

EI-259

MAE (MALKA) RAPPAPORT ABRAMS

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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CLIFTON, NJ**

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 5/1994

RUSSIA, 1913

AGE 5

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES: RUSSIA: ZEROMETZ

USA: NYC, LOWER EAST SIDE

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and it's
March 3rd . . .

ABRAMS: Fourth.

LEVINE: March 4, 1993, and I'm here in Clifton, New Jersey with Mae
Abrams, who was born Mae Rappaport. (the sound of wind
whistling is heard throughout this recording) In 1908 she was
born, and she came here from Russia when she was five years
old, and that was before the First World War and it was either
1913 or 1914.

ABRAMS: I think it was 19, well, the First World War started in 1913.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. so . . .

ABRAMS: Then I came in 1913, because I, we left Russia, and then I know the war started.

LEVINE: Okay. So I'm very happy to finally get to talk to you. And let's begin by your saying your date of birth and the town where you were born.

ABRAMS: Well, I was born, we didn't have a date. In Russia they did not keep records, so when we came to America we, the four of us made up dates for our birthdays, and we kept it since then. We asked my mother, "When about were you born?" She said, "Oh, you were born near this holiday, and you were born near this holiday." So they picked me for July 29th. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Okay. So July 29th, 1908.

ABRAMS: Yes.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

ABRAMS: I was born in a little town called Zerometz.

LEVINE: Could you possibly spell that?

ABRAMS: No.

LEVINE: And make a guess?

ABRAMS: Z-E-R-O-M-E-T-Z. Zerometz. And it was, and I remember living there in a very small one bedroom, one room house, because we had been dispossessed from the big estate where my father was the keeper. You know, those people were called "aporetz." Jews were not allowed to own big properties, and this was a big, big, big estate that we had a nice house, and my father's father and he, oh, you used to take care of that big, big estate. And then I think he told us to get out. And there was a trial, and naturally we lost. So we had, we, the first thing I remember is that we lived in a one great big house with a great big fireplace of brick, and most of us slept on the fireplace because it was warm, and a few of us had cots. And I remember that in cold weather my mother used to call the little chicks in and they would live in the same house with us when it was too cold. And then I also remember, my father left three years before we did, and he left my mother and the four small children, well, one of the children wasn't born yet. When he left, she was pregnant. And when she came to America, she was a little over two.

LEVINE: I see. So how many children were there in your family altogether?

ABRAMS: Five.

LEVINE: And did your father go alone when he left?

ABRAMS: I guess so. I really don't remember. I must have been about three or less, because I didn't even remember my father when we met him at the Ellis Island. My mother had another boy in America. We came with four girls.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

ABRAMS: Jacob.

LEVINE: And his, Rappaport.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

LEVINE: And that's your maiden name.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so you don't remember your father at all when you were in Russia?

ABRAMS: No. I remember when I saw him at Ellis Island, we used to call it Castle Garden or something. And I said to myself, I was five, "Ooh, he's an old man." You know, something to the effect, because I hadn't seen him. But this was his second marriage. He had five or six children from his first marriage, and they were already in America.

LEVINE: Oh.

ABRAMS: My mother was his second wife.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ABRAMS: And I remember some of them from Russia, slightly. But when we came to America they were all very nice to us.

LEVINE: Now, did your, was your father responsible for bringing his first, the children from his first marriage here?

ABRAMS: No. They were here even before my mother, before my father. We had uncles here and a few relatives and they all used to chip in and bring us over. They brought over a few of his daughters and two of his sons, and then the last two came by themselves. I remember they left our house maybe 1911, about two years before we did. And when we came to America, my father had an apartment at 82 Eldridge Street.

LEVINE: Okay. Before we talk about coming to America, let's talk about when you were still in Russia.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name and her maiden name?

ABRAMS: Her name was Chana, Chanalaya Suchin, S-U-C-H-I-N.

LEVINE: Chanalaya?

ABRAMS: Yeah. Anna, we called her when we got to America.

LEVINE: I see. And do you remember experiences with your mother when you were in Russia?

ABRAMS: No, I can't, I don't remember much. But I do remember when my little sister was born, my last one. We had three of us, and then we had two stepsisters living with us when he left. And then two years, he left three years before us, and they left two years before us. So we lived in this little village, and I remember when we moved, I don't remember the big house, but we had one room. And then when we had to come to America I remember my mother got a man with a wagon and all of us went on the wagon, which she had to walk, so it couldn't

have been too far. We lived with my grandmother, and she lived in Humin.

LEVINE: H-U . . .

ABRAMS: M-I-N. I don't know. It's also a county of Minsk Gubernia. And then we lived with my grandmother for about six months until our passports and everything were ready. And then I remember taking long train rides and getting off at night and somebody helped us cross into, from one country into the other, like a grenitz, it was called.

LEVINE: A grenitz?

ABRAMS: It's called, the division, like between America and Mexico. What's it called?

LEVINE: Like a border?

ABRAMS: A border.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

ABRAMS: So I think we passed a few borders, and I know that we must have left from Antwerp, because our ship was called Antwerpen, so I, we figured out it must have been Antwerp.

That's Belgium, isn't it?

LEVINE: Yes.

ABRAMS: And then I remember being on the boat in the very, very lowest part of the boat in one room, four children and my mother. And most of us were sick most of the time. I think it took us about three weeks to come over. But I remember going up on the dock and the people from the First Class used to throw down pennies and oranges and bananas, and we had never seen oranges or bananas, because I don't think Russia, where we lived it wasn't a warm enough climate. We only had apples and, you know, other fruits that would come from colder climates. Oh, and then, oh, and then when we got to Ellis Island we, I went there with a group recently and they were telling us how difficult it was for people to get in. They had to have medical exams and they were so scared and they were sent back, but nothing like that happened to us. We seemed to go through like, like with vaseline, you know. And before we knew it we were called, and my father picks us up.

LEVINE: What was the reunion like with your father?

ABRAMS: Actually I had no, I had no rapport, you know. I didn't remember him. The only thing I remember is that I said to

myself, "Ooh, he's such an old man." But he was much older than my mother, because he had been married and had five or six children before, and they were all in America by now. So he had an apartment for us where he lived with his two daughters that left two years before us, 82 Eldridge Street.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember when the boat came into the New York Harbor? Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

ABRAMS: No. I knew nothing about the Statue of Liberty, and I knew nothing about docking or anything. All I remember is sitting in a room. I don't even remember doctors examining us. All the four of us went out very easily. And then when I went there recently with a group, they were telling us how horrible it was for some people, they had to be sent back if they had glaucoma or whatever other illness. But I don't even remember being examined. Maybe they looked at us and we all looked healthy. And so they, I remember sitting up on a bench and then they called, "Rappaport." And before you know it we were united with my father.

LEVINE: What were your sisters' names, the ones that you came here with?

ABRAMS: Yeah. Well, we came with, her name is Edith now, but her

name was Etta. And then I came, my name is Malka. And Gutta is the third one, and Zlota was the baby. And her name was Sylvia, and the other, and Gutta's name is Augusta, and Etta's name is Edith and my name is Mae. It was Molly at first, you know, when we registered for school. In fact, one of our relatives registered us for school, and she didn't know. So she translated our names. I was called Molly. My sister Edith was called, uh, I think it was called Nellie. And Gussie was called Gus, and Sylvia wasn't registered. She was too young. And her name was Zlotta, so we gave her the name of Sylvia, and we took names and dates of birth for ourselves. But nothing else was, I mean, it was nothing very exciting, because I was, I didn't even know what was happening. I remember living at my grandma's house and, for about six months.

LEVINE: What do you remember about her house, your grandmother's?

ABRAMS: Well, I remember it was on stilts, and she had, under the house they had a lot of chickens and all kinds of, chickens and what else? What else? Things to eat, you know, that she raised.

LEVINE: Rabbits? Turkeys?

ABRAMS: No. We were Jewish, so we didn't have anything. And I don't, I know that we, one of my mother's sisters was lame. She had a

lame hand and a lame walk. And she used to help them. They used to sit for, and watch orchards, you know, big apple farms. So she used to sit. And then we heard later on that during World War Two, One, that she was attacked by the soldiers and molested, and she died of fright. But later on my mother didn't know how to even write Jewish. One of my aunts used to write to all the relatives that we had there, she had a brother and a mother and a father, and we used to send them a few dollars each month. And then I became Americanized very fast, because at that time they used to call us greenhorns, and we were ashamed that we spoke Russian or Jewish. We right away tried to learn English.

LEVINE: Do you remember how people treated you when you first came to . . .

ABRAMS: Very nice. They were very nice, and we were ashamed to say that we weren't Americans we were so, my mother was so happy to be here. She used to say, "America, I love you." You know? And we were very happy here. Later on we moved to 161 East Second Street, I remember, from Eldridge Street. And then from there we moved to Brooklyn. We were all growing up and bringing in salaries. We had graduated, some of us from high school and some of us from business school.

So we helped them to support the house. Because my father was not a, he wasn't, eh didn't have a trade. He used to be a farmer, so I guess he couldn't find any kind of work. So he was, he used to work at burlap bags somewheres in New York, and made eight dollars a week. So later on after we were here about two or three years my uncle, the one who brought us in, gave us an apartment. He had two houses at 161 East Second Street and 159, and my father was the janitor. And he still went to work, but my mother did, cleaned the halls, washed the toilets. And even when she was pregnant with my brother I remember, I felt so sorry for her. She had to, you know, there were two toilets, one on each side of the apartments, one is in the front and one for the back. So once a week she had to wash the stairs and clean the toilets. And I remember with her belly and all she used to do it so, I used to help her once in a while. And then later on when we became, most of us graduated high school. One of my older sisters, Edith, she graduated from business school. And we all had jobs, so we moved from Second Street to 544 Throop Avenue in Brooklyn and we became very rich. (she laughs) Very rich. I mean, it was ritzy compared to what we, what we had. But, you know, we got along so well on Second Street. I played with all the different children. There were Polish and Italian, and different nationalities. We were all friends. We never had any fights,

never had any name-calling or any disputes.

LEVINE: Now, this was in Manhattan when you were on Second Street?

ABRAMS: Yes, on the East Side.

LEVINE: When you were in Russia was there, were there Christians as well as Jews living where you lived?

ABRAMS: Where we lived in Zerometz, we were the only Jewish people. And I don't remember anybody from there or anyone. But I know that when my older sister Edith was five or six, my mother used to send her to a relative's where there was a Hebrew school, so she slept there and came back on weekends so she could go to cheder. But none of us had any education or knew anything about reading or writing or arithmetic. We just spoke, you know, Russian and Jewish.

LEVINE: And did your mother become a citizen?

ABRAMS: That's funny. My father and mother were afraid to take the examination. They were afraid they'd pass, they wouldn't pass the English. So they never became citizens. But when I was twenty-one I took out my own citizenship papers and the same with the other girls. And, of course, my brother was born here. But I remember I had my first child already when I went down to

City Hall to be sworn in.

LEVINE: Was that a thrill for you?

ABRAMS: Yes, but I had been so Americanized and so, I didn't even know that I wasn't a citizen or a citizen. You know, I always felt like a citizen. So they didn't ask me many questions when he heard that I was a high school graduate, you know, they, I passed without any questions.

LEVINE: Did your mother retain any of the customs that she had in Russia?

ABRAMS: Yes. A lot of the Jewish customs, you know.

LEVINE: Like what would she . . .

ABRAMS: With the way she cooked, and when she brought a rolling pin instead of, they didn't have ironers so they used to roll the clothes. And so that's how she did it for a while until we bought her an iron. And other little things, you know. Like we became Americanized very quickly, all of us. And my other two sisters that had been here before, they moved out and they got an apartment of their own in Brooklyn. And then when the older one was married, the younger one went to live with her, and we lived with my father. But the only thing my mother used to do

when people used to come in from Europe, they used to, "landsleid." They used to stay with us in the three room apartment until they were found by relatives or friends or something. But I remember having an assortment of Gentiles and Jews all staying, you know, one or two at a time, staying in our apartment. They were all very kind and hospitable, nothing like it is today.

LEVINE: Now, was this like a little business?

ABRAMS: No.

LEVINE: Or this was just extending hospitality.

ABRAMS: No business. My father made the eight dollars a week and we paid the rent. And later on, of course, after we went to high school we got jobs after school. I went, I worked in Woolworth's, you know.

LEVINE: Was that your first job?

ABRAMS: Well, no. While I was going to high school, I worked to make a little extra money. And then we used to work on Saturdays for a lady that had some work to do at home to paste material on like, it had packets to show what, they were making clothes, what material to pick. So we used to paste the cloth on the

different specifications, you know, what the manufacturer, whatever it is, she got to work in the house, and she got us to work there. And my sisters all worked after school. And then we, and the one that went to business school, she got a job right away. And then I went to high school, and I used to teach her bookkeeping. Of course, I went to a commercial high. And then my other sister, one of them graduated from college, and the other one graduated from high school, and we all worked and donated money to the house, and we moved my mother to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Do you remember any qualities that your mother tried to encourage in you?

ABRAMS: Oh, yes, yes. Honesty, and my father always let us do everything we wanted, even though they were religious. They said, like I worked in Lambert's, it's a Jewish firm that closed on Saturday. And my father said, "Well, you only have Saturday to do your work." You know, we used to wash and iron our own clothes. We didn't like the way my mother washed and ironed. And, of course, we had to do it all in the sink. And my father says that, "Whatever you want to do you can do even though I'm a Sabbath observer. But if you have to work, you work on Saturday if it's to make a living." He wasn't, he was religious in

his own way, to his own self and her, but he didn't press any of his religion on us because he saw that we couldn't live that way. And we supported them all the way through. As we, as we got married we each gave, like if I was making say thirty or forty dollars a week I'd give twenty and keep twenty for myself. And if my other sister was making thirty, so she gave fifteen, you know. And that's how we supported the house, and we moved them, and we bought them new furniture. We saw, there was a racket at that time. Very wealthy people living on Fifth Avenue used to put an ad in the paper selling their old furniture. But later on when we realized it they used to get in, they used to have furniture on display and then order the other from the factory. So we bought a sofa and lamps and rugs and everything. We thought we were doing very well, from Fifth Avenue. But it wasn't any bargain. She probably never refurnished. She had the order sent from the, you know, from the factory that she was working with. It was a good little racket. Of course, I thought we were so rich, we had such furniture from Fifth Avenue. But we got along very well. And even after we were married, my father and mother had an apartment, and we each gave like twenty dollars a month so they can maintain themselves. And then when my father died, we took my mother over to live with us.

LEVINE: Now, tell me how you met your husband. How did you meet your . . .

ABRAMS: Oh, I went to a weekend place in New Jersey. I think it's called Mountainview. And there were bungalows, very nice bungalows for girls and boys. And there were a group of girls, like about eight. We'd share the expenses. If it was 350 for the season, we'd each give, divided by eight. And then we'd cook in, and then there were boys that had their bungalows, and we used to meet near fire, we used to have fire, what do you call them?

LEVINE: Like a cookout place?

ABRAMS: Cookouts and fires and entertainment. We made our own entertainment. So that's how most of the girls in the bungalows met their husbands.

LEVINE: and how old were you when you went there?

ABRAMS: Oh, I must have been about twenty, and I was married at twenty-two.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's name?

ABRAMS: Samuel Abrams.

LEVINE: And was he also, did he immigrate?

ABRAMS: No. He was in, he was born in America.

LEVINE: And, like, what would you do for dates? When you were courting, when he was courting you?

ABRAMS: Well, we used to have the weekend there. Like we used to go swimming together, or we used to watch them play baseball. The boys had a diamond. And then in the evenings they all sat together in groups, and there were fires and singing and, you know, very healthy lives. It wasn't like the lives they lead today. No bed, no, you know, it was just a clean, clean living and that's why I'm so, I can't stand what I see on television. I can't, I never, I hardly watch television. I can't stand their songs, their entertainment. I'm talking about the entertainment we used to have with Jack Benny, the clean cut, and all that other one, Carol Burnett. There's nothing like that today. And what was, the one that used to eat candy from a, Lucille Ball. You know, all these gorgeous shows. But now I can't stand it. I turned on, they were giving out Emmys. And the weird dresses and the weird clothes and the weird songs. I turned it right off. I'm a little old-fashioned, but I like it that way, and my children are clean cut and they, well, maybe they've missed this time of the

year, because my children are now fifty and fifty-two.

LEVINE: What are your childrens' names?

ABRAMS: Maxine Chassin, and Judith Greenfield.

LEVINE: How do you spell Chassin?

ABRAMS: C-H-A-S-S-I-N. She's married thirty-four years. I just spoke to her this morning. It's her anniversary. March 7th will be her thirty-fourth wedding anniversary.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

ABRAMS: Yes. I have four grandchildren. One girl had two boys, the older one, and the younger one had two girls. And we're a very close-knit family and very well, we just love each other and we're very, very tight. They call me, they visit me, they buy me, and I give them. (she laughs) Never forget a birthday, never forget an anniversary, never forget a, I even have grandchildren, great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Really.

ABRAMS: I have four. I have three boys and a girl. And one of my granddaughters is going to have her second child. She has a

boy of three, the granddaughter. So now she's going to have another boy, because she had a sonogram. (she laughs) She knows she's going to have another boy.

LEVINE: Tell me what this period of your life is like for you?

ABRAMS: I had a wonderful life. My whole life was nice. We were never, uh, rich, we were never poor. We always lived within our means. And we brought up our children with dancing lessons and music lessons and art lessons and ballet. And I used to drive them. We moved to Elizabeth after I got married. After I was married ten years, we moved to Elizabeth, New Jersey where we lived for, since 1940.

LEVINE: Oh. And what did your husband do?

ABRAMS: He was a dress salesman, and later on he went into business for himself, a dress manufacturer on 35th Street and 7th Avenue somewheres. And then he went out of business and he worked with an attorney on, in Elizabeth. It was his friend, and he worked for him. He retired early because he didn't like, his partner died and he didn't like his two new partners. They were always stepping, they wanted to be too big. My husband was a small operator, and he didn't take any chances. He just cut enough goods that he got orders for and maybe a few

hundred extra, and they wanted to expand very rapidly. So he went out, he just sold out his share. And he worked in Elizabeth for the last few years that he lived, and then he died. He got Parkinson's.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Well, what is your life like now in your old age?

ABRAMS: Now? Well, I lived for thirteen years in my, after my children were married, we sold our house and we lived in an apartment in Elizabeth in a very nice neighborhood. And I used to belong to organizations, Deborah League of Elizabeth, I went all the way up the ladder. I was everything from President to Membership Chairman to Antique Show Director to Antique Show Manager to you name it. And I have very good rapport there. They still call me. And then I worked in the hospital during the war. I was a nurse's aide. I took a course with the Red Cross. That was in 1940. I was the second class to graduate. We had about sixteen week course where we were taught how to make, take temperatures, how to make beds, how to clean, how to take pots, potties, away and clean them. And how to wash the patients in bed, how to put flowers in and

how to give back rubs and put them to bed at night. And I worked there until the Red Cross dissolved that unit. So for a while I wasn't doing anything, and then my husband got Parkinson's, so I was paying attention to him. And we had the children. We had, I was always babysitting and always running there and having the children at my house or going to their house. And any time we changed homes they used to stay in my apartment, I'd go there. And after that, and that, my husband, then he got Parkinson's. So for six years we were sort of a little struggling. We had some help. And then after that I started working in the Elizabeth General Hospital again as a volunteer, and I worked for thirteen years in the pharmacy. I got all kinds of pins and all kinds of what do you call them, every, at the luncheon they used to give you awards and certificates. And I was very unhappy when I had to leave because it was getting a little too much for me and my building was deteriorating. My apartment was nice, but we had dirt in the house. I don't even want to mention what we had, so I was a little scared to stay there. And I decided that I would, a few of my friends were here, and I went, and I made an application. And for the first, for a year-and-a-half I wanted the three-room apartment. Then when certain things started happening in my building, my super left, and it was uncontrollable on different types of, different elements moved in, so I decided very quickly

I got to get out of there. And my children had nothing to do with pushing me. I had a fairly good income. Of course, my husband was working all the time. And so we went here. Oh, a year-and-a-half later when the thing happened in my apartment, I called up Rosalie and I told her that I had a year-and-a-half to think it over and now I can live in a one-room apartment. And so within a period of time I was accepted.

LEVINE: And how do you like your life now?

ABRAMS: I love it here. They keep you very busy and they're kind. They don't insult your dignity. They have different courses that elevate you instead of degrading you. You learn, we had a program, Jewish Ethics, and they were comparing the Jewish laws to the American laws. And now we have a music, a series of music, what do you call it, not jazz? What do they call the other music?

LEVINE: Classical? Classical music?

ABRAMS: Yeah, classical. And the man that comes explains to us about the composer, tells us a little about his life, plays his music. And we're up to the eighth, we're going to have eight sessions. I think we're up to the sixth session. And it's very enjoyable. And then we have exercise, which I love, and discussion

groups, discussion about what's happening, topics, topical questions. And then on Saturday, every Saturday we have another very nice lady who comes and talk to us, also topical, about what's happening and about the presidential election, and all the news that's fit to print. And we have discussions, and it's very nice here.

LEVINE: When you think back over your life, about coming from Russia and being here, what are you thankful for?

ABRAMS: I've had a very good life. I haven't, I've never been in want. Even when my father was making eight dollars a week, my mother had a little (?) there. She used to sew in something and put it into her bra, and always have money to buy us dresses, the three girls. Always had enough, somehow or other. Of course, that was with our donations after we worked. And I think I've had a very good life. And I've made myself interesting, and I, we've gone, we've gone to Europe twice, we've been to Israel. We've been to Italy and France and all the Baltic states. So I've had a very good life, and I'm having a very good live here, too.

LEVINE: Well, that sounds . . .

ABRAMS: And my children are just wonderful. They come to see me.

They bring things. And I still do little things for them. And they're very nice here. Everybody is very nice to me. I think they're nice to everybody.

LEVINE: Well, that's wonderful.

ABRAMS: Very nice people. And the park-like setting to walk here, you feel so safe. In Elizabeth every second day somebody else was, a purse was stolen. And here you can walk beautifully, and the shrubbery and the scene is great. It's very nice. And I have a beautiful room.

LEVINE: Good. Is there anything else you would want to mention before we close?

ABRAMS: Actually, I've had a very good life, and that's how I'd like to end it. And I think America's great, and no other place is like it. And I wouldn't compare it or want to go anywhere, live, ever live anywhere's else.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been talking with Mae Abrams here in Clifton, New Jersey on March 4, 1993, and we're signing off.