

EI-458
ABRAHAM MITTELMAN
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LITHUANIA, 1921
AGE 20
PASSAGE ON "THE OSCAR II"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Mittelman is the husband of Thelma Mittelman,
Interview EI 459. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/6/1996.

LEVINE: Today is April 17, 1994.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I'm here today with Abraham Mittelman, who came from
Lithuania

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: In 1920.

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: When he was twenty years old.

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Um, now, let's see. So you're about to have a birthday, and
you'll be ninety-three.

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: So you're ninety-two years old at this time.

MITTELMAN: Right now, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Um, I'm here in Mr. and Mrs. Mittelman's home in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Their daughter, Lorraine Goldstein is here with us.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I'm looking forward to hear everything you can remember.

MITTELMAN: All right.

LEVINE: Okay?

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Great. Let me start at the beginning. Tell your birth date.

MITTELMAN: My birth, my birth date is, uh, they got it wrong. It was June the 14th. They got it May the 15th. What's the difference?

LEVINE: (she laughs) How did it come that they got it wrong?

MITTELMAN: I don't know. It makes no difference, a month here, a month there.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, you were born in Vilna?

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And you lived in Vilna up until you left for America.

MITTELMAN: All my life in Vilna.

LEVINE: Tell me about Vilna. When you think about Vilna, what do you remember most?

MITTELMAN: Vilna was a beautiful, nice (a telephone rings) big city.
(a telephone rings) Hello? (voice off mike)

LEVINE: It was a beautiful, big city.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what was it like?

MITTELMAN: A lot of famous people came from Vilna. Vilna they called
Jerusalem of Lita, because a lot of educated people come from
vilna.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay.

MITTELMAN: Vilna Gon [ph]. You heard of him?

LEVINE: Who?

MITTELMAN: Vilna Gon [ph].

LEVINE: Vilna Gon [ph].

MITTELMAN: Was famous all over the world.

LEVINE: Let me just . . . (break in tape) Okay. We're resuming now,
having closed the door where the telephone conversation is
going on. Uh, you were saying there were famous people, many
famous people who came from Vilna.

MITTELMAN: A lot of educated people in Vilna. Vilna Gon [ph], Graf
Potochky [ph]. He was a Gentile. He studied Judaism, and he
liked our religion better, he converted himself to a Jew. And
then the Gentiles find out on him that he's changing his
religion through Judaism, they made a bonfire and they burned
him up.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, who was this person?

MITTELMAN: Uh, Graf Potochky [ph]. They burned him up. He said, "I like that religion better, and I didn't care what you go." They burned him up. And they took the ashes, they buried next to the Vilna Gon [ph], next to him.

LEVINE: Can you spell either of their names?

MITTELMAN: What?

LEVINE: Could you, could you try to spell the names of these famous people? Do you know how to spell them?

MITTELMAN: Potochky [ph]?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MITTELMAN: P-O-T. I don't know. Potochky [ph].

LEVINE: Potochky [ph] and Vilna.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. And what were they famous for?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: What were they famous for? What were they well-known for? What did they do that people looked up to them?

MITTELMAN: Graf Potochky [ph] became very religious in Judaism, and Vilna Gon [ph] was famous all over the Jewish communities. Vilna Gon [ph] was very educated, very famous.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was it . . .

MITTELMAN: Vilna was a big city. I'll say, there must have been there about eighty thousand Jews.

LEVINE: Was it mostly Jewish, the population?

MITTELMAN: Polish, mixed. Half Jews and half Polish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So . . .

MITTELMAN: And the Polish people never liked the Jews.

LEVINE: How did, uh, how, what did they do to show that they didn't like them?

MITTELMAN: They couldn't get no government jobs. Everything they give to the (?). If a Jew wants to get a government job, he couldn't get it.

LEVINE: What did most of the Jewish people do there for work?

MITTELMAN: Most of them shoemakers, uh, tailors. My father was a sheetmetal worker.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

MITTELMAN: Tovih Mittelman.

LEVINE: How do you spell his first name?

MITTELMAN: Tovih.

LEVINE: T-O-V?

MITTELMAN: Yeah, Tovih.

LORRAINE: T-O-V-I-H is what I'm guessing.

LEVINE: Okay.

LORRAINE: That's what it sounds like, but I don't know if I'm right.

LEVINE: Tovih. And he was a sheetmetal worker.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Where did he work?

MITTELMAN: He had his own shop. They had two men work with him.

LEVINE: And what kind of things did he make in his shop?

MITTELMAN: They used to do for the buildings, gutters, cover up the roof with metal, copper metal. Hi-rise buildings, I remember. He had two more men worked with him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So he was a craftsman. Would you say he was a . . .

MITTELMAN: My father was considered a very good, liberal man. He gave a nice pay. He was good to his workers.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's name?

MITTELMAN: Chipal.

LORRAINE: Chipal, Chipal.

LEVINE: C-H-I . . .

MITTELMAN: Chipal.

LORRAINE: I'm spelling it C-H-I-P-A-L, but I don't know the difference.

LEVINE: Okay. Chipal . . .

LORRAINE: His father was a rabbi also, an orthodox rabbi.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, what was your mother's maiden name?

MITTELMAN: I don't know.

LEVINE: And, so you . . .

LORRAINE: Grobar, I think he said. Uh, Gelbar, Gelbar.

LEVINE: G-E-L . . .

LORRAINE: G-E-L-B-A-R.

LEVINE: Okay, Gelbar. So your father was a sheetmetal worker.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: He was also a rabbi?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. He was very religious. He always had a religious book.
Day and night, he was very religious.

LEVINE: How many children in the family?

MITTELMAN: Me and my sister.

LEVINE: Who was the oldest?

MITTELMAN: My sister was two years older.

LEVINE: And your sister's name?

MITTELMAN: Bocha [ph]. And she was some educated girl. She knew how to speak English, French, Russian, Polish. (disturbance to the microphone) When she (?) English, we could not write when I

see a word, too. Very educated. And Hitler finished her off.
(voice off mike)

LEVINE: What did she teach you?

MITTELMAN: The First World War was German there, it was not Hitler. And she got a job right away for the German government to work in the office. Even the Pollacks, after no more Germans, they gave her a job. And they very seldom hire a Jew. They don't like Jewish people.

LEVINE: Were you close to her?

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What kinds of things do you remember?

MITTELMAN: She was my teacher when I was small, teacher when I liked to read and write, everything. She was a good sister, very close. No, I don't want nothing.

LEVINE: So, um, can you remember activities? What did you do? Did you go to school at all, or it was only your sister teaching you?

MITTELMAN: Yeah, I went to school.

LEVINE: You went to school.

MITTELMAN: Yeha, Hebrew school.

LEVINE: Say it again.

MITTELMAN: Hebrew school.

LEVINE: Oh, Hebrew school. Uh-huh. How long did you go?

MITTELMAN: Till the age of thirteen.

LEVINE: And, um, were you bar mitzvahed then?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. I was, in the First World War, in June the 14th was my bar mitzvah.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your bar mitzvah?

MITTELMAN: I went to school, I had the (?), the (?) on the (?), and also (?).

LEVINE: Was that a, was that a big celebration for you?

MITTELMAN: (disturbance to the microphone) (?) I can't afford to make a big celebration. They had cake and schnapps. (he coughs) A big smelt herring cut up in slices with the onions, and we celebrate.

LEVINE: Was that a big turning point when you were bar mitzvahed? Was that considered a big difference in your life?

MITTELMAN: Then they start the war, the First World War, and the Germans came to Vilna, occupied Vilna. They chased the Russians out.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the First World War? What did you actually experience yourself?

MITTELMAN: That time was no Hitler.

LEVINE: Right.

MITTELMAN: And as soon the Germans came to Vilna, all the food disappeared, and they, they made us get a pound bread a day for a person. Half was good flour, the other half they mix it with, they call it clien [ph]. They feed the horses. It was no good. It was very rough to digest. And we had to live that

way.

LEVINE: And what else did you have to eat during that time besides bread?

MITTELMAN: We had a, they used to smoke a lean potatoes. We had a couple potatoes.

LEVINE: Did you see any violence?

MITTELMAN: That time the Germans treat everybody the same. It was no Hitler, the First World War.

LEVINE: So they treated the Gentiles and the Jewish people the same.

MITTELMAN: The same thing. One time I was digging a ditch and a Pollack was doing the same thing next to me, and they was making fun of me. I remember the Germans slapped him in the face. They said, "Leave him alone. Everybody's the same to me," he said.

LEVINE: What else did the occupation of Vilna, what other differences did it make in your life when the German soldiers were there?

MITTELMAN: They were there about four years, which was no Hitler. My uncle and my aunt, they leave him for now. That the outskirts for Vilna and they had a mill to grind flour, all kind of flour, and he made a lot of money. The German Army used to bring a bag of flour to a guy, and he used to steal twenty pounds from every bag, and he, and they sell the profit with the Germans, with themselves, the German (?). They rob the German government, and they got rich from that. Every bag of flour, they took from the off, and the profit they got they share with the Germans. They became very rich.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents living near you?

MITTELMAN: I remember my grandparents.

LEVINE: What do you remember about them?

MITTELMAN: My grandparents had, it was a rabbi, he had smelt rabonis [ph].
But he never once make money on that. They had a dairy farm.
He used to bring milk and all kind of cheese in Vilna to sell,
and he made a living on that.

LEVINE: This is your father's father?

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember about him? How did he treat you?

MITTELMAN: Who?

LEVINE: Your grandfather?

MITTELMAN: Oh, very nice.

LEVINE: What did he do? What do you remember?

MITTELMAN: Every time I came this here, he used to give me a cook, a (?),
they call him. I didn't know. Some kind of (?). The cook,
the (?), they call it. I don't know.

LEVINE: What was it? Just tell, describe it, what he gave you.

MITTELMAN: They call it, like split [ph]. Bob, I see it in the market.
He used to trick me with that.

LEVINE: Was it . . .

MITTELMAN: A piece of cake sometime, yeah. My grandfather could have take

a job as a rabbi in a temple. He didn't want to be a rabbi in a temple. He wants to make a living from there.

LEVINE: Well, what was your grandmother like?

MITTELMAN: Her name?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MITTELMAN: Sit in the house and read the holy books. Her name was Mary.

LEVINE: And did you, did she ever take you any place, or did you, do you remember . . .

MITTELMAN: During the First World War, we didn't have enough bread. The Germans took away what little bread. My grandmother used to come with a full bag, slices of bread, and bring it to the house, we should have enough to eat. She was good to us.

LEVINE: Do you remember any religious celebrations or observances?

MITTELMAN: In Vilna?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MITTELMAN: I know we had the best cantor at that time, Motri Hirschman [ph]. That was his name. He was able to sing even opera. He had a powerful tenor voice. And that was our pleasure. Every month he used to play in the temple. I used to go there and listen to him. That time we didn't have enough heat. I used to forget about food, and I went there to listen to him.

LEVINE: It sounds as though you were very religious as a young man.

MITTELMAN: Me?

LEVINE: Yes.

MITTELMAN: I was, I cheat a little bit. I wasn't for nothing. My father and mother was very religious. My father especially.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh, what, what else did you do for enjoyment? What activities did people do for enjoyment?

MITTELMAN: My age? I grow up, I used to like to read day and night. I used to go to the library, look for books and see them read. That was my pleasure, nothing else. Read.

LORRAINE: He said there were beautiful gardens. He would always tell me he remembers gorgeous gardens there.

LEVINE: Do you remember the gardens in Vilna?

MITTELMAN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Tell me about those.

MITTELMAN: Was two nice big gardens. One was to go in free, and the second one they had to pay something to get in. They had a nice cafeteria there, and a band, music. But I used to get in free. Near my friend used to take, dig out a hole on the bottom. We used to go in there.

LEVINE: Under the gate? Under the fence?

MITTELMAN: Under the fence. I used to go in and watch everything. They had music playing, and they had a stage. They used to have all kind of shows there.

LEVINE: What kind of shows?

MITTELMAN: They had Jewish theaters. I used to see them for nothing.

(he laughs)

LEVINE: How about music? Did, did anybody in the family play music?

MITTELMAN: I like music, but nobody in my family played music.

LEVINE: Well, Vilna was a cultural city then.

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Vilna was a cultured city.

MITTELMAN: Yeah. A lot of educated people come from Vilna.

LEVINE: When you think back of your time living in Vilna, are there any experiences that come to your mind in particular?

MITTELMAN: I lived there all my life, and sometimes a Polish teenager try to stones, but I fight back. I never let them get the best of me. I know that. Then my uncles send affidavits to come to United States. They stayed first two months in Denmark.

LEVINE: How did you feel about coming to the United States?

MITTELMAN: It's a nice, free country. The first thing they asked me, before they, in Ellis Island, what type of government you believe. I told him, "Democracy. Democracy, where you could live nice and have enough to eat." I said to them, "Communism, that means starvation. We never had enough food under the communists." And they were satisfied.

LEVINE: When you came to the United States, who came with you?

MITTELMAN: I was the only one.

LEVINE: You came by yourself?

MITTELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your uncles here sent you, uh, a ticket?

MITTELMAN: I had to wait on Ellis Island two-and-a-half days till they bailed me out from there.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about leaving home. What did you bring with you? What did you pack up to take to the United States?

MITTELMAN: In Europe, I didn't do nothing. I was a young boy.

LEVINE: You just came without any baggage or luggage.

MITTELMAN: I stayed almost in Russia, almost, about six weeks till I got the visa. Every time I used to go pick up the visa from (?), it was about two hundred people in the line, and they only give out one hundred. And one day I said, "There's no choice." I got up, four o'clock in the middle of the night. I went down to the United States ambassador there.

LEVINE: The embassy?

MITTELMAN: And I got there, I find certain people I had (?), and I got my visas. Soon I got the visas, the agent in charge find out I got the visas, he took charge of us. For Warsaw, we traveled, we stopped in Denmark, and they put us on a big (?), and they feed us everything the best, all the eat I could eat, the best. We stayed there almost, we had our vacation there almost about two months.

LEVINE: Why were you staying there?

MITTELMAN: I don't know. They give us a good time. And then . . .

LEVINE: Did they examine you for medical, uh, exams?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. They used to take us and get a shower, and we see there eat the best, all kind of food. Then after a month or two months in Denmark, they put us on a boat, a regular boat, to travel to the United States.

LEVINE: And what was the name of that boat?

MITTELMAN: Oscar II, I think.

LEVINE: And where did it leave from?

MITTELMAN: Well, we traveled, the first three days was nice and pleasant to ride on the boat. On the fourth day I got up and I went on the deck. I saw the boat was the size of a finger. A big wave. I got scared. I thought I'll never make United States. That was three days. After, on the fourth day, they quiet on the ocean. It was nice and smooth. He came to the United States.

LEVINE: Were you traveling in the steerage?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Were you in steerage, on the bottom of the ship, with everybody in one place?

MITTELMAN: I was on the bottom, yeah.

LEVINE: And what, and where did the ship leave from?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Where did the ship leave Europe from? What was the port?

MITTELMAN: The port was Denmark, from Denmark. When they got to United States, my uncle bailed me out, me and my father, and he went in New York on Delancy Street, I remember. And they serve us (?) soup, and a nice piece of steak. I remember that.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Do you remember when the ship, when the Oscar II came into the New York Harbor? Do you remember that?

MITTELMAN: That was, uh, in 1924.

LEVINE: And do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

MITTELMAN: I passed by the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Did you know what it was at that time?

MITTELMAN: I heard about it. I remember another thing. When we came already in Ellis Island, I saw a boat with bananas, and the colored people worked there. And I heard everybody holler, "Nigger, nigger." I said to myself, "Why they insulting them?" I felt sorry for them. They call them all kind of names.

LEVINE: Were they selling the bananas?

MITTELMAN: I don't know. They deliver them to the market, I think.

LEVINE: Had you ever seen a banana before?

MITTELMAN: No.

LEVINE: Um, so tell me . . .

MITTELMAN: In Europe we never saw bananas. We never saw tomatoes. We had a lot of nice fruit in Europe, but not like in America.

LEVINE: What was your impression of Ellis Island when you, when you

went there? What did it look like, and what happened to you there?

MITTELMAN: I slept two-and-a-half days on the floor in Ellis Island on newspapers. Then my uncle, on the third day he came and bailed me out, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. One week they didn't let me do no work. They took me to all kind of shows, movies, and they bought me new clothes, a nice suit.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Were you staying on Delancy Street when you first came?

MITTELMAN: They took me there. We had a meal there. (?) soup, and a nice piece of meat.

LEVINE: Oh, then you went to Pennsylvania after you . . .

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Do you remember the movies? Do you remember what struck you as very different in this country those first few weeks?

MITTELMAN: Everything. Nice, beautiful, beautiful sidewalks, streets nice. Vilna was, there was no sidewalks in Vilna, broken up sidewalks. The street wasn't so smooth.

LEVINE: How did you go from New York to Scranton, Pennsylvania? How did you travel?

MITTELMAN: My uncle came.

LEVINE: With a car?

MITTELMAN: Uh, by train, I think. And then we went to Pennsylvania. I stayed there for one week and rest, and then I got a job in a restaurant, a dishwasher.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the restaurant?

MITTELMAN: I worked there a couple of weeks. I was allowed to eat all the food I could, and they paid me ten dollars a week. After I work in that restaurant, I left that restaurant, and I worked for a while. My uncle had (?) a restaurant in Philadelphia. He was partners with another one, and I work there. And, uh, I didn't like the work. The, my uncle's partner always thought I'm spying on him that he don't steal money during the night when he work. I cleaned that restaurant, and I work like, they have a nice, big restaurant, and I work there for a while as a dishwasher. Then they put me on the night shift, and I became a short order cook. I was making twenty dollars a week and all the food I could eat.

LEVINE: Where did you live when you were working there?

MITTELMAN: Uh, in a rooming house, two rooms.

LEVINE: Could you speak any English at that time?

MITTELMAN: No.

LEVINE: How was that for you, not being able to speak?

MITTELMAN: I used to speak good Polish, and a lot of Polish people. I used to speak in Polish to them.

LEVINE: So, uh, how was it? Was it difficult to learn English? What helped you to learn English?

MITTELMAN: I started a business for myself.

LEVINE: After you . . .

MITTELMAN: Yeah, you mingled with people. You learned English.

LEVINE: So after you were a short order cook at night . . .

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Then you opened your own business?

MITTELMAN: Well, I stayed there. I came to Newark, and I stopped there. I worked there in a shop, and then I left the shop and I went, I bought a confectionery store, and I made a living.

LEVINE: And how long did you keep the store?

MITTELMAN: One place '27, then I sold the store, I bought a store on Clinton Place. I stayed there eight years. Clinton Place that time was a nice neighborhood.

LEVINE: Was that in Newark?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. A lot of lawyers had the home, doctors. Then later on it started to change. Colored people, and the neighborhood wasn't so nice no more.

LEVINE: What do you feel proudest of that you did in your life? What makes you feel satisfied that you did?

MITTELMAN: I don't know, to tell you the truth. (?), I'm still alive. I'm ninety-three years old. I hope to God I'll stay another, I don't know how long, it's up to God. And that's it. I got a nice little family.

LEVINE: What, how did you meet your wife?

MITTELMAN: My wife? I met her on a bus ride.

LEVINE: Where were you going on the bus?

MITTELMAN: Way up in, someplace in Livingston. It used to be Goldman's. Go there, (?) for a good time.

LEVINE: And so you just, uh, what? You just met her on the bus?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: You just, did you sit with her on the bus? Is that how you met her?

MITTELMAN: Yeah, I met her there.

LEVINE: And what's your wife's name?

MITTELMAN: Uh, Thelma.

LEVINE: Thelma. And her maiden name?

MITTELMAN: It's Toby [ph], Toby [ph].

LEVINE: Thelma's maiden name, her last name, before she married you?

MITTELMAN: Toby [ph].

LEVINE: Toby [ph].

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LORRAINE: Rosenberg.

LEVINE: Rosenberg.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Rosenberg, uh-huh. Okay. Um, and how many children did you have?

MITTELMAN: Uh, I have two daughters.

LEVINE: And their names?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Your daughters' names?

MITTELMAN: Is, uh, here's one of my daughters, Lorraine.

LEVINE: And the other?

MITTELMAN: And the other, what's my other daughter's name? I forgot.

LORRAINE: You know it, you know it.

MITTELMAN: What?

LORRAINE: Elaine.

MITTELMAN: Elaine.

LEVINE: And you have grandchildren?

MITTELMAN: Three. Two grandsons and a granddaughter.

LEVINE: Do you consider yourself a religious person at this point in your life?

MITTELMAN: Not so religious. I'm a, I'm a Jew. I'm proud what I am.

LEVINE: And how about this phase of your life, old age time? How has that been for you after you retired, after you stopped having

your store?

MITTELMAN: I used to live in, in Irvington Center there. There was nice apartments. I lived there, it was beautiful there. And all of a sudden, the colored start to move in there, and it was impossible to live there.

LEVINE: When you think back on your childhood now, in Vilna.

MITTELMAN: I had it very good, because I was, my mother and father used to give me the best money could buy, when I was a small kid. They gave me the best food. My sister used to feed me when I was a small kid.

LEVINE: Now, did anybody else from your family come over here, your mother, your father?

MITTELMAN: Yeah, they were here.

LEVINE: They were already here when you came?

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LORRAINE: They came before you?

MITTELMAN: No, together.

LEVINE: They came together after you came here?

MITTELMAN: My father came with me. And then I send affidavits, got my mother here.

LEVINE: Ah. And how did they adjust to being here?

MITTELMAN: They like it.

LEVINE: They like it.

MITTELMAN: My father got a job (?) in Clinton Place, caterer. And he was making good money.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MITTELMAN: He had to keep an eye that everything is kosher, they don't cheat the public.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you feel like you have some ways or habits or keep some kinds of customs that you learned in Lithuania, even though you came here and you lived the rest of your life in America, do you have some Lithuanian, uh, qualities?

MITTELMAN: I have no feelings. I'm glad I'm here. I wouldn't like to live there on the other side the way the Gentiles treat the Jews. Every time you walk down the street they call you bahaha [ph] Jew. That means you're (Yiddish).

LEVINE: Did you run into any prejudice for being a greenhorn when you first came here?

MITTELMAN: Here in this country? No, not much.

LEVINE: How, how would you describe yourself, when you look back, when you were twenty years old, and you left, and you left, uh, Lithuania, and you came here, how would you describe yourself? What were you like as a young man.

MITTELMAN: I like, everything in this country I like better than Europe. I find a lot of nice friends. I find a, I used to have a friend, the nephew of Albert Einstein. He used to pal around with me. He always like to come and talk. He was an electrical engineer. Every time he saw me he used to come and

talk to me.

LEVINE: Did you, did you remain an avid reader? Did you always read a lot?

MITTELMAN: All the time.

LEVINE: All your life, uh-huh.

MITTELMAN: I could read day and night. My wife here always tried to stop me. "Don't spoil your eyes." And I asked the doctor, he said, "No, you ain't going to spoil your eyes. You can read all you want."

LEVINE: Wow. Is there anything else you can think of about starting your life in Lithuania and coming here, living out, um, seventy years now.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: How, is there anything else you can think of?

MITTELMAN: I don't miss nothing, nothing. I know the Jews had a hard time there.

LEVINE: Did you become a citizen here, then?

MITTELMAN: No. I wasn't no citizen yet. In 1936, I got my citizen paper. I neglected, I didn't bother. I had a witness, for a witness I had the district leader, a republican and a democrat. They went for me to make it good. I'll never forget. I went in. They gave me a paper to read. I read it, and then they asked me, "Are you selecting congressmen?" I told them I couldn't be the territory. One state has more, and the other state has less. And the senators, they have two senators to each state,

and they gave me citizenship with no problem.

LEVINE: How did you feel when you became a citizen?

MITTELMAN: I felt good. I felt like a member of the American people.
Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, maybe that's a good place to end.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I want to thank you very, very much.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: You have a very interesting story, and now your story will be a part of the Ellis Island Museum collection of people's remembrances of coming to this country and making this country what it is. So thank you very much.

MITTELMAN: Well, I remember I came to Ellis Island, I slept two-and-a-half days on the floor till my uncle came in and picked me up, bailed me out.

LEVINE: What was your uncle's name?

MITTELMAN: Uh, Barney. He owns a plumbing shop in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on Mulberry Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And Barney, was his last name Mittelman, too?

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

MITTELMAN: His name, my name used to be Mihrelman [ph], and they made me change to Mittelman.

LEVINE: Who made you change?

MITTELMAN: My uncle. He said, "Change it to Mittelman. It's nicer than Mihrelman [ph]." And I got a job in a restaurant. I changed jobs till I got like a (?). A Greek used to own that restaurant. And they make me work all the short order cooking in the nightttime. I was making two hundred dollars a week. It wasn't bad at that time.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the Depression?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: What do you remember about the Great Depression in the '30s here?

MITTELMAN: Oh, yeah. People couldn't get no jobs. People selling apples on the street to make a couple of pennies.

LEVINE: Were you working at that time?

MITTELMAN: I had my store. I had a stationary store.

LEVINE: And you were able to keep that going?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. Made the best.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MITTELMAN: That time I didn't pay no rent. There was no business till Roosevelt got elected as president. Right away he turned everything around. He picked up all the boys from the corner, and he send them work in the, in the woods, fix the trees, and he gave them eighteen dollars a week. And things started turning for better. Money was coming in.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the WPA projects?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. That's what it is, WPA. People started to have money.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other historical events that happened, that affected you?

LORRAINE: (?)

MITTELMAN: I know when the Second World War started, they couldn't draft me because I was a diabetic. They couldn't take me to go in the war, and I was making a good living. Was a (?) in cigarettes, and a (?) in candy, and I had a (?) with a (?), where they sell all that stuff. I was getting enough cigarettes to sell, enough candy. I was (?).

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LORRAINE: Do you remember the czar, you told me? You remember the czar when you were a little boy?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LORRAINE: The czar, you told me you remember when you were a little boy?

LEVINE: The Russian czar? Do you remember, when you were a little boy in Europe?

MITTELMAN: The Russian czar?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MITTELMAN: I remember him.

LEVINE: What do you remember about him?

MITTELMAN: He was no good. Discriminate against the Jews.

LORRAINE: What was his name?

MITTELMAN: Discriminate against the Jews.

LORRAINE: What was his name?

MITTELMAN: Charles Nikolai II. You could not, you wasn't allowed to ride all over Russia. You had to get a special permission to come to Petrograd, to (?), wasn't allowed. I remember Rasputin. He . . .

LEVINE: What do you remember?

MITTELMAN: He, yeah, he was a, he come from Siberia. He came to Petrograd. And he became friends with the Czar Nikolai. He hypnotized the czar, and they used to go in and they say he had sex with Czar Nikolai's wife. That's what they say. Till the higher rank officers from the army find out about it, and they had to shoot eight bullets in his body till they killed him, and they throw him in the ocean. I remember that.

LEVINE: Wow.

MITTELMAN: He was so strong. Eight bullets they had to pump in his body till they killed him.

LEVINE: Who's the person that you look up to? What heroes have you had in your lifetime?

MITTELMAN: What? I always liked boxing.

LEVINE: Oh, you always liked boxing?

MITTELMAN: Jack Dempsey was my hero. (they laugh) I remember when I

came to this country, he was, Jack Dempsey was fighting against, from Argentina, (?), and he ripped his shirt, and Jack Dempsey got real wild. He had him down seven times on the floor. He won the championship. Dempsey was my hero. I had a lightweight champion, Al Singer. He was related to . . . (a telephone rings) Related to my aunt. He wanted a championship, but he held it one year, that's all. I used to like a lot of boxing. I used to.

LEVINE: Did they have boxing in Vilna?

MITTELMAN: No. We never knew about boxing. Wrestling, I knew, not boxing. (a telephone rings)

LEVINE: Okay. Well, um, let's see. Is there anything else that you can think of? Are there any ways that you'd say you've changed over the years?

MITTELMAN: I don't know. What could I tell you?

LEVINE: Would you say you were a patient person, or you were a hardworking person, or how would you describe (??)?

MITTELMAN: Years back we, the people were good to each other, tried to help each other.

LEVINE: In this country?

MITTELMAN: All over.

LEVINE: All over.

MITTELMAN: Now, I don't know. If we're healthy, and we got money, they know you. If you're a sick man, no money, they don't want to know you.

LEVINE: You mean, that's how people have changed, would you say?

MITTELMAN: Yeah. That's the way I feel. I don't know if I'm right or wrong, I don't know.

LEVINE: So do you still read a lot?

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: So that's one of your pleasures that's kept being . . .

MITTELMAN: I find a good book, I still read.

LORRAINE: He uses tapes.

LEVINE: Tapes. You like to listen to music now, too?

MITTELMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Do you listen to music?

MITTELMAN: Good music, I like. I like music. I like the Russian songs. That's the best to me. I like Russian songs. When they sing, I love it. They have good singers, the Russians, and good dancers. They can't take it away from them. They had not long ago a group of Russian singers and dancers. They had them on television. Nobody could beat them, when it comes to sing and dance. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I'm going to close here. I want to thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I've been talking with Abraham Mittelman, and it's April 17, 1994. We're in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

MITTELMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off. Thank you.

MITTELMAN: You're welcome.