

EI-310

MIRIAM BRECHER HOLTZER

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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AUSTRIA-HUNGARY, 1913

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 19

SHIP:

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES:

- **AUSTRIA-HUNGARY: KOROPIEC**
- **US: NEW YORK, NY; St. Louis, MO.**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, May 11, 1993. I'm here at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in the recording studio with Miriam Holtzer. Mrs. Holtzer came from Austria-Hungary in 1913 when she was ten years old, and we just had the pleasure of finding her out in the museum, so we're going to do a little impromptu interview. Anyway, welcome to Ellis Island, Mrs. Holtzer. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

HOLTZER: It's October 1, 1902.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what your maiden name is, please?

HOLTZER: Yes. It was Miriam Brecher.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Mrs. Holtzer, where were you born?

HOLTZER: I was born in Austria.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

HOLTZER: Koropiec.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

HOLTZER: K-O-R-O-P-I-E-C.

SIGRIST: And whereabouts is that?

HOLTZER: It's, I couldn't really tell you, but I'll tell you near what city it was, Stanislav.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe for me a little bit what that town looked like to you when you were a little girl?

HOLTZER: It was really a small town but a very nice little town, and that's where I lived. My mother ran a general store, and my father had died, so she was a widow, and we were left six children. My oldest brother was twelve. The youngest was six months.

SIGRIST: When your father died.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: It was Mendel, M-E-N-D-E-L.

SIGRIST: And what had he done for a living?

HOLTZER: He was a manager in a big mill.

SIGRIST: So is this an industrial town, where you were?

HOLTZER: Well, I, it really, I – I don't know whether it was an industrial town, but that's what he did. Because I know I used to visit him there, you know.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your dad? Describe his personality for me.

HOLTZER: The nicest (tearful) -- the nicest and sweetest man. We were very close. We were six children but I was, I must say, his favorite.

SIGRIST: How do you fall into those six children?

HOLTZER: I'm the third from the, I'm in the middle.

SIGRIST: The middle child.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: You said you remembered visiting your dad in the mill. What do you remember about visiting him?

HOLTZER: He used to play games with me. You know, sit outside. There were big stones, like, for seating, you know, just two people. And he used to sit there with me and play different – different games, as one would play.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Do you know how he and your mother met?

HOLTZER: Yes. He was a salesman in a store, clothing, not clothing, but a goods, you know, where you bought goods for making things and all. He met her there. She was eighteen years old.

SIGRIST: Was she working in the store?

HOLTZER: No, no. She came to buy goods.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

HOLTZER: My mom's name was Esther Rothm--. Her maiden name, you mean? Esther Rothman.

SIGRIST: And that's R-O-T-H-M-A-N. Tell me a little bit about the same sorts of things about your mother. What was her personality like?

HOLTZER: She was a terrific woman. In fact, she was everything. You know, after dad died and she was left and she started this business, and she supported us in a very nice way. We never lacked of anything. There was always everything for us. And she worked very hard. She used to get up three o'clock in the morning to get everything started. And beside that she ran an oil factory.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that.

HOLTZER: Becau-- well, the oil factory -- my brother was really, he used to take care of it. He's all, he was all of eleven years old. And that's all I could tell you.

SIGRIST: You're saying an oil factory.

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Yeah. They used to grind seeds to make oil.

SIGRIST: Oh, like linseed oil.

HOLTZER: Yeah, all kinds. Poppy seeds, pumpkin seeds. And – and that's how she made a living.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you remember about your father's death. How old were you when that happened?

HOLTZER: I was, I think, five years old.

SIGRIST: And what did he die of?

HOLTZER: He died of an infection. He had a little pimple on his nose, and the doctor diagnosed it as putting cold on it. And -- I don't think they have a-- they had antibiotics like they have now, and it spread. So they took him to a hospital in Limburg, and he died there. It's just the infection spread, and that was that. He was thirty-two years old.

SIGRIST: That's very young.

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the funeral, or what happened directly afterwards?

HOLTZER: No. That I don't know, because my mother had to go there to bury him, and he's -- he was buried there, not brought back to the -- I don't know why. Some reason, I don't know.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, then, about how your mother got involved in these business ventures after he died.

HOLTZER: Well, somebody said -- a very dear friend suggested it and had her started on it. That's how she did.

SIGRIST: Which was more important to her, the oil-making enterprise or the general store?

HOLTZER: No, the store.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the store looked like for me on the inside?

HOLTZER: On the inside, I really can't. There were sacks of different food, different, rice and all different things, flour. And, you know, sugar. At that time you didn't just buy it ground, you had to chop -- chop in chunks. And that's all I could tell you.

SIGRIST: Did you children help out in the store?

HOLTZER: The only thing -- my brother was, took care of the oil, because it was, the store was like in the front, and that was down the aisle, like, you know, further, further down. So he, most of the time he took care of it.

SIGRIST: So the extracting of the oil was done right in the shop? It was part of that . . .

HOLTZER: No, no. It was entirely different. You mean, in the store?

SIGRIST: In the actual building?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Yes. It was in the same, you know, it was like an aisle. I don't know what they called it then, but it was like an aisle. You know, you, but it was wide enough for – for wagons to go through.

SIGRIST: Like an alleyway.

HOLTZER: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you also live in this building where the store was?

HOLTZER: We lived --yes. It was a beautiful new building. Somebody built it especially for – for us, for Mother, rather.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your living quarters inside the building for me?

HOLTZER: Well, we had one big room. We had a kitchen. We had an extra room that Mother rented. She rented it out to a schoolteacher in town. Because, you know, the one room was enough for us.

SIGRIST: Although crowded, probably.

HOLTZER: Yes. Two cradles. One b-- -- one brother was about a year-and-a-half, and – and my little sister was six months old.

SIGRIST: How did that, how did you heat that apartment?

HOLTZER: An oven. There was an oven in the kitchen, and there was a different, you know, it was like closed in. I don't remember what they called it or . . .

SIGRIST: A parlor stove of some sort, or?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Yeah. That was in the big room where it was a bedroom and a dining room which was all in one.

SIGRIST: Can you remember any of the furniture?

HOLTZER: Not really. I know there were two beds and there was a table, but I can't really, you know, describe it, as one would say. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember if you had electricity or gas light?

HOLTZER: No.

SIGRIST: Neither.

HOLTZER: Neither.

SIGRIST: So how did you light?

HOLTZER: Lamps with kerosene.

SIGRIST: Did you have a chore as a little girl that was specifically yours?

HOLTZER: My chore was when my mother's busy day was, you know, the market day that everybody, it was on a Tuesday. All I had to do is be with mother and some people were, you know, the peasants would come in. And today you call it charge it, but then they took it on the book, you know, and they would pay as they went or the -- say, the next week. So she always, when they took something and she couldn't mark it down right away, she'd say to me, "Remember that so-and-so took, you know, owes so much money." That was my chore.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: So as a young girl you had a good memory.

HOLTZER: Well, I sure did. I wish I had a tenth of it now. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little girl? How would you describe yourself as a little girl?

HOLTZER: How can I praise myself?

SIGRIST: Try. Go ahead. (they laugh)

HOLTZER: Well, I was very good, when I started school, I was very good in school. In fact, I was the best pupil. And that's really why my uncle sent for me when I graduated public school in Europe. He wanted me to come here and go on to school. And he sent for us. He was in the Army at that time. And he sent for my brother, my older brother, and myself.

SIGRIST: He felt the educational opportunities would be better here.

HOLTZER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the school for me, what it looked like?

HOLTZER: It looked like a school.

SIGRIST: Do you have any stories associated with school that you remember as a kid?

HOLTZER: Not really. You know, I got through, you know, whatever I learned there, and went home.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: The teacher that lived with you, was she one of your teachers?

HOLTZER: No, it was a ma—a male. No, he wasn't. He wasn't even my teacher, but he taught in the same school. But he wasn't my teacher.

SIGRIST: Is this a big school with lots of kids, or a small school?

HOLTZER: Yes. The whole town, I don't know, what you call big here is not big there. You know. It was a small school. Just the children of the town went there.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite subject? Do you remember?

HOLTZER: Well, see, in – in the school that I went to they taught languages. I was taught Polish, which was the main ca—the main language there, and German, and Ukraine. Don't ask me to, because I don't -- maybe German I remember a little, not the other languages, because I didn't use it. You know.

SIGRIST: Once you came here.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. So you speak, serviceably, several languages.

HOLTZER: I don't remember too much. And then I spoke Polish -- just it was my, really my main language.

SIGRIST: What did people do in this town for fun? When you were a little girl, what did you do that was fun?

HOLTZER: Playing games with children, that's all.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what games that you played?

HOLTZER: I don't really remember just exactly what games, but that's what we did.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have a party, maybe?

HOLTZER: No. Who made parties then? All we did is read, you know, books or so, that we can read within our education, as one would say.

SIGRIST: What about your religious life? What religion were you?

HOLTZER: Jewish.

SIGRIST: And was there a synagogue nearby?

HOLTZER: Oh, yes, sure. I went to school. I also know Hebrew. Not really Hebrew, but Jewish. It's different.

SIGRIST: Did you speak Yiddish in the house?

HOLTZER: Oh, sure. Yes, that was the main language to my mother, you know. Sometimes we Po—we spoke Polish, but most of the time to my mother I spoke Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a religious woman?

HOLTZER: Yes.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Can you tell me some of the ways that you practiced your religion at home?

HOLTZER: Well, we had a kosher home. We knew that Friday nights she would light candles and make a prayer over them. Every holiday she went to synagogue, and she came from a very, very learned family, and it was really scholars. In fact, when her uncle died, the whole town was closed, I mean, all the stores and everything, they respected him so much.

SIGRIST: And she was from this town?

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have other extended family in this town, like grandparents, or . . .

HOLTZER: No. I don't remember my grandparents at all. And, in fact, my mother's father died when she was a baby.

SIGRIST: So she didn't even really know her father.

HOLTZER: No, no.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how you celebrated Passover for me in Europe?

HOLTZER: Very nicely, but very quietly. We didn't, because we really didn't have any other family in that town outside of the immediate family. But we were, we were all children. Of course we had a Seder and all, but it was small, just nothing. You know what I mean, not as they make it elaborate here, some Jews, you know, with families here, you know. I used to have twenty-eight people to a Seder. But in Europe you don't practice that.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: What kinds of foods did your mother cook in Europe? When you think back to Europe . . .

HOLTZER: Very good food.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me something specifically that you remember as a child that she prepared?

HOLTZER: No, I really don't. You know, chicken soup, chicken. Nothing out of the ordinary, I don't think. And I don—and if it was, I don't remember, really.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help her cook as a little girl?

HOLTZER: No, never. I don't think she would allow me to. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me the names of your brothers and sisters, going from the oldest to the youngest.

HOLTZER: The oldest was Abe, Abraham. The middle one was Gerald. The youngest was Bernie. He was younger than I am, the others were older.

SIGRIST: So you have two older brothers.

HOLTZER: They're gone, they're all gone.

SIGRIST: And yourself.

HOLTZER: I'm the only one left.

SIGRIST: And you were the only girl in the four kids?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: No, no. I had another, I had two sisters. They died during the war. One was nine years old, and one was about seventeen. But I was in America.

SIGRIST: You were in America, so you didn't . . .

HOLTZER: No, I didn't witness any of it, but my mother wrote us.

SIGRIST: How did they die?

HOLTZER: I really don't know. I think my older si-- I mean, the older one of the two, died of meningitis. But the younger one, I have no idea. She was nine years old, and I don't remember what her sickness or why she died.

SIGRIST: Then, again, you were quite a bit removed from it all being here.

HOLTZER: Yeah, right, because I was here.

SIGRIST: Was that common for young people to die in those days?

HOLTZER: Children, yes. Children diseases. They didn't have all the stuff they have today.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being ill as a child?

HOLTZER: Yes. I remember having measles, and it was the high holidays. And my mother was in synagogue, and she would come during the time, the recess, like, they had, to come and run and see how we are, because my sister and I had it the same time.

SIGRIST: How would they treat measles?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: (she whispers) I have no idea.

SIGRIST: No idea.

HOLTZER: No idea. We didn't call a doctor or anything. I guess we just outlived it -- whatever. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Obviously. (they laugh)

HOLTZER: I'm here.

SIGRIST: Now, you said you have an uncle in America.

HOLTZER: He's gone, too.

SIGRIST: Why had he come to America?

HOLTZER: He came, see, this is also a whole story.

SIGRIST: Go right ahead.

HOLTZER: Because my grandmother, my mother's mother was a widow very young. She re-married, and she had all the, in fact, this uncle that sent for us was a half-brother – her -- from one mother. But he was very fond of my mother, his sister. And when, they used to correspond all the time when he came to America. They were all very young. My mother had two sisters, half-sisters, and she had two sisters and two brothers. And they all came, the whole family. She re-married, and her husband wanted to go to America, and they took the whole family. So they were, like, when I came here they were all Americans.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: They had come quite a bit before.

HOLTZER: Oh, yes. They were young. In fact, one was a schoolteacher, one aunt, in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: So this uncle of yours, whose name is?

HOLTZER: Nathan Ellman.

SIGRIST: So Nathan is corresponding with your mom.

HOLTZER: Yeah. And he found out that I do very good in school, and my brother, who was getting a little older, he was only I think fourteen. And, you know, with the army, everybody was afraid in Europe to go into the army, so he thought he'll send for us. And then he figured, you know, he didn't have the money to send for the whole family. So he figured, and my mother had a store, she was tied to business, big business. So she couldn't leave right away, even if he sent for her, but he promised to send for her about six, seven months later. He'll gather all that money, and then he'll send for her. War broke out. She was stuck. She couldn't come. Especially the Austrians were alien enemies. That's – that was a no-no. She couldn't come here, and that's why she was stuck.

SIGRIST: So actually you and your brother were lucky. I mean, you got out in time.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: As a child, you may not be able to answer this, but as a child were you conscious of there sort of rumblings of war at that time?

HOLTZER: No, no, not at all, no. We knew why the war, not why, but some prince or

EI-310/HOLTZER

whatever was killed that time, and that's how the war started – really, with Austria. But I don't remember names or anything.

SIGRIST: Right. So you were sort of oblivious to it all.

HOLTZER: Yes. But I knew that – but the war didn't start, but there was rumbling, you know, that they were against, you know, Austria and Germany, the whole bit -- bit you know. So.

SIGRIST: I did also want to ask you a question about the relationship, the Jewish population, to the rest of the population in this town, or was it primarily a Jewish town?

HOLTZER: No, it wasn't.

SIGRIST: Well, what was the relationship? Was it a good relationship?

HOLTZER: Yes, yes. I can't say that we did -- of course, you know, sometimes if children would fight they would call them, like, here you would say, "Dirty Jew." You know. But it meant nothing. We really didn't know our anti-Semitic— Semitic things happening in the – in the town. The peasants were very nice. In fact, one of them actually, when my mother, got sick, she actually came and nursed me and all this -- a baby. Mother told me that. Because every time that peasant would come in, you know, she'd kiss me and hug me. So my mother told me the story.

SIGRIST: So you guys got to know the whole town because your mother was selling . . .

HOLTZER: You know, people come and buy things. And, no, I can't say there was any . . .

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Bad feeling. What did you know about America when you were a little girl?

HOLTZER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Before you came here. Any . . .

HOLTZER: Absolutely nothing. They -- because my, you know, we were children and didn't, you know, we never spoke about it or anything. All we know is that Uncle Nathan sent a letter or something. That's about it.

SIGRIST: Did you want to come?

HOLTZER: Well, because I was promised that Mother will follow in six months, and in the meantime, see, I graduated public school, as they would call elementary school, whatever you want to call it. I don't know what they call it now. And so he thought I'd go on to school, go to high school and, you know, make something of myself, because I'm very good in school. OK. So I, I felt -- of course I felt bad leaving Mother there. But sh-- there was a promise there, and Mother felt the same way, that she'll follow in a few months, and she'll be with us.

SIGRIST: Had you ever met Uncle Nathan?

HOLTZER: Yes. Of course I did.

SIGRIST: Did he ever come back to visit?

HOLTZER: He came here to visit. He was in Honolulu, I think. He was in service there. So it wasn't that near to come here. We didn't ha-- I mean,

EI-310/HOLTZER

airplanes to fly. I don't know how you got there, from there here. But he – he did come to visit.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, did your mother give you a little goodbye dinner or, do you remember getting ready to leave, that whole process?

HOLTZER: No. I didn't have a goodbye dinner.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing?

HOLTZER: Mother did all the packing, and Mother gave us food along.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you had with you?

HOLTZER: Food?

SIGRIST: Well, what you were carrying with you when you left?

HOLTZER: Well, I might have had a couple of dresses and things like that, underwear.

SIGRIST: Was there a dress that sticks out in your mind that you really liked when you were a little girl?

HOLTZER: Yes, I do.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me?

HOLTZER: It was, Mother usually used to have a dressmaker to make my sister and myself dresses for the holidays, and that dress I remember. It was a woolen brown, striped, with a stripe. I can't describe it. (laughs)

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: But you do remember it.

HOLTZER: Oh, yes. I'll never forget it, because it was a very nice dress, and I liked it.
And I won't forget it.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. All right. So you're taking basically necessities. Now,
do you remember where you had to go to get to the boat?

HOLTZER: To the boat we had a nice, long travel. We went to, where was it?
Amsterdam, I think.

SIGRIST: Amsterdam, or Antwerp.

HOLTZER: Antwerp, Antwerp. You're right.

SIGRIST: Now, do you remember how you got from Austria to Antwerp?

HOLTZER: Oh, there were plenty of cities that we had to pass. Because we were
pretty far away.

SIGRIST: Who's going with you?

HOLTZER: My brother.

SIGRIST: And it's just the two of you traveling by yourself? Is there a chaperon,
or . . .

HOLTZER: I had -- yes, a cousin. She was eighteen. But we had to tell her what to
do. That's how smart she was. (they laugh) She's not around, so I can
talk.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: (he laughs) All right. So how did you get from Austria to Antwerp?
Specifically, how did you travel?

HOLTZER: By train.

SIGRIST: This is, had you been on trains before, or was this the first time you'd been
on a train?

HOLTZER: First time.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of that?

HOLTZER: No, not really. A train is a train, and that's where we went, and we were
going from city, from city to city.

SIGRIST: Did you, do you know how long that journey took?

HOLTZER: I think it took us, I don't know if I'm right. Six weeks, whether it took us,
with the traveling, to America, on the ship or, but it took six weeks.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories at all or stories about that trip, something that
happened during that trip to Antwerp that you might remember?

HOLTZER: The trip to Antwerp?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HOLTZER: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing . . .

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Everything went smoothly.

SIGRIST: Uneventful.

HOLTZER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have to stay over for any length of time in Antwerp before you got on the boat?

HOLTZER: Yes. We stayed quite a few days because our ship was on fire.

SIGRIST: Was on fire! (he laughs)

HOLTZER: Yes. Really. That's what tha -- we were told, so we had to stay there. Quite a, I think a week. I don't remember exactly how long, whether it was a few days or a week, but they told us that ship, the ship was on fire.

SIGRIST: Now, was that the ship you finally took?

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the name of it?

HOLTZER: You know, only until two weeks ago I remembered the name, and now I don't. I really don't remember.

SIGRIST: The ship that's on fire.

HOLTZER: Yeah. (she laughs) We really felt, my brother and I, we felt kind of funny going on a ship that was on fire. But I figured everybody's going, so we'll

EI-310/HOLTZER

go.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) So did they put up in a hotel in Antwerp, or was there some kind of facility?

HOLTZER: No, it was a facility.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

HOLTZER: It's -- it was just like a dormitory or something, you know, a big place, and there were places where we used to eat, where they fed us. And it was from the ship company, I think.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what ship line it was?

HOLTZER: Cunard?

SIGRIST: It could be.

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: So you're there for about a week, you said. Did you have to undergo any kind of examinations before you got on the boat?

HOLTZER: No, not at all, no. Only, you know, before we landed here.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how you felt as a little girl through this process? Was this like leaving your mother, leaving home? Was this kind of a scary . . .

HOLTZER: Of course it was, of course it was. But, as I said, I had hope that she'll be

EI-310/HOLTZER

with us in a few months.

SIGRIST: So when you said goodbye to your mother, it wasn't really a goodbye. It was . . .

HOLTZER: No, plenty of tears were shed.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, was she upset, too?

HOLTZER: Of course. Of course. What mother wouldn't – wouldn't be?

SIGRIST: That's hard, losing two of her kids.

HOLTZER: But, as I said, she also had the same hope that we did, that she'll be here, she'll be with us.

SIGRIST: And she wanted to go to America.

HOLTZER: Yes, oh, yes, she did.

SIGRIST: What did she think was waiting for her in America?

HOLTZER: I don't know what she thought she was waiting for her, but I think Uncle Nathan persuaded her, too a little, you know, telling other families here, and you're there alone and, you know, all that. So I guess she figured, look, she'll, she was a very bright woman, capable, and she thought she'll do something here.

SIGRIST: What was Uncle Nathan doing in America, do you remember? You said he was in the Army.

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: But he was in the Army at this time also, when you were coming over? He was . . .

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: He was in the Army.

HOLTZER: Yes. In fact, it took years before I really saw him.

SIGRIST: So this is another part to the story probably. (he laughs) Which we'll get to when we get to America.

HOLTZER: Oh, God!

SIGRIST: Well, let me ask you how long the voyage took, do you think?

HOLTZER: Thirteen days.

SIGRIST: Thirteen days. And can you describe where you slept on the boat?

HOLTZER: I told you that, I think I did, I don't know. I told somebody, that we went in the class, I don't even know how to explain it. We were in steerage all the way down, because I went down, I met somebody, a girlfriend or some – a friend. And she took me down. It was, like, in a cellar. You know, it was, but we were, like, on top, and they were, the same beds and all, but it was a higher level. That's all I can tell you. It wasn't the first class, and it wasn't the second class, but it was like in between. Maybe years ago they had it – today they have second and third.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: It's like maybe a tourist class of some sort.

HOLTZER: Something, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was it crowded, or did you have your own little cabin?

HOLTZER: No, no. It was, there are more people there. I was, we weren't the only ones. But it wasn't as big and crowded as down below.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

HOLTZER: I didn't. My brother did.

SIGRIST: Your brother got sick.

HOLTZER: I didn't. I wasn't sick.

SIGRIST: Hmm. We're going to pause just for a moment, and Kevin's going to flip the tape over, and we'll continue getting you over to America.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

HOLTZER: You don't understand.

SIGRIST: We're now continuing with Miriam Holtzer. Just getting our headsets all messed up. Mrs. Holtzer, you're on the boat, and you didn't get sick, your brother got sick, so what did you do on the boat? What was there to do?

HOLTZER: I'll tell you, we met a Polish fellow, and he, I -- he volunteered or something to be in the first class, a waiter. So he used to bring us down all the goodies from the first class, and he would visit with us when he

EI-310/HOLTZER

could. And that's about it. Just watched the water and the sky.

SIGRIST: Did you go up on deck?

HOLTZER: Yes, oh, sure.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how they treated your brother for seasickness at all?

HOLTZER: I don't think anybody treated him. We just got over it.

SIGRIST: You said your mother had packed you food to eat.

HOLTZER: That's just till the, it couldn't last that long, you know. Just on the train trip we had it.

SIGRIST: What did she pack you, do you remember offhand?

HOLTZER: We had pigeons. So she roasted some, what do they call little pigeons?

SIGRIST: Squab.

HOLTZER: Squab. So that's what she prepared for us.

SIGRIST: So you were munching on the squab on the train. (laughs)

HOLTZER: Oh, and some fresh rolls or bread or whatever.

SIGRIST: It was a rather elegant lunch.

HOLTZER: Yeah, after all. Well, that's what she has.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: So the trip lasts about thirteen days on the ship. And this is, what time of the year is this? It's 1913, and it's . . .

HOLTZER: October.

SIGRIST: It's October. So, let's see. Your birthday was October first? So did you have your birthday somewhere along the line here?

HOLTZER: Where? On the way?

SIGRIST: Well, do you remember having a birthday . . .

HOLTZER: No. No, I don't remember any of it. I don't remember any of it. In fact, I don't know whether I, my mother told us the date, because I really didn't know the date.

SIGRIST: Because if you were born October 1st, which is what you said at the beginning of the interview, you would have actually turned eleven during the trip.

HOLTZER: Yeah. But, see, I left, I don't know. But, anyway, that's what it is.

SIGRIST: Ten, eleven. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

HOLTZER: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me?

HOLTZER: Oh, it was such a, everybody ran on deck to look at, well, that means they're there, they're here, rather. So it was very exciting.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: How did you know you were in New York? Was there an announcement made on the boat?

HOLTZER: I guess so. I don't remember that, but everybody knew that we're there, we're here. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And then what happened? After the boat comes into New York Harbor, tell me what happened next.

HOLTZER: My grandfather was in Elizabeth with his two daughters. He had to come and sponsor me, or whatever you call. Otherwise they wouldn't, I was underage. So they wouldn't let me, you know, come here. So he came and, I don't know. There was a whole business going around with signing papers. I don't know what it was. But, anyway, he took me to Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: And that's here at Ellis Island that that happened.

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Your grandfather picked you up at Ellis Island.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of what Ellis Island looked like at that time, what sticks out in your mind?

HOLTZER: I only know the places that we slept. It was like a dorm. There were a lot of beds.

SIGRIST: Oh, you had to sleep here.

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: How many days?

HOLTZER: Because, no, no, no. Just overnight.

SIGRIST: Overnight.

HOLTZER: Because we came, docked, I think, late in the afternoon. I don't know what it was. Or they couldn't get in touch with my grandfather, whatever. But I did sleep one night. And that was, he came and took me to Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you here, if you stayed overnight, that you remember?

HOLTZER: Yes, yes. But where, what and when and what, I don't know. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: All right. So you were here overnight and, was this grandfather someone you had ever seen before?

HOLTZER: Not really.

SIGRIST: I mean, how did you feel about sort of going with this strange man?

HOLTZER: Strange, strange, very strange. But, you know, they explained it. We had a picture of him, so I knew him. But that time who was afraid. He came to take me, I went.

SIGRIST: Was the cousin still with you, or did you leave her off in Antwerp?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: No. She went with us, but she had to, there's another story to it. She was going to marry my Uncle Nathan, the one that sent for us, but he didn't know her. When he left Europe, she was a baby. And he thought she grew up to be -- and she grew up just the opposite of what she was. She wasn't good looking. Oh, that's a different story. So, anyway, she -- she came with us to Elizabeth, but from there she left to Honolulu.

SIGRIST: Which is where Nathan was.

HOLTZER: Right.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your grandfather doing in Elizabeth?

HOLTZER: He -- I -- I don't know whether, and he was giving Germans lessons in this school. But how or what, I don't know. You know what I mean? I don't know whether he was really a teacher or just giving tutoring. I don't know. But he used to teach German. In fact, the first thing he did is give me a German lesson when I came here. No—a -- you know, not -- a test, not a lesson..

SIGRIST: Oh, to make sure how much you knew. What was your grandfather like as a person? What was his personality?

HOLTZER: Very nice, very nice. I knew him a short time, but he was very nice. Because I left Elizabeth. I didn't like because they all spoke English and I didn't. My aunts, one aunt was a teacher in the same school that I went to where they registered me. I was there four months, and I was very unhappy. My brother was in Brooklyn, my oldest brother, that came two years before.

SIGRIST: Had come before.

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: He was in Brooklyn with my aunt, living with my aunt and uncle. And I don't know how I did it, but I did it. I wrote a letter without a stamp, without anything, but I want to go to Brooklyn. I don't want to stay in Elizabeth. And that's what happened. I came to Brooklyn to live with my aunt.

SIGRIST: What about your brother who'd come over here with you? What happened to him?

HOLTZER: He stayed in Elizabeth for a while. And then he, too, came to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: So you were both unhappy with your grandparents, grandfather.

HOLTZER: I guess.

SIGRIST: Yeah. My brother was very unhappy that I decided to go to Brooklyn, because my oldest brother came and took me to Brooklyn when he got the letter.

SIGRIST: Did that create sort of bad feelings?

HOLTZER: Yes, with the families, it sure did. It sure did.

SIGRIST: Did your, let's just talk about those first four months, because that was really the first time you were in America. Tell me about going to school.

HOLTZER: Well, I went to school, but it was hard, you know. I knew, see, I had Polish and English -- the writing, the alphabet, it's the same, it's simi--. Not similar, it's the same. So it wasn't so hard. But I did not like it, because I didn't understand anybody. You know, I was, I was the only one that couldn't speak English. It wasn't easy, and I didn't like it. But when I went

EI-310/HOLTZER

to Brooklyn for foreigners and they taught English, and there were many more. In fact, most of the class were people from – from Europe that couldn't speak English.

And in that class, from there they judged you where you belonged. So you could go to the 4A. I went to the 5A. That's how they put me. There was a school right next door to us, but I couldn't go to that school. I had to go to the school in Brooklyn that was quite a distance, quite a few blocks away, because they taught English. And that's where, in four months, I spoke English. That the teachers used to say, "My own child doesn't speak as well." Because I'd pronounce it right. Now I don't, but then I did.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, this is sort of what the whole intention was for you coming over here, was to pursue your education. Is there a story, perhaps, of maybe a mistake that you made learning English, or a tough time you remember trying to make yourself understood?

HOLTZER: It was very tough in Elizabeth. But here I felt fine because my aunt and uncle spoke Yiddish, so I can talk to them, they could understand me, and it was different. And in Class too, I had people that spoke my language. And the teaching was, I think, wonderful, the way they taught you there. The thing was shown and they were all – and you had to do it. The thing was shown and they were all – and you had to do it. Practice it. All – and you had to do it. Practice it. And that's how I learned.

SIGRIST: They really made you understand exactly what they were talking about.

HOLTZER: Right, right. I don't know what they do now with foreigners. I have no idea. But that's the, in school I had to go. And then when I, when I got promoted to the 5A, I transferred to the school, which was right next door

EI-310/HOLTZER

to the building where my aunt and uncle were.

SIGRIST: Did you want to become American?

HOLTZER: Well, I don't know what you mean by American. I wanted to speak the language and be understood. What did I know about America?

SIGRIST: Did you feel out of place because you were from Europe, or were you around so many other Europeans that you felt, actually, very much in place.

HOLTZER: That's right, that's right. Because in Elizabeth I did not feel in place, because it was all strange. Even my aunts. They all spoke English. They came here youngsters, young kids. So, in fact, I told you one was a schoolteacher. So I wasn't comfortable. I didn't appreciate it. I probably, if I stayed there maybe I would. But I just didn't.

SIGRIST: It was culture shock for you. Did you miss your mom when you were here?

HOLTZER: Of course I did.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit, again, about how the war sort of got in the way of bringing her over?

HOLTZER: Well, what do you want to know?

SIGRIST: Tell me what she did during the war. When she couldn't come over here, what . . .

HOLTZER: They ran from one place to the other. They ran from house to city. In fact,

EI-310/HOLTZER

when she got back the house was all burned down to the ground. She had nothing. So she re-married.

SIGRIST: So she was really right in the middle of the fighting then.

HOLTZER: Yes.

SIGRIST: So there probably was very little communication then between . . .

HOLTZER: No, we couldn't, because they were alien enemies and we couldn't, couldn't correspond at all, until there it quieted down, and then we heard from her.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year it was when you heard from her? It was after the war.

HOLTZER: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: When did she re-marry?

HOLTZER: A man that, she knew the family, but from a different town. But she knew the family, and they met running. That's how they met.

SIGRIST: Was this a good thing for her, to re-marry?

HOLTZER: It was a good thing for her, but not for us, because he didn't want her to come to America, and that was the story. In fact, we thought we'd send Uncle Nathan there. I was married already. And we sent him, and he'll bring her here. But he saw she was happy and he says, "Why disrupt the whole thing?" And we were angry with him, because he -- he -- he didn't, he wasn't successful. Of bringing -- of bringing her here.

EI-310/HOLTZER

SIGRIST: Did she ever make it here?

HOLTZER: God bless Hitler, he killed her. (tearful)

SIGRIST: She stayed in Europe. I see.

HOLTZER: The whole family. I mean, you know, her husband's family.

SIGRIST: Had she re-settled in Austria after all the running around?

HOLTZER: Well, they did come back, but not in -- not in the same town. They went to his town. He had a business there, too. I don't remember what business, but he was a businessman. And he went to his town where he -- where he was before.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me what your first job was in America. What's the first job . . .

HOLTZER: The first job was to take care of the family. My aunt, after I was here four months, my aunt died, the aunt that I lived with, she died. Forty-five years old. So I became the housekeeper because she died, my uncle lived there, my brothers lived there.

SIGRIST: This is in Brooklyn, or it's still Brooklyn, once you had gone. This must have been soon after you'd gone to Brooklyn. You were in Elizabeth for four months.

HOLTZER: Yeah. It was soon after, but I used to come from school and have to start keeping house.

SIGRIST: I see. What was the first job that you got outside of the home?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: I don't think I had any. It wasn't really, I took care of the house, and that was it.

SIGRIST: And you were going to school.

HOLTZER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You eventually graduated.

HOLTZER: Yeah, and that's it. I never went to high school because it was too much, you know, to go to school and elementary school is not that hard, than high school. So. And this family was different. They were European already, and they didn't believe in going and getting an education, so I was robbed of that regardless, see.

SIGRIST: And even you had come here . . .

HOLTZER: For that reason, and it didn't work out.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me when you met your husband?

HOLTZER: Well, this is also a funny story. I married my cousin. And he knew me when I was a baby practically. He was eight years older. And I knew him because we lived in the same house. That's what happened.

SIGRIST: But, of course, this is in America many years later.

HOLTZER: Of course, in 1925 I got married.

SIGRIST: You married in '25. And what was your husband's name?

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: Abraham. Holtzer.

SIGRIST: And tell me about what children you had.

HOLTZER: Well, I have my son.

SIGRIST: His name is . . .

HOLTZER: Alfred.

SIGRIST: Alfred Holtzer. And he's a professor.

HOLTZER: [not understood] Chemistry.

SIGRIST: Let me, well, let me ask you a final question here and send you on your way.

HOLTZER: Are you sure it's going to be final?

SIGRIST: It's going to be a final question. We're almost done. Tell me about, are you happy that you came to this country? Are you happy that Uncle Nathan sort of intervened and got you over.

HOLTZER: Oh, yes. I'm satisfied.

SIGRIST: Even though it was tough.

HOLTZER: Yes, I am, I am. I made a life of my -- I own here.

SIGRIST: You said you'd been to St. Louis for eighteen years.

EI-310/HOLTZER

HOLTZER: It will be after Labor Day. It's seventeen-and-a-half, whatever.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Holtzer, I want to thank you very much for taking a few minutes out from your visit here and . . .

HOLTZER: I never expected it, never. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Well, we never know who we're going to find, and where we're going to find them.

HOLTZER: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Miriam Holtzer on Tuesday, May 11, 1993.