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ROSLYN BRESNICK-PERRY
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LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's June 22, 1994, and I'm here with Roslyn Bresnick-Perry, who came at the age of seven to America in 1929. She came from Poland, and is today and has been a professional storyteller. And that's a first (she laughs) for the Oral History Project. So I want to say welcome, and I'm really looking forward to hearing your story.

PERRY: Thank you.

LEVINE: About this. So let's start, if you would give your birth date first.

PERRY: I was born on August 8, 1922, in a little town in what is now Belarus called Visoke Litovsk. It's the northern, northernmost western part of Russia, but I never knew what, if I, to say if I was born in Russia or in Poland, because it switched back and forth. And when my parents were born it was Russia, and only about five years before I was born, Poland got it back. And then several years after we came here, I think in 1938, it became Russia again, and now it's no longer Russia, it's Belarus. (she laughs) So I'm very happy to now have a name for where I was born. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like it was Poland when you were there.

PERRY: It just is. I have a Polish, I have a Polish passport, but it was only Poland for a very, very short time.

LEVINE: I see. Okay. Uh, what do you remember about the town were you lived?

PERRY: I remember everything about the town because it was like the camera stood still. The – the -- it was a tremendous shock, an emotional shock, coming here to America, because I left a large family on both sides -- my, both my mother's and my father's family. And we ca--, my mother and I came to America to be with my father, who had come here six-and-a-half years before, and I had not, I did not know my father when I came here. And although I looked forward to meeting my father, it was very painful to leave everybody behind, especially since we came on May 29, 1929, a Friday, sort of mid-day, and the temperature was about ninety-nine degrees.

It was the beginning of the Great Depression, because that, on that date was the first tremendous drop in the stock market, and after that it was downhill all the time. And, um, I di -- was not -- I didn't know – In fact, I didn't know till many years later that I was dyslexic. And so I had a very hard time learning English. I had a very hard time in school. I had no – very -- no friends because we lived -- we moved to the Bronx, to the upper Bronx, and, uh, the Jewish children that lived there all spoke English. They were all already born in America, and the parents were very, very anxious for them to be Americans, so they didn't require that the children speak Yiddish. And since that was the only thing I knew how to speak, I was quite isolated. So that, uh, but it was a trauma for me coming here.

LEVINE: Okay. Before we talk about here, let's first talk about life before you actually came.

PERRY: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: What do you remember of your early childhood?

PERRY: Oh, I remember, I remember lots of things.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents that you saw?

PERRY: I had grandparents. I had aunts and uncles and cousins. I had aunts and uncles and cousins on my mother's, no, aunts and uncles and grandparents on my mother's side of the family. And on my father's side of the family I had my grandmother and I had a lot of aunts and uncles, and a lot of cousins. And I lived right next door to my cousin Zisel, who was my age, and who was my companion. And, in fact, I've been writing things about, these stories about my little town, my little shtetl. And it's all about Zisel. It's Zisel and myself, and our adventures in the shtetl. The town was a small town. It had three thousand people in it. It was ninety-five percent Jewish and only five percent non-Jews living there, and they consisted of the authorities, you know, like the mayor and the police chief and people like that. And a few people living in the surrounding area. All the other people lived sort of outside of the town, and they were peasants.

The -- there was a drugstore there. The man who owned the drugstore was not Jewish. There was a doctor that was not Jewish. But otherwise everyone was Jewish, and so I thought everyone spoke Yiddish, and I thought everyone looked – looked like we did, because my town, the people

in my town were mostly all blonde, all fair-haired people, with light complexions and light eyes, and if there were people there that had dark hair, they were called shvarts kheynevdik, which means charming darkness. They were – they were – they were especially noted for being nice looking because they were dark and had dark hair. And so when I – when I came to America, I was very surprised when they told me all Jews have black hair and black curly hair and big hook noses, because I – I – I didn't – I didn't know any people like that. So, um, everything was terribly different here, and my father had a hard time here, so, so it's hard for me.

LEVINE: What did your father do in Poland before he came?

PERRY: Well, before he came it was Russia. (she laughs)

LEVINE: In Russia. What did he do in Russia?

PERRY: He, he, um, used to buy cattle. He would go out into the, into the farmlands, and he would buy cattle for the butchers. He would, you know, he would sort of, um, uh, I don't know what you call it, sort of make a contract with the farmer to give him this and this amount of cattle, and he would pick out the cows, and then he would sell them. He would bring them to the, to the slaughterhouses, and the butchers would then buy it. And my grandfather did that also.

LEVINE: Your father's father?

PERRY: Uh-huh. Yeah, right. I didn't know my father's father, because he had died in the great flu epidemic after World War One. But I didn't know him, but I knew my – my grandmother very well, because she lived next door. See, my – my grandfather's house -- when my grandfather died, the house was divided into three sections. And on one side lived my Uncle Borakh with his wife and six children, and he -- they had two, two bedrooms and a kitchen. And it was always crowded with people. We – we lived in the center, and we had one bedroom and one, uh, sort of kitchen. And my grandmother, Sheyna, my father's mother, lived on the – on the other side of us, and she had one small bedroom and one small kitchen. And I wrote a story called My Bubba Shana Never Liked Me, and she didn't like me. And I asked her why, and she told me she didn't like me because I was a shtik fun mayn maman, which means a piece of my mother, a clone of my mother, and she didn't like my mother. And the reason she didn't like my mother was because my father had married her without any dowry.

And she would tell me, "That fool of a father of yours. Just because she had a pretty face, and she knew a few chapters of the Torah, he married her without a dowry." And she said, "It was a horrible shame," and she couldn't lift up her head in front of people, she was so ashamed that he did such a thing. And then she said and now that he went away to America and he sends her money and all other things, she doesn't even talk to me. In fact, my grandmother said, "She doesn't even invite me in the house when they all read The Forward, the Jewish newspaper that – that he sends her from America." My grandmother said, "Everybody she invites in except me. I'm not good enough." And so she didn't like me.

She said I was just like my mother. And that made me feel really very bad, because my grandmother was a lot of fun, and my mother and she really did not get along.

LEVINE: Do you think that your grandmother, uh, do you think that your mother—

PERRY: [very softly] I fee-- I'm losing my—

LEVINE: Do you think that your mother, um, her relationship with your grandmother, I mean, what was the typical relationship, like when a man married a woman, what was the relationship between that woman and the man's . . .

PERRY: Mother.

LEVINE: Mother? Do you . . .

PERRY: Well, most of the time, I -- I think, (she laughs) I think daughter-in-laws and mother-in-laws are natural enemies. But in this case I think my grandmother really had grounds, because my grandmother was very energetic, and she was very bright, and the women in those days were, you know, they were frustrated, they really couldn't do anything, couldn't really, although they ran everything. But she, um, she loved parties, and she loved to be among people and to talk, and she loved the musicians, you know. And so she always sought the company of people. And so when – when my mother heard what my grandmother had told me, she said, she said to her -- she said to me, "Who are you talking to? Who told you these lies?"

Because my grandmother said that she's lonely, and that since my father went away, she – she feels like she's so lost and lonely. "Like a stone," my grandmother said. "Like a stone." So, uh, she said, "When your father was here he used to come in, and he would tell me stories, he would sing for me, and we would have, you know, we would talk, and he would tell me jokes." But now he went away and, well, you see, my father used to send my mother money from America. And he would send her, you know, the newspaper, and he would send packages for me, all kinds of clothes and things. And for his mother, he wasn't much of a writer, he was also dyslexic, I'm afraid. But, you know, who knew about these things. So, uh, his mother, he only sent something once in a blue moon, you know, from America, like for a holiday or something. And, and he didn't write her letters, and there was a terrible feeling of jealousy, you know, between, with my grandmother.

And then my mother was so, my mother was sort of the intel—of the intelligencia of the town. And, um, and, uh, she was, like, part of the educated people, see. And so she's kind of stiff-necked and, you know, and conceited. In fact, my grandmother said she was conceited. And, um, so, um, my, and, see, she didn't ask my grandmother to come in when they read the newspaper, she wasn't very nice to her. So, uh, I felt sorry for my grandmother, even as a little girl. In fact, in fact I tell about this, in fact, one, one day I knew we were going to go to America eventually, because we kept on talking about it. And one day I

saw there was a crack in the wall right near the sofa where, there was a little couch, a leather couch on that wall, and there was a crack there. And that was the wall we shared with my grandmother. And so I looked down. You know, I went to examine it, I looked down, I saw, it went all the down underneath to the very bottom, to the floor.

So I had this very bright idea. (she laughs) I — I -- I went outside, I found a little stone, and I pushed away the sofa when my mother wasn't around, and I started to dig into the wall. And I dug and I dug. What I was doing is I wanted to make a hole so that my grandmother, see, her -- my grandmother's bed was against that wall. So I went to make a hole so when my grandmother wanted to find out what was going on in America from The Forward, all she had to do was – was lie down on the bed and put her ear to the wall, and then she could hear everything. And I – I would show my grandmother that I wasn't like my mother. I just wanted to do that.

LEVINE: Do you think you did?

PERRY: Well, no. What happened was that, you see, I never cleaned up the plaster that fell behind the sofa, so every time my mother opened the door -- there was a window right near the couch -- so when the wind blew in there was like a dusty cloud floating around the little sofa. And my mother pushed aside the sofa, and she found the hole. And, of course, she knew who did it. (she laughs) And then when she said why did I do this and I told her, she was furious. And she, you know, she gave me a spanking and everything, and she plastered the hole back. And then she wrote a letter to my father telling him that, how hard it is to raise me, that I was such an impossible child. I just had these crazy ideas, and I just did what I wanted to do. And she is convinced that I took after his side of the family. In fact, she knows that I'm just a piece of my grandmother Sheyna. So both women . . . (she laughs) Both women were very, very strong about who I was like. Not themselves. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Did you have a sense that you were more like your mother or more like your grandmother?

PERRY: No, but I had, I had the – I had the feeling that it was much more fun to be with my grandmother Sheyna than it was with my mother's mother, who was a very bright and intelligent person, you know. But she was like kind of dour, and the other grandma was so much more lively, but I didn't have a chance really to be with her, because my mother kept dragging me away to my other grandparents. But it was a wonderful town I came from. It was a very intellectual town. They, they, um, they had an amateur theater group. They had a library, which they supported themselves. In fact, my uncle was in the – in the amateur, was in the theater group, and they would put on Shakespeare in Yiddish and Ibsen and, uh, Chekhov, and, uh, of course, I didn't know who these people were, but my mother was always taking me to the theater.

And my uncle played King Lear. He was King Lear. He was seventeen years old. We got him a beard and things. And, um, there were a lot of things going on in that town. It was a, you see, the town was

on a railroad line that went right to Warsaw and to Brest Litovsk and Bialystock and to Minsk. It was a railroad junction, so that you had people coming in from everywhere. And that's why I was so fascinated with the – the – the stories as an adult, because when I, when I read things, it triggered so many memories of what I had experienced. And two years ago I went back there. Uh, there were a lot of things still standing. I remembered a lot of things. I, in fact, I told a guide "Don't take me. I'll take you." And I knew a lot of things. But, of course, there were no Jews left. Everyone in the town was killed, everyone.

And it's, it is such a painful thing. I thought I was going to interview people and talk, because I wanted to write about it. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't do, I wasn't even crying. I was just, like, numb. I couldn't do anything. I mean, the synagogue that they had built up the year we left was a shell which had trees growing out of it, you know. Part of the structure was still there. The big, very big meadow that I played in as a child -- I used to go down with my mother and all the women, they washed clothes in the spring. Everybody went to do a washing, a spring washing. They took everything from the house, you know. The houses were shut tight. Because we had no electricity. We had no, like, it was, it was strange. At this time that, to live in two worlds at one time.

They were just getting in, they were just getting, my uncle just got a telephone in. But they had no electricity, and, of course, no radio, no television, no cars, you know, horse and wagons. And sometimes a car would come into town from – from Warsaw. Everybody in town would run out, and a plane, when a plane came overhead, the whole town came out. Um, you know, we had no running water, no, no indoor toilets, nothing. So it was like the old world, like it was like Mid-nineteenth Century in a way. And in another way the thinking was absolute twentieth century thinking. So it was like a schism. Was -- I really lived on the cusp of change. It was a very changing society. And all the young people wanted to go away from the town because the religious authorities had full control of everything. And it went, you know, the Jews, you know, the Jews ran their own communities, except where it came to things that impinged on the government.

They ran through a kahila , which is like a --- a governing body elected, sort of chosen by the people -- the most--. Actually the most affluent people in town and the most educated people in town sat on this community with the rabbi, and the laws were according to the – to the b-- to the Talmud, to the Torah. So the young people were -- there were a lot of socialists and communists in the town, and we were right there, you know. The Russian Revolution had already occurred. There were many people who felt that Russia was a great experience, but the Poles were ruthless, absolutely ruthless. If they felt that you were a communist, they would – they imprisoned you. But there were a lot of Utopian Socialists in the town, a lot. And a lot of Zionists. And the people kept preparing for either going to Palestine or going to America.

Because there was no room for the economy to grow. There was no room. There was – there was the houses, you know. They didn't build

new houses, and as the families grew, the houses kept getting sub-divided. And the Polish authorities became more and more anti-Semitic. And then, of course, you heard from America. They'd, some people wrote the truth of what was going on in America, and some people did not, but, um, there was always someplace to go. And they had, and they had camps, uh, like organizations where the young people prepared to go to Israel, to Palestine. It wasn't Israel then. And to work in the desert, and to become farmers. Because they, they weren't farmers in, in, uh, Poland and Russia, because for so very long the Jews weren't allowed to own any land, and they weren't allowed into many, many industries. And they didn't do that kind of physical work of building and things like that. They weren't – they weren't too many. They did, they were like carpenters. They did the finer work. They were artisans. So, um, they used to go to these farms and train to become khalutsim, you know, pioneers in Palestine. And they had songs. You see, I was brought up with my mother's sisters and brothers. They were young people, so they were always singing and reciting songs, and there was discussions, and they all had their friends coming in. And then when I came to America, we had nobody. We just lived in a three-room apartment. It was – it was like a desert here.

LEVINE: Did, was it, your cousins, were they planning to go to Palestine? Is that why they would . . .

PERRY: Well, my cousins didn't do that. There were other. My aunt and uncle's friends, I only have one, one aunt who took, she and her husband took her children. She had, by then she had three children, took them, and they went to Palestine. But they weren't allowed in, you know. They had to go surreptitiously. They had to – they had to sneak in, even before the second World War. They weren't allowed in. England had a mandate on Palestine, and they weren't allowed in.

LEVINE: Oh. So that would make it more likely for people to come to America.

PERRY: Yes. And people went not only to America, but they went to Argentina and South America and Cuba and Canada. They went to a lot of places. Their first choice was America. But, you know, in 1924 America adopted the, the quota, so that they weren't, you just couldn't come here. And then it cost a lot of money to come here, and then they didn't want to leave their people. My mother never stopped crying. She didn't want to come to America. My father was the one. And if – if – if my father wasn't such a strong person, I wouldn't be here. I would have been killed with everyone else.

LEVINE: Do you know why your father was so strong and so adamant about . . .

PERRY: Well, my father felt there was much more ap-- opportunity in America, and he was an adventurous guy. He liked, he was like, if he were not dyslexic, even though, well, if he were not dyslexic he would be much more able to be educated. He used to say, "I'm very smart, but I don't have a head for learning." You see, it was very hard for him. So it was very hard for him to learn how to read and write English. Because

my father was very enterprising, and loved to start things. A creative person, totally frustrated. Because he became a butcher here, and he hated it like poison. He liked to be out and to ride horses and to, you know, he was always doing things like that. And instead he had to stay in a butcher shop and deal with poor women who came to buy something and never liked what he gave them. You know, he hated it, he hated what he was doing. He really did.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

PERRY: His name was Max, Max Kollner, K-O-L-L-N-E-R.

LEVINE: And how about your mother?

PERRY: My mother's name was, is Dora. She's still here, my mother. I still have my mother. But she's very old and she's getting, you know, not quite there. Her name was Dora Zeyents.

LEVINE: Z?

PERRY: Z-I-E-N-T-Z. I don't know how to spell it. But it's not Zietz. There's an N in it, because it means, I know it means hare, you know, not rabbit, the hare, you know, the animal, a hare. That's what it means in Russian. Because there's a -- I keep finding family, you know, (laughs) like, you know, like my aunts married this man, uh, from the Zientz family, and my mother was from the Zientz family, but they're very distantly related. In fact, you know, almost, people in the shtetl were most, were related many times because they married in, in their own group.

LEVINE: It wasn't that unusual for, uh, for cousins to marry, for example.

PERRY: No, they didn't, cousins didn't, they were very discouraged from marrying. Oh, yeah. They didn't like that. They discouraged that. But, I mean, the town had three thousand people, so. So then they sent them around, you know, they went, they sent out shalikhem, you know, messengers to other towns saying, you know, "I have a girl, you have a boy," you know, so they got people to, to marry into other – other towns. People traveled around from town to town. They didn't stay in one town.

LEVINE: Do you remember any, like, wedding ceremonies from when you were a little girl there?

PERRY: Uh, I didn't, I myself didn't go to any wedding ceremonies. No, I don't remember any wedding. But my grandmother told me a fantastic story about a wedding on the cemetery, and, then she told me that story because, you see, I was afraid of cemeteries. And we, we – we went, we went by a cemetery each time we had to go into – into a certain place in town. And I wouldn't, and I didn't want to go because for Jewish people cemeteries are very important places, because the ceme—the cemetery was like a part of your life. Because Jewish people go to the cemetery to talk to their departed relatives. They go when they, when something wonderful happens to them, they go to tell their relatives. They go when

a sorrowful thing happens. They go when trouble is brewing in the town. They go because they feel that only the body is interred, that the soul is, floats around. And, and they petitioned the forefathers in heaven to talk to God.

And so they not only talk to their own relatives. They also talk to their forefathers and foremothers, you know, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Sarah and Rachel and Rebecca and Leah, and they talk to, they say that they ta-- you see, they can talk to them, they should petition God, because they don't have the nerve to petition God themselves. And so you're constantly going to the cemetery. So in a child's mind these - these souls, these spirits are very active. I mean, you go there, you tell them everything, and you know (and everyone says how much the spirits like it when you tell them everything). Especially they like weddings. So, so when something bad happens in town, and something bad happens, it sometimes is because a spirit is angry, and you have to placate this spirit.

And she said one time there was an outbreak of cholera in the town. Cholera was very, very prevalent, and usually cholera appeared in the summertime. But this time it was wintertime, and people were getting cholera. And the -- people came to the rabbi to tell the rabbi that, um, something has to be done, because otherwise many people are going to die. They know. See, everybody's very superstitious. They know that some spirit has been, has been, uh, angered. Some spirit is angry. And they said to the rabbi that they know that their mothers and fathers told them that the only way to placate a raging spirit is to have a wedding in the cemetery. But who would want to get married in the cemetery? And the rabbi happened to be not only a very educated man, but also very modern kind of person. He was educated in, in secular things also, and he didn't really believe in spirits.

But he couldn't convince the people not to, not to do this. And so they said, they know, orphans, you know, Jews had societies for everything, they had societies in little organizations taking care of orphans and widows and the poor, and for dea—for the taking care of the dead and, um, for the synagogue. They had, to visit sick people. They had, they had societies for lending money. They had societies for everything, because they took care of themselves.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here for a second, and turn the tape over, and then we'll continue with this. (they laugh)

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LEVINE: Okay, so we'll continue now.

PERRY: Well, so, the rabbi was not very anxious to do this. But the people said that they knew there are orphans there, two orphans, grown orphans, that would really appreciate, they would get married in the cemetery because the people themselves would arrange for the dowry, to give the dowry, and they would give clothes for the bride and groom to wear. They would, they would have money for the, for the shnaps [whiskey], for the kiddish, you know, what you have 'em for -- at a

wedding, and for the food. And the dowry would help them start a real life. And in Jewish law, in Jewish Talmudic law, it's absolutely a sin not to be married. I mean, you're, there was an omission to, um, no, that's not the right word, but there was a, you know, the Bible says, the Torah says that you have to be, multiply.

So, um, and if you don't get married, you're not living a Jewish life. So, um, this is a mitzvah. You're doing a mitzvah. You're doing a good deed. Well, the rabbi thought it over and thought, well, this is a good deed. I mean, two young unfortunate people will get a good start. So they approached these people, and they said yes, and so they were going to get married in the cemetery. And my grandmother said the whole town was invited. In fact, if you didn't go, everybody looked at you very, uh, cens-- they censured you, you know. And they were told to bring their children, because next to weddings, the spirits like children. (she laughs)

So, and my grandmother's telling me all this. She's not only telling, me, but she's telling everybody. Because my, my carrying on about I didn't want to go with my mother past the cemetery made her remember her own, you know, childhood. And she said, so her mother and father took her and her brother, one of her brothers, to the cemetery, to this wedding. And she described the wedding, you know, and how everybody came and brought things, and they had the khupa [wedding canopy] and the, and she said the bridegroom was shaking like leaves. He had to be carried under their arms. And just as the rabbi was going to -- and they - they stopped in front of the girl's mother's grave, because if a mother can't get to this evil spirit of the bride, then nobody can.

So just as the rabbi was about to do the prayers, all of a sudden from all corners of the cemetery came the most unearthly screams, like cries, screams, and then followed by this ghoulish laughter. She said people just, first they stood still, and then everybody started running out of the cemetery, and the bride fainted, and the groom was on the verge and had to be held up. Everybody started to run away, except the rabbi stood where he was, and some other people holding up the bride and groom. And everybody ran, and my grandmother said she felt, she was so scared, she and her brother were so scared, and they start to run with everybody. And because she was so scared, she peed in her pants. And so she was wet, and so she was screaming louder than anyone else.

And so then when they stopped outside of the cemetery, and they waited. And after a long while, the rabbi came out with all the me— the other men, with the bride and groom. And the men who had stayed with everybody were holding four young guys under the arms. They had young men with them. And, uh, the rabbi said that it wasn't evil spirits, it wasn't ghosts that were making that noise. It was these four men, young men, who were making the noise. And, uh, the townspeople, the people, they wanted to kill those young men. And the rabbi said, "No, just a minute." And one of the, he says, "Go ahead, tell them, tell the people why you did this terrible thing." And, um, and the young, one young man was the spokesman and said that they were ashamed of the people being so superstitious and they wanted to show them that it's not evil spirits, it was just them. And they said, "Why don't you, why don't you know that

cholera doesn't come from evil spirits? It comes from unclean water." And, uh, and, so the, you know, the rabbi let them go, and he said, but the people said that they should absolutely be punished.

And the rabbi said, "Well, the kahila would decide about that. The Beth Din [Court of Law] would decide about that." So then I said to my grandmother, "Well, what happened to the cholera." You know, the, in Yiddish it's kholerya, and that word is used as a curse, they said. When they want to say, "Oh, you should only drop dead," they say, "You should only get the ," which is the cholera. So I said, "Well, what happened to the cholera?" And my grandmother said, "Well, somehow the cholera stopped." You know, the cholera didn't spread that much. And she said, "Now, I don't know who would say if it was the evil spirits or the, or the unclean water, but as far as I'm concerned, the evil spirits should rest in peace. Because my grandmother's telling me that she really didn't believe in the evil spirits either.

And I always remember that story. It was just a fantastic story. So, uh, and, so I was never at a wedding, but I had heard about the weddings, you know. And I was at an engagement of my aunt, and in, in the old country the engagement was much more important than the wedding, because the engagement brought the two people together, and they, it was called a tenoim . That's the Hebrew word. In Yiddish, it's tenoim. I don't know what it is in Hebrew, really. They pronounce it differently. But then they had, they made a contract. They wrote a written contract of what the wife, the dowry the wife is bringing, what belongs to her, what belongs to the groom, who, in many contracts there was a stipulation that if anything happens to the marriage, the wife gets the dowry back.

All these things were all spelled out. And, you know, it wasn't two people marrying, it was two families marrying. And the families, the fact that it was very important to marry someone from a good family, because you didn't only marry the person, you married the family. And now it's, now a time (she laughs) we're beginning to see that it's more nature than nurture. So that’s -- that counts if you marry into a, you know, a functioning family and not a dysfunctional family. (she laughs) So a lot of, and also all these pre-nuptial things, you know. Now we think we're great, you know, we discovered America, but we didn't. They knew it way before.

LEVINE: How was the family connected? How were the families connected after a marriage actually took place?

PERRY: It was like, they were like, they were, like relatives. They were like relatives, because they shared, you know, there were no outside attractions and distractions, so all the celebrations were celebrated within the family structure. So you had all these life cycle celebrations that the families came together, then you had, then you had the religious holidays where everyone came together, but especially in Yiddish and in Hebrew there are words for that. I mean, we don't have a word for, like makhatonim or makhateynista or makhutin which means -- a makhateynista is the mother of your, is the mother of your, is the mother-in-law of your child. The makhateynista is the mother-in-law of

your child -- doesn't matter, boy or g-- you know, if you have a son or a daughter, but it's their mother-in-law That's the name – a makhateynista. And makhutin is the father-in-law, and the two of them are called makhitonim, which means -- it's a plural, and they're very important people. They're like family. So, um, of course, the things don't always go smoothly, and there's nothing as wonderful as gossip, especially in a traditional society. I mean, what else are you going to talk about? So, of course, people -- there's a lot of gossip, and it wasn't, everybody knows your business, everybody has something to say and, you know, it's, it's always a trade-off. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, how was it decided that you and your mother would come when you did?

PERRY: Well, my father had to become an -- citizen, and he had to get enough money together so he could send us money for a – for a ship's card, you know, to get a – get a boat. There was a lot of money needed. Plus he had to vouch for us, you know, that he could support us. And before 1924, you could come in on your, if your father was here, you could come on your father's papers, but this you had to get your own. So it took, it took five years. First you get your first papers, then you got your second papers. It took, and then my father had such a hard time learning how to read, and you have to learn how to read in order to become a citizen. And, um, you know, you go through this test, sort of, of finding, you know, who was this president and who was that president, and my father was very insecure in that area. But, anyway, he did it, and he -- we got – we got the, um, we got the papers to come here, and they give you a very, very thorough examination.

LEVINE: There?

PERRY: Uh, there.

LEVINE: Before you . . .

PERRY: And here, yes. There and here.

LEVINE: Do you remember packing up?

PERRY: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember what your mother brought, or what you . . .

PERRY: I have it all in this little book that I wrote. Yes, I remember, my mother was very hard pressed to -- to – to decide what to take. I mean, she, so she, what she took, we packed this big trunk, and what she took was, um, she took, first she took all her underwear, because, you see, there's nothing to do in the shtetl, so you sit at night with these kerosene lamps, like hurricane lamps, and you embroider, and you have people come. This is wonderful, it was a wonderful society, in a way. Because you were always together with people. People would come in each others' houses, especially in the winter, to spend long winter nights, and the women would sit and embroider and talk.

And somebody would read for everyone, you know. And they would sit and talk and discuss. They were always reading. They were always reading. Read newspapers and books and articles, and there was always discussions going on. And I always fell asleep to people's voices, you know, to the din of people's voices. It was something, singing songs and things like that. So my mother took these, I still have a little shirt of mine that I, that I -- hasn't fallen apart where, you know, she did this thread pulling, you know. She'd pull in, she did beautiful, beautiful embroidery. So she took her underwear, then she took her linens, which she also embroidered, and then she took two feather beds. You know what a feather bed is? It's a, like a down, down quilt.

And you make your own feather beds, because (she laughs) -- that's another story. Um, because, you know, you raise, you raise the geese, you raise geese. There are a lot of geese. And they, and they can't -- you can't leave them for the winter, because they, they, you know, they freeze. There's no place for them to go. So in the fall they kill the geese, and, um, and then they, and then they sit around nights and nights, and the women, and they pluck the down. And they do everything communally, communually -- everything, together. Families do things together, or your friends do things together, but mostly families do things together. And they pluck the down, and they, you know, they keep the down in some kind of sack. And then they take the fat out of the geese, because the geese get fat over the summer, and they rendered the fat, which they make into, you know, fat. They have grease, they have fat – like chicken fat -- and this geese, goose fat's wonderful. It tastes marvelous.

And then you have the grivenes, the residue. After you render fat, you have a residue of, sort of, it tastes like bacon in a way. It has that bacon-y taste, but only better, much better. So then you eat that with bread as a treat. It's a wonderful treat, because you make it with, you put in onions, you get onions, and it's a wonderful taste. By that time, it's already into the winter, so it's December, and Hanukkah is that month, the month of December. So what do you serve people when they come for Hanukkah? I mean, you have the people come over, tell stories, play cards, tell jokes, do all kinds of things for Hanukkah to celebrate the Hanukkah. Light candles, of course. You serve them latkes, potato pancakes. And what do you fry the potato pancakes in? You fry them in the goose grease. And there is nothing on this earth that tastes like potato pancakes fried in goose grease. Nothing. So that's why you serve latkes on Hanukkah. Some people think it's because of religious purposes. (she laughs)

LEVINE: It's because you have goose grease that you want to use.

PERRY: That's right, goose fat.

LEVINE: Goose fat.

PERRY: Goose fat, yes. My mouth is watering.

LEVINE: It sounds wonderful.

PERRY: So, wait. Then she took – then she took her couple of pots and pans, and she took her silver candlesticks, and she took two wooden rolling pins that fell out every time the immigration inspector opened the trunk. They fell out each time. And there were like two – two times in that thing. When they fell out, especially here, when we got here to America, and the immigration inspector says to my mother, "What, did you bring this to hit your husband with?" Of course, she didn't know what he was talking about, she didn't understand English, and someone explained this to her, and she said, "What does he mean? In America women hit their husbands with rolling pins?" So then she said, then she looks at me and this person that told her, and she says, "Maybe in America the husbands deserve it." (she laughs) So that's what she took with her, the two rolling pins. And I have them.

LEVINE: Oh.

PERRY: The reason why there were two, was because one is for dairy and one is for milk, I mean, for meat, because Jews don't eat, you know, have to keep that separate, milk and dairy products.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember actually leaving?

PERRY: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandmother and other people?

PERRY: Yes, everything. I remember very well. My grandfather. (she laughs) My grandfather, when we -- when we were -- my mother was sitting on the wagon waiting for me and crying. I didn't – I didn't realize, you know, I didn't realize how – how torn to pieces my mother was. With me, I was very excited, because I was going somewhere. I didn't know it would be forever. And, um, and I was glad I was finally going to see my father. And my mother finally, with all the crying, she was sitting on the wagon waiting, and my grandfather lifts me up to hand me to my mother, and he stops in mid-air, and he kind of presses me against his heart, and he says to me in Yiddish, "Und du mayn eynikel,du verst byayben ayn emese Yiddishe tokhter?" Which means, "And you, my grandchild, will you remain a true daughter of your people?" And I said, "Avada, Zeyda" "Of course, Grandfather."

And it felt like such an un, I didn't know what he was talking about. I – I -- I couldn't understand this question. And, uh, I never forgot it. I never forgot it, though, because I realized afterwards what it meant. And my grandfather was really the closest man to me because I didn't -- my father wasn't here. But I had all kinds of adventures as a little girl. I have it all in – in this – in this book, and I have many, many stories waiting to be published. It was, I decided that I had to get this all out, because there was nobody to tell the world about these people. Because, um, everybody knows about the six million people being killed, you know, six million, the Holocaust. They don't know the people that went. They don't know them. To them, to most people, these people of these little Jewish towns, this whole Jewish

population that was wiped off the face of the earth, uh, they were like, they think they were like mid-19th century people, like Fiddler on the Roof. Or else they think they're victims, or martyrs, you know. They don't see them as people, with all kinds of, these wonderful things. These -- they were extraordinary.

And when I think back, they were really extraordinary, because, you know, there were superstitious ones and stupid ones, and all kind, there were all kinds of people. But the general feeling was of great intellectual ferment of big ideas of, of, um, they had the utopian socialist's ideals for humanity, and they were all schooled in the Talmud, in the Bible, in the Torah. And they had, like, the two, the two aspects of what it takes to make a real human being. So, and they were, they were the ones that – that disappeared. I don't know what, it's not only that we lost them, we lost their potential. We lost what could have developed from these people. They were unique. They were unique, really. So I felt that I had to write about these things, because of -- how many college graduates do you have from these little villages, you know, that came at this late date. Most of the – most of the people who came here to America during that immigration time were dead. I mean, they're old. They're disappearing.

LEVINE: Yeah. It's quite a mission, it's quite a worthwhile . . .

PERRY: It's really a mission. I really have a mission. I mean, I would do better, you know, telling different kind of stories, but I do—I really don't like to. I tell stories of that. And, by the way, I, I don't know if you know this remarkable storytelling, national storytelling organization called NAPPS. It's the National Association for the Petu-- Perpetuation and Preservation of Storytelling. It has thousands and thousands of members, and they meet once a year in Johnson City, in Jonesboro, Tennessee. It has storytellers from all over the country, all over the English-speaking world, come there. There's ten thousand people at one shot. They have ten tents, a thousand people in each tent, and they ask the most, um, famous, the most, uh, you know, talented, or whatever it is, storytellers, to come and perform. And I was asked to come there this year, and they're going to hear all about the shtetl, and Yiddish, and this whole thing.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

PERRY: And all these stories that I'm, all these things I'm telling you are really, come from the truth, from what I had experienced, but I have them into stories.

LEVINE: Right.

PERRY: And I hope perhaps to really publish some more of these little books. This – this book is doing very nicely. It's called Leaving For America. And it was published by the Children's Book Press of San Francisco. They publish multicultural books, and this is their first Jewish-American book. So, um . . .

LEVINE: Tell me about when you were leaving. Do you remember going to the ship?

PERRY: Oh, yes. I remember going. We – we didn't go to the ship. We went, we went, first we went from the wagon to the train station, and from the train station we went to, um, uh, Hamburg, I think it was. No, we went to Danzig. We went to Danzig. Now it's Gdansk. I do not, it used to be Gdansk. I don't know what it is now. But at that time it was Danzig. It was a German port. But it was a German port that the Poles -- see, they had, they had to reconstruct Poland, because Poland wasn't a country after World War -- before World War One. So they had to reconstruct Poland, so they took a piece from Germany, and a lot from Russia, and from Austro-Hungarian, you know, and they made Poland. So this tow--um, city was a German town, Danzig, and then it became Gdansk. But when we left it was still Danzig, and we took a boat to Southampton. We went through London. I remember going, we went through London, and we stayed in a sort of big armory.

We slept over in, in Southampton, and I remember that it had a glass roof, like a, like a, uh, atrium. It had a glass roof. And some of the windows, it was made out of panes, windowpanes. And some of the panes were broken in – in the – in the glass roof, and birds came into the, into the, into this place, and were flying all around, all around the room. They have birds that flew in from the room. I wonder what they did if it rained. It didn't rain when I came. (she laughs) And then we took the boat at Southampton, and the boat was the Cu-- from the Cunard Line, and the boat was the Berengaria. And we were on, they had a tourist class. They had a first class, a second class, a tourist class. And we were on the be—behind -- underneath the tourist class. It was the third class.

And I was terribly nauseous. I was absolutely terribly nauseous from beginning to end. And, um, and I, and my mother had this big pumpernickel bread that the people told her that she should take with her, and a tin, a large tin of schmaltz herring, that, you know what schmaltz herring are, is? You know schmaltz herring? Schmaltz herring is, it's a plain little herring, and it's, um, it's preserved in – in salt, in brine, and so it's very salty. And, of course, the fat comes out of the herring itself, the salt draws it out, so it's salty and it's oily. And it's the base, it's the really the staple food of poor Jewish people, that was the staple food. When they didn't have what to eat, they ate herring and potatoes. And, um, in fact, all the – all the people of Europe, northern Europe, ate – ate herring and potatoes too. But the Jews, that was their. But for holidays they had gefilte fish, you know.

But herring, and when the immigrants came here, the early immigrants, they had herring all the time. You could get herring, it was a staple food here. In fact, in fact the, in fact, if you could afford for a celebration to have different kinds of herring, like schmaltz herring, like herring in cream sauce, herring in wine sauce, fried herring, uh, smoked herring, it showed how wealthy you are. Now I went to a bar mitzvah the other day, didn't find one piece of herring. (she laughs) In fact, very few stores carry herring. Anyway, my mother,

they told my mother that's a remedy. So every time I went to throw up my mother came to me with this herring, which I loved. But by the time this was happening to me and I was so nauseous, every time I saw my mother coming to me with another piece of herring I want -- I'd start to throw up before I even, she even came near me. And my mother couldn't understand why it didn't work on me, because she felt fine. And, um, it was a very fine ship, and I was a very curious child.

And, uh, I, one day I walked by myself around the deck, and the sailor said to me, "Where are you going?" In German. And, uh, in Germany, I could understand it, some of it. And I don't know, I'm very friendly, I'm used to adults, you know, being friendly and, and being my, you know, someone I could trust. I had never had a --.-- And he, he took me into the men's bathroom and started to molest me. And by some very happy incident, someone came into the bathroom, and I ran out. And, you know, I never told my mother. But I was frightened out of my head. It was a horrible, it was a very bad experience on the boat.

And, then it was, it took ten days to cross the ocean, and we had a big storm, and almost everybody was seasick. And it was, because you're on the bottom, you really felt the thing. And I felt, I thought we'd never get to America. And I thought I was going to die. I – I can't tell you how sick I was. And, um, finally one day about eleven o'clock in the morning there was like a whole big commotion on the deck, and everybody start to run, we're coming, we're there, we're there, we're there. And everybody ran up on the deck, and, um, and you could see little islands, you know. You saw -- start to see land. But it didn't, nothing, everybody stood on the deck, and finally we start to see the Statue of Liberty from, coming into the harbor. And then everyone got crazy. Up until then they just knew we were coming to land, but they didn't know, they didn't feel like we were in America. But when they saw the Statue of Liberty, people started to cry and hug one another and kiss one another, and jump around, and dance. And people that never talked to one another were hugging and kissing and crying. And I was crying with them. I didn't know why I was crying.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here and change the tape.

PERRY: Yeah, okay. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And then we'll continue.

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE BEGINN SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: This is tape two, and I'm speaking with Roslyn Resnick-Perry, who came at age seven in 1929 from Poland, what was Poland at that time. We were just leading her up to the Statue of Liberty, so, um . . .

PERRY: Yes. So, well, anyway, it was a very, very emotional time. And then, um, the boat docked at Port Newark. It didn't, it didn't dock at Ellis Island, because at that time, by that time Ellis Island was not the, uh, de, what do they call it, debarkation point, was not a debarkation point. Um, I don't know if it was Port Newark, or I don't

know where, actually, where we docked. I really should find out. Um . . .

LEVINE: It may have been Battery Park.

PERRY: Well, yes, it may have been Batt-- I don't know. Yes, it may have been Battery Park because, anyway, everybody ran off into their, the arms of people waiting for them, except my mother and I. And, because my father wasn't there. My father was supposed to come and get us, and he wasn't there. And we waited around and waited around, and I was so still sick, and I was so hot. It was ninety-nine degrees. It was like impossible. And I remember I had to go to the bathroom so badly, and I was crying. Then we were waiting on the deck, waiting, waiting. We came down off the deck, and finally, um, somebody from immigration came over to us and said, "Well, where are you going?" And we had a language problem too, you know. My mother didn't understand (she clears her throat) excuse me, English. And they said, "Well, you can't stay here any longer, and we're going to take you to Ellis Island." Because that's where, you know, when things are wrong that's where, and we have facilities if your, if something happened to your husband, you could stay there for a while until we find out what to do with you. And you can just imagine how upset we were. And my mother was doubly upset, because it was Friday afternoon, it was getting towards evening, and you're supposed to, you're supposed to light candles. The sabbath candles are lit before the sun goes down.

And she kept looking at her watch, and the sun was going to start going down, and my father hadn't arrived yet. And so she was, she said, "Here we are, look what's happening, and now we're lost in wild America," she said. (she laughs) She said she didn't want to come to America, because America wasn't a kosher land, because she was very religious. Well, anyway, they took us on a small boat, and they brought us to Ellis Island. And they put us in, they took us into some, a cubicle, a mesh cubicle, you know, with the, with the, wire mesh cubicles. And I was, I remember sitting on a stool, a tall stool, and my mother was sitting, she was crying because my father didn't come, and I was very upset. By that time I had already gone to the bathroom. (she laughs) And I think, they were very nice to us, very nice to us. And I remember they brought us something to eat, and they were very nice and comforting and said, "Don't worry. We'll find your relatives."

And they had a Jewish interpreter here. And, um, and as we're sitting there, all of a sudden a little short man with a red face, bald, sweating profusely, runs into the, this cubicle, and I see my mother, she runs into his arms, and they both stand there crying. They were crying and crying, and kissing and crying. And I'm looking, and I am absolutely horrified, because, you see, my father used to send us pictures of himself when he sent money, you know. And my father was always dressed up in a pin-striped double-breasted suit. He had spats on his shoes. He had a hat. He had horn-rimmed glasses. And he carried gloves and a cane. He was spiffed out. I thought he was the handsomest man. In fact, my mother used to put me to sleep, I would hold his picture, and she would sing me a song, and she would sing me a song, and

I thought she made up the song, but it turned out to be there must have been thousands and thousands of little girls like I.

And this, the Jewish writer, the most famous, Sholom Aleichem, he wrote this remarkable, this wonderful lullaby, words to this lullaby, and in the lullaby it says, "In America is your father . . ." You know it starts out, 'Shluf mayn kind.' sleep my child, my darling, you know, it went -- a lullaby. But there's one s-- one stanza says, 'In America is your father, sleep my sunanu.' But my mother would say, 'My Reysenu,' which was my name, like. 'He will send us twenty dollars and his picture, too, and he'll take us there, God bless him. There we'll live anew.' That's what, in Yiddish it said that. And I thought my mother wrote that song for me, because it had my name and my father was in America, and I always had money, and I had his picture. (she clears her throat) So I felt my father was a very handsome man, and I take a look at this little fat guy with a red face. By now he was crying like anything, so his eyes were as red as his face, and I can't believe he's my father. And he looked so short! He's about my mother's height.

And my father turns around to me and he says to me, "Nu, nu, how you like your father?" At which point, I start crying. So my father said, "Why are you crying? Far vus veynst du? Why are you crying?" I said, "You're not my father. My father's handsome. You're not my father." At which point my mother and my father start laughing. And my father says to me, "How do you know I was handsome?" I said, "You don't look like your picture. You don't look – you don't look like my father at all." And my father says, "Well, you know, it's hot, and I'm . . ." Da, da, da, da. And I thought to myself, "I know it was hot, and he couldn't wear all those clothes, but at least he could have worn his glasses." (she laughs) That's what I said to him. (she laughs) I said, "At least you could have worn your glasses." (she laughs) Well, anyway, he said he, my father got lost, and the cab got lost. I don't know. He got lost. Finally we – we signed the right papers, and we were going home, and my father says, "We're going to go in a cab now, a taxi, and we won't get lost, don't worry." And we go into the cab, and my father's holding my mother around, and with the other hand my father reaches into his pocket and he pulls out a banana.

And he says to me, "You know what this is?" I say, "No." And he said, "This is a panana." He couldn't say banana. He said panana. He says, "This is a panana." He said, "Do you know, did you ever see it before?" I said, "No." He said, "In America, all the children eat pananas." And he says, "You want one? You want some?" Now, I didn't feel like eating anything, but I felt I already had done terrible things to my father. I wanted him to like me. After all, he was my father. So I said, "All right." He said, "But now I'll show you." He says, "I'll show you how to eat it." He says, "You see, you hold it up like this, then you take it like this and you peel it down with the shell hanging down, like an umbrella, he says. He says, now he says, "Take a bite." So I take a bite, and I started to chew the banana, and it had this, I'd never eaten a banana in my life. I never saw a banana. It had this sweet, cloying taste, you know. The consistency was somehow -- I was not used to. It somehow reminded me of my nausea.

And I start to gag, and my mother put a handkerchief under my mouth, and I threw up again, because my stomach was still all upset, and the banana really got me right here. And my father looked so disappointed. And my mother cleans me up, and he said, then he cheers up. My father was a cheerful man, he says, and here he says, and he points with his finger, like up, up to heaven, you know, with his finger. He says, "You know, some day," he says to me, "some day, you're going to eat a whole panana, and then you'll be a real American goil [sic]." (they laugh) Well, I want you to know it took me a very long time to be able to eat a banana, and bananas are still not my favorite fruit. But now I eat them because at my age the doctor says I need the potassium.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's see. Um, so this was en route to your, when you left Ellis Island you were en route to where you were going when your father gave you the panana?

PERRY: Yes. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Okay. And then where did you go, first?

PERRY: Then we went to, we went to the Bronx. That's where my father took us. Because he didn't, he didn't want us to live in the, in the Lower, he didn't want to live on the Lower East Side. My father liked what he called modrun [sic], modrun things. Like, everything, my father was one of these, he could sing, "The music goes down and around." He knew all the songs. And he sang it, and, with all zest, and he – and he mis-pronounced every other word. For years, we didn't know, I didn't know that that wasn't the word. (she laughs) It was horrible. Sometimes it was so embarrassing to say the word, you know. Like, it's – like -- he's teaching me English, right? He's going to teach me English. He couldn't teach me English, really. He teach me English by singing songs to me.

LEVINE: Can you think of any of them?

PERRY: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Go ahead.

PERRY: He says, he says, "In America," he says, no, "In Europe," he says, "the people, the people, they would-- when they worked, they would sing like this, (she sings The Wedding Waltz) 'da-da-da-da.'" He says, "Not in America. In America the people work like this, (she sings Yankee Doodle) 'Yankee Doodle went to town, riding on a pony.'" (she laughs) And then he taught me another, another – another English lesson I got was (sings My Bonnie), "Mayn body lies over the ocean. Mayn body . . ." And for years, I couldn't understand how his body could lie over the ocean. (she laughs) And when I finally heard the song, I heard someone else sing it, I said, "Oh, my God, that's the song." (they laugh)

Or – or – or there was another song he'd sing. He'd sing the song (sings All Alone) "All alone by the telephone." (they laugh)

"Da-da-da-da." But this is the kind of words. Then he would, then he taught me this whole song. (sings, "I'm too tired to wash the dishes, too tired. Hoo-ha! (she laughs) Too tired to feed the fishes, too tired. Hoo-ha! Let's go to a show. Maybe, maybe it'll be nice. Yes, no, wherever we'll go, it's Mama's hotsy totsy, oy! Too tired to make a little candy, too tired. Hoo-ha! I think the show was dandy, too tired. Hoo-ha! Maybe you want to go to sleep, baby? I'm too tired, too.") (they laugh) I want you to know, I called up ASCAP. I wanted to get the real song. (she laughs)

So I said to them, "You'll never," I said to them, "you'll never believe me, but my father used to sing it. It must have been an English song, and I don't know if he had the right words, I don't know if he had the right melody, but it was about washing dishes." So the guys says, "There were a lot of songs at that time about washing dishes." So he said, "Sing me the song." I said, "I feel too embarrassed." He said, "Come on, sing me the song." (she laughs) So I sang him the song. He couldn't find it. I think it's a real loss. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, I think we're going to have to pause here, and hopefully we can, we can, maybe you'll come back?

PERRY: If you want me to, I'll come back.

LEVINE: Because you have such wonderful stories, and we just are out of time right here.

PERRY: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, this is Janet Levine. I'm signing off for the National Park Service. It's June 22, 1994. I'm here with Roslyn Bresnick-Perry, who came from Poland in 1929 when she was seven.