

EI-038

MAX MASON (MASONSZHNIK)

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AGE 8

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SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We're here at Ellis Island with Max Mason, who came from the Ukraine in 1921 when he was eight-and-a-half. Today is Sunday, April 21st. Good morning.

MASON: Good morning to you, sir. How are you this morning?

SIGRIST: Fine, thanks. Mr. Mason, could you please give your full name and your date of birth, please?

MASON: My name is Max Mason, M-A-S-O-N. I was born on June 23rd, 1912.

SIGRIST: Where were you born?

MASON: I was born in a little town on the border between Roumania and Russia. It was called Golovenevsk, G-O-L-O-V-E-N-E-V-S-K.

SIGRIST: What was the town like?

MASON: The town of Golovenevsk would be something like you may have seen depicted in the paintings of Chagall. Muddy streets, no paving. Houses in almost a decrepid order of arrangement. No particular styling of any distinction. The house we lived in, for example, had a thatched roof on it. It accommodated something like four families. And Mother lived with her three children, of which I was one.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit more about the house that you lived in. You said there were four families in this. Was this a two-story house?

MASON: No. This was a single story structure. It could almost be compared to the warren that rabbits lived in, sort of extended haphazardly in different directions and it was owned by my grandfather and my grandmother. And in it lived my mother, who was one

of his daughters, and a son that he had with his wife and three sons, and another married son that he had, and there were children of the different families. So we must have been approximately some twenty or twenty-five people in that structure.

SIGRIST: What was the house made out of?

MASON: It was essentially a lime or calcimine unit with almost double-type windows against the harsh snows and winters of the Ukraine. As I look back, I can remember on occasion when there were snow banks against the house that would be approximately two floors, or the full height of the building.

SIGRIST: Did you keep animals?

MASON: No, we did not. The, possibly a cat, but I have no distinct recollection of that.

SIGRIST: How was the house heated?

MASON: The house was heated essentially by built-in ovens or stoves probably of brick or similar lime construction, and it would be fed either wood, I don't recall ever having seen coal, but I do remember seeing mounds of shells from poly seeds that used to be brought in,

they used to be shoveled into the oven and it would radiate heat throughout the house. But mostly it was either your own bodily heat or blankets made out of down. I remember they used to do a lot of stripping of geese for the down. And they would make pillows and bed blankets out of that.

SIGRIST: What was the flooring like in the house?

MASON: The flooring would have been natural dirt that was reduced to as smooth a level as possible and polished. That was the floor.

SIGRIST: How was it polished?

MASON: The women would polish it with some emollient of some sort. I really don't know what it was. But it was kept clean, and particularly towards the Shabat weekend which would develop, they would particularly clean up the place.

SIGRIST: And could you spell that please? Shabat, could you please spell that?

MASON: S-H-A-B-A-T. That's the Sabbath. That's the Sabbath. In other words, it was an orthodox family and, of course, there would be great preparation, as is

customary, and the women would be cleaning for days before that holiday, including the polishing of the floor.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's talk a little bit about your parents. Let's, I know your father came to America. Let's talk a little bit about who your father was and what he did. What was his name?

MASON: My father's name was G-E-D-A-L-I-H, Gedalih. And in the old country he had a name that was spelled four or five different ways, which was finally and perhaps mercifully shortened to the name of Mason. I have seen papers from the old country, passports and ships papers showing four or five different spellings of it. The closest that it ever came was M-A-S-O-N-S-Z-H-N-I-K. Masonszhnik. And possibly that's what the immigration people in America saw, so they lopped off the "nik" on the end of it. And that's what we've been living under.

SIGRIST: I see. Describe your father a little bit to me.

MASON: Uh, back in the old country I never knew my father because he had left for the United States when I was only perhaps a year or fifteen months old. The

closest I ever had contact with him was on a big picture in which he was part of a musician's band in the Russian army. His face and head were approximately the size of a pinhead. And Mom had once pointed out that that was my father, and every Friday night when I had chicken soup I used to come over to that picture and feed my father chicken soup. That was the only knowledge and contact I had of him. The first time I ever saw him was right here in Ellis Island. When we landed on May 10th of 1921, he and an uncle of mine brought him down to the island here and I saw that he was hugging my mother and they were exchanging embraces, so I concluded that I may have some claim on him, too. So I climbed on his back and I patted him, and that was my introduction to my father.

SIGRIST: I see. Why did he come to America?

MASON: Uh, he had come here with a younger brother in 1913. In fact, I've seen ships papers showing that on August 1, 1913 he had embarked from Hamburg and he had come here. He had served, as I indicated before, in the Russian army, and I don't know if they sensed another war coming or not, but in any event he came here in

1913 and then the war broke out, and there was no contact between us other than mail, perhaps.

SIGRIST: What did he do when he got here?

MASON: Uh, when foreigners came to this country they tended to associate with other people from the old town that they had come from, and most of them were in the laundry business, hand laundry. They either pressed shirts or did linens on machines or did hand washing, things of that kind. And that was the business that Pop was in when we came to this country.

SIGRIST: Did he have, you said he came with a younger brother, but did he have any relatives here already?

MASON: Uh, we had a sister of my mother's and her husband had been here some years back, and he was a little more "Americanized." So he showed my father around and so on. Pop spoke some English, but it was always with an accent.

SIGRIST: Did he live with these relatives?

MASON: Well, they all lived on the Lower East Side. As a matter of fact, there were some brothers here and they all tended to herd together. They were pretty much

single people at the time, so they lived in small rooms down on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: I see. So your father's in the laundry business in America. Let's talk about your mother back in the Ukraine. What was her name?

MASON: Uh, Mom was a very unusual lady. She was very beautiful, blue-eyed, blondish woman. And she had a gift. She was very dexterous with her hands, and she used to sit in front of a bench and weave paroques, which were wigs. And she was a beautician.

SIGRIST: Could you spell paroque, please?

MASON: P-A-R-O-Q-U-E. It's essentially that French word. And she would be called to the countryside by the landed gentry to dress the women for balls, weddings, parties, things of that kind. And it was customary and stylish for women to wear these woven paroques or wigs. And she was very gifted at that. In fact, Mom did a little of that in this country when she finally came here.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

MASON: Rose. R-O-S-E. Over there they called her Reisel, R-

I-S-E-L, Reisel.

SIGRIST: I see. And you said that she was living in the house with her parents.

MASON: That is correct.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about her parents a little bit. What are your memories of your grandparents?

MASON: Ahh, I have some very wonderful memories. Back in the old country it was customary, especially among traditional orthodox Jewish families, for the men to sit and study. They would study the Bible, commentaries on the Bible. And the women would be, so to speak, the breadwinners or the wage earners. And, of course, men would help out as best they could. But mostly they sat and studied. Now, my memories of my grandfather are of a man in his seventies, a very handsome old man, beautiful white beard, and aquiline nose, a lovely old gentleman. And essentially he was my substitute father. I used to hold his hand and he would take us to the house of worship. He would, wherever he would go I would tag along with him. My guess is at that time I must have been around five years old. I have a distinct recollection where he

took me one time to what we might consider to be a Turkish bath. I had never been in one of those. And we went through the usual routine of all the steamrooms and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I have an equal memory one time of being taken to a Turkish bath by my mother. So here am I this little boy tagging along with all these nude women. One was apt to learn a little that way.

SIGRIST: Were you surprised by what you saw? Were you curious?

MASON: Well, it was different. It was different. It was obvious that women were different than men were, and they joshed a good deal about it, and Mom just patted me on the head and said it wasn't too early for me to learn.

SIGRIST: Talk about your grandmother.

MASON: Grandma had a marvelous, marvelous reputation of being a very wise and sage old lady. She was the one that everybody came to for advice and counsel. She was the one that ran that little business that might have been maybe twice the size of this room that we are now sitting in that had all sorts of scraps and odds and ends. You could almost compare it to the general

store out west that we used to have in colonial times.

SIGRIST: I see. Was your grandmother a good cook?

MASON: Uh, I have no distinct recollection of that, but collectively the women did some fine cooking.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about what sorts of things you ate.

MASON: Well, there was, of course, meat. I remember a ritual slaughterer would come, let's say, on Thursday, and take care of a few chickens which the family would then cook for the Sabbath meal. Potatoes and vegetables and so on. I indicated before that Mom used to go out into the countryside. She would bring back all sorts of fresh produce and vegetables and things of that kind. We also had in our town market days on Thursdays, and all the peasants and the farmers from all around would congregate in this little town. And you could easily find cages of fowl and chickens and geese and crates of eggs and sacks of beans, things of that kind.

SIGRIST: Did you keep a garden at all?

MASON: No. That was not a known thing there.

SIGRIST: I see. Talk a little bit about, there were sisters, you had sisters?

MASON: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me who they were and when they were born.

MASON: You're talking about my own immediate sisters?

SIGRIST: Your own immediate sisters.

MASON: I have one sister who's still living. She was called B-R-Y-N-A, Bryna, but we call her Bertha over here. When Bertha was a little girl she was afflicted with an epidemic that went around, shortly around World War I, and it left her somewhat mentally deficient. So she was never too much. For that reason, I literally became the man in my family. And then I had a little brother. I lost him recently; Abe. And Abe was about twenty-two months younger than I. Abe also became a lawyer, and we were partners for a long time down in New York. But the house itself was run, I might almost say, as an integrated unit where all the women helped one another. They did things in common. We used to bake our own bread. I don't know if you ever heard the word rybba, R-Y-B-B-A. It's like if you

have seen the way pizzas are being baked today in these long, metal stoves. Well, if you can picture an oven made out of brick and also calcimine or whatever, the women would have long wooden handled, poles, on which they would shove in loaf after loaf after loaf of the most delicious Ukrainian black bread you ever, ever ate. And this would be parceled out among the family. And, of course, the cooking was done there. One of the great attractions of the rybba was that it had a platform on it, and we kids used to fight for the privileges of sleeping on it because it was warm.

I don't know how many kids used to pile up there, but we were warm, either from bodily heat or from the heat of that rybba.

SIGRIST: Talk about the town, for instance, holidays in the town, religious holidays or . . .

MASON: Let me give you just a little description more of the town.

SIGRIST: Okay.

MASON: The town had absolutely no concept of what zoning was. If you know how wide, for example, Grand Concourse is or Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, this was a very wide

street on which our house was located. Mud, nothing but mud. The, to the left of us was an establishment that built the most beautiful wagons you ever saw. I used to spend all the time I could in there watching the men as they shaped wheels, beautifully shaped and delicate wheels, and I used to smell the marvelous fresh pine wood. It's never left me. On the other hand, right behind us was a tannery, and it was full of cow hides and it was forever stinking, and I was forever smelling it, but that's where the men used to do the thing. Way off to the left was a butcher, and he sort of used to set the standard time-wise as to when the Sabbath began. (he coughs) Excuse me. It was my job on late Friday afternoon to run out of the house and see whether he had yet lit the Sabbath candles. If he had, then Mom would light them. She would assemble the three kids around her, pronounce the blessings over the candles, and then we would join the rest of the family in the Friday night meal.

SIGRIST: Where was the house of worship in this town? The house of worship, the synagogue?

MASON: Yes. Actually there were two. There was a, you might say an ordinary everyday structure that was, nothing

particular about it, and the men would come there three times a day to worship and pray, and that's when I would go with my grandfather. And then way down near the river was a beautiful, beautiful brick, almost three-story high synagogue that was only used for the high holy days. I have very vivid memories of that. In fact, we recently came across a 1909 photograph of it, and I was amazed that my town could have afforded a structure like that, but they did. A beautiful structure. So . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that church? You said you had vivid memories of that specific structure.

MASON: It was very high. I've been in some cathedrals in the course of our travels, and of course it never could have presumed to attain anything like those proportions. But it had high vaulted ceilings with arched windows on both sides, and the sun used to stream through. As you may know, traditionally women are separated from men, so the men would pray downstairs and the women would be up on what might be the second or third floor equivalent. I would be up there with Mother, and we used to look through a grilled fencing like, and when the sun would come

through those windows and illuminate that thing it was absolutely elevating, absolutely elevating.

SIGRIST: And did all the children, your mother had all the children with her upstairs.

MASON: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was the town primarily Jewish?

MASON: Uh, the Jewish population was about sixty-eight or seventy percent. The rest would be peasants in the surrounding area. And it was these people that would come in to town to hold these weekly market days. In other words, the surrounding farming community.

SIGRIST: Being Jewish in that part of the world at that time, did you experience any religious persecution at all?

MASON: Oh, yes, yes. That was probably one of the other compelling and inducing factors in our coming here. Because I remember they used to call them pogroms, P-O-G-R-O-M, which was an assault on the Jewish community by surrounding peasants. And I remember we were hiding in cellars for two or three days down there. And when I came up I saw wagon loads of dead Jews that were being picked up from the streets just

hauled away. So it's something that's impressed on my mind, and you just never get over it.

SIGRIST: Was this something that happened frequently?

MASON: Well, small ones there were often. There were some very big ones that The New York Times used to write up over the course of the years. And it seemed to be known that when there were troubled times the government sort of encouraged this type of a diversion, if you can use this type of a euphemism for killing other people. So, yes, they suffered from it all the time.

SIGRIST: Were any members of your family hurt in any of these pogroms?

MASON: Yes. I have a first cousin who was picked up on the street and he had been cut up with sabers and swords all over his face. And to the end of his days he had scars from that.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about school. Did you attend school in this town?

MASON: There was no public school in Russia. I would assume the well-to-do non-Jewish population had private

schools, and possibly the few Jews that could afford it may have sent away their children elsewhere. But the only schooling that I ever had was what we called C-H-E-D-E-R, it's called cheder. And what you have there is a long wooden table with two long wooden benches on each side and little bedraggled kids would sit and repeat the alphabet, "Alpha, beta, gamma." The Hebrew would be, "Ala, bet, gimmel, dalen." Almost like that. And we would study that way by rote.

SIGRIST: Who conducted these classes?

MASON: Uh, the person that ran this was a skinny old man with a straggling beard, it looked like a goat's beard. And he was a very harassed man, because ever so often his wife would run in and upbraid him about something. And instead of going after her he would take after us kids from time to time. So we were the scapegoats there.

SIGRIST: Your grandfather, you said, was a learned man. Did he ever try to teach you, or did you ever . . .

MASON: I'm sure he did, you know, teaching us to learn the alphabet. They were curious as to what we were

learning there, so they followed through, of course. That would have been natural.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help your mother do her weaving and that sort of thing? You talked about her having her, is it a loom?

MASON: That was not anything that I had any skill in, but I had mentioned before that I was sort of the man of the house so she would turn to me instinctively for little things to be done around the house, to run errands, bring things and so on. I have a very vivid recollection that Mom was ill one time and she sent me to fetch some drugs or medicines, and it was way, way out of town somewhere. And it was a winter day, the ground was heavy with mud and snow. And all of a sudden, as I was coming back, there was a funeral parade from the Russian Orthodox church, and I had never seen anything like that before, and I became terribly frightened and I took off. And somewhere in the mud and snow of Russia is a boot that I've never been able to retrieve.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk a little bit about your mother's decision to come to America. You think there was some

communication between your mother and your father?

MASON: Oh, yeah. There's no question about it. First of all, one would have had to have had a passport and a visa and what they call schiffs karten, which would be boat tickets, I suppose. So ultimately that came from America. And I'm sure there was a letter exchange, no telephones. And so that was a mutual decision. And it would have been obvious anyway. Mother wasn't going to raise three children by herself, and the conditions were very oppressive.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother telling you that you were going to America?

MASON: Uh, this is a very interesting project, by the way. Theoretically we were going to a wedding in Roumania, because she could not leave Russia after the Russian Revolution. You couldn't get out. There was no quota. So two women, my mother and another woman, hired a wagon, a teamster and horses and we took our three children, Mom's friend took her three children or four, and the two women ostensibly went to a wedding from which they never came back. We couldn't get out of Russia legitimately, so somehow

arrangements were made where we became Roumanian citizens, and we sneaked out of Russia in the middle of the night in a setting which I think only Hollywood could do justice to. They would ferry us across in long rowboats and there were men whistling to each other and giving signals, and we marched through bushes and swamps, got ourselves all scratched up. But ultimately we wound up on the other side of Roumania in a thing called Debrecen, D-E-B-R-E-C-E-N, Debrecen. And I think what happened there was that . . .

SIGRIST: Is that a town?

MASON: Yes. Members of the Jewish community met us there. They may have been an organization or an association and they gave us shelter, food, lodging, clothing. The passport picture that was taken of us was in garments that a lady gave us. A woman picked us off the line one day as I was standing there, took me home, and for weeks I ate there, myself and my brother. I told her I had a brother. And clothed us, fed us and took care of us.

SIGRIST: The group that was being ferried across, this group

that's travelling, was it just your family and this other family, or were there a lot of people?

MASON: We had the impression that there were other groups also going elsewhere, but in our immediate group was these two women. It was a handful, with seven or eight children and two women.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember what you took? Did you take anything when you left?

MASON: Uh, Mom took some household utensils, customary. Bedding, pillows, covers, things of that kind.

SIGRIST: How did you carry these?

MASON: Bundles. Bundles on our backs. I don't remember ever having seen a suitcase or a satchel. I think it was just bundles wrapped either with rope or somehow tied together.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

MASON: By that time I had lost my grandmother and I had also lost my grandfather.

SIGRIST: I see.

MASON: And incidentally, I think this was the first death I had ever seen. Again, if Hollywood could have staged it, it would have been a beautiful setting. This beautiful old man lying in a white bed with his long beard. And if we had a rearastat and could put out these lights slowly, that's how his life dimmed away. And he was saying goodbye to people who came to say goodbye to him. And then he was laid out on the floor with candles at his head, and from there he was buried. That was the first death I'd seen.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

MASON: I must have been about seven years old at the time.

SIGRIST: Did this all frighten you?

MASON: I'm not sure that I was frightened by it, because there was so much family around. But the women, of course, were mourning and wailing, and everybody who knew this old man came with tears because he was a beloved old man.

SIGRIST: Was your mother very close with her father?

MASON: Oh, yes, very. Absolutely.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

MASON: Mom had four sisters, one of whom was in this country and then took us in when we came.

SIGRIST: So this was, your grandfather died approximately a year before you left.

MASON: A year or two, somewheres around there. And that may also have been an inducing factor, finally sort of breaking off.

SIGRIST: And you said the religious persecution, also, fired this ahead.

MASON: Oh, yes. Very contributing.

SIGRIST: All right. Why don't we go back to, you're all with this woman who's giving you clothing.

MASON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What happened after that?

MASON: Well, we were sheltered what must have been an institution where there were rows of beds almost like in a hospital, and that's where we stayed and slept. We were fed.

SIGRIST: This is in Roumania, right?

MASON: Yes. This was in Bucharest, okay, the capital. Apparently this was going on while all these people were waiting for clearance papers of one kind and another, passports, visas, and so on. So we must have been there a couple of weeks. And then we finally wound up in Antwerp, Belgium.

SIGRIST: How did you get from Roumania to Belgium?

MASON: By train. Again, I had never ridden on a train. The first time I saw a train was when we were outside of Russia, and a very interesting thing occurred. Again, reflecting on the religious orientation. We found ourselves on a Friday night riding in a train. You're not allowed to ride on the Sabbath, but it's customary also for the women to light Sabbath candles. So there is Mom and another woman riding on the Sabbath, but they have to light candles. And so where the windowsills are, or the ledges, they put candles and they blessed them as the train is riding on the Sabbath, and Mom says, "What is to man is to man, and what is to God is to God." And that's how she observed.

SIGRIST: And so you went to Antwerp.

MASON: Yes.

SIGRIST: And did you have to wait in Antwerp for your boat?

MASON: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Antwerp?

MASON: I would say we were there a few weeks, and again I think we stayed in a hotel.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of that?

MASON: Well, for the first time I ate in what you might call a restaurant and where there was a white tablecloth and waiters came around and asked you what you wanted, and they served you with some decorum, things I had not seen before. Incidentally, I saw something near the waters of Antwerp that I had never seen in all my life. I saw a black man.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

MASON: Ah, a small tug had come alongside either our boat where possibly they were refueling or re-supplying, and I saw a creature running around on the boat. I

had never seen a black man. I was positive that this was a creature that came from the sea. Never saw one before.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

MASON: Kronland. K-R-O-N-L-A-N-D.

SIGRIST: And as a small child, how did you feel about seeing this huge boat?

MASON: Well, the whole thing was overpowering. I was describing this to somebody. We had never had toilet facilities back in the old country. If you'll forgive me, we children used to do our business alongside the four walls of the house, and the only sanitation we observed was that your hand must not touch the hand of the little boy or little girl that sat next to you, otherwise you were in some kind of a violation. And on the boat that we took to America, I had an occasion to use a men's room, and for the first time I flushed a toilet. And water started gushing, and I ran. I ran because I was positive that I was drowning that boat. I never told anybody about it, and I was waiting for that boat to sink.

SIGRIST: What class did you travel?

MASON: I think we must have been second class.

SIGRIST: You had a cabin.

MASON: Probably, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that a little bit for me?

MASON: Well, if it were the size of this room, that might approximate it. Mother and the three children, I have no distinct recollection, but I have a vivid memory of those round windows that I used to look out on and see the water level.

SIGRIST: The, can you talk a little bit, say, about the dining facilities on the boat.

MASON: Yeah. That, once again, was the second time that we had sat where there are tablecloths, waiters. They asked you what do you want, and what would you like. By that time we had learned one or two phrases in order to get a certain kind of food. I think, there's a word kasha, which is cooked groats. They used to come around, "Kasha, kasha, zub, zub." Zub is soup. So we knew how to eat soup and the groats, kasha.

SIGRIST: What do you think your mother was thinking about through this whole process? It's such an ordeal just getting to the boat.

MASON: Well, Mother was a very spunky little woman, and she never shied away from any task that had to be done. She was a pretty aggressive little person. And she knew that this was something that she had to do, nobody else would do it for her, and she did it. We all got here safely, thank God, and we were healthy. I have no recollection of any illnesses or sicknesses.

SIGRIST: Did anyone get sick on the boat?

MASON: Nothing that I can remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going on the deck at all, of the boat?

MASON: No particular recollection of that. Before we came onto the boat, somebody in Antwerp had picked up possibly some little rash on our forehead, on our scalp. And so they exposed my brother and myself to x-rays, and all our hair fell out.

SIGRIST: This was on the boat.

MASON: This was before we got to the boat.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see, in Antwerp.

MASON: So that my head was as smooth as my hand. And when we landed in this country and had to be taken to school, we looked like two white mice. And some nurse thought that she was being merciful, she covered our heads with gauze nurse's caps, and we looked even less conspicuous in that assemblage.

SIGRIST: On the boat, how long was the trip, do you remember?

MASON: Probably a week. Ten days, perhaps.

SIGRIST: Do you remember coming into New York Harbor?

MASON: I don't have a distinct recollection, except I think we came in towards dusk or towards evening and I've been asked did I see the Statue of Liberty. I don't think so. I don't think so. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did they bring you over to Ellis Island?

MASON: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What was that process?

MASON: As I understand it, Ellis Island could not accommodate a big ocean liner, and I think we may have been taken

possibly by a smaller boat from a larger boat to the island here. See, the whole impression is one of, you could say, a melange of people and crowding and shoving and pushing and holding on desperately to Mom's hand or her skirt, this kind of thing. Three children, each looking out for the other, and not to lose Mom.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you said you remember the crowds at Ellis.

MASON: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember waiting? Did you have to wait?

MASON: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, I have always had the impression that we had somehow been sorted out and put under a large red letter M, as in Mary, but I don't know why this fixation has remained in my mind. But I asked about it and nobody seemed to recall that there were ever any letters under which people were sorted out.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Interesting. Could you excuse me just for a moment? (break in tape) This is Paul Sigrist, we're continuing the interview with Max Mason. We are

at Ellis Island. Mr. Mason, could you tell us again.

I know you told us this earlier in the interview, but could you sort of just tell us again about seeing your father for the first time here.

MASON: Yes. I had no physical vision or image of my father other than what I had referred to before as a little head about the size of a pinhead on an army photograph.

SIGRIST: Did you bring that photograph with you?

MASON: We don't have that. We don't have that. But I remember that this was my one contact with my father. I used to come to his picture every Friday night. In any event, my father, I stand five feet four. Pop was a little bit shorter than I, blondish, blue-eyed. I would say he almost looked like a cousin to King George of England, that type of a straight aquiline nose. He had all his hair. He had all his hair till the date of his death. I would say he was an attractive man, a good looking man. An interesting obverse to that is that he used to describe my mother as the most beautiful lady or woman in the entire town, and many, many years later when I used to see

her alongside of the other wives of people, it was very obvious that that was so. She was a beautiful little woman.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother see your father first at Ellis? Who recognized whom?

MASON: I don't know. I have no recollection of the encounter. I remember a very famous scene in Gone With The Wind where two characters come from a distance and fall into each other's arms. No such thing occurred here. They came together at a place where we were standing. They were embracing, hugging, and that's where I climbed on my father's back.

SIGRIST: I see. And what happened next?

MASON: Okay. I had mentioned that I had an uncle here who had been here for some years, was an American citizen. He had come along with Pop. And so between the two of them and Mom and ourselves, whatever luggage we had was taken, I suppose downstairs, and we must have taken a taxi. I had never in my life ridden in a motor vehicle, and we were taken uptown to Yorkville, about 76th Street. And then we climbed up two or three floors where my aunt had an apartment, and

that's where we stayed the first night. A whole . . .

SIGRIST: What was it like being in New York for the first time?

MASON: Well, again, there was all this hustle and bustle. I had mentioned that the only hustle and bustle I ever knew of was on these market days when all the peasants came together. Noise, noise. But, of course, it was evening, so it wasn't the noise that we encountered the next day. When we got to my aunt's house, there was a house full of people who had come to see the greene, G-R-E-E-N-E. When you first came to this country, you were called a greenhorn, so in Yiddish that made it the greene, those that are green. You know, till you ripen and mature.

SIGRIST: How did you get to your aunt's house? How did you get to your aunt's house?

MASON: By taxi. We had gotten over here somewhere. I suppose on the other side when the, when we crossed from Ellis Island to Manhattan we took a taxi.

SIGRIST: Had you been in a car before?

MASON: Never, never in my life.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

MASON: Well, I couldn't understand how the thing was moving, and there was a man up there holding, I suppose, a wheel, and the thing was moving. I didn't know that. Never seen one like that. I'd seen horses, I'd seen wagons. We had been on a train, but I'd never been in a motor vehicle.

SIGRIST: And here's a city full of them.

MASON: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So you stayed overnight at your aunt's, and . . .

MASON: The next morning, again, a motor vehicle and Father and Mom and the three children packed into this thing, and we went down all the way down to 97 Orchard Street. And, again, I saw for the first time a raised train. It was the Second Avenue Elevator, Elevated train, or the Third Avenue. I never saw that. Roared, made a noise, moved. For the first time in my life I ate a banana. I'd never eaten a banana in my life. Then we came into Orchard Street, and that was a real, real maelstrom of people and pushcarts and noise and hustle and bustle.

SIGRIST: Your father had procured this apartment ahead of time.

MASON: Oh, yes, yes. If we were to take the room we are in and make it two-and-a-half times the size that it is, the rooms were no wider than this. There was only two windows, one in the front and one in the back.

SIGRIST: What was the layout?

MASON: It was like a railroad flat, a railroad flat. You come into some sort of a room where you saw immediately a sink, a tub. Right behind it was a dank little room, and right in front of it was the so-called living room, which was a little bit larger, and there you found fire escapes. I never saw a fire escape before. I'd never seen a building as tall as this one.

SIGRIST: How many stories?

MASON: This was at least five floors high. On each floor were four families, and there were two toilets in the hall. And I told somebody recently if you didn't have an exquisite sense of timing, you were in trouble.

SIGRIST: The, had your father furnished the apartment?

MASON: Oh, yes, yeah. It was, today what's interesting is all that decrepid stuff passes for antiques, stuff from the 1920s. You could have bought something for two dollars or a dollar fifty or three dollars, and this was a chiffonnier, and that was a table, and the chairs were decrepid, rickety, but that was it.

SIGRIST: Where was the kitchen in this apartment?

MASON: The kitchen was right, smack in the middle. And we had no electricity. Lighting came from a gas jet. There was a black box hanging right over the door, a metal box, maybe it was about eighteen by eighteen inches, and you put quarters into it, and that renewed the supply of gas.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you sleep in one bedroom with your sisters and your brother, or . . .

MASON: Uh, my, I think we did until, you know, we sort of sorted out where, who goes where. I've never been able to figure out where anyone had any privacy in that structure.

SIGRIST: What sorts of other people lived in that building?

MASON: Uh, we weren't conscious particularly of who else was

in the building, but we knew there were a lot of people because the narrow, dark wooden stairs were forever being used and they creaked going up and going down, and there was all kinds of shouting. You could smell a million and one aromas from the different ethnic groups that were living there. Each one had their own style of cooking.

SIGRIST: Was this primarily a Jewish neighborhood?

MASON: I would say essentially yes, and that made it quite easier for a foreigner to sort of not feel lost, because the language of the street was Yiddish, all the pushcart peddlers, all the noise, all the selling, all the signs, it was all going on in Yiddish.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about being a little boy and learning English.

MASON: That's an interesting thing. Of course, when we came here we had a relative right across the street from us. They spoke very poor Yiddish and we, of course, spoke no English. But we were able somehow to communicate. We played essentially on their fire escape. You could play some games by running under the feet and under the pushcarts of all these peddlers

over there. I might say about the peddlers, that some of them were little department stores all their own, and some of them were specialists, selling glasses, eyeglasses. Other ones were selling ladies intimate garments. Still other ones were sheeting, dishes, crockery, fruit, fish, you name it. It was all to be had there.

SIGRIST: A very colorful neighborhood.

MASON: It was, yes, it was. It still is on Sunday, but it doesn't quite have that. That building, I think I mentioned to you, at 97, has since become a tenement house museum, and to me it's been an attraction because it shows what happened to us after we left the confines of Ellis Island. We were taken to school. See, when we landed in this country we landed on May the 10th, and school I think doesn't end until June. About learning English, this cousin of ours took us to school and we were registered, okay. When classes ended everybody had left and I was left all by myself, and I didn't know where I was. I couldn't speak. The teacher, by the way, that we had, was bilingual. She spoke Yiddish and English, so she was able. It was, the class was a real mixture of all different ages.

It was sort of an entrance into schooling. I'd never been to a school before. Anyway, when school ended, everybody had left and I was there all by myself. And I didn't know where I was. I wandered around for hours and hours and I didn't, I thought I'd never see my parents again. And then way off in the distance I spotted some red fire escapes. And all of a sudden I recalled that that morning when I left for school, two men with white overalls had come and were painting our fire escapes red, and very slowly I threaded my way back and I came home, but it was quite an experience because I thought I was lost.

SIGRIST: Did you eventually pick English up?

MASON: Oh, yes, in the street, sure. We played around the streets, and kids used to take advantage of us until, until we, they played games and played all kinds of tricks on the greenhorns.

SIGRIST: What sorts of tricks?

MASON: Oh, if we, they'd be tossing cards of one kind, or they'd be matching cards with one another, or you had to guess how many nuts maybe you had in one hand, even or odd. And I was forever being taken because I

didn't know it. When people spoke to me I said I talked Jewish. That's the only way I could describe it. But over the summer we learned enough so that when we got back to school they again sorted us out, and I was much behind in school, but they advanced me pretty rapidly.

SIGRIST: I see. So you learned pretty quickly then.

MASON: Yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Were any of these tricks malicious? I guess my question is did you experience any religious persecutions here?

MASON: Oh, no, no. Everybody was Jewish. There was no, there was none of that. There were neighborhood where the Italians lived, there were neighborhoods where the Irish lived, but this was essentially a homogenous group.

SIGRIST: I see. Where was, was there a synagogue in that neighborhood?

MASON: Oh, yes. There were a number of them, sure. We used to go to any number of them. I recently went back to the neighborhood when I was at the museum, and they

had knocked down all these buildings, so it's sort of painful to look for a memory and it's not there.

SIGRIST: Sure. Can you describe a Passover celebration in these early years, please?

MASON: Yeah, yeah. Uh, because the other two uncles that I had were single, our house used to be the signature of the center of a holiday observance, and again Mom would cook and all that, and my two uncles would come well-dressed for the occasion, of course. I had an uncle who had a beautiful voice, singing. It was almost like Richard Tucker's, if you know him. He used to sing, and with him he would bring other men who were singers, and we used to have real choirs over there. I was introduced to opera through records, and I was introduced to classical music through my other uncle who used to bring the old 78 recordings. We used to play them on the Victrola machine that I used to wind.

SIGRIST: Were your parents musical? Your father must have been if he played in a band.

MASON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He had, you might say, an average singing voice. But there were a number of voices in

my family. Two cousins of mine, and my uncle. When they got together, it was real beautiful singing. They'd sing essentially religious music. But ever so often my uncle would take off and he would sing an operatic piece. A beautiful voice.

SIGRIST: And so part of your memories of a Passover gathering would be the music that you all shared.

MASON: It was something, we looked forward to it, because this uncle had this lovely voice, had a marvelous sense of humor. And when he came the place lit up. Just . . .

SIGRIST: How was he related to you?

MASON: He was my father's brother.

SIGRIST: Your father's brother.

MASON: My father had two brothers.

SIGRIST: I see.

MASON: My schooling, at night. I went to school twelve years and two years of high school, four years of pre-law, no, two years of pre-law, four years of law, and I then went back later and I took a degree in public

administration. So I spent some twelve years of mine . . .

SIGRIST: Did your parents take night classes at all?

MASON: No, not at all.

SIGRIST: How did they adjust, in our few remaining minutes here. How was, especially your mother's adjustment.

MASON: Mom learned much faster than my father. She was more aggressive in it, and she was trying to get into the beauty profession, and she worked for others, and tried to run some out of her home. It was never too successful, because that's the old country, and this is America. But . . .

SIGRIST: Were they intent on becoming Americans, or were they more intent on preserving the old ways?

MASON: Uh, I would say that my father was absolutely a non-fanatic individual. He could laugh at a lot of aspects of, let's say, religious observance or so on, but he was an observer, there's no question about it. And, you know, I think the idea was that we glide into Americanism, but we still hold on to what we had. I've spoken about this to other people, where I can

still see myself as being from two worlds. About ten years of my life from the other side, and all the other sixty, almost seventy years, over here. So I can see, I can sometimes stay on the side, if you will, and take another kind of a look at the American scene.

SIGRIST: Ultimately were your parents happy that they chose to come here?

MASON: Oh, yeah. I think so. Of course, you never lose sight or longing to your roots, which they kept in touch, until all the other, the families were wiped out in the Holocaust. But during all that period they were in touch with each other. Letters used to come back and forth. One of the interesting things that you may have heard from other ethnic groups is that they formed local societies here of people that came from the same towns, and they had Social Security, they had health benefits, they had a community doctor who used to come around. For two dollars or a dollar he would come to your home. And if somebody died in the organization and didn't have enough money, they'd collect money for it. They had these self-help groups, and they were way ahead, if you will, on

social vision.

SIGRIST: And your parents were very active?

MASON: Very, very. As a matter of fact, those, the meetings of those groups were very much looked forward to. Each week there was a way of catching up with what's going on at home. What's each family doing. Somebody had a bar mitzvah, it would be common. Somebody got married, everybody would come. Any of these happy occasions, a new birth. They would always be together, and the, of course, the children grew up with that.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Mason, my last question for you is this. Obviously you've had a very successful life, your adult life.

MASON: Thank God.

SIGRIST: Are you happy that your parents chose to come here?

MASON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We raised four beautiful children, two boys, two girls. They're all on their own. And they wouldn't have had the opportunities in any other place than here. So far, thank God, we've all been free of, you know, religious persecution and things of

that kind. I recently spoke to somebody, and I said, with the melange and the potpourri of religious and racial and ethnic groups here, if anything ever happens here it's going to be the most terrible, terrible, it will be worse than Lebanon ever could have been.

SIGRIST: Well, hopefully that won't happen.

MASON: We always pray for good leadership and wise leadership.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you for taking your time, coming to Ellis Island, and for giving us this interview. It's, you have very vivid memories, especially of the old country, some wonderful stuff.

MASON: I've been writing some of this down, and every so often my children look at it and they laugh, they cry, they appreciate it. So I want to thank you.

SIGRIST: Oh, it was our pleasure, believe me. This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Max Mason at Ellis Island.