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RACHEL SHAPIRO CHENITZ

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AGE 10

PORT: ALEXANDRIA/ LE HAVRE

RESIDENCES: PALESTINE: SAFED

US: BROOKLYN, NY

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

Today is July 14th, 1991. I'm here at Ellis Island with Rachel Chenitz, who came from Palestine in 1922 when she was ten years old. Let's begin by you giving me your full name . . .) . . . with your maiden name included, and your date of birth, please.

CHENITZ: My name is Rachel Chenitz. That's my married name. My original name was Rachel Shapiro, S-H-A-P-I-R-O. I was born in Safed, S-A-F-E-D, Palestine. My father

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migrated to the United States primarily because in that city most of the people were rabbis, and they couldn't make a living, absolutely couldn't make a living. My father reached the United States just at the outbreak of World War I. At that time, he kept trying to send us money, material, everything possible to sustain us, but it was under the British mandate, and unfortunately nothing reached us until the war was over. As soon as the war was over, a lot of the materials that was kept back, plus money, was being sent to us.

SIGRIST: Okay. Before we get too far along in the story, what was your birth date please?

CHENITZ: My birthday? Oh, February 12, 1912.

SIGRIST: Okay. And let's talk a little bit, Safed, that was the name of the town?

CHENITZ: S-A-F-E-D. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Safed. Could you talk a little bit about the town? How big was this town?

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CHENITZ: It was a small town. I actually, what the population was, I actually don't know. But it was an equal number of Jews as well as Arabs. At the time, the Jews and Arabs got along very famously. As a matter of fact, I remember I was a little girl, that my grandfather did the bookkeeping for the, it was called the "rase." It was equivalent to the governor of the city.

SIGRIST: Called the what?

CHENITZ: Rase. I think it's spelled R-A-S-E, or R-A-I-S. It's a Turkish name.

SIGRIST: And he was an official of the town?

CHENITZ: He was the official of the town. And my grandfather was very, very friendly with him.

SIGRIST: I see.

CHENITZ: Okay, now . . .

SIGRIST: What was the town, what did it look like? What sorts of houses were in this town?

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CHENITZ: Charming. Most, there was never anything more than one floor, you know.

SIGRIST: What were the houses made out of?

CHENITZ: Uh, brick. Good brick. Very sturdy. As a matter of fact, I went back to see, to Israel, not too long ago, for the last time that I was there, the houses are still intact, in perfect shape.

SIGRIST: Now, was there any industry in this town?

CHENITZ: The trouble is there wasn't. That's why people were starving. There was, during the war we were literally starving. My mother used to take a piece of silver. Evidently she inherited a lot of silver from her parents. And she would take, every week she would take a piece of silver, bring it to the Arabs. They, in turn, would give her that white corn that you feed chickens with. She'd come home and make a concoction of that. Cook it or bake it, whatever. Bake it, I believe. And give us a piece a day. My sister told us that when we came to the United States we looked like

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the children from the Holocaust. Our bellies were swollen, our legs and arms were thin.

SIGRIST: Let's, what was your mother's name?

CHENITZ: My mother's name was Marley, and her maiden name was Lohr, L-O-H-R.

SIGRIST: Marley.

CHENITZ: Marley.

SIGRIST: And talk about her family a little bit. What was her background?

CHENITZ: I didn't know her family, because her parents had died. As a matter of fact, I'm named after one, her mother, Osa. But as far as I know, in those days there was no such thing like parents living away from their children. My mother took care of her grandmother. She used to tell us how she would bathe her and take care of her, and she was very old when she passed away. She lived with us, but of course I didn't know her.

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SIGRIST: What did your mother look like?

CHENITZ: Have you ever seen a Spanish señorita, or señora, with the black shawls, dark skin, big, black eyes?

SIGRIST: Was she short, tall?

CHENITZ: No, she was a little taller than I am.

SIGRIST: I see. And what was your father's name?

CHENITZ: My father's name was Moses, M-O-S-E-S, rabbi.

SIGRIST: And let's talk a little bit about your father. He was a Rabbi in Palestine but . . .

CHENITZ: He was a rabbi in Palestine, but was incapable of earning a living. There was nothing to earn it from because there were "x" numbers of synagogues that people would attend, just like you have "x" number of churches here. And there was no need for more. And because he couldn't earn a living, and he saw that he couldn't support us, and there were seven daughters! Only seven.

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SIGRIST: Big family.

CHENITZ: (she laughs) As a result of it, he had to do something. So he and a friend of his migrated to the United States.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

CHENITZ: He was short, with dimples, light. As a matter of fact, I looked like him, to a degree.

SIGRIST: He had light hair?

CHENITZ: Light hair, light skin. And hazel eyes. And very good-natured. Dimples, and a very good-natured smile, constantly smiling.

SIGRIST: Was your mother good-natured also?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: List all your sisters for me.

CHENITZ: Uh-huh. There was, the oldest one was called Rebecca. I don't know whether you'll notice it. Are you

familiar with the Old Testament?

SIGRIST: Parts of it. Rebecca at the well.

CHENITZ: We had the four mothers: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. We had all those four mothers' names. All right, my oldest one was Rebecca, the next one was Shifra, which was Sylvia.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

CHENITZ: Shifra, S-H-I-F-R-A. And the next one was Edith. The next one was Sima, S-I-M-A, or Selma in English. And the next one was Leah, L-E-A-H. And here I am, Rachel. The next one after me was, is Betty.

SIGRIST: That was a full household.

CHENITZ: A full house. And to maintain, to support us, that was the tragic part of it.

SIGRIST: And your mother didn't work.

CHENITZ: What could she do? There was nothing to be done. There was no industry. I sometimes wonder how the

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devil those people got along. Today it's become an artists' colony, so imagine that a lot of the artists migrated to Safed because the air is delightful there, and the scenery is beautiful. It faces a mountain called Mount Tabor, T-A-B-O-R.

SIGRIST: I see. Describe for me, you say there was nothing to do. Give me your mother's average day, after your father left.

CHENITZ: My mother's average day was to get the children off to school, clean the house, cook if there's anything to cook, or else go to the Arabs to trade or barter with silver. Come back, and try to maintain us as we came home from school. She managed to ask us what we did, and help us with our work. Of course, I don't remember too much of the work I had, the homework, because I was so young. But she did, she took care of all us kids. She would bathe us and shampoo our hair, and do whatever was necessary. And sew. She had us sew, from one child to the next, she had to sew the clothes so that they fit the next one, because poverty reigned supreme

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at that time.

SIGRIST: Was there, what kind of commerce was going on in the town? Was there a butcher shop? Was there a store of some sort that your mother patronized?

CHENITZ: I remember a stationery store where we bought notebooks for school. I would imagine that there was a place for, I imagine so.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you, what kind of age span were all the girls?

CHENITZ: The oldest, there was a difference of about three years between each of us.

SIGRIST: So by the time we get to you, there's quite a span, actually, before your oldest sister.

CHENITZ: Yes. Oh, yes, there was.

SIGRIST: Talk about school, because you obviously remember school.

CHENITZ: Oh, school was a delight.

SIGRIST: What did the school look like?

CHENITZ: Well, it consisted of about two or three rooms with a beautiful big courtyard for all kinds of athletics and fun and games. The teachers were delightful, as far back as I remember. As a matter of fact, I met one of the teachers. After many years, I met her in Brooklyn, and it was such a lovely reunion. A lovely reunion.

SIGRIST: Were you in school with Arabs also, or was this just a Jewish school?

CHENITZ: It was Jewish. The Arabs didn't want to mingle with the Jews because they were teaching religion, and so were the Jews, for that matter. And so there were religious factions in both directions.

SIGRIST: You had Arab friends?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. We got along, as far as I remember, there was never a problem with the Arabs.

SIGRIST: And did you live, your family itself, did it live in

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one of these one-story houses?

CHENITZ: Yes, we lived, you see, my grandfather on my mother's side had owned a home, and my grandfather on my father's side had owned a home. So we lived, we left for the United States for my grandfather's, my paternal grandfather.

SIGRIST: I see. What kind of cooking apparatus did you have in the house?

CHENITZ: A stove with coal or wood.

SIGRIST: And what is the climate like in this city?

CHENITZ: Delightful.

SIGRIST: So you didn't have any kind of heat needed in the house?

CHENITZ: No. We didn't need it. It was a summer resort, the city that we lived in. People came from all over to spend the summers there, and the winters as well, because the climate was very mild. Now, where we live,

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if you know Israel at all today, or in those days, it was called Gallil, G-A-L-L-I-L. That's the Hebrew name. There was Upper Gallil and Lower Gallil. The upper name was where Heifa is, and so on. The lower one was where Safed was, and Tiberias. Tiberias was a winter resort where they had these mineral baths where people came with all kinds of ailments to bathe in there.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about religious life. Was your family, obviously your father was a rabbi even when he was gone. Did your mother maintain a strong religious life?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue near your house?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. Not in the house, but near the house.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that synagogue a little bit?

CHENITZ: Very small, very quaint, and very, very sincere. The people, everyone knew everybody else, and everybody

helped out to everybody else. Something you don't see around here.

SIGRIST: Now, in this synagogue, were the women separated from the men?

CHENITZ: Yes, yes. That's the strictly orthodox element. Today we have conservative, and we have reform. But at the time everything was absolutely religious. You couldn't find anything but.

SIGRIST: Talk about some of the religious practices at home, for instance. Some of the things your mother observed.

CHENITZ: Well, we observed, we observed the sabbath, beginning Friday night, with a Friday night meal. Saturday there was no work. In fact, you weren't permitted to walk more than "x" number of blocks, which was called by the rabbis at the time in the Talmud, that's called (Hebrew) shabbat. That means the area for up to an area where we can travel on the Sabbath. What else would you like to know?

SIGRIST: What sorts of preparations would you . . .

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CHENITZ: My mother would cook and bake. Did you ever eat the Jewish bread that is twisted, white?

SIGRIST: Challah?

CHENITZ: Challah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

CHENITZ: Well, that, she would bake challah, if she had the material to bake it with. And she would make gefilte fish, which is fish that is filled, you know. The bones are taken out, and chopped well, the fish is chopped well and cooked.

SIGRIST: Where would she get that?

CHENITZ: There was a market for fish, and there was a butcher shop, I imagine. I don't remember it, but I'm sure they had it.

SIGRIST: I see.

CHENITZ: For chickens.

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SIGRIST: So describe a Passover celebration. Were there relatives living in the neighborhood?

CHENITZ: Oh, the whole family.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about Passover.

CHENITZ: That was a beautiful celebration. Everybody dressed up in its very best that they had. And everybody around the table. The father, the man of the house, the father, would conduct the service. And all through the night, till about midnight, and sometimes more than that, after the service was over, we sang all kinds of songs. Most of them more or less religious songs, but beautiful melodies. They still . . .

SIGRIST: You were a musical family?

CHENITZ: Yes. My father loved music. Unfortunately, you know, they didn't have, in those days they didn't have the facilities of teaching kids music. What else would you like to know?

SIGRIST: Let's, just fill me in again on your father leaving.

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CHENITZ: My father left just before the outbreak of World War I.

SIGRIST: You said he left with a friend. Who was the friend?

CHENITZ: His friend. I don't know who he was. I guess another rabbi, I assume. And they both got jobs not too far away from each other. They worked in Brooklyn they had synagogues that they were in charge of.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father leaving? You were very young.

CHENITZ: I remember my father meeting us at Ellis Island when he got off, on that little boat, you know, that brought us over.

SIGRIST: Good, well, we'll get to that.

CHENITZ: And he had a nice little gray beard, sparse, you know.

SIGRIST: So he had a congregation in Brooklyn.

CHENITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: And he was, you said that he was sending stuff during

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the war, but you weren't getting it.

CHENITZ: We never received it, no.

SIGRIST: And you sort of got it all after the war was over.

CHENITZ: Yeah. We didn't get it all, but we got part of it, which was a godsend. I'll never forget the very first time that Mother received money that my father had been sending. She came over to me and whispered to me as a secret, she says, "Now I can buy you a book." We were the people of the book. Constantly books, books, books.

SIGRIST: I've always wanted to ask this question and I never have. Did they send cash through the mail, or how did the money come?

CHENITZ: I don't know how they did it. What we received afterwards was cash. By the time it reached us it was English money. I guess it was liras, no? I guess it was liras?

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about your mother getting ready to

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come here.

CHENITZ: She had a big job on her hands. She had, number one, books that she had to give away. She gave them to the various synagogues. A number, so many, you would think we were millionaires, all the books that went to the synagogue.

SIGRIST: Which were precious objects at that time.

CHENITZ: Very much so. Then she had to sell or give away whatever we had, which was two times zero, as far as value was concerned. Interesting enough, you know, we didn't even have beds for all of us. They used to have a cavity in the wall in which a child would be able to sleep. They'd put a feather bed in it so that the child wouldn't be uncomfortable, and sleep in there, in any room that was. We lived in two-and-a-half rooms, nine people.

SIGRIST: Now, was one of those rooms designated as simply kitchen/living space, and then the other . . .

CHENITZ: Are you kidding?

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SIGRIST: No, it was just a free-for-all?

CHENITZ: It was a free-for-all, and all for free. (they laugh) But let me tell you something. Love reigns supreme. It was the most remarkable thing. Everybody was for everybody. There was no such thing like "this is mine, and this is yours." But, you know, I recall that we had a very bad siege of malaria at that time. And I was deathly sick. And there's the Hadassah hospitals. I'm sure you heard of it. And I was at the Hadassah hospital, and they wouldn't allow my mother to come in for fear that she would infect the others. So she would come near the window where she knew I was, she'd knock at the window and call me and say, "How do you feel, sweetheart?" I never forgot that.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

CHENITZ: About eight, seven. I remember much more of that than I remember what I ate yesterday. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Now, were all eight children, or, I'm sorry, nine . . .

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CHENITZ: We were seven children. There were eight, but one passed away when she was very young, when she was a year old.

SIGRIST: Were all of the seven daughters with your mother after your father left?

CHENITZ: No. Two of them had been married, and they came with my, one was married, and the other one was single, and my father took two of them with him.

SIGRIST: And did they live with your father here in Brooklyn?

CHENITZ: They lived in New York. I don't know where they lived. One of them was married by the time we came out, and the other one was single. She came to live with us when we came out.

SIGRIST: What did America mean to a little girl in Palestine?

CHENITZ: I was very unhappy at first.

SIGRIST: You didn't want to come.

CHENITZ: I walked into a classroom where the kids were talking

English. I didn't understand a word.

SIGRIST: No, no. Before you left Palestine, what did you know of America in Palestine.

CHENITZ: Oh, the imagination ran away with us. It's supposed to be beautiful. You know, my mother tried to sell us a bill of goods because we hated to leave. And she would cry and say, "Listen, children, we have to leave because we can't make a living here. We're going to starve if we don't leave." So, you know, she had to convince us to do that. But the interesting thing was that when we came here my father was already knowledgeable in English.

SIGRIST: So that helped.

CHENITZ: So he had, come on now. He had a book, and in the book something about a ship or so, and he's teaching me English that I shouldn't cry because I came home, I said, "I don't know what's going on in class." So he said, "I see the ship on the ocean." (she laughs) I never forgot it.

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SIGRIST: So you never tried to learn any English in Palestine?
It wasn't until you got here.

CHENITZ: They were teaching English, but you had to be in the eighth grade. None of us were . . .

SIGRIST: None of your older sisters?

CHENITZ: The older sisters were away already.

SIGRIST: Gone. Do you remember saying goodbye to everyone in the family?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

CHENITZ: Very heartbreaking, of course. Crying, tears, "We'll see you again, come and see us." We had no idea of the distance, as kids, how far. But by the time, we had to cross the Caveret, which is in Tiberias. That's the city adjacent to Safed. We had to cross that. It's, by ship or by little boat.

SIGRIST: Is this a canal or river of some sort?

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CHENITZ: Yeah. It's a little, what can I call it? A little bit of an island, or an outlet. Anyway, we had to cross that by ship, and then we came into Alexandria, Egypt. We were detained in Alexandria for a week. We had to wait.

SIGRIST: So it's your mother with four.

CHENITZ: With five.

SIGRIST: Five. That's right. Two have already gone over, so there are five of you.

CHENITZ: But the, no. With us, with my mother, four of us came, because two had already gone over, and one was married, and her husband had sent for her. So three of them were out of my mother's jurisdiction until we came here. The single one came back to live with us, which made us five.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, talk about Alexandria, because this is a big city, and you came from a small town.

CHENITZ: Yes, and a dirty city. Oh, I remember how the prostitutes. Now look, I was about eight years old, nine years old. The prostitutes would sit outside, and they wouldn't let a man go by without trying to lure him in. And not only that, but my sister, who was the assistant to my mother, she was the oldest, the sixteen-year-old, she had to be guarded like crazy, because she was a very pretty girl, and my mother was horrified that something would happen to her. We always went where there were men going any place that we could go, you know, so that she would be guarded. It was a very dirty city, filthy, oh. I remember . . .

SIGRIST: Was this the first time your mother had ever been in a big city?

CHENITZ: No, she hadn't. She hadn't.

SIGRIST: I interrupted. You said you remembered something else about Alexandria.

CHENITZ: Alexandria, the filth, the dirt. And the food. You know what they used to feed us? All the immigrants

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that were congregated from all over, who were waiting to go on the Cunard Line ship heading for the United States. No, it had to go first to Paris . . .

SIGRIST: Marseilles.

CHENITZ: La Havre.

SIGRIST: To La Havre.

CHENITZ: It's interesting, it all comes back.

SIGRIST: What did they feed you? I mean, what was so horrible about what they fed you?

CHENITZ: Vats. Big vats of meat that looked so disgusting. My mother would look at it and say to us, "Would you like a piece?" We were starving, but we couldn't look at it. And the people were grabbing at, you know, just like you see, in New York today with the starvation.

SIGRIST: Were you the only group from Safed who were travelling, or were there other people from Safed that were travelling with you?

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CHENITZ: From Safed, at the time, we were the only ones. And then we came into Ellis Island. We didn't get to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: We haven't gotten to Ellis Island yet. But you said there were other immigrants waiting in Alexandria.

CHENITZ: Yeah. I don't know from where they were.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of, what's the word, not an encampment, but some sort of place where everybody waited for the boat? Did the supply you accommodations?

CHENITZ: Obviously they had us in accommodations, if you can call it such, yeah.

SIGRIST: And this was all sponsored by the Cunard people?

CHENITZ: The Cunard line, yeah. We came on a ship called Saxonia, S-A-X-O-N-I-A.

SIGRIST: Is this what you picked up in Alexandria, or what you picked up in France?

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CHENITZ: We picked it up in France.

SIGRIST: When you were still in Alexandria, you had to take a boat to France. Was that a small boat?

CHENITZ: To France, yeah. Small, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time you'd ever been on a boat?

CHENITZ: Well, we went on that little boat crossing the island into, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you, how long were you in Alexandria?

CHENITZ: I think about a week. You see, our problem was that we were passed the quota, so they detained us in Alexandria, and my father had to spend a fortune of money. In fact, my father made history that they allowed, to this very day. Today they don't have quotas, but when they had the quotas, that the clergy was to be outside of the immigration. And that's why they let us in. Otherwise they were going to send us back to Palestine.

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SIGRIST: Were you detained in La Havre too, for a while?

CHENITZ: No.

SIGRIST: You just, you got there, and . . .

CHENITZ: We got there in about a day or so, and they immediately got us, we met the ship.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's talk about the voyage. What was the name of the boat, again?

CHENITZ: Saxonia. S-A-X-O-N-I-A.

SIGRIST: And what was this boat like?

CHENITZ: It was large. I think it had three stacks, or two stacks. Is that what they call them? Yeah, stacks. The people on there were from all over the world. They all congregated in one area to get the boat to go to, and everybody was going to America. And, you know, to us America meant, like Safed, one place, this one was going to Baltimore, this one to San Francisco. It was names to us, it meant nothing.

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SIGRIST: Right. What were your accommodations like?

CHENITZ: Well, the same as you would have in any, in a third, steerage. You know, way below, and we got seasick plenty. One of my sisters, I remember, was deathly seasick right throughout the trip. I think it took about seven or eight days for us to cross.

SIGRIST: Was it a rough crossing, or was she just inclined to be ill on the boat?

CHENITZ: No, it was pretty rough. It was pretty rough. We came here towards the end of August.

SIGRIST: But you didn't get sick.

CHENITZ: I don't remember being sick.

SIGRIST: So what did you do on the boat all day?

CHENITZ: We played and we walked around. And we ate. On the boat we ate because the climate, you know, the sea air was so wonderful that we had no way of resisting the food. We ate it no matter what it was. (she laughs)

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SIGRIST: Where did they feed you on the boat?

CHENITZ: They had the dining rooms.

SIGRIST: And what did that look like?

CHENITZ: Terrific. Can you visualize it in the steerage what dining rooms looked like? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So it was pretty grim.

CHENITZ: You're damn right. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What do you think your mother's thinking through all of this?

CHENITZ: I don't know. I would imagine that she's very concerned to see what she's going to be confronted with when she gets here. But it was such a beautiful thing to see these people so much in love. When she saw my father, when her face lit up, and when he was down on the boat, on the ship, you know, bringing them the little ferry bringing them in, so she said to us, "You see why we came? We came because he is here."

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SIGRIST: Back on the boat, what was it like to be surrounded by immigrants, people that spoke different languages?

CHENITZ: But the common language was Yiddish.

SIGRIST: So there were other people who spoke Yiddish.

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. Lots of them who spoke Yiddish. We spoke Hebrew to my mother. We were raised in Hebrew. But the others all spoke Yiddish. I learned how to speak Yiddish on board ship, believe it or not, yeah.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Do you remember going up on deck at all?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. We spent a good deal of the time on deck because when you were on deck you weren't seasick as much as you were in the little cubbyholes.

SIGRIST: Did they have any kind of organized activities for you, or . . .

CHENITZ: No. You were on your own. I imagine the first class and second class probably had it, but we were steerage.

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SIGRIST: When you were up on deck, was there an area for the steerage people on deck? Could you not go to other parts of the deck?

CHENITZ: I don't remember that. Somebody else asked me that. I honestly don't remember it. I wonder.

SIGRIST: I see. We'll pause for a moment.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

CHENITZ: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, describe what that was like.

CHENITZ: To us we were told what it is today, actually. We were told that that is the symbol of freedom.

SIGRIST: Who told you?

CHENITZ: The people on board ship who had read about it and knew what it was all about. To us, we saw, and I said,

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"Doesn't her hand freeze that way?" Until we got very close and I saw that it was a statue, you know. Afterwards, of course, we learned what it stood for, but at the time, I couldn't imagine why a statue meant so much to everybody.

SIGRIST: What was it like to see the New York skyline for the first time?

CHENITZ: Fascinating.

SIGRIST: Even in Alexandria, they didn't have anything like that.

CHENITZ: Oh, no. Absolutely fascinating. It was such a thrill to look up and see people all the way, I would say to my mother, "Don't the people get scared to look down?" She said, "They probably are accustomed to it."

SIGRIST: All right. Well, just sort of, from the Statue of Liberty to the time you got to Ellis Island, just kind of tell me what happened.

CHENITZ: Ellis Island.

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SIGRIST: The boat docked, I assume.

CHENITZ: The boat docked, and they dropped us off on Ellis Island, but like a bunch of cattle or sheep, I'll tell you, not like humans. And then came the time of examining everybody.

SIGRIST: This was the first day you were . . .

CHENITZ: Oh, was that a day of, that was an experience. Apparently trachoma . . .

SIGRIST: Trachoma.

CHENITZ: Trachoma was prevalent at the time. Everybody was tested, the eyes, with eye drops, and again, and again. All right, we passed through that, then they tested the ears. They took you from one little cubby hole to another, and there was a physician in each area examining you. We had a very peculiar experience. When we were in La Havre, my older sister decided to buy my mother a nice pair of shoes. (she laughs) So, they had low heels. My mother was never accustomed

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to heels. We wore sandals. So she tied it up, and that was a hinderance to us, because they took her and they started to look at her feet and test her. (she laughs) They were going to send us back because they thought something was wrong with her. She was going to fall prey to the city, you know, to the government, until they were convinced that she can walk, because she had to take her shoes off when she walked. They couldn't understand why. (she laughs) We had so many experiences.

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island very crowded?

CHENITZ: Yes. Yes, it was. Not only crowded, but all kinds of people from all walks of life. There was no such thing like an upper class or middle class. Everybody was inter-mingled. It was miserable. The days weren't so bad, but the nights, they had these bunkers. There were no stools to get up on the top of a bunker. There was no linen. Nothing to cover with. Every night you had to go to a certain area to get blankets. Thank God that they had sterilized the blankets. We probably

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would have caught all kinds of diseases.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people in this dormitory room with you?

CHENITZ: Oh, yeah, the whole place was filled completely. And it was a huge hall, nothing but bunkers in it. And everybody had to make a dash. Each one had to go for blankets. And my mother said to us, "Go get blankets." I carried a blanket that was heavier than I. And we couldn't cover, we didn't get two blankets, we got one. So my mother contrived an idea that we divided the blanket into half, sort of. Sleep on one half, and cover with the other half. Necessity, the mother of invention.

SIGRIST: Now, how long were you here for?

CHENITZ: I don't remember exactly, but I know it was a little more than two weeks.

SIGRIST: And this was because the quota had run out?

CHENITZ: The quota. My father had to intercede, to appeal to

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Washington. He had to have a congressman appeal, and it was a big to-do. And then the papers were filled with it, that, we made history, actually. Since then I don't think they ever had any quotas after that. Did they I really don't know.

SIGRIST: The, talk about an average day at Ellis Island. What did you guys do all day?

CHENITZ: Boring. Boring to death. Nothing to do.

SIGRIST: You said it was dirty.

CHENITZ: Dirty, filthy, wherever you went. And the most important thing was to look forward to have family to come to see you. My father would come. My sisters who were already here would come. And we had some cousins who lived in New York and they would come. That was the God-send. For that we used to stand and look, or else we'd look out at the harbor and see the different ships going by and the people. That was our hobbies. We had nothing else to do.

SIGRIST: Were your sisters allowed to bring you anything while

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you were here? Did they bring you anything?

CHENITZ: I don't remember. I don't remember if they did or not.
I don't believe so.

SIGRIST: You know, I never asked you this question, what did you take with you when you left Palestine? What did you have with you? What were your worldly possessions at that time?

CHENITZ: Two times nothing. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you have, not even a suitcase? Literally just what you had?

CHENITZ: A suitcase. What was in the suitcase? My mother, my father, some of the books that my father wanted badly that my mother didn't give away. That was one thing in the suitcase. She had two pieces of linen that she salvaged. She put that along. Actually, there was nothing.

SIGRIST: Did you have a toy or anything like that?

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CHENITZ: Who had money for toys? Are you kidding?

SIGRIST: Right. So it was really boring here. Were you allowed to go outside at all?

CHENITZ: Boring and filthy. Filthy more than the boring.
(they laugh) I have never forgotten the filth. You know, when they showed these bad ladies and the poor people in New York, it reminds me so much of the poverty that we saw in Ellis Island. But it was so poorly controlled, so very poorly controlled.

SIGRIST: So you actually saw people who were poorer than you who were here.

CHENITZ: I would imagine so. I don't know if there is such a thing as degrees, I guess so.

SIGRIST: Talk about feeding you. What kinds of things, did they feed you any new foods you had never seen before?

CHENITZ: There was no fruit, there was no vegetables. They had potatoes. They were very soggy. I remember how soggy they were. And they had meat. Meat, meat!! I guess

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they killed a lot of horses. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Describe where they fed you for me.

CHENITZ: They had a huge dining room, but huge, that covered, I can't even imagine, about a hundred and sixty feet if not more. And big tables. And plates, and no forks, but spoons on the tables. And the spoons were so filthy that you hated to eat from them. A lot of the people ate with their hands.

SIGRIST: Did they feed lots of people at one time?

CHENITZ: On every table there was a big vat put on, and you were on your own.

SIGRIST: I see.

CHENITZ: And some grabbed it, and some waited. My mother used to say to us, "Don't rush." (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Your mother, of course, is keeping track of all these little girls running around.

CHENITZ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

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SIGRIST: Did you and your sisters get into a lot of mischief when you were here? Did you talk to anybody?

CHENITZ: You mean in Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Yeah. Here at Ellis Island.

CHENITZ: Oh, my mother was very cautious with us. First of all, she was afraid, there were stories that people attack young girls and so on. You hear those stories, even in, what, seventy years ago we heard those stories, believe it or not. And she kept very close guard on us. We couldn't walk too far away from her where she couldn't see us. And then we met a lot of other little girls on board ship, so we would play with them. I don't remember what games we could have played. We had no toys whatsoever.

SIGRIST: In dealing with this quota business, did you ever have to go into a little courtroom here at Ellis Island?

CHENITZ: No, we didn't have to. My father took care of that on the other side in Brooklyn. It cost him a fortune to

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get through with it.

SIGRIST: But he did come and visit you.

CHENITZ: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Now, when they came to visit you, could you talk like we're talking now, or was there a screen?

CHENITZ: There were screens, there were screens. But it wasn't screens, it was windows, and the windows were more or less open, where you could hear them and they could hear you, but you couldn't get too close to them.

SIGRIST: Like a prison.

CHENITZ: I guess so. Just like a prison. Primarily just like a prison. I don't know, maybe the intentions were good, not to contaminate the people who were coming. I'm trying to figure out what the reason was.

SIGRIST: Well, let's get you off of Ellis Island.

CHENITZ: Oh, that was . . .

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SIGRIST: Talk about how your father finally got you free and seeing, and being with your father for the first time.

CHENITZ: When we came into an apartment in Brooklyn, three rooms, and a kitchen. It was a palace, literally a palace. And my two sisters who were already married here fed us. They had bagel and cheese for us. And eggs! We hadn't seen that for months. I remember one of my sisters saying that I was the, I ate so many bagels she was afraid I was going to get a stomach ache. (she laughs) We were starved, literally starved.

SIGRIST: Now, your father came to Ellis Island and got you?

CHENITZ: Yeah. My father and sisters.

SIGRIST: And sisters.

CHENITZ: And the two sisters who had their husbands also came, so there were a slew of them that came to get us.

SIGRIST: Well, now how did you get from here to the apartment in Brooklyn?

CHENITZ: Well, after crossing the ferry they took us by bus, I guess. I don't recall that.

SIGRIST: Bus or subway?

CHENITZ: I would imagine either a subway or a bus. Probably a subway.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of that?

CHENITZ: Uh, that was another horrifying experience. There we were underground. You couldn't see anything. And sometimes the lights blink, you know. What an experience. It took a long time to get used to subways. You walked out and walked upstairs and saw daylight it was a delight. And then of course to see all the people. We didn't see, on one block we saw more people than we saw in the whole city of Safed, so you can visualize what it meant to us. Everything was a thrill. We looked at the buildings. We looked here. We saw the stores. We saw that many thing. All in one time, it was horrifying. It was a tremendous experience.

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SIGRIST: Talk about your mother in those first six months of being in America. How did she cope?

CHENITZ: She coped a lot, except that she was sick. She had a very bad case of rheumatism. At that time they called in rheumatism, today we call it arthritis.

SIGRIST: Is this something she always had?

CHENITZ: She probably had and never complained because she had nobody to complain to. But once we came here and the children were in school and two of the girls went to work and went to school at night, so it made life a little easier for her. And my father was a rabbi and earned a lot of money. Ten dollars a week. That was, in those days, ten dollars a week. And my two older sisters went to work. I guess it was sweat shops. And at night they went to school. They didn't last long in the sweat shops. They improved their conditions.

SIGRIST: So your family actually wasn't doing too badly. I mean, you had cash.

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CHENITZ: Considering. We didn't have, but we earned. My father earned and my sisters earned, so we had enough to sustain us from week to week. If you're talking about reserves, forget it.

SIGRIST: No. But at least you weren't living hand-to-mouth any more.

CHENITZ: No. It was easier here, much easier than what we had in Palestine. There's no question about it.

SIGRIST: Talk about the neighborhood in Brooklyn.

CHENITZ: It was cute. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember the address of your first apartment?

CHENITZ: Yeah, sure. 152 Glenmore Avenue. Glenmore Avenue.

SIGRIST: What part of Brooklyn is that?

CHENITZ: What is today called Brownsville, where all the murders and everything else is going on, that's where we came to. And it was, if you ever read anything about Jewish life, they called shtetl. Shtetl was a life in a city

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where the Jews were predominant. You know? It was beautiful.

SIGRIST: Was it a crowded neighborhood?

CHENITZ: Not too crowded. Everybody . . .

SIGRIST: And it was all Jewish?

CHENITZ: Yes. Everybody spoke to everybody else. No, not, it was predominantly Jewish, but there were plenty of Gentiles, too. Italians a lot. I remember a lot of Italian kids in school. And when we got to school that was a delight.

SIGRIST: Did you start right away?

CHENITZ: Yes. We came in August, and September school started.

SIGRIST: Oh, so right away. All right. Well, tell me about that. That must have been kind of scary, actually.

CHENITZ: Well, it wasn't scary. It was a horrifying feeling not to understand. Here lovely girls, you want to be friends with them, and you can't communicate. There

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was lack of communication. And I had a teacher who was marvelous. And she brought me, she got me a notebook with a picture of Mary Pickford. (she laughs) I had good, lovely big blonde curls, so she decided to show me the picture, and she tried to make me feel that I looked like Mary Pickford, because I had curls and Mary Pickford had curls. That's where it stopped. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of immigrants in school with you?

CHENITZ: No, no.

SIGRIST: You felt like you were the only one.

CHENITZ: In my classroom I was really the only one. In my classroom I was the only one. But it didn't take me long. Within six months I skipped three grades. Boom, boom, boom.

SIGRIST: Did they start you in first grade?

CHENITZ: They started me in third grade, according to age.

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SIGRIST: Now, you told us a little bit before, your father already knew a little English.

CHENITZ: Yeah. "I see the ship." (they laugh)

SIGRIST: What about your mother? How did she learn English, or did she learn?

CHENITZ: She didn't learn enough, because she became a housefrau. She ran a house, and she cooked and she marketed, and she sewed, and she took care of us beautifully, as sick as she was, and she was sick. But we taught her. I remember the thrill she had when we taught her how to write her name. And when my father went to get his citizen papers, this I got to tell you.

SIGRIST: What year was this?

CHENITZ: I couldn't guess.

SIGRIST: Soon after you got here?

CHENITZ: Shortly after we got here. Oh, yeah, because, no. We told him that he better get his citizen papers because

we want to go to college, and you can't go unless you're a citizen, to go to a city college. So we prepared him in advance, because we were all very Americanized already. We told him everything. So we told him how to go and get his citizen papers, and he came home and he said he passed, so I knew he couldn't spell two words correctly. I said to him, at that time I was already about twelve years old, or thirteen years, I said, "What did you write, Papa?" He says, "What do you care? The teacher asked me questions, I answered her. She told me to write, I wrote." So I said, "What did you write?" He says, "They asked me who the first president of the United States was, so I wrote George Washington." I said, "How did you spell it?" He says, "The teacher understood what I meant."
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: But he got his papers.

CHENITZ: He got his papers, because he knew it. Orally he knew everything. And gradually he learned how to write a little bit, too.

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SIGRIST: Well, and he was a smart man.

CHENITZ: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he have a large congregation?

CHENITZ: Eh, fair. I would say about eighty, ninety congregants.

SIGRIST: Did this congregation have its own synagogue.

CHENITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: And that was in this neighborhood?

CHENITZ: Yeah. It was three blocks away. Because rabbis don't travel on Sabbath, you know. So whenever he got a job it had to be right near his temple, you know. So we were about three blocks away.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about the actual physical layout of the apartment. You said it had three-and-a-half rooms. Tell me things about how the rooms were laid out and how the place was lit, and that sort of thing. How it was heated.

CHENITZ: Did they have electricity then, in 1922?

SIGRIST: They might have, sure. Or you may have had gas light.

CHENITZ: You know that I don't remember. I think it was electricity already.

SIGRIST: Was it like a railroad apartment, three . . .

CHENITZ: Yeah. You entered the kitchen this way. (she gestures) Then to the right was a bedroom that my parents shared. And the next one, in the railroad style, was a smaller bedroom in which three girls slept. Then there was the living room, and in the living room there were two cots that we would raise in the morning, open them at night, and two of the other girls would sleep. And my mother, who was sick, we had a stove in the kitchen. I remember the name of the stove was Excelsior. My mother would stand there and shine it, you know, so that it looked very clean and shiny. Coal we had to order, and they would deliver it to the basement down where my landlady lived. The landlady had about eleven kids. They lived on the

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ground floor. We lived a couple of steps up, about six, seven steps up. On Sundays we would all, we had a lot of coal that we would order at the time, at one time, in a big burlap bag. And on Sundays we would go with pails and bring up enough coal so that my mother wouldn't have to go to the basement to gather the coal, so she can heat the kitchen. And we never sat in any of the rooms, but in the kitchen. In the kitchen we did our homework, in the kitchen we spoke, and in the kitchen we ate. Of course, that was the only room that was warm.

SIGRIST: What was the furniture in the kitchen?

CHENITZ: A table and chairs. What did you think? (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Was the apartment furnished when your father got it, or did he go out and buy the furniture?

CHENITZ: My sisters did.

SIGRIST: They did.

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CHENITZ: They bought a bed, they bought a table and four chairs. Period. And my, one of my sisters took us, the three younger ones. In those days there was no such thing like going to department stores to buy clothes. So one of the sisters took us, in Brownsville they had pushcarts, and on the pushcarts was underwear. So she took us and bought us socks and panties and little shirts. She dressed us up for school.

SIGRIST: Of course, this is the first time you've worn store-bought clothing.

CHENITZ: You'd better believe it, but it was bought on pushcarts.

SIGRIST: Well, in our final couple of minutes I want to ask you were your parents really happy that they came?

CHENITZ: My father wasn't because it was too orthodox. My mother made her adjustment much more rapidly than my father.

SIGRIST: Isn't that interesting. And he was here longer.

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CHENITZ: Yeah. But because he lived in an environment before that everybody was orthodox, whereas here he had to go seek out the orthodox people, and he had to preach orthodoxy to them, you know. That made it rough on him.

SIGRIST: Did he, did your mother, you said she adapted more easily, and yet you said she hardly . . .

CHENITZ: She didn't speak the language. She didn't have to. Brownsville, at the time, the little Shetl, I called it, was all Jewish. Everybody spoke her language. We learned how to speak it fluently. As a matter of fact, when I was in college I worked for an organization where I had to type Jewish and Hebrew and it was no problem because by then I knew it.

SIGRIST: Sure. What a great job to have, your qualifications.

CHENITZ: I supported them during the Depression. If not for me they would have died of starvation.

SIGRIST: Well, my final question to you is are you glad they gave you this opportunity? What would have been

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different if you had stayed in Palestine?

CHENITZ: How would I know? I mean, it would all be guesswork. I can't answer it. I really can't. I was very happily married. Unfortunately my husband died after eighteen years of marriage, so it was a struggle, a big struggle to raise a daughter and educate her, etc., etc. As far as what it would have been like in Israel, I don't know, because today it's Israel. They're not having it too good, either. So it's difficult to tell.

SIGRIST: So you're American. (he laughs)

CHENITZ: I'm in America, and it's the land of opportunity. I taught all these years, and it was fine. I had no problem making a living. And I raised a daughter and educated her with four degrees, so that was no problem.

SIGRIST: It turned out very nicely.

CHENITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank you, Mrs. Chenitz, for coming out to Ellis Island.

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CHENITZ: You're very welcome. I want a picture.

SIGRIST: And this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National
Park Service.