

EI-550  
ABRAMS "CY" SEYMOUR  
BIRTHDATE: FEBRUARY 12, 1914  
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 17, 1994  
RUNNING TIME: 1:33:43  
INTERVIEWER: ALYSA MATSON  
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM  
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: MELODY FEIST  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: R. HALE, A. BAY, I SILBERG

RUSSIA, 1923  
AGE 9

SHIP: "THE POLONIA"  
PORT: RIGA  
RESIDENCES:  
? RUSSIA: YELESVEGROD  
? US; BAYONNE, NJ; NY, NY; MIAMI, FL; CLEVELAND, OHIO

Oral Historian's Note: A follow-on interview is on EI-1246 and a sister's (Sylvia Schreibman) interview is on EI-1245

MATSON: Good afternoon. This is Alysa Matson for the National Park Service. Today is the 17th of September, 1994 and I am in the home of Mr. Cy Abrams, who came from Russia in 1923, when he was nine years old. Mr. Abrams, can you start by giving me your full name and your date of birth?

ABRAMS: My name is Cy Abrams and I am eighty years of age. And my name has been changed coming to America. My original name was Samyoum Zbritsky and when I came to this country, I was adopted by an aunt and uncle and we changed our names and took their name on.

MATSON: What, when were you born?

ABRAMS: I was born February 12, 1914.

MATSON: Do you remember the town that you came from? Do you remember what it looked like?

ABRAMS: Uh, somewhat. Uh, it may be a little hazy but It was a -- really a village. It is a town now, it's a city now but it was a village at that time and most of the things I remember was actually the backyard...

MATSON: Tell me about the backyard.

ABRAMS: ...because me being the youngest boy and very active, they always, always shoved me in the backyard, you see, to play, when they'd

get me out of the house. So, the things I remember in the, in that area was, they had a lot of community work. Um, they'd bake bread and when they baked bread, it was for the community and they allotted a certain amount of bread for each family based on how many people in the family. Uh, I remember about the house, that we had the dark furniture in the living room and it had little holes in it and I thought it was a decoration but it most likely was termites, or of something that ate the wood up.

MATSON: Do you remember what your house was made out of, the outside.

ABRAMS: It, It was made out of white stucco and our place faced the backyard and then there was another house in the front of us facing the street. So, the backyard was like in a circle or semi-circle and all the neighbors we would meet in the evenings, all the families would meet in the evenings and we'd gossip and talk and -- and sit on benches there and the children sit at the, at the knees of their parents on the ground and hear stories, you know. And one of the stories then, that, that hit me right away was the streets in America was paved out of gold. So, we took it for granted that this is what it was, you know. I didn't understand it was just a saying, you know, that things are so much better in America than here. So, when we came to America, we were kind of disappointed that the streets weren't paved in gold. [chuckles]

MATSON: What was the name of the town?

ABRAMS: At that time it was called Yelesvegrod.

MATSON: Do you know how to spell that?

ABRAMS: It's Y-E-L-E...uh...S-V-E-G-R-O-D.

MATSON: Great. Can you tell me, do you remember, um, your father, what he looked like?

ABRAMS: My father? Yes, he was a --. He was a kind of stern, stern man, very strict. And, uh..

MATSON: What was his name?

ABRAMS: ...very firm. His name was Abraham, Abraham Zbritsky. He was -- he had a beard and I would say he was about forty, forty-five years old and very disciplined. And all the children had to be very disciplined. And he had certain things that he enjoyed having that was just for him, certain fruits and certain things, you know, that he kept by him-- to himself.

MATSON: Do you remember...

ABRAMS: And he had a watch repair place and a little store where they had a showcase and some jewelry and -- and he was very strict that, with, with the children, you know. We had, just had to do everything exactly what he, the way he told us and we never s-- sassied him back, you know. We, we knew we had to take orders. And he, he was so -- so frugal that

even the crumbs, he said, "Pick it up with your fingers, like this," you know, and the crumbs and sticks to your finger and you just eat it. Don't waste nothing, you know. And he was an unusual man but he made a comfortable living, at the, at that time, it was considered a comfortable living and we had seven, seven children.

MATSON: Now, your mother. Do you remember what she looked like, what she was like?

ABRAMS: Well, my mother was a very beautiful woman. She was on a Jewish stage in Odessa and -- before she was married. After marriage, she devoted all her time to her children and her home. She was a very attractive woman and very kind, considerate, thoughtful warm.

MATSON: Is there a story you remember, as a child, something you associate with your mother?

ABRAMS: Well, yes. When things really were very bad and we had nothing and she couldn't take care of us, she sent me and -- and my younger sister to an orphan home. And it was heartbreaking for her to send us away but she figured that we would be saved, see, while the others perished, you know. So, we went into that home and my sister stayed there because she was a couple years younger than I was. I was about seven and she was about five.

So, she stayed in there but I, during the, when everyone's supposed to take a nap, I just got over the fence. I put a lot of furniture and things together and I went over the fence and I ran away home, back home. And I followed the railroad track because I realized that's the way I came, you know. So, I just followed the, the -- the river and the railroad tracks and I got home and my mother was very shocked and surprised, you know and says --. So I thought I'd done something real bad for her to send me away, you know, so I -- I kept saying, "I'll do anything," I said, "Just let me stay home. I don't want to go." And she just wouldn't, wouldn't send me back. She just kept me there.

MATSON: Can you name for me your brothers' and your sisters' names?

ABRAMS: Yes I had the oldest brother was Yasha. Uh, he was short, kind of stocky with black, curly hair. Then there was Niche, which was a very, he was very handsome, the tallest in the family. And then there was my sister, Pauline, who lives with us, lives in the United States now. And then there was Eunice. There was my -- then there was my brother, Irving and myself and my sister, Sylvia, was the youngest.

MATSON: Do you remember your grandparents at all? Did you know either set of your grandparents?

ABRAMS: Uh, no.

MATSON: No?

ABRAMS: Mm-mm.

MATSON: Okay. What can you tell me about religion?

ABRAMS: Well, we were kind of -- my family was orthodox and it was the duty of the youngest boy in the family to shine everybody's shoes and get those things in order for the holidays. So, before sunset, before yeah, before sunset, we had to get dressed for the services on Friday night before we go to synagogue. So... And then we went into the ser-, we went into the synagogue and we had a special "pew," I guess you call it, a like, seating place. So, we had that and that's because my father was a big contributor to the synagogue, so they gave him special privilege in that respect. And, uh...then we'd come home, we'd come home, you know and the, before we went to synagogue, it was the duty of the girls to prepare the meal, you know, to set the table and so forth, according to age...

MATSON: Do you remember what you had to eat? Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: ...you know. Well, usually it was I guess the same as out here chicken soup and chicken and a dessert called tzimmes, which is a stewed -- stewed fruit. And khala [ritual bread] and very similar to the Jewish dishes now.

MATSON: ...that would be, today.

ABRAMS: Yeah. And that's the, only people that were able to afford these things. Uh, most of the peasants couldn't do that.

MATSON: What was your neighborhood like? Do you remember neighbors?

ABRAMS: The neighborhood, I wouldn't know. I don't, I would, I never seemed, I don't recall ever getting, getting out at all, you know.

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: All I remember is that backyard...[laughs]

MATSON: Just the backyard.

ABRAMS: ...you know? Although, my older sister, she says to me that I used to follow her. She used to want to go out, to see boys and she was about fourteen or so and I'd follow her, you know and she, she didn't want me to follow her around, you know.

MATSON: How about school? Did you go to school when you were in Russia?

ABRAMS: No.

MATSON: No. Do you remember any games that you played with children, or...

ABRAMS: The, the -- just with sticks...like a ball, playing ball. And we - we didn't have any toys as far as I remember, you know and just

chased each other around and uh, not very much activities, as I remember, you know, according to the way the kids play now, you know.

MATSON: What, what was the weather like when you were growing up? Do you remember that?

ABRAMS: The weather, the weather was severe sometimes, real severe, real cold. It was so cold that eventually we had to burn-- burn up our furniture to keep our bodies warm. Sometimes we just huddled together to keep, keep ourselves warm, you know. It's all according what time we're talking about now, you know.

MATSON: Seasons.

ABRAMS: Yeah. Uh...

MATSON: Did you have a garden? Do you remember having a garden in the backyard?

ABRAMS: No, I just remember that -- not a garden but we, I remember once getting hurt in the backyard. I stepped on a nail or something and they put my foot in a pail of water and I saw the red, red water, you know and I thought, oh, I must've lost all my blood, you know. And so they made a big fuss out of it, you know and all the neighbors came around there and -- and we had friends I never saw before, you know, all feeling sorry, the way I got hurt, you know. And I was happy because all the kids that I wanted to be close to came in to see me because I, [chuckles] I was considered a -- a casualty list.

MATSON: Oh, so they wanted to see you.

ABRAMS: Yeah. And another time I ran down the street and I got run over by a wagon and it was a two-wheel wagon but it was empty. It was -- and the horse was pulling it, you see. And I fell under the wheel and one of the wheels hit me on the arm, you know and uh, after that I never ran out, ran out in the street again. Because I was warned not to go out in the street but I wanted to see what, what it would look like, so I just rebelled and just ran out, see and that was the reward I got for doing that.

MATSON: So, I guess you didn't do that again?

ABRAMS: No, never, never. Learned the hard way. [laughs]

MATSON: Describe for me, if you can, what happened and why you came to this country.

ABRAMS: [sighs] Well, first of all, in 1917, when the czar was overthrown, there was turmoil. There was no government, so they got -- had a bunch of hooligans forming gangs, you know. And the first thing they start doing is beating up the Jews, you know. And we couldn't escape them. A lot of us got killed, a lot of us got hurt and, uh...and, uh. What was the question again?

MATSON: I was just asking you about what happened in Russia and...

ABRAMS: Oh...

MATSON: ...then how you...

ABRAMS: ...oh...

MATSON: ...actually got on the boat...

ABRAMS: Okay, so then, so then things got real bad. A year later, no one was able to get employment. There was no work because there was no government. And, so my sister, my oldest sister, she had to go to work in a house, as a housekeeper and all she got in return was bones, soup bones and potato peels. Now, the potato peels, you put on top of the stove, it puffs up like a potato chip and they, the bones, she'd make us soup -- of some kind of soup out of the bones. And the youngest two, which was my sister and myself, we, we went out begging. So, there was a -- a jail near us. So, we stood outside the jail wall and the, we see the prisoners, most of them were political prisoners. So they threw down black bread and things like that --whatever they had, you know. And -- and then my sister had a big scab on there, she fell or something and she had a big scab, so she'd show the scab to the people and they feel sorry for her and they give her something, you know, whoever had anything. Very few people had anything in the ci-, in the village.

But then my brother was, my brother was in the army. And then my father bail-, got him out of the army because he was under-aged in the first place. He lied to the authorities, so he got him back home. And my oldest brother was studying to be a pharmacist, so he was busy at his books, you know. He stayed in the house and he was always studying until one, two o'clock in the morning, you know. And so things got so bad that we start burning -- people start dying one after another, my mother, my father, my sister, one brother, all died from starvation, one by one and that was, I think, within one year.

And my mother, she was, she was laying in the house for a long time before they picked her up because they had these wagons, the big flat, flat wagons, so it's horses, four, four horses, I think, drawin'. And they had a flat bed and they just piled the bodies up as they died, you know. So and my youngest sister -- my -- myself, we stood outside and we watched and we said, we just kept following the wagon, you know, until we were about a block away and then we came back. We kept waving because we couldn't see the --our mother no more because they buried her with other bodies on top, you know. But things got real bad and then we found out we had an uncle that lived in another town near us.

MATSON: Now, what did you do? I mean, you were all by yourself at that point, right?

ABRAMS: Yeah, there was four of us that were left, I think. The oldest one, my sister, she must have been about fourteen, you know. And then, then my sister, the youngest, was five and I was seven and my brother was nine, you know. So -- so we considered our sister as, as the

mother, you know because she was the oldest. So she, she couldn't do very much for us but we found out we had an uncle. So somehow, my uncle in the other town contacted us -- because we had an aunt living in America and she contacted him, my uncle, and then my uncle contacted us. He came into town to see us. And we were on the verge of starving, too, you know, because the others all starved already. So, he told us to come to his town, you know, he will take us to his town. Meantime, before he took us into town, we start getting care packages from the United States, like evaporated milk and cloth...

MATSON: Now, how would they get to you?

ABRAMS: ...to make things...

MATSON: How would you get these packages...

ABRAMS: Uh...

MATSON: ...with all the turmoil that was going on?

ABRAMS: Well, they don't all come through.

MATSON: Mm.

ABRAMS: You might get one or two through but maybe ten of them might be lost, you know. I think it was, it might've been through the Red Cross or something like that...

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: ...you know. Most likely that's how we got it. So, that, that helped us a little bit, you know. Then we, we went to his town and his town was altogether different. We couldn't understand it, here there were trolley cars and, yeah, a lot of activities going on. And my uncle was a printer. So, there was a May Day parade or some, there was some kind of parade to celebrate -- the, some kind of holiday and he was in the parade. The, the union, there was a union, printer's union. So, I felt real proud. I was walking beside him, you know. And so he took us, he took us to his town until they made preparations to bring us to America. My...

MATSON: So, you aunt wanted you to come...

ABRAMS: This was, that was my mother's sister. And my mother's sister married a cousin, so he was our uncle and also related. So but before, before we had all that, we had a lot of misery because when we cut up all the furniture, you know, we had to burn up the furniture to keep warm, we had nothing, you know, absolutely nothing. So, when we got to his town, you know, it looked so beautiful, kind in comparison and at that time was a bad time for him because his wife just lost a child at birth. So, she wasn't very, too friendly to us, you know. We were looking for a friendly hand, or...

MATSON: A mother...Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: ...some compassion or some feelings, you know? But she didn't show any because she felt we were intruders because she liked to get all the attention from her husband, you know and this time she wasn't getting it. He was giving us attention, see and she just didn't understand it. So, we, they took us to Riga, Latvia and then they went to Belgium because they had some relatives in Belgium. So, they dropped us off at Riga Latvia. From Riga Latvia we came, came here on a boat.

MATSON: That was the port?

ABRAMS: Yeah, that was the port where we started from. Uh...

MATSON: Now, did they handle getting all the paperwork together and - and all of that that you needed?

ABRAMS: Yeah. See my uncle got all the stuff together. They were working from both ends, from America and from, from the other side, you know and from, from Russia, to get the papers. It was very difficult to get papers together because it sti-, it was still a mess. There was no, no government at all, you know. How they got anything together is beyond me, you know.

MATSON: It's amazing. [laughs] Um...

ABRAMS: But the thing that...The, the main thing, as they, the misery that was involved in there, before we came to America, see, that they, uh...We didn't know what starvation was in the first place. All we know is that my brother and my mother fe-fell asleep and she just was sleeping. As far as we were concerned, she was sleeping, you know. And they looked real nice, you know, after a while. They look real nice except they swell up. They swell up about twice as, as large as they originally were, you know. So, we used to have little candles around her when she died, you know, all around her. And she was laying on the floor until somebody picked her up. That's, that's outstanding in my mind, is, you know, it's what we saw.

MATSON: I know.

ABRAMS: As little kids, you know, we were scared. We didn't know what, what's happening, you know. And then, then you go to the market and you ask for bread, like, you ask for a handout and the bakeries, they save the crumbs. So they had like a wooden board and they had a slot in there. And they'd throw all the crumbs in because the, the rye bread or the black bread was real crunchy, you know. So when they cut it they got a lot of crumbs, so they just shove it into this little thing and that's what they gave us.

MATSON: They gave you the crumbs.

ABRAMS: The crumbs, right. And then they, if you had money, you can buy blood, congealed blood. They used to eat congealed blood, was, looks like, a little like liver, you know.

MATSON: That's something.

ABRAMS: Yeah and then the my -- my other sister, when she went into the store and she asked for stale bread or something like that, they threw her, they threw her out. So, she fell down and the two of us are trying to pick her up, see. She was a little older than I was, you know and she got hurt when she f-, when they threw her out. And we took her home and eventually, she died from starvation, see.

MATSON: Probably weakened her.

ABRAMS: Yeah. It hurt her and may-- she must've fell on her skull or something, mm.

MATSON: Well, do you remember the name of the ship that you came on?

ABRAMS: Yeah, it was called the Polonia. Um, on the Red Star Line, I believe it is Red Star, the Baltic. I've got a picture of it in this book, here.

MATSON: What, what do you remember about that boat? Do you remember what you felt or, or, um, what it looked like? Were you...obviously afraid?

ABRAMS: [sighs] The boat the boat was -- was like a miracle. I mean we never saw anything that so big, such a giant, you know, of anything. How man can put things together like that, you know. To us it was...it was unbelievable, you know, the ship was a big ship, was a beautiful ship. But I didn't know, you know, we went all the ways down to steerage, down below, you know. So then, I remember it had two stacks. And it was hard to say goodbye, you know, to my uncle, who, who actually saved our lives, you know...

MATSON: Right.

ABRAMS: ...coming down to pick us up. And there were many interesting things on the ship [laughs] that... First of all, there's people of all, all races and all, all, all languages babbling, all different languages. Couldn't understand any of them, you know. They didn't understand us and we didn't understand them. [laughs] And us two -- my younger sister and myself, we just ran all over the place, you know, up and down, up and down the first, second, third, fourth layer, you know [laughs]. We just, we was having fun, you know. First time in our life, we had the freedom of running around and doing, we, we went, what we wanted to do, you know. And the food was good. You got plenty of food.

MATSON: Do you remember what you had to eat there?

ABRAMS: Uh, I don't remember the food but I know it, compared to what we had...

MATSON: What you had, it was [laughs]...

ABRAMS: ...it was very good, you know. And a lot of things happened on that boat because, see, we had a guardian. I didn't tell you about that.

MATSON: Tell me.

ABRAMS: We were too young, so we had to have a guardian. So, my uncle from Russia, his wife had, had a brother and he wanted to come to America, so...

MATSON: Now, what was your uncle's name. I don't know if I got that earlier.

ABRAMS: His, the one that came as a guardian?

MATSON: No, the one that took you to the boat, that, that saved you.

ABRAMS: Oh, Moyshe, Moyshe

MATSON: Do you know how to spell that?

ABRAMS: Wodonos. His last name was Wodonos, W-O-D-O-N-O-S.

MATSON: Okay. And then there was another uncle, who was your guardian on the ship?

ABRAMS: Yeah, well, he wasn't my uncle. He was just uh, my uncle's wife's brother.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: See? And his name was Aron. Uh, so he was our guardian and he was, he was a very strict man. He was ne-, he wasn't married. He was single. And he didn't gi-- he didn't give us any freedom there, you know, even on the boat, he was after us all the time, you know. So my sister had a little doll, you know and he was mad at her because she didn't listen to what he, he was saying to her, so he threw the doll overboard. And, boy, that was the meanest thing any many can do because that was the only thing that she possessed.

MATSON: The only thing she had.

ABRAMS: She posse-, she had nothing else. That was her, her whole thing. So, when she threw the, he threw the doll off, you know, I, I just gave him a kick in the shin and I and I ran away from him. I said, "You mean man, you!" And walked away. And he, didn't seem to care or understand, you know, that it was such an awful thing to do to a child, you know, with all the problems we had, you know, to show such, such bitterness, you know, because he was, might've been, an angry man. Who knows, you know? So then a lot of -- then another thing is that they told us to take a bottle, a coke bottle. They gave us a coke bottle and they said, "Tie a string to it. You're going to catch fish." You know? You think how ridiculous it is but to us, say well as an adult talking, he must know what he's talking about, you know. So we threw this bottle

over and nothing came up, you know. [laughs] And they're all standing on the side laughing their heads off, you know. [laughs] And then, I remember, also, that there was music, there was a movie at night. And they were showing a picture, Charlie Chaplin and the Gold Rush, or something like that and -- and that's the...

MATSON: Where was it? Do remember, on the ship, where it was?

ABRAMS: That was on the, where well, that was on a better class...

MATSON: But they let you go up and watch?

ABRAMS: ...you know, like a first class. Well, we ran up there. They didn't, they didn't stop us, you know. We -- the other ones were, all the people, they knew they had to stay down there but we were running all over.

MATSON: You were just kids.

ABRAMS: So, we got, we got over, we got there, you know and they were showing this picture and I, we're both looking at it, saying, where, how did these people get onto this, onto this boat. We didn't see these people getting on the boat. We just couldn't understand... You know, we just thought people snuck on the board and we looked on the back and we couldn't find nothing in the back and we couldn't understand or visualize how you, you know, how movies are. So, it was a shock, you know and then the and a surprise and then after, after that, we kept running up there and we wanted to hold the music for them, So they let -- the musicians let us hold the music, while they were let- playing concerts and stuff like that, you know. And we, we were so proud we were doing something, we were good for something, you know. We were holding this--What do you call it?--they have these little stands, you know?

MATSON: Yes. Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: Some of them had them and some didn't. So the ones that didn't have it...

MATSON: So you would become a music stand...

ABRAMS: ...we'd just hold it. Yeah. So we felt real proud of that. And, uh... But they, the rest of the -- my other two, my brother and my sister, they got seasick, you see. They were always seasick and us two weren't seasick. We just kept running around and enjoying ourselves.

END SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B,

TAPE 1

MATSON: Was this, were the seas rough when you saw them?

ABRAMS: The seas were very rough, yeah, they were very rough and -- and, uh...

MATSON: What time of year was it, do you remember?

ABRAMS: It was -- I guess September, October.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: Somewheres around there. And not only were they reef-uh, they -- was it rough, the seas but we had to go downstairs and they're really smelly downstairs, you know, because people had no control. They're all squeezed together in steerage, you know, a lot of people. In the upper decks, you know, they were, they had a lot of room between spaces, you know. Here we were all, just squeezed in there and all different people. We couldn't understand them. They know we want to talk to them but there was no way to talk to them, you know. So, the only thing we understood, if someone gave you a hug or something like that, we knew that they were friends, you know. Otherwise we [laughs] would shy away from them, you know. And you know, there was so much throwing up going on that you, you just couldn't go stay downstairs, you know. You just had to run away from there and run upstairs [laughs].

MATSON: Do you remember where you slept on the boat, what it was like, the room that you slept in?

ABRAMS: Oh, there were a lot of cots, I think there were three cots, you know. We slept in cots. And there was, it seems like we all slept together, you know, it's, was like a...

MATSON: In a big room.

ABRAMS: ...big, big room. It wasn't individual families or anything like that. But, uh... People, there were all kinds of people there that we, we couldn't understand. Some wore these red hats, you know, the "fez" hats. They were Egyptians, I guess. And they would all try to be friendly, you know, to the children but they couldn't because they couldn't communicate with them, you know? But they, it was, it was a -- it was a, a good experience and a -- and a sad experience, going away and saying, "Geez, now look how fortunate we are. We are on our way to a promised land, to a country where we, where we will be treated like human beings and -- and here, our parents are gone and -- and our sister, siblings are gone." You know. We felt bad. So, there was a combination of sadness and -- and good feelings.

MATSON: How long do you think it took you to get to America?

ABRAMS: It, I believe it was thirteen or fourteen days.

MATSON: Yes, about two weeks.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

MATSON: Do you remember reaching, um, Ellis Island, seeing the Statue of Liberty?

ABRAMS: Oh, yeah. I remember that quite well. You know, I, I couldn't understand what it was, really and I tried to get an explanation

from my sister, my older sister. And she said, "That's just a -- that's just a woman that was put up, put up there to welcome you to America." See? She's just a, a woman that was there to welcome us to America. And so, that explanation was good enough for us, you know. Uh, that's all she most likely made it up. She didn't know nothing about the Statue of Liberty anything more than I did, you know. But she made that up to make us feel comfortable that we're welcome to America and she's there for that purpose. And then when we got off the boat...

MATSON: How long did you have to stay on the boat before you got off? Do you remember if you docked for a day or two, or did you get right off?

ABRAMS: No, no, we do-- we docked and we got off maybe an hour or two hours later because they had to get all the... Each one had to get a duffel bag or some kind of bag or whatever their belongings was in and the and they put a tag on you, you know, on you. So you -- in case you're lost or something like that. And we were supposed to hold hands and make sure we're all together, you know, so we don't get separated. Everybody was so anxious to get off of that...

MATSON: Were you...

ABRAMS: ...boat.

MATSON: ...with your guardian at that point, when you got off the boat, or was it just the...? You were with him...

ABRAMS: Yeah.

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: Yeah, he was, he was on the boat with us. Uh-huh. We just ignored him, we just, you know, we just didn't pay much attention to him after, after he threw that doll over...

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: ...you know?

MATSON: When you got off the boat, did you go to see a doctor first? What, what did you do first when you, when you got off the boat?

ABRAMS: Oh, for the, first we, a lot of people they just bent down and kissed the, the ground, you know. At last they got here because most of them felt they'd never get here because it was so rough on the ocean, they figured the boat would go down or something. Uh, so, then we, when we got off, we got into this big, big room. And then they and then we got separated. We went in different sections. He had us sit there. We had to sit there for a long while. There was hard benches, rows of hard benches and we all sat there until our number was called or our name, or number, see? And then we were called to see a doctor. So, there was --, there was many a doctors there. There was maybe ten doctors and so we came down there and we saw a doctor and after we saw him, he examined us and he marked different things on a chart, you know -- what condition we

were in, you know. And if you was if you had some kind of catching disease or something, they put you in a different section, see? And if you were healthy, they put you in the other section. And if you were borderline between yes and no of being deported, they put you somewhere else.

MATSON: And were all of you okay? You all went into...

ABRAMS: Yeah, we, we were all okay. Uh, I had kidney problems when I was a kid but I don't think that had any effect on it because my eyes were puffed up or something and I just explained to him what it was. But when we -- when they put us in different categories, you know, some, some went back, some went back to the, where they came from, you know. And some were sent into -- to be cured, whatever was ailing them it was something that was minor. And after that we had to go into different rooms where we had to wait. It was real nice, it was, it was real clean places, you know. We had, like cots, where they were all white sheets on them, white pillowcases. I'll never forget that! Because it was, it was something you would dream about, you know, something clean. And the food was, was out-of-this-world, you know.

MATSON: Do you remember anything you ate at Ellis Island?

ABRAMS: Well, yeah, well, the food there, see... The only thing that was a little puzzling was the bananas and the oranges because we never tasted either one of those. So, the bananas tasted funny. It took a long time to get used to a banana. But the oranges were delicious. You know, the oranges are something that we never saw, you know and uh...

MATSON: Did you know how to peel them? Did somebody show you how to peel the orange?

ABRAMS: Yeah. Sure, sure, they showed us and the and the plates and the silverware and everything was... We, we had really good food, you know. It was, "God, if this America, we want it forever." You know. [laughs]

MATSON: How long did you stay at Ellis Island?

ABRAMS: Uh, we stayed there a while. I don't know why. I guess they couldn't get the papers together. They had the -- they had to pass a, a special law or something to... The laws have been changed. In 1924, they were changed but in 1923, for some reason, they had a lot of problems getting us in. Because my uncle... [sighs] I guess he wa-- he didn't have enough money, or was sufficient enough for him to take by himself. So he had to have his other brothers co-sign for him -- that if he can't handle it, that they would take care of it. So, they contacted an uncle I had in Wilmington, Delaware and he was -- he was practically a pauper. He was a -- a cantor in a synagogue, see and they don't get paid much, you know. And he had a little house, I think he paid two thousand dollars for it and it had, it still had a mortgage on it. [laughs] So they couldn't get nothing out of him.

But, my uncle that adopted us, he had rich, rich brothers. So we waited maybe a week or two there, you know. But we got used to a good style of living there because they were, we were treated real nice. And then they burnt your clothes, you know. They burned all your clothes. I had one, one suit that I particularly liked -- they kept, for all the time. It was a Cossack outfit, you know. It had, like a blue and silver bullets, you know and a Cossack hat and a little stiletto, you know. And they burned everything as soon as my aunt brought some fresh clothes, new clothes for us. And then they cut our hair, everybody, they shaved their heads off, you know. The women they left a little stub, you know, just a little bit. But the men, they shaved it off -- the men and boys. They shaved it off so there'd be no lice or anything like that. So, we all looked --we all looked alike, men and women and boys and girls, you know. We all had our hair shaved. But they did it for sanitary reasons, you know.

MATSON: What were the people like at Ellis Island, that worked at Ellis Island? Were they kind to you?

ABRAMS: The people who worked in Ellis Island?

MATSON: Yeah.

ABRAMS: Yeah, they were all very nice but they were very busy. They were very busy...

MATSON: So, it was crowded?

ABRAMS: ...They couldn't give you very much time. Well, it wasn't as crowded as on the boat, you know. It was just the, the main room where they, where they question you and all that, you know.... That was a little crowded but our quarters where we stayed, where we slept and where we ate wasn't too crowded.

MATSON: It wasn't so bad there.

ABRAMS: Yeah, it was very orderly. Everything was very orderly.

MATSON: Did you remember, do you remember playing outside? Did they take you outside?

ABRAMS: No, we didn't go out.

MATSON: What did you do during the day?

ABRAMS: I guess they sh-- play-, we played games of some kind. They, they had like social workers, I guess. And they were in there trying to help us, you know, with a few English words, to introduce us to English words. So we'd be a little prepared to say, "Hello" and "Good-bye" or something like that, you know.

MATSON: So, you didn't know any English when you came?

ABRAMS: No, no. We had a real tough time in school when we came here.

MATSON: So, what happened, um, when you were allowed to leave Ellis Island? Who came to pick you up?

ABRAMS: Well, my uncle and aunt both came.

MATSON: Both of them.

ABRAMS: Yeah, they came and, uh...uh...my...

MATSON: What was your aunt's name?

ABRAMS: Uh, Rebecca.

MATSON: Had you ever met her before?

ABRAMS: No, no. Uh...Oh, she came, she came when we got to Ellis Island. Then they had to go. They just said, you know, that they're there for us. And then they, then they came back later with clothes and stuff. But my, my uncle was a very warm person, see. My aunt tried to kiss or hug my brother and he thought that was like being a sissy, you know, that's the wrong thing. So he just walked away from her. He didn't feel any closeness to her, you know, or try to be close to her and he thought it was macho, you know. This, -- this is -- boys don't do that, you know. But my sister, my younger sister, she was glad to have somebody to hug, you know. And I, I felt the same way. I -- I hugged her and I hoped that she would be kind and nice, you know. But my uncle seemed to be more appealing to us. For some reason, he was -- he showed more warmth. Because she had two children of her own, you know. But they didn't come at that time. He, they just came themselves. So, then he took us to -- in a car. He had a...

MATSON: So, they had a...

ABRAMS: ...a Durand car, which was--. It had cellophane on the, on the -- celluloid windows all around it. So, like a converti-...

MATSON: Had you seen something like that before?

ABRAMS: No. I never seen a car...

MATSON: Everything was new.

ABRAMS: ... Oh, no, I'd never seen a car. I'd never even seen a trolley car. Uh, the horse and wagon's about the only thing I saw when I ran out. Of course, we went to Moscow once. And that was, that was -- I don't remember that, even. My sister told me. I, I, we went to Moscow...

MATSON: Probably not.

ABRAMS: ...but, I must've been really young, maybe three, four years old. So, uh...What was I --s-- talking about?

MATSON: So you, so you got into the car and they were going to take you...

ABRAMS: Oh, I got in the car and they were going to take us to their hou-- home in, in New Jersey. They owned...

MATSON: Where in New Jersey?

ABRAMS: Bayonne, New Jersey, next to Jersey City. So, we're walking, we're going into this car, you know and we're all sitting there and we're going through the east side of New York on Delancey Street or Orchard Street you know and we see all these pickles, jar, big barrels of pickles and -- and then they had knishes and then they had corn and different little pushcarts, you know? And geez, I looked, everything looked so good and the place was so mobbed with people and cars and it was like a... We were so bewildered about it all, you know? Until we got into New Jersey and it calmed down a little bit in New Jersey, you know. So we drive and drive and we got to his home. I was kind of disappointed because here I'm expecting gold streets and everything else and it looks like ordinary streets.

We got this house. They lived in a Irish neighborhood, all Irish. There was a San Andrews church on the corner, there and Father Doyle was the priest there. He, he greeted us, see, because he knew my uncle was going to adopt these children, you know. He greeted us. And we -- we enjoyed seeing this man, you know and his church and everything else. And we went into the house. It was a two-story house with real narrow stairway going upstairs, you know. And went up there and there's -- must've been a hundred people there. The family, his, my uncle's family. He had a big family. Had something like thirteen brothers and sisters. So everybody's pawing us and touching us and trying to talk to us, you know and it was overwhelming, you know.

MATSON: Did anyone, was anyone able to speak to you, though, in Russian?

ABRAMS: Uh, they spoke in Yiddish a little bit.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: I don't think in, in Russian. In Yiddish. I, I think in our house, we must've spoke some Yiddish...

MATSON: So you understood that...

ABRAMS: ...I don't remember.

MATSON: ...when they were speaking to you?

ABRAMS: Yeah. And -- and Russian. I didn't speak much Russian either because I didn't go to school, you know.

MATSON: Right.

ABRAMS: So whatever I heard in the house was a little Yiddish and a little Russian. I didn't pick up too much. I was when I came here I was nine years old. I had no schooling at all. So -- so, we were so glad when they all went home, you know.

MATSON: Was that a party they had put together, to greet you?

ABRAMS: They, they, yeah, a party to greet us, see.

MATSON: But you were exhausted and...

ABRAMS: Oh, we w-- want to be so much alone. We wanted to be on the street, walk -- discover for ourselves, you know, what, what it is, you know. But it was very overwhelming for us, anyway, because we were depressed and, -- because of our family's death. And here, all of a sudden, this, they overwhelm us, you know, with, with kindness and devotion. Each one's trying to show how, how much they care, you know and everything will be fine, you know. But we wanted to-- we, we just wanted to go out and play, run around, you know. So that was o--that was over with. And then the next day, the next morning, we got up. We start scouting around the neighborhood ourselves, just my little sister and myself. We, my sister and I were always together. And my brother was by himself. He liked to be by himself. And my older sister, you know, she was discovering things for herself, you know.

MATSON: Now, what happened when you went to school, or when did you go to school for the first time?

ABRAMS: Well, in the school - the school, they -- first they put us all in one, the first grade, all of us.

MATSON: All of you.

ABRAMS: Yeah. Ah, so...

MATSON: Now, had your older...

ABRAMS: ...we felt funny. We felt so funny, you know, sitting with these little tiny kids. They were...

MATSON: Your older sister...

ABRAMS: ...five, six year...

MATSON: ...and your older brother, had they gone to school at all in Russia or had they had no schooling either?

ABRAMS: Uh, my sister went to school there.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: That's the only one. So we're sitting in this first grade, you know. [laughs slightly] And we were supposed to be there for a short time to learn English, see? But we were so uncomfortable and -- and the kids ridiculing you. You and -- and little kids ridiculing you and I -- . You felt like beating them all up, you know? [laughs] And we got through it. After about six months, they all put us in different grades based on our age, see. So, I enjoyed school very much. I always got good grades because I paid a lot of attention in school. To me, this was the -- very important. I was learning things every day and I was... And my, my brother didn't like school. He wanted to go to work right away. He was fourteen. And so one day he goes over to the, to the teacher, you know and there's a wastebasket of paper and he spits in the wastebasket.

So... He didn't know. He thought that's what it was for. And everybody started laughing, you know and he goes back to his seat. [laughs] And -- and the teacher comes over to him, says, "You're not supposed to spit in it, in that. That's a paper basket. You, you use a handkerchief for that." You know. And so she gives me a note to take to -- to my aunt, you know. [laughs] But I said, "Give them the note and tell them to teach him about different things." You know. She said, she didn't understand that we just came from so far away and [laughs] we didn't have anything like that, not even a paper basket, you know.

MATSON: How long do you think it took before you had learned English enough to get by in a classroom?

ABRAMS: Well, you know, there was a lot of ridiculing going on. You know, "Greenhorn, greenhorn!" and making fun out of you and -- and punching you or giving you a kick or something like that, you know. And I said, "Geez, I'm not going to stand too much of this." So I, I went down to my adopted brother and he says, "I'm going to teach you how to box." he says. So, down in the basement we went and he put on a, a bunch of rags, a bag and he's punching the bag and showing me the skills of boxing, you know, he says...

MATSON: What was his name?

ABRAMS: Sammy. Samuel, Sammy.

MATSON: And there was another adopted sister, or...

ABRAMS: Yeah. Her name was Pearl. See, we, I had the same name as he did, so they had to change one of us. And my sister had the same name as, as his sister, so they had to change her name, too. So our, our first names were changed. Beside the...

MATSON: Your name was changed to Seymour?

ABRAMS: I, my name was changed to Seymour from Samyoun, see and...

MATSON: And your sister's name was changed...

ABRAMS: ...and, actually, so it should've been Samuel, the same as my other brother. So, they couldn't have two Samuels in the same... So,

they changed my name and they changed my sister's name from Pearl to Pauline.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. Well, so after I learned how to box, you know, I didn't have any more trouble. I wasn't looking for no fights but when they fixed a fight for me, I, I enjoyed it and I, I was winning them. I was winning them. I was so proud. I was the star of the -- of the whole place, now. Before they were kicking me and ridiculing me, now they're preparing fights for me after school, you know. Didn't get a chance to eat lunch many times. [chuckles]

MATSON: How about in your neighborhood? You said to me that it was an all-Irish neighborhood.

ABRAMS: Yeah.

MATSON: Were there any times of trouble in that neighborhood?

ABRAMS: There was no tro-, the [not understood] No, there was no trouble. It's just that when I used to play ball, you know, they'd -- the kids would take me in to play ball with them, you know, like touch-ball or -- or kick or, or, tackle, you know. So my aunt used to watch me. She says, "Seymour, you bum, you, get upstairs!" you know? So, the kids, she thought I was a bum because I was playing ball, you know. She thought I nee-, you know, I was supposed to be more studious and do my schoolwork instead of playing, you know. And to me, this was heaven. I didn't ever played before with a bunch of kids...

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: ...like that. So it was enjoyable for me. And she, she'd make -- and they, all the kids would make fun of me as soon as I leave to go upstairs. "Seymour, you bum!" You know, ridiculing what she was screaming out of the window, you know, stuck her head out the window, screaming. And embarrassed me! I got red in the face, I, you know, every time she did that, you know. So, I get up there and I tell her, "Don't do that! I don't like that!" I said. "The kids making fun out of me," you know? But she wasn't, she wasn't too understanding. She wasn't too understanding. I always tore the overalls. She bought me a pair of new overalls, you know and one of the kids pulled the overalls. So, she call me a bum. They, they ripped my overalls, you know. Playing tough game, you know, a rough game and she says, she was surprised that my overalls were ripped, you know.

MATSON: What can you tell me about dinnertime in this household? What kind of a cook was your aunt? Was she a good cook?

ABRAMS: Yeah, she, she was a good cook. She was a good cook. She was more of a baker. She baked good things, cinnamon buns and -- and stuff like that, you know.

MATSON: What was your favorite that she'd make?

ABRAMS: Well, she used to help me, I, I used to help her make a sponge cake, see? And I used to mix the stuff and I was able to lick the spoon off and stuff like that, you know. And mix the yolks and the sugar and I enjoyed that very much. And I eat everything, you know. I was, I was the type of guy that enjoyed everything. But the only thing that I resented is that I got the same thing all the time, like oatmeal for breakfast. While her kids, they had eggs and they had Kaiser rolls and we had to eat oatmeal and rye bread all the time.

MATSON: So, she would separate and give you different food than her own children?

ABRAMS: Yeah, we were discriminated against all over again, you know. And -- and I thought when someone adopts somebody that it becomes like their own.

MATSON: Right.

ABRAMS: But it wasn't their own. These are the, these are the two of her children, right there. See it?

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: I, that's my sister Pauline and that's Sammy. [chuckles] Anyway, so there was discrimination in the house and I - I -- we felt real bad about the fact that there was discrimination. And I said, "Why can't I have an egg?"..."You're healthy. My s-my son is sick. He's a sickling, you know. We have to give him eggs." Wasn't so but that's what she said.

MATSON: Now, do you remember whether there, how did you get along with your, with your adopted brother and sister?

ABRAMS: Oh, we get - we got along alright with them.

MATSON: The kids all got along fine.

ABRAMS: Yeah, yeah. We didn't have any problems there. It's just that we - we start feeling bad because we were discriminated against, you know, because she, I got oatmeal and he got eggs and I had to eat rye bread and he can eat the Kaiser rolls, you see? And this went on and on and on, you know. And he get -- she'd give him a nickel to ride the jitney bus, which is a bus, you know. And it's called a jitney then time. So, it's five cents. And I had to roller-skate all over. I had roller skates, so I rolle-- roller-skate day-- going to school, out of school, going to work, from work and so forth. I was always using roller skates. So, the wind up at the end is that we - we remained. We're still alive. They've been dead a long time...with all the fancy foods and stuff like that. So, we had the good, wholesome food, though and the oatmeal and the rye bread saved us. [laughs]

MATSON: [laughs] Where did you work? Where'd you roller-skate to work, you told me?

ABRAMS: Well...

MATSON: Where were you working?

ABRAMS: Well, I started working as soon as, as soon as I was able to speak a little English. I, what I did is-is --. Bayonne was only like thirty blocks long, no, about forty, forty blocks. So, I go from 1st Street to, to 20th Street on Broadway. And I'd walk every block and go into all the stores on one side, see? And then coming back, I'd come back on the other side, back and then back home. And I'd ask them if they need somebody to, to work for them. Most of them made fun out of me and kidded, "Wait until you grow up," and "Come back when you grow up." 'Cause when I was when I was about thirteen, fourteen years old I looked like nine. I had real short pants, you know. She gave me these short pants. And it didn't look, I didn't look my age, you know.

Until one kind man says, "Okay." He says, "You can come in after school." He says, "You can come and you can deliver, you can deliver suits," you know, it was a clothing store. He said, "You can dust the boxes. You can sweep up. You can do... We'll find things for you to do." Real kind man. So, first I had to deliver papers in the morning from six to seven. Then seven, then seven o'clock, I get on the roller skates and go to work and go to school. And after school, then I go to work. And I'd stay at work until ten o'clock at night, then I roller-skate, at night, home. So, I didn't have no time for anything. There was no such thing as playing or being with anybody, you know.

MATSON: Long hours.

ABRAMS: And, uh...I didn't...

MATSON: Where would your money go? Would you give your money...back into the family...

ABRAMS: Well...

MATSON: ...or was that your money, your allowance, your...

ABRAMS: No, I didn't give it because there was nothing to give, you know. The roller skates themselves wear out. The wheels wear out. [laughs] I had to replace the wheels. And the little that I got, you know when I got it, I moved out. I moved out real fast.

MATSON: So, as soon as you could you moved out on your own.

ABRAMS: Yeah. As soon as I mo—as soon as I was able, I moved out because... The room was only three dollars a week in a rooming house.

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: See? And I was getting about twelve dollars a week, so and my favorite dish was cream cheese.

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: Cream cheese and Kaiser rolls.

MATSON: Mr. Abrams, we're gonna stop just for a second here and -- and go on with the story. We just ran out of room on the tape.

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

ABRAMS: Oh.

MATSON: So, we'll start in one second. We're back with Mr. Cy Abrams and we're discussing his life in America. Mr. Abrams, why don't you tell me about moving out of the house that you were living in with your adopted parents, your aunt and your uncle. How did that happen and...

ABRAMS: Well the reason we wanted to move out as fast as we can is we felt that we were being mistreated, that if she did adopt us, she should've considered us as her family and to treat us the same as she does her own children. And the...we felt bad enough trying to get used to a different environment, a different language and -- and being ridiculed at school and outside of school, that we wanted some warmth and some compassion shown and it wasn't there. Uh, no one can replace a mother and father but some people could at least try and because... I guess she did the best she could but, uh the reason, uh... She was a cold person because even with her own children she didn't show any affection, so it wasn't just us.

But the discrimination about, they can go to s-, they can take up music lessons and we can't take music lessons and they can take up acting in, in school plays and we can't and -- and they can have certain clothes and we can't and they can go with their friends and we can't. So we, we felt that we have to get out as soon as we can and -- and to do it on our own. The only way we could do it is to get any kind of work. We weren't fussy as to what kind of work we were gonna do, just so it's an honest way to make a living. Uh, we were, we were taught at an early age that there's only two ways to go. You're ei-you either can go bad, or you can be good. It's up to yourself and we see plenty people hanging around the corners, there, in this town and they don't do nothin'. They just cause a lot of problems and so we studied hard. We all studied hard in school and try to abide by the rules and regulations in the school and respected everybody. And it was just time for us to move as soon as we can, as soon as we were able. So, I figured out that on twelve dollars a week, I can be on my own. So, I paid three dollars a month to rent, three dollars a week, I mean, three dollars a week, rent. And the rest was for food. Uh, so...

MATSON: How close did you move? Far away, or, or close...

ABRAMS: ...I like...Not too far. I'd say within radius of a couple of miles. Well, I had to move in a place where it would be convenient for school as well as for work. So...

MATSON: How old were you when you moved out?

ABRAMS: I believe I was...fifteen, I guess. Although they were supposed to keep us until we were eighteen, anyway but we moved out-- I moved out at fifteen. And I found it wonderful to, to live by myself, knowing that I don't have to be abused and I don't have to do chores. They gave me all kinds of chores to do there. She'd give me ten cents to see a double-feature on Saturday but before I get those ten cents, I had to scrub all the floors, I had to clean all the dishes, I had to clean the, scrub the floor in the kitchen and I had to do a lot of chores, about four or five hours work to get the ten cents, so I can go see a movie, you know. So, I was so glad to be on my own, have my own room and I really had no time for anything else beside going to school and work, you know. So, I, I enjoyed doing that and then eventually, I moved to other places and went on from there - to move to New York, you know, later on...

MATSON: When you finished school, um...

ABRAMS: Oh, yes, when I went to school, I was -- I wanted to go to high school and she said, "No, you can't go to high school." I said, "Why not?" I said, "I'm getting' good grades. She said, "Because your uncle is a printer, see, and you make good money in printing" she says. "And you have to make money because you have to support yourself." So, I says, "Well," I says "I really want to go to school." She says, "No, you go printing." So, I took up printing for two years, I got a diploma and I went out on my first job. I was the second, second-best in the class in marks. So, I went to New York to -- and I got into a sweat shop. And there was a man about seventy years old and he was an old-time printer. And he came out with a little box -- wooden box, where they had sega-separa-- separate little quarters for different letters, see? And then they give you a bunch of mixed up type, individual type, in a box.

He said, "Now, distribute this into the boxes where they belong," you know. So, just getting out of school, you know, it went like this, you know. He looks at it for a few minutes -- he says, "I'm sorry. You wouldn't do." And that was the end, see. I told him I just got out of school, you know. Anyway, so that discouraged me so much, I never went to a print shop again. That was the end of my printing career, see. And I still wanted to go to school. But the, she, "No, sh- you can't do that." So, after I got out of vocational school--it was half -- actually half was high school, math- and -- and half was training for printer. So, I did get some academic work in there.

So then from there I said, "Well, I'm not making enough money. I have to get another job." So, I changed jobs and I got another job in a boys' clothing store, see. And there, he gave me fifteen dollars a week and he - and he -- and then after I was there about a year, he promised to open a shop for me and I would manage this store, see. So, I figure, well, I'm too young to, to manage a store and I don't want the responsibility. I want to live a little, you know. I don't want to be tied down to a store. So, I got another job that I figured would pay me more. If I work in a restaurant, I would get my meals there. And so, I would be able to save more money. So, I got a job in a restaurant and

they taught me how to make sandwiches and salads and ice cream sodas, you know, how to prepare the syrups and everything else.

So, here, now, I'm, I'm in my glory. I've got a job where the food is paid for. I don't have to worry about food, the only thing I have to worry about rent. Now, I got much more left out of my paycheck, you know? So, then I started admiring girls, see? So, when I start admiring girls, I wanted to show off. So, whatever money I had left from that week, I spent for the w-, with a girl, weekends. I'd take her to a theater and then I'd take her to an ice cream soda place, you know. And by that time, I was -- I didn't have no money for the rest of the week, see? [laughs] So, then I'd go back to my boss, I ask him if he could loan me some money ahead of time, 'cause I spent all my money on a date. So, I learned my lessons, you know. I just enjoyed going out and having some fun, you know. I was fifteen, sixteen years old. So, aft-...

MATSON: So, this was in New York, that you were living...

ABRAMS: No, this was in New Jersey. All this was in New Jersey...

MATSON: Oh, you were still in New Jersey, okay...

ABRAMS: ...I'm still in New Jersey. In New York... When I went to New York, I got a room there, see and after I got a room (it was on 14th Street, I think) and I don't know if you know New York...No?

MATSON: No, not quite.

ABRAMS: This is, there's a 14th Street was all activities there. They had the, the soapboxes and all kinds of people different beliefs, you know. Uh, it was a very busy place. There was all the department stores there and so I got one that was over a cigar store. Above the cigar store is a rooming - rooming place, very noisy. All night long, you hear buses and streetcars and, you know. And I stayed there, I wanted a central location because I got a job in a -- for a big company, a drug company. They had soda fountains all over New York, something like seventy-two stores. So, I worked for them because I had the experience already. I gathered experience in New Jersey, you know, working in restaurants and the soda fountains.

So, then I went to New York and I worked six stores a week. Every day I worked in a different store. I was relief man. So, when people have a day off, I fill in for them. So I had very exciting places. One was in Times Square area and the other one was in Pitkin and Herzl in Brooklyn and then in Pennsylvania, Southern Brooklyn and Brighton Beach Line on Brighton and 16th Street, the Kings Highway. And I had different stores: Yorkville, in New York. So I, I got good experience from different places but I acclimate myself real fast at different kinds of jobs. And I -- I lived in New York for - for quite a long time because I not only worked in one store, I worked in two, two different things. Uh, this job that I had was from one to one, twelve-hour shifts. So, I worked six stores, six days, like that. So, I worked quite a few hours. I didn't have no time for anything, twelve hours a day 'cause it took me an hour to get there and an hour back on the subways...

MATSON: So, you just had enough time to sleep...

ABRAMS: Yeah, yeah. That's about all. Then I, then I decide I'm gonna join the Golden Gloves, you know, so, figure, "Well, am I -- where am I gonna train? When, when will I have train?" you know. So, my sleeping time I spent training, part of my sleeping time. This was taken there when, when I was at Golden Gloves, see?

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: Yeah, so, I was experience different things and then I got, I got a lot of experience in New York being taken by many people in the -- in the streets, you know. I had one guy would come over and say (he's all dressed up real nice) he says, "Can you, can you spare a quarter?" I said, "What for?" He says, "Well," he says, "I just got off from Connecticut," he says, "and I and someone picked my wallet and I'm waitin' for an aunt, I have to call my aunt up so she'll pick me up," So, I figure, geez, well, he's in trouble, so I give him the quarter. Then I come back an hour later, I see he's, he's doing it to other people, see? So, I learned a lesson, you know, not to give money away so easily when I work so hard for it, you know. [laughs] Another time, there was somebody selling stockings, socks, you know, men's socks.

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: So, it was six pair for a quarter. I said, "Well, God, that's a good buy!" you know? So, I give him I quarter. I come home. I open up the socks. Each one was a different design. [laughs] Each sock was a different design.

MATSON: Oh, so you couldn't wear it. There were no pairs.

ABRAMS: Well, they had, they had like a clock, a little embroidery on the sides, some of them. And some were without it. So, I took all the socks, I put them in the basement and I put bleach on them. I made them all white, so I could use them for work. 'Cause they had to wear white socks at work, you know, so, I bleached them all out to white. So, I figure, well, I didn't get stuck too much but, you know, you couldn't trust any of them. I go to an auction one - went to an auction in Times Square, see and they were selling watches, you know. So, I was working in this drugstore, you know and I had a little intermission between the one and one. They give you an hour break in the afternoon, so I was walking around there, see this auction. So when I get to the auction, they're auctioning off watches, you know. So, I got a watch at the auction, you know. And I come back to the, to the place, there and the thing doesn't work. It stopped. It was advertising, "seventeen-jewel watch," and stuff like that, you know. And I say, "Geez, seventeen-jewel watch? I only paid five dollars for it. I got a good, good buy on it." And I come there, you open up the cover, says "four jewels," not fourteen jewels, you know. So, by all these little experiences...

MATSON: You learned it...

ABRAMS: ...it taught me, it taught me to be very careful, you know, about different things. But you learn through experience, so when you try to pass it to your grandchildren, you know, oh, they know all the answers, they, they don't want to anything, you know.

MATSON: How long did you live in New York?

ABRAMS: Well, I lived in Greenwich Village for a while. I lived, my brother got a pad down there and so we would have wild parties there in Greenwich Village, on Macdougall Street. That was, you know, where the artists and all the people lived there. And when and when I stayed there, you know, it was one rainy evening and I said, "Geez! I have nothing to do. It's my day off. I think I'm gonna try to paint." So, I went and I got some canvas and some brushes and I -- I painted two things. And that's, that's one of the, these are the two things, right here. See 'em?

MATSON: Oh. Is that all that you painted?

ABRAMS: Napoleon, Napoleon and then these two little kids wrestling, mm?

MATSON: Did you continue to do some painting, or was that all you...

ABRAMS: No, no. Just you know, because I didn't have no training or anything, you know. But I just got out of my system that I wanted to do something and try something and so I did that and it's been hanging over all my nephews' and nieces' cribs, you know, that little picture with the kids wrestling. I lived on MacDou-- I lived down there, then I moved in with my brother in the pad. There was two other guys and him, was four of us. So, we lived right near New York University. So, we had, we had a lot of young girls from the college that used to come for weekends, you know. Dancing and eating, you know, having fun. So, this is a little of the social life that I had, you know. Very little of it. But I stayed in New York. I lived in Brooklyn and I lived in New York City, Manhattan, I lived in the Bronx. I lived in different places according to where I worked...

MATSON: Now, what did you...

ABRAMS: ...to make it more convenient for myself.

MATSON: What is, what was this story about the Golden Gloves? How long were you doing that?

ABRAMS: Oh. I went to Ebbetts Field in New York. It's in Brooklyn. And I ran around the field there, you know, for training. And I did pretty good in the Golden Gloves. I had about, I'd say, fourteen fights or something like that. But you get rings, you get watches, you get different things. You don't get no money at that time.

MATSON: Did you win some of your fights?

ABRAMS: Yeah. I won - I won -- I won 'em all.

MATSON: Terrific.

ABRAMS: But I wouldn't continue. You know why?

MATSON: That was enough, or...

ABRAMS: No, I didn't continue 'cause a nice Jewish boy don't do these things for a living.

MATSON: Hmm.

ABRAMS: See? Everybody kept saying, "A nice Jewish boys don't do these things for a living. So you gotta be a doctor, you gotta be a lawyer, you gotta be something. You gotta have higher ideals, than punchees-- punched around with somebody else," you know?

MATSON: Now, you were in the military...

ABRAMS: Yeah...

MATSON: ...at some point?

ABRAMS: ...and then I went in the -- went to the Coast Artillery, when I was in New York, which is the -- yeah, the 244th Coast Artillery in New York. And that was 1935. I was there for a year. And then after that, you know, in the Second World War, was -- was in there a couple year-- , two, three years...

MATSON: Now, how did you meet...

ABRAMS: ...I got the credit.

MATSON: How, how did you meet your wife? Were you, had you done this beforehand, or...

ABRAMS: Oh...oh. I went to...No, I went to -- I went to Florida and...

MATSON: On a vacation?

ABRAMS: No...

MATSON: To live?

ABRAMS: ...I went to Florida to open, um, to get a concession on a soda fountain concession.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: Usually, the drugstores have soda fountains. So, you get a concession. You give them twenty percent of the gross. They collect the money, see. So, they get twenty percent and you get the eighty percent. But out of the eighty percent, you have to pay the utilities and you have

to pay for the help and the merchandise, see. So, we opened a place on Fourth and Collins in - in Miami Beach.

MATSON: Now, when was this?

ABRAMS: Uh, this was in 1938.

MATSON: Okay.

ABRAMS: And so I opened this place and it was open from seven in the morning to one at night. Eighteen--what is that? Eighteen--how many hours? Seven to one.

MATSON: That's long hours.

ABRAMS: Yeah, about eighteen hours. But in the afternoon, I'd take two, three hours to go to the beach and -- and just sun myself. So, there was a lot of kids that used to come in from Georgia and Carolinas, you know, for the summer, to work. So, they worked as waitresses. They didn't get much money but they were looking for the -- to get away from home, I guess. And we were able to serve wine there sandwiches, salads, short order cooking, lamb chops, pork chops, stuff like that. So, I stayed there for the season. Then, after the season, I figured, well, I'd still like to work a little longer. So, I went into the Blackstone Hotel in Miami Beach and there was a soda fountain there and a short-order area, so I start working there. That's where I met my wife. She was the cashier. And I used to throw nickels to her. She had a c-, one of those machines, you know, where they put a nickel in? "As Time Goes By," Casa Blanca, with the - with the -- what's the name? Uh, that movie star...

MATSON: I'm not sure which one.

ABRAMS: "As Ti-As Time Goes By" is the name of the song.

MATSON: Right. I'm familiar with the song.

ABRAMS: Yeah. Well, the - the one - the one that was in it, Ingrid Bergman and, uh...The, geez, I can't think of the, uh...

MATSON: Well, that's okay. So...

ABRAMS: Anyway... So, uh...I kept throwing nickels to her because she liked that song and I liked that song, we... And then one - one day, we went out after work at the, at the beach, you know. It was a big, big moon, you known and we got along pretty good. And I told her, I said (she was going home to Cleveland -- and I was going home to New York) I said, "I tell you what," I said, "If you feel the same way about me and I feel the same way about you in six months," I says, "Write to me and I'll send you fare to come from Cleveland to New York and we'll get married." So, sure enough, six-, we only knew each other two days...

MATSON: Mmh!

ABRAMS: ...see. And it seemed to click somehow. 'Cause she was orphaned real early and I was orphaned and, you know and it seemed to work out because we needed somebody. So, there was quite a de-- waited six months and, sure enough, I get a call, "I'd like to come to New York." So, I send her the fare, she came to New York. And things were pretty bad at that time. I was working on two jobs...

MATSON: Mm...a-...

ABRAMS: ...one from eleven to three and then another one from four to - from four to one.

MATSON: So, you didn't get to see very much of each other.

ABRAMS: ...see much of her. And I lived in a room and we had a salami hangin' there and a rye bread and that's all we were eating. It was pretty rough. And so she got a job, you know, she started working. And we got along fine after that.

MATSON: Did you have children?

ABRAMS: No but she, she had about four, four times that she -- she aborted.

MATSON: Oh.

ABRAMS: And then that's when I decided to - to adopt a child later on.

MATSON: And you adopted a child?

ABRAMS: Yeah, then...

MATSON: Tell me about that.

ABRAMS: Then... Well, that was after... This was - this was in New York, see, but when I moved out of New York and went to Cleveland.

MATSON: So, you both moved to Cleveland.

ABRAMS: We decided to go to Cleveland because her family lived in Cleveland -- and they, they wanted us to come out there and live there. And they were much better off than we were. So, they were gonna set us up in something. So, we went to her sister and we slept with her sister in Cleveland. And then I got a job in a machine shop there, as a - as a milling machinist...

MATSON: Mm-hmm.

ABRAMS: ... 'cause during the war... At first, I was working as a - as a machinist. I took up training for machinist work. So, when we - when we - when we got to Cleveland and we set up home and we were already married a couple years, then the Second World War started. So, we already opened up an apartment and furnished it and everything else,

so we had to store everything away and she had to stay, go back to live with her sister again and I volunteered for Services. They agreed that if I, if I volunteer they will give me a certain rating, see?

MATSON: Mm-mm.

ABRAMS: Because I was, I was already a machinist and they promised to give me a portable machine shop and I would be directing five other men under me. So, they gave me a rating before I went into the army. I mean, after basic training.

MATSON: So, then when did you adopt your child? Was that after you came back from the war?

ABRAMS: When I came up after the war... Well, while I was in the war, she became pregnant when I was on leave. But, she, she lost it. So, then when I came back, we, I - I talked to her about adopting. Now, she, we had - we had one child when I came ba-, not one child. When I came back, she became pregnant and she aborted it herself. And I, I wanted to know why she aborted it, she said, "Well, I don't want my child to be born poor, poor. You know that we don't have no money and I was brought up in a poor family and I know how much suffering we had to do and we don't want to bring a child up that way." And I said, "It doesn't matter," I said, "One child wouldn't need, take that much," you know. "If you love each other, there's no reason why we can't have this child now." But she, she aborted it without my consent. When she aborted, things changed after that. I didn't feel as close to her because she did something like that, you know. It's different if we weren't married at that time but we were married already.

So after she aborted it, then many years later, I asked her, I said, "How about adopting a child?" So she said, "Well le-, we'll try so- for more." I said, "Well, we tried for seven years now," I says "What's the sense of trying anymore?" I says, "You, we haven'-, you, you abo-, after you have the child, you can't carry it no more." You know, after six months, seven months, she'd lose it all the time. So, I said, "Let -let's put in for adoption." So, we put in for adoption and we got a child. And then we had a lot of trouble with it, the adoption.

MATSON: You had trouble with the adoption?

ABRAMS: Yeah. [clears throat] They, the girl wanted the child back...

MATSON: Oh.

ABRAMS: ...after we had it six months. And we became so attached to the child that I was not gonna give that child up. And I didn't. I said, "If I have to go to Mexico and live the rest of my life in Mexico, I will but I will not give that child up." It's not because the mother wanted it for her own. She wanted to give it to someone else because there was more money involved. And I said, "Here we got si-, the baby six months. We're used to the child. We love that child. We will not part with it." So, I went to New York with the child and my wife stayed

here. And I contacted some people in Cleveland. One was a Superior Court judge. And -- and her brother-in-law, my wife's brother-in-law, was an attorney out there. And they said, "It's a cut-and-dry deal. In California, if the mother wants the child back, she gets it back." She said, "Nothing you can do about it." I said, "Well, I'm not giving that child up."

MATSON: Now, this was in Cleveland?

ABRAMS: [coughs] In Cleveland -- and I went there for consultation, so that my...

MATSON: Oh, okay.

ABRAMS: ...and the Superior Court judge. And he came out here in my behalf to see what he could do for me. And he couldn't do nothing either, that Superior Court judge. So I had, I had a friend and he says and he knew the trouble I had and he says to me, "Let me, let me take a stab at it. Let me talk to the girl." And he went and he bought her some clothes and he took her out and showed her nice times, you know. And tried to reason with her and to be reasoned with her the fact that she'd be better off where she is. She's well loved and these people you don't know, just because they're gonna give you five hundred dollars more, or so. So, what he did is talk her into signing the papers. And she didn't bother us after that. She was only fifteen years old, the girl, see, that had, that had my daughter.

MATSON: Now, what's your child's name?

ABRAMS: Judy.

MATSON: Judy.

ABRAMS: Mm-hmm, yeah.

MATSON: Do you have any grandchildren?

ABRAMS: I have two grandchildren.

MATSON: What are their names?

ABRAMS: Their name is Damien and Nadia. And they're half Chinese and half Jewish.

MATSON: Okay, Mr. Abrams, um, later on you put this book together, called Glancing Back. Now...

ABRAMS: Mm-hmm.

MATSON: ...how did you go about putting that book together?

ABRAMS: Well it's powerful memories.

MATSON: Well, [laughs while she talks] we've heard very powerful memories on this tape.

ABRAMS: Uh, powerful memories based on my early life. It, it's not a continuous story or anything. It's just incidents in my life. They were powerful enough for me to remember. And going through this writing class brought out more things that I thought I didn't remember. Because there were similar cases that other people had, similar events. It made me think back to things in my life which were similar. So, it really reacted a lot of things that I, I forgot all about. So, in creative writing, you help each other. You critique their stories. You don't tell them they're wrong about this or wrong about that. You're just critiquing and tell them how they can possibly make it better, to make it more interesting for other people to read it. So, you have to put yourself in the position, as a child and write in a child's language, as, as you would talk when you were a child. So, this is how we got our story together. We had...

MATSON: The classes were helpful.

ABRAMS: ...free classes. There were free classes for senior citizens and they were by a high school teacher that started these classes because he, himself, his father was a psychiatrist and he never knew nothing about his father. When his father died, he had nothing to remember him by because he didn't re-he didn't relate to him in any way. There was no communication. So, he decided that the older people, the senior citizens, should have something to leave to their grandchildren or people that they love or relatives that they know. So, I was very happy to take this because it was like a therapy to me. After I wrote this thing, I felt a hundred percent better. All this time, it was in me...

MATSON: And now it was...out.

ABRAMS: Yeah and now... And, uh it, it's a relief. It makes you feel better. It's therapy in every sense of the word.

MATSON: Well, I want to thank you for doing this interview with us. These are fascinating stories that I'm sure will be used again and again as part of our project. Um, this is Alysa Matson signing off for the Oral History Project at Ellis Island. It's September 17, 1994, with Mr. Cy Abrams and Peter Hom, who's been doing the recording for us today. Thank you.

ABRAMS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW  
EI-550/ABRAMS