EI-354
LEAH SONNENSHEIN SHAIN
BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 25, 1920
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 20, 1993
RUNNING TIME: 43:20
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

Historian's Note: Mrs.Shain's aunt, Pearl Weiser, was deported from Ellis Island in the late 1920's

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is July 20, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Leah Shain. Mrs. Shain is going to talk about her aunt, who was detained for around five months, some time in the mid to late 1920's here at Ellis Island. Her aunt had come from what was then Romania, and her aunt was eventually deported and sent back. Mrs. Shain is going to tell us about what she remembers about visiting her aunt, and also some background about her aunt, family information, that sort of thing. Anyway, welcome. Thank you very much for coming.

SHAIN: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Shain, can we begin by you giving me your full name with your maiden name in that, please?

SHAIN: Yes. Leah Sonnenshein Shain.

SIGRIST: Can you spell your maiden name for us, please?

SHAIN: S-O-N-N-E-N-S-H-E-I-N.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, please?

SHAIN: September 25, 1920.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

SHAIN: In Manhattan.

SIGRIST: Right here in New York. Can you just give me sort of a thumbnail history of your own background, your parents, where they came from, that sort of thing?

SHAIN: My parents came from the same town. They came from the same town that my aunt had come from. But since they came before the First World War, it was then part of czarist Russia. My parents did not come together. My father came first. My mother came about two years afterwards, because my father was here and so she kind of left home, even

though they paid for her passage. Because I don't think her parents thought it was a suitable match. Her parents were much better off than my father's parents were, and so I guess they just didn't approval. My mother came here, and then married my father, who was a working man.

SIGRIST: He had come previously.

SHAIN: He had come two years before.

SIGRIST: Is your aunt your mother's sister or your father's?

SHAIN: My mother's sister, my mother's younger sister. My mother was the oldest sister in her family.

SIGRIST: For the sake of record, could you please give us your parents' names, please?

SHAIN: My father was Morris Sonnenshein. My mother was Fanny Weiser Sonnenshein.

SIGRIST: And spell Weiser, please.

SHAIN: W-E-I-S-E-R.

SIGRIST: So your aunt's last name would be Weiser.

SHAIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Her first name was?

SHAIN: Was Pearl.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about maybe what your mother might have relayed to you about the sisters growing up together, maybe some background information about your aunt and your mother when they were growing up.

SHAIN: I think there was a large separation in ages between my mother and that particular sister. Because she was almost the youngest person in the family. So I don't know if there was a background, except that I know that my grandparents had a store, and they sold leather and beans. I never did get the combination, but I guess you'd call it dry goods of some kind. And very often my mother was left to mind the store if her mother or father had to be away, and she also was left to mind the smaller children. So it was kind of as a surrogate mother that her relationship with her sister was. And not until after my aunt came did it become very apparent that there obviously was a great love that my mother had for this sister. And I think it stemmed from the fact that as they were growing up she was left in charge. And instead of hating her, as I think I might have, (she laughs) she took care of her and seemed to want to.

SIGRIST: Were your parents instrumental in bringing your aunt over to this country? For instance, were they her sponsors?

SHAIN: No. My aunt was married to a man who was here and was gainfully employed. Married back in Romania and he did what lots of people did at that time. He came to get a job and to earn money, and then fully intended to bring his wife here to live with him, never foresaw that there would be any kind of problem, and he did that. He had a job . . .

SIGRIST: What was his name, because she has a married name.

SHAIN: Which I don't remember. I remember his first name, and only in Jewish. But I don't remember his second name. I racked my brain, and I suppose I should have asked some of my Is-- relatives in Israel who might have known. And, if it's important, the next time I speak to them I will ask.

SIGRIST: What was his first name?

SHAIN: Khunah, which translates into Charles.

SIGRIST: That would be C-H . . .

SHAIN: C-H-U-N-A-H.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the man, because he was here in America.

SHAIN: Yes, I . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about him?

SHAIN: He was a very big man. I think of him as a giant. He was very tall, very large, had enormous hands, and very gentle. He loved us, he loved my sister and me. He visited almost every weekend with my parents and played with us and brought us things that I think we couldn't have afforded, because he was a longshoreman and worked on the docks and made a good living. And I think of him warmly and kindly. I don't know where he is. I don't know if he's alive. He might not have been, because if he is he's a very elderly man by now.

SIGRIST: What do you know of your aunt's immigration experience before she got to Ellis Island? What information do you have about . . .

SHAIN: He sent her a better steamship ticket than, for instance, my mother or father came on. They came steerage. She didn't. So she came on a better ship. So her experience on the trip here was fine, because he provided as much as he could, the best that he could. And my parents were instrumental in finding out, you know, if there were two things and one cost more money, he wanted to spend the money to make sure that she would have it as easy as possible. I now, in retrospect, think that maybe he knew that there was something wrong with her, because I now know that there really was. And for many years I thought there wasn't, but now I do know. And if you want to know why, I will tell you later on.

SIGRIST: Had he, there had been quite a lapse of time since he had seen her last.

SHAIN: Yes. But he was, as good as he was, he was not a terribly sharp-witted or clever man. He was very good-natured. If you loved him, he knew how to give love and warmth. He also knew how to be angry. But he wasn't very smart. He knew, however, that he wasn't very smart, and he was willing, for instance, he would turn to my father, who was his brother-in-law, and ask my father for advice in every step in this road. And my mother and father were grateful. They treated him like a brother-in-law or a young brother, or whatever. And they did all that they could to help him, because what he wanted was to bring his wife here and to have an apartment and to buy furniture and to live with her for the rest of his life. He didn't want the world.

So he was a decent man. Again, in retrospect, maybe not terribly high I.Q. And the first that I was aware, I knew that this aunt was coming. I knew that there was excitement, and that my mother and father were very busy, and they were looking for an apartment, and that an apartment was rented, and that it got furnished. Everything was new. He had worked and saved. He had not squandered it like other people did. He had known exactly what it was he wanted, so he prepared a home for himself and for his wife.

SIGRIST: And would you say that your mother was happy about seeing her sister?

SHAIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Because it had been quite a long time since she had seen her.

SHAIN: It had been a long time. But, I think, of that generation, each one of them in turn, anyone that they could help get out of Russia, get out of Romania. You see, you may not be aware, Jews were terribly discriminated against in Romania. They couldn't go to secondary schools. They couldn't enter the hospital if they were sick. They couldn't enter many facilities that were run by the government. So anyone who had the opportunity to help anyone in their family to come, everybody was willing. It's not that my mother was so self-sacrificing. It was, I grew up in a milieu that everybody was trying to bring who, whatever relative they had, if they could possibly afford the steamship ticket. So my mother was very happy that her sister was coming.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have photos . . .

SHAIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Or anything like that? So you knew what this woman looked like.

SHAIN: Yes, I knew what she looked like. My mother had photos. My mother even had their wedding picture, which was a formal wedding picture with a white gown and a veil and the whole thing. So I know what she looked like. She was pretty.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what happened. She came over on the ship . . .

SHAIN: She came on the ship, and my uncle and my father came down that day to meet her.

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis Island.

SHAIN: Yes, to bring her home. To bring her to our house. My mother, my sister and I and my paternal grandmother and grandfather, who were here by then, you see, because this was what families did in those days. Everybody worked to bring everybody over if they could. My father, fortunately, managed to bring his entire family here. All of his sisters, all of his brothers, his parents. And so we were all in our apartment waiting for my father and my uncle to bring my aunt home, and my mother had prepared dinner, and I can't remember everything that was said, but I remember my mother getting very nervous, my grandmother getting upset, and my grandmother and my grandfather having an argument, which stemmed out of sheer nervousness, because neither one of them had anything to be fighting with each other about, but since they were both very nervous, why are they so late, why, what has happened? They were hours and hours late.

And my uncle and my father finally came in without my aunt. And they told us that my aunt had not passed the spoken question period. Now, I can't swear to what I'm going to tell you next, but that's what I remember, that she had told them, by them I mean, by the time my father and my uncle had come home, they had seen her already, but she was not allowed to leave. And she had told them that she had been physically examined and that was fine, and then somebody started to ask her questions, and one of the questions was, "How many feet does a horse have?" I think if I live to be a hundred I will never forget that. And my aunt's answer, as she explained it to her husband and my father, was she didn't know was he fooling her, was he trying to trick her, or was it a serious question. So she didn't answer.

When he repeated it, she might have answered, but I think by then she was totally confused and maybe did not really know how many feet a horse had. I don't know. But that was the question that seemed to stop her. And my father and my uncle were told that they could come back the next day, because by then it was night, and find out some more particulars, and they did. And they were told that she was slated for deportation because she was, they didn't know how badly, but she was mentally retarded. I don't know what words they used, because I'm not sure even my father would have understood in English the words "mentally retarded" at that time. But they came back home with that information and my uncle was not willing to have his wife just go back. And he said to my father and my mother that he needed help, but he was willing and wanted to hire an immigration attorney again, and immigration is my word.

He might not have known how to use it. He wanted my father to find a good attorney and to go to Washington, if need be, to go and do whatever needed doing, to try to get her to be allowed into the United States. My father asked people and was eventually sent to an attorney

who hired investigators to find out what had happened in this interrogation period, and it seemed as though she didn't know how many feet a horse had. I was never certain whether that was a trick question done to trick people or not. However, it didn't matter. So the attorneys were hired. An attorney went to Washington a number of times. My father and my uncle went to Washington a number of times.

The family started a process of coming to Ellis Island every Saturday or Sunday. My sister, my mother, my father, my uncle and I would come. And I have a very vivid memory of my father and my uncle holding these huge shopping bags full of food because when we would come here, and it was a very long rooms, it looked like it lasted for millions of miles at that time, and my aunt would be waiting for us, and then we would all proceed to have dinner together, and talk. We could speak only in Yiddish, because it was the only common language that we had with my aunt, but both my sister and I could speak Yiddish, so we got to know my aunt.

SIGRIST: You were about how old at this time?

SHAIN: I was, I would say somewhere between six and eight. And my sister was two years older. But we got to know her. We got to like her. She was a very pretty woman. She spoke softly and gently. She enjoyed our coming. She dreaded going back. She very, very much wanted to come and live with her husband. There seemed to be genuine affection between the two of them, as much as I could tell. I was a child. But after this four or five month period, it seems as though the attorney had gone down every avenue that there was to go, and finances was not the problem. My uncle would have kept paying. He would have kept working, and if the attorney had said, "Well, I need more money to file another thing," my uncle would have done it gladly.

But the attorney finally said, "We have done everything we can. We've lost. She has got to go back." She eventually was sent back. We got pictures of her. She had to go back and live with her parents, which she did. And after a few years there was still a close relationship between my uncle and my parents and my sister and I. And my parents were really heartbroken for him and for her. But I guess they were very pragmatic, which was good. Because they said to my uncle, "You're a young man. You're not going to go back to Romania to live. Get a legal divorce. You will meet a young woman who will want to marry you, whom you will marry. So you'll marry here, and you'll have children, and you'll have a life. This way you don't have anything." And they convinced him that they would not think badly of him, and if he felt badly that if he made a small kind of a contribution to her upkeep, then certainly he had no more responsibility, that he had done as much as he possibly could to provide her with the good life. That through no fault of his own it was not possible, so he should not suffer.

This relationship lasted. I mean, between my family and him. And one fine day, after a while, he brought a very nice lady to introduce her, and he married her, and he did have a family and went into business. Never very bright, but a decent, upstanding, good citizen of the United States. My aunt stayed in this small town of Khotyn in Bessarabia and

lived with her parents, and then the German Army invaded their town. And this I know because it was told to me by a cousin who was still alive in Israel, who lived through this, that they were not taken to an enclosed concentration camp as we imagine concentration camps, you know, not like Auschwitz. They were taken to what they called a lager, which is like a built-in jail. But she said it was a big fence, a big field with tremendous fences around it. And until they got them organized, they were just there. She said every day people died, and you heard shots.

And one day the German soldiers announced that for the older people, if they wanted to go back home, they would allow them to go back to the town and go back to their homes. My grandmother and grandfather, who were quite elderly, talked it over and said, "We really can't live out here. We'll die in a day or two anyway. So we'll take our chances." So they took this daughter, Pearl, and started to go back to town with other elderly people, and my cousin said a few minutes after they locked the gates again, they heard these bursts of machine-gun fire. And she said so what the Germans did, they got them all out there on the field and they shot them all. My aunt, my grandmother, my grandfather were never seen or heard from again, so we have to believe that the Holocaust killed them.

However, I, not however, but to bring this around so I don't hate the immigration authorities, I was in Israel this April and May staying with my cousin, the cousin who lived through this, and I, we were talking about this. And I said, "Well, you know, we don't know. Were they trying to trap her? Was she really foolish?" And my aunt says, my cousin said to me, "But she really did have something wrong with her." So, she had grown up with her. She was in a position to know much better than I. So, unfortunately, my aunt, according to the laws, did not belong as a legal immigrant because she was obviously mentally retarded, but it's a shame she had to die the way she did.

SIGRIST: And that's what the cousin was implying when she said that she did have something wrong.

SHAIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: That, indeed, there was a simpleness about her.

SHAIN: Yes. Because she didn't get terribly involved, but she, in very plain, simple terms, said to me, "But there was something wrong."

SIGRIST: In our last few minutes here, what else do you remember about visiting your aunt here? Think back to what she was like as a person, and how she interacted with your mother, for instance, or with you kids.

SHAIN: She wanted to hold your hand, or some part of you. It seemed as though she wanted to have the human contact. She would sit and go like this --. I remember that. Or sit, if you were sitting, she would then put her hand. And if you reached out towards her, there were these long benches, and if you reached out towards her, she would move closer to make it easy for you, because she wanted very much to be together. She, uh, would sometimes tell my mother, my mother was very anxious that

we be very good, and not make noise and not make any racket while we were here. And we really were pretty good. But my aunt would kind of interrupt my mother if she thought my mother was going to yell at us. She was, I think she wanted us all to love her.

SIGRIST: Oh, and she must have been very, very frightened.

SHAIN: I think she was probably scared to death, and probably couldn't tell us how badly scared.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember your mother talking about what her reaction to the divorce from her husband, how she reacted to that. There wasn't anything she could do about it.

SHAIN: There wasn't anything she could do about it, and we never got her reaction. The only thing that I remember is my mother got a letter from her parents at the time of the divorce saying that they approved of what my mother and father had done because Pearl was not going to come here, and why should his life be ruined. And the fact that he had set up this fund, even though it was not necessary, it was a very nice gesture on his part. They could have afforded to support her. But they were not objection, they had no great objections to that, even though I understand they were deeply Orthodox Jews, so I don't know how they basically felt. But as people they could understand where this was coming from. You know, why ruin two lives?

SIGRIST: As you say, they were all very pragmatic about it.

SHAIN: So obviously my grandmother and grandfather there were also pragmatic about it, but I don't know if they, you see, my aunt didn't know how to write. My mother was one of these weird people, not weird, but the education that she had as a girl growing up in a small town in Romania, a Jewish girl, my mother graduated from gymnasium, which is like low levels of college, very unusual for a Jewish girl, even. So it was a family that obviously believed in education and tried to give it to its children, even its girl children. That aunt could not read or write, so obviously she couldn't learn.

SIGRIST: We need to pause just for a second, and Kevin's going to flip the tape, and I have a few more questions to ask you.

SHAIN: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Mrs. Shain, tell me a little bit about the procedure of coming out to visit your aunt. What did you actually have to do to get out here to visit her? How did you get out here, and where did you meet her, that sort of thing, as you remember?

SHAIN: We came by train.

SIGRIST: You were living where? In Manhattan, or . . .

SHAIN: No, by then we were living in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: In the Bronx.

SHAIN: We were living near the Third Avenue El, so we took that, and then maybe a trolley and then the bus. Not the bus, the ferry. And we had passes. I don't know whether we got them new each time we came. I don't remember. But we had to have passes each time. We had to show them. And we met my aunt in that big hall. She was never outside waiting for us. I didn't know, I guess I was too small. I never found out, or did I ask, could she go outside? Did she choose to meet us inside? I don't know.

SIGRIST: And then you would generally stay in the Great Hall.

SHAIN: Yes. Uh, my mother once asked if she could see where she slept. I don't remember having seen it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember ever bringing your aunt a present or some, you mentioned food.

SHAIN: Yes, we used to bring things, things like fresh underwear. Because in the process of having furnished the apartment, my uncle also had asked my mother to buy her like a beginning of a wardrobe.

SIGRIST: American clothes.

SHAIN: Yeah. And so a lot of that was being brought each time, some. Things like a pocketbook. I don't know why I remember this, but fancy combs that used to wear in her hair. The clothes I remember.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how . . .

SHAIN: A watch. I don't know if she could tell time, but I remember my uncle bought her a watch.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. That's, tell me a little bit about how your mother interacted with your aunt. I mean, obviously there's great feeling there, but there's also . . .

SHAIN: She was almost like her mother. I think she treated my aunt as an in-between child -- between my sister, who's only two years older than I am, but my mother, I think, treated my aunt as though she was her child and she had to take care of her.

SIGRIST: Well, and especially under these circumstance.

SHAIN: And so she did. Um, I think she felt, maybe she felt somewhat responsible. My mother was a very responsible woman. Um, I don't mean to single her out. All of the people of that genre that I grew up with were very responsible people.

SIGRIST: Responsible for your aunt's comfort while she's here, or responsible for what was happening to your aunt?

SHAIN: No. She was responsible for her comfort and felt responsible enough to try to have as much input in this effort to keep her here, because she wanted her to be kept here. I think that was a parental desire, like she was taking care of her child. And she knew this was no place to go back to.

SIGRIST: Was the process of getting a lawyer . . .

SHAIN: It was paid for, my mother, when the war ended, my mother got a cablegram telling her which members of her family were dead. My mother also had a nervous breakdown that day. I always thought part of it was because Pearl had died. The other people had never been so close to being here. And it took my mother a long time to get better. She eventually did get better. But I think it was, she felt a, maybe she felt a sense of failure, I don't know, that she couldn't fix something. Because I'm a lot like that. If something's wrong, I feel that I have to fix it. And if I can't, I feel terrible.

SIGRIST: And, sadly, this was just completely out of her hands.

SHAIN: Totally.

SIGRIST: The expense of the lawyer and the goings on concerning, you know, the legal work, must have been quite large.

SHAIN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: I was just wondering, and you may not know the answer to this, if, you know, if it was all split up so . . .

SHAIN: No.

SIGRIST: All, among the families, or if your father paid . . .

SHAIN: No, no, no, no, no. Her husband paid it all.

SIGRIST: Your uncle paid it all.

SHAIN: Yes. I think for coming here or whatever, you know, my mother wouldn't take money for the food that she bought and things like that, because it's just not done in our circumstance. We were all working people, but my uncle made more money than my father, and we knew he was not going to be hungry by paying for her expenses, and he wanted to. He felt a responsibility to do it and to pay for it. And he was that kind of a man. As I said, he was not very bright, but he was very good.

SIGRIST: Well, and he had looked forward to her coming for a long time.

SHAIN: Yes, very much so, very much so.

SIGRIST: I mean, this is, while it's obviously a tragedy for your aunt, I mean, this must be very painful for him also.

SHAIN: Yes, yes, it was. I remember him sitting and crying. If you can imagine this great, big man. Even his face was big, his hands were huge. Of course, I'm little, and so when I was younger I was even smaller. And, you know, I was like this next to him (she gestures). And I remember him sitting and sobbing, and tears running down his face, because he truly wanted her here.

SIGRIST: Were you all present when she actually got on the boat to go back?

SHAIN: Not me. My mother, my father and my uncle. They did not bring my sister or me.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or father ever talk about that?

SHAIN: Yes. They talked about it in very heartbreaking terms, that my aunt had tried to get to the railing, but everybody was shoving so -- that they caught a short glimpse of her and then people shoved. And they couldn't get to see her for the whole time that they wanted to, because there were a great many people. So they stayed, they said, "But we stayed the whole time, but we didn't see her the whole time." They had just had a small glimpse of her. And, uh, since none of them ever returned, they never saw her again.

SIGRIST: The decision to divorce, was that being talked about even during that five-month period when things seemed hopeless . . .

SHAIN: No.

SIGRIST: Or that was very much afterwards.

SHAIN: I think it was after the fact, and I don't know whether this was an idea originating with my parents, or whether they had a very bright friend who suggested it (laughs), I don't know. But I do know that they were the ones who were instrumental in bringing the subject up, and convincing their brother-in-law that this would not be an act of disloyalty, that he had gotten all that he could, and shouldn't sacrifice any more.

SIGRIST: Do you think that, looking back on your own life, do you think that your aunt's trials and tribulations has affected your own life somehow? Is there something that, having lived through this experience with her, is there something that you kept with you your whole life?

SHAIN: Yeah, and it bothers me right now, because Americans want to shut the gates. And I get infuriated if it's a friend of mine who wants to shut the gates. Because I remember this aunt never coming off, and I remember a mother and a father, and me being born here. And if my mother and father had not been allowed in, where would I have been? And, uh, I think it did color my life, and maybe that's why I never forgot. It made me very aware of a phrase, what is, it, "Immigrants all, Americans all?"

And I'm always kind of on the side of people who come and ask for political asylum. Whether it's true or not, I'd let them stay. I think that has a lot to do with how I feel. I never stop to actually try to delineate my feelings, but the more I think of my aunt in that period, I say, "I bet that that has stayed all these years, and it must have something to do with how I feel." Sure.

SIGRIST: How could it not.

SHAIN: You know, so it must have. I know I have a Filipino housekeeper who was here illegally, and I think it was my aunt, again, my aunt's story that convinced me that we should sponsor her to become legal. To first become legal, and then to become a citizen. And I felt so good doing it, and I think it was because my aunt could never come. So here was a person that, as far as I was concerned, is an addition to the United States. Because she works hard and earns her own living, and she's not a drag on society. So does her husband, and I was glad to do it. But I think it made me want to do it because of her.

SIGRIST: You knew the other side of the coin.

SHAIN: Yeah. And so when I found out, I didn't know for a long time that she was illegal, but when I found out I said, "Well, I'm going to find out what we have to do to make you legal." And it's a bother, but it's a bother that's worthwhile, as far as I'm concerned. And maybe if I didn't have an aunt who didn't make it, I wouldn't be quite as compassionate towards somebody else. Because it was a pain in the neck to do, but I was glad to do it. So that had to have a connection.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Mrs. Shain, I want to thank you very much. This is a rare opportunity. We hear so much, of course, from people who came through and made wonderful lives for themselves, but rarely do we hear, as I just said, the flip side of the coin, and the people that were not quite so fortunate. And I want to thank you for telling us your aunt's story.

SHAIN: I want to thank you for being interested in it. Because when I wrote it I debated with myself. I said, "They're not interested in what I remember." And then I said, "So what do I lose? I'll write it, and I'll mail it. If they don't answer, they don't answer." And, basically, I did it almost because I thought to myself, "Well, so Aunt Pearl will have a proper end."

SIGRIST: The story deserves to be here.

SHAIN: And that's why I wrote it. Because I thought, well, Hitler's bullets were not the proper end, but this is.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Shain, thank you.

SHAIN: I thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Leah Shain on July 20, 1993, at the Ellis Island Recording Studio.