

EI-464/FISHER

EI-464

TESSIE (TAIBEL) CHESSLER FISHER

BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 28, 1898

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 21, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 20:57

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: WORKMAN'S CIRCLE HOME  
ELIZABETH, NEW JERSEY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 8/1998

RUSSIA, 1909

AGE 11

SHIP NAME NOT RECORDED

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service.

Today is Thursday, April 21st, 1994. I'm in  
Elizabeth New Jersey at the New Jersey Geriatric  
Center, Workman's Circle Home. It is  
approximately quarter of twelve and I am here with  
Tessie Fisher. Mrs. Fisher came from Russia. She  
was...

FISHER: Oh yeah, I lived with my aunt in Russia.

SIGRIST: Right. She was born January 28th, 1898. She was  
eleven years old when she came to this country in  
1909. Mrs. Fisher, thank you very much talking



know                   that.

SIGRIST:    What did he do for a living in Europe?

FISHER:     Uh, a carpenter, builder.  He worked, you know,  
              building.

SIGRIST:    Did he build houses?

FISHER:     Yeah, build them or he fixed the houses, all that.

SIGRIST:    Do you know what your father's name was?

FISHER:     Yeah.  His name was Mayha [ph].

SIGRIST:    Can you spell that?

FISHER:     No.

SIGRIST:    Mayha [ph].

FISHER:     Yeah.

SIGRIST:    Mayha [ph].

FISHER: Like Marty, so Mayha [ph].

SIGRIST: And what was his last name?

FISHER: His last name was, oh...

SIGRIST: Your name before you were married.

FISHER: My name before I was married? Oh, I, I can't  
remember now.

SIGRIST: Didn't you say that it was Chessler?

FISHER: Chessler. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Chessler, okay.

FISHER: Yeah, I knew and I didn't know.

SIGRIST: And your name, your name in Europe was different.

FISHER: Taibel.

SIGRIST: Taibel was your first name.

FISHER: Taibel, yeah, Taibel Chessler.

SIGRIST: How old were you when your father died?

FISHER: My father died, I was about maybe thirteen, no, no  
about twelve years old. I was next to the oldest.  
We were four children.

SIGRIST: What were the, do you remember your brothers' names  
and sisters' names?

FISHER: Esther was one, my sister. And then the boys, I  
don't remember no more. And my name was Taibel.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

FISHER: Uh, oh, I knew the name. Uh, (Rochel?), (Rochel?).

SIGRIST: And what was your mother like as a person?

FISHER: Oh, a doll, a doll.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things in Europe did your mother like  
to do?

FISHER: She was so busy being poor and she was busy with the  
kids, so I can't tell you. I don't know.

SIGRIST: So you were a poor family in Europe?

FISHER: Oh, yeah, working family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you ate in Europe?

FISHER: No.

SIGRIST: What kind of food did you have?

FISHER: It was very good whatever we ate. (she laughs) What  
can I tell you about food? Food is food, you  
know. They cook it different. It's different  
food, you know. What can I tell you?

SIGRIST: So that wasn't an important thing back back then.

FISHER: No, no, no. We were always hungry anyway.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have a kitchen in her house?

FISHER: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you grow any of your own food in Russia?

FISHER: I don't really remember that. Everybody had a garden, I know, but I don't remember. Everbody had a, uh, gahrtin [ph], they used to call it, a garden with their growing food. I don't know what.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did your mother have to do around the house?

FISHER: Everything. Every...

SIGRIST: How did she do the laundry? Do you remember how your mother washed?

FISHER: Yes. You used to put on the stove, I remember that, in a big boiler. It used to cook the clothes on the stove.

SIGRIST: And this was all...

FISHER: And water and soap and all that. (voices can be heard over the intercom system in the background) And then they used to take it out and rinse it and dry it outside on the garden, uh, you know, in the garden.

SIGRIST: What kinds of clothes did you wear in Europe? Do you remember what kinds...

FISHER: Nice clothes.

SIGRIST: What did they look like?

FISHER: Just as good as here.

SIGRIST: Did you wear long skirts or short skirts?

FISHER: No, I was just a kid.

SIGRIST: So you had short skirts?

FISHER: Medium. Uh, nice. Whoever had money used to be dressed gorgeous. I remember that. And who didn't was poorer.

SIGRIST: Was this a little town that you lived in or was it a big town?

FISHER: No, a, a town, you know. Not very big and not very small.

SIGRIST: Did you have grandparents that lived in this town?

FISHER: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember...

FISHER: They had their own house. They were Chesslers. They used to build and, and fix things. And their name was Chessler, my father's name.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about visiting your grandparents when you were a little girl?

FISHER: Oh, they were very nice people.

SIGRIST: What did they look like? Do you remember?

FISHER: Normal. (she laughs) Normal people. We all looked normal. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, were they big people? Were they small...?

FISHER: There were big ones. There were small ones. There were big ones and medium. There were cripples. They were homely looking, good looking. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: So people in Russia looked just like people in America.

FISHER: Yes, sir. All over, the same people. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you go to school...

FISHER: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...when you were in Russia?

FISHER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to school?

FISHER: A school, and they were teaching very nice and good  
and everything.

SIGRIST: Were you getting a religious education, also?

FISHER: Yes, but I don't remember no more, you know. And  
they used to have reports, you know, you used to  
give out report books and, very nice.

SIGRIST: Do you...

FISHER: Europe people were (she laughs) the same people as we  
are. They haven't got two heads, I'm sure. (she  
laughs) They're normal people, normal people.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, when you lived in Russia...

FISHER: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...your religious life. What religion were you?

FISHER: Jewish.

SIGRIST: And was there a synagogue in this town?

FISHER: Yes. They had it in school even, in kindergarten,  
too.

SIGRIST: So the school was part of the synagogue?

FISHER: Yes. They had (synagartens?), that's rabbis, you  
know, in our shul. And they had schools. They  
had a, a college in one of the city, in Bialystok.  
They had a, they were normal, we were all normal  
people.

SIGRIST: Was the town that you lived in near Bialystok?

FISHER: Yes.

SIGRIST: So it wasn't far from Bialystok...

FISHER: No.

SIGRIST: ...where you grew up.

FISHER: No, no, no. In Grodno gubernia, the name of it was.

SIGRIST: That's right. That's near the Polish border.

FISHER: That's right.

SIGRIST: Uh, did, did...

FISHER: You know, I don't remember a lot of things, too (she laughs) many years.

SIGRIST: Were, were little girls allowed to get an education?

FISHER: Oh, everybody was allowed. Everybody was.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write?

FISHER: Yes, Jewish. And whoever wanted went to night school and learned English.

SIGRIST: That was here in America.

FISHER: No, in Europe. In Europe they had a night school,  
too.

SIGRIST: You could learn English in Europe?

FISHER: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Now, why did your family want to come to America?

FISHER: Oh, America was better things. You know, you worked,  
you got more money. And it (?) you know, people,  
there was a lot of things here in America.

SIGRIST: Did you have relatives who lived in America?

FISHER: Everybody moved to America. They moved, they came  
back. (voices can be heard over the intercom  
system in the background) They, but they,  
everybody, I had relatives all over, you know,  
Jewish people, my, my own.

SIGRIST: Now, when your father died, you're still in Russia  
when your father died?

FISHER: Yes, oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Is that the reason why...

FISHER: I think after the last child was born he died. And then my aunt and uncle, that's my mother sister, she didn't have no children. I'm going to tell you the whole business, what I remember (she laughs), you know. So he died and I, I was born and I was a year or close to two years, he died. And then my aunt never had children so she, she was my mother's sisters, you know, another, uh, she had a husband, you know, but no children. So, then I was born before (voices can be heard over the intercom system in the background) my father died. And then he died and the children were left. And she came with her husband and said she wants to take one child from my mother. She had three, she wants to take one child if she'd give her. So she gave me, you know. So I went to, with them in Espuhskeh [ph], another, he was a carpenter on my, the uncle, you know. And I lived with them quite a while. Then they, we all came to America.

SIGRIST: Did you come to America with your aunt?

FISHER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what about your own mother?

FISHER: My mother came, the children got bigger so she came.  
They, they all went, came to America or other  
places, you know. And then she did, I did, then I  
got older and I got married.

SIGRIST: When you lived with your aunt...

FISHER: I got married.

SIGRIST: In Russia, when you were living with your aunt, did  
you see your mother a lot or not?

FISHER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Not a lot, you know, every time they  
used to come, somebody used to bring them for a  
couple of hours, you know. Then my mother, then,  
then she, she came to live with me. (voices can be  
heard over the intercom system in the background)

So my mother lived, then she got married again.

SIGRIST: Is this in America?

FISHER: No, no, in Europe.

SIGRIST: In Europe. She got married again in Europe.

FISHER: Yeah, yeah. So, then she came to America with her new husband.

SIGRIST: Were you already here?

FISHER: I was there. I was in America already...

SIGRIST: I see.

FISHER: ...with my aunt. I went to school.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, before you left Russia when you were living with your aunt...

FISHER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...and, and your aunt and uncle decided that you were going to come to America...

FISHER: Yeah, they came for me...

SIGRIST: Did they come...?

FISHER: ...to bring me, that's right.

SIGRIST: They, they came before you did?

FISHER: Yeah, just to take me when I was young yet.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed to take to America?

FISHER: No, I wouldn't. Whatever I had, (she laughs), I'm, I'm sure I didn't have too much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you went to get the ship?

FISHER: In Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: No, no, before Ellis Island. When you were leaving Europe, where did you have to go to get on the

ship?

FISHER: Oh, that's where, uh, the place where they have the ships that used to take you all over.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the city where you left from?

FISHER: Bial--, uh, we left (Narewka?) and then...

SIGRIST: And then how did you go to get the boat? How did you travel to get the boat?

FISHER: Oh, on a horse and wagon. A lot of things I don't remember. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Tonight you'll remember them. Do you remember being on the ship?

FISHER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

FISHER: Oh, no, no.

SIGRIST: No, okay. Tell me what you remember about being on the ship as a little eleven year old girl.

FISHER: Well, I'll tell you, you know, there they used to go and put my name on somebody else's family when they were going to America, you know. They, they didn't know it wasn't, I don't belong to them. And that's how they used to take over. And they used to pay the people when they went to America with them, with me like.

SIGRIST: As a chaperone for you.

FISHER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And they used to take care of, uh, 'til my aunt and uncle came. That's how I got to America first, too.

SIGRIST: So you had a chaperone with you on the boat.

FISHER: Yeah, yeah. A family with a few kids of their own and I was another kid.

SIGRIST: Now, do you remember where you stayed on the ship?

FISHER: On the ship?

SIGRIST: Yeah, but where in the boat? Where did you, where  
did you sleep at night?

FISHER: We, oh, I don't remember that much. I'm here so many  
years. (she laughs) I don't remember sometimes my  
own name, so how could I remember that?

SIGRIST: Do you remember getting seasick?

FISHER: Getting what?

SIGRIST: Did you get seasick on the ship? Sick?

FISHER: Oh, seasick. I don't remember. I don't remember  
that much. I remember playing with the kids, you  
know, when I was, when I first came to my aunt  
and uncle.

SIGRIST: So, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when  
you came to New York?

FISHER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I saw it here in America, too.  
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: (he laughs) I meant the first time, of course,  
coming in.

FISHER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about being at Ellis  
Island? Did you have to go to Ellis Island?

FISHER: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What, is that where your aunt met you?

FISHER: That's right.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about being there?

FISHER: Nothing, just a lot of people from different places.  
we were kids who (?). I saw my aunt. I didn't  
know her, you know, I didn't remember her. So my  
uncle, he was a very nice man. He used to say, "We  
going to be just like your father was." We were, I

will never forget it. He said, "(Yiddish)"  
That's all. And then they went away and (a week  
late again?)

SIGRIST: Where did they, where did they take you to live?

FISHER: With my aunt.

SIGRIST: When you left Ellis Island, where did your aunt live?

FISHER: In Espuhskeh [ph].

SIGRIST: No, I mean in America. Where did, where did, where  
did you go to live in America when you first got  
here?

FISHER: I didn't live there right away. I went with my aunt,  
so wherever she lived, I lived with them.

SIGRIST: But do you remember where that was?

FISHER: You mean in the, the name of the city?

SIGRIST: In, in America. When you first got to America, where

did you live? Did you live in New York City?

FISHER: No, no, no. I didn't live in New York. I lived in,  
not in, oh, I got the name, well, anyway it had a  
name. It had a nice name. And I lived there  
quite a while.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it was like to learn English?

FISHER: Uh, we learned like you go to a school. They're,  
they're normal people. (she laughs) They ain't  
got two heads, I want you to know.

SIGRIST: Was there anything in America that was new to you,  
that you...

FISHER: Well, of course.

SIGRIST: ...had never seen.

FISHER: Listen, you go from city to another, it's new, right?  
And then it's different. But they were nice  
people.

SIGRIST: What did your uncle and aunt do for a living?

FISHER: Uh, carpenter.

SIGRIST: And they were carpenters here, too?

FISHER: That's right. That's right. Builders, carpenters.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, once you got to America, when your mother and her husband came over?

FISHER: Her husband was dead, my father.

SIGRIST: No, her second husband.

FISHER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what, how long after you were here that they came?

FISHER: Oh, quite a few years, yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh.

FISHER: And then she lived with me after, after he died, the  
second husband. I was married already and she  
then lived with me.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you got married?

FISHER: Nineteen.

SIGRIST: What was the name of your husband?

FISHER: (she laughs) Morris.

SIGRIST: Morris Fisher.

FISHER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you remember what year you got married?

FISHER: Oh, no, no. A long time ago. Listen, I'm married  
many, many years. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, are you glad that you came to America?

FISHER: Of course. Everybody wants to come to America. It

was a different world than them.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to visit Russia when you were,  
when you got older?

FISHER: Oh, for a visit, over there I had a grandmother, two  
grandmothers, on both sides and we used to come,  
we used to, and then we came to America.  
Everybody came to America.

SIGRIST: But I mean when you were an adult in America, when  
you were grown up in America...

FISHER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...did you ever go back to visit Europe, like on a  
vacation or something?

FISHER: I don't remember. Maybe yes, maybe no.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Fisher, I want to thank you for...

FISHER: Listen, I can't remember everything.

SIGRIST: Oh, you did a good job. You really did. I want to  
thank very much for answering my questions.

FISHER: Oh, don't thank me. But tell, tell me, I want to  
know, why do you, did you want it so?

SIGRIST: Because it's important. It's important that people  
know what happened back then, "a long time ago" as  
you say. Do you think it's important?

FISHER: I don't know. My mother came. My mother was with me  
quite a few years before she died.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, thank you again. This is...

FISHER: All right.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Tessie Fisher  
on Thursday, April 21st, 1994 at the New Jersey  
Geriatric Center, Workman's Circle Home in  
Elizabeth, New Jersey.