

EI-030

NISSIM CRESPI

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1/1993

TURKEY, 1911

RESIDENCE; ANKARA

AGE 18

PORT: ISTANBUL

US RESIDENCE: NYC, LOWER EAST SIDE

Oral Historian's Note: Mr. Crespi is the husband of Sarah Asher Crespi, EI-29. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr. Oral Historian 2/24/1993.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We are here on Wednesday, March 13th, in Far Rockaway, with Mr. Sam Crespi. We are at his home. He came from Turkey in 1911 when he was eighteen years old. Good afternoon.

CRESPI: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Mr. Crespi, could you please give us your full name and your date of birth.

CRESPI: My full name is Nissim Crespi.

SIGRIST: Could you spell the first name, please?

CRESPI: (he pauses) Let me write it down.

SIGRIST: Okay, that's okay. And your birthday?

CRESPI: My birthday, 1893, I think.

SIGRIST: Yes, July 4th is the date?

CRESPI: 1893. July 4th is right.

SIGRIST: Where in Turkey were you born?

CRESPI: Angora.

SIGRIST: Okay. And did your family all come from that town?

CRESPI: That's right.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about your father.

CRESPI: My father?

SIGRIST: Yes. What was his name?

CRESPI: Daniel.

SIGRIST: Daniel.

CRESPI: Yeah. His name was Dan.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

CRESPI: Bakery. Jewish bakery. The only one. He was in Turkey, Angora. He was the only Jewish bakery there. He was the one. His name, he was Daniel Crespi.

SIGRIST: He had his own bakery, his own shop.

CRESPI: That's right. He had the laborers. The beginning, I was working with him. Then I have an argument with the labor. He send me go to Constantinople. Since then I don't see my father any more.

SIGRIST: I see.

CRESPI: I left. I didn't go back no more, and I didn't see my father. But I brought my mother over here, my sister.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother. What was her name?

CRESPI: Rachel.

SIGRIST: Rachel. And did she, she didn't work?

CRESPI: Never.

SIGRIST: How many children did she have?

CRESPI: Ten.

SIGRIST: Wow.

CRESPI: Five dead, and five living.

SIGRIST: Five were dead when you were a child.

CRESPI: Yes, miscarriage. But we was five living.

SIGRIST: I see. What religion were you?

CRESPI: Jewish religion.

SIGRIST: And was there a synagogue nearby?

CRESPI: Oh, yeah. A temple.

SIGRIST: Could you describe that for me, please?

CRESPI: What, the synagogue?

SIGRIST: Yes. Was it a big building?

CRESPI: It was a big temple. In my time they built it new. I remember the old one. The old one was, you know, there was pillars, the beams. You've got to pick your head

for the end. Old, they throw down in my time. I think I was sixteen, seventeen years when they throw down. The old Jewish (?), and the children's pushkin. You know what is pushkin? You put pennies inside. From the shul, all that pushkins, they went to the shul. There was a temple for that time. Now I don't know. Now the government took it.

SIGRIST: And you remember them building the new building?

CRESPI: The old one, I remember. The new one, sure.

SIGRIST: I see.

CRESPI: I had a picture, I think. I have a picture.

SIGRIST: We'll look at it later. Well, let's talk a little bit about the house that you lived in in Turkey.

CRESPI: I had beautiful house.

SIGRIST: Yes. What was it like?

CRESPI: How can I say? The building that was in the back, the front it was garden. We had vine, grapes. It used to be just like Paradise. A vine, it spread all over. The neighbors, so beautiful grapes it used to be.

SIGRIST: And this was in the front?

CRESPI: Inside, the entrance, the building built behind. It was four rooms downstairs and four rooms upstairs.

SIGRIST: Now, you said in your house there were four rooms downstairs and four rooms upstairs.

CRESPI: That's right.

SIGRIST: I see. So it was a big house.

CRESPI: Yeah, it was a big house.

SIGRIST: And your family was the only family that lived in this house.

CRESPI: That's right.

SIGRIST: So your father was quite affluent, then?

CRESPI: My father was, his own bakery, Jewish bakery in a Jewish section. The bakery was next to the temple. It was a nice area all around.

SIGRIST: He made a good living.

CRESPI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: So you were very comfortable.

CRESPI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me the names of your other brothers and sisters?

CRESPI: Yeah. I had two sisters. One it was Fanny, the other one is, Fanny died. Esther is living. I have another one. I have a big brother. We were three brothers. That brother, he die. I was until the day, I was in Constantinople. We was left another brother and two sisters. My little sister die. I got one sister now. My brother die. We only had a sister and a brother living.

SIGRIST: I see. Would you say that, when you were living in Turkey, were you a close family?

CRESPI: What do you mean, close?

SIGRIST: Well, were you, did you do a lot of things together, for instance?

CRESPI: Oh, yeah. Always. All the Jewish in Turkey, the family, they was tied. We used to love each other, you know, we cared for each other. The same thing with my

family.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother's family come from that town?

CRESPI: Yeah. They come from Angora.

SIGRIST: And did you spend a lot of time with that side of the family?

CRESPI: Sometimes, yeah. We used to visit there. The nighttime, winter. We used to go visiting. They used to come to us.

SIGRIST: Did they live near you in the town?

CRESPI: Yeah. All the Jewish people there was in one section.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about holiday celebrations. Did the families get together for the holidays?

CRESPI: That's right. They used to come together. It was just like a party.

SIGRIST: Like a party.

CRESPI: Especially Passover. They used to come, my house, it was four tenants. We had a big house. We had tenants.

All they bring the tables to eat. Also we have big second floor, very big, like a dancing hall. Everybody bring their tables outside, and we sing Passover, we got to read something. All they say now, it was beautiful.

SIGRIST: I see. Who did the cooking for Passover?

CRESPI: My mother.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

CRESPI: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. My father was a better cook than my mother.

SIGRIST: Did he ever cook in the house?

CRESPI: Who, my father? No. Bakery, he has a special, how can I say it, just for cook. Standing up on four legs, and he was on the top scales, like. He used to cook over there.

SIGRIST: I see. But at home Ma did, your mother did . . .

CRESPI: No, Ma used to cook home.

SIGRIST: I see. Were your parents musical at all?

CRESPI: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that. Well, let's talk a little bit about, let's see, your first job. You said you helped your father in the bakery.

CRESPI: I used to help him at the beginning.

SIGRIST: What did you do?

CRESPI: My father used to send, suppose you need ten pounds of bread, three pounds of dark flour. My father used to know all the Jews, how much they eat. He was a smart man. And I used to work for him. He knows this man eats three pounds or ten pounds a week. He used to send him a box, without asking, trust. And I used to take them to the houses.

SIGRIST: So you used to delivery for him?

CRESPI: Yeah, I used to do it.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

CRESPI: I was about thirteen, fourteen years.

SIGRIST: And that was your first job? That was the first job you ever had?

CRESPI: That's right. After I took a different job.

SIGRIST: What did you do after?

CRESPI: Shoes.

SIGRIST: What did you do with shoes?

CRESPI: Shoes, make new shoes. I have a son of my own. He has a store, and I worked for him. I used to know more than he knows.

SIGRIST: But in Turkey, you were . . .

CRESPI: In Turkey, yeah, in Turkey. And I used to work my cousin, and he used to pay me a year. I think five-and-a-half, six dollars a year. And I used to work for him, and then I opened for myself.

SIGRIST: In Turkey.

CRESPI: In Turkey, Angora. See, I couldn't do it because Turkey wasn't there business, like people goes, come. You wait, I wait two weeks, some villagers are going to come in and they're going to bring old shoes and you're going to repair it. I see it's no money in there. I went to Constantinople.

SIGRIST: And how old were you when you went to Constantinople?

CRESPI: I think I was eighteen. I think eighteen.

SIGRIST: Did you say goodbye to everyone in Angora?

CRESPI: Yeah. I didn't go no more back. And I, I work, Tersanay. Tersanay is . . . (he pauses) How can I tell you? Tersanay was, the government navy yard, just navy yard. I worked for the government making the shoes for the navy. And then business finished over there, work for them finished over there. We went to Tersanay. Tersanay is for the army. We used to make shoes for the army.

SIGRIST: Did you know someone in Constantinople? Why did you choose to go there? When you decided to move . . .

CRESPI: To Constantinople. I don't know nobody.

SIGRIST: You didn't know anybody there.

CRESPI: Yeah, I have a cousin over there. I went to him. But I didn't go to him, to her, a duahgter of my aunt. I left Angora because I don't like, I don't want to work for my father no more. And I'm going to go to Constantinople, he said, "What are you going to do over

there?" "Tanti Simprrie is over there. I'm going to go live, they have us." And I went to Constantinople.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay when you went to Constantinople?

CRESPI: I was eighteen years old, and I start to work for the government, shoes making. First we worked for the navy. Finish up over there, we go to Tersanay. Tersanay is the army. I work over there for a year or so. Work and finish over there. And then I didn't have no job. But I started after.

SIGRIST: So when did you decide to come to America?

CRESPI: After I lose, I couldn't get no job. I sent a letter over here to my brother that lives over here.

SIGRIST: Your brother came, was already over here.

CRESPI: Before me, yeah.

SIGRIST: When did he come over?

CRESPI: I don't remember. You remember, Sarah?

MRS. CRESPI: (she whispers) 1909.

SIGRIST: He came in 1909.

CRESPI: He come before me. A year before. I'm telling Yeda I come over here, after my brother.

SIGRIST: When your brother came over here, what did he do? Did he get a job?

CRESPI: They have some kind of a checkroom. We have a cousin over here, he has a checkroom.

SIGRIST: A checkroom?

CRESPI: Checkroom, you know, you check coats in big hotels. My cousin has two, three hotels like that. When he see my brother, he give him a job, and he start to work in checkrooms.

SIGRIST: Coats, oh sure. And then he wrote to you?

CRESPI: He send a ticket, and I come over here.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's talk about the boat ride over. Do you remember the boat ride over, coming over here?

CRESPI: I come, nine days. It took so long. In the middle of the ocean, the boat it was shaking, piled up. We was with the same boat, and it stop in the middle of the ocean. They took, some kind of wood. About three,

four days, I don't know how many days in the middle of the, and some place, and they brought some kind of a wood. And then we come over here.

SIGRIST: I see. And the boat ride took nine days, you said.

CRESPI: I don't know how many days it took, the truth.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick on the boat?

CRESPI: No, no. I didn't.

SIGRIST: No. Was it a rough voyage? Was it a smooth voyage?

CRESPI: It was a nice voyage. For me it was all right. I never get seasick.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay in the boat?

CRESPI: We have swings, you know, one on top of the other. And we lay in the night time. I think it took nine days. I don't know. I don't remember how many days it took to come over here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being up on deck at all? Did you go up on deck, on the deck of the boat?

CRESPI: Oh, yeah. We, I used to go. I have another friend

with me. We used to go right in the point. We used to see the big fishes going in the front of the boat, this side, that side. We used to sit down and look on that. Big ones. All day. I don't know how many days it took, about nine. I don't know. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you . . .

CRESPI: The beginning, they told us. It was something for us. We're going to go to, we went to this, like, we see from far, this is the Statue of Liberty. We see them from far away. And then we come near, we come to the Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What was that like? Do you remember Ellis Island?

CRESPI: I remember, we went in the front of the judge. He was on the top. And they start questioning, to ask. I used to talk the French, wonderful, the Spanish, wonderful. Turkish. The judge there on the top. On this side, an interpreter, on this side. They know Mediterraneans, they talk a few language. I know Spanish, Turkish, French. And I used to answer when they used to make me in the Spanish and French. Most of them over here it was French. French was a style in this country at that time. And I start to talk, it was two interpreters, one he knows Spanish there, one he

knows French. Then I start to talk French. Because in my country we, children, we start to talk French in the house, and I start to talk that in the house.

SIGRIST: What sort of questions did they ask you? Do you remember?

CRESPI: (he pauses) They asked me the beginning, the name, the address, where you come from. (?), from (?), and French, (?). All French now. Yes, the things that they need, my address, my name, where do you live, what kind of a work do you do. And give answer the way they ask.

SIGRIST: I see. Was Ellis Island very crowded when you were there?

CRESPI: It was, it was. But it was just a cover, it was lines, lines, lines, in the front of the judge, on the top. It was lines, droves. I was in one line. I have a friend looking at me. I have a friend, we come together. We used to sit down in the front of the boat at night time. We can't sleep. We used to see the fishes, the whales, big ones. We used to talk, sing. This friend, he was with me. When he come in the front of the judge, I didn't have no tickets over here. My friend, he was different line. You know, it was line, in the front of the judges, in Ellis Island he was

there. My, I didn't have no ticket over here because he asked me, in French and in Turkish and in Spanish, I answered. They let me go. They didn't hold me like some other ones. They show go ahead. I don't know where to go, and then they showed me. Those, the Spanish man. "Espanol tu? You are Spanish?" I say, "Yeah." "Go to the boat." What do I think? I start to go. I come to downtown. East Broadway, the Broadway.

SIGRIST: Did your friend go with you? Did he get through?

CRESPI: No, they took him away for some reason. He was, robes like this. On this robe he was my friend. I was on the robes, on this line. I think I had a tag over here. He had it, he has the tag. You see, having that, he took the tag away. But the people, everybody in that line, it was the tag. When they see they got no tag, he took the tag that was over here, he took them away and he puts them in his pocket. They see it, they hold him. They hold him for a night.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you ever see him again? Did you ever see your friend?

CRESPI: Yeah. Later. I see him. But they called, the next day they called his aunt, his uncle. My, his uncle was my uncle, too. They call him to Ellis Island. And

they went there, they explained, and they mentioned it.
They let him go.

SIGRIST: I see. So you weren't at Ellis . . .

CRESPI: You know, go ahead. I don't wait to go. And then the man, he was passing around. "Espanol es tu? You are Spanish?" "Si." "Go to the boat, go straight to the boat." And I went and I was finished.

SIGRIST: So you went through Ellis Island very quickly. You had no problems.

CRESPI: Because they're asking, I used to speak French, Turkish, Spanish, they let me go.

SIGRIST: Did, do you remember what luggage you brought? Did you have a lot of luggage with you?

CRESPI: The truth. (he laughs) I think I had bed, you know, mattress, from wool. On the other side, it was a lot of wool. My father used to buy it. A lady made, they sewed it and then they put them in the sun. They clean it. I have wool, any wool.

SIGRIST: Wool. I see.

CRESPI: They clean it, they give it to clean it, and they make

mattresses to sleep on the floor. So I have one of them, it was nice and clean.

SIGRIST: You brought one of those with you.

CRESPI: Oh, yeah. I had a carpet, a beautiful carpet. I think I brought the carpet over here. That carpet, it was my father's, something out of this world. It was good for him. I took that carpet, and I rolled the bed, mattress, and formed a pillow. We used to sleep on the floor. And I brought that with me over here.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, so you got on the boat and you went to Manhattan, you went to New York.

CRESPI: Yeah. I come to East Broadway.

SIGRIST: To East Broadway. Then what happened?

CRESPI: From there I have the address where I'm going to go. And East Broadway goes through, you know, people like me, they used to go over there, it was men. They took you, you got the address where I was going to go. I got the address. East Broadway. I gave them the address, they look at me, they took me to my brother when I came over here.

SIGRIST: I see. I see. And did your brother have his own

apartment?

CRESPI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it a nice apartment?

CRESPI: Usually. It was nice. But I used to sleep in the kitchen. We make, from boxes we make a platform. And then I brought some kind of a mattress with me. I put on the top, and a quilt, I fix it. A month, I start to work. We bought that quilt, and we bought something.

SIGRIST: Did he live in that apartment alone, or were there other people?

CRESPI: No. Lived alone with my brother.

SIGRIST: I see. And what was the first job that you got?

CRESPI: The first job? The checkroom.

SIGRIST: The checkroom.

CRESPI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The same person who hired your brother.

CRESPI: That's right.

SIGRIST: So what sorts of things did you have to do?

CRESPI: In the bedroom, downstairs. Over there, they have, like a fountain, water. Hot water and cold water. On the top of the faucets, it was a little glass. Over there, it was the owner, that place. He owns it, somebody. They put me over there, my cousin. He has a lot of places like that. And you got cologne, napkins, everything you got for the people that come downstairs to the bathroom. I have something, I was working over there, and they used to tip you. The money I take, I'm supposed to give it to the owner.

SIGRIST: The money that you got in tips you had to give?

CRESPI: Yeah. I gave them towels. The towel and the soap and the cologne belonged to the one who rented. And how much you make. And I worked there for a while. About a year, maybe more than a year.

SIGRIST: But you didn't get to keep your tip money? You had to give that?

CRESPI: No. I had to give it to the boss.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about that?

CRESPI: It comes anything, stranger. I miss my father, I miss my mother. I miss my family.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father ever come to America?

CRESPI: No. My mother, yes, but not my father. My father died, and then I brought my mother over here.

SIGRIST: When did your father die?

CRESPI: I don't remember the years.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

CRESPI: How old I was? About eighteen, maybe more than eighteen.

SIGRIST: I see. And you brought your mother over.

CRESPI: That's right. My other brother, he was over here from long. I used to take care of my mother. Then I was married, I get married, and I took my mother with me. And the other brother, they don't care much about helping her.

SIGRIST: Your, did your mother come and live with you?

CRESPI: No, I took her with me. I took rooms. When I get

married, I took rooms.

SIGRIST: How did you meet your wife?

CRESPI: Love her, love her. My sister-in-law has a sister. Her sister is my wife's mother. Move on this side, move on this side, because I was single, you know. Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old. And my sister-in-law has a sister downtown. Before some day she'll come uptown. And Sunday, she'd see me, my name is "Nissim." You see, Nissim. My name is Nissim. "Is Nissim over here? Bring Sarah." They move when I come over. And they stuck me with her. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So, now how long did you know her before you got married?

CRESPI: I used to know since I was a child, very young.

SIGRIST: Did you know each other in Angora?

CRESPI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, you did? I didn't realize that.

CRESPI: Because my father has a bakery every year, they used to live, and my uncle has building, and they used to live in that building next to my father. And I used to

know, but not know to get engaged to go.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Crespi would have been a little girl back in Turkey.

CRESPI: Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: But you remember her when she was a little girl?

CRESPI: Oh, yeah. She used to come. Her father was tinsmith, and he make satchel from tin. They used to give him food to eat in the school. He has a spoon and the dish. She used to have the dish and the spoon, "Bugga, bugga, bugga." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, isn't that interesting that you would have known each other then, and then so many years later would have gotten married.

CRESPI: It comes, because my brother, (?), he was, my brother's sister-in-law. And when I come over here, the sister-in-law has daughter. And he told them, "Move over here. Nissim over here. Nissim is over here." I'm over here, Nissim is my name.

SIGRIST: Do you remember . . .

CRESPI: "Nissim is over here. Let him, Nissim. Give, tell

Sarah. Take Sarah." I used to go Sunday, I used to work at paper boxes factory. Paper boxes.

SIGRIST: Paper boxes.

CRESPI: Yeah. I used to work there at the beginning. I used to, some days we didn't work. And I used to go to Central Park and hire a boat for all day. It was a dollar for all day, and I used to go there. And then my sister-in-law, I lived with my sister-in-law, and she said, "Take Sarah with you. Take Sarah with you." I was bashful at times and shy. And I took her. Little by little, touched the row, or something, touched, the hands start to touch. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year you were married?

CRESPI: Yeah, but I don't remember the date.

SIGRIST: What year was it, do you remember? Do you remember?
What year was it?

MRS. CRESPI: 1920.

SIGRIST: 1920 you were married. So you've been together for a long time.

MRS. CRESPI: Seventy years we celebrated.

SIGRIST: Seventy years. Well, I think that sort of brings us full circle, actually.

CRESPI: That's right.

MRS. CRESPI: I hope I can hear that in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Well, anyway, I want to thank you very much, Mr. Crespi, for telling us, you know, about your experience, and I just want to thank you both for letting us come into your house.

CRESPI: My story. You are welcome any time.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service.

ADDITION TO ELLIS ISLAND INTERVIEW NUMBER 30

WRITTEN BY SARAH ASHER CRESPI (INTERVIEW EI-29) AND SENT TO PAUL SIGRIST ON MARCH 18, 1991 TO BE ADDED TO HER HUSBAND'S ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW.

CONCERNING THE SYNAGOGUE MENTIONED ON PAGE 4:

In Ankara, Turkey lived Jews and Turks, also Greeks and Armenians. During Christmas and Easter time, the Christians went to church. During the sermon that the priest gave, he mentioned the Jews killed Christ and they made matzoth with human blood. That incites the congregation. When the services are over, they come out angry and hateful toward Jews. The young men come to the Jewish section and break windows in every house. The Jews complained to the Christian elders. Nothing they can do. It happened every holiday. There was a schochet who slaughtered the cows for the community. He was entitled to take the heads of the cows for himself. The horns, he threw them in a shed. Maybe someday they will be useful. Maybe someday he will sell them. There was a Catholic school in the Jewish neighborhood surrounded by a brick wall. When holidays came, the Christian young men came out angry to the Jewish section and started again breaking windows. Our young Jewish boys grew up to fourteen or fifteen years, a group of them got together and said, "We have to do

something about this." They went to the schochet's house, got all the horns from the shed and threw them over the wall to the school yard. In the morning the custodian saw all the horns, some smelling. He complained to the priests. They figured it was the Jews who did it. The priests came to complain to the elders of the Jewish community. There was one answer for them, "Every holiday your young fellows broke our windows and did a lot of damage. Now our young grew up, they took revenge, your priests incite the young with hate that the Jews killed Christ. Now the whole world knows Jews didn't kill Christ. The popes should have announced it long, long time ago." After that incident, nothing happened any more. As I remember, it happened in the year 1900.