

EI-432

MORRIS SOIFER

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 15, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 20, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:44

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ORLANDO, FLORIDA

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1996

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 9/2009

THE UKRAINE, 1922

AGE 13

PASSAGE ON "THE LAPLAND"

PORT OF EMBARCATION: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES: JERENE (UKRAINE); CARNARSIE, NY

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Soifer is the husband of Rose Soifer, Interview EI-431. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/1/1996.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine, and it's February 20, 1994. I'm at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Soifer. I've just interviewed Rose Soifer, and now I'm about to talk with Morris Soifer. Um, he came from The Ukraine in 19 . . .

SOIFER: I came to the States 1922.

LEVINE: 1922. And how old were you at that time?

SOIFER: Uh, thirteen.

LEVINE: Thirteen years old. And we're going to begin by Mr. Soifer saying his birth date, his name, and the place he was born in The Ukraine in Russian, on the chance that somebody might hear it and because Mr. Soifer lost all of his father's family, and he's hoping that somebody . . .

SOIFER: And mother's.

LEVINE: And mother's family. He's hoping somebody might hear this and make some connection. So let's begin, Mr. Soifer.

SOIFER: Okay. My name is, in Yiddish, Moishe Soifer. I was born in Jerene [ph], I was born in Jerene [ph], Pudoski Gubernia [ph], (Russian). (he is moved)
I would be glad if I could be connected with some relatives that are, if they hear the name and address where I was born, maybe they'll come in touch with me. I'll be very glad.

LEVINE: What was, uh, did you give your birth date, your

birth date?

SOIFER: April 15, 1908.

LEVINE: Now, did you live in the same town for the thirteen years before you came here?

SOIFER: We lived in Jerene [ph]. My father went to America. I think it was 1910, or 1912. I was about six years old when my father left us, my mother and my two sisters. I'm the oldest. My sister next to me, Luma. The youngest one, Dina.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

SOIFER: My mother's name? Ethel.

LEVINE: Ethel. Do you remember her maiden name?

SOIFER: Marmelstein. Ethel Marmelstein.

LEVINE: M-A-R-M-E-L-S-T-E-I-N.

SOIFER: S-T-E-I-N.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

SOIFER: Gurah [ph] Soifer.

LEVINE: Now, what did your father do when he was in The Ukraine?

MRS. SOIFER: Pressed the clothes.

SOIFER: Huh?

MRS. SOIFER: Presser.

SOIFER: No.

MRS. SOIFER: Yes.

SOIFER: When he came to America, but what did he do in Russia?

MRS. SOIFER: Oh.

SOIFER: He was . . .

MRS. SOIFER: A peddlar.

SOIFER: Uh, buying furs, wheat, selling it to the, the people in town. That was it.

LEVINE: And were you a religious family?

SOIFER: Well, not too religious. I wouldn't call it

religious.

LEVINE: Did you go to school?

SOIFER: No. I did not go to school, because in Russia you had to pay. In Russia, if you're born, you're a Jew born in Russia, you're a citizen without privileges. You cannot go to a public school. If you want to be educated, you had to pay, hire a teacher, and that's where you learn, otherwise, nothing. However, my mother sent me to a cheda [ph], Hebrew school. A teacher, we were, let me start it from the beginning.

LEVINE: Okay.

SOIFER: My father went to America. He left my mother pregnant. And when the time came to give birth, there's a midwife, an elderly woman. No nurses, no doctors. She woke me up in the middle of the night, and she told me, in short, "Morris, Moishala, go call the bubba, the midwife. Just knock on the door, if she don't hear the door, knock over to the window, knock on the window." At

that time it was before Passover. There were no sidewalks in Jerene [ph]. And it rained always, if it rained, it rained for about a week or two. Mud.

I had a little pair of boots. Running, because my mother told me run, fast. By running, I lost one of my boots that got stuck in the mud. So I ran with one boot. (he laughs) I came over, and I knocked on the door. No one, but she lived with a granddaughter. Nobody answered. I went over to the window. I knocked on the window, and the granddaughter heard me. And I screamed out, "Come quick. My mother is dying." Because she told me, "I'm dying." Well, they got dressed, the granddaughter and the midwife, the old lady, and they came over. They put me outside of the room, whatever had to be done. It was, on the way back, going with the midwife and her granddaughter, I happened to hit the boot. (he laughs) I just pulled it out from the mud, and I carried it. Anyways, we lived in a house which my father bought. It was one side of an old house, and a new side. Before the revolution, they crept, the

Gentiles crept up on the roof and they threatened my mother that they're going to kill us if we don't leave the house. So my mother had to leave the house, just take us and whatever belongings she could take along on a horse and wagon, and we went to our mother's, to my mother's sister in Bierskefka [ph]. That's the name of the town. They also had a, one old house, one entrance, but one side is the old house, one side is the new house. They lived in the new house. They gave us the old house. I went to Cheda, Hebrew school, when the revolution was on. They were, each group was fighting one another to control Russia. But there were two gangs that were just like Hitler. Their motto was, one of them was Pecurov [ph]. He was the worst. His motto was, "Kill the Jews, save Russia." The other one was Tutunov [ph]. His motto was, "Kill the Jews, get rich." They were fighting one another. There was Tutunov [ph], Machnov [ph], Denichen [ph], Pecurov [ph], and all different, each one fighting, and the Bolsheviks and MEncheviks. There were, being that they were

fighting one another, bullets were flying astray. You were sitting and eating at a table, and all of a sudden a bullet came in through the wall, got you. So there was one man, and experienced war, he leaded the town, going down the hill. I wouldn't know how to call it in English, but houses were built under the hill. The roof was the hill.

LEVINE: Huh. They were like into the hill.

SOIFER: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SOIFER: In the hill.

LEVINE: Set in, uh-huh.

SOIFER: Why? So that the bullets cannot penetrate to kill you when you're in the home. The worst army came in, Pecurov. He came over to where we were hiding in that house, or wherever you would call it.

MRS. SOIFER: A hut.

SOIFER: With us was the richest man in town. He was in the

leather business, also making boots, and he wanted to make himself as a poor man, but you could tell the face, the beard, the way he's got it, his hands. Well, anyway, one of Pecurov's [ph] came over, knocked on the door, and everybody was afraid to open the door. So he came over to the window, and he yelled, "If you don't open it, I'll break that window, and I'll come in." He came in. Women had earrings. He didn't ask them to come off. He just pulled them, made their ears bleed, rings, whoever wore, the women, they broke the fingers. Finally he came over to the rich man. There was no room for him anywheres, because we were crowded. My mother and my two sisters were on the bed. I had no room, so I was under the bed. The rich man was just facing me. I was under the bed over here, and he was facing me, his wife, and his daughter, he had one daughter. The Pecurovs [ph] came over, "(Russian), give me money." He said, "I haven't got any." He hit him with the butt of the gun in the mouth, he started to bleed from the mouth. But he, when he was bleeding, then he opened up his

jacket, took out money from the vest, and gave it to him." And the gangster said, "Ah-ha! I knew you got money. Give me all the money that you got." He said, "I haven't got no more." He walked, he made a few steps backwards, loaded the gun, shot him into the chest. And I'm lying under the bed, and I see the blood pouring out from the chest. I got scared, nothing in the thinking of my mother and my two sisters, I got so scared, being I was a child, I was about nine, ten years of age, I started to run out into the street. He saw me, the man who saw me running, with a whip. He got me on the shin. The skin came off, because it's the bone, and just a thin skin on the shin. It burned like fire. He came over, in Russian he said, "Shut up, or I'll kill you." I had to shut up, being that it burned like fire, but I had to keep quiet to save my life. The Bolsheviks came in, and they retreated. The bandits ran out of that town. It kept changing every day. Different armies came in. But the Bolsheviks were winning, of all the, because they gave everybody the needed shoes,

clothing, they caught me on the street, the Bolsheviks, they needed to peel potatoes, so they called children that walked on the street. They got me, and pulled me out in back of the town, on a horse and wagon. My luck, they gave me to peel onions. I was crying. Not that it hurt me, but I was crying from the onions. Well, anyways, I got paid, and what did I get? A red shirt. (he laughs) I got paid. Well, anyways, of all the gangs, the Bolsheviks were the best, the most friendliest towards the people. They didn't kill.

But before the Bolsheviks became in power, also the Pecurovs [ph] were in our town, and I used to go to a cheder. We were eleven boys, we were fifteen boys, but I got sick that day. I don't know whether it was a cold or what, and one of my friends, a boy, also got sick. Thank God we were sick, so we saved our lives, because the bandits, they poured kerosene on the roof. The roof was made out of straw, and they burned thirteen boys and their teacher, the rabbi. Then my mother became sick with typhus. She kept talking out of

fever. She called me, "Hey, boy, bring me flour, bring me water. I'll make some bread for you." She didn't, she wasn't responsible. She didn't know what she was saying. The same boy that was sick the day I was sick, we became friends, because we were the only two left from the cheder. His father originally was a kosher butcher, but he gave up being a butcher, and he hired farms, or rented, you would say. He became . . .

MRS. SOIFER: Tobacco.

SOIFER: A grower of tobacco plantations. And his, and my friend came over to my house, and my sisters were crying because they were hungry. I was hungry myself, but I was older, I was the oldest, I knew that there was nothing to eat, no use in crying. Why am I going to cry? My mother is sick in bed. She doesn't know what's going on. My friend asked me, "Why are they crying? Why are your sisters crying?" I said, "Because they are hungry." "Why don't you give them to eat, then?" I said, "We haven't got anything." He ran home and told his

mother. It didn't take five minutes, he came back with his mother, she brought bread, milk. She also made the milk for and bread for my mother. When his father came home from the farms, she told him about, they knew me, and they called me Moishe.

"Moishala's mother is very sick." He came over, called the doctor. He paid for the doctor, paid for the medicine, because we didn't have no money.

Since then my friend's mother came every day helping my mother, give her the medicines and food and everything. I protested to my friend's father.

"I will not accept any food from you as long as your wife comes to help my mother and my two sisters. I'm willing to work. Take me on the farm, on the plantation. I'll do anything. I'll give water to the people that are working. Whatever the foreman will tell me, I'll do." A goy is a goy. He gave me a shovel, "Dig." Shoes, I didn't have. So what happened? By digging, using the shovel, my foot became a blister on the bottom, on the step, on the foot. I couldn't, but I walked with the blister, but I saw my boss coming, I

grabbed the shovel, I started to dig. And he looked at me, and looked at the shovel. But as I was pressing my foot on the shovel I started to bleed. Pus came out, and blood. My boss grabbed the shovel away, he gave the foreman an argument, "Don't you dare let him use the shovel. Give him anything to do, work, but not a shovel." The peasants, they liked me. So each one gave me pears, fruit, pears, cherries, plums, and I used to put it into my shirt, and when I came home not only did I have, I also gave to my aunt and uncle and their children. Well, that was the life.

LEVINE: Let me . . .

SOIFER: That was during the Russian revolution. My father was here in America. No American consul was in Russia, because it was during the Revolution. American consul was in Roumania. My father got in touch with a cousin of my mother's side. He sent him money to get a delegate, hire a delegate, and take him out from Russia into Sarocca. That's the town where that cousin lived, in Roumania. How do

we come to Roumania? With that delegate. The delegate bought off the guard from Roumania that if he come back from, when he comes back with the people, we were about, every bit about twenty if not more. But one woman was carrying an infant, and we had to pass by a forest from the Russian side going to Roumania. Uh, a person came in and came out, and he came over to the woman with the infant, and being that she was carrying a package and a baby, he offered to help. The woman saw that he was so kindly. He offers to help, so she gave him the baby. All of a sudden, he started to run away with the baby. Everybody started to run after him. Two young men caught him, and they took the baby back, they gave it to the woman. Now, coming from the Russian side into the Roumanian side, there's a river. The river is just as big or wide as the Hudson River, but in Russia the river freezes when it's cold. Being I was the youngest, I also carried a package. What was the package?

MRS. SOIFER: Pillows.

SOIFER: Pillows. In the pillows my mother put in a silver cup for wine, you know, a bacha [ph] they call it in Yiddish. That was in my package. So what I do, I took my package, the river was frozen, made a sled out of it. I just lied down on it and was down. I was the first one coming into Roumania. What happened? We were late. The delegate was late with us, and the guards changed. They were on the border of guards. I was the first one, they cut me. They didn't know, they didn't say anything, because they didn't want the other people to know, to hear. There was a forest where you cross the river. Point to (?), "Sit down." The rest of them came. The rest of them came, whoever had money, gold, silver, they took it away. When they took it away, they started to yell, "(Russian)." "Go back." They sent us back to the Russian side. I did the same thing. Took the package that was my pack. I was very, made a sled out of it. I was the first one into Russia, waiting for my mother to come. And my mother also had the package on a, like the soldiers were, and

she had two children, my two sisters, each one of them holding onto their hands. It was during the nighttime we're going back. I said to my mother, "Let me take Dina, the youngest one. You hold on to Bluma [ph]." And I walked up first with my little sister, she was the youngest. She was about seven, about seven years. And I said to my sister, I took off my packet, see, I put it down, I figured as long as I got to save, I'll go down and take the pack off my mother, because we had to walk up a hill. So I left my sister on the hill with a pack, and I went and got the pack off my mother to help her come up. I was leading the first one, and they followed the rest of the people also. A boy, eleven, eleven years old, he's fast. He runs. I didn't feel anything. On the way back to my sister where I left the pack, I lost the passage. I began sweating. It was cold winter, but sweat anyway came out. What am I going to say to my mother? I couldn't say anything. She will drop dead if I say anything about my little sister. I walked this way and that way. Finally I see the same root sticking

out, and I went, "Oh, my gosh, she's got to be on the left hand side." I went, sure enough, she was sleeping. She didn't know anything about it. I didn't say a word till after we came to America, because I told her what's what. All right. Now, in Roumania, we had to wait for the visa.

LEVINE: Now, wait. You went back to Russia.

SOIFER: We went back to Russia, and the Bolsheviks stopped us off, and they asked us, "Running out of Russia, huh?" And one of the men said, "No, we went to a wedding, and we were robbed of the horse and wagons, horses and wagons. We had to walk." So they accepted that excuse, but they locked us up. They looked, then they let us free, because they started to fight again each, so they let us free. We went a second time, that was the second, the guards were paid off. The guards were there. They let us, as Rose said, she had to carry flowers or something like that, we had to carry, I had to carry books. It was in the morning, about seven, eight o'clock in the morning, children go to

school. I was carrying books. But each one had to be about a half a block away, and we came to our cousin, delegate leaders everywhere.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SOIFER: To wait for the visa, we had to go to the capital of Roumania, Bucharest. And over there, there was the organization HIAS. They helped the refugees. There was like a, I don't know how to explain it, a camp, and all together we lived, you sleep here, I sleep here. A year-and-a-half, a year-and-a-half we got a visa. We had to take the boat at Antwerp, Belgium, so we had to travel by train through Austria, Germany and so on until we reached Belgium. We came to Belgium, we had to go to disinfection with a German man, and he spoke German. So men had to go on the men's side, women went to their side. And he said, he gave me a burlap bag to put all my clothing and everything. (Mrs. Soifer speaks off mike) I wore, in Russian they call it a kitzma [ph], a fur hat. I threw

everything in. But going through the steam, that fur hat became half the size. (he laughs) It's true. It's true. I tried to put it on, it's impossible. (he laughs) But it's all in the same. We all lived through that, and then we took the boat.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name?

SOIFER: By the name Zeeland, Red Star Line. It took us eight days, third class, coming to America. My mother was seasick. My sisters were seasick. I was the only one who was all right. So instead of staying down on the third class, I walked up the steps on the second class. It was lunchtime. People were sitting in the restaurant eating. I see one man eating grapefruit. I never saw grapefruit in Russia, especially in a small town. They do, do know about these people in the big towns, Odessa, Kiev and so on. But in the small town where I come, didn't even know what a banana is.

MRS. SOIFER: Or oranges.

SOIFER: I see him eating grapefruit, and just on the other side I had a door and watched him. His table was nearest to me. And one of the men spoke to me in Jewish. (Yiddish) I said I didn't know what it was. I said, "Yes." He gave me, and it was good. I thought good, because it was sour, you know, and the sea, the salt of the sea, you know. I say, in Jewish, "Give me this here so I can give to my mother and my sister, because they're seasick." I went up and I gave it to them. They didn't know what it was. (he laughs) I didn't know what it was either, but it was good. Well, we reached the Statue of Liberty. Everybody came out crying. Freedom. My father came to meet us on a boat. Didn't have to go through Ellis Island, because he's the one that had to put up so much and so much money for us to come in.

LEVINE: Did he actually come aboard the boat?

SOIFER: He came on the boat.

MRS. SOIFER: He was an American citizen.

SOIFER: He was not an American citizen. He first became an American citizen after we were here. That's what that, that's the way I became a citizen.

LEVINE: So he came on the boat, and what was that like meeting him?

SOIFER: He came on the boat. I recognized him through pictures. In Roumania, we got pictures. And I knew every time I looked at him. But he came up on a boat. I was sitting right at the entrance where they come in. I recognized him. I pulled him by the coat. It was wintertime, January we came, in 19, January 20th, 20th, January 20th, 1922. He looks at me. He was stunned. He couldn't say anything. But he, he didn't say anything, and he didn't believe that it's me. He left me seven years old. Here I'm thirteen, twice the age. Oh, yeah. I reach the age of thirteen in Roumania. Thirteen you have to be bar mitzvahed. My mother took me to the synagogue. As a woman, it was an Orthodox synagogue, they wouldn't let her walk into where the men are. She was standing outside, and

she told me, "You go in and tell them that you're getting bar mitzvahed. You're thirteen years of age." I walk in, sure enough an elderly man approached me. And he asked me what's the purpose that I came in here. I told him, "I'm thirteen years of age." And he told me, "You have to be bar mitzvahed?" I said yes. He took me in, and I said the broha [ph] of the Torah, whatever, and I was bar mitzvahed, that was (?). I came out, my mother kissed me, that's all that was. That was the bar mitzvah. But coming back to the boat, my father took us off the boat. We came into an apartment on Snedeker Avenue, Brooklyn. The second day was the first day, it as on a Friday. On a Saturday we were supposed to get company, (Yiddish), relatives. My father says to me, "Go outside, get some fresh air." A greenhorn, I walk outside, not noticing what apartment, not noticing what number of the building. I go outside, what happens, two boys came over and they started to play checkers, the checkers nearest to the crack of the sidewalk. I never saw things like these in Russia. So I go and

pick up one checker. It was a black one. And I look at it, turn it over on the other side. Instead of putting it in the same spot, I must have put it two or three inches in a different spot. I go over to the other checker, that was a red one, I look at the other one, I see it's the same thing, but different color. Okay, same thing, I must have put it. They speak to me in English, and he start to motion. I look at him like a dummy. I don't know what it means. One of them started to hit me.

I said to him in Yiddish, "(Yiddish)" So I just gave him a slap in the face, and you could hear the slap for two blocks. And he turned around, and I kicked him with my foot, and the two of them started to run, and I chased them to the corner. Coming back, I don't know which house I came out from, because all the buildings were the same design. I didn't know the number of the apartment, I didn't know the number of the house. I got hungry, I went out before breakfast. I sat down on the sidewalk with my feet on the gutter, and I'm sitting. Maybe somebody will come out. Sure

enough, my father came out yelling, "Moishe, Moishe." I came in, we had company already, my relatives, my aunts, uncles. They asked me, "What are you doing there on the other side of the street? You live over here!" I told them that I didn't know where I lived, what number of the house, and they were all laughing. And I told them that I had the fight. And a cousin of mine registered me in public school, put me 3-A, 3-B, two classes, rapid advance, they call it, because I had to catch up with the other children. I was interested in history and geography. Arithmetic was very bad for me. I didn't know a thing. I didn't learn anything in Russian. I didn't know anything in spelling. I always had an argument with the teacher. She says, "This is a knife. K-N-I-F-E." I said, "It's wrong." I gave the teacher an argument. "It's wrong." She asked me, "Why is it wrong?" I said, "The K does not belong here. The E does not belong here. It's 'nif'." (they laugh)

LEVINE: How did you learn English? What helped you to

learn?

SOIFER: Well, the teacher helped me, and also the boys and girls that were there before. They knew, not much, but they knew more than I did. And they, they tell me, the teacher told me, "Your name is Morris Soifer." So I told her, "Your name is Morris." (he laughs) Learn how to read, the same thing. It was very hard. Like a truck passed by and it advertised "Sloan's liniment. Best for your backache." I read it, Sloan's liniment, best for your bakake [ph]. Backache. (he laughs)

MRS. SOIFER: Do you have more time for that?

SOIFER: Uh, we have some more time.

MRS. SOIFER: Yeah, Morris. Uh . . .

LEVINE: You want . . .

MRS. SOIFER: No, I'm not (?). We didn't have enough time to fill in.

LEVINE: Oh, this is good, though. It's funny, these stories.

SOIFER: Now you mixed me up where I was up to.

LEVINE: You were still in school.

SOIFER: I went to school, and my cousin registered me. I registered as Moishe Soifer, and they told me, "Your name is Morris." In Ukrainian they called me Moshka, Yiddish they called me Moshe, and real Russian they called me Moise [ph], I came to Roumania, they called me Moisu [ph], and now in America I am Morris. (he laughs) All right. Another funny thing. The same cousin that registered me at school, she gave me a banana to eat. I never saw a banana in my life. "Eat it. It's good, it's sweet." I take the banana, with the skin, and I bite into it. It was bitter. I say, "No, no good." So she peeled it off, then it was good. All right. My father was working here as a presser by clocks, mens coats, season work. There was slack and busy. He had to work three months, and in these three months save up for the slack three months. Not like now we have social security, people live like kings and queens. I

needed a suit for Passover. I said, "Pa, this suit is old already, it's torn. I need a suit." He told me, "You'll have to go to work." "I'm sorry," he says, "I can't afford it. You need a suit, I can't afford it." During school time, vacation time, I went to work in a brush factory, making brushes. And I saved up some money to buy shoes and a suit. As the time goes, my mother, being five years in the country, got sick. Years ago, now it's nothing to go through a . . .

MRS. SOIFER: Hysterectomy.

SOIFER: Hysterectomy. Years ago there was no antibiotics. We went to see her, my father and me, and she was supposed to come home the following day. The nurse took her out on the balcony of the hospital, and it all of a sudden got windy, she caught a draft, got into pneumonia. Two o'clock in the morning we got a telegram, come quick, your wife and mother is dying. I came, she was still alive, but in a coma. But she must have felt, when I touched her hand and it was cold, I put it in between my two hands,

and just that time, she must have felt me, and grabbed a hold of my hand. Two nurses had to come and take the fingers apart, take my hand out. I was working in a fruit and vegetable store.

LEVINE: You were still in school, or after?

SOIFER: After, as I grew. And my mother was saving for me ten dollars. I think I got twenty dollars a week at that time, and she was saving ten dollars every time I brought home the pay. Before she passed away, my father said to my two aunts, my mother's two sisters, "You see what children are? His mother in the hospital, she saved money for him. He doesn't even say, 'Here's the money to help Mom.'" My two aunts came over to me, called me over, and they told me what my father said to them. I said, "Why didn't he say it to me?" As a boy, it never did even occur to me. I went with the bankbook, punched the holes through and through, I said, "Here, Pa. Save Mom." All right. A short time, we wanted to get married.

MRS. SOIFER: Excuse me. You forgot to say you lost the job.

SOIFER: Huh?

MRS. SOIFER: You lost the job sitting shiva.

SOIFER: That was before I was sitting shiva. Oh, yeah. I went, I went, you got to sit eight days. You got to sit in mourning. After the eighth day, I went back to my job. Before I left, I told my boss I lost my mother and I'm in mourning, I have to sit shiva eight days. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm sorry that it happened," he says, "but you come back, don't worry." I came back, what happened? A cousin of his wife's, the wife insisted to give the job to the cousin instead of me. I lost my mother, I lost the job. My father wanted to get married again. He tried to get rid of me. He went to the neighbors, telling them I come home late at night, I'm gambling. The neighbor called me over, tells me, "Morris, I'm surprised at you. You should hurt your father's feelings. I always thought of you you were a good boy." I said, "What happened?" He tells me, "Your father came around, told me that you come home late, your gambling, this." I come

to my, it was on a Sunday, I come to my friend's house. Everybody called me Moishala. They liked me. They see that I'm pale, and I feel like crying. My friend's father asked me, they called me Moishe Canarsie. Why, because I lived in Canarsie, and I had to take the train two stops to my friend. He noticed, he says, "Moishala, you feel it's good? What's wrong?" I say, "Why?" "You feel, you look pale." And I tell him the story, my father going around telling that thing. He said to his wife, "Bela, put on your coat. Let's go over to Morris' father." We came back to my home, he wasn't there. We were sitting and waiting and waiting outside, he didn't come. He tried to get rid of me in the worst way, because he wanted to get married with another woman. This woman was a close friend to my mother. She used to come in every time to my house and have some dinner, lunch with us. He was after her. Oh, she was a spinster. She wouldn't marry him because she was afraid on account of me, I'm the oldest in the family, she was afraid I'll say, "Don't touch this

here, that's my mother's." So she didn't, that's the reason he wanted to get rid of me. That's the only way he could marry her. Well, one way or another, I came to my aunt and uncle in the Bronx.

I lived in Canarsie. And I told them what's happening. My uncle says to me, "Come. Come, Morris, we'll go to there together." They didn't believe me. "We want to talk to your father." And what was the answer of my father? "If he's so good to you, why don't you take him?" My aunt says, "To us he's good, he's a good boy, and we'll take him."

So I went to live with my uncle and aunt. No money, no job, no mother, no home. I was discouraged, disgusted. My uncle used to throw in fifty cents into my pocket. "Here, go look for a job." At that time it was five cents a coffee, five cents a danish, it was good enough. Carfare, five cents.

LEVINE: How old were you about now?

SOIFER: Now? Eighty-five.

LEVINE: No, I mean in this point when your mother died.

SOIFER: At that time I was . . .

MRS. SOIFER: Eighteen, nineteen.

SOIFER: Oh, about nineteen, eighteen. I go looking for a job. I couldn't find anything. And I'm just, I felt tired. My uncle threw in fifty cents, every day. He meant well, but to me, it wasn't right. I'm not doing the right thing. But I kept going and looking for a job. I passed by, are you acquainted with New York? I passed by Union Square looking for a job at, near the station there. Sure enough there's a sign, "Uncle Sam, I Want You." Uh, I hit my head. Here I am, who am I and what I am? Nothing. I'll join the army. I'll have clothing, I'll have a home, I'll have what to eat, and whatever else goes with it. Good. I come, and the doorway's open. I come over the step. The recruiting officer was there. He says, "Yes, young man. What can I do for you?" I say, "May I come in?" He said, "Sure, come on in. Sit down." And that time was peacetime. There was no war. And you got to give a reason why you want to join the

army. And I told him the whole truth, what's going on with me now. Right away he asked me one question. "Are you the oldest one in the family? Do you have any younger sisters or brothers?" I say, "I got two younger sisters." And I told him, I told him the story about my father and everything. He says, "Now, look here, Morris. You're the oldest one. Suppose something happens to your younger sisters. What happen to you? Who's going to take care of them." That, my mother said it on her dying bed, "Moishala, you're the oldest. Take, in case anything happens, take care of your sisters." The (?), he was so kind to me, he says, "I know you're depressed. I know it hurts you. I understand everything the way you say. But think, your two sisters. However," he says, "let's fill out the papers." I fill out three different papers. I ask him, "What are these papers for?" He says, "These, you register to join the service, into the army. One goes to the capital, one goes in the state, one remains in the city." He says, "You see these here papers?" He opens the bottom

drawer. "You see this here drawer? It's an empty one. I'll put these here papers into this empty drawer. I'll give you two weeks' time," he says. "Don't look for any high pay, anything, just get a job so you can go out and buy your own food, and you pay your own carfare, you don't have to take your uncle's money." I listened to him. I got two week's time. Sure enough, before the week was over, I got a job. And what a job. A wholesaler, a wholesaler, potatoes. Those days potatoes were not fifty pounders, the way it goes now. It used to be a hundred and eighty pounders, big burlap bags, and I had to make steps to reach one on top of the other to the ceiling. At the beginning it was very hard. I was sweating bullets. But I got used to it, and I got very powerful. And in a week's time, I got like I was in it. Well, anyways, in appreciation that the man was talking to me was better than my father, I went into the candy store, I bought a package of cigars. I said, "Give me a package of cigars." The guy said, "How many do you want?" I said, "Give me the minimum."

He says, "Six." I said, "Fine." I don't remember how much I paid. "Thank you." I took the pack, package of cigars, went to Union Square. I come over, a different man, a different officer, recruiting officer. I asked him, "Where, what happened to the man?" He was transferred to a different state, and he's in charge. And I tell him the story. I said, "Please, look in the bottom drawer." He looked, he says, "No papers." He must have tore them up because he was transferred.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, wait, I want to pause here a minute.
(break in tape)

SOIFER: We're married sixty-two years. And I love her. I don't know whether she loves me, but I love her.

LEVINE: I think she loves you, too. (they laugh)

MRS. SOIFER: We have six grandchildren, five great-grandchildren. You say it. It'll be on the tape.

SOIFER: We have . . .

MRS. SOIFER: Six grandchildren.

SOIFER: Six grandchildren.

MRS. SOIFER: Five great-grandchildren.

SOIFER: Five great-grandchildren. And that is it. That's the life.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's close here. This is Janet Levine. I've been speaking with Morris Soifer and I'm signing off.