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BITIA ROSENDOR
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BELGIUM, 1941
AGE 20

SHIP: "THE NYASSA"
PORT: LISBON
RESIDENCES:
? BELGIUM: LIEGE; ANTWERP
? US: NEW YORK

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Sunday, May 16, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Bitia Rosendor. She was born in Jerusalem, came to the United States from Belgium in 1941 when she was twenty years old, and she was detained at Ellis Island for thirty-nine days. Anyway, it's my pleasure to have you here.

ROSENDOR: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: Could we begin by you saying for us on tape your full name and your date of birth, please?

ROSENDOR: Bitia Rosendor, born the 14th of December 1920, in Jerusalem.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me why your family was in Jerusalem?

ROSENDOR: My family, both my parents were born in Bessarabia. Bessarabia was a part of Russia when they were born, but after the Russian revolution, this part of Russia was given by the allies to Romania. And my parents, having been Zionists as youths, as young people, decided they didn't want to stay in Romania and would leave for Palestine at the time. The only trouble is that they didn't have the famous number which was given by the English for every Jewish immigrant. So they left without it.

My father left with his fiancée, not even married, his, one of his sisters, and a friend. Three girls and a man. They were, respectively, my father was born in '97, my mother in '99, and his sister was even younger. You have an idea. They left with beds, gear, you know? And probably provisions, and hopes for the best. And they went as far as Constantinople. Then they took a boat, arrived in Lebanon, in

Beirut, probably, and tried to get to Palestine. And this is a whole epic. I don't know if I (laughs) tell you this.

SIGRIST: Just quickly, if you can tell us.

ROSENDOR: Quickly, they rented, they hired a carriage, a man who had a charrette [cart] or something like that. And they all piled into that, and this man brought to the border of Lebanon. But there he just abandoned them. He said he couldn't go any further. And we have understood later why. There were just no roads. And it turned up that many people, and in the book of Arthur Koestler, when he speaks of the -- the miracle of the birth of Israel, one of his books that he made, he said he walked also a lot. Because at that time, a lot of people walked a lot. There were no roads. And what finally happened is that they gave all their baggage to a young boy with a donkey.

They had the courage to abandon their belongings, and he went ahead. There wasn't – they couldn't -- they couldn't afford any more donkeys, and they said they would meet him in Acre, St. John D'Acre, you know, St. John D'Acre. And the most amazing thing is that they found him later. But they started walking. They just walked all along the coast – quite [not understood] which was quite a [not understood], you know, for four young people.

SIGRIST: What year is this?

ROSENDOR: In, uh, it must have been in 1819.

SIGRIST: 1918.

ROSENDOR: Yeah, '18 or '19.

SIGRIST: Just after the war?

ROSENDOR: Just after the war, yeah. Until they arrived, you know, it took some months, you know. And then they installed themselves there. Of course they had nothing, hardly anything. Everything they had was eaten up. And my father found a job to, I think, the Jewish Workers Organization, is that all he found a job as a chauffeur for VIP's who came to visit Palestine. And he went to, he learned to drive a car, which was very rare at the time. He used to be a good horseman, so he went from horse to car.

And the, uh, he went around with all kinds of important people showing them the – the tombs and the, you know, the, everything that was to be seen. Mostly English people, you see. And, uh, his car was a, oh, I should give you a copy of that. I had a photograph of him with his car, which was a Ford Model T, and he's sitting there on the floor preparing the car, because he had sometimes more than twenty, but he got punctures on the way. He had to, because the – the heat was so strong that when he repaired the inner tire, it bust open by the heat of the road, you see, whatever road. And there were so many stones and what not. So that was his, uh, his job. And he worked for the courts, the

courts. They were, there was a section for Arabs, for Jews, and that's where he, he stayed for a few years, and I was born in the end of 1923.

SIGRIST: Did he marry your mother in Jerusalem?

ROSENDOR: Actually, they never married.

SIGRIST: I see.

ROSENDOR: They lived sixty-nine years together. (they laugh) And she never called him 'my husband.'

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

ROSENDOR: Rosendor.

SIGRIST: First name.

ROSENDOR: Aaron.

SIGRIST: Aaron.

ROSENDOR: Aaron.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about what his personality was like?

ROSENDOR: Oh, he was some character – very courageous man. Fearless -- very courageous man. Fearless, you know. You had to be, he was a very good raconteur. You know what that is? He told stories. I was fascinated from my youth, when they got together with friends. They used to ask this and that, don't they remember, because some of them met that had been together. But about my parents' marriage, they finally found two witnesses who vouched that they had been married religiously, and then they were, it was admitted as far as civil, too, and I was not born out of wedlock. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

ROSENDOR: Sarah. Sarah Beherman, pronounced Beherman.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it, please?

ROSENDOR: B-E-H-E-R-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same question about your mom. What was her personality like?

ROSENDOR: Ah, she could have been a, you know, like Hillary Clinton. She had the brains for a minister. She was so wise a person.

SIGRIST: Was she an educated woman?

ROSENDOR: She was educated. She was – she was to be a doctor when they studied in Odessa, but there was the quota against Jews, not to speak of women. So she didn't make it. And, uh, when she finished high school and the – the --civil war happened, she left, went back to the village of -- where her father lived, which was called Rezina, Rezina. Rezina, R-E-ZET-I-N-A, on the Dniester, which is the waterway, the Dniester, a river. N, D-N-I-E-D-E-R. Dniester, yeah, I think that's it. And you wanted to ask?

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

ROSENDOR: And my father's village was Falesti, F-A-L-E-S-T-I, Falesti, but the S has a cedille on it to make it sound like a, you know.

SIGRIST: Now, were you the only child born in Jerusalem?

ROSENDOR: Yes, I was the only one. And, uh, they went through very hard times. But, and my father was also a student in Russia, in Odessa. His father, he just work already for himself. My grandfather was a . . . Is that interesting to you?

SIGRIST: Yes, go ahead.

ROSENDOR: He was a dealer in cattle. He used to buy cows and, uh, des brebis [ewes], how do you say that? Mutton, how do you call that? Mouton?.

SIGRIST: Mutton sheep?

ROSENDOR: Muttons, muttons. And, uh, they used to raise them and have little ones, you know? And they sold the little ones, I think, uh, sometimes for the fur, then they sold for the meat. And he used to go to the markets and go to the little villages and buy here two cows, here a cow, and then gather them, and then sell them, also. Because during the war, there was a lot of demand for meat. He used to ship them to Warsaw. And my father, as a young boy, before he went to school, before the -- the 1914, he already helped the people. He must have been fifteen, and my grandfather trusted him to go and collect the money because it was not easy to trust somebody, you know? So as a young boy he had already the experience of going to foreign countries, see. Which probably formed his personality.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure. Well-traveled at a young age.

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me why your father . . .

ROSENDOR: Became a student. Because his father wanted to avoid him going into the Russian army, which had a very long, uh, you know, time to be, and Jews were very maltreated, you know. I don't see if you say that in English maltraiter.

SIGRIST: Sure.

ROSENDOR: So he, he said his father probably saved his life, you know, by making him a student, and he was taken in a school in Odessa. And he finished, also, high school. And then when they went to Palestine, he wanted to continue his studies, and my mother, too. So that's why, that's the reason why they left Palestine.

SIGRIST: That was my next question, yes.

ROSENDOR: Because there were no schools at the time, you see? And since they had friends from Bessarabia, here and there, and news traveled that way, he wanted (since in Palestine for the Jews one of the important things was agriculture. They needed agricultural engineers. I don't know.) -- and he wanted to go, and he heard of a school in Toulouse. So he brought -- my parents brought, left, in 1923, and I was, uh, I was not taking the climate so well. I don't stand heat so well. And apparently if I had stayed I might have, be gone. Apparently, when we were on the ship I was immediately better when the, you know, some kind of dysentery which hits at the time when they didn't have all the things necessary to protect, you know, the antibiotics.

SIGRIST: So, now, did they go directly to Toulouse or did they . . .

ROSENDOR: No, they went . . .

SIGRIST: That's kind of a long journey.

ROSENDOR: No, no. They went to see their parents in Bessarabia. In fact, only the father survived. Both had, uh, no mothers. They're both orphans. And my mother stayed with her father in Rezina several months. Why my father went (I don't know if he went to Toulouse) -- I think on the way he spoke to someone who told him, in Belgium, there was in Liege a very good university, and there were people he knew, which makes a lot, you know, for making a person more easy if they are in a foreign place. And he finally settled to – in Liege. And then we came, my mother and I.

SIGRIST: What's your earliest memory, as a person?

ROSENDOR: My earliest memory is in – in Liege. I have two memories which stuck. (she laughs) I didn't think you would ask such things. A funny one is that in the first apartment where we remember as a room or two where we lived, once the, the landlord had a dog. I don't remember having had contacts with a pet, because in these countries animals are mostly wild in those days. They were dangerous, even, to – to touch, you know. They could bite. So these people had a dog who was trained to get a sugar, and he had to, uh, to, uh, cough to get a sugar. Say, “Toux! Prévoir sucre.’ You know, “Cough.” So it remained in the family, "Toux!" You know, if you wanted a piece of chocolate you say, "Toux!" They say, “Cough!” you see?

And the second memory is at the same place they had gas lights, and my mother made the gas lights. And it caught because they had these lovely scarves which were hanging -- this decorating -- and it caught. And I started running, you know, it's an innate fear of fire. I

didn't – I didn’t realize, it was – I was maybe three years old, or something like that. And my mother said to me, “Ve Ima”” – “Et Mama?”. That's in Hebrew, because we spoke Hebrew. So I remember that shocked me, you know? And I'm abandoning my mother! (she laughs) Are you interested in the third one?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

ROSENDOR: Well, the third one is that my parents, of course, were not rich at all, and they didn't eat very well, but one thing they liked is peanuts. So . . . I didn't move it too much? (referring to the microphone) So they, I remember they were sitting each on the side of the table, and the mountains of shell on the kitchen table because they were eating peanuts. It probably was very good for their bodies. Those are my three first memories.

SIGRIST: Those are wonderful. Tell me a little bit about growing up, um . . .

ROSENDOR: Ah, well I was . . .

SIGRIST: In a Jewish family.

ROSENDOR: Well, I didn't know I was Jewish, you see? Because we spoke Hebrew, but I had, my parents were, you know, from the time of the Revolution, they had ideas of liberty, and all these ideas were running around, and they, they certainly were not religious at all. And my grandfather, one, I know, had two seats, two different synagogue. And when he asked my father, "Where have you been on Friday? Did you go to synagogue?" He said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I didn't see you." "Well, I was at the other one, you see." (she laughs) That was his idea of religion. And he hated the school where he had the Kheder, where he had to study by heart. But in the end I think it did him good because when you study a lot you kind of train your memory.

SIGRIST: Now, did you move a lot?

ROSENDOR: Like gypsies.

SIGRIST: But within the same town did you move a lot?

ROSENDOR: Yes, first. We moved from that place, Ribasaing[ph], it was. And we went a little higher, because Liege is very hilly. And we were almost on the top, a street which had houses only on one side. As a matter of fact, my husband and I, a few years ago we had an exhibition in Spa which is not far from Liege. We went there, we were very sentimental, and we went, and we photographed the houses where I was going to, I used to go to school, to kindergarten. With -- my father went to the university, he held me by the hand, and we went downstream together.

And there was one street which was, still exists, called the Bat Street, la chauve-souris. With steps, steps and steps and steps, you know, going down. And, uh, that's where I went, to a small school, and

then later to grammar school. And I loved Liege because it was – it was beautiful, the view. You could see, it was a view, you know? A flat country you don't see the view in the same way. This way you saw the city, the hills. And we got very near the, how do you call that, the charbonnage, the mines. The mines were running under the houses from time to time. The stones in the cour—in the lobby used to lift up from, you know, having maybe dynamite underneath. And the lady used to take a stick . . . (she laughs) And she used to, you know, knock on the floor.

SIGRIST: Now, your father is a student at this time, right?

ROSENDOR: My father is a student.

SIGRIST: Is your mother working?

ROSENDOR: No, no, no. But my mother studied in Palestine. She became a teacher, a kindergarten teacher, in Hebrew. She passed, I have photographs where she is with her class, and I'm on her lap, you see? I was already born, she went to school. And later she opened a school in Hebrew in Antwerp, where we lived.

SIGRIST: So you, you eventually moved to Antwerp in this.

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: You said you moved around a lot, like gypsies.

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: Why? Why did you move so much?

ROSENDOR: Because my father finished the university, as he didn't finally do economy, but he made, he made civil engineer, ingenieur licence commercial commercial studies. And that kind of study brings you to be -- either work in a bank or in a corporation. They didn't take foreigners. So he had no openings.

SIGRIST: I see.

ROSENDOR: So that's, you see, that's the beginning of discrimination against Jews that most people don't even feel, don't even see. It's a, you know, a kind of a, they gave lessons to make money to other students.

SIGRIST: Was this something that your father was keenly aware of, though, the discrimination? Can you talk a little bit about how he felt about that?

ROSENDOR: Oh, my father, he used to, very often in those days people used to say "dirty Jew," very often. And, uh, oh, they said voux sont autre, you – you people, you know. That's a special way that they say in Belgium, separating them from nous sont autre the Belgium. Now – now they don't even feel Belgium any more. They feel either French or Flemish. They got their punishment. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, what about you as a little girl? You said you were not keenly aware of your religion?

ROSENDOR: No, no, no, not at all. That I felt, from the anti-Semitism, I met for the first time in Antwerp.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you moved to Antwerp?

ROSENDOR: Uh, well, I had done the first class -- the first time of school, and I was very upset by this change because I had already a circle of friends. And then the language was different, and that still was a shock for me, a very great shock. Well, that was hap-- how my first meeting with anti-Semitism, if that interests you.

SIGRIST: Yes.

ROSENDOR: Because this is, I guess, to show people what discrimination can bring. Is that, uh, you know, the Jews keep boxes on many houses to put money for the, the, it's called the pishka in Yiddish. Do you know what it is? Have you ever seen it? It's usually with the map of Israel with the colors of the Israeli flag, which became white and blue. And the pishka means a little box. And everybody that wanted to put what they had extra, like a piggy, you see? And then certain times somebody came to collect, and that money served to buy the land in Israel, Palestine. But it really did, and really this buying of the land is really what made Israel. Without having bought the land, they couldn't have done it. It's really was the basis that everybody participated in this buying of the land, you see? Luckily it was owned mostly by very rich absentee landlord who didn't care for the people who lived -- who worked on it who, or squatters who lived on it, and they sold it. That's one of the reasons for resentments is because these people were misplaced, you see? The Palestinians.

SIGRIST: So tell me about your experience.

ROSENDOR: My experience is this - is that we were, a frei-- we used to go to the seashore for vacation, you know. In Antwerp my father started a garage and it became a little more. After the crisis, you know, after the 1929 crisis it, we had a little more, more, more than before, and I had friends, and we used to go to the seashore. And there there's a game that children play. I have never seen it here in -- in the United States, on the beach. The kids make a hole, and then they arrange very nicely in the front, and the mother's make paper flowers, they are put on sticks or on wires, and they make a little boutique. And the children say [sings out] acheter de fleur, you know, and they sell the flowers for shells, and the kids go and pick special long shells which are called couteau knives, they don't look likes knives, but they call them, but they are more rare, and they give them ten or twenty or thirty or fifty, depending on the beauty of the flower. And I had an idea with my friends, and we made little flowers with this blue and white, and we went in the street and sold them to put the money in the box. And then I was told that I was a dirty Jew. That was the first time.

SIGRIST: Who told you that?

ROSENDOR: Somebody in the street. So I came in – I came --I cried to my mother, why did they call me that Jew. Then she told me that we were Jewish. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, what, how did you, how did you process that information? I mean, did that mean anything to you?

ROSENDOR: No, not very much, not very much. No. But in school I was put first into Flemish class, and that shocked me profoundly because I didn't -- I spoke Hebrew at home, and I – and I spoke, uh, French with my friends -- and that was the beginning of the, uh, you know, the Fleminzacion you know, and they wanted only Flemish in the Flemish part. And right away they put the new kids in Flemish class. There were still French ones, but there had to continue from before. And I couldn't follow, I couldn't follow. So my mother had to come to town and had to prove we were foreigners that didn't know the language and spoke French at home, and then they promised me to go back to a French class.

SIGRIST: I see.

ROSENDOR: But that was very bad. I really, and then there were very many Jewish girls in Antwerp, you know, Jewish people. And we lived on the limit of the Jewish quarter. But, uh, my parents didn't go to synagogue, you know? They did go to the Yiddish theater, but I didn't like, I couldn't stand it. They were singing. (she laughs) It annoyed me a lot. Now I would – I would take it differently, you know?

SIGRIST: Well, now, what did you know about America when you were growing up?

ROSENDOR: Only later, America was paradise. America was the land of democracy. There was no graft. There was only beautiful people. There were beautiful people. Everybody was, there were no snobs. People were talking to each other. They were, uh, it was the land where – where you went to get out of this, you know, stuffy people, like they – that there were, of which there were many, you know? And that's my idea when – when the war came to, to Poland, you know, when Hitler attacked . . .

SIGRIST: 1939.

ROSENDOR: '39, and when there was all this talk with Chamberlain, and the Munich Pact, etc., then we want to my father and mother. They were aware of what fascism was. Many people weren't, but they were very well aware. They were – they were educated people, so they read a lot, they followed that. My father was a member of a Jewish organization. See, a cultural organization. And, uh, I had an uncle who was a poet in America, you see? He had four of his sister in America. Before the war, they – they went to America. I have an enormous family in America. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So there was already, there were . . .

ROSENDOR: I had great-grandparents who were – who are buried in Philadelphia, for instance.

SIGRIST: So you already had a connection with America, then.

ROSENDOR: I had a connection.

SIGRIST: The family, there's family members there.

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: Why don't you start to tell me how your family went about getting out.

ROSENDOR: Ah, that's just what I'm coming at. We couldn't, because, uh, the visas were given proportionately, as we have seen, and they were counted as Romanians, because of their place of birth, of which there were few in America, therefore the quota was very small. And we had to wait three years. And in '38 we inscribed ourselves to get a visa, '38. And in '40 the war happened. So meanwhile everybody, everybody was trying to get out of Europe that understood and could, because you had to have means. The poor people couldn't get out, you know? Or if they ran away with the exodus that happened, they had to go back. Because very few, very few know that the refugees in France from Belgium, who were not Belgium, and the Belgiums who had no means, were forced to go back, because the – their funds were cut before the consulate of – the cons-- the governor of the Province of Liege, I think, was the consul in Toulouse.

And there there was a hell for these people, that couldn't -- would then be left to starve. But when there was armistice after a little while, they were told they had to go back. So we wanted to go back. We wanted to leave. We – we tried to leave Belgium, and there was, like, I can't describe it. There was a mad, you know, rats that try to leave the ship, everywhere. For instance, the Argentina. Oh, the Argentinians are given visas, but you have to convert, you have to show a certificate of baptism. That somehow didn't -- was displeasing to my parents to go and convert just to go away. They didn't understand that even that was just a means of saving your life. Besides, it cost a lot of money, because the church did not make it easy to convert. You had to show that you were really feeling it, not simply paying for it.

SIGRIST: Doing it to get out of the country.

ROSENDOR: Yes. But some people managed. And then this country gave, and this country gave. And by pure chance, and I'll tell you in two words, we were at the seashore, I think it was in '39, yes, it must have been '39, in the summer of '39. No, it must have been '38. I can't remember exactly. And around the middle of August there's a tremendous crowd. It's like, uh, the Fourth of July here, I don't know, uh, Memorial Day, you know. We have trouble finding places in Washington to sleep because there are so many people. The same at the seashore. And my mother went to buy something, they sold soup for people, because they -- people liked to have shortcuts, you know, they didn't have what they

have now, all these iced food. And at the hotel where we had been before, they sold soup at noon, so you didn't have to do the vegetables and so forth.

She went to buy soup, and there was a lady there who was practically crying to the boss and saying, "Don't you have a room for me, my two daughters are waiting in the car, and it's so hot, and I can't find a place." And my mother had pity on that lady. She thought they were two children. So she said, "Listen. My husband is not coming home for this big weekend. If you want, you can sleep in the room that we have extra." So this lady accepted, and they -- she took her. The girls turned out to be teenagers or so. And this was the wife of the consul of Uruguay, you know? And these people, of course, were very thankful, and they returned the favor of inviting us to a tea in the consulate. It was very chic and so forth, you know? More than, very genteel, you know?

And then when it came to pass that we couldn't get the visas for America before, from '38 to '41, my parents tried to get a visa from Uruguay, and they said they would help us. But they had, my father had to deposit money, because the government of Uruguay demanded a sum. So he took a, what they asked. I think it was ten thousand dollars, and he deposited in the bank in Uruguay. And I make it a party now. That money could have saved us if we would have had it in Portugal, but the United States opened the quota at a certain moment in the, in the beginning of '41. If you could show a certain amount of money, they gave you immediately the visa, without a quota. I don't know if you are aware of that.

SIGRIST: And your money was in Uruguay.

ROSENDOR: And nobody ever gave any sign of this. He had the book, the bankbook, but he couldn't get the confirmation. And it's, I think, ten years later, that he finally got signed from that bank in Uruguay and he got his money, without interest, back, but he got it back. Well, so, uh, we were waiting for the visa, and we started liquidating. My father had a garage, he sold his cars, and we were waiting and waiting, and nothing was happening. And then they promised it for the 15th of May we would get the visa. And what do you know? The 10th of May my mother was at the seashore with my brother and sister, which were younger and were born in Belgium. They were ten years, twelve years younger than me. And suddenly, at four in the morning, I was home. My father was there, and a girlfriend was with me, you know? And we hear a noise, and we go to the windows, and we see people on the roofs. They were bombing Antwerp, and it was the German invading. It was the 10th of May.

SIGRIST: Okay. We need to pause and Peter's going to flip the tape over.

ROSENDOR: Maybe it’s too much. No?

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay, we're resuming with Bitia Rosendor. Um, get us, get us to the port. Get us to Portugal.

ROSENDOR: Okay.

SIGRIST: Uh, from the bombing of Antwerp.

ROSENDOR: From the, so right away we left. My father took a car and brought me to the seashore where my mother was with the kids. And, uh, meanwhile he had been waiting, so he brought a few cars back, and people started calling him. At four thirty in the morning, they wanted to buy cars, to run away. So he had only two or three, and he was able to, to bring people from Antwerp to the seashore, and one, a family that we knew bought a car, but they couldn't drive, so I drove the car, since I was almost born in a car, you know? (she laughs) And we left for, uh, for France. But we were foreigners, remember. And they let only the Belgian pass the frontier. There were discrimination all over.

So my father luckily knew Belgium well because he had traveled as a, as a, he became a, uh, salesman in cars, ah, he had cars. So he knew Belgium. So he took us to another frontier, and there we were able to pass. But Alapan[ph], we couldn't. So we went to the frontier, and we went through Cambrai, then on the road, extraordinary as it may seem -- I had three cousins in Belgium, which came afterwards, which my parents helped to install. And one of the cousin, one of the cousin had taken, and my brother was sitting in the back. We were a caravan of two cars. My brother was sitting in the back of the car that he was driving, and then he said, "Oh, Fima [ph], Fima!" And my father and mother thought he was crazy. "What's this?" He said, "No, Fimaila." It was my cousin with my father's car on the road. So then we became a caravan of three. We went to the south of France.

We arrived in Bordeaux, and there we went to the Bay of Arcachon. We rented a place, but they didn't let us stay there and we had to go to Toulouse. All the people that came from Belgium had to go to Toulouse. And there we arrived. We were, I think, fourteen people with the other family, my cousin. And we rented a room for the night, because the par—the child of one of the lady of whom I was driving the car, her daughter had, had already arrived. And it was, there was no place. People were sleeping in the corridors and distribute half their legs out. (she laughs) You know? And when you walked there in Toulouse, "Ah, there's a friend here," and, "There's a friend there." You met all the people that you knew.

SIGRIST: Well, everyone's trying to get out, so . . .

ROSENDOR: Yes, yes. They did. The Belgium boys had to leave because they were – theyb were supposed to be reserves, they were supposed to be taken into the armies. They were told all to leave. They were afraid that the Germans would catch all the young men. And, of course, I knew more young men then – at the time. (she laughs) So I see here one and there one.

SIGRIST: Quickly, get us onto the boat from Toulouse.

ROSENDOR: On the boat. So we were in France for a while, and we started to try to get out, and that was very hard. But finally we managed to get a visa to go to Portugal, to go through Spain, and a transit visa for America to San Domingo for a month. My uncle who was the poet was in the literary circles, was able to get this visa, which was worth, which had the value for the Americans, not all the visas had the value. And there we are in Portugal, means have to search for a boat. We met again lots of people, which we knew, and we had to wait, we arrived at the beginning of December. We had to wait till the 15th of April to get a place on the boat.

SIGRIST: Of 1941.

ROSENDOR: Of '41, yes.

SIGRIST: So this traveling is taking up a chunk of time, isn't it?

ROSENDOR: Oh, yes, yes, yes. And I want to tell you, I could tell you plenty of this time, which was dangerous and how we got out was miracle, you know. We -- the Spanish didn't want to let stateless people, our visas, our passports, as Romanians, were worthless, you see? So we had to buy, uh, we had stateless passports, but we had to throw them away, because we couldn't go through Spain. Spain was afraid to let stateless people go through. They were afraid they would stay. But finally we managed that, and we came to the states, uh, we came to Portugal.

SIGRIST: What boat did you take?

ROSENDOR: The Nyassa.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ROSENDOR: N-Y-A-S-S-A.

SIGRIST: And tell me about that boat.

ROSENDOR: Ah, first of all, I found a few girlfriends on the boat. I met some young men. I met the captain, which was very nice. And every time he came to New York, he came to visit us. It was Captain Bettencourt. And his second came, they were very nice. And, uh, they gave us a table extra outside because the dining room smelled from all the people who had gotten sick.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the boat for me?

ROSENDOR: Sure. It was rather simple. It was, I think, a very old boat, and they had made, uh, bunks. Bunks? Bunks, on the bottom. And all the people were on the bottom. I think there were very few places for passengers of first and second class. Big mistake, we didn't go into first and second class. (she laughs) We might not have landed in Ellis Island. I found that out on the visit we made a couple of days ago.

SIGRIST: Were there lots and lots of people on this boat?

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: And they were mostly, mostly people trying to get out, refugees.

ROSENDOR: Some of them had visas. Some of them were on transit, you know? But they were all refugees. And in the hold, people got sick. I didn't sleep one night in the hold. I took my coat and blankets and I went and slept in the, you know, in these, uh, waiting rooms, on the deck, whatever I could. I took cold showers of sea water. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was it actually a passenger ship, or was it a freight, was it a freight ship that had been converted?

ROSENDOR: Yes, it was a passenger --. No, no. No, no, no. They just put more bunks, bunkers, how do you call these, that they got stacked?

SIGRIST: Bunk beds.

ROSENDOR: Bunk beds, yeah, that's it.

SIGRIST: So how long were you on the boat?

ROSENDOR: Ten days.

SIGRIST: And then did you go to Santo Domingo, or did you . . .

ROSENDOR: No, no, no, no, no. We had a transit for the states. But when we arrived, uh, the, uh, the officers of, uh, the health control, you see, came on board, and there was a rush and a crush. Everybody wanted to go out. And my kid sister and brother were all excited, you know, we are coming to the states. And they must have been red. And there was an epidemie , an epidemie?

SIGRIST: An epidemic.

ROSENDOR: An epidemic, pardon. An epidemic of measles in New York at the time. So they spotted these kids and said, "I think they . . ." They thought they had measles, and they made us come to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how your parents felt about this?

ROSENDOR: Very bad, because the first thing they did is separated the men and the women. And I even have a letter from my mother, from my father, that he wrote to my mother, that they should not worry, and everything would be all right, that my brother is okay, he doesn't have any fever, because I have all the letters that my mother has written to me, and that I wrote to her in, in the last, I don't dare to say. Since 19 . . . Oh, I even have letters from 1934.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about Ellis Island. You were here for thirty-nine days.

ROSENDOR: Ah. Thirty-nine days. Well, um, the family came to see, those sisters that could come, because one of the sister had, uh, that had problems with her mind, she had, I don't know if that interests you. She was in America, she had joined her fiance in America before the war, and she came to visit her father. And then, the war happened, she wanted to go back. And she went on a train, Trans Siberian, and there were lots of soldiers, (it was during the war) and she was done in by a, by, a terrible thing happened to her. The men, you know, they were open cars, she was attacked. And as a result of the night, she had a child. She never recovered from it, and finally ended in an institute. But the three other sisters were there.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep?

ROSENDOR: Uh, here? Uh, the big, uh, you know the big room there, the famous reception there? On top, you know. The, we had bunks, my sister, my mother and I.were there And my brother and my father were somewhere else. I think they took my brother maybe to the infirmary. I don't know. But not for long. It must have been a shock to him, you know. He was ten years old. You can imagine that. And, uh, we thought it was very nice.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you?

ROSENDOR: There was a dining room, and they ga- they gave us powdered eggs in, uh, in, scrambled, you know? And for the kids, they had an hour in which they gave milk. I even have a picture where the man with the big apron is pouring milk to the kids. And we were very well-treated. But the worst was -- we had only an hour to walk outside, you know? We didn't have fresh air. And then the tension was great, you know? And there were some problem people. They were, they gave the atmosphere a tension. There was a Chinaman who had been several times in the Ellis Island. He said he was a poet. I wrote his name, Chung, I think it was, and it was rather sad. And then there was, there was Italians from a boat, because they, there had been a declaration of war, I think. No, not yet. What was it? How come this Italian boat? All, the crew members were all taken in the, and put in these rooms, these places where you see on the left, when you look toward New York on the left, you know? And they always came, when we were on the courtyard they were at the window, and they waved, and they hollered, you know?

SIGRIST: How did you, as a young woman, twenty years old, I mean, how did, how did, how did this all impress you?

ROSENDOR: Well, I found a boyfriend here. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about that.

ROSENDOR: I mean, he didn't, I didn't know him, but he was a real Romanian, and he courted me. And then I had boyfriends, you know, in the life of a girl of twenty. Boys from Antwerp came to visit me and brought me perfume and flowers and things to draw, you know, paper and sketch books and ink and pens.

SIGRIST: And you, you were an artist. You did this kind of work.

ROSENDOR: Yeah. I was a student at that time. I was, I was going to the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Antwerp. I had even set up a still life all in yellows to paint the next day (she laughs) when the war happened.

SIGRIST: What did you find at Ellis Island to draw and paint? What . . .

ROSENDOR: Well, I tell you, I wanted to talk to you about this, these drawings that I made that at that time I put together in form of a book and I tried to show them. But once you were out of Ellis Island, I want to tell you, that world disappeared. Nobody knew, wanted to know or heard of or pooh-pooh'ed and completely obliterated what the people that were here suffered. Absolutely, it was like it didn't exist.

SIGRIST: No one was interested in what you had experienced here.

ROSENDOR: No. I went, I don't know to whom I went to, because I prepared very nicely, and I showed it. Yes. They looked, but nobody was interested to publish it or to speak about it in the papers, or.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what specifically did you find intriguing to draw and to paint here?

ROSENDOR: Well, I just drew the life here. I, for instance, I show you, you know, the windows have a kind of, see I'm banging the stool, like everybody else. We all talked with our hands. (she laughs) So the, uh, the windows . . .

SIGRIST: Like the latticework on the windows?

ROSENDOR: Yes, yes, yes. It looks a little bit like bars, if you want. And I drew that. Or did I drew the, I don't remember exactly. Maybe I drew that, in any case, yes. I drew that with a man looking longingly to the outside, you know? And then I drew the bars. Not the bars, the wires. You know, these, uh, these kind of things, you know?

SIGRIST: Like the chicken wire fence.

ROSENDOR: Yes. It's batik. I drew that with, uh, with a view and, you know, I drew the Statue of Liberty through the bars from the bedroom windows. So these things were, uh, you know, they shocked me that we were, uh, jailed. And then what, what my father says really disgusting was we were counted all the time. And once my brother was asleep and they didn't find him, so there was a number missing, where, what's that number? That was my brother missing.

SIGRIST: Now, you said your father and your brother, they were somewhere else.

ROSENDOR: Yes.

SIGRIST: When, did you get together during the day?

ROSENDOR: Yes, of course, of course. And they gave the ladies, they gave them material so they would be busy, and my mother sewed dresses for my sister, you know. I was always busy. And then there were religious Orthodox people, and the ladies used to pray on kind of a tray, a standing tray, like with (?) by the toilets, which have disappeared, incidentally, these toilets, by the end there. They changed that. And I found it so strange they were praying right against the toilets. (they laugh) And then what I found very strange was the toilets, because in Europe you don't have that. First, in Europe they didn't have men and women separate, and then they didn't have this space underneath where you saw the feet. (she laughs) I thought that was disgusting, you know. Why they had that was beyond me, you know?

SIGRIST: Did they supply any entertainment for you, or anything like that?

ROSENDOR: No, no, no. We just stayed – it was enough as it was. People were busy with their own, tsuris. You know what tsuris are? That's in Yiddish for misere, for misery. That was, you know, people were waiting for news, for news, for news, when they would get out.

SIGRIST: Was your . . .

ROSENDOR: I'll tell you how we got out.

SIGRIST: Was your family more anxious or more bored by being there?

ROSENDOR: Ah, they were never bored. My father, as I tell you, was trying to get us out. He would never lie down and wait. So we had a lot of family in Philadelphia. You want to know how we got out?

SIGRIST: Yes, sure.

ROSENDOR: That's very interesting. You know, my father is a man who couldn't believe that America was not a country who everything was straight. And we had a cousin, one of his, a son of one of his uncles, actually, who, uh, who was a lawyer, and he came to see us, because we had problems, we needed, you know, the HIAS took care, you know, the HIAS. But, uh, you know, I understood now why they wanted us to go back to, to go to Santo Domingo. They didn't want to give us that month. I understand why now. That visa was expired. And I didn't understand it, you see? That's it. We stayed thirty-nine days. The visa was for thirty days. We were thirty-nine days in the United States, so we had to leave. And that's what they told us. So these cousins said, "Listen. If you give me five hundred dollars, I'll get you out." And my father says it's ridiculous. He said, "Yes, I'll arrange it." So finally in, all this is part of the cost, you know, my father gave him five hundred dollars, and he was in a group of lawyers, and one of the lawyers knew somebody in Washington and, uh, and in a few days it was arranged, and we got out.

SIGRIST: Did, do you remember the authorities telling you that you are now free to go? Do you remember any of that?

ROSENDOR: Uh, I just remember that we were supposed to leave, that's all. We were getting out, that's all. I don't remember exactly how they told us.

SIGRIST: Where did you go when you were released from Ellis Island?

ROSENDOR: Ah, my father went right away at the seashore. He went to Seagate, and he rented, uh, in, by a lady, a couple of rooms for the family. But I was kept for a week by other cousins, this daughter and her husband of one of my father's sisters, and they wanted to show me New York. So I stayed a week in New York, they introduced me to, to, uh, ice cream soda. (she laughs) I won't forget that. They didn't live far from Fifth Avenue. They didn't show me too much. I think Rockefeller Center. A week is pretty fast, you know?

SIGRIST: Other than the ice cream soda, was there anything in New York that was new to you?

ROSENDOR: Well, you know, I came from cities.

SIGRIST: Right.

ROSENDOR: You know, when we went to Philadelphia to a wedding where all the family, my great-grandparents, as I told you, went to America, only my grandfather stayed, because he got married and had children. So the uncle, my father, I went with my mother, went to the bathroom, pulled the chain, and said, "You see what we have in America?" Because when he left, it was an outhouse. But we had an apartment that was much more modern than his, his house, you see? So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: That's a good story.

ROSENDOR: You know. But I see the outhouse, you know? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how your mother and father adjusted to this country.

ROSENDOR: Well, before we left, we stayed in Portugal from the end of November so the month of December till the middle of April. And my mother told me that she was very worried of this change of language. She had already changed from Yiddish when she was a child to Russian. She also studied a lot of Hebrew when her father was a Zionist, and she became a teacher in Hebrew. And she, uh, she was worried about the English. And in Portugal she studied. And you know with what book? Three Men In A Boat, from Jerome K. Jerome. And I guess that's how, she did all right. Later she really spoke English, you know? Whereas, for instance, the mother of my husband, who came in 1905, I believe, she hardly spoke English. She lived like she was still in the shtetel [village], never took the subway alone. And she's not the only one. There were many in that case.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your dad and how he adjusted. Did he learn English?

ROSENDOR: Well, the first thing that happened is that he, uh, oh, he knew already some, you know. He was a linguist. He spoke almost eight languages or more, you know? I don't say he knew them completely, but he . . .

SIGRIST: But it wasn't foreign to him, yeah.

ROSENDOR: Yes, yes, yes. He went to the university, after all. He studied some English, some German, and he knew, also, you know, Hebrew, French, Russian, Romanian, some bits of Arabic, too. So he really knew how, he had a talent for that. But, uh, you know, when we came down, we came in transit, and we stayed, and we had three months. They gave us three months. Then we had to go to the HIAS every time, and they got us renewal. And then came Pearl Harbor, and we couldn't live in the States any more. But we remained as visitors, and my father had no right to work. Neither did I. So for more than two years, he had a family of five to feed, and whatever he had melted and melted and melted, you know? It was pretty, very serious.

SIGRIST: So, let's see. You get left off, you get let out of Ellis in April of '41, right?

ROSENDOR: The 25th, I think.

SIGRIST: Right. Pearl Harbor is . . .

ROSENDOR: No. We arrived the 25th, and then we stayed thirty-nine days, so it was in May.

SIGRIST: It was in May. So, so you go through the summer and fall, and then Pearl Harbor's in December of '41.

ROSENDOR: Yes. And then we had the right to stay. We couldn't get out, even. Nobody could get out. But we still came as visitors.

SIGRIST: So how did he, how did he support the family?

ROSENDOR: Finally he got the right to work. After a certain time he got the right to work. Then . . .

SIGRIST: But couldn't he take odd jobs, even though he wasn't supposed to be . . .

ROSENDOR: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Like what? What kinds of things would he have . . .

ROSENDOR: Ah, well, you see, what happened is that he was in, uh, he was in Antwerp, and he wasn't in the diamond dealers business like many people from Antwerp. He was a car dealer.

SIGRIST: A car dealer.

ROSENDOR: So these, his clients were many diamond dealers. So they gave him odd jobs. They'd go bring that, see if they like it, and they gave him a little commission, something like that. And so we survived, you see?

SIGRIST: What about your mom? Did she do the same kind of thing, or . . .

ROSENDOR: No. She had to take care, we had two small children, you know? My sister, they went to school. And my sister got a very big shock with Pearl Harbor, because they started doing these, these famous tests. They had to, the kids had to go under the benches for the atom bomb – no, for bombings. There wasn't the atom bomb then. Just for bombings, in case. And she couldn't, she stopped eating. She had a real psychological shock. For many months, she always stayed thin, and she's completely different from me as a result. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, now, because you're a young woman at this time, did you contribute to the household? Did you . . .

ROSENDOR: I took, once, a job as an illustrator, to help an illustrator. And, uh, I don't know how, I went to school. I went to school.

SIGRIST: Did you learn English in school, or did you know some before?

ROSENDOR: I had learned English in the, in high school, and I went to the Art Students League. I used to go every day, you know, to the Art Students League. And I, with George Grosz, which is a famous German artist, and he was antifascist, and he was invited to, to the United States to save, to be saved. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Was there something about America you didn't like?

ROSENDOR: Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Something that you just didn't like.

ROSENDOR: The familiarity was sometimes a little tough on me, since I had an accent I used to ask, "How do I go here and there?" People used to stop me and says, "Oh, you're a refugee." "Yes." "And where do you live? And what do you do? And how much rent do you pay? And what does your father do? And how much does he get?" Because in Europe it doesn't go like that. Nobody knows what the neighbor's making, you know. And here they're very open. It was a little shocking. And then everybody, "How do you like America?" As if I came here, you know, they didn't understand what it was to be a refugee. I got kind of bored of this, "How do you like America?" (she laughs)

SIGRIST: It's kind of patronizing.

ROSENDOR: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But everybody, what I did like is people were not stuffy, that I liked very much that, on the contrary of what Europe used to be, there they used to dress on the weekends, here they undressed on the weekend, and it was easygoing, you know? I like that. What I didn't like so much was the noise, especially those radios, when they make the games, the famous big league games. All you had, "Whoo, whoo," they scream everywhere. It was all . . . (she laughs) Since I was never very much for sports, I guess for others it might be interesting.

SIGRIST: Now, how long did your family stay in America before they . . .

ROSENDOR: We stayed all ten years altogether, and then we left. Just as they gave us the right to become immigrants, then we left.

SIGRIST: And did you go back to Belgium?

ROSENDOR: Yeah, we went back to Belgium. First to France. I stayed in France. I took my husband, there he is, and we went together. We decided to go to Paris to study.

SIGRIST: So in our last remaining minutes, tell me when you met your husband, and when you . . .

ROSENDOR: Ah, we met, we went together in the Jewish camp. First we met by a kind of association of Jewish teacher who taught artists, who taught in Jewish Sunday school. And there was a lady that knew that we were, that called us all together to kind of organize us together. And, uh, I took a job in a big camp. I was given a job by an agency, and I found him there. He was also hired to . . .

SIGRIST: And what is his name?

ROSENDOR: Martin Raesberg.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it, please?

ROSENDOR: M-A-R-T-I-N, we call him Marty, everybody calls him Marty, Raesberg is R-A-E-S-B-E-R-G. And it was since 1950 that we are together, to give you a vague idea. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So now you, you still are an artist.

ROSENDOR: We both are. We both are, yes.

SIGRIST: You both? And you travel back and forth. You come to the same salons, or . . .

ROSENDOR: No, no, no, no. We came five years ago, and it was the, he came to see his parents in '57. Since then they, they were, you know, they didn't live any more. And we came again in '88. And that, we left in '51, so you can imagine how long it was. And then we were in heaven. We just, you know, we were on a cloud. It was so wonderful. We enjoyed

it, as tourists. But you know why we wanted to go? Because we were painting here. Both of us were students and artists, and all people used to tell us, and me especially, "Why don't you study typing? Why don't you get a job as a saleslady? You could make so much money." You know? But I wasn't interested. I wanted to paint. I wanted to be an artist. And nobody, but now it's different in the States.

But in those days, I went many, to many homes I even went with a reporter that described beautiful homes. I saw a lady, she had picked a beautiful piece of material, she framed it, but she had nothing else framed in the house. Painting was not the thing. And in Europe, every concierge her wall was full of paintings, and normally her husband, or her daughter or a son paints the place, you know? One out of three Belgiums like and do art, you see, either as an amateur, or as a professional. And in the states it wasn't appreciated. They just kept on telling me to do something else. So I wanted to continue my studies, and that's how we left, and that's how we stayed in Paris.

SIGRIST: And now you just come back to visit, you know? It's nice to have you back in Ellis Island under better circumstances.

ROSENDOR: We are not coming only as visitors. We have an interest in, we have a kind of mission, you see? We made an exhibition, uh, which was already presented four times, and we hope that we can show it in America, too, and we have contacts with the Holocaust Museum. We made an album which we will show you, and this is one of the reasons we came besides the family that remains.

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good place for us to end. I want to thank you very much for giving your time to the Oral History Project.

ROSENDOR: I thank you.

SIGRIST: It was a real treasure to find you. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Bitia Rosendor on Sunday, May 16, 1993.

ROSENDOR: Thank you.