

EI-318/BERNSTEIN

EI-318

TESSIE TEITZ BERNSTEIN

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 22, 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/18/1993

RUNNING TIME: 46:11

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1994

LITHUANIA, 1921

BORN: SVEKANA, LITHUANIA

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 19

PORT OF EMBARKATION: HAMBURG

RESIDENCES: SVEKANA, LITHUANIA

US: NYC, EAST SIDE

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, May 18, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Tessie Bernstein. Mrs. Bernstein came from Lithuania in 1921 when she was nineteen years old. Welcome to Ellis Island, Mrs. Bernstein.

BERNSTEIN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

BERNSTEIN: My birth date is February 22nd.

SIGRIST: And what year?

BERNSTEIN: 1902.

SIGRIST: 1902. And what was your maiden name?

BERNSTEIN: Tessie Teitz.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

BERNSTEIN: Tessie, you want me to spell Tessie?

SIGRIST: Teitz. Could you spell Teitz?

BERNSTEIN: Teitz. T-E-I-T-Z.

SIGRIST: I see. Where were you born, Mrs. Bernstein?

BERNSTEIN: In Lithuania.

SIGRIST: Where in Lithuania?

BERNSTEIN: It's a little town, Sveksna.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for us, please?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Sveksna is S-V-E-K-S-N-A.

SIGRIST: Do you know whereabouts in Lithuania that is?

BERNSTEIN: It's on the German border, just about a half an hour from the German border.

SIGRIST: Can you describe to me what your town looked like?

BERNSTEIN: It was a very small town, and the people were, everybody knew one another, sort of like one family.

And we just grew up there. We didn't know any better. We had a school there. The school was a Russian school at that time. I don't know why, but that was a Russian school. And everybody, you know, my family had a little business there. My father was always traveling, you know, bringing merchandise.

SIGRIST: What kind of a business did he have?

BERNSTEIN: Piece goods, you know, by the yard, he would sell.

SIGRIST: Fabric.

BERNSTEIN: Fabrics, yeah. And my family consisted, I was the only girl. I had two brothers, and my two brothers had left for America.

SIGRIST: Before you were born?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. I was a youngster they left. They were two young, you know, rabbinical. But they had no future there, and they didn't want to go in the Russian Army, so they skipped the border and they went to America. They were only very young boys, eighteen, nineteen years old.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

BERNSTEIN: One was Bennie, Ben Teitz, and the other one was Max Teitz, Max.

SIGRIST: Max.

BERNSTEIN: Max, yeah. I think his name is on there, too.

SIGRIST: And what was your dad's name?

BERNSTEIN: In Jewish was Herschel.

SIGRIST: And what was he in English?

BERNSTEIN: Well . . .

SIGRIST: What would Herschel be in English?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Herschel. Can you tell me what your father looked like?

BERNSTEIN: I lost my father as a very young girl. So I really hardly remember my father.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your father?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, he used to come home weekends. He was always

traveling, always going. I don't remember too much about my father. I remember what he looked like, what he looked like, you know, a little beard, like a businessman.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

BERNSTEIN: Who knew what sickness they had. There were very few doctors. Nobody knew anything what was happening. I don't know what he died of.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

BERNSTEIN: I must have been about ten, nine, ten years old.

SIGRIST: Do you remember him being sick at all, any of that?

BERNSTEIN: No. I just remember him when he was very sick, just a few days before that I saw him. He was very much in pain, and it was very tragic. So I was left just with my mother. My brothers had gone to America.

SIGRIST: What did your mother do to support you?

BERNSTEIN: Well, she continued having that business, that little store.

SIGRIST: She used to help your father with that.

BERNSTEIN: Yes. She was the main business lady there, because she was hardly ever home, you know. So she remained there.

SIGRIST: Was that unusual at that time, for a woman to be running a business?

BERNSTEIN: No, not in our town, not in our town.

SIGRIST: There were other women doing that.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

BERNSTEIN: Anna, Anna.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

BERNSTEIN: I forgot.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe it will come back to you.

BERNSTEIN: I really, I can't think of . . .

SIGRIST: Well, maybe as we're talking about your mom it will come back to you. Can you describe for me what your mom's personality was like?

BERNSTEIN: She was a good-natured person, a very good woman, a

simple woman, you know, like we all were there. And she tried to help. I had a grandma living with us.

SIGRIST: Was that your mother's mother?

BERNSTEIN: My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Oh, what do you remember about your grandmother?

BERNSTEIN: And she raised me, you know. She was part, she lived with us.

SIGRIST: And because your mother had to be at the store a lot.

BERNSTEIN: That's right, yeah. She raised me. She was there.

SIGRIST: And you, when you think about your grandmother, what do you think about? Is there any story that you remember about your grandmother?

BERNSTEIN: The only thing that, I was the only girl, and I remember they pampered me very much. I was spoiled.
(she laughs) Now I can see, I can see the way children are brought up here. And I had all the privilege. There was nothing, nothing too much for me. Whatever my mother and grandmother could do, they did for me.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you lived in for me?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. We had a nice little home. In those days it was nice. It was a wooden house, all on one floor. It must have had two, three, about four rooms, yes. It was a nice little house.

SIGRIST: How would you heat the house?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, we had a stove with wood, a wood stove, that would heat the house.

SIGRIST: Where would you get the wood?

BERNSTEIN: I guess brought in from the farms. We had to dry the wood first in order to make it, you know, it should burn. And that's the way there was, the house. And then in the wintertime I remember we had double windows. This you put it before when it gets cold, and it remains all winter long. That keeps the cold out, you know, and the warmth in. Yeah.

SIGRIST: How would you light your house?

BERNSTEIN: With kerosene lamps, kerosene lamps.

SIGRIST: And would your mother do her cooking or, your

grandmother probably did the cooking.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, the grandmother did the cooking.

SIGRIST: Did she do that on the stove that you used to heat the house, or did you have a separate . . .

BERNSTEIN: No, we had a little burner, like, with little pieces of wood. Or coal? I don't even remember. On top of a stove there, some kind of stove, and a burner. And that's the way they used to warm water, and that's the way they cooked.

SIGRIST: What kinds of foods did your grandmother cook for you in Lithuania? What do you remember?

BERNSTEIN: Very simple food, very simple. Nothing like we have here, in cooking.

SIGRIST: What was a typical dinner?

BERNSTEIN: It was meat, a lot of potatoes. You know, we could fill up. The potatoes was the main meal. And we had herring, if you know what herring is. You know what herring is, herring and potatoes? And soups, a lot of soups. No vegetables. We didn't know of any vegetables.

SIGRIST: Did you have a garden plot of any sort?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. I didn't have, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that. Did you keep animals?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, we had, my mother had a cow in the back.

SIGRIST: Did the cow have a name?

BERNSTEIN: No, no.

SIGRIST: It was just there for milk.

BERNSTEIN: For milk, yes. We used to drink the cow's milk while it was still warm, and I hated it.

(she laughs)

SIGRIST: So your mother's working all day. Can you describe for me the inside of the store?

BERNSTEIN: The store was a little store not too much farther than this here room, and maybe a little longer. It had shelves. The piece goods were displayed there. And we had there, like every Thursday of the week we had a market, and all the farmers used to come to the market on Thursday. And they'd bring their stuff, like fruit and vegetables and potatoes and

all that to sell. And then they used to come into the store and buy the goods.

SIGRIST: Well, that's interesting.

BERNSTEIN: Once a week.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help out in the store?

BERNSTEIN: Not too much, no.

SIGRIST: Did they pay with money, or did your mother ever trade things with them?

BERNSTEIN: Not trade, no. It was money, all on credit, you know. We knew them so well. They used to come from the farms, and they used to stop in our house, you know, leave their things and go out and, some of them, you know, our customers, leave their things in the house and go shopping or if they had to sell anything like eggs or chickens or potatoes. It was like a square, and everybody used to bring their stuff out there. That was the shopping day.

SIGRIST: Was that something that you would look forward to?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. It was the main, where we could get our potatoes or eggs or chickens, live chickens.

SIGRIST: Did you keep live chickens at home?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. We didn't keep any.

SIGRIST: So your grandmother would go and buy a chicken?

BERNSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And then how would she slaughter the chicken?

BERNSTEIN: Well, you know, in our religion we had to go to a man that kills it.

SIGRIST: A shochet?

BERNSTEIN: A shochet, yes. That's right. A shochet. And he used to kill them. And I used to come home and pluck the chicken. It wasn't easy. Then it's very strange that they didn't think it was hard. Because if you didn't know any better, they weren't unhappy, the people. They knew there was no future for them, especially for the younger ones. But they were all friendly. Everybody knew one another and everybody, you know, there were class there, too. Class, like the poorer ones, the rich ones stayed with the better class. Even there, nachus.

SIGRIST: Where did you fall into that?

BERNSTEIN: I think we were more in the better class.

SIGRIST: Well, your mother being a merchant.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes, and my father, you know. So we fell in, and we had our own home. So we fell in the better class.

SIGRIST: You were talking a little bit about market day. What other kinds of entertainment would you have growing up in this town?

BERNSTEIN: Absolutely nothing. No entertainment. For the young people it was not interesting. It was very dull, very dull.

SIGRIST: You said there was a school in town.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, there was a school.

SIGRIST: Can you, was it just a single building?

BERNSTEIN: It was a brick building.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the school, or maybe going to school when you were a child?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. Well, I went in the lower grades there. But I had a tutor that used to come and teach me other, like German. German was a very important language there, because we were so connected with Germany. Everybody traveled to Germany, to Mamel, if you ever heard of Mamel, Konigsberg, it's right on the border there. And most of them traveled there with a horse and buggy, and the border stopped and you showed your identification, and that's the way you got in there. That was very close, and that's the only, the only recreational thing that we had there was going to Germany.

SIGRIST: And that was sort of a bigger town?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. It was a bigger town.

SIGRIST: What would you do when you got there?

BERNSTEIN: Well, for us it was to get away and see and there they had big stores and, you know, it was an enjoyment to be there.

SIGRIST: So even at that time you were aware of how boring and how limited it was to be there.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about your religious life in the town. You were Jewish.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. There was two, there was two synagogues, like one bigger one for the holidays and one smaller one. I still have the pictures home from them.

SIGRIST: Was the town mostly Jewish, or was it half and half, or?

BERNSTEIN: Well, those, I told you, the little town was mostly Jewish. I don't remember that there were any other, because the other religions, like the Lithuanians, lived on the outside. They were mostly farmers, and they used to come in. I really don't know, in those days, whether we had, maybe they did. I don't know.

SIGRIST: And it must have been a good relationship then . . .

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Between the Lithuanians and the Jewish population . . .

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Because the farmers are buying from the merchants
and . . .

BERNSTEIN: That's right. Yes, that was all right, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any instances of anti-Semitic
activity growing up?

BERNSTEIN: No, I don't. We started feeling bad after the
Germans came in in 1914.

SIGRIST: When World War I started.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What are your recollections of World War I?

BERNSTEIN: That was a very different, bitter time in our lives,
because we were afraid of the Germans. And when
they raided, everybody ran away from town, left
everything, and we ran away outside on farms, and
they accepted us. The Lithuanians kept us. We had
some very good friends.

SIGRIST: Again this is another example of a good relationship
between the Catholic Lithuanians . . .

BERNSTEIN: Yes. We didn't experience any, before the Germans came in.

SIGRIST: Did the Germans bomb the town or do any kind of destruction?

BERNSTEIN: No, they didn't. No, they didn't bomb, but everybody was afraid of them, so most everybody ran away from town. But the only thing is when we got back later, weeks later, all the stores were opened and vandalized, as you would say here, with all the material, everything was out and taken from us.

SIGRIST: And this happened to your mom.

BERNSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: What other things about World War I stick out in your mind when you think back to that time? What else was difficult about that period for you?

BERNSTEIN: Well, you know, I didn't, we didn't feel anything bad there. Because I was a young girl and I didn't take any interest in anything, you know, a youngster, playing with my friends. Nothing bad.

SIGRIST: So basically it was just running, getting out of

town that sticks out in your mind.

BERNSTEIN: That's right. And then when they were there it was very, the Germans stayed quite a while there. Then it was not so good. Everything was restricted and everything, you know.

SIGRIST: This is after you moved back.

BERNSTEIN: That's after we came back, yeah. We didn't stay away too long.

SIGRIST: So you moved back and the Germans still occupied your town.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes, yes. They stayed there . . .

SIGRIST: What was that like with strangers in your town?

BERNSTEIN: It wasn't good. It wasn't good.

SIGRIST: Did you have Germans living in your house?

BERNSTEIN: We had soldiers living in our house. They occupied and took all the buildings, all the houses. And they stayed there.

SIGRIST: How did the soldiers treat you?

BERNSTEIN: Not bad, not bad, no.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever, when she was in Lithuania, want to remarry after your father died?

BERNSTEIN: No, she did not. Whether she wanted or not, but she didn't. No, she did not remarry. We stayed there until my brother sort of, you know, got a little, they started working, the two brothers.

SIGRIST: What jobs did they get in America when they went?

BERNSTEIN: They had an idea. So I had two brothers. One went for a cutter. You know what a cutter is, when they cut in material?

SIGRIST: Oh, a cutter, yes.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, a cutter. And the other one was an operator, just to put together the things. They have learned that, the two of them decided they wanted to do some kind of little business. In those years everybody tried, everybody that had an idea tried to advance here. So they thought if the two of them will know how to go, how to start the business, they could go together, and that's what they did. After they learned the trade they started on a small scale.

They went in business. They manufactured knee pants. You know what knee pants?

SIGRIST: Were they in New York?

BERNSTEIN: In New York, yes.

SIGRIST: And are they sending money to your mother?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, they send us money. They send us packages. But then they insisted, you know, we should come here.

SIGRIST: What did you know of America when you were growing up in Lithuania?

BERNSTEIN: Nothing. We didn't know anything, because anybody that left from Lithuania in those years, nobody ever came back to tell us. But we thought it was wonderful. We knew it must be wonderful. Everybody's going.

SIGRIST: And your brothers obviously were happy here.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did they establish families here? Had they married at this point, or . . .

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. When we came one was married, yes, and one was single. And the single one took an apartment on 117th Street between Fifth and Madison, if you're ever familiar with New York. And we lived together.

SIGRIST: When, so it really was the brothers who decided that you should come to America.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, because we were there alone.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about going to America? Did she want to go?

BERNSTEIN: Well, she wanted to see her kids, her boys. Otherwise, in those years when you sent children to America, nobody ever saw them again. It was for life. Only through mail, and if the children would go there wrote, and some children forgot about their parents and never wrote. It was heartbreaking.

SIGRIST: They just wanted to forget everything.

BERNSTEIN: Well, they were maybe, they didn't do well here, and they couldn't send money, you know. Most of them sent money when they came here. As little as they had they sent some home for the parents.

SIGRIST: How do you think your mother, she wanted to come to America, but did she feel badly about leaving her town?

BERNSTEIN: Well, she felt badly when she came here. She was a very religious woman. And the boys did not observe when she came here and they, and she saw they sort of changed. She wasn't happy about it, but she couldn't help it, and she made the best.

SIGRIST: You said that she was a very religious woman. When you were a girl in Lithuania, how did you practice your religion at home? What would you, what kind of observances would you do at home?

BERNSTEIN: Well, if there was, it's just to use different dishes, you know, we are supposed to have two kinds of dishes. We're supposed to use kosher meat. We're not supposed to do anything on Saturday, you know, besides go to temple.

SIGRIST: And she was very strict about these things.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was her store closed on Saturdays?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. All the stores were closed Saturdays.

SIGRIST: I see. What about your grandmother? How did she feel about, did she go with you?

BERNSTEIN: No. She was, she had passed away.

SIGRIST: Oh. How old were you when she died?

BERNSTEIN: I really don't remember. I know I was a little girl. I don't remember. I can't tell exactly.

SIGRIST: I see. So your brothers are sending money. Did they send the steamship ticket, too?

BERNSTEIN: Well, we had a little house, and we sold the house and we bought the ship tickets.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the selling of the house and, uh . . .

BERNSTEIN: I don't remember the selling of the house, but I remember being involved in getting the passports.

SIGRIST: Oh, tell me what you remember about that.

BERNSTEIN: It wasn't so easy to get it. You had to travel in different towns. (she points to her passport) Like you can see here, in different countries, in

Riga, in Latland. And to get it it's very, very. And then we had to, we had to have a guarantee that they will pick us up and they will take care on us.

It took months and months to get that passport that I just showed you. You can see how many places, in Germany, in Mamel. And to get that, this, I was involved in traveling, in getting all the passports with the stamps with necessary papers.

SIGRIST: Was it interesting going to these different places to do this?

BERNSTEIN: No, it wasn't interesting, no.

SIGRIST: You just wanted to get this done.

BERNSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And get on your way.

BERNSTEIN: It was compulsory that I have to do it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you, what you packed?

BERNSTEIN: A lot of things that I never used here.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember what, specifically?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. We came with pillows and rolling pins and pots and pans and (she laughs) it's a joke. When we came here we never even used those.

SIGRIST: How did you pack them?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I don't know how you would pack them. Probably we didn't have any good, what do you call that, suitcases. We bound them and different things. I don't remember, but I know we brought the feathers, a lot of feathers, (Yiddish).

SIGRIST: Wanted to be all set once you got to America.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. We could get it here.

SIGRIST: Now, did you, was all that sent ahead before you left, or did you take that with you when you left?

BERNSTEIN: No, I think we took it with us.

SIGRIST: And where did you, you left your town, and where did you go to?

BERNSTEIN: From where the boat took off?

SIGRIST: Yes.

BERNSTEIN: Hamburg.

SIGRIST: So how did you get from the town in Lithuania to Hamburg?

BERNSTEIN: Well, we got as far as the German border. That's with a horse and buggy, and that took us there. And from there we took the train to Hamburg.

SIGRIST: You had been on a train before?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, sure.

SIGRIST: Was it sad saying goodbye to your town?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. It was such an empty feeling to leave, you know. Everybody knew one another. It was, I remember, very sad.

SIGRIST: Did friends give a little goodbye party or a little dinner or something before you left?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. I got a picture from everybody. I still have the pictures. But we didn't know parties there.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this when you left?

BERNSTEIN: In July. I came here July, I think July 21st.
July 21st I think we came here. It was very hot.
It's in the passport.

SIGRIST: Now, is it just you and your mother traveling, or is
anybody else from your town with you?

BERNSTEIN: No, just my mother and myself.

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay for a period of time in Hamburg
before the boat took off?

BERNSTEIN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of processing in
Hamburg before you got on the boat, medical exams,
or something like that?

BERNSTEIN: No, not in Hamburg.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time you'd ever seen a big boat?

BERNSTEIN: It wasn't a very big boat. It was like, say, one
class. It wasn't a luxurious boat. Like a one
class boat. I remember I got very sick on the boat.
(she laughs) Yeah. It was rocking, and.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat?

BERNSTEIN: That's one thing I don't remember.

SIGRIST: You don't remember that. How long was the boat trip across the Atlantic?

BERNSTEIN: It took quite some time. I don't remember exactly. We came here on the 21st. Maybe on the passport. Would you want to take a look?

SIGRIST: We can do it after. You said you got very sick on the boat.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah. Everybody got that nauseous feeling.

SIGRIST: Where were you? Where did you sleep on the boat?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, they had like any other boat, you know. There was, what do you call them? The cabins. In a cabin.

SIGRIST: Did you and your mother have a cabin by yourself?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did she get sick, too?

BERNSTEIN: No. She was not so sick. She did better than I did.

SIGRIST: Did you go up on deck at all?

BERNSTEIN: It was one place. You had to go up on deck.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a dining room on the boat?

BERNSTEIN: No, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you bring any food to eat with you?

BERNSTEIN: No, no, no. No, no. They supplied the food there.
You couldn't take any food with you, no.

SIGRIST: So the boat ride wasn't very pleasant for you.

BERNSTEIN: No, not at all.

SIGRIST: Do you remember coming into New York Harbor?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. I remember coming here, to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty before
you came here?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. I did not.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what you remember about Ellis Island
when you got here?

BERNSTEIN: Well, when I got here, so many people and they took

us in right there, and I don't know what I was going to tell you. Coming to a strange, strange country.

Everybody's strange to you. Even your own folks are strange when you come. And I remember standing downstairs there and looking up on the balcony. There was a lot of people standing there, coming to see, I guess, who's coming or what. Then, as I told you before, and I see a lot of them were standing there and chewing. And I was thinking to myself, "What is that? Is that a sickness here? They all keep chewing." Until I was talking to my family later and they explained to me that this was probably chewing gum. Nobody's sick. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island very crowded at that time?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, it was very crowded.

BERNSTEIN: Can you tell me, what do you think mother is thinking through this whole process?

BERNSTEIN: We were sort confused, you know. Not knowing where we're coming to or what, sort of confused at the beginning when you first come here with all your luggage and your little bags and this and that.

SIGRIST: Did they examine you at Ellis Island?

BERNSTEIN: The only thing they examined in those years were the eyes. And if you had trachoma, then they would send you back. That's the only thing they looked for is the eyes.

SIGRIST: And do you remember that?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, I remember that.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

BERNSTEIN: They called us in a room and they checked our eyes. Everybody had to go in and be checked.

SIGRIST: I see. How long were you at Ellis Island, do you think?

BERNSTEIN: Not too long. Came in in the afternoon, and my brother, I had an aunt here, they came to pick us up. And they waited.

SIGRIST: What was the reunion like between your mother and your brothers?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, very warm, very happy.

SIGRIST: Did you recognize your brothers?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I haven't seen. I was a little one when they laughed. But I knew, you know, from pictures that they used to send. I knew him.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause right now so that Peter can flip the tape over and we'll get Mrs. Bernstein into America. (they laugh)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now resuming the interview with Tessie Bernstein. Mrs. Bernstein, your brothers came and got you. Both of them came?

BERNSTEIN: No, just one came, and one aunt came.

SIGRIST: So the married brother?

BERNSTEIN: No, the single brother.

SIGRIST: The single brother. Now, you said an aunt. Whose, is that your mother's sister, or . . .

BERNSTEIN: That's my father's sister.

SIGRIST: Oh, so he had family over here, too.

BERNSTEIN: He had family, he had a brother here.

SIGRIST: What was his sister doing in America?

BERNSTEIN: She was married. Yeah. She had a family here. Somebody brought her over before, and she had a brother. That was my father's brother.

SIGRIST: This was some time before.

BERNSTEIN: Yes. They was here before they were already established here.

SIGRIST: This is kind of an odd question, but do you remember the clothing that you wore when you got off the boat?

BERNSTEIN: No, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering if you were wearing nice clothing or more sort of European . . .

BERNSTEIN: I don't remember. No, no. Most European, yes.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, so where do they take you when you leave Ellis Island?

BERNSTEIN: Well, they took me first to the apartment in Harlem.

SIGRIST: And what was the address of that?

BERNSTEIN: That was between, it was on Fifth, between Fifth and it was, what did I say before, 117th Street between Fifth and Madison.

SIGRIST: And this is the unmarried brother's . . .

BERNSTEIN: That's the unmarried brother, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the apartment for me?

BERNSTEIN: The apartment was a railroad apartment. You know what a railroad is? You know, you come in and everything is on one side of the house. You come into the kitchen, and then there's the bedroom and another bedroom. We didn't have a dining room. The dining room is where you first come in. And to the left, to the right there's a little bit of a kitchen, yes. And we stayed with him there.

SIGRIST: Was he the only one living there?

BERNSTEIN: That's right. He took the apartment before we came, so he can stay with us.

SIGRIST: What did you think about the apartment? Was this nicer than what you had in Lithuania? Was it worse

than what you had in Lithuania?

BERNSTEIN: I hate to say it, but that apartment was worse than what we had in our house in Lithuania.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like up there at that time?

BERNSTEIN: At that time it wasn't bad. There was a lot of our kind of people there.

SIGRIST: Meaning immigrants, or . . .

BERNSTEIN: Immigrants too, yes. Families . . .

SIGRIST: Was it a Jewish neighborhood up there, too?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, it was a Jewish neighborhood. 117th up till 125th. You know, that was a very populated nice neighborhood, Harlem.

SIGRIST: Did you have, how long did you stay with your brother?

BERNSTEIN: A couple of years.

SIGRIST: Oh. So you were there for a while.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, oh, yes. It was a couple of years.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you some of the same questions I asked about your house in Lithuania. How was the apartment lit?

BERNSTEIN: With gas. In New York was gas, too, at that time. And there was a meter, and you had to put in a quarter.

SIGRIST: And how was the apartment heated? Do you remember that?

BERNSTEIN: It wasn't too warm. (she laughs) I think they must have had steam heat. I don't remember. I think there were radiators. There must have been steam heat.

SIGRIST: Was there a bathroom in the apartment?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. Oh, no. Most of the apartment was heated by coal. It was a coal stove, yeah. It must have been the bathroom, yeah. I guess it was. I don't even remember that. I didn't like that apartment.
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: What was the, did you go right to work when you got to America?

BERNSTEIN: Well, my brothers were in business already, you know. They had a factory. So I started there. Not right away. It took me a couple of weeks or so, and I went there and worked with them.

SIGRIST: What job did they give you to do?

BERNSTEIN: Just on the floor. I couldn't do anything. You know, I didn't know how to sew, I didn't know how to do anything. Yeah. I was just like a floor lady on the store, on the thing there.

SIGRIST: Did they hire mostly immigrants to work for them?

BERNSTEIN: In those years there were so many immigrants that, only the immigrants worked in the factories. Seems to me they were all immigrants.

SIGRIST: Were they from different countries, do you remember?

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Not just all Lithuanians.

BERNSTEIN: No, no, no. From everywhere.

SIGRIST: What was this like for you to come from your small town in Lithuania to an environment with lots of

different kinds of people?

BERNSTEIN: It took a little time to get used to it. It took a little time to adjust myself. Many times I was lonesome. It felt lonesome. Surprising, I coming from a small town. But I had a lot of friends there. But I started night school right away.

SIGRIST: Is this how you learned English?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Tell me about what that was like, learning English?

BERNSTEIN: Well, when I came here in July and, of course, the school was closed during the summer. And in the fall I started night school. There was a night school on 124th Street and Madison Avenue. We were not too far. We were between Madison and Fifth. And that's where I started to go to school, to night school every night. And there were all, all Europeans, all foreigners.

SIGRIST: Mostly adults?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And how did they go about teaching you English?
What was the process? How did they, how did they
teach you English?

BERNSTEIN: I hardly remember. I know we had a teacher. It was
quite a number of years. We had a teacher there.
And a blackboard, talking to us. I don't really
know. I can't tell exactly.

SIGRIST: Was there a point when you were learning English
that suddenly it all made sense to you? Do you
remember that suddenly it clicked?

BERNSTEIN: I tried to help myself. I always have a book. What
do you call that? It's English, and like you can
have English and Jewish in (?), any other language.

SIGRIST: Like a two language dictionary.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, a dictionary. I couldn't think of that word,
a dictionary, yes. And I used to, even on my, when
I went to work I used to take the dictionary with
me. And during my lunch hour I used to sit and
learn the words. I was determined to learn English.

SIGRIST: Do you remember an instance where you made a funny

mistake or . . .

BERNSTEIN: Well, I'm sure I made plenty of mistakes.

(she laughs) Yeah. But they used to tell me that's the only way to learn, to talk, and you make mistakes, but you learn.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she learn English?

BERNSTEIN: No, she did not learn English, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how your mother adjusted to America, if she did, and . . .

BERNSTEIN: Well, mother never adjusted. You know, she was an old-fashioned woman and she never learned English. And she just remained the same as she was.

SIGRIST: Yeah, but your mother was used to running a business, and . . .

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, well, the business there is on a small scale, you know. It's not a big business. There were no big businesses there. We just made a living.

SIGRIST: But still she was used to having her mind active.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes. But here, no. Here she didn't do

anything. Here she just stayed with us and prepared, did the cooking. You know, I think it was difficult for her. She never learned the language, so she just couldn't speak to anyone else but the family.

SIGRIST: Did she make friends perhaps of other Lithuanian people?

BERNSTEIN: No, no. We had families. In those years we had a lot of families. And they all used to come, like on Sundays. We always had family coming to visit us. Or some of them lived in the same neighborhood used to come, but she never went anyplace by herself.

SIGRIST: This is kind of sad, really.

BERNSTEIN: Well, I don't know. She was happy as long as she was together with the children. That's what made her happy.

SIGRIST: That's why she came here in the first place.

BERNSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: So she never worked.

BERNSTEIN: No, she never worked.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, you said she was very religious in Lithuania.

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And she was sort of upset with your brothers because they were not so religious here.

BERNSTEIN: That's right. When you're in business, you can't do it.

SIGRIST: However did she practice her religion? Did she continue to be very religious?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. She practiced her religion. She didn't change.

SIGRIST: Did she try to make you very religious? How did you fall into all of this?

BERNSTEIN: Well, my mother was a very good-natured person. It hurt her to see the children not to live up to the way we were, but she really never said anything. I know she was hurt, but she didn't try to change us. Maybe she realized that we're living in a different country and we can't be the same as we were at home, never tried to change us.

SIGRIST: And I can see some of the things that might have upset her were the fact that your brothers probably ran their operation on Saturdays.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Things like this.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: So how long did you work for your brothers?

BERNSTEIN: Till I got married.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

BERNSTEIN: I think it was in 1923.

SIGRIST: So soon after you got here.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes. Not too long.

SIGRIST: Whom did you marry?

BERNSTEIN: Whom did I marry?

SIGRIST: Yes.

BERNSTEIN: A young man. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Yes. What was your husband's name?

BERNSTEIN: Charles.

SIGRIST: Charles Bernstein.

BERNSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me how you met your husband?

BERNSTEIN: Yes. I met him in the place where I worked, in my brother's place.

SIGRIST: What was his job there?

BERNSTEIN: Well, he was also doing, you know, part of the work there.

SIGRIST: And you married in 1923.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And how many . . .

BERNSTEIN: Maybe it was 1924. I don't remember, yeah.

SIGRIST: How many children did you have?

BERNSTEIN: I had two children.

SIGRIST: Could you name them, please?

BERNSTEIN: Two daughters, yes. The one, this one here in Marilyn, and I have another daughter in Montreal, Phyllis.

SIGRIST: Now, had your husband come from a different country?

BERNSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was he an immigrant?

BERNSTEIN: He came from Poland.

SIGRIST: He came from Poland. When had he . . .

BERNSTEIN: Poland, Austria, whatever it was then.

SIGRIST: When had he come?

BERNSTEIN: He came before I did, I think. He came before, yes, because he spoke English already.

SIGRIST: What was it that you liked about him when you first met him?

BERNSTEIN: Well, I don't know what it was I liked. We just met. I guess we had a lot in common being Europeans. And we just started going out, and then we decided to get married.

SIGRIST: Was there something about America that you really didn't like that was very hard for you to adjust to, some aspect of maybe living in New York that was very difficult for you?

BERNSTEIN: I didn't like to travel on the subway.

SIGRIST: Why not?

BERNSTEIN: Because coming home was so packed. If you ever go in the subway during rush hour. Have you ever traveled in the subway during rush hour?

(Mr. Sigrist nods) (she laughs) Then I don't have to tell you how it was.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the first time you had ever been on the subway?

BERNSTEIN: No. Everything was so new to me. And, on the other hand, I never worked at home, I never did anything.

It took me a little time to get used to this way, to this life.

SIGRIST: You mean to going out and having a job.

BERNSTEIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun in New York in those days?

BERNSTEIN: Not too many things. In the beginning, first until you get acquainted, you get adjusted. You don't know anybody. It's just you mingle with your family. There is work and, and being with the family.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever want to go back to Lithuania?

BERNSTEIN: No. No, she never. She had all her children here. She wouldn't think. No, no. She wouldn't. No, no.

SIGRIST: And, of course, it wasn't too long when all the kids were sort of Americanized, right? Your brothers already were when you got here. And, you know . . .

BERNSTEIN: But we used to speak to her in Jewish, in Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Are you glad that you came to America?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How would your life have been different if you had stayed in Lithuania?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, it would have been entirely different. I don't know. Maybe I wouldn't have been alive by now. I

know my friends all got killed there by the Germans.

I had friends, and many of them got killed. So, of course, I have a nice family.

SIGRIST: So you're glad your mother came?

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. These two daughters, and I have four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Wow.

BERNSTEIN: And they all turned out to be excellent, good people.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you one more question before we end. Is there something about you that is still Old World? Is there some part of you that still is European? Maybe some way of thinking, or some tradition that you try to carry on?

BERNSTEIN: I don't think so. I don't think so. My thinking is different than it was, but I don't think you could any (?) that I completely forgot that I ever was there.

SIGRIST: Right. It all must seem sort of like a foggy dream.

BERNSTEIN: Oh, yes. That's right. That I was born here.

SIGRIST: Well, that's interesting. Well, Mrs. Bernstein, I want to thank you very much for coming out here and letting me ask you some questions (Mrs. Bernstein laughs) about your immigration experience. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Tessie Bernstein on Tuesday, May 18, 1993.