember. Because

my mother died when I was two, and then we had to take the trip to France, and he left me when I was four in the care of the nuns in the convent in Cherbourg, and they were very good about reminding me of my father, who was working very hard in the United States to earn enough money so that I could rejoin him. So they were very good about that.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: And then when I came over to this country I must have been scared. (she laughs) Certainly I was alone. I didn't know whether I'd recognize him or not.

SIGRIST: Did you have photographs then? Did the nuns have photographs for you?

SPROSS: Yes. The nuns made sure that he sent photographs, and they sent pictures and letters. And when he died I discovered that he had saved every single letter.

SIGRIST: Really.

SPROSS: Every single letter that I wrote as a little girl of five and six. And all the letters the nuns had sent to him.

SIGRIST: Wow.

SPROSS: He saved every one of them. So now I'm showing a few of them to my grandsons.

SIGRIST: It's nice that you have all that stuff.

SPROSS: Yes, I think so.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your mother. You said she came from an aristocratic family. Do you remember grandparents at all, or do you remember any side of that family?

SPROSS: No. I, all I remember is in Constantinople when we went to a bath house. This was before my father found us. And she was very soft. That's all I remember. (she laughs) She was soft.

SIGRIST: Were there photographs of your mother, too?

SPROSS: Yes, I have a couple.

SIGRIST: So you did know what she looked like.

SPROSS: Yes, yes. She was, I remember very gentle and very soft. That's all I remember.

SIGRIST: Do you, can you tell us a little bit about the circumstances surrounding her death? From what did she die?

SPROSS: She hemorrhaged after an appendectomy.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: My father was the doctor for the county, for the government of Bulgaria. And he was out doing his thing, taking care of the peasants. And then when he came home he found her dead. And there I was. So then he had to take me with him, and that must have been pretty rough.

SIGRIST: And where did you go from there?

SPROSS: Well, then he left me in charge of a friend of his until he could make plans to go to Paris.

SIGRIST: And you were in Bulgaria at that time.

SPROSS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, of course, you moved around.

SPROSS: Yes.

SIGRIST: It seems quite a bit.

SPROSS: Yes! (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Of course, you were just a small child, but do you have any remembrances of moving around that way of, you know, taking a train somewhere or . . .

SPROSS: Oh, yes. I remember going with my father on his rounds. He had a donkey, and I rode the donkey, and the poor man had to walk.

SIGRIST: Where would this be?

SPROSS: This was in Bulgaria.

SIGRIST: In Bulgaria.

SPROSS: And he was being a county doctor. He had to go pretty far distances to the peasants' house. And I remember the peasants all bowing to him and giving me figs. (she laughs) Why figs, I don't know, while I was riding his donkey. Then he decided that was a little too much, so he left me with a dentist friend of his. And then the next thing I remember I was going cross country in a train full of people. And the soot coming into the window. I must have been close to four by then, and . . .

SIGRIST: Were you leaving Bulgaria?

SPROSS: Leaving Bulgaria. And he did have a couple of Russian friends with him, and then I don't remember anything else until in Cherbourg, where I was a little girl with the nuns.

SIGRIST: So from Bulgaria you went to Cherbourg?

SPROSS: Yes, to Paris and then to Cherbourg.

SIGRIST: To Paris. Okay. Now, why did, why that move?

SPROSS: Well, I guess a lot of the emigres, the White Russians, and there were a lot of them from Crimea to Constantinople to Greece. Why Greece I don't know, but I have pictures of that. From Greece to Gallipoli, and then to Bulgaria. And I guess the next step was Paris and the boat to the United States.

SIGRIST: I see. When did your father decide that he wanted to come to the United States?

SPROSS: Oh, I think when he was in Bulgaria he decided that.

SIGRIST: He decided that would be the way to go.

SPROSS: Yes, because there was no future for him there. I mean, after all he was an office in the army and he was bound to do more than just be a county doctor, and he was a surgeon and well-established as he could be in those days during the war. It was pretty rough, you know, in the middle of a Revolution. So he managed to get to Paris.

SIGRIST: So his intention was once in Paris the next step would be to America.

SPROSS: Right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about Paris?

SPROSS: No. No, I don't even remember his leaving me with the nuns, although he left all the letters and one of the nuns wrote to him, a terrible letter, really, saying that I was becoming a little more easily manageable and that if, and he had been ill, evidently, in America, and if anything should happen to him for him not to worry, that they would take care of me.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: I can just imagine when he read that letter. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, you were quite an international child. (they laugh) Were you a discipline problem at the, uh . . .

SPROSS: Evidently I was for a while, yes. Yes, yes, I was. They did say that, but the nun did say that she remembered very distinctly when he threw me at her and left very quickly, ran away so that she wouldn't see, I quote her, she wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. The poor guy. I mean, to leave me there. But it must have been a terrible thing for him to try to, you know, to leave me.

SIGRIST: What year did he leave you?

SPROSS: '24.

SIGRIST: He came over, he came to America in '24.

SPROSS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he leave from Cherbourg?

SPROSS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. And you were at the convent in Cherbourg at that point.

SPROSS: Yes, yes. Yeah. He thought he was going to take me with him. Went to the boat and they said, "No." So, what to do?

SIGRIST: Was this because of the quotas?

SPROSS: Yes, that was the quota business. So when he came over to this country he had to establish himself and earn money and all that. And I have newspaper articles from The New York Times in 1924 in which there was a big article about the White Russians, and he was featured in that article.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about what life was like for him when he got here. Did he work as a surgeon when he got here?

SPROSS: Oh, no, no. Don't forget, he couldn't speak any English.

SIGRIST: That's right. So what happened to him?

SPROSS: He was a dishwasher.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: And . . .

SIGRIST: In Manhattan?

SPROSS: In Manhattan. And when, he had to be fired because his hands were big. He was a big man. And the owner of the restaurant told him that although he was the best dishwasher he ever had he broke too many glasses trying to dry them. (she laughs) So he had to let him go. Then he worked in the linoleum factory, and that's where he ruined his hands to be a surgeon, because working with a knife and all that and cutting the linoleum. So meanwhile he was taking English lessons and working as a masseur in one of the hospitals in New York City. And he passed his medical boards in one year, having had to learn English and having to study to take the boards in English, and he passed his medical boards. And he decided that since he couldn't be a surgeon he would go into tuberculosis, which is what he did, and he went up to Saranac Lake, and ended up in Poughkeepsie, New York. So his boss's wife was very fond of the White Russians, and they had a little community of White Russians in Poughkeepsie. So they tried to get in touch with Hoover, President Hoover, to see, you know, if they couldn't bring me over sooner. But the quota was there, and I had to wait my turn.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a question. You keep using the term "White Russian." Does that denote a specific area of Russia, or an extension of the army?

SPROSS: No. It was a division of the, well, it was a government, the white government. Red, as opposed to the Red. The Red Russians were the Communists, and the White Russians were the ones for the czar, yes.

SIGRIST: When your father came to America where did he live?

SPROSS: Manhattan, I guess. (she sighs)

SIGRIST: But where? Did he have family here? Did he know somebody here?

SPROSS: No, no. He knew nobody. He knew nobody. He just came over here, and in that article in 1924 I think he lived, the YMCA, I think, had rooms that they rented out or something. And there was one gentleman working for the Salvation Army, I think, who sort of took care of these White Russian emigres. And they were all, most of them were aristocrats.

SIGRIST: Sure.

SPROSS: You know, and generals and we had an old friend general who would come to the house. And, you know, he, they had nothing, most of them. All they could do was be generals, you know. So they ended up washing dishes.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, in later years did your father ever tell you how he felt about having to come to America and not being able to ply his trade?

SPROSS: No. He very rarely talked about it. He didn't even talk to me about it, my

mother. He told some of his girlfriends about my mother, and then they in turn told me. But . . .

SIGRIST: This, of course, would have been after you were brought.

SPROSS: Yes. See, it was too rough for him, I think, to even think about it.

SIGRIST: Um, well, while this is all happening to your father, what's going on with you with the convent?

SPROSS: (she laughs) With the nuns. Growing up, growing up.

SIGRIST: Was it a nice place to be?

SPROSS: (she sighs) Well, it was my life, it was my environment, and I knew nothing else, really. And I always thought it was a very nice place, and the nuns were as good to me as they could be.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of their names?

SPROSS: Madame Gautier was the director, and I did see her again in 1938 when I went back to France, but the others I wouldn't remember. But again, I have photographs of me growing up.

SIGRIST: Did you have to wear a uniform?

SPROSS: Oh, good Lord, yes.

SIGRIST: What was the uniform like?

SPROSS: Black, black with a little white at the neck. And I have a black cape, and black shoes and black stockings most of the time, although whenever they took pictures to send my father I always had white socks on. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What other sorts of girls were at the convent with you?

SPROSS: It was one of the better, and I have letters in which the nun writes to my father and say, "Well, Little Ira." My nickname is Ira. (pronounced "Eer-a") "Little Ira is having dinner with the admiral's daughter." (she laughs) So evidently I made friends with the children who came. It was a boarding school but during vacations, of course, the kids all went home except for me, and I had to stay there.

SIGRIST: Was there somebody who took care of you when you stayed there, or . . .

SPROSS: Well, all the nuns.

SIGRIST: Of course, they were always there.

SPROSS: (she laughs) They were always there.

SIGRIST: What, were you supposed to participate in the everyday goings-on at the convent? For instance, were the kids expected to help cook in the . . .

SPROSS: Oh, no. No, no, no. No, they had cooks and they had the maids, and the maids and the cooks were really very good to me. They did spoil me. The nuns were too strict, they would pick me up and let me cry, and the cook was a tremendous woman. I swear she must have had eight petticoats. (she laughs) You know, when, and the little tight knot on the top of her head, you know.

SIGRIST: Was she French?

SPROSS: Oh, yes. Yes, they were all French.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the cook's name? (they laugh)

SPROSS: No, that was too long ago.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to, were there animals at the convent or anything like that?

SPROSS: No, no. No.

SIGRIST: It wasn't a working farm or anything.

SPROSS: No, no, no. It was in the middle of town. As a matter of fact, my husband and I went back in 1985 and I said, "If we're going to Europe I insist that we go to Cherbourg." And, of course, everybody said, "Who wants to go to Cherbourg? What's in Cherbourg?" I said, "I don't care. I'm going."

And when we arrived I asked the taxi driver if the school was still there, and my husband had said, "Don't worry, it will be bombed out." Because it was, the town had been bombed during World War Two. So he said, "Oh, no, the school is still there." So I had photographs of the school, the way they used to do them in those days. They'd put them on postcards, and you'd have the brown, sepia, I guess.

SIGRIST: Sepia, yup.

SPROSS: Okay. So, anyway, I had those postcards with me, and we went to the convent. And I talked to the secretary, and she looked at these postcards in complete astonishment. And I said, "May I go in and look at the courtyard where I spent five years of my life." And I walked into that place, I was so shocked. It was so small. That's all I could say. To me it had been a big place.

SIGRIST: Sure, as a little girl.

SPROSS: You know, (she laughs) so I do have a picture of me as one of the maybe, what, fifty or sixty kids, and the nun had put a little arrow where I was, me. And I was the smallest of the bunch. And I was standing in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. So my husband took a picture of me in 1985 standing in front of the Virgin Mary. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Wow. Can you describe the actual physical school? Was it a single building? You said it had a courtyard.

SPROSS: It had a courtyard. It was, I'm sure added onto so that it was a sort of a square with a square inside, yeah. And then the nuns were in a separate section and they had a nice little garden where I was allowed to go during the summer time. I could play with them because I was all alone then. And all the other children had gone off home to vacation, so whenever they did allow me to come into their inner sanctum, which was really off limits to the other children. They were strict about that, you know. And the church was strict. They wore, they didn't wear the uniforms of a nun with the flowing robes. In those days they wore black veils and black dresses.

SIGRIST: Were you expected to attend religious services at that school?

SPROSS: Oh, yes, yes. But they did not let me take Communion because I had not been baptized a Catholic, although I had been baptized a Russian Orthodox, baptized and confirmed at the same time, you see, whereas the Catholic church is a little bit different. So I couldn't take Communion, couldn't take confession. But they did allow me to help clean the altar in the chapel.

SIGRIST: And what did that entail?

SPROSS: Dust a little bit, you know. But I was, if I was good I was allowed to clean the altar, if I was a good girl. But that was it.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed, because you were quite a small girl, actually, I mean, were you allowed toys or anything like that?

SPROSS: Oh, yes. They were very good. My father did manage to send me toys and I had a lot of dolls.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of, you know, specific?

SPROSS: Oh, my dolls. And they did teach me how to crochet, and darn. I was the best darner among them all, and I used to darn their black socks, stockings, you know. I made the most beautiful darns. And, you know, I sewed beautifully, really, for a little girl. They taught me how to do embroidery.

SIGRIST: When you said they taught you, was this a class?

SPROSS: No, no, no. This was just part of growing up in a Catholic convent. You just learned those things, you know.

SIGRIST: Domestic handiwork.

SPROSS: Yes, yes, just as much as the letter-writing too, you know. You had to do your letter-writing. And they taught with ink very early on, much more so earlier than here.

SIGRIST: Only French was spoken?

SPROSS: Yes, only French was spoken.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's get you to America.

SPROSS: Okay.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about how you got there. Did your father write a letter and say, "It's time now to send . . ."

SPROSS: He said he's got the money. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: He's got the money.

SPROSS: Yes, because, oh, that poor guy. The nuns, some of the letters, they say, "I'm terribly sorry, but things are so expensive we have to raise the price for her, you know." And then a couple of times the mails weren't very good. "No, we didn't get your money. Just sent it in dollars, never mind about trying to exchange it into francs over here, you see. Just send the dollars and we'll exchange them." You see. So they, the Leviathan couldn't come close to, into Cherbourg Harbor because they hadn't dredged it out. They were in the process of dredging it.

SIGRIST: And it was all arranged that you would be on this boat.

SPROSS: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Your quota came up.

SPROSS: Yes, my quota came up. I guess it was in April. And he had managed to

save enough money for second class so I wouldn't have to go steerage.

SIGRIST: This is 1929.

SPROSS: 1929. And the nuns bought me a new outfit.

SIGRIST: What did that entail?

SPROSS: Oh, my dear, it was not black. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What color was it?

SPROSS: It was oatmeal. And it had a little dress, and it had a coat to match and a hat to match with a red ladybug on it, a glass ladybug on the hat, and I was very proud of that. Very proud. So they took me out on the tender to the boat, and the pursor was there. I guess it was the pursor, I don't know. One of the officers. So they're standing on both sides of me and saying, "Here she is, she's yours." And I guess I must have been scared.

SIGRIST: Sure.

SPROSS: I don't remember that. All I remember is this officer handing me an orange, and I've told this to my kids and they don't believe me, and I tell them it was as big as a basketball, because I had never seen an orange before. It was tremendous. So they really didn't know what to do with me, a little girl by herself, not speaking anything but French.

SIGRIST: Were you given a cabin with someone?

SPROSS: I don't remember that. But I do remember that there was an American couple who could speak French, and they had a little baby girl. So the officers asked if they would sort of take me under their wing, and they did. They were very nice. It was good for them because I played with the little girl.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SPROSS: You know, and they could watch me running around on the neck. And I remember the bouillon that we got every morning, and I remember all the fruit. I'd never seen a banana, and I remember . . .

SIGRIST: Were you expected to appear in a formal dining situation or a dining room?

SPROSS: I guess so. I must have eaten with them, because evidently they did take care of me. And I remember running around on the deck, and I remember the fruit and I remember the bouillon, but that's about all until we came to America.

SIGRIST: Was it a smooth ride? Did you get sick at all?

SPROSS: No, evidently, no, no. But then when we arrived it was very early in the morning, and I think it was sunny. But everybody crowded to the one side of the back of the bow of the ship as it passed the Statue of Liberty.

Everyone was over there, you know. Of course, I was in the back and I couldn't see a thing. So somebody, I don't know who it was, picked me up, put me on his shoulders, a tall man, so that I could see over the heads of everybody, and I saw the Statue of Liberty for the first time.

SIGRIST: Were people excited about that? Were they just . . .

SPROSS: Oh, yes. Everyone was crowding. And this was, of course, this was second class, and there were a lot of returning Americans at that point, so that wasn't as if this was something new to them, but it still was an awesome sight, you know, as we approached. And then the next thing I remember, I have no recollection of getting off that boat, is sitting in the Great Hall.

SIGRIST: Why were you brought to Ellis?

SPROSS: I really don't know.

SIGRIST: Because if you came on second class they wouldn't normally have brought you to Ellis Island.

SPROSS: I know, right. But this was where my father was going to pick me up.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: And I guess because I was an immigrant and . . .

SIGRIST: And very young.

SPROSS: Yes, and also the quota, it was my, I was on the quota, you see. So he came with a friend of his, a Russian baroness, who had come to the convent, so I knew her, although I didn't know really what my father looked like. And I remember sitting on that bench, and my feet couldn't touch the floor, you know, and I'm just sitting there in my new outfit. And there was an officer's sleeve. That's all I can remember. And he said, "Here comes your father." And this man was twelve feet tall, and he picked me up and hugged me. The hall was mobbed, but there was a lot of sunshine and, coming through those windows, you know.

SIGRIST: You were sitting near one of the big windows.

SPROSS: I was up against. Now, it seems to me, I may be wrong, but it seemed to me that the benches went all the way back against the windows. But right now you have them in front of the columns.

SIGRIST: They're arranged differently.

SPROSS: But weren't they all the way back?

SIGRIST: Yes. Well, at different times they were in different positions, so they very well may have been all the way back.

SPROSS: Well, I was up against that window.

SIGRIST: Which side were you on? Do you remember?

SPROSS: That side. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: Which is the Manhattan side?

SPROSS: My back, yes. My back towards Manhattan. I know exactly where I was sitting, you see. And when I came, you know, it was in '76 when I came for that interview, it was very painful. I was crying the whole time I was in that room.

SIGRIST: And yet your experience here was not necessarily a bad one.

SPROSS: No! Except I think it was frightening. I was . . .

SIGRIST: Well, you were a little kid.

SPROSS: (she laughs) I was really scared. I must have been.

SIGRIST: I want to ask you a question about the Russian baroness that you talked about. You said that she visited . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: You mentioned that she had come to visit you at the convent.

SPROSS: Yes.

SIGRIST: But was she living in America?

SPROSS: She was a friend of my father's, and she came to visit me, and there was a letter that the nun had written to my father saying, "Ira is visiting her little friend, I think in Roven, but she will be here when the baroness comes."
(she laughs) So I know it was the baroness. And she bought me a pair of earrings, little pearl earrings.

SIGRIST: In Cherbourg.

SPROSS: In Cherbourg, which of course I was not allowed to wear. One didn't wear that kind of thing. You could wear a cross around your neck, but you could not wear jewelry. So she came with my father and . . .

SIGRIST: To Ellis.

SPROSS: Yes, to Ellis. Now, I have actually no recollection of leaving Ellis Island, or how on earth I ever got to Poughkeepsie. (they laugh) I guess it must have been a train. How did one go from Ellis Island to Grand Central to . . .

SIGRIST: Well, by ferry, of course, and then you'd get on the train.

SPROSS: Did they have subways in those days?

SIGRIST: In New York? Oh, yes. Yes. So your father came to Ellis Island. So he remained in Manhattan all that time? Was he still living in Manhattan?

SPROSS: No. At that point he was working in Poughkeepsie.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: He was an assistant director of a TB sanatorium. And I think he started there in 1927.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: Because that's where the letters went. And I remember the head nurse had been a nurse in France during World War One. So she had a smattering of French. Because, you see, I couldn't speak to my father. The baroness spoke French, you see. That's another reason he brought her. (she laughs) So at least I had somebody to talk to.

SIGRIST: Now, did your father learn English at all?

SPROSS: Oh, yes. He learned English. That's, he studied, and that's how he managed to pass his boards. And he was written up in the Times that it was an absolutely incredible feat for him to have learned English in one year to pass the medical boards. I mean, that was a rough language. (she laughs) You know?

SIGRIST: Now, when you went to Poughkeepsie, you said that there was a small enclave of Russians there.

SPROSS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you live in that neighborhood?

SPROSS: No. He had a suite of rooms in the hospital, and I stayed with him in the suite of rooms in the hospital. And then the wife of the director lived in a lovely home, and so she let me come with her, and I stayed with her because my father didn't want me next to the patients, the TB patients. So I used to, but I'd eat with him, you know, and go to eat in the nurse's dining room and . . .

SIGRIST: Were you put into school immediately?

SPROSS: Uh, well, let's see. If I came in April, they, he got me a teacher, one of the nurses, I guess, tried to teach me English. And I went to school in the little local school which was mostly farmer kids. And I was put in the second grade, and I was actually horrified, but they were learning how to read and write, you see. So they figured they'd better put me where I'd be, of course, I was taller than those kids. (she laughs) It was pretty rough.

SIGRIST: So how did you learn English?

SPROSS: Well, just by being here, really, and taking lessons. And I remember jabbering at my father and he would say, "Speak English!" And, you see,

he didn't teach me Russian, which was too bad. I've always regretted that. But he was so insistent that I speak English.

SIGRIST: Was he very much involved in being an American himself?

SPROSS: Oh, absolutely. Yes, he volunteered in the army in World War Two.
(she laughs) He was pretty old by then, you know.

SIGRIST: When you were in school you said, of course, you were disappointed they put you in second grade. Did you ever experience any kind of prejudice among the students, you know, because you were a foreigner?

SPROSS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I had a, I had a weird name. They used to call me, "Ear-A-Corn." (Mr. Sigrist laughs) Which was awful! It was just awful. And so the following fall I was sent to a private school, a girls' school where it was a little bit kinder, the kids were kinder. And I learned English. You learn fast at that age when there's nothing else, no French being spoken, you see. I had to, I had to speak English.

SIGRIST: Did you have a private school? Were you able to continue your French?

SPROSS: Oh, yes, oh, yes, bilingual at that point. And so, and I went to camp and . . .

SIGRIST: All those . . .

SPROSS: All those things that . . .

SIGRIST: American girlhoods.

SPROSS: Right, right. Yes.

SIGRIST: Talk about your father at this point, after you came back over . . .

SPROSS: Well, he married, he re-married an American woman from Texas.

SIGRIST: What year was that? Do you remember?

SPROSS: '32.

SIGRIST: '32.

SPROSS: I was twelve. Oh, at that point he was sending me to a Catholic, to an Episcopal convent in Peekskill, which was a very familiar surroundings to me. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's right.

SPROSS: All the nuns there, they wore the habits. But they let me take Communion because I was Episcopal, and as far as they were concerned I had been baptized and I had been confirmed. So I was allowed to take Communion.

SIGRIST: I see.

SPROSS: That was the difference between them and the Catholics.

SIGRIST: He was still living in Poughkeepsie at this point.

SPROSS: Yes, uh-huh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So did you, he continue to practice at the tuberculosis . . .

SPROSS: Right, yes. And then he became a heart specialist and then opened his own practice.

SIGRIST: Did he and his new wife have any children?

SPROSS: No. She had a daughter and Betty and I got along famously. We were good friends. We still are.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you happy, once you got here and got established, were you happy to be here?

SPROSS: Oh, yes. It was a good life, sure. He gave me a very good life here. I didn't, oh, and one of the patients at Papa's hospital was a seamstress, and she made me little dresses with bloomers to match. And that was pure heaven! Oh, my gosh, I thought that was the best thing that ever happened to me. I remember it was a green gingham, and she also did a red and white check. (she laughs) I remember those two dresses. (she laughs) No more black things. Then, of course, he sends me to St. Mary's in Peekskill and I had to wear the black again. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You're back to the black.

SPROSS: And black stockings and black shoes. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your first job?

SPROSS: In America?

SIGRIST: Yeah, in America.

SPROSS: Uh, working in a factory.

SIGRIST: What was the factory?

SPROSS: Whitman Publishing.

SIGRIST: And what town was this in?

SPROSS: In Poughkeepsie. I had come back from a year in Europe. My father sent me to Europe in '38, '39. He figured I could go to the university there. And, of course, '39 was when the war started, so he said, "Come on back fast." So I came back, and I went to college, and so he said, "Well, you've got to do something." (she laughs) So he went and got me this job, fifteen dollars a week stuffing envelopes. It was fun.

SIGRIST: How long did you do that?

SPROSS: The summer, during the summer. And then after college I worked, you know, during the war I worked in the French litigation and McGraw Hill and then ended up at the U.N.

SIGRIST: Did you, were you able to speak French? Did you eventually lose that, or were you always able to . . .

SPROSS: Well, I majored in languages, so I had French and Spanish and a little bit of German. FBI offered me a job, and I turned it down.

SIGRIST: Oh!

SPROSS: I've often wondered, oh! And the OSS wanted to send me to Egypt, and I got cold feet. (she laughs) You know, sometimes you wonder why, why, why?

SIGRIST: Well, it just wasn't meant to be.

SPROSS: No, I guess not.

SIGRIST: Well, in conclusion, let's just talk about your father in his later years.

SPROSS: Well, he was a very successful . . .

SIGRIST: You said he went into his own heart practice.

SPROSS: Yes, very successful, and had all sorts of initials behind his back, you know, on his letterhead. He was a founder of the American College of Chest Physicians.

SIGRIST: Did he stay in Poughkeepsie?

SPROSS: Yes. He had all sorts of awards. And during the war he went to, he was sent, he was a colonel in the U.S. Army. He went in as a major and came out as a colonel. He was sent to Kungming in China as a liaison between the Chinese, the Russians and the Americans. Because at that point the Soviets were our allies, and so he could speak Russian. And I, among his things I found a dictionary, Russian and Chinese dictionary. Can you imagine?

SIGRIST: Wow.

SPROSS: So he was there during the war, and came back. And it was very interesting. When he stopped off in Africa, in those days you went by boat, and one of the officers, a general, called him in and said, "Colonel, we would like you to do a special job for us in the Soviet Union." And my father said, "No." "Colonel, you could be court-martialed!" He said, "You go right ahead and court-martial me, but I'm not going to the USSR." Because he was on the black list. And he said, "I would have an accident." And he wasn't about to go, so they let him come home.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, that's good. And how did he spend his final days?

SPROSS: He continued working. His wife divorced him and he was very glad when the children came along, his granddaughters. He, I used to go out and visit him every week. And then he died very peacefully, really.

SIGRIST: And when was that?

SPROSS: 1978. He was eighty-four.

SIGRIST: Wow.

SPROSS: So he had a full, interesting life.

SIGRIST: Yeah, very colorful.

SPROSS: Colorful, but I don't think it was particularly happy until the end. I used to accuse him of being mellow in his old age because he was a very strict father, a European father, you know, very strict. But as he got older and as I got my kids, he became a little mellower. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, he certainly led a very dramatic life.

SPROSS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: As did you also.

SPROSS: Not really, you know. I think the only claim to fame as far as I'm

concerned is that I came alone.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SPROSS: I was talking to a lady for instance in the line, in October. She came over here when she was six years old from Scotland, but she was with her mother and her sister.

SIGRIST: Sure.

SPROSS: So whenever I'd tell anyone, "I came in 1929 by myself," they say, "Ooh, by yourself!" But it wasn't that bad, I don't think. (she laughs) I really don't remember. Except I couldn't get back into this place.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, except for when you returned.

SPROSS: I just can't imagine. My husband thinks I should be hypnotized.

SIGRIST: Well, you've had no trouble today.

SPROSS: No, no, I didn't, and I didn't have any trouble in October. But I sure couldn't walk in there. And, you know, the little guy, the ninety-year-old beekeeper. He was so sweet. He said, he took my hand, he said, "You don't have to worry now. They won't send you back." And that's on the tape. You should . . .

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. This is the interview that you did for, was it NBC?

SPROSS: NBC. You really should see it.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

SPROSS: Because he was so sweet. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I should bring him in to do an interview.

SPROSS: I wonder if he's still around.

SIGRIST: Well, who knows.

SPROSS: He was ninety then. He was very agile. He'd been climbing up a tree to get the queen bee that had disappeared. And that morning he said he was up in the tree trying to get her back. So he might still be around. I think NBC probably has a record of it.

SIGRIST: We might have a copy of it in the library. I'll have to look.

SPROSS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I think that that's probably a good point to end.

SPROSS: Okay.

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Spross, for coming out to Ellis Island.

SPROSS: I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: And enduring the air system. (Mrs. Spross laughs) And this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service signing off with Irena Spross.

END OF INTERVIEW