

EI-337

MAX SUSSMAN

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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POLAND, 1912

AGE 3

PASSAGE ON "THE GEORGE WASHINGTON"

PORT OF EMBARCATION: PORT IN GERMANY

RESIDENCES: LEMBERG

LOWER EAST SIDE (PITT STREET)

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Sunday, June 20, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio, using the portable dat machine, with Max Sussman. Mr. Sussman came from Poland in 1912. He was three years old at the time. Mr. Sussman, welcome.

SUSSMAN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Let me begin by asking you your birthdate.

SUSSMAN: March the 9th, 1908.

SIGRIST: And where were you born, sir?

SUSSMAN: In Poland.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

SUSSMAN: Let's see now. The name of the town was Lemberg, L-M-, L-E-M-B-E-R-G, Lemberg. It's like New York City, somewhere around that...

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the town at all?

SUSSMAN: Not much. I remember that when I was three, two and a half years, or three years old, when I lived there. We lived on the outskirts of Lemberg, which is farm. My, my mother had a cow there. She has, you know, a dog and all that, had a little house. My mother worked for, for a banker. She was a, for a banker, she was a clerk, and, over there, and that's what I tell she told me. And I also remember playing with children in, in my town where we lived. And we had a little argument. I was two and a half years, and a kid, and a child cut me. You can see it here somewhere's (he indicates his eye), and...

SIGRIST: He cut your eye.

SUSSMAN: Yeah, yeah. That I remember. As far, that's as far as I can remember.

SIGRIST: Is, is Lemberg like a large town?

SUSSMAN: It's like New York City.

SIGRIST: It's a big, it's a big town like New York City.

SUSSMAN: Yeah, but they, we live on the outskirts of that, it's just like from here to Connecticut. You know, from New York to Connecticut, somewhere out, that's where we lived. My dad was in New York. He was, he was, he, he came before us, about three years ago, before we came. And he was working here nine hours a day as a, as a, as a presser. You know what a presser is? A garment, a presser. And he saved some dough, you know. That's what, now, how, how did we get here?

SIGRIST: Wait. Let's not get there yet.

SUSSMAN: No.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

SUSSMAN: His name was Samuel Sussman.

SIGRIST: And that's S-U-S-S-M-A-N.

SUSSMAN: S-S-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And do you know what he did in Poland before he came here?

SUSSMAN: I have no idea. I think it was in the same line that he did, he worked as a presser during that time. Men's presser, women's press, I don't...

SIGRIST: And he came to this country a few years before you did.

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: So you were just a baby or not even born yet?

SUSSMAN: I was, I was almost I think one year or two, I wasn't born yet. I wasn't born yet.

SIGRIST: Were there any other children in the family?

SUSSMAN: Yes. I had two brothers. Older brothers. And...

SIGRIST: What are their names?

SUSSMAN: One was Joseph Sussman, and my other brother was William Sussman.

I also had a grandmother there, and my, my mother's name, you want, was...

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

SUSSMAN: ...was Rebecca Sussman, R-E-B-B-, becca, A-C-K-A.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name, do you know?

SUSSMAN: His name, her maiden name was, I don't know.

SIGRIST: You're not sure?

SUSSMAN: All I know is...

SIGRIST: The grandmother that you know,...

SUSSMAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: ...is that your mom's mother or your father's...

SUSSMAN: My mom's mother.

SIGRIST: Was your mother from this town?

SUSSMAN: From where?

SIGRIST: From Lemberg?

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And your father was from there, too?

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

SUSSMAN: Well, no. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: No one talked about those things back then.

SUSSMAN: No one talks about it, no.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections, or do you remember your parents talking about the house that you lived in, the actual house?

SUSSMAN: I should say no. I was a baby.

SIGRIST: And they nev, again, that's not something that they talked about.

SUSSMAN: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, your father came over here, he's been here three years, and he got work as a presser, as you say.

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then you started to talk about the whole process of how you came over. Why don't you, you tell us that...

SUSSMAN: Oh, of how I came over. Well, it was during, it was around 19, 1912 when I came over here. There, there was a rumor. My mother worked as, by a banker. And she, her first name was Rebecca. And the banker told me, told her, told my mother, "Listen, Mrs. Sussman. Get, get in touch with your husband, and try to take him over to America, because there's going to be a first world war." They knew a year and a half ago that there's going to be the first world war. So she wrote my father, and my father sent her a schiffskart. You know what a schiffskart, a pass, a passport, and he sent of us to come over. And we came over around 1912. He sent for us. He came, he came, we came in 1912. Okay. Ask me what ship I, I was on. How did we get there. Okay. We went, so, we sent, he sent us passports, we went to, what do you call that town in Ger, I don't know. We went to, we went to the, forgot the Cunard line.

SIGRIST: Do you remember leaving at all? Do you have any vague impressions of...

SUSSMAN: Where? From there? Leaving?

SIGRIST: From your home. Leaving your home.

SUSSMAN: Yeah. I, I, I remember leaving a little bit. Yes, I do. My two brothers and me and my mother, see, and...

SIGRIST: So it's the four of you travelling.

SUSSMAN: Yeah, yeah, yes.

SIGRIST: Grandmother stays...

SUSSMAN: Was still there. And we went, we went to a certain German town, for the ship, where the ship was. And during that, where the ship was. Name of the ship was George Washington. So we came to, not first class, second class. I recall second class.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the boat? Do you, do you remember...

SUSSMAN: Remember about the boat? That we slept on the, on the beds, three

beds atop of each other. I remember that my mother was seasick. I remember that my brothers were seasick, but I as a three year old wasn't. I loved the boat. I used to run up, down to the first class, second class, and all the sailors liked me. And they gave me candy, and all that. (???)

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever talk about the ship voyage? Did she ever say how she felt about what it was like for her to be sick on this boat later on? Did she...

SUSSMAN: Yes, she, she did. She was sick. She couldn't stand the two weeks of, you know, it took two weeks for the ship to come here. And she used, you know, she was really sick, you know.

SIGRIST: Did your mother really want to come to America? How did she feel about leaving Poland?

SUSSMAN: She not, not the idea that she wanted to, but they're talking about war. And she, she came. My father brought her over here. And now if we hadn't come here, and if we were, if we, if we weren't, if we weren't passed by the doctors on, here in Ellis Island, it's just, it's so, we would probably be shipped back to Poland, and get, and be murdered by Hitler. That's what would have happened. But we're lucky that the doctors passed, eyes and ears and all that...

SIGRIST: So, so the, you were on the water for two, two weeks...

SUSSMAN: For two weeks.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you have any recollections, or do you remember your mother or brothers talking about the Ellis Island experience at all?

SUSSMAN: Well, well, I, I was a child, and I didn't bother staying there down, and you know, running around, and all that. And, but they, they, I, I think my, my middle brother spoke about Ellis Island and all that. He says, "Where are we going? Are we going to see a lady with a torch?" They prob, somebody told him this. And all that. Yeah, so he knew about that. And, so we came to America.

SIGRIST: So who met you here at Ellis Island?

SUSSMAN: Now, there's, there's something you'd be interested, my dad. He saved, he came there, during that time there was no buses, there was, excuse me. There was no buses, there was no trolley, but we had horse trolley. Horse trolleys we had. There are six horses attached to a bus. And they, right here in the Battery place, and they picked us up. My dad was there. And they, they put us on there. It was a nickel, a nickel bus fare during that time with

the driver. And they brought us all the way down to the eastside, which, with the name of the street was Pitt Street.

SIGRIST: This was on the lower eastside.

SIGRIST: The lower eastside where most of the immigrants where there Jewish. The population was Jewish there during that time. And they brought us over to 89 Pitt Street, on the fourth floor, walk up places.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that apartment?

SUSSMAN: I remember that very well.

SIGRIST: Can you walk me through the apartment and describe it was your walking through it?

SUSSMAN: Well, now. We had a walk up to the fourth floor. And, and, and when, we had four, four rooms. And one was a bedroom, one was a kitchen, small kitchen, one was a living room. And it was, it was terrible to live up there, because we had to go to the bathroom we had to go outside, in the building, outside. Two, it was four, four tenants. In the back and in the front. In other words four rooms. And when we had to go the bathroom we had to wait until the other tenant finishes. And that's how we got along. And

there were, that's, the apartments were, rats running around. And the, you know, we were kids, and all that.

SIGRIST: How long did you live in this one apartment?

SUSSMAN: In this, in this...

SIGRIST: The one on Pitt Street.

SUSSMAN: Oh, yeah. Until, until, let's see. I was about thirteen years old.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you lived there for a long time.

SUSSMAN: Yeah. Yes. I knew the eastside very well.

SIGRIST: Can you, can you describe what the neighborhood was like, what it, what it looked like, what it sounded like?

SUSSMAN: It was very nice. It was very interesting. Living in, the cost of living was cheap. A soda was two cents, three cents, five cents. We had push carts all around the neighborhood. Rivington Street, Stanton Street, Avenue C, all push carts, all tenement push carts. And the line, and my, my mother had to hang out her laundry in the back yard. There was a line going up there, and

she had to put, back yard. And we needed, instead of Frigidaire, the man used to bring up i, we used to call the iceman up there. For a dime he used to come up to the fourth floor. And we had a sort of a box where we put the piece of ice under there, and, and that's how we lived, you know.

SIGRIST: What kind of stove did you have in the kitchen?

SUSSMAN: We had a, just like a, a four, how can I explain that? We had a stove, just like a, and four covers on it. That's just to heat it up. Just like a range, you know, and...

SIGRIST: Was it a gas stove?

SUSSMAN: A gas stove, yes.

SIGRIST: Gas? Did you have electricity in this apartment or did you have gas light?

SUSSMAN: No, we had electricity. Yeah, we had electricity. Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Did, did you, how did the, how did you heat the apartment, do you remember?

SUSSMAN: To heat the apartment we had to use the stove. There was no

heating facilities. We used the stove. You know, we put some wood in, we put some coal in, and all that. That's how we kept the, and we had a, we had a, it's called a washtub, or a sink there. And we had to take a bath in, in that sink, in that washtub. And I remember that.

SIGRIST: How often did you take a bath in those days?

SUSSMAN: Well, we can say, my mother, according to my mother every week or so, you know. And we washed things, and all that, and hanged it outside. (he laughs) It was...

SIGRIST: Who lived in this neighborhood? Was this primarily a Jewish neighborhood, or...

SUSSMAN: Mostly Jewish. Most, and, let's see. Yes. Oh, yeah, we had some Italian people there living in, on Pitt Street. This, the church, it still exists. The church is still there. There's a church right where we lived. I lived at 89 Pitt Street. We had Italians and the Jewish people. Mostly Jewish and Italian. And when we were young, I was thirteen years old, I used to have some ba, fights with kids. And Hamilton Fish Park, around there, and right in the park. There was...

SIGRIST: How would the kids fight each other. How, how would that happen?

SUSSMAN: Threw, threw stones at each other. We had a, what do you call it?
(he laughs) The Jewish, Jewish people, the Jewish kids and the
Italians kids threw rocks and each other and all that. But we, it
was not bad. And, and I grew up, and, I grew up. I was sick
during that time. I couldn't go to school.

SIGRIST: Why were you sick? What was wrong?

SUSSMAN: Well, I had some kind of a, I don't want to say, thank God I'm all
right. I would say epilepsy during that time. How did I get
that? I got scared in Europe.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that?

SUSSMAN: Yes. I got scared, and started shaking. The kids had a fight at
the (???). And we had to suff, and when we came here, the doctors
didn't know that, about that thing, see? So, that's what happens.
When, so, I didn't go to school. But I had a teacher come up
there, up my apartment. Thank God I went to Gouvernier Hospital.
They, and they, thank God everything is fine, was fine...

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt as a kid being incapacitated as a kid
like this? I mean, did you feel...

SUSSMAN: How did I feel?

SIGRIST: Yeah, did you feel different from the other kids, or...

SUSSMAN: Sure. Oh, sure. I was afraid to go down the street, and all that. I had to be watched, and all that.

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little kid? What was your personality like?

SUSSMAN: Very nice Very nice personality. Everybody liked me. (he laughs) And very ni, I had friends, nice friends. As I grew up and I was working in the, I got a job in a, in a fruit and vegetable store on my street.

SIGRIST: Was that your first job?

SUSSMAN: My first job? Yeah.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

SUSSMAN: I was about thirteen, I got a job, worked there, and support, you know, my mother and my brothers were there living with us also. And I got a job, and I grew up and...

SIGRIST: Tell me about your, your mother in America. Did she get a job?

SUSSMAN: Well, no. She was a house, a house, housewife. She was cooking, you know, and cleaning, and...

SIGRIST: How did she learn English?

SUSSMAN: Well, how did she, she learn, she knew not too much of the English. But my brother started coming from school, and they would talk in English. They, you know, and then we bought some paper, and we told her so and so, and she learned English, you know. That's the way she learned English.

SIGRIST: Of course, I assume you father knew some English.

SUSSMAN: Yes. Yes. Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did your, having been separated for a few years, how did you parents get along once they were back together?

SUSSMAN: You mean when they were, when they were, how did they get along...

SIGRIST: Right, when they had to live together again...

SUSSMAN: Actually we had family quarrels. You know. We were very poor.

Father was working so, nine hours a day and so much. You know, the pressure and all that, until my brothers grew up. And they were...

SIGRIST: Did he work in the neighborhood, your father, or did he have to go somewhere else?

SUSSMAN: Yeah, he, he wor, he worked up in the garment center on 29th Street, around there, 7th Avenue used to be the garment center. And...

SIGRIST: Did a lot of immigrants work in that industry?

SUSSMAN: Yes. Yes. They used to work, women and men. And that was the, during that, yes.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun when you were a kid on the lower eastside?

SUSSMAN: What do you mean?

SIGRIST: What kind of entertainment did you have?

SUSSMAN: Movies. That was my, I loved movies, I used, we used, on the eastside...

SIGRIST: These were silent films at that time?

SUSSMAN: Eh?

SIGRIST: It would have been silent films at that time.

SUSSMAN: Silent films. William, I remember the star William S. Hard, Pearl White, and all this. We used to go to Clinton Street, was the name of the street where we had to go. There was five movies there. And I went every week. Serials, you know, stars and all that. I loved the movies.

SIGRIST: How much did the movies cost then?

SUSSMAN: Oh, twen, fifteen cents.

SIGRIST: Was that for one movie, or is that for...

SUSSMAN: No, for about two movies, with Pathe News. Pathe. They used to give the news. And all that, and that's how we enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go to the Yiddish theater or any of the live theaters?

SUSSMAN: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the Yiddish theater in that neighborhood.

SUSSMAN: Well, do you, have you, would you know what the Yiddish theater is?

SIGRIST: I know a little bit about it.

SUSSMAN: The Yiddish, the Yiddish theater was wonderful. I, when I reached about seventeen years I took my mother and my, they, we got, we took our grandmother over.

SIGRIST: Oh, you brought your grandmother over.

SUSSMAN: I brought my grandmother...

SIGRIST: What year did Grandma come...

SUSSMAN: Oh, well before the war start, 19, it was going, 1913. Then the war started in 1914. We brought her over. I, I, I loved Yiddish theater. They had Morrey Schwartz, is a Shakespearean actor. Then there's others you wouldn't know the names, you know, we loved them. The sing, from then on, I, when I started to, when I went to the theater with my fa, we went there, we heard, sing,

Yiddish, you know, Yiddish. I learned the Yiddish singing. I learned it from them. I still sing it now. You know. I know a lot of songs.

SIGRIST: Did you speak Yiddish in the house or did you speak Polish?

SUSSMAN: We speak, we, no, we spoke Yiddish in the house. In the house.

SIGRIST: So you understood Yiddish, obviously.

SUSSMAN: I understood, yeah. I told my mother, "Mama, mama, red nicht, red nicht kein Polish." I mean, "don't talk Polish." "Red Yiddish, so we can now understand." And so...

SIGRIST: So it was great having the Yiddish theater, because it was a language...

SUSSMAN: It was wonderful there.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it was it like to attend an evening at the Yiddish theater? Was it like vaudeville, or was it one play that you would go to? What, what would an evening's entertainment at the Yiddish theater consist of?

SUSSMAN: At the Yiddish theater it was one play, which is, took about two

and a half hours, and, you know, and we went there, and...

SIGRIST: Was there a general theme to these plays, would you say?

SUSSMAN: There was a theme. Yes. There was a, the dibbick (ph), and there was a lot of (he laughs), Morrey Schwartz was a Shakespeare, we went there. And, you know, it didn't cost much. A ticket cost about a dollar.

SIGRIST: So the Yiddish theater was very important to this community.

SUSSMAN: Very important. Very important for the, you know, lived around the neighbor. Most of it was, ninety percent was Yiddish around Second Ave, you know the street, Second Avenue was all Yiddish theater like Broadway. And Orchard Street, where, you know...

SIGRIST: So all the theaters were in, in that area.

SUSSMAN: Around and in there, yes. And, and that's...

SIGRIST: Tell me about your religious life when you came to America?

SUSSMAN: Now, my...

SIGRIST: Were your parents religious people?

SUSSMAN: Now, my father, my fa, my dad was religious. And, and he brought us up like, you know, he wanted us to be religious. And we came here to go to synagogue. When I was thirteen years old I got bar mitzvah. Bar mitzvah. You know what that means? Become a man.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about your bar mitzvah.

SUSSMAN: Bar mitzvah? Well, when I, when you get thirteen years old, you're a man according to the Jewish religion. And we came in the synagogue, and I had a, I had a, to scri, I had a torah. You know what a torah is? And I read, and then when I got bar mitzva'd they threw nuts and raisins on us, and, and, and, I, I didn't like it very much, when I grew up. You know. But my father was a very strict man. He was very strict. You must, you must come to the synagogue on Saturday. You know, Friday and Saturday.

SIGRIST: Would you say he was an orthodox Jew?

SUSSMAN: He was orthodox Jew. He says if you came late, he used to shout at me, or give me a slap sometimes, you know, and...

SIGRIST: So this was very important to him.

SUSSMAN: It was very important. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Was she less so?

SUSSMAN: She, she was, she went along with my dad, you know. But she protected us, the children. She said to my father, "Don't you dare hit him," and all that. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: She was the peacemaker.

SUSSMAN: Peacemaker, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how you practiced your religion in your home. What kinds of things did you do at home to practice your religion?

SUSSMAN: My religion? Well, I, I knew the, the alphabets of, of the, what do call the sither (ph), prayer book. I knew about. Because when I, I was very good. I caught up with the Jewish language. Like this used to be the forwards during that time. And all that. And, I caught up with the Jewish lang, a rab...

SIGRIST: You're talking about the Yiddish newspapers?

SUSSMAN: Yes. And a, yes, and a rabbi used to come in my house, because I couldn't go to school. I was, he taught me the Yiddish, a b c of the Yiddish. So that's how I grew up, see? When I, and, I grew

up, and my brothers, my middle brother went to college. He went to, you know, he became a writer. A writer, you know. And he grew up there. Then he got married, and my older brother got married, and I was still single, okay.

SIGRIST: Where they a lot older than you, your brother?

SUSSMAN: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: How much older.

SUSSMAN: Well, I would say when I was twelve, they were about, between, two, two years older from each other.

SIGRIST: But they were more than two years older than you?

SUSSMAN: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

SUSSMAN: Yes. So they grew up.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what your, I want to get back to your parents for a second. Can you tell me a little bit, you said your father was a stern and strict man.

SUSSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When you think back to your childhood, not older, but when you were a kid, what sticks out in your mind about your dad? Is there a certain instance, a certain story that you always remember about your father?

SUSSMAN: Sticks out? That he was a tyrant.

SIGRIST: Is there a specific instance that you remember? Maybe sometime you did something wrong specifically that you remember?

SUSSMAN: That I did something wrong? Well, I don't remember doing anything wrong, but...

SIGRIST: Just in general.

SUSSMAN: In general, you know.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

SUSSMAN: Handsome looking. I wonder why I can't get no pictures here, about when we came off the ship. I don't know why. I don't know. But he was handsome. Tall and handsome. And...

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about his background, anything about his growing up?

SUSSMAN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

SUSSMAN: I don't know. He was a stern man, that's what he was, but...

SIGRIST: What about your mom? What was her personality like?

SUSSMAN: Her pers, very nice personality. Such a sweet woman. She was very nice to people, you know, and all that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember...

SUSSMAN: She...

SIGRIST: ...a specific story about her when you were a kid growing up, something that sticks out in your mind when you think about your mom?

SUSSMAN: About my mom?

SIGRIST: Something she did maybe for you once, or...

SUSSMAN: Well, she had to take care of me, and, I don't...

SIGRIST: When you were ill?

SUSSMAN: When I was ill she had to take care of me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of treatment they gave you when you were sick?

SUSSMAN: Treatment?

SIGRIST: Yeah. What kind of, do you remember...

SUSSMAN: I went to...

SIGRIST: ...if they gave you medicine...

SUSSMAN: Medicine.

SIGRIST: ...or if they gave you physical therapy...

SUSSMAN: Medicine. Medicine. That helped me. Thank God, that helped me.
We went to Gouvernier Hospital to help me. I got out of that

thing. So, when I grew up, I, I went to, all right I'll tell you what happened dur...

SIGRIST: Did you go to school?

SUSSMAN: No, I couldn't go to school.

SIGRIST: At all.

SUSSMAN: I'm self, as, you know, I'm, I'm self learned. I can read English very well. I didn't go to school. I can read papers, I can read Yiddish. And then I, I remember things. And I grew up self learned. That's, and, I grew up, and then I did a lot of, then, when there's, when, during the war, I forgot what I was going to say. I, I went to work, you know, selling the fruits and all that, vegetables...

SIGRIST: You were thirteen, you said.

SUSSMAN: I was thirteen, fourteen, I helped her. And then...

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of, of World War One, and what was going on in New York at that time, how it might have affected your life, other than bringing your grandmother over here to get her out of there?

SUSSMAN: Well, recollect, recollection, I was, World War One I was, already thirteen, fourteen, about fifteen years old, because it started in 1914.

SIGRIST: And ended in 1918.

SUSSMAN: The war of the, 1918. I remember President Wilson? I remember him, and...

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing anything in New York, like soldiers or anything like that?

SUSSMAN: There was, I saw soldiers, you know, and coming of the, coming in to New York. Not as much, I remember more in the second world war.

SIGRIST: Of course you were much older then.

SUSSMAN: Much older.

SIGRIST: All right. So you got your job in the, in the, the fruit and vegetable store.

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me, what, what did you have to do? What was your task in the, in the store?

SUSSMAN: In the store? Well, I had to go with my, with the, with my boss who had a horse and wagon. Go down to the market, the fruit market down Water Street, somewhere around there. There was fruit mar, Fulton Street. Used to go and help him. I used to sell, I used to sell. I was a salesman. Fruit, you know, fruit, the vegetables, and all that. That was my part. So, and then, there came, the world, the Depression.

SIGRIST: Now, we're going too fast through time, here.

SUSSMAN: Too fast. Let's...

SIGRIST: Did you have to give, do you know how much you got paid when you were...

SUSSMAN: Where, where, at the fruit...

SIGRIST: At the fruit place.

SUSSMAN: Twelve dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Did you have to contribute that to the household?

SUSSMAN: To the household, yes.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Now what jobs did your older brothers have?

SUSSMAN: Well, my older brother had a job in the thread industry, thread. You know, threads? And, and my middle brother had a job in the post office. He was working for the post office for years, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you know how they got those jobs?

SUSSMAN: Well, when he, my middle brother went to college, and he got the job, you know. He was lucky to get a job in the post office. My older brother...

SIGRIST: So he didn't get that job until after he was out of school.

SUSSMAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: But when you first got, you know, or when you were growing up...

SUSSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...do you remember them having jobs.

SUSSMAN: No, they were too young. They had...

SIGRIST: They were in school?

SUSSMAN: ...school, see? And, now what else am I going to say.

SIGRIST: We're talking about working in the fruit and vegetable place.

SUSSMAN: Yeah, then, yes. Then I grew up. And there was the Depression there. So during the Depression, that was 19, forget what it was, what year it was.

SIGRIST: '29 is when the crash happened.

SUSSMAN: 1929. The crash. And I used to sell apples, a nick, for a nickel apiece, I used to sell to make some money. And then...

SIGRIST: How did the Depression affect your father and his job?

SUSSMAN: No good. He got sick, and you know what I mean. And...

SIGRIST: Did he lose his job?

SUSSMAN: Yeah, he lost his job.

SIGRIST: So how was the family supporting themselves?

SUSSMAN: Well then, my brother's helped a little bit.

SIGRIST: Were they married by that time?

SUSSMAN: No, they weren't married yet. So, they, well that, and, so that's how I got along. And, and selling apples and all of sudden during the, oh, I remember. Where shall I start now? I remember the President Kennedy being assassinated.

SIGRIST: Well, wait, wait...

SUSSMAN: That's going to far. (they laugh) (dialogue unintelligible)
...coming here. Well what I am talking...

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about the Depression in New York.

SUSSMAN: It was very bad.

SIGRIST: Talk about what you saw at that time in New York.

SUSSMAN: I saw, I saw selling apples in New York, and...

SIGRIST: That's what you were doing. But what kinds of things did you see during the Depression that stuck out in your mind.

SUSSMAN: Well, oh, during the Depression. People were, people were thrown of the, they couldn't pay their rent. They were thrown out by the marshals. They threw their furniture out. That's what I saw. And...

SIGRIST: Was the lower eastside still a Jewish neighborhood at that time?

SUSSMAN: During that time, yes.

SIGRIST: Still at that time.

SUSSMAN: Yeah, it was still at that time.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever go to work to help bring in money?

SUSSMAN: Never. Never. She was a house, a housewife, cooking and sewing, and all that. And, I guess that's about, then I can go one more when you let me tell you...

SIGRIST: All right. Go ahead.

SUSSMAN: What should I tell you now? Oh...

SIGRIST: Well, get us to the 1940's. Since we've gone through the '30's, go to the '40's

SUSSMAN: 1940. Okay, we come to the '40's. 1930, '33, '35. Then there was the, there was the, the Wall Street crash, and then I didn't have a job. So I went to the New York State employment for a job. And they gave me a job in, in a liquor store on Fourteenth Street, whereas I learned the trade while working in the liquor, the brands of the trade. Then I, somebody told me, why don't you go up, if you know the trade, why don't you become a bartender. So the New York State employment had a job for me at the Astor Hotel. That's the best part of it. I got a job in the Astor Hotel. They needed a bar boy. Now, when I came there, they needed a, a, a, there was a wine cellar steward who took care of the, all the liquor. A steward. And he, and I, I worked down in the cellar with five other men. They told me, "How come a Jewish boy would work there in the wine cellar?" So I says, "I have to

make a living." You know, for my mother. But the wine steward was very nice. He was German fellow. I forget his name, must have forgot. But I learned the trade. Then along came the union, and they said we'll make you for a bus, for a bar boy. You know what a bar boy is. To help the bartenders. So I worked there so many years. I worked, then all of a sudden they said, "I'm going to make you a bartender, now that you know the trade." So I became a bartender in the Astor Hotel. I worked there fifteen years, and I knew the, I knew most of the movie stars that came there. They had Nelson Eddy, Jimmy Durante and all the politicians came there. And I served them. What did they drink? Martinis. And they, I learned the trade as a bartender.

SIGRIST: What year did you start working at the Astor?

SUSSMAN: Oh, jeepers. Let me see. It's about thirty years ago. Thirty years ago at the Astor.

SIGRIST: Had your father died by this point?

SUSSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

SUSSMAN: Heart trouble.

SIGRIST: How old was he when he died?

SUSSMAN: He was only, sev, seventy-two.

SIGRIST: Was that tough on your mom?

SUSSMAN: It was tough on my mom, but my brothers and all, we supported her.
And then my brothers got married. And she was alone, and it was hard for her to get during that time welfare, not like now. It was hard on her.

SIGRIST: Were you still living with your mom at that point?

SUSSMAN: I was still living with my mom, see?

SIGRIST: So how old are you at this point, that you were working at the Astor?

SUSSMAN: Now? How old was I when I was working at the Astor? Let me see.
I was, I was about twenty-five years old.

SIGRIST: Tell me, you must have some stories about working at the Astor Hotel. You...

SUSSMAN: In the Astor?

SIGRIST: Tell me, if you have any of those stories. Let's get them on tape.

SUSSMAN: Well, here's a, I can tell you stories. I was a bartender. Let's go from a bartender. Oh, yeah. When I came in the Astor there was eight bartenders there. Night and day shifts. When I became a bartender, let's go from there. They asked me, asked me why are you a Jew, a Jewish boy works, now this one got me sore. I says, "Look." I says, "I'm trying to make a living." That's why I'm, or, they were my best friends thereafter. My best friends. And I had so many people come there. I had, they made a, like I talk. One here in experience. I was, wait a minute, there were men sitting around the bar. And one guy, one guy was drinking there. And all of a sudden his hand goes to the other man's, feels. (he gestures) So the other man complained to me. He's a, a, what do you call it, one of the, what do you call it, flowery guy, the, that's what he says. You know. They told me. So I had to tell the manager. The manager says, the manager, what the manager did is, is put some undercover men there, and, at the bar. And those fellows that try, he was a fairy, I don't want to say a fairy. You know what a fairy is? Okay. And, and, and they caught, they caught, they caught them and they chased them out. That's one, one. So...

SIGRIST: Do you remember an instance where a fight broke out in the bar, or something like that one time?

SUSSMAN: Bar, a fight? Well, let me, there, there was a fight there between two men there. One was drunk, and he hit this guy, and, that's, I don't know much about it.

SIGRIST: Was that exciting for this kid who grew up on the lower eastside to be working in a place like the Astor Hotel?

SUSSMAN: I loved that. Now, here's two things I loved. The bartender. I told my mother, or my brother's, "I want to be an actor." So what did I do? So during the time I had, before I became, I went, there was, Long Island Studio. Paramount Pictures. So I went out there, and I got a job as an extra. And, and when I went, and, and when, then they hired extras, so, I says, "Can I come the next day and the next day?" He says, "Well, we have so many. The casting director." I says, "Here's five dollars." He says, "Okay, you can come the next day." And all that. I got a job as an, as an extra.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first movie was that you that were in?

SUSSMAN: It was the first movie, God Gave Me Twenty Cents, and a lot of

other movies that I made. All right, so, where do I go from there? I got a job. I was still working for the Astor. The Astor caught on fire. One day the whole, the whole damn thing burnt down. I was working there fifteen years. And so, so it caught on fire, and they closed the Astor, and they gave us severance pay. And then I got a job with the Roger Smith Corp., bar on Lexington Avenue and Thirty-seventh Street. I worked there ten years, there. And I was, then I, so, I made a lot of tips, and, you know. Then I, and at age thirty-five I got married.

SIGRIST: And whom did you marry?

SUSSMAN: I married a beautiful girl. She lived in my neighborhood where I lived.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

SUSSMAN: Her name was, her name was Frieda Sobel, Sobel.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

SUSSMAN: S-, S-O-B-E-L. Frieda her first name. She lived across the street. There was tenements. And whenever I came down, whenever I passed by there, there was a girl standing at the stoop. There were stoops. She kept looking at me. And I looked at her. Well,

here's what happened. So then the war broke out, second world war, broke out. And I became an air raid warden. You know what the air raid warden was? You know what it is. We had, we had a store on the same street. And, you know, we took care of tenants, we told to take the lights off during the 1940, '41, took care, I was, I was the captain of the air raid warden. And we used to have meetings. And one day a young lady comes over to me. And she says to me, "Hello, Max. I enjoyed your, your speech," and all that. I says, "Thank you." So we got to talking to each other. She says her name is Mimi. She says, "I have an older sister, would, that you would like to meet." She told me that. I says, "Bring her down to the meeting." And sure, she came down to the meeting, and I made a speech, and then we introduced each other, and she became, we came in love with each other. That's when, who I married.

SIGRIST: And what year did get married?

SUSSMAN: What year? Well, let's see. '35, well, I would say, year '40...

SIGRIST: Was it before the war or after the war?

SUSSMAN: It was after the war.

SIGRIST: After the war.

SUSSMAN: After the war.

SIGRIST: Did you have children?

SUSSMAN: One child. It was, his name was Leslie Sussman. He is now an author. He works for the Daily News. He's an author. He writes articles. And he's a, he works for the film, film producers. He's, not an agent, something else. He works now. He works for the news. (he coughs) My only child, and he's not married. (he laughs) He's not married. But that's all I had, one child. Very nice guy. And...

SIGRIST: How many years were you married.

SUSSMAN: Married forty-one years. Then my wife passed away.

SIGRIST: I see.

SUSSMAN: It was terrible. She passed away. She was sick. Cancer, and all that. And I had to move away, I lived at FDR drive for thirty years. Thirty years, thirty, then I moved. I got an apartment when my wife died at Seward (ph) Park where I live now. And, very nice, and I joined...

SIGRIST: Tell me about your life now. Tell me, tell me how you spend your time now.

SUSSMAN: Beautiful. Three years I got my, three years ago when my wife died, I got an apartment here at Seward Park, which has all the night, twenty-four hours. I'll tell what my life is, I joined, then I reached a certain sta, age of, when I joined the club. Senior citizens, okay? Three years ago. So I joined senior citizens. I joined another organization that helps handicapped. I joined Education Alliance. It's probably know that, on the east side. Education Alliance. I joined, I belong to four organizations right now. When I, three years ago on a Friday, we, we, we used to sing and dance. I know hoe to sing, and, and in comes a girl on Friday. She says she would like to take photograph of about ten people. So I, I was there, the second one. She took my name and address. I says, "Can you please tell me what this is for?" She says, "You'll find out." The next day I get a call. She says, "Meet us at the Good Companion, eight o'clock in the morning." And along comes a limousine, and we were three, five men and five women. And they told us to get into the limousine. And he says, I says to the chauffeur, "Where are we going." He says, "You'll find out." So we end up at the Waldorf Astoria. "Where, what floor are we going?" I says, "You'll find out." We go up on the eighteenth floor. We see, we see Woody Allen Production working there. As extras they took, he took us.

That's where we were working. We made that film Crime and Misdemeanor. Maybe you probably heard of, probably saw me in there. And, and we were working seven days there. He treated us wonderful as extras. Waldorf Astoria gave us the foods, and, you know...

SIGRIST: What kind of a scene were you in?

SUSSMAN: Oh, I was in a scene, one, every day I had to put on a tuxedo, wear a tuxedo. I was in the wedding scene. If you saw the wedding scene, if you saw me sitting near a table, drinking champagne. You didn't see that.

SIGRIST: I didn't see the film, but...

SUSSMAN: You can get. And here, you're shooting for the movies, and Woody Allen comes over to me. He says, "Max," he calls me Max like you call me, I call. He says, "Keep quiet. Don't, don't shake the glass, the champagne." Actually it was ginger ale, and we drank it, and the camera behind me shooting. He says, "Don't talk, but just make with your mouth." I found out, "Why do I, why can't I talk?" He says, "We have to pay you four hundred dollars for each word you say," am I right, you're right. (he laughs) I worked there. Seven, seven days, he gave us, it was during Passover at that time. And we had to separate, he gave us, matzos for the

Jewish. Matzo. Passover, you know. Different, it was very nice. Well since then I made a movie, since then, next, two weeks later, I get another call. We like to do a movie. "Are you Max Sussman?" I says, "Yes." "We want to do a movie on the eastside." So we went, he says, "Come down to Twenty-fifth Street.(he coughs) Twenty-fifth Street and Tenth Avenue." There's the movie studios there. And we came over, and the director, the assistant director came over to me. He says, we were about ten people. He, I, he says, "Wait around a few minutes." So there's a call. "Max Sussman next." I walk in a dark room, I see five Japanese guys sitting there in the dark, and they look at me. I got scared. And the reason they looked at me, they were, they were the producers. They were the money men. And they said to the assistant director, okay, I'm all right. So, we went down the following day. We made a movie on the, on, on the eastside, Crosby Street, near Broadway in the alley. I had to grow a beard, because I was suppose to starve, and lay on the floor. And along comes a woman with a, with rags, what do you call a woman with rags. And she says to me, she bends down, she says, "Are you hungry?" I'm not supposed to talk. She asks, okay. We got, we got dressed in the, in the dressing room. We have, you know, the dressing rooms. And this woman, she's Japanese, she says to me, "Can you hold hands with me?" I says, "Sure." And there's the news photographer taking photos. And then when she left, I says to the news photographer, "Who is she?"

She says, "Ono Yoko, Yoko Ono." And she, and they made a movie, the homeless, and they send that to Japan. And then while I was, with the, so we made movies. Then I got another movie in the park with a colored movie producer. They come down to the club where we are. Picked me.

SIGRIST: Who would have thought a little kid from Poland would end up here.
(he laughs)

SUSSMAN: From Poland. They all say that.

SIGRIST: Well, well, we have just a minute left. But I want to ask you, you know, do have any thoughts about where you came from and where you are now? What, what do you attribute to your success? I mean, how, how did you end up being...

SUSSMAN: My tribute to success is America. I can't say anything about where I was born. I mean, we were very poor, and I, you know. There are a lot of things. I read once, there are a lot of things. And, we still do. We help senior citizens now.

SIGRIST: If you, if you had to give some advice to somebody listening to this tape a hundred years from now, what advice would you give them?

SUSSMAN: Oh, that's, giving advice?

SUSSMAN: What would you want to say to someone a hundred years from now?

SUSSMAN: I'd say this is, this was a great country. I mean, I can say for anybody, where else but here? I'm happy that we're lucky to come here, and all that. And, just do, you know, try your, it's the country. Everybody has op, an opportunity. If you're, you know. That's me. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) That's why I'm still going to mov, they still call me, the movies, and all that. Oh yes, I forgot to tell you. A reporter, they call, have you got time yet.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Just one more story.

SUSSMAN: They call me here. A year and a half ago I got a call from a producer. "Mr. Sussman Max?" I says, "Yes." "Meet me at Battery Park, near the Ellis Island office." And so I come down there. And I say, that producer, "Hello, Sussman." So three women and three men, "We're going to shoot a movie at Ellis Island." So we went across here and we shot a movie here in, outside the park, and one inside the main, where I came in. And they asked me, the, those, what's the man, the prod, the ac, no, the producer. Oh, the director ask me questions while we shooting the movies. "What happened," like you do, "on the ship? Was there any fun there?"

What did you do?" He, yes. And they send me a recording. What do you call it. A recording somewhere. And so I made a movie here. So there you are.

SIGRIST: Everyone wants to know.

SUSSMAN: Wants to know.

SIGRIST: Everyone wants to know. (he laughs)

SUSSMAN: So there you are.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Sussman, I want to thank you very much for coming out to Ellis Island.

SUSSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Wait, wait.

SUSSMAN: No, I'm not going yet.

SIGRIST: Okay. We'll look at those after I turn the tape off. But, anyway, I want to thank you very much. It's been a pleasure. And, and you've certainly had an interesting life, so...

SUSSMAN: Well, there more to tell, but I forgot. I can tell you more, can I say a few more words, no.

SIGRIST: We, we've got to stop now. We're just about out of tape, but...

SUSSMAN: Okay. Never mind.

SIGRIST: ...anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Max Sussman here at Ellis Island on Sunday, June 20th, Father's Day, 1993. Thank you very much, sir.

SUSSMAN: Yeah.