

EI-441

MINNIE STRAUSBERG (MAIDEN NAME AND MARRIED NAME)
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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POLAND, 1922
AGE 25
PASSAGE ON "THE AQUITANIA"
PORT OF EMBARCATION: LE HAVRE

RESIDENCES: KUROW; BAY RIDGE, BROOKLYN, NY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is February 25th, 1994. I'm at the Shore Hills Senior Citizens' residence with Minnie Strausberg. Mrs. Strausberg came from Poland in 1922. She was twenty-five at that time. Mrs. Strausberg, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

STRAUSBERG: February 27th, 1897.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Where were you born?

STRAUSBERG: Poland.

SIGRIST: Where in Poland?

STRAUSBERG: A little town. Kurow.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it? (she refers to some papers she is holding)
Mrs. Strausberg is going to spell...

STRAUSBERG: Here?

SIGRIST: Yeah. You can use this as a piece of paper. Just, you can
scribble right on there. (she writes) Does that look right?

STRAUSBERG: The state, too?

SIGRIST: No. You spelled it Kurow, K-U-R-O-W?

STRAUSBERG: K-U-R-...

SIGRIST: O-W. Kurow. Whereabouts in Poland is that?

STRAUSBERG: That's between Warsaw and Lublin.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what the town looked like when you were
a little girl?'

STRAUSBERG: Oh, it's a little town. There weren't too many people. And we were in business. We had a store.

SIGRIST: What kind of a store?

STRAUSBERG: Like a general store.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things did you sell in this store?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, everything. Everything. Stockings and soda. From everything, you know. And my father was a tailor. And he had the shop, like, we had a big front house right near the, the road that goes from Lublin to Warsaw. So we had the store on one side, and my father had the, his business on the other side. He was a tailor, a very good tailor.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

STRAUSBERG: Morris.

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

STRAUSBERG: Oh, he was a very, very, very good tailor. And, you know, there

was, in Poland there are (unintelligible), like, like in Washington. And they, they had a man that the people elected to go to the (unintelligible), and he was dressed up. He was from the, from the party that have, I can't explain. He was dressed up that he came from this part of the country. So the only tailor in all Poland that could make clothes for him was my father. So he, when he used to come back from Warsaw to the town where he lived about maybe fifteen kilometer from our town, he used to come to our town, and come to our place, and my father used to make clothes for him, and fitted out from the, the party that have ground. What do they call it?

SIGRIST: You mean like land owners?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Like a land owner?

STRAUSBERG: I forgot what they call it.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe it'll come back to you.

STRAUSBERG: Okay.

SIGRIST: Okay. You said your father was a good tailor. What was his personality like? What was he like as a person?

STRAUSBERG: He was a very happy person.

SIGRIST: What did your father like to do? In, like, what did he like to do for a hobby, or for recreation?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, hobbies. He had plenty hobbies. He was the first Zionist in our town. I'm Jewish, you know.

SIGRIST: And he was the first Zionist. So what, what does that mean? How did that make him different?

STRAUSBERG: Because the very religious people didn't believe in Zionist. They taught that they're not religious enough. You know, that was in the beginning, that maybe, maybe eighty, ninety years ago. Not like now.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in town?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, sure. A very beautiful old one.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what it looked like for me?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, it was, it was very beautiful. It was, you had to go down steps. Down steps. They said it's (unintelligible) very, very old ones. And then the, from there they had steps to go up. And there was a separate place for the woman, and a separate place higher up for the men. So when my grandmother used to take me there. You know, she didn't know how to read. When I went to school and I learned how to read, she was proud of me. She took me, and I had to read from the book to show all her friends that I know how to read.

SIGRIST: Was that, you're just stepping on the chord here. There you go.
(he adjusts her microphone chord) Did a lot of people not know how to write and read in this town?

STRAUSBERG: Most of them didn't know. My husband's mother, her mother came from Russia, because her husband, the Russians used to grab Jewish boys when they were six years old to take them to Russia. So they came back. My great grandfather al-, was also the same way. They grabbed him, they took him to Russia when he was six years old. When he came back he was thirty years old. And my husband's grandfather was the same way. He married a woman in Russia. She came back to our little town. And she was the first one to know how to write. And she was a teacher. She

taught, she was the first one, Jewish woman, knew how to write.

She came from Russia. She was educated there. And she taught all the Jewish women how to write. And then her daughter, my mother-in-law, she was a school teacher, and she taught, see, I went to school there, too. And she taught all the Jewish girls how to write.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me a little bit about how you went to school? You know, did you have a separate building, or did she come into the houses to do it?

STRAUSBERG: That's not, it was just like big, they had just like big benches. Big benches. You sit down, and on the top, you know, it was like this was a bench. (she indicates) And this was a big one. And we just sit and write. Then my father was a very good tailor. And the older, like the (unintelligible) and the doctors, he used to make clothes for them. So when they came back on vacation, when I got older, he put, he, I used to go for lessons for them in the summertime. See, I knew how to write Russian and Polish. Not everyone knew how.

SIGRIST: What about Hebrew? Did you learn Hebrew also, to learn to write...

STRAUSBERG: Hebrew not much. That time they didn't teach any Hebrew. Later on they tea-, they taught Hebrew. But when I was younger they didn't teach any Hebrew.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house that you lived in?

STRAUSBERG: The house? So, let's see, like this is the front. (she indicates) So there were two stores. One was my father's business, and one was, my mother had, we were five sisters. My mother says that she doesn't want to send the sisters away to work, because in that little town there was no work. You either had to go and work, and be a maid someplace, or be a, a tailor or something, to learn how to sew. So she says there's nothing for the girls to do. But she says we this store, they make a store. So the store, the girls (unintelligible) take care on the store. And the father, and in the back we had a big place just as big as this. So it was like, in the back was beds, the beds. And in the other side was the kitchen. And would you believe it? I slept when I was sixteen years old already, my sister and I, we slept on the floor. There was no room. We slept on the floor on the, what do you call it, straw, straw bags. Yes, ma'am.

SIGRIST: On straw bags?

STRAUSBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did you keep your house heated?

STRAUSBERG: Heated? (she laughs) It was like the gas range. We put in coal inside, or wood, and that was all. And then was another one like a big stove. And we just put it in to warm the other part of the house.

SIGRIST: Did...

STRAUSBERG: But we had no running water. I had to carry water from a pump, from a, you know.

SIGRIST: From a hand pump? What about, how did you light the house?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: How did you light the house?

STRAUSBERG: A lamp. A lamp with kerosene.

SIGRIST: Kerosene lamps. Can you tell me a little bit about, you said

your father's name was Morris. And what was his last name, your maiden name?

STRAUSBERG: Well, I, that's the same name. I married the third cousin.

SIGRIST: Oh, so your maiden name is also Strausberg. Oh, okay. Tell me, what was your mother's name?

STRAUSBERG: Well, I can't tell you her, I don't know, I don't remember, I don't know her maiden name.

SIGRIST: What was her first name?

STRAUSBERG: Her name, first name was like Rebecca.

SIGRIST: Rebecca.

STRAUSBERG: Refka [PH].

SIGRIST: What, what do you remember about your mother's personality? What was she like as a person?

STRAUSBERG: She was a very good person. A very hard worker. Very stingy. Every week she used to bake. She start baking Thursday morning,

get up Thursday middle of the night to make the dough, and get up Friday early in the morning to bake the bread. And she made sometimes cookies. And that was for the whole week. We used to eat the same bread all week long.

SIGRIST: What else did you eat in Poland at that time?

STRAUSBERG: Potatoes and bread. And milk and water.

SIGRIST: What would your mother make for a special occasion, perhaps for...

STRAUSBERG: For holidays we used to make like chicken, like a half a chicken. She bought a chicken, half with her sister-in-law, with my aunt. They used to cut it in half. Or they used to buy, in the wintertime they used to buy geese. Geese, you know, goose? A quarter or a quarter and the half. And the fat, they used to make soup with the fat from the, from the thing.

SIGRIST: Did, did, how, did you play games when you were a little girl?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Games? Did you play games?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, yeah, they played games.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the games?

STRAUSBERG: Sure. Little, little songs. My mother taught us. I was very happy when I saw my mother sitting on the floor and teaches us how to play the things, you know. She never had time for that. She always (unintelligible) pregnant or nursing a baby. Ten.

SIGRIST: You had ten brothers and sisters?

STRAUSBERG: No, not ten of, the first one's died. But the five sisters survived, and I have a, still one sister and a brother now.

SIGRIST: How do you fall into all of that? Are you the oldest or the youngest or in the middle?

STRAUSBERG: I'm the shortest. My brother's the tallest. And I have, I had two sisters. One is in a home now. She eighty-eight. One that died was shorter, short, too, but they were all taller than I am.

SIGRIST: But what about age-wise? Were the first born, the middle born?

How did you...

STRAUSBERG: My mother had two boys before me, then I was born, then after me she had another boy. Then she had a girl. Then she had, one sister, three sisters, four sisters. Then she had two other boys. But the little one died and the other one is in Canada. He's eighty-three years old.

SIGRIST: That's a big family. Big family to, to be supported by, by a tailor. I mean, that's big responsibility for your dad.

STRAUSBERG: Everybody was doing something, you know, we're not sitting around and do nothing.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about, was it mostly Jews in the town?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, there, not mostly. There were Jews in the town. There were, everybody, either they were shoe makers or tailors or hat makers, all kind of other things. The store keepers. There must have been about two thousand Jewish people. And there must, left, Hitler left about ten of them.

SIGRIST: How did, at that time when you were growing up, how did the

Jewish population get along with the gentile population in the town.

STRAUSBERG: They got along all right, but they're very anti-semitic.

SIGRIST: Do you remember ever seeing a pogrom, or experiencing a pogrom?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: A pogrom?

STRAUSBERG: Not in our town.

SIGRIST: Not in your town. So everyone got along okay in your town?

STRAUSBERG: They got along because they, you know, they get along all right. Well, as far as I know when I was there. But they didn't like us. No matter how you try.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Can you describe for my how your family would very celebrated Passover at that time?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, very religious. Very religious. Very religious.

SIGRIST: What would you do to celebrate Passover in Poland?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, we do, we had to wash the whole house, clean up the whole house. And burn the whole, where we cooked, we had to burn, we didn't use the same pots. Only glassware. Only the glassware. Otherwise we used everything for Passover new things. Not new things, but they had special things for Passover. Then we had to make the two seders. So then my grandmother used to come to the seder. She didn't want to stay with us. She lives for herself. She was very independent. It was very religious. We ate matzo. We all did what we had to do the, the, the Jewish way. Not like here.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandmother? You've mentioned her a couple of times.

STRAUSBERG: Oh, she was all right. She was all right.

SIGRIST: When you think back of your grandmother, what, what do you think about?

STRAUSBERG: I don't know. What can I tell you?

SIGRIST: What did she look like?

STRAUSBERG: She was tall. And she was strong. And when my grandfather died, because when he was in Russia he got asthma. He was in Russia. He was a, a medic. So when he came back, the Russians used to give a round thing to put up, and he was like a medic in that little town. If somebody got sick, he was allowed to give a medicine. They used to call them, well, I can't explain it to you in Hebrew. Anyway, she learned from him a lot of things. She knew how to shave with the, with the old fashioned things. And the Jewish peop-, (unintelligible) woman that were very religious, they shaved their heads. So she used to shave their heads with that thing. And they paid her for it. She was so proud that she never cut anybody. And that, she didn't want to stay. She had two sons. My father and my uncle. She never wanted anything from them. She want to be independent al-, she lived in a little, in a room for herself, and she did everything for herself. And she used to, I don't know whether you know was bankus is. They used to have little...

SIGRIST: Oh, the cups.

STRAUSBERG: Cups.

SIGRIST: The cups. Sure.

STRAUSBERG: She used, they used to take her out of the, the, they (unintelligible) live on the farms. You know, the little village and the farms. They got sick, they used to take her up, they covered a wagon and take her up. And she took the, the bankus with here, and she took some alcohol, and she took the bankus, and put them on the, that alcohol and cooled them off and covered them up. (she jostles her microphone) She says when she takes care on them, they get well right away. So she used to bring potatoes, she used to bring home eggs, she used to bring home cheese, she used to bring home butter. So what can I tell about her?

SIGRIST: So that how they would pay her, right? With the, the butter and every-, so she was kind of an important person in this town, wasn't she?

STRAUSBERG: That's kind of, yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: I, I want to ask you a question. I'm very interested in the fact she, she shaved women's heads. Would the women then wear a wig on top of their heads?

STRAUSBERG: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Where did they get the wigs from?

STRAUSBERG: There was a wig maker. A friend of mine, she used to make wigs in Europe. Her sister's in Canada. Her brother was my brother-in-law. She used to make wigs. She always used to sit, and they used to, the wigs, before like, before the holiday they used, everybody had more than one wig. They used to give the wig to her. She had her heads, and she used to dress up the wig, and they used to put in on the holiday in the morning and go to shul. When I got married they didn't wear wigs anymore.

SIGRIST: That's very interesting. How often would women shave their heads?

STRAUSBERG: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Once a week, or...

STRAUSBERG: No, no, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: No. How old were...

STRAUSBERG: Not everybody shaves. Some had hair, and they cut their hair.

But in, for very religious ones that they shaved them off. But not everybody. There must have been about five or six in the whole town that had shaved heads.

SIGRIST: How old would a woman be when she started to do that?

STRAUSBERG: Well, she started when, when she was married to my grandfather. She had like a barber shop. And he was like a medic. So he, people came to shave, like, like Saturday morn-, Sunday morning they came from all over to church, before they went to church, they came in to be, to be shaved. She learned how to shave, and he learn-, and he taught her how. So that's how she learned.

SIGRIST: How old would a girl be when she started to shave her hair?

STRAUSBERG: No, that's was the older women. Young girls didn't do that.

SIGRIST: The old, oh, they didn't do it. I see. You mentioned that your grandfather was a medic, and you talked about the bankus cups. What else did he do that you remember?

STRAUSBERG: I don't remember him.

SIGRIST: You don't? I was wondering if you might remember...

STRAUSBERG: I only would have heard about him.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other kinds of home made remedies and medicine or ways to treat illness...

STRAUSBERG: Yes. Somebody had a cold, they put a piece of ham, hot ham on the chest.

SIGRIST: Ham?

STRAUSBERG: Fat, the fat on the chest. In my, they called my grandmother to put the bankus in the back. You should put the bankus, you should put after that, cleaned up and put some alcohol on it, and cover them up, and they sweat it out. And if they got more sick, they called the doctor.

SIGRIST: And that's how those worked that way?

STRAUSBERG: If there was a doctor in town. Otherwise they had to go sixteen blo-, sixteen kilometer to get a doctor. There was not doctor in town. Not in our town.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about World War One?

STRAUSBERG: About what?

SIGRIST: World War One. What do you remember about the first world war?

STRAUSBERG: What I, I remember what we did, I can tell about myself.

SIGRIST: Please.

STRAUSBERG: When they sent the Russians, the Germans were supposed to come. The Russ-, we were Russians. Russian-Polish. When they, they said the Germans are going to come. So we had a lot of merchandise. See, my father was a tailor, and if they came to order something, he had the material, we had a lot of merchandise, the material that you make suits and coats and, what you make...

SIGRIST: Fabric?

STRAUSBERG: Fabric. A lot of fabric. My mother had relatives in the big town in Lublin. So what we did, we took all this merchandise. We weren't poor. We had some money. We put the money in the back, we used to wear a long skirts. Sewed in the money in the long skirt. And the merchandise we used to put, a wagon. They

hired a wagon. And we went with the merchandise and the whole family to Lublin. That was twenty-eight kilometer from our town. And on the way the Germans came and they start shooting. We were on the road. In between the road and the, where the thing grow, you know, the fields, there was a, we got in, in between the road and this. And would you believe it? At the, they were shooting. The, right, we saw the thing flying, the, the, and I was carrying my sister, the one that is in the home. She's eighty-eight years old. Anyway we got to Lublin. We weren't hurt. But in our town, my friend's father was killed while they were shooting, when the Germans came in. Then when the Germans came in, and they were there a few weeks, we came back home. And we didn't recognize the home because we were right in the front, in the (she pauses), the officers and everybody were in our house. They cooked there, they left a lot of junk there. But we came back, and we cleaned out, and we moved in, and we were there. All the times they were there a few years, the Germans. And we got along very good. We were, it was, it was, everything was all right. But in the big towns, like in Warsaw they didn't have, they were starving to death. But we didn't starve because we had all the, the villages, they had the cows and the, and the thing, they used to bring into the city the things. So we, so we didn't have, we had enough food. We were all right.

SIGRIST: Because there a lot of farms on the outskirts of this town? I see. So when the Germans occupied your town, everyone got along fine?

STRAUSBERG: Yeah, we got along all right.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

STRAUSBERG: They came in, they were very friendly.

SIGRIST: Now did you have any relatives in America?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, we had an uncle. That's why, my father's brother, that's how we came here. He left when he was young. He was sixteen years old. So he left, he walked, he walked. He didn't have money. He walked. He walked to Warsaw, then he, with, with rides, you know. Then he went to England, to London. And there he went into a Jewish family, he met his wife. And he was here. That's how we got here. He took us here.

SIGRIST: What was he doing here?

STRAUSBERG: First he was a tailor. Then when the movie came out, they had a

little machine where they put in pennies. Put in pennies. Then he opened moving pictures. When he died he had forty movies. He died in 1947, and his value thing was more twelve million dollars that time.

SIGRIST: Wow. He was at the right place at the right time. When you were growing up, what did you know about America?

STRAUSBERG: First of all we knew that people work very hard here in the shops, because he wrote the letters home to his brother that he gets a headache from the shop working. His head hurts and it's very hard to work in the shops here. So we knew that it's very hard for the "gruener," they used to call my gruener, that the gruener, you know what the gruener is? The one that comes to American, they come in and they, they have to work very hard until they get settled, you know. So we knew it's very hard. But the people that came here worked very hard. They had wife's home, and children home. And then they took him here. They, it was different. It wasn't like now.

SIGRIST: So your, your is uncle is here. Is he in New York?

STRAUSBERG: He died in '47.

SIGRIST: Yeah. And so he's writing to you in Poland...

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: ...about America. Your uncle is writing to you about America. Who in your family wanted to go?

STRAUSBERG: Well, we went first, my husband and I. We were the first ones to go.

SIGRIST: You were already married by the time you came to America? How did you meet your husband?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, well, he was a third cousin. He was in the war, in the first world war. And he was a prisoner of war in Germany. In the Russian army. And he was with the British, so he learned how to speak English. He was educated in Europe. When he came back, I was walking around, walking around, going around with other boys. When he came back I went to see him, and...

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about the experience of being a prisoner of war?

STRAUSBERG: Plenty. I have pictures here.

SIGRIST: Could you tell us some of the things that he said about that experience?

STRAUSBERG: He said that they're rotten, the Germans. That's all right? I thought maybe you're German, I don't know. They treated them like dogs. He had typhoid fever till, they threw him out, and he was laying in the gutter until he got better. That's how they treated them. He did...

SIGRIST: How long was he a prisoner of war?

STRAUSBERG: I don't remember, I don't know. I, he told me a lot of stories, but he kept on telling so many times that I couldn't stand it anymore. I told him once, "Stop telling me because I'm going to go crazy. I can't take it anymore." He stopped.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. So, what year did you get married?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

STRAUSBERG: We got married in 1919.

SIGRIST: Can you, can you describe for me what the wedding was like?

STRAUSBERG: It wasn't a big wedding. It was right after the war. There wasn't even a rabbi to get us married. An uncle of his, an uncle of his married us. There was no music. Nothing. We didn't have, just, you know, a Jewish ceremony, that's all. And my mother and her friends made the dinner, that's all. We didn't...

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were married in, what dress you wore?

STRAUSBERG: I, I don't re-, yes, I remember. I still have the apron. I still have the white apron. I had a white dress on. A long white dress and a white apron. You had to have an apron.

SIGRIST: Is that what people wore at that time, aprons?

STRAUSBERG: They have to. If you didn't wear an apron you wasn't like, you know. (she gestures)

SIGRIST: What was your husband's first name?

STRAUSBERG: Samuel.

SIGRIST: Samuel. And was he older than you or younger?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Was he older than you or younger than you?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, yeah, he was older than I.

SIGRIST: He was older than you.

STRAUSBERG: About nine years older.

SIGRIST: So you said that you and your husband wanted to come first, or did come first. Did you want to leave Poland?

STRAUSBERG: No.

SIGRIST: Why not?

STRAUSBERG: Well, he came here, because I hated to leave my parents and my sisters. He came here first and I didn't want to come. So I stayed home. And he bought tickets for me to come.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Did he come to New York when he came to America?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, I came to Brooklyn. I'm still in Brooklyn. He bought tickets on the, on the, on the British, what did I write down. He brought, bought the ticket on the British small ship for me to come on the second class. He didn't want me to go third class. He and his brother-in-law, for his wi-, for his sister, they bought the same tickets. So what I want to tell you, when we came, so the winter I didn't want to leave right away. I didn't want to leave my, so I stayed over the winter home. And then in the summertime, in July I left. We came to, we left Warsaw, we came to Fra-, to (she pauses), to France, what, that big city.

SIGRIST: To, to a port in France? Did you go to, did you go to, you were going to the ship?

STRAUSBERG: We went from Europe, from, from Kurow, from, to Warsaw. From

Warsaw we went through Germany on a train. From Germany we went to Paris. And from Paris I was supposed to go to America to take a ship. We came to Paris, they told us the ship is not here. Told us, me and there was another Jewish woman with me, that the ship isn't here and we have to wait. So we were scared. We thought that they would, they wouldn't let us in, that something's wrong, and they wouldn't let us in. From there they took us to Le Havre, they were, to a motel, to a Jewish motel. We were there for about a week. Then they told us that our ship is out of, of service, and we're going to go on a big ship. The Aquitania was the first day on the ocean, and I was there with that woman on the second class.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what you took with you when you left your town in Poland?

STRAUSBERG: (she laughs) I took a pair of shoes and I threw them out. I bought them in Warsaw. Grey shoes. Beautiful. And I liked them very much. I came, they were laughing, I threw them out.

SIGRIST: Do you...

STRAUSBERG: Whatever I had I sent back home.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying good-bye to your mother and father?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, I still remember. (she sighs)

SIGRIST: Did they want you to go?

STRAUSBERG: They said you go when you're married. You go by your, Jewish religion says you go where your husband goes. Says when you get married, you go where your husband is, not where your parents are.

SIGRIST: So it was difficult for them? Did, you didn't have any children at this point?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Did you have any children at this point?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, I had one.

SIGRIST: You had a child? So the child is with you also?

STRAUSBERG: Yeah. And I had two others here.

SIGRIST: Was this, and you're travelling with a woman?

STRAUSBERG: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes. What are you feeling when you're on your way to France?
I mean, you're going through all these countries that you've never been in before...

STRAUSBERG: Well, in Germany we were just on the train. We just passed by on the train. I didn't see, just, just through the, the window. In France we walked, we were there, the Jewish men, I asked them when it's kosher. So he told me in Jewish, it's, if it's a Jewish name it's kosher enough for you. You know.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on The Aquitania?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: What do you remember about The Aquitania?

STRAUSBERG: Oh. Don't ask. They told me, so then, so I went up there to see, because I thought, you know, that, the first time, and the big people were there. Vice President Coolidge was on

that thing. I found out later, years later, I found out that he was there on that, on that ship, too. A lot of, they were dressed up. I said they wear wigs. They were French ladies.

They were dancing. And I was sitting there with a, what do you call that, a "schollah [PH]." You know, like they wear in Europe. I didn't go up anymore. I was ashamed of myself. I didn't go up. I didn't, I went up once to eat. I didn't, I didn't know what to ask for. So there was a Jewish family, and they came over to me. They said I should go over to their table. So they gave me a salad. I didn't know what lettuce is. I never had lettuce in Europe. So I decided I'm not going to go there. So I said to them I want them to bring down to me the food to my, they brought down everything what I told them. I had potatoes and fish. That's all.

SIGRIST: Did you have a cabin in the ship?

STRAUSBERG: Yes. A beautiful cabin.

SIGRIST: Was it just you and this woman, or were there other people in the cabin?

STRAUSBERG: No, no, no. This woman was in different. I had a cabin for myself.

SIGRIST: Oh, all by yourself.

STRAUSBERG: Second class.

SIGRIST: Well, and you had your child with you.

STRAUSBERG: But he paid very little, because he bought it, he said they buy on the ship that was supposed to be three weeks on the ocean. It'd be on the second class. See? But they didn't know that the ship is not going to go. That...

SIGRIST: So you were lucky. You were very lucky...

STRAUSBERG: My sister-in-law had the same thing. She came a year later. Because she came with the Queen Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: How long was the ship voyage? How long did it take to get to New York?

STRAUSBERG: It take us about seven days. That was a (unintelligible) short trip that time. I suppose to go, it was supposed to be three weeks on the ocean. But seven days was good. Then they took us off from there, and they put us on a little boat to

New York. That's it.

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

STRAUSBERG: Sure. We were all very happy to see it.

SIGRIST: Did you know what it was?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, we saw, "New York, New York." (she pronounces it "Nehv York") (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, now, did they take you to Ellis Island? Did you go to Ellis Island?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, we were there. The doctor had to see us. Sure.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that experience?

STRAUSBERG: Nothing. He examined. We were always afraid, they said that they look in the eyes. They said some kind of a sickness in the eyes. So everybody was afraid. But some people they made sit down. They told us that if you make you sit down, either you go to the hospital or they send you back. And if they tell you to go this way, then you go home, then you're here.

(she indicates) But they told me to go this way, so I knew I'm all right. They didn't make me sit. They said if they make you sit you're all licked. The people on the boat, they knew already everything, you know. You, by the way, I want to tell you something else. I was on the second class. What I did, I went down every day downstairs in the bottom, on the first, in the, in the first class there were a lot of Jewish people. Not the first class, the bottom.

SIGRIST: The third class.

STRAUSBERG: The third class. I went down to the third class every day and I had a lot of fun with them.

SIGRIST: You felt out of place in the second class.

STRAUSBERG: There was my place. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What did people do on boat for entertainment? How did they entertain...

STRAUSBERG: Nothing. They sit, they play cards, they talk, they joke, they sing, they, what do they do? What can they do? They dream about America.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick while you were on the boat?

STRAUSBERG: Yes, a little bit. The first, in the beginning. But later on, you have to know how to sit. When you sit when the boat goes straight, you have to know how to sit. In the beginning you don't know, but you get used to it.

SIGRIST: When you arrived in, in New York, you said it was July? Did you arrive in New York in July?

STRAUSBERG: No, I came in the end of August.

SIGRIST: August. You came in August. So you were at Ellis Island for a little while?

STRAUSBERG: No. We just came in, I wasn't in Ellis Island. That was, you came, the boat came in and we came out right away.

SIGRIST: I see. And then was your husband there to meet you?

STRAUSBERG: Oh, yes. My husband and my uncle, they were all there.

SIGRIST: What was it like to see your husband?

STRAUSBERG: Well, all right. We kissed and that's all. We went round.

SIGRIST: Where did he take you?

STRAUSBERG: We first went, he had an apartment already, but the, the furniture didn't arrive, so we were off for a few days in my uncle's house. It was a big house. And my aunt was very good to me. So we were there for a few days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you spent your first night in America?

STRAUSBERG: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Did you have a dinner, or...

STRAUSBERG: No, we ate in my aunt's house.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you saw in America, in New York that you had never seen before?

STRAUSBERG: Subway. I hated it. I couldn't stand it. They took me to the subway, I threw up. I was sick like a dog worse than on the boat. I couldn't stand the subway.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what your husband was doing for work here in America.

STRAUSBERG: Well, first he was a tailor. And then we went to business. My uncle had the bus-, the movies, so he gave us a lease on the candy concessions.

SIGRIST: Candy concessions?

STRAUSBERG: We had the candy concessions.

SIGRIST: So what kinds of things did you do, just sell the candy, and...

STRAUSBERG: Well, I used to go in and help out, too.

SIGRIST: Tell me about learning English.

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Tell me about how you learned English.

STRAUSBERG: Well, I knew a little Russian, but I forgot all about it, but

Polish I still remember. I used to write down the English, the English words in Jewish, or in Polish, and that's how I learned. And mostly I learned from reading the paper. My relatives, they used to go to the movies because it didn't cost them any money. So they learned from the movies. But I didn't have time to go because I had babies. So I learned from reading, you know.

SIGRIST: And your husband already knew a little English, right?

STRAUSBERG: Yeah, he knew English. If I didn't know anything I ask him. But if he start to teaching me, so he used to talk loud, I couldn't take it, so I, it's, (unintelligible) to each their own. I learn. So I, I talk with an accent. So what? It's not so terrible.

SIGRIST: Did, did...

STRAUSBERG: People understand me.

SIGRIST: You speak very well. Did the, did the rest of your family come over?

STRAUSBERG: Yes. They couldn't come here. They had to take them to

Canada. They had a quota. So I had a good friend in Canada, and my uncle was a good uncle, he paid money, she took him there. It's her relatives. But my sisters died. But I have nieces and nephews there, and I have a brother there.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father come? They stayed?

STRAUSBERG: They, my mother died and my father didn't want to come here. He says he has a house there, he wants to be independent, he doesn't want to be on my neck. And one of my sisters, she was supposed to come here. Like, she had her visa ready for the New Year's. In 1939 the, the war broke out. She's gone. Hitler, Hitler fixed her up.

SIGRIST: When you first got to America, did you want to go back to Poland?

STRAUSBERG: No.

SIGRIST: Again, you were here with your husband?

STRAUSBERG: I didn't miss Poland. I was glad to be out of that damn country. They hate you. Do you know you're hated. So how can you like the country when you know you're hated. When I

was a little girl, and my father, he had the, I told you he was a good tailor in the, he thought he'll put me in the, there was no regular school, so he put me into a, a teacher, a Polish teacher. She had, you know, like children from the better class people. But she took me in and I was learning Polish there. When they, the children did something wrong, she says (Polish). "That they don't get the Jewish style." And I was sitting there, I want to tell her, Jewish style isn't this way. But I was afraid to tell her. She used to tell them they do, when they did something wrong she says, "You're doing, you're doing it in the Jewish way." That means that the Jews do everything wrong. That's how, you live in a country like this, when you go, go to school, and the teacher tells the children that when they do something wrong, they do it the Jewish way. They bring them up with the, with the, with the hate. The Poland is brought up with hate. If I wouldn't sit, be there myself I wouldn't talk like that, you know. So what's the use? So how can you miss a country like that?

SIGRIST: Right.

STRAUSBERG: I, I can't tell you that I didn't miss certain things. I miss my friends, I miss my, my family. But how can you miss a

country when you hate it? When a teacher tells children that when they do, do something wrong that they did it the Jewish way.

SIGRIST: Have you ever gone back to Poland to visit?

STRAUSBERG: My uncle went back. He went back.

SIGRIST: What about your husband, did ever want to return?

STRAUSBERG: We never wanted to return there. Never. Especially when they got their own country. When, first under Russia, it wasn't so bad yet. They hated us. But do you know, before I left, you know, we had a store and this, and the, the Polish people used to come in and they used to be like, it was like brothers and sisters. Do you know we had a meeting that boys and girls who used to sing, have a committee, you know, like entertain each. We were there and they came in, the first day they, they, they got Poland free, they came in with the guns like this. (she gestures) I says to him, "Yanic." Yanic was his name. I says, "What are you trying to do?" He says, "It's our country. We're going to do what we want." First we were like brothers. He used to come in, it was like a brother. He used to come in, you used to give him something, he used to bring

you something. You, you know, he was like a neighbor. And all of a sudden it's his country and he's going to do what he wants. So when I went away and I told him. I says, "I'm going away and I'm glad I'm going to be in that country." He says, "Why are you going? You going to like, maybe you wouldn't like America." I says, "If I don't like it, I wouldn't hate it as much as I hate it here now." I told him. I told him later when he didn't have the gun.

SIGRIST: It was a very bad place for...

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: ...for Jews to live. Poland was very bad, a bad place for Jews to live.

STRAUSBERG: If a Jew came back to a town, they killed him. When they came back after the, after Hitler, they killed him.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me the names of your children?

STRAUSBERG: Hmm?

SIGRIST: The names of your children. The names of your children.

STRAUSBERG: Yes. One is David, one is Robert, one is Norman.

SIGRIST: And where do they live now?

STRAUSBERG: Dave lives with me. You know, he walks with a stick, he has arthritis. Look at me. I can't move. Robert lives in Washing-, not in Washington, in the suburbs of Washington. He has two married daughters, he has six grandchildren, and he has a son that isn't married yet. Norman lives here in Bayridge. He has a bar here on 86th Street. He has one son.

SIGRIST: I see.

STRAUSBERG: That's all.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Strausberg, I think this is a good place to end. I want to thank you very much for letting us ask you a few questions about...

STRAUSBERG: So what are you going to do with this?

SIGRIST: Well, we go around and we interview people, and all of these interviews are at the museum. People come and listen to them. People who want to know what it was like to...

STRAUSBERG: They'll hear that story with Po-, about Poland that I'm telling you.

SIGRIST: Someone might.

STRAUSBERG: Let them hear. I don't care.

SIGRIST: Most Jewish people who came from Poland feel the same way.

STRAUSBERG: Yeah?

SIGRIST: Yes. I hear that quite often. So...

STRAUSBERG: You'll give me a tape?

SIGRIST: I'll give you a copy of this. We'll mail it to you. Anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Minnie Strausberg on February 25th, 1994 in Brooklyn. Thank you. (a door opens)

STRAUSBERG: You're welcome.