

EI-383

ROSE LESSURE (LECHZER) MAYERS

BIRTH DATE: MAY 24, 1910

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 2/2007

RUSSIA, 1921

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE BERENGARIA"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: SOUTHAMPTON

RESIDENCES; RUSSIA: STIVASHTE

US: COVINGTON, KY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 17, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Rose Mayers. Mrs. Mayers came from Russia in 1921 when she was eleven years old. Anyway, welcome. And let's begin by giving me your birth date.

MAYERS: I was born May the 24th, 1910.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

MAYERS: My name in Russia was Lechzer.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it, please?

MAYERS: Well. (she laughs) I have to think about that. L-
E-C-H-T-Z-E-R.

SIGRIST: I see.

MAYERS: Would be the closest.

SIGRIST: And then was that changed in America?

MAYERS: Yes. For some peculiar reason my name was Lessure,
the family name is Lessure. L-E-S-S-U-R-E. My father
had been in the United States previously, like about
1890 or so. He came by himself without my mother's
knowledge, left her with two young sons because she
would never have come anyway. So he left, and after
he left he wrote to her, or wrote to the family where
he was and what he was doing. He was here a couple of
years, and he adopted the name of Lessure. I believe
he said that a cousin of his had lived in the United
States and had changed his name to Lessure, and that's
why he used that name. So he came, I don't remember
the details, of course. But he had come to Newport,
Kentucky where a sister of his lived. Newport is
right across the river from Cincinnati.

SIGRIST: Do you know why his sister would have ended up in Kentucky?

MAYERS: I have no idea. But she was already here, with an older sister. Her married name was Klatch, K-L-A-T-C-H.

SIGRIST: Thank you. And this was about 1890, you said?

MAYERS: Somewhere in the 1890's. He lived here for a couple of years. He used to send home mother, money to mother, which her brother took and she never got. But he wanted to have a dream, after a couple of years. His mother came to America in a dream, and said, "You've got to go home to your wife." So he picked up and went home to his wife.

SIGRIST: What was he doing in Kentucky for work?

MAYERS: My guess is that he was a peddler with a pack on his back, going into Kentucky. That's what I think he did, but . . .

SIGRIST: You don't really know.

MAYERS: I don't really know.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

MAYERS: Ellie, Eli.

SIGRIST: Eli.

MAYERS: E-L-I, yes.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about his personality?

MAYERS: His personality? Well, (she laughs) all I can say is I was born in their later years. My father was forty-six, my mother forty-seven. So I remember them as old people more or less.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me when you were growing up how you saw your dad, what his personality was like when you were growing up.

MAYERS: Well, he was tall, he was strong. My father had an amputated hand at the wrist.

SIGRIST: How did he get that?

MAYERS: He was a young man, somewhere in the early twenties. He was engaged to my mother. Now, he worked at a farm mill. Now, I don't know whether he had an infection or whether he was hurt by a machine, but it's a very

interesting story. He had his hand amputated while he was engaged to my mother, and she decided that she was not going to marry a man like that, because he'd never make a living for her. So she says, "We're Jewish." And these were biblical customs, I guess. I don't know them, but this is really true, because I remember hearing those stories. She sent back the engagement papers saying that she was not going to marry him. But he wouldn't agree, so he sent them back to her, and she had to marry him. That seems strange to us these days, but . . .

SIGRIST: Now, he was still in Europe at that point.

MAYERS: That was, of course, when they were just engaged. And, of course, he got married. He was a grain merchant when I remember him. He had a little store in Stivishte, the little town where I was born.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

MAYERS: S-T-I-V-I-S-H-T-E.

SIGRIST: Great. Can you describe the town for me a little bit, what it looked like?

MAYERS: A little bit. I was there a couple of years ago, but

it's different. It looked all the same.

SIGRIST: What do you remember as a kid when you think back and close your eyes?

MAYERS: Close my eyes. Small little houses, individual houses. They were fairly close together. Mud streets, but there was one big road going through town. A big lake. Mother used to take me with her when she wanted to do the laundry in the lake. She washed in the lake.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you did laundry in those days.

MAYERS: Well, as far as I can remember, don't forget I'm eighty-three years old. This is a long time ago. My mother would just take everything I suppose, in a basket, and I'd go with her. I mean, she'd just wash the clothes with soap in the lake. And then she'd take them home and hang it up in the barn or something.

SIGRIST: Did this lake also supply the water for the town?

MAYERS: Yes. We had water carriers who would come with big barrels in their wagons, with strong horses, you know, big wagons. And they would deliver water, and the

people paid for the water.

SIGRIST: Very interesting.

MAYERS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me some more details about town. Do you remember maybe stores or what the downtown area looked like?

MAYERS: The downtown area. All right, I'll tell you this. We were Jewish, as I said. Most of the town, I think all but very few people were Jewish. And we all lived in this little town. Now, I can't say how many people were there. I don't know. We had a few synagogues. We had a pharmacy with the only telephone in town. What else? Uh, the noble, nobility lived around us, on the outside. It seemed like they were in a circle around us, but I can't say for sure.

SIGRIST: Would they have been Gentile, the nobility?

MAYERS: Yes, yes. Well, no Jews were nobility. I don't know. You must know a little bit of the history. If not, read it up.

SIGRIST: But what were the relationships in those days between . . .

MAYERS: Let me tell you this one thing. I must include this.

SIGRIST: Okay.

MAYERS: I remember distinctly on spring and summer evenings after dinner, we'd sit outside and could hear the peasants around us singing. It was beautiful.

SIGRIST: And I assume the peasants also would be Gentile. Would they be Catholic?

MAYERS: Well, they were Serfs, yeah.

SIGRIST: So they're still, they're still sort of employing a feudal type society.

MAYERS: That's it, that's it. They work for the, what, the nobility.

SIGRIST: The landowners.

MAYERS: The landowners. That was the nobility. The peasants did not own land. They worked for the others.

SIGRIST: How did the Gentiles and the Jews get on?

MAYERS: Very well, very well, until the Revolution, of course.

SIGRIST: Which changed everything.

MAYERS: That changed everything.

SIGRIST: Well, when you were a young child you remember the relationships being good.

MAYERS: Yeah, up until ten years, when I was ten years old is when all Hell broke loose.

SIGRIST: Oh, good, well, we'll talk about that a little bit later. Describe your house for me.

MAYERS: Much as I can remember, you walked down a few stairs. It was one floor.

SIGRIST: Did you say you walked down a few stairs?

MAYERS: Two or three steps. A big room, square room. Earth floor. On one side was a very small room that was used for a bedroom. Straight ahead was the kitchen, great, big oven. And then on top of the oven was finished. I don't, plaster maybe, if they had plaster at that time. Because I know in the wintertime, when it was very cold, I used to go up with my sister and my brother and we'd keep warm on top of the oven.

SIGRIST: What was the oven made out of?

MAYERS: I think brick, but I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

SIGRIST: And that was sort of the central point of the kitchen was the oven.

MAYERS: That was the oven. And it was something like a sink. I can't remember what that looked like, because I know we washed our hands in there. And mother washed the dishes in there, but I cannot remember exactly what it looked like.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the earthen floors in the house, if you needed any kind of special care, or how you took care of the earthen floors?

MAYERS: It seems to me my mother used to sprinkle some kind of powder or something on top of them.

SIGRIST: Was it dusty inside because of the earthen floors?

MAYERS: No.

SIGRIST: It was packed.

MAYERS: No, it was packed. But then there were other rooms. There was another great, big room there, and I don't remember the furniture there at all. And then there was another bedroom. It was a dark bedroom, and that's about all I can remember.

SIGRIST: It's a good-size house.

MAYERS: Yeah, yeah. We had that house. And then next door there was another small house that my father owned, and that was rented to someone, who was a scribe. He knew how to read and write, and whenever anybody got a letter from, well, maybe their children in America, they would take it to him and he would read it for them.

SIGRIST: The town scribe. Tell me, who lived in the house with you? It's you and your mother, and your father.

MAYERS: Right.

SIGRIST: And then you mentioned some siblings. Can you list them by name?

MAYERS: Okay, all right. Miriam was my oldest sister, and the oldest child at home. I had two brothers in the United States.

SIGRIST: Who were much older than you, probably, the two of you.

MAYERS: One brother was about twenty-two or twenty-three years older than I. In the house, Miriam, who was fourteen

years older than I. The next one, my brother Herschel. It seems to me he was much, much younger than Miriam. He was about, no. He was about eleven years older than I, yes. And then there was another sister who was eight years older than I.

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

MAYERS: Her name was Golda.

SIGRIST: Now, can you, think back to your early childhood. Tell me something about your relationship with your brothers and sisters. Is there a story that comes out in your mind, or something that you enjoy doing together with them? Anything like that? Maybe you all got in trouble one time?

MAYERS: No, no. No, I can't think of one thing in relation to my, my oldest sister got married when I was seven years old, moved to a Egedirinesslav (ph) in Russia. And she once sent me some toys. It was a little set of furniture, doll furniture. I remember that. And I guess I must have written. I didn't know I could write at that time, but I guess I could, because there wasn't anybody else that wrote for me, to tell her that I was a big girl and I was too big for toys. And

I got a letter back saying that no, I wasn't. That those were for me to play with.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Were you closest to the sister, what was her name, Golda, who was your . . .

MAYERS: No.

SIGRIST: Because she's the closest to you in age, correct?

MAYERS: She was closer to me in age. She was eight years older.

SIGRIST: So that's still a substantial difference.

MAYERS: As I remember, she was sick, a big problem with Golda. Golda died in the Holocaust. You'll hear about her.

SIGRIST: Yeah, sure. You said she was sick as a child. What was she sick with?

MAYERS: Uh, she limped as they told me as a result of typhoid fever, typhus, typhoid. But also, also mentally there was something wrong, they thought. I don't think there was anything serious.

SIGRIST: She was maybe just simple.

MAYERS: Something simple, but enough to keep her out of the

United States with us.

SIGRIST: That's right, because that's an important part of your story later on. But as you remember, as a child in Russia, you just simply remember her being ill, or just . . .

MAYERS: No, just never got along with her. And my other, the others were too old for me.

SIGRIST: Oh, yeah. You really were a true baby in the family.

MAYERS: It was, there was a woman, a young blonde girl who was supposed to take care of me. I remember her name. I remember she took care of me, but I don't remember any close relations with her, whether I liked her or disliked her or anything. And then there was another woman who used to come and help my mother clean the house, I think. But I know we had a cow, and she used to feed the, yeah, feed the cats.

SIGRIST: Did the cow have a name?

MAYERS: No, but that was supposed to be my playmate, because they bought it when I was born, the day I was born.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you, because you were born so late in life, your mother was how old, again, when you were born?

MAYERS: She was forty-seven.

SIGRIST: Oh, my goodness. So she was born in the, what, 1870's sometime?

MAYERS: I guess. And I was born 1810, I was born.

SIGRIST: 1910.

MAYERS: 1910.

SIGRIST: (they laugh) Did she ever relate any stories about your birth to you?

MAYERS: Well, all right. She didn't have a midwife like everybody else had. They sent for a doctor, and she said it was a woman doctor. I don't remember later on a woman doctor again. All I can remember is an old, old man that was a doctor. He was professor, and very highly thought of, you know, almost revered, because he had gone to school in Vienna. But she said that they had, her son was born on a Tuesday when my father was at the marketplace, and I had to run and get my father to tell him this news. And I was known to my

father as the child, never by name. "Where's the child?" I remember him picking me up, holding me in his arms, buying me little somethings when he came home. I remember a little (?) whistle that he once brought home.

SIGRIST: I can only imagine that you must have been a surprise to them at that age.

MAYERS: Oh, yes, indeed. (she laughs) And my mother told me that she was very, very embarrassed when she was pregnant. However, when I was older, when she was older, she was very happy that she had me.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, what was your mother's name?

MAYERS: Hannah.

SIGRIST: That would be C-H-A-N-N-A-H? Channah, is that . . .

MAYERS: No, we spelled it with just an H.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

MAYERS: Hmm. No, I can't recall it.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe you'll think of it later. Is it written down on here somewhere? Well, let's see. We can look

it up afterwards. Can you tell me a little bit about your mom's personality?

MAYERS: Well, my mom was a redhead, bright red hair. And I heard later on that she probably had a temper.

SIGRIST: Butzarsky, is that her, "my father became engaged to Anne Butzarsky."

MAYERS: Butzarsky.

SIGRIST: That's B-U-T-Z-A-R-S-K-Y. For the sake of the tape I am reading off of a paper prepared in 1928 by Mrs. Mayers when she was in school, about her family tree. So her name was Hanna Butzrsky.

MAYERS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

MAYERS: That's all right.

SIGRIST: Tell me about her.

MAYERS: On the papers in the United States it was Anna. Anna, we pronounced it Anna.

SIGRIST: Her personality.

MAYERS: All right. As far as I was concerned she was a very sweet, gentle woman, no formal education whatsoever. But she had been brought up by an older brother and sister-in-law. It seems that, well, her father died in a fire when she was only three years old. I don't know when her mother died. It may have been while she was engaged to my father, but long ago. But so, somehow had a sixth sense about everything. You know, it's laughable. Sometimes I wonder the things that she would make me eat. Later on I learned I was so glad I had the right vitamins and minerals. At any rate, I, if I were very upset I'd put my head in her lap, and that's about all I needed, and I'd feel much better. Everything would go away. A very gentle person.

SIGRIST: But am I to believe that perhaps with other people she was not so gentle?

MAYERS: No, not with the other people. She'd yell at my father. That is what my older sister told me later on, that she yelled at my father. But, no, for the most part, I'd say she was, because I know from the relatives here in the United States, my father's relatives, that they'd always go to her to complain,

and then they'd leave smiling. I had a sister-in-law who was once divorced from my brother and then remarried. And then I remember one time here in the United States I was at home and my sister-in-law came barging in, and they made me go out and play. And she looked so mad and irritable. And then after about a half hour she came out smiling. Even then, at such an early age, I thought she's going in there to tell that lady about her son and complain, and then she comes out smiling. How come?

SIGRIST: Now, your father came back to Russia when, roughly?

MAYERS: Well, he was only away two, two-and-a-half years.

SIGRIST: Oh, so . . .

MAYERS: So it was still in the 1890's.

SIGRIST: Some time in the 1890's. Did he ever, shall I say, did he regret going back to Russia? Did he really not want to come back to Russia, do you think?

MAYERS: That's right. Because from the stories I heard, and you understand that I was too young to really know about these things, he wanted my mother to come to the United States, and he begged her to take her and the

two little boys to the United States. But she would not go, because she was a very observant person, kind of a Jewish thing, you know. She was orthodox, very observant, and she'd heard that people didn't believe in God and people were not religious in the United States, and she just would not go, so he remained at home.

SIGRIST: Well, what finally changed his mind? Why so many years later did he decide to come back?

MAYERS: Oh, come on! (she laughs) That was right at the Revolution time.

SIGRIST: So it was the political climate, then, that made him change his mind.

MAYERS: Oh, my land, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, talk a little bit about that for me, please. About . . .

MAYERS: You want me to talk about it now?

SIGRIST: Yeah, please.

MAYERS: All right. The revolution started in 1917, but we really didn't feel it until maybe a couple of years

later. Well, then these gangs started coming through town, killing and slaughtering and burning.

SIGRIST: Indiscriminately, or just Jewish people?

MAYERS: Just Jewish people.

SIGRIST: So these are the pogroms.

MAYERS: That's right. But pogroms were before that. This was more than a pogrom, because it was constant. Maybe they let us alone for a day or two or a week maybe, and then they'd be there again, and it was constant. There was one day when we heard that they were going to come and burn the town. So everybody got up and left. And we all walked to the next town, which was Belatserkov, Belatserkov, in Russian. I just kept following everybody, and the first thing I know I wasn't with my family or anything. I wasn't frightened or anything, I knew (?). I never frightened easy anyhow. But my father sent my brother to go looking for me, and then they, he found me there, and they all came there anyhow after a while. So that's what was happening, but that, why we came, let me tell you why we came to the United States, what made us come. My two brothers were here in the United

States. In fact, one brother came here about a year before I was even born, and then the other one came about a year later. He got in touch with some of his friends in the United States. There was one in New York, I know, and one in Chicago. I don't know if there were any others. And that group decided, since they couldn't reach their parents either by phone or by wire or by letter, nothing reached Russia at that time. They decided to send for two of them to go to Russia, look for all the parents in that little town, and bring them to the United States. Well, these two young men got as far as Roumania, and then they just didn't know how to go, or they didn't know how to cross the border. That was Dniester River, between Roumania, at that time Roumania, you know, the map has changed many times. They decided to hire someone that knows the terrain, knows the country, that would go over and look for their families. They hired a man and his wife to go over there and see if they could find them. Well, they evidently were pretty smart people. They knew the place really well. And they got there, we weren't in Stavishte, because we had gone away from there. And so they reached Belatserkov and found us, these different families. I can't

remember who they were, but I know that there were a few of them. Then all of us, but my father had gone back to Stavishta to see if he could salvage anything from the houses.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if the town had indeed been destroyed?

MAYERS: Had what?

SIGRIST: Had been destroyed. When he went back, what did he find?

MAYERS: Yeah, it was destroyed, because when I went visiting there a few years ago, they told me, and that reminded me, I do remember that. And, but they rebuilt the town almost the same as it had been before, and that's how it looked today, years later. Anyhow, they found us, but my father had gone back to Stavishta, and they told us, you know, they were in a hurry to get us all together to start on our journey. So my mother sent my brother Herschel to Stavishta to tell my father to hurry up and come, we're going to America. On the way there he found this gang of marauders, and there was a woman there that they were molesting. They had found another group that were on their way out. And so he tried to defend this woman, and they killed him.

SIGRIST: Killed your brother Herschel?

MAYERS: My brother Herschel.

SIGRIST: How old was he when that happened?

MAYERS: How old was he then? Well, if I was, what did I say, he was eleven years older. If I was ten, he was twenty-one.

SIGRIST: A young man.

MAYERS: So, but my father must have heard from these people that my brother had met, going back to Stavishta or someplace. So we knew what the situation was. And I suppose he must have buried him on the way, or taken him or whatever. He came back to Stavishta, and he got prepared. We prepared to go on our journey. They had several wagons they hired, these people, of hay and straw and all that. Whatever little bit we had I suppose we had in the straw there. Now, I remember this. I had my school uniform that had, it was a brown sateen. You know what sateen is? A little collar here, and a belt here, but it was sewn in, not separate belts. They put their jewelry here and here and in my hem. My mother baked some brown bread, and

she put money or whatever else, you know, the precious things, into the bread.

SIGRIST: She put it into the bread. Isn't that interesting.

MAYERS: In the bread.

SIGRIST: We need to pause so that Kevin can flip all the tapes, and we'll get you on your way.

MAYERS: All right. Now we're not . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now resuming. Is it right for me to assume, then, that this packing process is happening very quickly, that once that couple found you and your family . . .

MAYERS: Well, then in a couple of days, I suppose, very quickly.

SIGRIST: It was over very quickly. So you're hiding valuables in your clothing, and in the food. You said your . . .

MAYERS: In bread.

SIGRIST: In bread. What else did you take with you? What else did you have to take?

MAYERS: I don't, I don't recall anything, but there must have been something, a few things, that I know of. What could there have been?

SIGRIST: Especially if everything was destroyed.

MAYERS: We walked out of Stavishta, and we walked to this next town.

SIGRIST: As a young girl around ten years old, are you frightened by what's going on, or are you sort of not aware . . .

MAYERS: I'm not frightened.

SIGRIST: It's more of an adventure than a frightening . . .

MAYERS: I don't know if it was an adventure, just something that had to be, and that's what happened. So we just take it as it comes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your parents, how they reacted to all these events? You know, was this, did they just become hardened to it all after a while?

MAYERS: I really can't say.

SIGRIST: And they just lost a son, you know, a young adult.

MAYERS: It seemed like we were almost without any feelings. We just didn't feel frightened or sad or anything. It just, nothing. I do remember that when I heard about my brother being killed my first thought was, "I guess I'd better not tell Mama." That's it.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, then, a little bit about what happened. You got everything into the wagon. How many wagons are there? Just one, or . . .

MAYERS: It was more than one. At least two, there may have been more. Now, I don't know. I was only interested in the one, maybe the one behind me. But, you know, as we were riding along, I remember talking to my father as if nothing had happened. Talking about the soil. You know, and the rich soil and the things growing. It's strange. We rode along, and if, I was told if we were stopped I should say, "Where are we going?" "We're going to such-and-such a town," which was the next town, wherever we were. We were to say that we were going to the next town. Finally, and I don't think it took too many days, we were at the

border, the Russian border.

SIGRIST: This would be the border of . . .

MAYERS: Dniester.

SIGRIST: Of Roumania and Russia.

MAYERS: Dniester, Russia, the border of Roumania. Besarabia.

SIGRIST: Is it, it's nearing . . .

MAYERS: Just (?).

SIGRIST: Miriam is with you, Golda is with you.

MAYERS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Herschel has died.

MAYERS: Yeah. Miriam's husband.

SIGRIST: Oh, Miriam's married, that's right. So it's Miriam
and her husband, and Golda and you.

MAYERS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Mom and Dad, this couple, and other people.

MAYERS: And other people.

SIGRIST: And other people.

MAYERS: They were more than just a couple. I know there was one family, I think she was a niece or a cousin of my mother's, that was with about six children, her husband and six children.

SIGRIST: Little kids.

MAYERS: Now, yeah. Now, they were not sent for. In other words, these other families, the son sent for them. These were just our relatives, and she was a very strong woman, and she says she's going, too. And she just got on the wagon with her family, and she's going, no matter what. So there were other people. Now, we got, finally we got to the border. The woman took my sister and her husband and some of these, and the young and able people, when it was the darkest at night, you know, and they started crossing over.

SIGRIST: Would they do that in small boats?

MAYERS: Yeah, rowboats.

SIGRIST: Who supplied the boats?

MAYERS: They found them, or hired them, you know, paid for

them. And then later on when there was a little bit light, they took the older people, took my sister that was crippled, and maybe some of the children, I guess.

I don't remember that part. And they took us across.

Now, my sister and brother-in-law were stopped by the border guards, the guards on the border. And they were arrested and taken to this town. I don't quite remember the details of it. It doesn't seem to come out. Let me say what they did with us. They also, oh. And then guards met us, too.

SIGRIST: This is on the Roumanian side.

MAYERS: This is on the Roumanian side, yeah. Yeah, because Russia wouldn't let anybody out, Roumania wouldn't let anybody in. But we were already in there, couldn't do anything about it. But we were stopped in, you know, not in the town, in the countryside where there's nobody. And so they brought us into the town, too, and we, and my sister and brother-in-law were there. Now, I don't know whether they just let them stay and were watching them or what, I can't recall. But we were all there, and we had to go on a trial, in a courthouse. It was very cold, I remember. I was leaning against the wall, trying to warm up. My

brother-in-law and my sister were sentenced to an interment, inter, what's the word? A camp where they . . .

SIGRIST: Internment camp.

MAYERS: Internment, is that the right one? Yes, an internment camp. Why weren't my mother and father there? I don't know. But I was there. And my sister or my brother-in-law said that they had some relatives in Kishinev which at that time was the capital of Roumania. I don't know if it was, Basarabia is where we were. Evidently Shirokov was the name of the town. Evidently it had public relations with Roumania or whatever, or maybe it was part of that country then. But, at any rate, they said they had relatives there, and that would they please let the child, let them leave the child with relatives so that I wouldn't have to go with them, so I didn't go to this camp with them. They were there about six months or so. My father negotiated with somebody, and he paid ransom or whatever and got them out after a while.

SIGRIST: Did they ever tell any stories about being in the jail?

MAYERS: Not too much. It was not difficult, and they did have enough to eat. However, they couldn't just get up and go.

SIGRIST: So that delayed you.

MAYERS: But they said, yeah, but I was with my mother and father.

SIGRIST: Right, but I mean it delays the whole trip just that much longer.

MAYERS: Yeah. It took us a whole year to get here. And then, let's see. I was with my father and mother, and then they, and Golda. And then they came back, and then we had to go to, what we were doing in Hamburg, Germany I have no idea, because we left from South Hampton, England. But we were interned there too, for some reason, and we had to steal borders. We didn't just, you know, get a ticket for a train and go. We had to find our way somehow, and we had to just go across borders, but there were guards. We somehow made it.

SIGRIST: Do you think that Hamburg, was Hamburg actually your destination, or did you just kind of go aimlessly?

MAYERS: No. I don't think we went aimlessly. I think, well,

maybe, yeah. I guess they figured out that was the best way to go. Probably someone figured it out. There were a few families, don't forget.

SIGRIST: Do you remember at any of these points where there were guards, being searched? You've got valuables sewn into your clothes.

MAYERS: Whatever happened to them? I don't even remember bringing them to the United States. Maybe they sold them.

SIGRIST: Or maybe they were used to get your sister and brother-in-law out of jail.

MAYERS: That's it. At any rate, I remember the one instance where it was Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, I don't know. It was in the middle of the night, and I remember the lights going on. It was a train station. And we couldn't get them on, and we finally got on the baggage train and went from one place to the other. And then, but when I got to Hamburg, then the people were very nice to us. But that also was under somebody's jurisdiction. We didn't just, we just weren't free to move around.

SIGRIST: Was it like a refugee camp of some sort?

MAYERS: No. That was not a camp. I think it was like an apartment. Maybe it was a camp. Maybe it was, something like that.

SIGRIST: How long did you have to stay there?

MAYERS: We stayed quite a long time, a few months.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything . . .

MAYERS: So between, between Roumania, and between Hamburg it took almost a year, because then from Hamburg we went to London, and we stayed in London for a while. I was vaccinated there, I was vaccinated in Hamburg. And, well, so we were under somebody's jurisdiction there.

SIGRIST: When you were in Hamburg, did you take it, you must have taken a ship to London from Hamburg.

MAYERS: I guess. I don't know.

SIGRIST: But you don't remember that.

MAYERS: I don't remember it at all.

SIGRIST: What do you, do you have any stories or anything about staying in Hamburg for those months? Did anything

stick out in your mind?

MAYERS: I can remember soldiers. I can remember that they were so nice to me. And in my story here I wrote about the book they gave me to read. I learned German very quickly, and in a few months I was talking to them. All the children there. People were nice. I remember that the streets were so clean that if you dropped something you had to pick it up, otherwise you were fined. And everybody was very nice to us.

SIGRIST: Now, why London? Why did you go from Hamburg to London?

MAYERS: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you have family, or somebody have family?

MAYERS: No, no. We had no relatives anywhere along the way, none. No. No acquaintances, nobody.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being in London?

MAYERS: Very little. Almost nothing. But I do remember Germany, because people were so nice to me. I remember playing outside, but I don't remember any children.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if you had steamship tickets in hand, or were you going to have to get them once you got to wherever it was you were leaving from?

MAYERS: My brother sent tickets. Now, maybe that's, maybe we had to go to London to pick them up. It's a possibility. I know that . . .

SIGRIST: So your brother was paying for all of this.

MAYERS: Oh, yes, yeah. My father had money until we got to the ship, except for the tickets. That I know. Now, we came here on the Berengaria. And we were on second class.

SIGRIST: And you left from Southampton.

MAYERS: Yeah. Not in steerage, but . . .

SIGRIST: This is . . .

MAYERS: But second class.

SIGRIST: And what time of the year is this?

MAYERS: This was in October.

SIGRIST: October of '21.

MAYERS: Yeah. Now, my sister and brother-in-law left earlier. They left in the spring. Maybe April, March or April. And perhaps, yes, I think. They left earlier. They were free to come, whereas we were waiting because my father with a, with the amputation, and my sister with her condition. Now, my brother had to arrange to be responsible for us, a guardian. He lived in Covington, Kentucky. And he had to put up bail or whatever, no, not bail.

SIGRIST: A bond.

MAYERS: A bond. Yeah. He knew a senator that lived in Covington. And he was helpful to him, so that my sister, because she was crippled, and nothing about her sanity or anything, but for that, and my father, because of his amputated hand, that they wouldn't become a ward of the state, wouldn't have to depend on welfare. And that went okay, finally. That's why we stayed in Hamburg, and that's why maybe we had to go to London. And so we came to the United States.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the boat?

MAYERS: About the boat.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Tell me about the Berengaria, and what you remember about it.

MAYERS: Well, we had good food. It was nice and warm.

SIGRIST: Did anything . . .

MAYERS: And I didn't have to . . . Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did anything interesting happen while you were on the boat? Were there any . . .

MAYERS: I don't think so.

SIGRIST: No? Were you sick?

MAYERS: No. No, I wasn't sick.

SIGRIST: An uneventful trip on the boat.

MAYERS: No. Nothing, nothing outstanding whatsoever.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long it took?

MAYERS: Yeah. I think it was six or seven days, about a week.

SIGRIST: Were you all in one cabin, in second class?

MAYERS: Yes. Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you

came into port?

MAYERS: Yes, and I remember the thrill. I really do. I don't think I knew anything about the Statue of Liberty, or that I had to look for it or anything, but I was so thrilled I can still remember that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, then what happened when you got into New York?

MAYERS: Okay. They examined people, or examined them, on first and second class. The steerage all had to go to Ellis Island. The others did not, and that's why my brother had sent us second class tickets and all that, with all the arrangements. Well, he was with his friend in New York waiting for us to come, and his friend, this is the story I heard, and I remember part of it. His friend suggested that he had a friend who was a reporter, and he was a good talker. He knew how to do things, and to get him to go on the boat and speak for us and there would be no problem whatsoever to take us off. Well, he got drunk, and he came on the boat, and he started talking. And evidently said something about my sister, and they held us up and sent us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: He said something about your sister's . . .

MAYERS: Your sister's mental capacity.

SIGRIST: Her mental capacities.

MAYERS: And so they took us to Ellis Island. All I can remember is a great, big hall and benches, and that's all I can remember of Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long you were here?

MAYERS: A few days.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you had to stay overnight.

MAYERS: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the kind of testing that they might have put to your sister?

MAYERS: No, I don't know any, I was examined physically by a doctor, you know, looking for my eyes being clear, no breaking out of the skin or anything like that. That's all I can remember about that part. I just can't remember anything.

SIGRIST: Then I should think that they probably would have done tests with your father, too, because of his amputated arm.

MAYERS: No. Well, my brother had taken care of that part, and also my sister being crippled. That all would have been okay. But they didn't know anything about her mental state, and that, I think even now you couldn't do anything about, they wouldn't allow her. But, at any rate, that was the situation with us.

SIGRIST: So what was the final outcome?

MAYERS: All right. They let my sister stay for two months, you know, stay here for two months.

SIGRIST: Not in Ellis Island. In America.

MAYERS: No, no, in America. And then after two months they let her have another two-month stay, but after that she had to go back. And my brother found a home for her in Germany. It was owned by B'nai B'rith, the Jewish organization. You might have heard of that probably, that had a home for people like that, and my other brother took her back to Germany. Now, we heard from people that had been there for, you know, to see other people, or had been in Germany, and the family asked them to look her up. And they said they couldn't see anything wrong with her. She was

perfectly all right. They may have had some kind of, today they would have spotted, and then a psychologist would have known what to do, you know, but at that time that was the unfortunate thing. She went back to Germany, and she stayed in this home. We corresponded. And then, of course, Hitler came and Hitler took her away.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember her leaving when your, do you remember when your brother took her back?

MAYERS: Sort of. It isn't really clear. I must have shut my mind to a lot of things, maybe to Ellis Island, too.

SIGRIST: Sure, because that must have been very sad for your family.

MAYERS: Oh, of course. My poor mother.

SIGRIST: Did they ever talk about it in later life, your father and your mother ever talk about that whole situation and when she was sent back?

MAYERS: Interesting, no, no. Nobody ever talked about it.

SIGRIST: Well, we've got ten minutes left. Tell us a little bit about getting adjusted to America. Did you stay

in New York, or did you go right to Kentucky?

MAYERS: We went to, we went to Covington, and lived in the house that my brother had.

SIGRIST: What was he doing there?

MAYERS: He had a, what they call a general store. He owned a building, and downstairs was the general store. And he had two living, two floors of living quarters. We lived on the second floor, and my sister and brother-in-law lived on the third floor.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you were seeing in America that you had never seen before?

MAYERS: Bathtub. Washcloths. Uh, hot water coming out of the tap. I don't know. I was so busy playing. Now, this was in October. The weather was still pretty nice to go out in the backyard, and all these little boys and girls talking English, and here I am. In no time whatsoever I was talking with them. And I had the most wonderful time. And I remember the next summer thinking then, and it stayed in my mind, "I'm having such a wonderful time. I wonder if I'll ever have a good time like this again." School. I was a

big girl, eleven years old. There is a third grade, I think, in Covington, where they had a German teacher, and since I knew German my brother heard about it from friends and they were told, he said they told him he ought to enroll me in that so I could understand. He said, "No." He was going to enroll me in a regular American school. He enrolled me in the first grade. And here I was, and I learned English very fast, and I remember hearing a little girl say, "Look at that big girl. She's only in the first grade." But I didn't care. I knew I, after four years I was right up there, finished school.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were learning English, do you remember like your first word?

MAYERS: No.

SIGRIST: Or anything like that?

MAYERS: No. It just came so natural.

SIGRIST: You know, your mother didn't want to come to America in the 1890's. How did she feel about being there in the 1920's?

MAYERS: Well, she wasn't a complaining person, but I know she

was not happy.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about her Americanization, if you will, if there even was one.

MAYERS: No, none. Never learned English. Stayed in the house pretty much. Of course we had my father's relatives who lived across the Licking River in Newport. And they'd visit us, and we'd all visit them. And my mother had them to be with, so she wasn't completely alone. But, of course, I know that she missed her home. But there was nothing to do about it. I mean, if she had stayed in Russia she would have been killed, too, like everybody else, so what do you do?

SIGRIST: In Covington, was there a Jewish population or an immigrant population that she could . . .

MAYERS: No immigrants, no. No immigrants. There were a few Jewish people, but scattered through the whole town, but very, very few. She had no friends in Covington, none, and she did not mingle with the other people. She never made an effort to.

SIGRIST: Were there any ways that you as the young girl tried to Americanize yourself, perhaps in clothing or . . .

MAYERS: I didn't have to try. It just came so natural.

SIGRIST: Did you ever experience any kind of prejudice because you were an immigrant?

MAYERS: No. If I did, I didn't notice it. I just felt American immediately, I really did.

SIGRIST: Did your dad get a job right away?

MAYERS: My brother had the general store, and he opened another general store for my father to run. But my father knew English, because he had been there. I mean, he had been in the United States for a few years, and he knew English, so he ran a little store for him. But then, of course, things got bad and the Depression in '29, and he had to close it, and then he was too old to look for anything else. He got to be a very sad person.

SIGRIST: Do you think, in your own heart do you think your parents should have stayed in Russia?

MAYERS: How could we? We wouldn't have lasted any time at all.

SIGRIST: Well, but, you know, they were on in years at this

point, you know. They were in their late forties, and they had such a hard time assimilating into America. Do you think that they would have actually been happier?

MAYERS: Well, not at that time because we all would have been killed.

SIGRIST: It was a bad time.

MAYERS: For sure, we all would have been killed.

SIGRIST: So really, they were sort of stuck between a rock and a hard spot, you know.

MAYERS: For them it was hard. No, they didn't regret coming. They had to come. And it was, I mean, it was sad, but it wasn't impossible, because they did have the relatives.

SIGRIST: Right, right, so they had some support.

MAYERS: They had some support, of course. And my mother had her two sons that she had and she never thought that she would ever, I remember as a little girl her saying, "I'll never see them again." That was a long ways away from Russia to America. And, of course,

during the Revolution you never heard from them.

So . . .

SIGRIST: So it was like getting long-lost children back, sort of, for her.

MAYERS: That's right. Oh, my brother, I can remember when he came on the ship and saw her. He fell on his knees and he kissed her hands, and I can still remember it was so sad.

SIGRIST: So America is really a mixed blessing for them, isn't it, really?

MAYERS: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: It's so good, and yet so hard.

MAYERS: Well, it was hard, but they were happy to be here, sure.

SIGRIST: Are you glad they came?

MAYERS: Me? (she laughs) Of course, I am. Oh, my land, yes. Of course. But I feel American.

SIGRIST: Like you grew up here, sort of?

MAYERS: Of course I do, I really do. I don't feel any, I

don't feel Russian, none whatsoever. No allegiance to Russia. I was there two years ago. My daughter wanted her roots, so I took her to Russia to find Stavishhta, and I found a woman who knew my father.

SIGRIST: Was that emotional for you, or . . .

MAYERS: Oh, it certainly was, it certainly was. I went into, well, that's a long story. (they laugh) No, that's okay. But it was emotional, it certainly was. And I tried to remember some of it. There was very little I could remember, except that the town looked exactly as it did before, even though it had burned to the ground and they rebuilt it.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Mayers, we've got to end now.

MAYERS: Okay.

SIGRIST: But I want to thank you very much. This is . . .

MAYERS: This has been fun. I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: And, you know, it's such a dramatic and really heart-wrenching story in a lot of ways, and I thank you very much for letting us record it.

MAYERS: I don't think about it as heartbreaking.

(she laughs)

SIGRIST: It's a dramatic story. Anyway . . .

MAYERS: When people suffer so much, then nothing phases them any more. They more or less get used to it.

SIGRIST: Sure. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Rose Mayers on August 17, 1993 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Thank you very much.