EI-25
REGINA (REBECCA) SASS TEPPER
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POLAND, 1923
AGE 14

SHIP: THE CANOPIC
PORT: DANZIG
RESIDENCES:
POLAND: WARSAW
KLASTICZ
DIVINA
US: BRONX, NY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Thursday, February 21st, 1991 and we're here in Yonkers with Regina Tepper, who came from Poland in 1923 when, uh, she was fourteen and had the pleasure of being detained for thirty days at Ellis Island. Mrs. Tepper, could you please give us your full name.

TEPPER: My full name now is Regina Tepper.

SIGRIST: Your maiden name?

TEPPER: And my name at that time was Rebecca or Regina (hard "g") as they called it in Eur..., in Poland.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: And my original name, my last name, was Sass. S-A-Double S.

SIGRIST: I see. And what's your birthdate?

TEPPER: And my birthday is, well, in Europe no..., nobody recorded a birthday. You were born about this and this date. Right before this holiday and between the other holiday.

SIGRIST: What birthdate do you go by?

TEPPER: So that to this day I don't really know my real birthday.

SIGRIST: I see.

TEPPER: But I think I'm eighty-two years old...

SIGRIST: I see.

TEPPER: According to what I'm trying, able to figure out.

SIGRIST: I see. O.K., and what...

TEPPER: How do I look for eighty-two? Not bad, huh?

SIGRIST: No, very good! (they laugh) What town were you born in?

TEPPER: I was born in Warsaw, Poland, and then the war broke out. My mother had four children.

SIGRIST: World War One?

TEPPER: World War One, right. And when the war broke out my father was in business, he was in the paper goods business and he did pretty well.

SIGRIST: Did he have his own business or did he...

TEPPER: He ran his own business.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

TEPPER: His name was Morris. And when the war broke out my father felt that we were in danger so that we should go to my grandmother's little village where she lived called Klasticz. No one would ever know of it.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that please?

TEPPER: I would spell it K-L-A-S-T-I-C-Z. Klasticz.

SIGRIST: And this was outside Warsaw?

TEPPER: And this was outside Warsaw. It was really, at that time it was Russia. So we traveled over there for safe keeping. The whole town was very sma..., it was a very tiny little village. If you went by sixty miles an hour in one minute you would have passed it, you know, less than a minute.

SIGRIST: Were these your father's parents or your mother's parents?

TEPPER: No, this was my mother's mother.

SIGRIST: I see.

TEPPER: That was my grandmother's place. And we stayed there for a while and we wanted to stay on but the mayor of that particular city was a real anti-Semite. And he felt that we didn't belong there. So he would come and say to my mother, "You have to leave! You have to leave!" And my mother had no place to go, she didn't know where to go and she had four little children. We were steps and stairs, you know, one after another. So finally I remember one day my mother got so angry that she took a pail, maybe hot water, cold water, I can't remember, and she spilled it on him. And then he never came back to bother us again. But, however, life was not very good for us there.

SIGRIST: Was your father with you also or did he stay in Warsaw?

TEPPER: No, my father stayed in Warsaw on account of his business.

SIGRIST: I see. Let me just ask you details about life with your grandparents. What kind of house did you live in there? What kind of house did they have?

TEPPER: Oh, some tiny little house that we had probably, maybe my grandmother owned it.

SIGRIST: How old were you approximately when this happened?

TEPPER: Six. Maybe.

SIGRIST: Quite young.

TEPPER: I don't remember the exact age. And let's see now...

SIGRIST: Did they have animals or...

TEPPER: There were some. My grandmother had like a country store where she sold groceries and yard goods. The real, like the real country stores.

SIGRIST: Did she run this store herself?

TEPPER: And she ran the store at that time.

SIGRIST: Was that, was there a grandfather at that time?

TEPPER: And the family...there was no grandfather, no.

SIGRIST: He had died.

TEPPER: My grandfather had died. I never knew my grandfather because he died rather young.

SIGRIST: What was your grandmother's name?

TEPPER: Pearl. And so finally we stayed on there for a while and we moved to another city in Russia called Dwinsk. And I would spell it D-W-I-N-S-K. Dwinsk. And when we were there the Russians and the Polacks and the Germans, everybody was fighting and the bombs were flying over our heads almost every single day. You didn't know any minute whether you were going to live or die.

SIGRIST: Was this still during World War One?

TEPPER: This was still during World War One. And you see the army marching in the street. And the street that we lived on was the hospital where they would bring back all the wounded soldiers. And I remember as kids we would stand there and watch one ambulance after another pull out and they would bring all these wounded soldiers. We had nothing to do, you know, as

children so we did that all day. And we were caught there. We couldn't leave that city for two and a half years. We were stranded there.

SIGRIST: How long were you at your grandparents? Your grandmother's?

TEPPER: I don't think we were there maybe a year.

SIGRIST: I see. A short time.

TEPPER: I really lost time of, track of time, you know, through the years.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned there were four children and I should ask you before we go any further...

TEPPER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you name your siblings?

TEPPER: Yeah. Well my, the youngest one was, Runsenke we used to call her, Rosie I guess was her name in American way. Then there was my brother Ben, then I was Regina, and my sister Fritzi, Frieda. We were four

children and we were like...

SIGRIST: All born in Warsaw?

TEPPER: All born in Warsaw, yeah. When the Russians or the Polish, Polish people took over the city, then we were able to start traveling back to where we came from, which was Warsaw. I remember as a child standing by the window and seeing a bomb fly right into my window. Something that never leaves you, you know. And everyday, every morning we'd wake and we would see a house across the street or two blocks away or three blocks away all flattened out, the whole family killed.

SIGRIST: As a child, were you frightened by any of this?

TEPPER: Oh, we were always frightened. It's a terrible way to live. You lived in constant fear. It was very cold to begin with. The Russian winters were very cold. And you didn't have enough food. If my mother had to have, let's say some bread for the children she would go and stand on line maybe twenty-four hours to get flour.

SIGRIST: And there was still very little communication with your father?

TEPPER: And there was, in the two and a half years I think we had I think one letter through Red Cross that he was alive or we were alive. And that was it. There was no communication.

SIGRIST: Why did you or why did your mother choose this particular town?

TEPPER: I have no idea.

SIGRIST: Did she have friends there or did she have family there perhaps?

TEPPER: Not that I recall, no. No. But maybe that was the nearest city to go to. For whatever reason, I never really quite knew why but there we were for two and a half years.

SIGRIST: Was there any anti-Semitic feeling there?

TEPPER: Oh, tremendous, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

TEPPER: All of Europe I guess until this day probably had a lot of anti-Semitism. I don't know why the Jews are so hated.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any specific instances of some affront happening to you or to your mother or to your brother's and sisters?

TEPPER: Uh, no, except that we were just...uh, wait a minute. Well the soldiers would come into your home and say, "We want this or we want that. And you feed us and give us whatever you have," and you had to do it or they'd kill you. Yes. We did, we were confronted with that so we were in fear of that.

SIGRIST: Talk about where you lived a little bit. Can you remember?

TEPPER: Well, we lived in a house. We lived upstairs.

SIGRIST: Two story house.

TEPPER: Two story house and the rooms were tremendous. Some

very wealthy people must have run away when the war began, must have left that house.

SIGRIST: This was in town?

TEPPER: In town, yeah, on a street normal like here, you know. And we had very little furniture. All we had I think was beds to sleep on and a table and chairs to eat on. But that was not our concern. We didn't really care.

SIGRIST: Did you, did you have to share a bed with your sisters or..?

TEPPER: I think I slept with my sister, my mother slept in another bed and I don't know, we had quite a few rooms in that house. It was a nice house.

SIGRIST: Was there a kitchen?

TEPPER: There was a kitchen, yes. There was a big dining room and a big living room and a couple of bedrooms.

SIGRIST: So it was very...

TEPPER: It was a big house. It was a very nice house.

SIGRIST: And another family lived underneath?

TEPPER: And another family lived downstairs and I remember going down into the garden every morning and we had rose bushes. And I remember plucking that little rose off the bush and smelling it and today when I smell a rose (she laughs) it still reminds me, it takes me back to Europe then.

SIGRIST: In an environment of anti-Semitic feeling, what was your religious life like?

TEPPER: Well, we really didn't have any. We had no life. It was just day to day survival.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue?

TEPPER: There may have been...

SIGRIST: But not that you remember.

TEPPER: But not that I remember. And, uh, let's see...

SIGRIST: Do you remember celebrating holidays at all?

TEPPER: Yes, I think we celebrated. My mother was a religious Jewish woman. That's the way she was brought up. That was her background. Like on Saturday you didn't tear a piece of paper or you didn't put a light on or you're not allowed a ride, so we observed the customs of that, you know.

SIGRIST: I see.

TEPPER: We did, yeah. And...

MR. TEPPER(off mike): You used to make that "chelunk."

TEPPER: Yeah, like, and every Friday my mother would make, like, a big pot and we would take it to a baker and about a hundred people would come with their pots and on the top you covered it with a paper and then stuck a number on it and they gave you the same number. And then that was Friday afternoon and Saturday afternoon we would go and pick up that pot so we would eat because we weren't allowed to cook on Saturday.

SIGRIST: What was in the pot?

TEPPER: And in the pot was meat, beans, and potatoes basically...

SIGRIST: I see.

TEPPER: You know and that was your Saturday meal. But mostly I think my mother had to worry about how she's going to feed us because she couldn't get any flour. She would stand in line for twenty-four hours maybe to get a bag of flour, and just as she would go up to the window they would close the window, "Sorry, we have no more flour," and so she would come home and she didn't even, didn't even, couldn't bake bread for us because the women all baked their own bread then. You didn't have bakeries like here, you know. And you, when I went down to the yard to pick my roses in the morning and we had, uh, a couple of chickens, we had a barn there, or a turkey, um, I used, we used to find casings of the shells that used to drop in our backyard. And we were always afraid that those would explode so we would, we knew enough not to touch them, you know. Now after about two and a half years that we were there suddenly word got around the town that we could leave. We could go back to Russia now, to Poland.

SIGRIST: To Poland.

TEPPER: To Poland, to my father. (exterior traffic noise) Um, let's see. My mother was not home at that time and we four kids got all excited.

SIGRIST: And how did you find this out?

TEPPER: By talk, I don't know, it was just like a village, everybody said, "Oh, everybody's going. We can leave now. There's a train going out." Somehow, after running around all over town looking for my mother we found her. She came back to the house. All we had was a straw basket and all our belongings were in that great big straw basket. Instead of valises the way they have today made out of these materials, they didn't have it in those days. And basically what did we have, uh, we had "perena" is what they called it in Jewish. But a perena is like a down comforter. And that was very precious to us because...

SIGRIST: Perena?

TEPPER: Perena.

SIGRIST: P-A-R-I...

TEPPER: Perena. I would spell it P-E-R-E-N-A. Perena. And that was a down comforter. And this was a very priceless possession to us, uh, as far as because it was cold at night and if you didn't have something warm to cover yourself with, there was no steam, of course, you know, you would be cold. So...

SIGRIST: Is this something your mother made?

TEPPER: I imagine, yes, they did. They used to take from the, uh, from the ducks or the swans...

MR. TEPPER:(off mike) The feathers.

TEPPER: The feathers. And they would pluck it because at that time everybody owned a duck or a goose or something. And they would save the feathers when they killed it and they would pluck all these feathers and save them and finally they would make their own...

MR. TEPPER:(off mike) Wait, and excuse me, and these things were fluffed up like pillows.

TEPPER: You know, like a down pillow. It's not like the ones that we use here now, which is what, uh, nylon fabric or whatever.

SIGRIST: So you had one of these with you?

TEPPER: The clothes that we owned were the clothes on our back. We had no clothes whatsoever. But all that was very unimportant to us. We threw in, in those straw baskets, our bedding, which was our main possession that we had and we ran, got someone to drive us to the station. When we got to the station there was a train, a cattle train. There were no seats or anything like that. And people were actually almost hanging out of those cattle trains. There was no room for another person to get on. Did you ever see that picture that they showed on television about the Holocaust, the way people are escaping? Did you ever see that?

SIGRIST: I know, I know of what you speak.

TEPPER: If you ever saw it on television, um, I have watched that picture maybe once or twice and everytime I've

seen it on television I sit and I really cry because it takes me back to that scene. So here's my mother standing there with the big basket, maybe another one or two smaller ones, and four children and there's no room for us to get into the train. But there were some, uh, policemen or guides, whoever they were, you know, that worked on the station. So they said to some of the single men that were there, a lot of single people, to get out and make room for us. And they put us... (to her husband) Honey, would you go into my bedroom and get me the sma...on the night table, the small Nitros, the bottle.

MR. TEPPER: (off mike) There's some small Nitro?

TEPPER: Yeah, there's a litt...small bottle in my bedroom. (to Brian Fenney) Could you stop that for...(pause in tape)

SIGRIST: Uh, this is Paul Sigrist and we're returning to the interview with Regina Tepper. Mrs. Tepper, you were talking about leaving the, uh, little town in Russia...

TEPPER: Oh.

SIGRIST: Getting on the train...

TEPPER: Getting on the train.

SIGRIST: And going back to Warsaw?

TEPPER: And on the way back to Warsaw we traveled overnight and the next morning the train stopped and in German, which I knew German pretty well at that time, I understood German. "Alles Arose", which means "everybody out." And they took us behind barbed wire into a, I would call it sort of a concentration camp. I have never heard anyone say that the Germans practiced what they did in the Holocaust but they did begin it in that year, which must have been around 1918.

SIGRIST: World War, the end of World War One.

TEPPER: Yes. They took us into this camp. The whole place must have been, with barbed wires all around, maybe, as far as I can remember, eight blocks square. My mother, traveling with four children, was a privileged person. They gave us one room to ourselves and at

the, it was a long narrow room. And at the end of that room there was a board and there was straw on the floor where you would put a horse in. And this is where the four of us children and my mother slept. The room was barren. Nothing in it. It must have been at a spring or fall of the year and it was damp there. There was a lot of dampness. So the water would run off the walls. We used to line up for our food with a galvanized pail in the morning, each person was allowed a quarter of a pound of dark bread, black coffee, and a little jelly. That was your breakfast. For lunch and supper you had a pail of horse meat with some potatoes and God knows what else they threw into it. That was what you ate for lunch and supper. And they had to write to my father in Warsaw to find out what that, we are not spi...they had to check on us that we were not spies. A woman traveling with four little children, whether she was a spy. Single people or maybe if there were two or three people, they used to put them in a great big barrack and that's where they lived. We were privileged.

SIGRIST: How long were you at this, this, uh, encampment?

TEPPER: We were there about a month.

SIGRIST: But this is in Poland?

TEPPER: I can't even tell you where it was between Russia and Poland. But it was occupied by the Germans at that time, you see, and Warsaw at that time was occupied by the Germans because everybody was fighting everybody. The German was fighting the Poles and the Poles were fighting the Russians and the Russians were fighting the Germans. So we stayed there for a month and every morn...day about eleven o'clock we would gather like in the center of this little place and they would call out names of people that were allowed to leave. And if they didn't like somebody or if somebody tried to escape they would shoot them or they had those big German police dogs and they would tell their dog, "Go ahead after this person." He would take a chunk out of somebody's, men, men's leg or something. And those were the conditions that we finally, that we had to live under. Can you picture that? Unbelievable. Just like a dream.

SIGRIST: Did they finally contact your father?

TEPPER: They finally contacted him and, uh, we were able to leave. This was after about a month. Now you wonder why I'm sick today. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So did, um...

TEPPER: Now we finally came back to Warsaw.

SIGRIST: By train?

TEPPER: I guess it must have been by train, yeah. That was the mode of transportation at that time. And my mother greets my father and us children are running to greet our father after two and a half years.

SIGRIST: You hardly knew your father, really.

TEPPER: Sure. But this was, this was what we looked forward to and my father says to my mother, "I don't know you. I have a new sweetheart and I want no part of you." Can you imagine? And in those days, by golly, that was scandal. Today it's nothing but you never heard of divorce in those days. So my mother and father divorced. I happened to be my father's favorite child out of the four.

SIGRIST: You were a little older at this, by this time.

TEPPER: Well, I was the third one, you know, the third oldest. My sister was older than I am. After a while my father remarried. My mother had no source of income whatsoever. And my father at that time owned a restaurant. My mother lived in a one room apartment with a toilet in the hall and all she had was a couple of beds and a table and chairs to eat on. And she had no source of income whatsoever. I, being the favorite child of my father's, I helped him in the restaurant. I must have been what, eight, nine, ten at the time. So I also handled cash. I would wait on customers, I would prepare the food in the kitchen, I would clean, I would scrub the floors, I did everything a maid would do, at that age. And then I used to take money and stuff it somewheres in my dress somewheres and I would go home and give it to my mother, otherwise she had no way of existing. In the meantime my mother had, uh, relatives here in America, she had a couple of sisters and brothers so she wrote to them telling them how bad conditions were.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: My youngest sister got sick of tuberculosis and she became almost like a skeleton.

SIGRIST: This is Rosie?

TEPPER: Yeah, the youngest one. And we used to have a little carriage. She couldn't walk so we would wheel her around in the carriage and when we wheeled her in the carriage everyone would look at her and she finally died.

SIGRIST: In Warsaw?

TEPPER: In Warsaw. And I can remember the body laying, her body in that one room until she got buried. And it took my mother a while to get the visas and they sent her some money for passports and travel expenses.

SIGRIST: Her relatives did?

TEPPER: Her relatives. But they weren't rich people and they didn't want to take, send for my, for all of them, it was too much of a responsibility. So they felt as long as I was close to my father or he was close to

me, and my brother who was younger than I am, I kind of, I was like his mother to him, to my brother, that they would take my mother and my sister and bring them here to America. And my father did not like my sister. So they came here.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

TEPPER: In 1920. So that took about three years, didn't it.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: Somewhere, yeah. And I remained living with my father and his new wife and they had a child.

SIGRIST: How did you get along with the new wife?

TEPPER: Well, you just minded your own business. And you didn't ruffle any feathers.

SIGRIST: Was she kind to you?

TEPPER: Was my father kind?

SIGRIST: Or was she kind to you?

TEPPER: We were non-ex...we were nonexistent. They weren't bad to us but you shifted completely for yourself.

SIGRIST: And you lived with then once your mother left.

TEPPER: And I lived with them, yes. And then my mother came here and she got a job working in a cloak and suit factory.

SIGRIST: Did she stay in Manhattan when she was in America?

TEPPER: She lived in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: Is that where her family was?

TEPPER: That's where her family was so she came and stayed with them for a while. Then she got her own place and she saved up two hundred and fifty dollars and she sent it to us so that my brother and I could come. And we didn't have control of that money at all and she would not dare send it to us because my father would squander it and that would be the end of it. So she sent it to the HIAS. H-I-A-S.

SIGRIST: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

TEPPER: Yeah. They were a society, right. And they sort of controlled the money for us.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: They knew the situation.

SIGRIST: And there was a division of the HIAS in Warsaw?

TEPPER: And there was a division there, yes. So it took me, I would say from, almost a year of going to the HIAS, to the doctors. Oh, they examined you very thoroughly. My brother had a bald spot on his head. Well, that's contagious as far as they were concerned because they were looking for every reason for you not to leave the country. Then he had caught his finger in a door knob and the nail was black. You could not go to America for those two reasons. Did you ever hear anything so absurd? So they send us to one doctor and they did electrolysis supposedly on his head. And we must have spent out of that two hundred and fifty dollars maybe twenty five dollars for each. And that was a lot of money then. Then we, I went to another doctor with

him and he had to take the nail off. Now here am I, twelve or thirteen years old and I was maybe the size of an eight year old because I hadn't developed and here's my brother who is younger than me and the doctor is taking off his nail and I'm standing there and the kid is screaming holy Hell.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. (end of side one)

TEPPER: And then they finished the electrolysis on his head and we must have spent I think about forty dollars between the two doctors. And that was a lot of money. That took months and months and months until you finally got the O.K. So we figured now, well, we're through with the nail, we're through with the head, now we can go. So you have to go to a certain place where you have to get an O.K. They examined him. "Sorry, the nail hasn't grown back yet." Would you believe that. The nail has to grow. In order for a nail to grow back it can take at least a year and to me as a child can you realize what a year of my life meant at that time. Another year of this. So I went back to this doctor who originally, I think, took off, or he, he was the guy who was supposed to give me the O.K. and he says "No." So I being Sarah Bernhardt at

that time got down on my knees. This was a tall, six foot two, distinguished looking, good looking guy that you ever saw in your life. And he was, and here is me, the little stinker I would call me, gets down on my knees. I grab his hands and I kiss his hands and I cry and I beg him, "Please, you must let us go to America! My mother is there. Life is impossible. We've got to go. You must give me this O.K." Well, I broke the man down and he gave me his O.K. When I came back and told this to people they did not believe it. It was almost an impossibility, you know. So we finally get the O.K., we go back to the HIAS and they start calling, the last boat is leaving on Saturday.

SIGRIST: May I ask a question? How did your father feel about you going to America?

TEPPER: He had nothing, he cared less what happened.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: He wasn't anxious, I don't think, to see them go, to see us go.

SIGRIST: But he wasn't preventing it, either.

TEPPER: But he didn't give a damn. And he kept on saying, "Well, maybe when you get to America you'll send for me." And I says, "Well, we'll see." I was on good terms. I was able to take my father and twist him around my little finger. He loved me. I was very smart supposedly and I was. I was, you know, that kind of child. So the HIAS calls up the ship company and the ship is leaving tomorrow morning. Well, I had nothing to get ready for, I was ready at any moment but my brother and I had some winter underwear, heavy cotton underwear that we wore and that underwear was not clean. And, of course, I had great fear if they find dirty underwear on us they may not be able, they may not let us go to America. So I stayed up half the night washing and trying to get the, the dampness out of this underwear of our's. And when we finally packed the underwear in the morning it was still wet 'cause there was no way of drying it, we had no, (she laughs) no dryers. And we got to the train in Warsaw to travel to Danzig, which is in Germany...

SIGRIST: Who took you to the train?

TEPPER: Maybe my father did. I think he did.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Did your father have an automobile?

TEPPER: I don't know how, I don't even remember how we got there. Maybe we hired one of those, what they call a "druska", which was like a, a small car with a horse of something.

SIGRIST: A hack?

TEPPER: A hack. And I think that's how we got to the train. And we traveled overnight and we got to Bremen, no, to Danzig rather 'cause that's where the boat was leaving. We stayed there for five days. I don't know why. Great big barrack, you know, almost like...

SIGRIST: With other people waiting for the boat?

TEPPER: With other people, yeah. And we got on the boat.

SIGRIST: While you were there for five days did you have to undergo any other examinations?

TEPPER: Constantly.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things?

TEPPER: They always examined your heart, your liver, this and that. Oh, and they, and they also vaccinated me. Ah, what a story that vaccination. They vaccinated me.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you had ever undergone a vaccination?

TEPPER: That was the second time.

SIGRIST: Second time.

TEPPER: Because when I was a child I was vaccinated and then I was vaccinated again. And I had one dress and my dress was a navy blue, but original real wool and when the vaccination started, um, you know, taking its course there was like a little puss and blood coming out of it so it stuck to my navy blue wool. And every time I would try to take that sleeve away from the vaccination I would tear a piece of, I would open up that wound again. This went on for one solid month but I had no other dress and nobody would treat me, you know. You're afraid to even go and say that this is happening to me. You didn't want them to see it.

So we got on the first boat and when we were out I think four days in the middle of the ocean they said the boat was sinking.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

TEPPER: The boat was "Canopic," spelled C-A-N-O-P-I-C, I believe. Canopic.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what line you were on?

TEPPER: We were on the White Star Line.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: Yeah, that I remember. So on the fifth day we pulled into some port somewheres but here you're out in the middle of the ocean in January. Can you imagine the waves? We were sick, sick like dogs. Oh, were we sick. And when you're seasick you wish you were dead. (she laughs) You absolutely do. Were you ever sea sick?

SIGRIST: No, no.

TEPPER: No. It's the most horrible feeling in the world is to be sea sick.

SIGRIST: Where were you in the boat? Where were your accommodations?

TEPPER: And we were third class. Down at the bottom. And, um, the fellows who were in charge of the cabins would, 'cause they didn't speak any of our languages, we spoke Russian, we spoke Polish, we spoke German but they only spoke, I think, English. We didn't know a word of English. So they would always tell us to go up on the deck and so we would take a blanket and we would go up on the deck and sometimes after a while you would feel a little better. And at night you'd go back into your dungeon cabin again. And the cabin was two by four. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: It was just you and your brother in there.

TEPPER: Yeah. I slept down and he slept up on top and there must have been that much room between us. (she gestures) That's it, you know. Then, so we got another boat and don't ask the name of the other boat because I still don't, I don't remember it. And we

stayed on that for days and then we stopped in Bremen, Germany. So we were already seven days on water. After the two days on the next boat I think we stopped in Liverpool. Where's Liverpool? England?

SIGRIST: England.

TEPPER: England someplace, yeah. And we were there maybe seven days and we got on the third boat and the third boat was, what the heck was the name of the, I knew that name, the third boat, oh gosh, I knew the name and I can't remember it.

SIGRIST: Maybe it will come to you in a bit.

TEPPER: Maybe it will come to me. So anyhow we were on three boats, fourteen days on water, fourteen days on land, it took us twenty-eight days to get to America.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh, long trip.

TEPPER: Long trip. And we finally get to Ellis Island and they take us in and we go before this great big jury in this courtroom which I described in my manuscript. And they ask us our names and our ages and where we

came from and the father's name and the mother's name and all the basic information and they tell us to sit down. And they cross examine us, you would think we were really spies. And they tell us to sit down. And we sit down and they call my mother in and she walks in. Well, my mother had gained a lot of weight. She wasn't fat but she was beautiful looking 'cause when she left she was emaciated looking. And here this beautiful woman walks in and this is my mother. And I want to run and greet her and kiss her and hug her, you know, and they won't let me. And so they call her up. And they question her and she wants to run to us and we want to run to them and we're not allowed to see each other. No contact whatsoever and they, they tell her to go out. Then they call us back and they tell us our quota has been filled. (exterior traffic noise) We left after the quota was filled, that they, we cannot enter the United States of America. "And we will see what will happen." That's all they tell you. They tell you very little. "But you will be able to see your mother. She will come to visit you during the week." And my mother did come to visit us. Do you, I don't know how much they've changed of the entrance there but there's that long hallway, do you ever know a long hallway when you come into Ellis

Island?

SIGRIST: There are long hallways depending on where you come in.

TEPPER: But as you went in there was a long, narrow hallway which was probably half the size of this room in length. It was quite long and the windows were like high up and this is where we met. There were no tables, chairs, anything. This is the way my mother visited us. And fortunately my uncle, uh, my two uncles I think, belonged to a Democratic club, so they probably knew other people that were influential and they must have known somebody in Washington D.C., you know, the senators, the congressmen, I don't know who. And they worked on it practically a month. And then our pictures appeared in all the newspapers. In fact, I still have a copy of that from...

SIGRIST: You sent me a xerox.

TEPPER: I think I, did I send you a xeroxed copy of that? And, uh, that here are two children coming to see their mother, they lived with a, you know, had such bad life, the father and mother were divorced and they

won't let them come into this country. And finally they let us come in here to America.

SIGRIST: Now, when you were at Ellis, did they ever tell you how long you were going to be?

TEPPER: No, no.

SIGRIST: No one really knew.

TEPPER: You didn't know from day to day. But the worse part also about being in Ellis Island is they were constantly examining you. They were always looking for a reason to send you back. And I said I was not going to go back. I was going to jump overboard and that would be the end of me, you know. And my brother would say to me, "Oh, we'll never make it. No, forget it, we'll never make it. We'll have to go back." And I would say to him, "Oh yes we will. Yes we will. We've got to make it. It's so bad things just got to get better."

SIGRIST: How much younger is he than you?

TEPPER: Two years.

SIGRIST: Two years.

TEPPER: Two years.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: Two years younger.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about, just sort of, since you were at Ellis for...

TEPPER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Quite some time, just sort of the everyday procedure. What was, what was...

TEPPER: It was like being in a prison. You just looked out and you saw a ship or whatever, you weren't interested in what was outside. You certainly could not go out. They never let you out. Now the funny part of it is this here. About five years ago I went back to Ellis Island, somebody said to me, "Oh, a whole group is going to Ellis Island, Reggie. Do you want to go?" And I said, "Yes, fine." I thought it would be a nice

day's outing. When I got off the boat and as I approached the steps, I think it's in my thing that I wrote, I looked around and then there were walks there. And there were trees. And I, you know, I, I just froze for a moment and I thought to myself why didn't they let us out at least to take a walk? There were facilities there but we were not allowed to leave that building.

SIGRIST: What did you do?

TEPPER: What did we do, right! It's a good question! Nothing.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

TEPPER: You just sat there and you walked around the place and you talked to this person and you talked to that person and you probably looked forward from meal to meal to go to sleep. You just led your routine and you prayed and you hoped and you wished that you could enter America.

SIGRIST: What were the meals like?

TEPPER: The meals, well having, never having had really great food in Europe, that was not important to us. You could survive. They weren't that bad.

SIGRIST: Where did you eat?

TEPPER: We ate in one great big place, you know, long tables. You just got up and whatever was there you ate and that was it. You didn't care what your food was.

SIGRIST: Was it crowded? Were there a lot of people at Ellis at that time?

TEPPER: Well, oh, there must have been hundreds.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: And everyday, I guess, somebody left and somebody came. And every night I remember going upstairs, walking all those steps to go to sleep, you know. And life was like, well I'll tell you, when you grow up and you have so many problems in your life, so many, you get so used to troubles that you feel life can't be any other way. You begin to accept it because you have no choices. And there were none given to you,

you know. But you are unhappy every moment of your life. You don't know the definition of happiness. All you know is troubles, troubles, troubles. And that's all you know.

SIGRIST: And this is how you felt.

TEPPER: And this is how I felt.

SIGRIST: Did, uh, how were you treated?

TEPPER: Today, now that I'm old I'm happier than I have ever been. But I never knew what a happy day meant in my life.

SIGRIST: Were you treated well by the staff?

TEPPER: Well, the staff didn't really bother much with the people, no. They didn't mistreat us, I would say. You know, you just did your bid and you minded your own business and it, if it wasn't broke you didn't fix it.

SIGRIST: Describe, for instance, where you slept.

TEPPER: Well, uh, you slept in a big, dark dungeon with maybe hundreds of people. And when you went to sleep you were afraid that maybe somebody was going to come during the night and pull you out and say, "Well, you're sick. Come on, we'll send you back," or something. And people were in fear. Even if they were sick they were, tried to fake it, you know. They wouldn't let them know. You lived in constant fear of being sent back.

SIGRIST: When you, when you, for instance, went to sleep at night, were there people monitoring the room?

TEPPER: I don't think so. There were...

SIGRIST: There weren't guards or anything like that?

TEPPER: There was, I don't think so, no.

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier about people watching you while you slept.

TEPPER: Well, they used, they used to walk around, the doctors, would walk around and look into different people to see maybe somebody was sick and maybe, and

they, they were constantly examining you, the examinations went on. That was the worst part of it.

SIGRIST: What sorts of examinations specifically?

TEPPER: Well, like a doctor would give you a going over, uh, if you went to the doctor and he gave you a check on your heart and your lungs, looked at your nose or throat and that's what they were doing.

SIGRIST: Did anyone speak Polish?

TEPPER: Well, everybody there spoke, no, no. Except the people that were there, the immigrants.

SIGRIST: I mean, did you talk to anyone?

TEPPER: Oh, I spoke to different people, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

TEPPER: I spoke Polish, I spoke Jewish, I spoke German, I spoke Russian. That's the one thing we did have on us is languages. And I was like a linguist by nature anyway, you know.

SIGRIST: Were you, um, were you, you talk about there was nothing to do but where were you doing nothing? Were you in the main Registry Hall?

TEPPER: We were in the main Registry Hall. And you sat and maybe, maybe you read a paper if there was one or you talked and you sat or you walked to this person and you talked and you sat. You were just killing time.

SIGRIST: Did they ever offer movies or music or anything like that?

TEPPER: I don't remem...I don't remember a thing. If they did I'm a blank now.

SIGRIST: Was your brother allowed to stay with you at night?

TEPPER: Yeah. Well, we always stuck together because you had nobody else, so naturally.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: And, uh, it was just, just horrible. Have you had worse descriptions than mine? Can there be worse? I

don't know.

SIGRIST: It's, it's a typical description of someone who, who was detained.

TEPPER: Is it typical? Do I sound very much like a lot of other people?

SIGRIST: A lot of people were, you know, it was not a pleasant experience. (he laughs)

TEPPER: Oh gosh, yes.

SIGRIST: Mostly the boredom. That's what people remember.

TEPPER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Um, but, uh, but...

TEPPER: Well, you didn't.

SIGRIST: But you and your brother were in good health, though.

TEPPER: We were basically, we were all right.

SIGRIST: You weren't being treated for anything while you were at Ellis? You were just simply waiting for the, the next quota to open.

TEPPER: No, just waiting. Just waiting to go, to go to America. That was our only ambition in life. There was no other.

SIGRIST: Well, and you could see it there right through the windows, probably you could see New York.

TEPPER: Right, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, let's get you off of Ellis Island. (he laughs)

TEPPER: O.K.

SIGRIST: How did you get off finally?

TEPPER: Well, finally they worked it out through Washington and, uh, we got word that we are released.

SIGRIST: Did your mother come and get you?

TEPPER: My mother couldn't come. My mother was hospitalized

then. She got sick.

SIGRIST: What was she sick with?

TEPPER: She had a kidney problem. She had high blood pressure and from everything that she went through she got sick. And she worked so hard. To work on cloaks and suits and sit and sew all day was not easy.

SIGRIST: Was she working in a factory?

TEPPER: In a factory, yes. She worked in a factory.

SIGRIST: In the Bronx or in New York?

TEPPER: She worked in New York and she traveled on the subway in those days, of course. And she finally got sick and she was a young woman when she got sick. She was no more, maybe in her forties, fifties, forties.

SIGRIST: Who came, who came and picked you up at Ellis?

TEPPER: So my uncle came.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's brother.

TEPPER: That was my mother's, um, sister's husband. He was her brother-in-law. And I remember he came and picked us up and took us by subway home to the Bronx and the whole subway of people, everybody was staring at us 'cause...

SIGRIST: And this was your first time in a subway, probably.

TEPPER: And my first time. Well, we had gone in trains so...

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: And it was rush hour, I think it was working time and everybody was going home from work and I remember my uncle talking to everybody, you know, and maybe because of the pictures that had appeared in the papers, also. We were like front page news, you know. Maybe people recognized us, you know. So we came to America to a sick mother who had three children and she was, she was sick. She, the children were fine but she got sick and we had no support. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was your, was your older sister working?

TEPPER: Nope.

SIGRIST: Because she would have been old enough.

TEPPER: She was, wait, so what happened just about that time she started working, I think, when my mother took sick, well, she was just sixteen and you couldn't work until you were sixteen. Then I dropped out of school after fifteen months of public school.

SIGRIST: Well, let's get you into school first. Did you, did you start...?

TEPPER: Oh, let me get you into school. I started first grade.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: With all the little...

SIGRIST: And any, being as old as you were.

TEPPER: Yeah. And, then, I think in one week they said "1A. Now you go to 1B." At that time they had 1A, 1B. Did you know that?

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

TEPPER: Then they shoved me into 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4, 5, 6. I was in the seventh grade after fifteen months. And my mother was sick.

SIGRIST: She continued being sick but was she, was she at home or was she hospitalized?

TEPPER: She continued being sick. She was in and out of the hospital. In and out. In and out. And my sister didn't make enough money to support all of us so I went to work. Oh, as a matter of fact before I even quit school, that was the summer time, we had summer vacation, I got a job in a book bindery factory. And the man says to me, "How old are you?" and I figured, well, if I tell him I'm fifteen he's not going to hire me, can't say I'm sixteen and I don't look sixteen, I look twelve, I swear. I said, "I'm eighteen." He says, "You don't look it." I says, "But I am." And I worked for twelve dollars a week for five and a half days. All the way from the Bronx down to Hudson Street somewheres.

SIGRIST: Was where the book bindery was.

TEPPER: That's where the book bindery was. And what I had to do was take a knife and as the book would come off the assembly line I had to cut like every other stitch. Then I had to pick up these heavy books and carry then over to another table and rush back because if you didn't cut off those books they would fall on the floor. So you were working like assembly line work. Quick. And that's what I did.

SIGRIST: And it was...

TEPPER: And it was...

SIGRIST: Money that you were making that the family was being supported.

TEPPER: That, that was the family, yes. And I gave it all to my mother and she would give me like twenty-five cents a day.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own apartment at this time or were you living with your mother's family?

TEPPER: By that time we had our own apartment, yeah, we had a cold water flat.

SIGRIST: Was it a big apartment?

TEPPER: I think there were three or four rooms but they were tiny rooms.

SIGRIST: You had cold running water.

TEPPER: Cold running water.

SIGRIST: Electricity?

TEPPER: Three flights up on 136th Street near Alexander Avenue. There wasn't...

SIGRIST: Was that on the East side?

TEPPER: On the, in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: In the Bronx, oh yes, right.

TEPPER: And there wasn't a Jewish family in sight and we were the only Jewish family there and talk about

anti-Semitism. It's going to go on for years, you know, it's here to stay. Let's face it. (she laughs) Uh, the Gentile people would say, call us "greenhorn, popcorn, five cents a piece" and they would throw milk bottles at us and call us "dirty Jews." And believe me, we weren't dirty. Jews happen to be a very clean people. Like any other people there's good and bad in everyone. And so we lived there for a while and then we moved in closer to our school where we were going and there were Jewish people there so we felt at home.

SIGRIST: You were more happy.

TEPPER: Oh, I was more happy then.

SIGRIST: In our final minute...

TEPPER: Yes.

SIGRIST: That we have here, I just want to ask you a question.

TEPPER: What?

SIGRIST: Are you glad you came to America?

TEPPER: Oh, God. What else! (they laugh) What else is new, huh?

SIGRIST: Did your father ever make it?

TEPPER: No.

SIGRIST: No, never.

TEPPER: And I wrote him several letters and he wrote me and the whole thing died.

SIGRIST: Well, good. So you're glad that you came over here.

TEPPER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and, and, was she happy that she made that decision?

TEPPER: She was happy that she made it, yes, but she wound up a very sick person.

SIGRIST: She had a...

TEPPER: And she died a vegetable.

SIGRIST: Yeah, she had a...

TEPPER: So that was sad for her.

SIGRIST: She had a tough life.

TEPPER: She had a very tough life, very tough.

SIGRIST: Yeah, well...

TEPPER: And do you realize that some of the people over there now, what they're going through?

SIGRIST: Well, it's a lot of what you went through.

TEPPER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: In one way or another.

TEPPER: Oh, the same thing.

SIGRIST: It's funny. Everything is cyclical.

TEPPER: You know, everything goes around comes around, huh?

SIGRIST: That's right.

TEPPER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, anyway, I just, I just want to thank you very much...

TEPPER: Well, thank you.

SIGRIST: For giving us your time.

TEPPER: Well, Paul, you're a de...

SIGRIST: And being part of the Oral History Project.

TEPPER: You're a delightful young man.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

TEPPER: I'm so glad I had the pleasure of meeting you and, and telling you my whole life's history.

SIGRIST: Indeed. Now for posterity.

TEPPER: I think it's more than my husband knows, I swear.

SIGRIST: Well, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service signing off with Regina Tepper.

TEPPER: Thank you.