EI-330
SOLL SHWISBERG (SCHWEISBERG)
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 10, 1915
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1995
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THE UKRAINE, 1921
AGE 5
PASSAGE ON "THE LAPLAND"
PORT OF EMBARCATION: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES: MUNKOVITZ
DETROIT, MI; EAST NEW YORK NY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 27, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Soll Shwisberg. He came from Russia and arrived January 8, 1921. And Mr. Shwisberg was almost six years old, five and so many months. Anyway, welcome. Good afternoon. Can we begin by your giving me your full name, if you have a middle name or something in there.

SHWISBERG: My full name is Soll Shwisberg, no middle name.

SIGRIST: That's spelled S-O-L-L, correct?

SHWISBERG: That's correct.

SIGRIST: Is that an abbreviation for a longer name, or . . .

SHWISBERG: Well, in public school they used to call me Sollie, S-O-L-L-I-E. In high school they call me Solomon. And in City College they called me Sol. And my father's citizenship papers, which were approved in 1927, I saw the name spelled S-O-L-L. In order not to make any waves, I retained that spelling.

SIGRIST: I see. What's your birthday, sir?

SHWISBERG: My birthday is March 10, 1915.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me where you were born in Russia?

SHWISBERG: I was born in a little town called Minkovitz. And that would be, at that time was called White Russia. It's about forty Russian miles south of Kiev.

SIGRIST: Is that the Ukrainian part of Russia?

SHWISBERG: Ukrainian, yes. That's southern Russia.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what the town looked like?

SHWISBERG: Well, I can relate to the town or respect, or coming

back to Fiddler on the Roof. It was surrounded by mountains and the one exit across the bridge that had a little stream or a river, you would call it, underneath. And that's the only exit out of town, but we're completely surrounded by mountains on three sides.

SIGRIST: Did you and your family live inside the town or outside the town?

SHWISBERG: Oh, inside the town. Most everybody, they all huddled together. I don't exactly remember how many people we had. All I do know is that everyone was a volunteer soldiers. Everyone in town had to be a volunteer, because we did have raids or pogroms by Bolsheviks, Cossacks, you name it. Any type of a renegade band, they used to stop, and they'd rape, plunder and steal, and out they went.

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a child a specific pogrom, experiencing something like this?

SHWISBERG: Well, sure. We were surrounded completely by mountains. And my father, may he rest in peace, had a store which sold ice cream and that had a metal roof. So when the machine guns were firing over the

town, they used to hit the metal roof. And we were hiding in the house under a kitchen table where the windows were stuffed with pillows. And that's as far as I can remember during that. Also I do have a defective pinky here. There was a band of Cossacks riding through the town, and I was out on the street, which is a cobblestone street. And my mother called to a relative of mine, "Grab Solly and bring him inside." She grabbed this pinky so hard that it never got into a bending position. That's another memento.

SIGRIST: My goodness. Can you describe the house that you grew up ion?

SHWISBERG: Well, again, I relate to those homes that were shown exactly on Fiddler On The Roof. They were small, compact, but sufficient for a small family, very small. And, uh, a lot of them were made out of lumber, and just sheeting. Nothing too well-built, I should say.

SIGRIST: Did all the houses more or less look the same in this town?

SHWISBERG: I don't quite remember that. I don't quite remember

that.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

SHWISBERG: My dad's name was Abraham.

SIGRIST: And, um, you said something about what he did. Can you elaborate a little more about his ice cream business, how he got involved in that?

SHWISBERG: Well, I can't go back that far. All that I can tell you that the Russian ice cream is far superior to the American, far superior. And we used to get treated, every once in a while we'd have ice cream, and that was it. It was our only dessert.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how he made the ice cream?

SHWISBERG: No, not really.

SIGRIST: You just remember having it.

SHWISBERG: Oh, yeah. I remember eating it.

SIGRIST: Did they do flavors of ice cream, different flavors, or . . .

SHWISBERG: Most of them were all vanilla. Vanilla, that was the favorite flavor.

SIGRIST: Do you have any idea how your dad got involved in this business?

SHWISBERG: None whatsoever.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your dad's personality like?

SHWISBERG: I would say, my wife would say better than mine. (they laugh) No, he was an easygoing man, a hard worker. And, of course, he loved my mother immensely and they were married for quite a while. And, by the way, we just celebrated our fifty-first.

SIGRIST: Well, congratulations.

SHWISBERG: So we all stay that way.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

SHWISBERG: Not really. My wife was a blind date. That I can tell you. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, once we get you to America, we'll talk about that.

SHWISBERG: Three of them, blind dates. We married them all.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Can you tell me what your mother's

name was.

SHWISBERG: My mother's name was Liba, L-I-B-A.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

SHWISBERG: Uh, Coira. C-O-I-R-A. That was her last name.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a similar question about your mom. What was her personality like?

SHWISBERG: Oh, my mother was a very fine woman. Very, very well-spoken and, of course, she did everything for her children. Very, that's as far as I know. She wasn't too good a cook, because they were all involved in business constantly. And we had to eat whenever we could.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you eat in Russia?

SHWISBERG: (he sighs) That I can't answer.

SIGRIST: Other than ice cream. (they laugh)

SHWISBERG: Honest, really, I have no idea. But I guess they made mostly soups and maybe occasionally a piece of meat, chicken, that's about all. After that, why, uh, although they did have a lot of fruits and

vegetables in the area that I can remember, but after that not too good in the memory.

SIGRIST: And you said you had a sister.

SHWISBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

SHWISBERG: Her name is Edith.

SIGRIST: And she's older than you.

SHWISBERG: Two years older than I am.

SIGRIST: Any other siblings?

SHWISBERG: No, that's it. My father said, "That's enough." One like me, and that was enough.

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little kid before you came to this country? What were you like as a young child?

SHWISBERG: Well, I should have brought a picture. Short, robust and, of course, into plenty of mischief. That's about all I can remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember getting into trouble for something?

SHWISBERG: No, not really.

SIGRIST: What do you remember as a child in Russia? What sticks out in your mind when you think back to those days?

SHWISBERG: All I remember is just coming to the United States, America. It took us six months to cross from White Russia to Antwerp, Belgium.

SIGRIST: Were there other family members in this town in Russia, grandparents, perhaps?

SHWISBERG: Yes. No, not grandparents. I never met my grandparents. But there were first cousins. My mother's brother and his two children and his wife, of course, lived in the same town. We grew up together. But they came on the Lapland one month prior to us.

SIGRIST: I see. But their idea was the same, to get out of there and go to America.

SHWISBERG: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about religious life in this town? Was there a synagogue in town?

SHWISBERG: That I don't remember. Most of the people there that I have no idea what the population was, but a good many of them were the old Jewish. And, of course, I don't know whether they were real staunch Jews, orthodox, I should say, because they never did get too much time to go to pray. Maybe on Friday nights, maybe on a Saturday morning, but I don't remember fully. I was too young to remember that.

SIGRIST: Your father's sort of a businessman in this town. But what did most of the people do? Were they farmers?

SHWISBERG: There was tailors, and I just don't remember just too far back for me. At five-and-a-half you have no idea of what to remember. All you know is you're having a good time, you know. You're a child, and you play in the streets with the other children, and that was it.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious. Your parents, in their later years, did they ever tell you stories about what life was like when they were children?

SHWISBERG: Not that I can remember. They may have. Maybe my sister would remember those things, but I personally

don't remember.

SIGRIST: Once your parents had come to this country, were they inclined to talk about the old country, or did they just sort of put that behind them?

SHWISBERG: No. We lived close by to my, uh, American aunt, who said once you're here you've got to forget, you must learn how to speak English. And immediately, the day after we came to Detroit, Michigan, we were put in a school called Maybe School immediately. Then I was brought, I went to school there about two or three years that I can remember, and we learned how to speak English. And my mother and father were made also, or forced actually to go to school, to learn how to speak English.

SIGRIST: So they very much sort of put their old country life behind them.

SHWISBERG: Exactly, exactly.

SIGRIST: Who wanted to come to America?

SHWISBERG: Most everyone that I can remember wanted to come to America.

SIGRIST: But in your family, I mean.

SHWISBERG: In my family was my mother, my father, my sister, myself, and my first cousin.

SIGRIST: But who wanted to come here? Who was the impetus in your family to get you to America?

SHWISBERG: Oh, my aunt was the instigator. She was the one that sent us the money to get out. And she, uh, made it possible for us to come there.

SIGRIST: Where was your aunt living?

SHWISBERG: In Detroit, Michigan.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

SHWISBERG: Aunt Molly. Molly Feinberg, to be exact.

SIGRIST: And when did she come to this country?

SHWISBERG: Hmm. It must be at least eight or ten years prior to ours.

SIGRIST: I see. A long time before you came.

SHWISBERG: And they had done quite well. He was the biggest haberdasher in the State of Michigan. So, or say in

the City of Detroit, Michigan. And, of course, they were able to send us the money to come to the U.S.

SIGRIST: Is this your dad's sister?

SHWISBERG: That's my father's sister, yes.

SIGRIST: Your father's sister.

SHWISBERG: She's already demised.

SIGRIST: When you were a child, did America mean anything to you before you came here? Did you, it didn't mean anything to you.

SHWISBERG: It didn't mean a blessed thing, no.

SIGRIST: Do you think, did both your parents want to come, or did one want to come more than the other?

SHWISBERG: I think they both wanted to come across, because we were living in that stage or era of pogroms, which was hard to accept as a way of life. Just like you're accepting a way of life here with all your vandalism and gang shooting, etcetera.

SIGRIST: Do you think that, looking back on it as an adult now, do you think that the pogroms were just to

frighten you, or were they really trying to annihilate the Jewish population in these towns?

SHWISBERG: Hmm. That's very hard to, I would say both frighten plus annihilation, although we did lose six million Jews during the Holocaust. But this was after World War One. And the roving bands, of course, the economic conditions were not too good after the war, and I guess the only way they would get food or money, etcetera, was by going out and plundering. That was their method. They'd ride into town and out, as quick as they possibly can, taking everything they possibly could with them.

SIGRIST: So it sort of happened without warning, and it ended as quickly as it began.

SHWISBERG: Definitely, exactly, right, yeah.

SIGRIST: A very frightening time to be Jewish.

SHWISBERG: Very frightening. I don't think it only pertained to the Jews, because we had a lot of Gentiles living in town. They, in turn, of course, when they were, they were frightened out of their wits. And, again, everybody was in the volunteer army. So that any

band that came in, they all got out there with the guns and they tried to kill them, but they were too many, too many. Our town was very, very small.

SIGRIST: Did your father have to serve in the First World War?

SHWISBERG: Yes, yes. He was in the Russian army.

SIGRIST: Do you have any stories about that?

SHWISBERG: All I can remember is my father was in most every hospital in Russia, because he had very, very bad teeth. And he was being shipped from place to place to see if he could get his teeth repaired so that he could serve. And, uh, by the way, we lost sight of him for about four or five months, while we were traveling across the country to get to Antwerp, Belgium. And we did meet up with him either in Spain or in France. And then, of course, we went up to Belgium together.

SIGRIST: Why did you lose sight of him? Did you not all leave at the same time, or . . .

SHWISBERG: Because, no, that's correct, we did not. He was in the hospital at that particular time. And when we

left, that was it, we just didn't see him. But my mother had an idea that he may, maybe she had got a letter or two telling exactly where he would be at that particular time. And just luckily we met up with him.

SIGRIST: So that was always the intention, that somewhere along the line you would all reconvene once he got better.

SHWISBERG: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing, or what you all took with you?

SHWISBERG: Hmm. Whatever little we could carry, because we started out on a wagon, a horse-drawn wagon, into a very, very frail boat, and I had a pair of sneakers on, and the boat was leaking a little bit, and I had an infection on my foot. And, uh, got past that, and we used to hide at night in the bulrushes, because they did have bands of soldiers always looking for runaways, they called it. And, uh, my mother, may she rest in peace, told me this story where I got very, very thirsty. And there was a gentleman, which I never met. He called the

bulrushes and dipped his felt hat in a stream of water and brought it back to me. By that time all the water had been, had run out of the hat, and all he could do was wet my lips, and that's the way I got a drink of water, just wet my lips. And we stayed in the bulrushes all night, and the next day we started to walk again. We did an awful lot of walking, I can tell you that. An awful lot of walking.

SIGRIST: Were you traveling with a group of people?

SHWISBERG: Yes. There must have been about, uh, well, we met up various groups going, we, uh, I remember climbing the mountains in Italy. That was the, my mother carried me, and then she put me down, and then carried my sister. So we all had our chances of being carried up these steep mountains, and they were steep. And from then on we rode in boxcars, in France, and then we rode in a little bit better railroad, and I think we went all the way into Belgium on that railroad. That's the last I remember.

SIGRIST: This is taking a chunk of time.

SHWISBERG: Six months to be exact.

SIGRIST: Six months.

SHWISBERG: Sure.

SIGRIST: From the time you left, to the time you arrived in Oslow . . .

SHWISBERG: Six months.

SIGRIST: Now, had your aunt sent you, had she already sent you ship tickets ahead of time?

SHWISBERG: Hmm, I just don't remember.

SIGRIST: You don't know that part.

SHWISBERG: Honest.

SIGRIST: Where in the route did you meet up with your dad?

SHWISBERG: I think in Spain, if I can remember. Somewhere in Spain.

SIGRIST: Do you have any other recollections of things that happened along the way going to Antwerp? You talk about the story that your mother told you. Do you remember, uh, anything going on at that time?

SHWISBERG: Not personally, no.

SIGRIST: Were there other children traveling in this group?

SHWISBERG: Oh, yes, yes. There were, as far as I know, my sister, who's just two years older. But I remember that may have been a child or two or three. We all traveled, by the way, steerage. Not first class or second class, steerage.

SIGRIST: But that wasn't till you left from Antwerp.

SHWISBERG: Until we left Antwerp.

SIGRIST: Can I just ask, do you know what you ate through this whole process? This is a long time and tentative circumstances.

SHWISBERG: Probably bread and milk was our biggest food that we had. I just don't remember.

SIGRIST: So when you arrived in Antwerp, how long did you have to stay?

SHWISBERG: Hmm, just a few days until the boat was ready to leave.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you have any recollections of being in

Antwerp, being there for the first time? Nothing like that.

SHWISBERG: No.

SIGRIST: And what boat did you take?

SHWISBERG: We sailed on the Lapland. That's the Red Star Line, Lapland.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me about what your accommodations were like on the boat?

SHWISBERG: All I can remember is steerage. We were packed pretty close and tight in steerage. And, of course, on board they did have barrels of herring. And since most everyone on board was sick, I was the getter-man. I used to run up to the front, the bow of the ship, and bring back the herrings. They told me, "Please bring it by the tail." Which I did. And that was, I was known to, actually a go-between.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being on the boat? Do you remember being on deck?

SHWISBERG: Yes. It was very, very rough crossing, very rough crossing. Twelve days.

SIGRIST: It's the height of winter, right?

SHWISBERG: The height of winter, exactly.

SIGRIST: You've left December 20.

SHWISBERG: And crossing the North Sea is not the best place to cross.

SIGRIST: So did you get sick?

SHWISBERG: No. I never did get sick. In fact, now, I mean, in these years that I've been in the United States, I went fishing quite a bit, since I live at the Jersey Shore. Never got seasick in all my life.

SIGRIST: Do you have recollections of your mother and sister being sick?

SHWISBERG: Hmm. So they told me. That's all I can recollect. They told me they were quite ill.

SIGRIST: And, uh, a little earlier you referred to a mechanical problem on the boat.

SHWISBERG: Oh, yes. My mother told me that we did have some propeller problem. And they sent down divers to see if they could repair it while en route. And they

shut down the motors and they worked for, I don't know, half a day or so. And they had it repaired. Since it was a twin-screw job, either we came in on one, or they repaired the other. I just don't recollect.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of, perhaps, safety drills on the boat?

SHWISBERG: Not that I can remember.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

SHWISBERG: I don't think that they even practiced them. They were just anxious to get on and off.

SIGRIST: You said it took twelve days.

SHWISBERG: Twelve days, to be exact, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember arriving in New York Harbor?

SHWISBERG: That I do.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

SHWISBERG: Looking at the Statue of Liberty. And, of course, getting on Ellis Island and going up, up to second floor there. And I saw a lot of people crying.

They were being rejected for some reason or other. Any type of sickness which they thought they couldn't eliminate in a very short length of time, they would send them back. And a lot of people had the misfortune of having children sent back. But a lot of them went back with the children, because they didn't want to leave them. But I remember going through the, uh, complete examination. I passed with flying colors. There was nothing wrong. My sister was fine, and my parents. And that was it. That was the beginning of our entry into the United States.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long you had to stay here? A few hours, maybe?

SHWISBERG: Just a few hours that I can remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being crowded?

SHWISBERG: Oh, it was plenty crowded, yes. That I can tell you. We weren't the only one. We were not the only boat that docked.

SIGRIST: Did someone come to meet you at Ellis Island?

SHWISBERG: That I remember. I think my aunt came because she

was going to take us to Detroit, Michigan. So she may have been here. Or my, uh, mother's brother. I really don't remember. I have to ask my sister on that.

SIGRIST: Your mother had a brother in America, too.

SHWISBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: Oh.

SHWISBERG: He came over a month earlier.

SIGRIST: Oh, he was the one who came over.

SHWISBERG: He was the one who, a month earlier.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

SHWISBERG: His name was Ely Coira, C-O-I-R-A.

SIGRIST: And did he live in Manhattan?

SHWISBERG: He lived in, uh, Brooklyn, New York, yeah, Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Do you know what job he had at that time?

SHWISBERG: Not really, although I did know that he became very wealthy in real estate.

SIGRIST: Later on.

SHWISBERG: Later on, yes. But as far as what kind of work he did, I do not have any idea.

SIGRIST: So he's practically fresh off the boat. I mean, he'd only been here a month.

SHWISBERG: Yes, but he had a lot of relatives, or friends that helped him out more so than they helped my family.

SIGRIST: I see. Where did you spend your first night in America?

SHWISBERG: Oh, boy. Can't recollect.

SIGRIST: Did you go . . .

SHWISBERG: It might have been in Detroit, Michigan for all I know.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, did you go immediately to Detroit?

SHWISBERG: I believe we did, yes. I believe we did.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the trip to Detroit?

SHWISBERG: Just the train trip, and that's about all.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything on that trip that you had never seen before?

SHWISBERG: (he pauses) Just fields and fields and fields.

SIGRIST: A lot of farmland out there.

SHWISBERG: A lot of farmland out there between here and Michigan, yes.

SIGRIST: What do you think is going through your parents' mind on their way to Michigan? I mean, they've come so far through so much. What do you think they're thinking about?

SHWISBERG: Well, of course, my Dad, I guess he was thinking about how am I going to support the familia? But he did have promises of being employed by my uncle. And, uh, I don't think it ever worked out. And in a few years my mother's brother told us to come out to Brooklyn, New York. And my father went into the grocery business there.

SIGRIST: So you went to Detroit first, and then . . .

SHWISBERG: Detroit, and then back to New York, to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Detroit?

SHWISBERG: About three or four years, I think, yeah. From 1921 to '25, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you live with your aunt?

SHWISBERG: Oh, no, no. We had our own house.

SIGRIST: Had she gone ahead and gotten you an apartment?

SHWISBERG: I guess that was the answer, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the apartment?

SHWISBERG: No, not really.

SIGRIST: No. Can you tell me a little bit about those three years in Detroit, and how it was for your family, your mother and father, to get adjusted to this new environment?

SHWISBERG: I think, well, you know, youngsters can become more easily adjusted than their elder people. My father was always working, and my mother was taking care of the house and taking care of us, as far as I can remember.

SIGRIST: What job did your father get in Detroit?

SHWISBERG: He was in the haberdashery business, selling clothes with my uncle in his place of business.

SIGRIST: Of course, this is a far cry from being an ice cream merchant.

SHWISBERG: Yes, I'm afraid so.

SIGRIST: How did your father feel about that? Was this a hard adjustment for him?

SHWISBERG: It was, because, you know, you had to depend upon your own family for a living, and he just couldn't take it. And I think that was one of the reasons we did leave.

SIGRIST: Your aunt and your uncle, of course, had been here quite a good chunk of time.

SHWISBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: And probably had Americanized to a certain extent during that time.

SHWISBERG: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did, was your father and mother sort of, did they

feel the difference between themselves and the aunt and uncle? Did they feel very different and out of place?

SHWISBERG: They never discussed that with me, of course. But, I mean, from what I could see, there were some sort of, uh, emotional disturbance, I guess you would call it, or just things didn't come out exactly the way they thought it would be.

SIGRIST: Do you have any idea what their expectations were of America?

SHWISBERG: Not really.

SIGRIST: No.

SHWISBERG: Never questioned it.

SIGRIST: How did your aunt and uncle treat you and your sister?

SHWISBERG: Oh, they treated us quite well, sure. But, of course, I tried to stay out of their hair as much as I possibly, we went to school every single day, and on weekends we spent with our family. But we saw them, you know. We were invited to various dinners,

etcetera. And that's as far as I can remember.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to school those first couple of years?

SHWISBERG: Hmm. Well, I did know how to speak Russian, Polish and Yiddish, and that's as far. So we had quite a change to make, or to become accustomed to speaking English. And it came, of course, at that age you're taught very, very easily, and you do, uh, learn very easily.

SIGRIST: Do you remember an instance when you were learning English that sticks out in your mind, perhaps a mistake that you made, or anything like that?

SHWISBERG: Not really. I might have made many of them. (he laughs) Too numerous to remember.

SIGRIST: Tell me how your parents learned English.

SHWISBERG: They found it pretty rough. And, of course, we as youngsters, we tried to help them the best. And they did learn how to speak English, but, of course, they retained an accent. And I don't think I retained any accent whatsoever.

SIGRIST: Well, you were so young.

SHWISBERG: Neither did my sister, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, did your mother ever work in this country?

SHWISBERG: I don't believe so.

SIGRIST: Would you say that she was sort of isolated? Did she stay at home mostly?

SHWISBERG: Most of the time, yeah, taking care of the apartment and taking care of the kids, yeah, sure. Because, you know, time does fly. One minute you're in school, the next minute you're home for lunch or going back again. The kids come home. There's always something to do.

SIGRIST: Did Detroit have a big immigrant population?

SHWISBERG: Yes, they did. Certain areas more than others, of course.

SIGRIST: Did you live, perhaps, in a Jewish section of Detroit, or an immigrant section of Detroit?

SHWISBERG: I don't remember, honest.

SIGRIST: Do you remember in school, were you with other immigrant children?

SHWISBERG: Oh, most likely. I just don't, I don't remember one day in school, really.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Just, did your parents wish that they hadn't come to America in those early years?

SHWISBERG: I have no answer for that.

SIGRIST: So you go to Brooklyn. Your father's offered a new job of some sort.

SHWISBERG: A business. He was going to go in business for himself, and he became a grocer.

SIGRIST: How did that all happen? Did someone want to go into business with him?

SHWISBERG: No, no.

SIGRIST: How did he find out about this?

SHWISBERG: My, uh, mother's brother discussed it with them. He thought that he could make a go of that, because he was in business in Russia. But, as I understand, he didn't do too well in one and two. The third was a

little bit better. All I can say, is that type of business killed him. That was the answer.

SIGRIST: Did you all move back to Brooklyn with him?

SHWISBERG: Oh, yes, sure.

SIGRIST: I see.

SHWISBERG: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your parents having any particular feelings about moving back east again, or how did you feel about being uprooted from whatever friends that you had made?

SHWISBERG: At that time it really didn't make much difference. Because as youngsters you do make friends very easily, more so than the grownups.

SIGRIST: So how old were you when you moved to Brooklyn?

SHWISBERG: I was six, or ten, I would say.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your first address was?

SHWISBERG: East New York, if you know where it is. That's, I lived on Sutter Avenue and Barbey Street. That I do remember. That's it.

SIGRIST: Barbey Street?

SHWISBERG: B-A-R-B-E-Y.

SIGRIST: Oh, uh-huh. We're going to pause for a second, and Kevin's going to flip the tape around, and then we'll get you to Brooklyn and your life there.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now resuming with Soll Shwisberg. Let me ask you, so the whole family moves to Brooklyn, and your father begins in this grocery business. You said that ultimately this business killed him. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Was it just very hard work?

SHWISBERG: Yes, the work was very, very hard. And, of course, I was there to help him as much as I possibly can, or could. And, uh, he went from one area to another, to another, and then a fourth, and that was as far as he, he lasted till sixty-five.

SIGRIST: Why did he move the location of the store?

SHWISBERG: Business was very, very poor, and he thought he

could better himself in a different area. And we did try areas that were just starting up, but it didn't seem to work out that way. It seems that most of our business was done on Saturday and Sunday, and Saturday was actually a day that he had to be closed, because he was a little religious. So you can't very well make a good living actually one or two days out of the week. And he looked, of course, to better ourselves and, of course, a little bit better life that we could live.

SIGRIST: What was the first job that you got that you were paid for?

SHWISBERG: I was pretty handy with my hands. I could repair most everything. That is, I used to repair vacuum cleaners, electric irons. Anything that they gave me to repair, I was able to repair. But I always had a dollar in my pocket. Of course, when I went to radio school I learned how to repair radios, and I started to do radio repair work.

SIGRIST: That's a little bit later, right?

SHWISBERG: Later, yes. I was already seventeen or sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, of course, radios were hot items at that time.

SHWISBERG: Of course, that's right.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the '29 crash?

SHWISBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: And perhaps how it affected your family.

SHWISBERG: Well, I know it affected my uncle back in Detroit. He got very, very sick, and he never made it. And, of course, we did hear stories of people jumping out of windows. And, after all, a child just can't remember each and every item. But things were not that great, that I can tell you.

SIGRIST: During the depression, what do you remember seeing in New York or in Brooklyn? What kinds of sights did you see on the street during those times?

SHWISBERG: People selling apples and other items for a penny or two or three. And, in fact, we were able to buy, at that time, if you know Coney Island, a whole hot dog for five cents, and they were a foot long, and they were good. And, or a bag of potato chips for five

cents would be that high. You could have a meal for five cents. But, uh, things on the whole were not that great.

SIGRIST: And would you say the depression contributed to the fact that your father kept moving his business?

SHWISBERG: Oh, definitely.

SIGRIST: You said that your father was a religious man, to a certain extent?

SHWISBERG: To a certain extent, yeah. Not that religious where he went every day to temple, you know, such as other Orthodox. He couldn't, because he was a business person. So he, on Friday nights he was supposed to close up as soon as the sun set. But, listen, if he had things to do, he stayed another hour or two.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever wish that they had returned to Russia?

SHWISBERG: I have no answer for that.

SIGRIST: They never spoke about that.

SHWISBERG: They never spoke about it. I don't believe so. I don't think so. Whatever we got in the United

States was most appreciated. And whatever food we could have, we appreciated. There was no course for dissention amongst us, and we got along the best we possibly could.

SIGRIST: Did you or your family ever experience any kind of prejudice because you were immigrants? Of course, you were so young.

SHWISBERG: Not that I could, I was too young to appreciate that.

SIGRIST: But perhaps your parents.

SHWISBERG: We played with all, we played with the Italians, and we played with the Catholic and the Irish. We played ball, you know. And on Friday nights we used to have one good time running around the milk cans and play stickball, things like that. But . . .

SIGRIST: A normal childhood.

SHWISBERG: A normal child, that's correct.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about your sister's adjustment to America. She's a little bit older than you, not much. What things about America did

she like, and what didn't she like?

SHWISBERG: Well, she did like her education. She was a very well-educated girl. And, in fact, she went to Hebrew high school, which I never did, and she kept on. And, uh, I never had too much to do with her, because she had her own friends, and I had my own friends. So just said, "Hello, how are you," and that was the end.

SIGRIST: Tell me why you wanted to go to radio school.

SHWISBERG: Well, at that time everybody was starting to be a radio technician.

SIGRIST: What time is this? How old are you? What year is this?

SHWISBERG: I graduated RCA 1934. So that means that when I graduated high school I went to RCA. And I did quite well. And I went to work for one organization. I did some repair work. And I thought I could do better, so I just went up the ladder a little bit more and more. I built amplifiers in 19, what was it, '36 or '37. And I did quite well as a youngster. In fact, I went out

and bought myself a car. At that time, fifty dollars a car. I had a 1934 Dodge. Oh, first, before that, I had a Ford Roadster. (he laughs) You know, with the top down. And then year, as I grew a little older, I went to other cars. I must have had God knows how many cars.

SIGRIST: Did your parents know how to drive?

SHWISBERG: No, they never did learn how to drive, never. I was their chauffeur.

SIGRIST: Did they enjoy riding in the car?

SHWISBERG: That they did, yes.

SIGRIST: Were they supportive of education, or was that not an important thing with them?

SHWISBERG: Oh, no, they were supportive of education. They wanted, yes. They definitely said, my aunt was the one that really, well, she hammered on the table, "We've got to go to school and learn how to be an American." In fact, she told us to forget how to speak Yiddish and other languages, which we did. And, of course, I just don't remember how to speak Russian or Polish any more, or Yiddish, of course,

in our area is almost a dying language. And very seldom do I get a chance to speak to someone that understands the language.

SIGRIST: Did becoming American, did that mean changing your clothes or changing the type of haircut you had? What did it mean to become American? What was it that your aunt, what was she trying to change you?

SHWISBERG: By all those, yes. Changing your hairstyle, changing your clothes. Your behavior, mostly. That's it.

SIGRIST: What would be European behavior versus American behavior?

SHWISBERG: I cannot answer that.

SIGRIST: Uh, so you graduated from RCA in '34.

SHWISBERG: Hmm.

SIGRIST: And when did you marry?

SHWISBERG: I got married in 1941.

SIGRIST: And whom did you marry?

SHWISBERG: Blanche Shwisberg. Blanche Feinberg was her name.

SIGRIST: And that's F-E-I-N-B-E-R-G.

SHWISBERG: That's correct.

SIGRIST: How did you meet her?

SHWISBERG: Blanche was a blind date with two other girls, and we were three young fellows. We were introduced to them and, believe it or not, we married them all. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have?

SHWISBERG: Just two, and that's enough.

SIGRIST: And would you like to say who they are for the tape?

SHWISBERG: Yeah. I have a son, Ricky Shwisberg, and a daughter, Phyllis Shwisberg, and they both are married at the present time. My daughter Phyllis is a Spanish teacher in California, and my son is an attorney with an accounting degree, too. So Daddy made sure they got an education second to none.

SIGRIST: What would you have to say to people, if someone asked you, you know, what thoughts do you have about coming from where you came from and going through

all that you've gone through, what kind of advice or wisdom would you bestow on people? Do you have sort of some final thoughts about sitting back and looking at your life.

SHWISBERG: That the United States gives you all the possibilities of improving yourself regardless of race, creed or color. And it's entirely up to the individual to educate himself, after he doesn't have a parent which can afford to send him to school. And I think the United States is the best country, as far as I'm concerned, where you can realize what you are at the present, and, of course, monetary wise, that's entirely up to yourself, what education you've had. But it does give you a chance to really pull yourself out of a hole.

SIGRIST: That is, you get out of it what you put into it.

SHWISBERG: Exactly, exactly. That's the way you should express it, yes. You get out exactly what you put in.

SIGRIST: Wonderful. Well, Mr. Shwisberg, I want to thank you very much for driving up from the Jersey Shore to give this interview for us for the Oral History Project.

SHWISBERG: It's a wonderful day to drive.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it's lovely outside.

SHWISBERG: Lovely, yeah. I'll take my wife back home and treat her.

SIGRIST: To some ice cream. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Soll Shwisberg at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio on Thursday, May 27, 1993.