

**EI-551**

**LIBA FEUERSTEIN**

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**INTERVIEWER: ELYSA MATSEN**

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**ISLAND OF RHODES, 1939**

**AGE THREE YEARS (?)**

**PASSAGE ON REX**

MATSEN: Good afternoon. This is Elysa Matsen for the National Park Service. Today is September 17<sup>th</sup>, 1994, and I'm in the home of Mrs. Liba Feuerstein, who came from the Island of Rhodes in 1939. She did not come through Ellis Island, but we wanted to get her story on tape because of the interest of coming from the Island of Rhodes and because she had such an interesting story to tell. Mrs. Feuerstein, why don't you start by giving me your full name and your date of birth?

FEUERSTEIN: Liba Breger Feuerstein, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1936.

MATSEN: And that is your maiden name, Breger

FEUERSTEIN: Breger, uh-huh.

MATSEN: How do you spell that?

FEUERSTEIN: B-R-E-G-E-R.

MATSEN: Can you tell me a little bit of what it was like to live on the Island of Rhodes, maybe what your town looked like?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes, there are two little towns on the Island of Rhodes. There's Lindhos, which is on top of a mountain and then there is, around the port by the sea, and that's Rodhos [Rhodes}. And I was born in Rodhos and it is a small fishing community and...that depends now a great deal upon foreign tourists.

MATSEN: Can you tell me about your father? Can you tell me what he looked like and what he did for a living?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. My father, to me, was very, very tall, except that when I saw him and I grew up and I saw him surrounded by other men, he was short. But still my remembrances of him are that he was a very big man. He was only about five [feet], ten [inches]. But he was Professor of Talmud and History and headed up what was known then as the Colegio Rabbinico [ph] in Rhodes. He came there on the invitation of Mussolini and at the time, when he accepted his position, 1930, he...Mussolini was in the process of sort of reinventing the Roman Empire and he wanted to bring the very best of everything back to Italy and its possessions. And then that was the time when he brought even fashion houses from Paris to Milan, and he even wanted to bring Jews under his auspices and have it be a flourishing Jewish community. And so he reopened this Jewish seminary on the island and my father headed this seminary.

MATSEN: Is there a story that you remember from your childhood that you associate with your father strongly?

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, just about everything...he...he was my mentor. I often had him confused with God, particularly when he would wear his rabbinical robes and it was maybe a Jewish holiday or something. I was sure that if God had a face, it was my father's face. And he was extremely kind. He studied all the time and allowed me to play next to him while he studied. And I recall every Saturday, at least when we first came to America, he read to me. He read all of Twain and

all of Dickens and he read all of Greek mythology to me. And he was adamant about the...the value of education. When we first came to America, he made very little money and I remember he bought me a set of books. It was a hundred and thirty dollars and was a lot of money then, but that was his first purchase in America.

MATSEN: How about your mother? What was her name?

FEUERSTEIN: Her maiden name was Wittenberg. My mother is a trained dentist and she would be what would be called a “blue stocking,” that is, she was of the intelligentsia. And both of them spoke many languages. They spoke eight languages.

MATSEN: What languages did they speak?

FEUERSTEIN: Well (she laughs), they didn't speak English when we came to this country. My mother spoke Russian, Italian, Ladino, Greek, French...I'm trying to think and I don't remember what else. My father did not speak Russian, but he spoke, in addition to what my mother spoke, he spoke Yiddish and Romanian. They conversed at home in German and Italian, and that was in the States. That's what they spoke. But on Rhodes, they spoke Italian and Ladino. I don't know...do you know what Ladino is?

MATSEN: I'm not sure (unintelligible).

FEUERSTEIN: Ladino is like Spanish, but from the Middle Ages. It's the language that the Jews from Spain kept, so while Spain...while Spanish in Spain continued to change, the way English changed from Old English, Middle English, to Modern English. Spanish went through those changes, but the Jews, because they weren't surrounded by Spanish, kept that language that they had. So, in fact, it...it is now studied to see...

MATSEN: But it is not spoken?

FEUERSTEIN: No, it is spoken.

MATSEN: It's still spoken. Okay.

FEUERSTEIN: But the Spaniards study Ladino to know how their language was.

MATSEN: Okay. Is there a story you remember from your childhood?

FEUERSTEIN: From Rhodes?

MATSEN: No...from...with your mother or from Rhodes, if you can think of one.

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, I can remember some sweet little stories from Rhodes (she laughs).

MATSEN: Tell me.

FEUERSTEIN: I had...well, my parents were members of the...like the Diplomatic Corps and my mom had servants. We lived in a place called Monti Smit, which is Mount Smit. And I recall the house having on the beautiful tile and we had...I had a nanny and her name was Penelope – that's Penelope. And I had a giant tortoise named Marta and I had a dog, who sort of watched me. And my mother had a cruel streak and she named the dog Adolph. So when she called Adolph, people sort of like stayed away from me. But Penelope called him Dolphi. And Dolphi opened the gate and I walked out. I was about two and I wa...got lost. And everybody was looking for me, and I was in the house of an old...some old Turks. And I just was drinking Turkish coffee with them. And I used to sneak out to go, and my mom tells me that's why I'm short, because I drank Turkish coffee.

MATSEN: You were too young in age.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-hum. And that's what did it. And I'll tell you something kind of interesting. Then after Mussolini made the pact with Hitler and they started with the racial laws, one of the things that happened right away was the Jews were not allowed servants, Gentile servants. So we lost Penelope. And Jews were denied milk. And we had some Jewish friends and their names were...their name was Al Hadeth, which means like "The Chief." You know, Al Cad...the Cadiff? And, in fact, there...there are streets in Rhodes called Al Hadeth. In fact, there's a lovely restaurant in the corner of Al Hadeth and Al Hadeth. But Batami, which means "daughter of my people." Batami Al Hadeth had a baby, Izzy, about six weeks after I did, and she didn't produce any milk and they didn't...they didn't allow Jews to have milk and the baby would have died. And my mom, who herself had a wet nurse, and was loathe even to nurse me, nursed Izzy and I sort of like, he sort of like became my milk brother. And I have even today kind of a relationship with him that's not quite family, not quite friend, it's sort of...

MATSEN: Special.

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah, it's a very kind of a special...and then we were exiled... fortunately. That is, Jews who were invited in were exiled; the other Jews could not leave. And one of the reasons that you don't have that many people from the Island of Rhodes is they...they all went to Auschwitz and nobody who went to Auschwitz survived. And so then, we were supposed to go to Abyssinia, or Ethiopia, and...because Mussolini had marched there, too. And...

MATSEN: So they told you to leave the Island of Rhodes.

FEUERSTEIN: That its, put nicely.

MATSEN: And you were going to go to Ethiopia?

FEUERSTEIN: We tried to get back...my father was Romanian, but all the doors to Jews were closed. He tried to get into Palestine, but it was the British White Paper. There was no place for us to go, which was the plan for Jews, having no place. Hitler was right; no country would take them. And so we didn't know what we were going to do. And I recall my mom took me up high above the cliffs. I was about - and I remember this - three, and she was going to throw me down because they didn't know what to do with the baby. And then she was going to come, you know, with me, but her friends, you know, prevented her from doing this and we...we couldn't take any money out, anything. So we...we went from Rhodes to Athens, which is about an hour flight. But Athens was Greek; Rhodes was Italian. And we couldn't take any money from an Italian place to a non-Italian place, and we had to get to Brindisi. And in Brindisi, we were going to go on a boat called the Rex and we used up all our money. We went first class on the Rex, and we...

MATSEN: What was that boat like? Do you remember?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. It was a very...just like you see in the movies, very, very fancy boat, people dressed up all the time. I dressed in a red velvet and I...I was very, very...my mother is Germanic and had trained me very well. And so I was like, you know, I was like a...an adult, only short. And I had lace collar and cuffs, like a nun, I guess.

MATSEN: What time of year was it?

FEUERSTEIN: It was January and I...they called me La Donina, "the little lady." And I...people passed me around and I remember the long, like chaise lounges on the deck. And I remember a woman got very sick and they were looking for a doctor and somebody came up to my father and said, "You're a doctor. Do

something.” And he said (she laughs), “I’m a Doctor of Philosophy and I can’t do anything.” And that remained a, you know, a family joke. “Oh, he’s a Doctor of Philosophy and can’t do anything.” And...

MATSEN: How about food? Do you remember eating on the boat?

FEUERSTEIN: Well, we were and are kosher, so it was just fish and fruit, and that’s what we had. And then I had a white fur, probably it was rabbit, but I just thought it was wonderful. And I had a fur muff and a fur hat and leggings. And when...I remember it was dreary, very foggy when we arrived. The crossing took forever; probably was just two weeks. And when we arrived, everybody went out to see the Statue of Liberty and I did, too. And then I think I mentioned to you that we landed in America and I spoke just Italian. And people were going, “Coochy coochy coo,” or whatever they were saying to, you know, a little baby. And I made the “Seig heil!” sign and said, “Viva il Duce.” Those were my first words on American soil, whereupon, you know, people just couldn’t believe that I would, you know, that I said that. And we lived in New York, where I attended night school with my dad to learn English. And I remember...

MATSEN: Did you go to a regular school, as well as night school for English?

FEUERSTEIN: No, I didn’t. My dad went at night, so I went with him. And I...I remember once the teacher was trying to explain the difference between attached and detached, and (she laughs) finally got it through and she said to my father, “Your collar is attached to the shirt.” Well, he had a European collar that is detached, so after...yeah, I remember him saying, “Oh, yes, attached.” And then he took it off. And she was beside herself be...and it was...I remember going with him on this subway to night school and then...he was a very burly man. In fact, I’ll show you a picture of him. And he had a black beard, square Van Dyke beard. And we even went to the New York World’s Fair in ’39, and he and my mom were speaking Italian and he got lost. And my mom and I went

back to where we were staying, and then the FBI came and wanted him (she laughs), because they thought he was a member of the Mafia. And so then my father walked in a little bit later and he was handcuffed and everybody had to explain, “No, no, no. He’s not, you know, he’s not Mafioso.” And those were kind of experiences that he was sort of proud of, because he led, in many ways, up until then a cloistered life, you know, so he kind of liked that. And...

MATSEN: So your first place that you lived in America when you came to America was...

FEUERSTEIN: New York

MATSEN: New York.

FEUERSTEIN: Long Island. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Did you have a house there?

FEUERSTEIN: No, we just had a room in a house.

MATSEN: Uh-huh. And how did you get that room? How did...do you know?

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, yes, it was family, but they weren’t very pleased to have refugees, you know, and that’s what we were. So as soon as my father learned English, he went as far away as he could. And he went to Tucson, Arizona. They didn’t even care if they had a rabbi who could speak English or not. It was the wild west. It was...

MATSEN: So you went from New York to Tucson, Arizona?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: What was it like there?

FEUERSTEIN: In Tucson?

MATSEN: Yeah.

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, it was...I don't know if you know this, but Tucson is the only walled city in the United States. I don't know, did you know that? When we were there, got there in 1940, there were hardly any Jews, I can tell you that. And it was a sleepy, Mexican Indian town. And my parents were these urbane Europeans. And my father took to it, and my mom did not. But my father loves everything, loved everything in God's world and was fine, and he was wearing a ten-gallon hat. And he just...just really was just wonderful; he really enjoyed it. But it was very hard. We had no money and so we took in boarders. We rented and then we took in boarders as well, but it was like a different time, you know. And I grew up like in...

MATSEN: Were you the only child?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Just to make sure. I thought that was the case, but...

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. Yes, and I grew up in the Mexican barrio and...

MATSEN: Did you learn any Spanish?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. Yes, and had many great friends. And...

MATSEN: Can you describe for me what it was like to have dinner at your house? What would be a typical meal for your family? It could be in the United States, when you were in Tucson, that's fine.

FEUERSTEIN: A typical meal.

MATSEN: Or, what was your favorite thing that...

FEUERSTEIN: Hot dogs! (She laughs)

MATSEN: ...your mother would make?

FEUERSTEIN: I was...I just thought they...that that was just really great. But I'm sure, and in retrospect, since we've all had cancer, that there was far too much meat. But I remem...we had a victory garden and we had meatless Tuesday (she laughs). But, other than that, I remember...I remember discussions that they could pinch pennies on everything, but not food. And the irony is that's precisely where they should have pinched pennies. I remember I wanted to go barefoot because everybody went barefoot. And my father said, "No child of mine is that poor that they have to go barefoot." Everybody was always sleeping over at other people's houses. It took a long time for them to let me sleep at people's houses. They said, "You have a home to sleep at." But I was very proud that my parents were different and that I came from a different kind of a house. I really...and...but they, in retrospect, they gave me a lot of freedom. I used to roam the streets, had great friends, collected toads, did all of those kind of things that you can do in a carefree, you know, youth. The only thing is that when the United States finally did enter the war, my father tried to get in. And that was a big C, change in my life, because my dad went in like three days before his thirty-eighth birthday and he went in as a private, I think I told you. And he made sixty dollars a month and our rent was sixty-two dollars a month.

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: And so that was very, very difficult. And I remember like a week after he left, I found a rabbit. And I said, “Well, the rabbi’s gone, but we have a rabbit.” And that didn’t sit too well with my mom (she laughs). And we always had soldiers at our house, always, always. My mom...the reason I don’t remember meals is my mom was a really horrible cook.

MATSEN: Oh, really?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. The only thing (she laughs) that she would make...made a lot of eggplant dishes and zucchini dishes and artichokes. And...but...and she would make them the way they made them in Rhodes. But she didn’t cook anything else well.

MATSEN: That was not her specialty.

FEUERSTEIN: No, she was a lousy cook.

MATSEN: No.

FEUERSTEIN: No. No, no, no, no, no. And so I don’t remember food as being that important. I do remember sitting around the Sabbath table and singing. And I do remember always these discussions about books, always discussions about, well, at the time....

MATSEN: How was the school there? Did you attend school there?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes, I did, and oh, gosh, it was really....do you remem...? Well, you can’t remember, but we used to Pledge Allegiance. I don’t know if you remember, it was “I pledge allegiance to the flag.”

MATSEN: Yes, uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: It was, you know, "I pledge allegiance to the flag." That's what we used to do. And then, of course, when the heil came out, then we started this way the whole time.

MATSEN: I didn't know that.

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah, and then during the war, they made us have...we had to be strong, so they gave us cod liver oil. And I couldn't swallow the cod liver oil, so I never had a recess. It was terrible. And we had to b...all the time we were buying, what do you call this? Savings bonds.

MATSEN: Do you remember any persecution while you were living there?

FEUERSTEIN: In Tucson?

MATSEN: Yeah.

FEURSTEIN: Oh, sure. I was beaten up all the time.

MATSEN: Are there any instances that you can remember about that?

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, yes, I was beaten up all the time. "The Jews killed Jesus," all the time, all the time. And, in fact, a friend of mine was really quite helpful. I remember (she laughs) because he was beaten up, too. And he was constantly beaten up and then he stopped being beaten up. And I asked him why he wasn't being beaten up and he says, "Well, they would beat me up and beat me up and I would run. And finally one day I just stopped and I just yelled, "Not the

Hungarian Jews!” “ (She laughs) So then they stopped beating him up. But I was, oh, yes, teachers were very anti-Semitic, students were very anti-Semitic.

MATSEN: Where were most of the other children from?

FEUERSTEIN: From Arizona.

MATSEN: There were...

FEUERSTEIN: There was no immigrant.

MATSEN: No immigrants whatsoever.

FEUERSTEIN: No, no, no, no, no, unless they were, you know, just Mexican immigrants who came back and forth, but no. Huh-uh.

MATSEN: So you were the only...

FEUERSTEIN: I was the only person I ever knew that was born in a place other than the United States, at least growing up. And I was, oh, yes, there was a great deal of anti-Semitism, covert and subtle from adults, but really out there from kids.

MATSEN: Yeah, children can be harsh.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Well, what can you tell me about religious life in your family, when you were...?

FEUERSTEIN: I had a very rich religious life. Our house was always, always open. And the week was geared to the Sabbath, and the months to...I don't know if you know

there's a holiday per month, and the month to the holiday. And with I think probably the big holiday of the year was Passover, and then another one was what we called Sukkot, or Tabernacles, which my husband is in the process of building a little hut that'll go out there. And it was interesting. I never ever felt anything except that those kids who were beating me up were so benighted, you know. I never...I don't even remember asking my parents, "Did we kill him?" It just wasn't, you know...I, I mean, it was so dumb. And I was just...in fact, I had to tone down. You know, I purposefully got lower grades because, you know, they would gear everything to the middle of the class, and it was just like, you know, incredibly easy. So I didn't have the terrific grades, but I just...I never had any other feeling except that the group that I belonged to was vastly superior to these throngs.

MATSEN: And it sounds like a lot of your education came from your father...

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh.

MATSEN: ...and from your family.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Yes.

MATSEN: Made that possible.

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. I was probably very snooty. My father was not, but now that I look back, why would I think that? But I did.

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: You know, I never felt, "Oh, you know, I wish we hadn't done that." You know, but...

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

MATSEN: Now you told me before some more stories about your family...

FEUERSTEIN: Yes.

MATSEN: ...and how they came to the Island of Rhodes and they were fascinating stories, but one of them was that...

FEUERSTEIN: I'm trying to remember...

MATSEN: ...was that...you told me about, I guess, your grandparents and...

FEUERSTEIN: Oh.

MATSEN: ....even further into your family store sake.

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, let me try...I can. Did I tell you that my...that my children are fifth generation American citizens and first generation born here on my side?

MATSEN: No.

FEUERSTEIN: That could, I think, probably be in "Believe it or Not." I have to give you like the names, okay?

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: My father's name was Marcus. His father's name was Jacob. Jacob's father's name was Moses. Okay, my name is Liba and my daughter's name is Esther,

my first-born. Okay, the first to come to America was Moses. How did he get here? Jacob was his eldest son, so Jacob, who is Marcus' father...

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: ...remained in Europe, but he had a youngest son whose name was Miles. Miles came to America, 'cause he just was going from pillar to post in Europe. And he made it really big in America. And he sent for his father. And so his father came, and that was Moses. His father came and lived here and Jacob was left in Europe, perfectly happy. He was a businessman. In fact, he gave my father the name Marcus because he wanted him to do well in the business world. And my father was a rabbi (she laughs), so Marcus was not the best of all names. But then...then Marcus came and with Marcus...so it was Moses, Jacob, Marcus, Liba, Esther. Okay, so Moses came, then Marcus came before the war, bringing Liba (me). After the war, we found out that my mother's entire family perished and I can tell you those stories if you want to know, because we did find out how. And my father couldn't find his family and then, all of a sudden, his brother wrote to him and said, "I'm in Paris. Do you know where father is?" (That's Jacob.) My father said, "No, I don't know." Then my father got a letter from Jacob and my father put Jacob in touch with his other son. And then my father got them as far as Quito, Ecuador after the war. And then Barry Goldwater wanted to run for the Senate and came to see my father for an endorsement, because by then my father was a big man in Arizona. And my father said, "No, I don't endorse political candidates; however, could you please have a rider to a bill?" You know how they have them. I would like my father and brother to be able to come to this country legally. And that was Senator Goldwater's first act in Congress.

MATSEN: Unbelievable.

FEUERSTEIN: So then Marcus brought Jacob. So you have Moses, Jacob, Marcus, Liba. Liba grows up and gets married and her child is fifth generation American citizen...

MATSEN: Oh.

FEUERSTEIN: ...but first generation born here. That's kind of an interesting story.

MATSEN: Amazing, because they all came.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh, but and at different times.

MATSEN: Different times, but different generations came before other generations.

FEUERSTEIN: But my mom's family – that's...is also very interesting. My mom's father was the Court Jew. Is that the story?

MATSEN: That's the story.

FEUERSTEIN: (She laughs) Okay. And the Czars and they were, as you know, Russia was a very, and is, a very anti-Semitic country and had state-sponsored pogroms all the time. And they had within the palace grounds, they would have a Jewish family. And that family was the Rittenbergs. And they...it was my fath...my mother's father. And so she grew up and she knew with, you know, and played with the Czarevitch, with Alexander, and she knew Rasputin. And there's a picture of, that we have at home of her on Rasputin's knee. And he is exactly like he was in the movie. But looks exactly like that, with these crazy eyes, humongous man and his wild, wild beard and hair like a real hippie, you know. But that's the real Rasputin. So then during the Russian Revolution, as I indicated, she was not a red Russian, as most Jews were, but a white Russian. So the Bolsheviks were after her, her family, and so...and the other Russians, well, you know, whatever. And they got as far as Berlin and my mother said that her

mother never came out of like a depression. She was just all the time..she never ever...she said...my mom said she just cried all the time. And she had...my mom had a brother named David. Want me to tell you stories about him? And he was born four years, four months, and four days after my mother. And my mother said she made his life perfectly miserable with those fours. And she said that David, when it came time for David to go to school, he said he would not go the first day. And the father, whose name was Jacob also, by the way, took him to school the first day and he ran away and they couldn't find him. And then towards evening, they found him and he said, "I told you I wouldn't go the first day." And she...my mother said the family was all set for another deal the next day. He got up perfectly fine. He went to school. He says, "I told you I wouldn't go the first day. I'll go the second."

MATSEN: (She laughs)

FEUERSTEIN: So he went.

MATSEN: So this is your mother's brother?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh.

MATSEN: This is your uncle.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. But I never knew him. He perished in the Vilna ghetto. When my father served in India and Okinawa...because he spoke eight European languages, they sent him to the Pacific. And he had a very distinguished military career and his last place stateside was San Antonio, Texas, and we stayed there. And then after the war in '45, there was a German-Jewish newspaper called the Aufbau. And they printed lists of survivors. And my mother saw three names there that she recognized – three brothers named Landau and they were in Stockholm. And she wrote to them and said if...and I

remember, we frantically got, you know, all sorts of...it was in San Antonio, which is rather warm...we got flannel underwear and all kinds of things, you know, and sent them boxes of stuff. And we wrote them that, you know, if they are family, this is who we are and please get in touch with us. And if they're not, please enjoy these things and we're very sorry. Well, they wrote back that they are family and then they told us how everybody perished. Her parents were beaten to death. And her brother's wife...he had one child who starved, and just before the child probably would have died...I mean, just exactly like you read about...an SS officer came and picked the child up by the legs and smashed it up against a wall. And then it put the mother into labor and they tied her legs together and so she burst. You know, it was just horrible...I mean, one thing after another. But they said they had never seen or heard how David died or if he died. So my mom really thought he lived. And how they lived was extremely interesting. Do you want to hear this?

MATSEN: Yes, I would.

FEUERSTEIN: Okay. There was a Dutch doctor named Kersten, K-E-R-S-T-E-N, not Jewish, who was Himmler's personal physician, and Himmler had a bad back. And every once in a while, he would call for this Kersten to manipulate his back.

MATSEN: Like a chiropractor?

FEUERSTEIN: Yes.

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: And Kersten would get to a critical spot and say, "I'm not going any further unless you give me two hundred Jews," "...unless you give me fifty Jews," "...unless you give me seventy Jews." And then Kersten and Himmler would go in the Mercedes to the lines and Kersten would pick out people whom he

thought had a chance of survival. And they were picked out. They were standing naked right before going into the gas chambers and Kersten...in fact, you can check and verify this story. It's in a book called The Kersten Memoirs. And then they...then Count Bernadotte from Sweden took these people to Stockholm and there are several hundred whom Kersten saved, and these three were among them. And then after the war, they wanted to get as far away from the continent of Europe as possible, and they went to Singapore and Australia and so on. In fact, I met two of them. I went to Australia to see them, but the first time I met one, he was so drop-dead handsome. Before the war, he worked for MGM, and then after the war, MGM said, "Anybody who survived, you have your job back." And he worked, of all things, on the film "Tora, Tora, Tora." Do you know what that was? That's about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Evidently "tora" means, of all things, "attack" in Japanese. And he came here, and I didn't know he was coming. And the doorbell rang and he said, "I am Bronick Landau." And he was SO handsome, and he said...the first thing he said was, "I'm sorry you don't have other people to know. They were all so wonderful." He's telling me he's sorry. So, very, very special young men. They are not religious at all. They are now dead, but they were not religious at all. So...and then, in fact, one of their widows is coming to spend Sukkot with us, that's...and she'll be here about another week, in another week.

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah, very lovely, lovely people. She was in the camp Ravensbruck and she...her back was broken and her legs were broken and when you see her, she looks like...she looks a mess! And then she opens her mouth and is lovely. She has her doctorate in French from the Sorbonne, brilliant, just an angel, an angel. And my mom found out that eighty-one members of her family perished. And she had to take that all alone because my father was in Europe.

MATSEN: So she found out all of that when she was by herself.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh.

MATSEN: That must have been very hard...

FEUERSTEIN: Very.

MATSEN: ...difficult.

FEUERSTEIN: Very, very hard. I'll show you a picture of that family and you'll see some like interesting things. But she had...this is really interesting, too. She had a grandmother born in Chicago because her grandfather - they were wealthy, after all, you know, in the Czar's court - came to the World Exposition in Chicago sometime in the 1800's, found this lovely lady, brought her back. So even then, I have a great...

MATSEN: You had a relative that was born in this country.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. But they were considered like exotica, you know. And also America, at least before World War, you know, World War II, was just considered an outpost, sort of barbarous.

MATSEN: Where did you...when your father came back from World War II...

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh.

MATSEN: ...where did you live after that? Did you stay in Tucson...

FEUERSTEIN: Well, what happ...

MATSEN: ...or were you...you moved around?

FEUERSTEIN: No, we were...he came back to us in San Antonio.

MATSEN: Okay.

FEUERSTEIN: And then we went to New York to say again thank you to the people who took us. And then my father's reputation was already made and he was asked to teach at a couple of universities and so on. And he...and he had sort of like terminal loyalty and he said, "Now when I came here, you know, I didn't...you didn't take me. Now all of a sudden, you'll take me?" "Huh-uh," and he went back to Tucson. And he taught at the University of Arizona and served as their rabbi until he was sixty-five there. And he died in 1975.

MATSEN: Now how did you meet your husband? Where did you...

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, my gosh, my husband and I met when I was five years old.

MATSEN: Oh, my, when you were five?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I'm fifty-eight years old, celebrating my golden wedding anniversary (she laughs). And he...and he was ten and we sort of always had a little sweetness for each other and I always knew whom he went out with and he whom I went out with. And for a while there, he was sort of like a big brother.

MATSEN: Now was this in Tuscon?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Our families were friendly and then he went into the Army. It was the Korean Conflict.

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: And when he came back, I'd grown up. And we started dating and it "took."  
And we've been married, oh, my gosh now, I don't know long it is – since '57.  
How long is that? Thirty-seven years? Thirty-eight years? Something like that.  
It's '94.

MATSEN: Yeah, so it would be thirty-seven years.

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah, uh-huh. But seems as if I've always been married to him, because I can't  
even think of a story or...that he wasn't part of (she laughs).

MATSEN: That's wonderful.

FEUERSTEIN: You know. I said, "Did I ever tell you the time...?" "Yes, I was there." (She  
laughs) You know, or something like that.

MATSEN: And how many children do you have?

FEUERSTEIN: We have three children and seven grandchildren.

MATSEN: Wow. And what are their names?

FEUERSTEIN: Esther and Judith and David. And Esther's married to a rabbi and Esther is the  
head of a Jewish Children's Museum – the only one in the world. And she goes  
all over the world consulting on how to set up children's museums. She's in  
New York a lot. And they have three beautiful children.

MATSEN: And where do they live?

FEUERSTEIN: They live on the other side of the hill, in Los Angeles.

MATSEN: So they're close.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh, but I hardly see them because they're just so busy...

MATSEN: Traveling.

FEUERSTEIN: ...just busy, busy, busy. And then I have Judy, and Judy – I'll show you some of her work. Judy's an artist and she specializes in making Jewish wedding contracts. And the Jewish wedding contract is the oldest continually-used contract, legal contract, in the world. So she does the calligraphy in Hebrew, following the recipe for the making of ink like to write a torah. You know what a torah is?

MATSEN: Uh-huh.

FEUERSTEIN: And she...and then she really does some beautiful work around it. And she has works hanging in the Jewish Museum in New York, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and in a museum in Miami. She even has one sort of like Art Deco, and she's made a couple of lithos. But she usually makes them on parchment, which is really quite rare. So she's very busy, and she has four children. And then I have David, and you met David. And David is an Israeli citizen and he's just home for a while.

MATSEN: So he lives in Israel?

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Well, Mrs. Feuerstein, thank you very much for doing this interview.

FEUERSTEIN: Thank you.

MATSEN: We appreciate your time and...

FEUERSTEIN: You didn't ask me what I do now?!

MATSEN: Oh, let's get that on tape as well.

FEUERSTEIN: Yes.

MATSEN: We can't sign off yet. Tell me about what you're doing now.

FEUERSTEIN: Okay. I'm a high school English teacher. And the reason I majored in English is by the time I got to college, I already knew that you're not supposed to get low grades just to make the other kids think you're okay. And so I got all A's and when it came time to...

MATSEN: Where did you go to school? Where did you go to college?

FEUERSTEIN: I went to the University of Arizona and the University of California at Berkeley. And then when it came time to declare a major, remember I said, "Daddy, what do I do?" And he says, "What do you mean, what do you do? You major in English and get better at what they do than they can." And so I majored in English, and I teach high school English and I've taught it for the past thirty years. I teach Advanced Placement English and English Lit, American Lit, and Modern Lit. And I enjoy it very much, and I have students teaching at Harvard, the University of Indiana, and all the, you know, all over. And it's a really very special thing to be a teacher.

MATSEN: It must make you feel accomplished...

FEUERSTEIN: I feel...

MATSEN: ...to see your students doing so well.

FEUERSTEIN: ...very, very lucky. Yes.

MATSEN: Tell me about your relationship with Mr. Wiesel.

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, well, one year I had the kids read Night by Elie Wiesel. And as a response, instead of just writing, you know, you know, a book report or answering a question or what not, I had them write a letter to him and I said that I would send it to him. And that's what we did, and so packed up thirty letters and put them in a manila envelope and sent them. And I thought, well, chick-chock, that's done...I, you know, and then about four or five weeks later, I got an answer. And he had written to each one of the kids. And so we've done that. We did that, by the way, with Jersey Kazinski. We do that with poets. The other day, Philip Levine was here. Last Tuesday night, we went to hear him. We're going to go hear Thomas Gunn next month. And students from all of the years that I've taught have really met some very, you know, big people, and that has had a tremendous influence on their lives. In fact, I have many Asians whose parents are furious because they had their kids programmed to go into the sciences, and many of them, you know, changed majors and went into, you know, English and lit or intellectual history or something like that. And not to please, but it had been because they had met these people and it was such, you know, a salient evening.

MATSEN: It made an impact...

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: ...on your students.

FEUERSTEIN: Yes. And I love teaching. I love it today as much as I did the first day. And...although teaching has changed, because students have changed. But I've

gotten a lot of...lot of strokes from it and a lot of honors. I was Teacher of the Year a couple times, and I've really enjoyed my career as wife, mother, teacher, and daughter.

MATSEN: All of those things.

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Well, if you were to answer to me whether or not you are glad you came here, then...

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, there's no question. There's no question.

MATSEN: I can hear the answer through your story.

FEUERSTEIN: That's something. I've never been an America-basher. I don't allow that with my students. My father was buried with the American flag over his casket, you know. It was draped over his casket and then flew over the synagogue afterwards. I'm very, very grateful to America. That is not to say that America doesn't have faults, but it is far and away the best country, I think, in the world. And it's interesting, it's also, I think, one of the best countries for Jews. It's even better for Jews in many respects than Israel, in that Israel doesn't have separation of church and state. And all of the family law is under the rabbinate. Here, of course, it's all...it's different, you know.

MATSEN: But there also would be a little bit more fear living there as opposed to here.

FEUERSTEIN: Fear, in terms of what? Actually, there's more fear here.

MATSEN: Really?

FEUERSTEIN: Yeah, oh, yes! You don't feel...you don't feel at all afraid in Israel in terms of...you mean, in terms of terrorists or things like that?

MATSEN: That's what I was thinking.

FEUERSTEIN: No, here I don't walk outside at night, but I walk...sure, you walk up and down the streets of Israel.

MATSEN: You mean it's safer?

FEUERSTEIN: There are soldiers walking with, you know, AK-47's. My son, when he was in the Army, walked with his rifle. And when he was out of the Army, you know...now in terms of safety, it's safer, I would think, there. But I don't think here the lack of safety is because I'm Jewish. I think the lack of safety is what any citizen in an urban center now feels, with the craziness of drive-by shootings and gang warfare and that kind of stuff. And see, that you don't have, of course, in Israel because it is a homogenous society. So the glory that is America also, you know, are the seeds for its, you know...it's a blessing and a curse, you know. But America is still everything in the world. But the price of freedom is, of course, those, you know...

MATSEN: Problems that we have.

FEUERSTEIN: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MATSEN: Well, I want to thank you for doing this with us.

FEUERSTEIN: You're very welcome.

MATSEN: I appreciate it very much and I know the project as well will be more rich for this interview.

FEUERSTEIN: It's hard for you, isn't it, to just hear th...you know, hear this stuff all the time?

MATSEN: No, I love it, actually. I really do. It...what I need sometimes is to get the space to think about it when we're done.

FEUERSTEIN: Hm.

MATSEN: But to sign off for the project...

FEUERSTEIN: Oh, I'm sorry.

MATSEN: Ellis Island Oral History Project. This is Elysa Matsen on September 17, 1994.  
Thank you.

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