

EI-057

HERMAN BARRETT, RUBIN BARRETT AND RUTH BARRETT TEPERMAN  
BIRTH DATE: JUNE 25,1918, FEBRUARY 22,1925 AND OCTOBER 1,1922  
INTERVIEW DATE: 7/24/1991  
RUNNING TIME: 51:57  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1993  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1/1993

POLAND, 1929  
AGES 11, 4 AND 7

PORT: LIVERPOOL  
RESIDENCES: POLAND: ODZIWILL  
US: NYC, LOWER EAST SIDE

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We're here on Wednesday, July 24th, at Ellis Island, with Ruth Teperman, Herman Barrett and Rubin Barrett, who came from Poland in 1929 and were detained at Ellis Island for five or six weeks. Good morning, everyone.

ALL: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Why don't I sort of go across the room, and everyone give me your full name, middle names included, or

maiden names, whatever, and dates of birth. Rubin?

RUBIN: Rubin Barrett. That's Rubin L. Barrett. And I was born February 22, 1925.

SIGRIST: Okay. And Herman?

RUBIN: Herman was born, how old? What year were you born?

RUTH: 1918.

HERMAN: 1918.

RUBIN: What day?

HERMAN: The 25th.

RUTH: June 25th.

RUBIN: June 25th, 1918, Herman was born.

SIGRIST: And Ruth?

RUTH: My name is Ruth Carol Boretsky Teperman ( she laughs ), and I was born October 1, 1922.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Boretsky for me, please?

RUTH: B-O-R-E-T-S-K-Y. You want the Polish spelling?

SIGRIST: Sure.

RUTH: B-O-R-I-C-K-I.

SIGRIST: That's easy. Were you all born in the same town?

RUTH: No.

SIGRIST: Okay, why don't we go across and do that.

RUTH: Herman and my brother Nat, who lives in Florida, were born in a very tiny village called Odziwil.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

RUTH: Well, I don't, I have the Polish spelling, but I imagine it would be O-D-Z-I-W-I-L, or something like that. Rubin and I were born in Opcznie, O-P-C-Z-N-A. No?

RUBIN: O-P-C-Z-N-I-E.

SIGRIST: Okay. Whereabouts in Poland is that?

RUTH: Like everybody else, not far from Warsaw. ( they

laugh ) It really wasn't far. I think it was closer to another town called Tomaszow, and Lodz and that vicinity.

SIGRIST: I see. You said Herman was born elsewhere. Did your family move to this other town? Why was that?

RUTH: Okay. Herman and Nat were born in Odziwil because after my parents got married they lived in my father's home town. Then for I think financial reasons they moved to my mother's home town.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about your parents, then, since this is sort of important to the story. What was your father's name?

RUBIN: My father's name was Abraham, and his father and his brothers, in the town of Odziwil, were the town shopkeepers and merchants of the town. And he was, I think, the middle of the children. I think they had nine children.

RUTH: He had an older brother.

RUBIN: He had an older brother.

RUTH: And he was, I think, the second brother, and then there were younger brothers and sisters. There were nine children.

SIGRIST: You say they were shopkeepers. A specific trade, or . . .

RUBIN: They were mostly egg merchants, and they owned the . . .

RUTH: They owned horses. They also had orchards.

RUBIN: They also had orchards. They were the, from what I understand my father telling me, they were the wealthier of the people. And if we get further on to the Hitler era, we can tell you what happened to them when Hitler's troops came. But my father, my mother lived in a different town, you know, Opoczno, and he always loved her, according to what my mother said. And my mother's father was a shoemaker. I'm diverging . . .

SIGRIST: That's quite all right. Go ahead.

RUBIN: And her mother's name was . . .

RUTH: You're named for her.

RUBIN: Rachel, Rachel.

SIGRIST: And what was your mother's name?

RUBIN: My mother's name was Toba.

SIGRIST: Do you know when your parents married?

RUBIN: 1916.

RUTH: We have their marriage certificate with us.

RUBIN: They were married in 1916. And I think the reason my father left his home town after my two brothers were born is because I think, I believe he had some sort of argument with his father and his brother, a financial argument, so he left and came to live in the town of Opoczno, where my sister and I were born.

RUTH: And we lived with our maternal grandparents.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about what that was like for you as children, living with your grandparents.

RUTH: It was lovely. As I remember . . .

SIGRIST: What were they like? Tell me what they were like.

RUTH: Well, I don't remember my grandmother because she died shortly after I was born and, Ruby, you were named for her. But I remember that it was really, we were, you know, poor people. Consider it poor. And we lived, you know, like in the Jewish ghetto, but it was very pleasant because we lived in a two-room house. I remember Grandpa Zeta in Opoczno. It was very nice. I have nice pleasant memories of it. I remember summertime, swimming in the pond. And across from his house there were orchards, flower-like orchards. And my maternal grandfather was a lovely man.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

RUTH: He was, ( she laughs ). He had a beard. Typical, you know, Orthodox Jewish beard. And he used to smoke. And he was just a very, very nice man. We used to, the two of us used to sit on his lap at one time. And it was, going to America was wonderful, except that we were leaving him. And we were also living near my

mother's sister's family. Although her sister had died right after, just before I was born, there were several children who were older than we were, and they were always with us taking care of us, and it was the communal nice life.

SIGRIST: So you were surrounded by extended family growing up. Do you remember your grandmother, because you're a little bit older.

RUTH: No, he's younger.

RUBIN: . . . because I'm named after her.

RUTH: He's the youngest.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. I'm sorry.

RUBIN: I remember my grandfather a little bit, but I do remember that cottage. It was like a log cabin type of thing. And I don't know if it's a dream, but I do remember in the summertime we'd go across, the orchard was right across the road from our little cabin. And to the left was like a little river or a pond.

RUTH: We walked down a little road.

RUBIN: And we'd swim there, and it was just a lovely time. After all, I was three or four years old, and it was great living and it was great. And my mother told me how much my grandfather, I was the baby of the family, how much he used to watch me and shake me and take care of me in the carriage. That's what she told me. And it was just a lovely time.

RUTH: We had very loving cousins, and it was just nice. It was, I mean, we were aware of anti-Semitism on the part of the Polish people. I remember, if you want to hear an incident.

SIGRIST: Sure. Go right ahead.

RUTH: I remember walking through the town with my grandfather one day. I can't remember too much, but that incident always stood out in my head. And as we were walking down the street, there were a group of young men walking in the opposite direction, and my grandfather took me across the street in order to avoid any confrontation. So we ourselves did not live through

pogroms because the year was 1929, but we were aware that these things had happened.

SIGRIST: Let me ask Herman about your grandparents. What do you remember of your grandmother, since they don't remember.

RUBIN: Do you remember Mama's father or mother?

RUTH: Mother, the mother. He wants the mother.

HERMAN: Father come to . . .

RUBIN: No. Your grandfather.

RUTH: Grandmother. The grandmother.

HERMAN: My mother?

RUBIN: What do you remember about them?

SIGRIST: Was grandma a good cook? Try that.

RUTH: Remember Mama's mother?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUTH: Do you remember her?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUTH: All right. What do you remember?

HERMAN: She told me I was a bad boy.

RUTH: ( she laughs ) She used to tell him that he was a bad boy.

SIGRIST: Why? Why were you a bad boy?

HERMAN: Mischievous.

RUTH: He was very mischievous.

SIGRIST: What kind of trouble did you get into?

HERMAN: I fooled around.

RUTH: He fooled around. He was, well, you have to be aware of the fact he was not born deaf. And he had spinal meningitis when he was about a year and a half old. But his mind was very active, and he was going to school in Poland. He had private tutors, and he was even going to Hebrew school. And when he came to this country, he first had to learn another language, but he

was. And he was always protective of our brother Nat, who lives in Florida, because they were two years apart, and they were both two bright, had bright red hair. And he was the one who used to take care of Nat, even though he was deaf, he was stronger. ( she laughs ) Right?

SIGRIST: I see. How old were you when your grandmother died?

RUTH: ( to Herman ) How old were you when Grandma died? I'll figure it out. How old were you when Grandma died? If I, she died after I was born, and he's four years older than me. He must have been five or six.

SIGRIST: Since we were talking about, we started talking about anti-Semitism. Let's talk about religious life in general. Now, you said you lived in a Jewish ghetto of a sort. Talk about what it was like to live in that kind of environment.

RUBIN: I don't remember too much about it, because I was just happy. I was a happy young baby, you know, boy. I didn't see any anti-Semitism till I came to this country, to be honest. But I, all I remember is what

my mother told me about it. They had pogroms, and it was terrible. And the, it seems that every time there was something wrong, some sort of famine or some sort of reaction in Poland, they blamed the Jews of everything. And this is what I hear, and this is what I read. I don't remember any overt anti-Semitism, because I was too young.

SIGRIST: What about your own family life. Talk about Passover, for instance. What was it like?

RUTH: Okay. I was just, you were reading my mind. I remember Passover, I remember a seder. I remember a seder because we were sitting in our grandfather's house where we lived, around the table, and I remember very clearly when it came time to open up the door for, you know about opening the door for Elijah?

RUBIN: For Elijah, the prophet, comes into every seder.

RUTH: The prophet. And just as somebody went to open up the door for Elijah, one of our cousins, he came in and frightened me. You know, it was as though Elijah was coming in. And they used to play tricks on us. I

remember one winter there was a lot of snow. And I was walking with my cousin, and he had put eggshells along the way. ( she laughs ) You know, "Look where the chicken laid the egg." You know. It was pleasant. I mean, it was like being raised almost semi-farm, semi-rural.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking for Passover?

RUTH: Well, I guess it was my mother, that I remember.

SIGRIST: What kind of foods do you remember in Poland?

RUTH: Well, you'd have to go to the baker for your Passover matzos, which were baked. And I remember my grandfather going around and cleaning the whole house with a, what was it, like a goose feather. Instead of, I don't know if you know about these rituals. Okay, you clean. And there were people who still do this, to clean the house of any crumbs, of any breadcrumbs that might, because it has to be very clean and pure. And they were very Kosher. If a, for example, if a knife which was a meat knife was used for dairy, it was no longer Kosher, but there was a way of cleansing that

knife. You went outside and stuck it in the ground, and that cleansed the knife. I mean, I guess there were a lot of superstitions involved, too. But we were raised Orthodox.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue nearby?

RUTH: Oh, sure. I remember going on the holidays.

RUBIN: Every town, yes.

SIGRIST: Describe the synagogue a little bit for me.

RUTH: That, I really don't remember it too well. It was small, you know.

RUBIN: ( to Herman ) We were at schul, we would, Saturday, go to schul. You remember the schul? What did it look like?

RUTH: In Poland.

RUBIN: You don't remember? No.

RUTH: In Hebrew, tell him. ( Hebrew ).

RUBIN: What did it look like? Small? Wood?

HERMAN: The house, the house.

RUBIN: The house.

RUTH: The synagogue was a little . . .

HERMAN: The boys go far away, but I played soccer.

RUBIN: You played soccer for the school, the boys and girls followed you. You were the captain of the soccer team. We're talking about old men going to pray. You remember the building? Do you remember where it was?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUBIN: What did it look like?

RUTH: He doesn't. His memory . . .

HERMAN: A stone house.

RUBIN: A stone house.

SIGRIST: In fact, I was going to ask you that. What, in this town, what were the buildings made of? Obviously this is a large stone building you're talking about. What

about the houses?

RUBIN: If I remember the house we lived in, it wasn't stone, it was wood.

SIGRIST: That's right. You said logs.

RUTH: As a matter of fact, Grandpa owned the house we lived in, and some adjacent ones.

RUBIN: They were wooden houses. Log cabin-type houses.

RUTH: He was a shoemaker, but they had the property.

RUBIN: You have to understand a shoemaker in those, in Europe, from what I was told, a shoemaker was the lowest class of person. And people used to say, my grandfather's name was Motel, Motel the Shiester. That's called Motel the shoemaker.

SIGRIST: How do you spell "motel"?

RUBIN: M-O-T-E-L.

RUTH: Like motel. ( they laugh )

RUBIN: That's called Motel the Shiester, or motel-the-

shoemaker. And I was told that the shoemaker is like the lowest class of occupation. But he was a lovely person. Even though I was young, I remember how lovely he was.

RUTH: Well, my mother always said that even though he was the lowest caste occupation-wise, he was very respected.

SIGRIST: Did you keep animals at all?

RUBIN: I remember animals all around. Chickens around. We didn't have pigs, because pigs were not allowed. But there was chickens, and dogs . . .

RUTH: And do you remember going to the slaughterer, to the schoitet?

RUBIN: No, I don't remember going to the slaughter.

RUTH: I remember going with my mother when she'd, you know, with the chicken, to have the chicken slaughtered kosher-style.

SIGRIST: And there's the name for the gentleman who does that.

RUTH: Schoitet.

SIGRIST: That's right. That's right. S-C-H-O-I-T-E-T, or something like that.

RUTH: Right. C-H-I-E-T. You'll have to look that up.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about school, because you mentioned somebody went to school.

RUBIN: Herman went.

SIGRIST: Herman went to Hebrew school.

RUTH: And to Polish school.

RUBIN: ( to Herman ) You went to school in Europe. Yes, he went to school.

RUTH: And my other, Nat, who was, Herman was the oldest, Nat was second, then I and then Rudy.

RUBIN: You wore a uniform.

RUTH: Oh, sure they wore uniforms.

RUBIN: No, no uniform? No.

RUTH: Well . . .

RUBIN: There was no uniform in school at all. But he went to school, my other brother went to school. I didn't go to school there. Ruth and I . . .

RUTH: No, because you didn't start school until you were seven, and that's when we came.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about, get back to your parents a little bit, and why they wanted to come to this country. Who wanted? Was it your mom, your dad?

RUBIN: My father. My father wanted.

RUTH: My father. It was a choice of either Palestine or the United States.

RUBIN: He had applications made to Palestine and the United States. And from what I understand, he was waiting on both. And we got the visa to the United States and about a week or two later we got the visa to Palestine, but he chose to come to the United States because he had three aunts living here.

RUTH: One of them who had vouched-safe to, you know, vouch

for him.

RUBIN: His father's sisters, three of his father's sisters. And he chose to come here because he felt it was the land of opportunity. And he, my father was, he hated the fact of the anti-Semitism in Poland. It was just, it got into him so badly that he was, became, just wanted to get out of there, and he wanted his family out of there.

RUTH: He was also a Zionist at that time.

RUBIN: He was a Bundist. He wasn't a Zionist. A Bundist was like a Socialist, and a Zionist was a Zionist. But he figured, being Palestine, they were going to have a socialist state, which eventually did happen. But he came here because he just wanted to get out, he wanted to bring his family.

RUTH: And he wanted, he was looking for business opportunities, and to take care of his family.

SIGRIST: Talk about the aunts that were already here. When did they come?

RUBIN: They came . . .

RUTH: The early '20s.

RUBIN: From what I understand, they came in the early, 19, like from, I don't even think they were at my father's wedding. They were probably here before then.

RUTH: Not all of them.

RUBIN: Well, the three of them. I don't know.

RUTH: Because Tanta Gietel came just the year before we did.

RUBIN: All right, so . . .

SIGRIST: I guess my question is were they well-established here? They hadn't just come here.

RUBIN: They were established here, but they were working people, but they were established.

SIGRIST: Did your mother want to come?

RUBIN: I really couldn't tell you.

RUTH: She wanted to come because this was where her husband

was and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Your father came first.

RUBIN: My father came in 1927.

RUTH: Six. 1926. He was here three years when we came.

RUBIN: He came in 1927. I beg to differ with her, but let's keep it that way.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to him when he left?

RUBIN: I don't.

RUTH: I do.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, can you talk about that for me, please?

RUTH: I remember, well, that I had to be four or five years old at the time. And that we went from our town to his parents' home town where he was born, Odziwil. And that we were in a wagon and I remember falling asleep and being covered in the wagon. And after we left his town, coming back to our town and then he left, but I

don't remember anything else. But I remember being traumatized by it because here he was just leaving and, uh, well, we were lucky because, like, from what I was told a lot of men came and didn't bring their families. But he said the one good thing that he always remembered about President Hoover was that he allowed people to bring their families on their first citizenship papers rather than having to wait five years. So as soon as that happened, he applied to bring his family.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about Mom being alone in Poland those three years, three or four years, when he was here. What did she do? Did she get a job?

RUBIN: No. She didn't get a job. She took care of the four children.

RUTH: She had four little children. He sent money.

RUBIN: Sure. And my father sent money, and my grandfather took care of us, but she was the house, she was the housekeeper in the house. And then she had her brother-in-law, you know, whose sister died and

brother-in-law, and their children who, cousins who helped take care of us.

RUTH: She always had help at home.

RUBIN: She was quite busy.

RUTH: It was very different for her when she came here because she no longer had her nieces and nephews who were always around to help with four children. And as soon as she came here she went to help my father in his business.

SIGRIST: So your father was, there was frequent communication between them.

RUBIN: Mail communication.

RUTH: They didn't have telephones in those days.

SIGRIST: Right. Sending money?

RUBIN: Mail communication. He sent money.

RUTH: He supported his family.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when your mother said, "We're going to

America?" When it all actually happened? I assume he sent some tickets or something.

RUTH: Yeah. Well, we had to go to the consulate in Warsaw and my father was worried that they might not allow my brother Herman to come in because he was deaf, but there was no problem apparently. But that was, you know, a fear that they had.

RUBIN: My father's fear was, in fact, he told us later on. He told my mother that if they don't let Herman in we all go back.

RUTH: And he'll go back.

RUBIN: Imagine what could have happened to us with the Holocaust and all. We all would have, he would have taken all of us back including himself. As it turned out, it was held up because of me, not because of him.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about packing. Do you remember getting ready to go?

RUBIN: I was too young.

SIGRIST: You were too young.

RUTH: You know, I don't, I was too young. My mother brought bedding, I don't know. I guess they told her, "Bring feather quilts and pillows." ( she laughs ) So she brought some of that, and I may still have a pillow in my house. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did you bring anything that was yours that you can remember, something that you didn't want to give up?

RUTH: I probably tried to bring a toy, you know, home made doll or something, but we didn't have too many toys. I don't know, we made toys. It's not like now. But aside from that, I don't remember. I think that after my mother died we probably got rid of a lot of stuff anyway. But I don't remember bringing anything special of my own. Oh, no, wait a minute. Mama did bring some silverware. As a matter of fact, Ruby and his wife still use some of those very big spoons that she had. And I think that I still have a sharp knife that was made in Warsaw. It's not stainless steel. She brought knives and she brought choppers.

SIGRIST: Did Herman bring anything that was his?

RUTH: ( Addressing Herman. ) Do you remember bringing anything special from Europe? When we were coming here did you pack anything that you liked? No, no. He says he doesn't.

SIGRIST: I see.

RUTH: It was a very traumatic experience for somebody like him. Even more so than for us.

RUBIN: Didn't we go to Hamburg, and from Hamburg went to Liverpool?

RUTH: We went to Danzig, Gdansk.

RUBIN: Danzig, we went to Liverpool.

RUTH: Remember, because we had to go to, it was called Danzig at that time, to take a boat to Liverpool.

SIGRIST: How did you get there?

RUBIN: By train.

RUTH: Probably on the train. We probably went to the next

big town, either Warsaw or Tomaszow and probably Warsaw and took, wait a minute. We went to Warsaw, because in Warsaw we went to an aunt's house, my father's sister who lived in Warsaw. And then we took the train to Danzig, and from Danzig we took a boat, which was a small vessel, because I think we were all seasick. My brother Nat remembers being very, very seasick.

RUBIN: I remember being seasick on the other boat, but that . . .

RUTH: Then we waited in Liverpool like in a dorm-type place. We took the Aquitania.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Liverpool?

RUBIN: A few days. Let me tell you about an incident in Liverpool.

RUTH: This is a good story.

RUBIN: My brother was mute, and my mother, who hasn't seen her husband in two years, was a young thirty-five . . .

RUTH: She was thirty-six years old.

RUBIN: She was a thirty-six year old woman. And unfortunately she had bad false teeth and they cracked. And here she was, shaky because she was going to see her husband who she hasn't seen in two years, and she hasn't got teeth in her mouth. She went out on a snowy night with my brother here. ( referring to Herman )

RUTH: She had only ten dollars.

RUBIN: She only had ten dollars. And it seems in England, like, also in Canada, the dentists do their own bridge work. They don't send it out. And he helped her find a dentist. He pointed . . . ( Addresses Herman. )  
You were with Mama in Europe with bad teeth.

RUTH: She always said with the Yiddish language you can go any place in the world.

RUBIN: And he found a dentist for her and fixed her teeth. It was a lovely incident, because here she was, you know, a handsome young woman. We all think our mother was handsome, and she wanted to greet her husband, who was a very handsome man. My father was a very handsome man. And this man, ( referring to Herman ) who was

about ten or eleven . . .

RUTH: He was eleven years old.

RUBIN: Who was deaf and cannot speak, he found this dentist to help my mother. That's the incident in Liverpool, and it's a very interesting story, and a true story.

SIGRIST: When you were in Liverpool, do you remember being processed at all? Any kind of inspections there? Nothing like that.

RUTH: No, no.

RUBIN: No. None whatsoever.

SIGRIST: Were you the only ones from your town that were traveling?

RUBIN: Yes. As far as I remember, we were the only ones from our little town.

RUTH: Yes. There were a lot of people there, but we were the only ones. I saw my first banana in Liverpool.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What was that like?

RUTH: What kind of, you know. ( she laughs ) I remember seeing somebody eating something yellow and peeling it. And you fell in love with bananas right away.

RUBIN: I ate too many. ( Addresses Herman. ) In Liverpool, England. The first banana.

RUTH: And then we saw people chewing gum on the boat, the Aquitania and I said to my mother, "Why are they chewing? What are they chewing?" You know.

SIGRIST: So you said that you were in Liverpool for a couple of days.

RUTH: Two days, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

RUTH: Oh, or over. Like maybe three or four days.

SIGRIST: You had no relatives in Liverpool that were seeing you.

RUBIN: No, no. Strangers.

SIGRIST: And what class did you travel?

RUBIN: Steerage.

RUTH: No, we didn't come steerage. We had a cabin for the whole family, but it was probably third class.

SIGRIST: Yeah. They didn't, by the '20s, there was no steerage.

RUTH: No. We had our own cabin, because I remember that very clearly.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it, please.

RUTH: It was small. It probably wasn't any bigger than this area that we're in now, with bunks, and probably a chair, one or two chairs. I remember my mother being sick almost the whole trip.

RUBIN: I remember a pole in the cabin.

RUTH: See that? I don't remember that.

RUBIN: And I remember holding onto the pole because the ship was swaying. And I was four years old, a little over four-and-a-half years old. And I remember that distinctly, that I was holding on to a pole while the ship was swaying. And you were right, somebody was laying on the bunk.

RUTH: Oh, she was sick the whole time.

RUBIN: With a cold towel on her head. It must have been my mother.

RUTH: It wasn't me. ( she laughs ) No. Whenever she had a headache she'd put a wet cloth on her head.

RUBIN: ( Addresses Herman. ) Do you remember the ship, coming to America? What do you remember about it? All of us except he was very sick. He wasn't sick at the ship at all. He had the table to himself to eat anything he wanted, because nobody else wanted to eat.

SIGRIST: And how old was Herman?

RUTH: Eleven.

RUBIN: We all were throwing up all the trip.

RUTH: My brother Nat remembers being very sick, too.

RUBIN: ( referring to Herman ) And he was flying. Because he, the truth is, the strongest of us all and the most athletic of us all.

SIGRIST: Was it a very rough journey, or was it just you weren't used to this kind of . . .

RUTH: The first part of the journey, and then I think afterwards it quieted down. Because I even remember going up to the deck, and watching them play shuffleboard. Maybe we played, I don't remember. But I remember seeing that.

SIGRIST: So you were allowed up on deck from time to time?

RUTH: Oh, yeah. We were allowed. I mean, we weren't confined. It wasn't like when people came on steerage. It was no steerage.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, we're going to pause for a moment, and Peter is going to flip the tape for us.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. So we're on the Aquitania, and we're going across the Atlantic. How long did it take?

RUTH: I think it was two weeks.

RUBIN: No.

RUTH: That's what Nat said. He said it was two weeks.

RUBIN: It didn't take two weeks. It took us about a week,  
about a week.

RUTH: That's what I thought. But when I was talking to Nat,  
he said it took two weeks. I'm just giving, throwing  
it out. I don't remember.

RUBIN: ( Addresses Herman. ) How long was the trip on the  
boat? Seven days.

RUTH: Seven days.

RUBIN: My older brother says seven days.

RUTH: Yeah, that's probably more like it. Well, maybe when  
he said two weeks he meant the whole trip from the time  
we left the hometown until we got to America.

RUBIN: Probably. But it must have been seven days.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember the Statue of Liberty, seeing  
the Statue of Liberty when you came into New York

Harbor?

RUTH: Vaguely, but I do remember my father being given permission to come on board. I don't know how, he got permission.

SIGRIST: Once the boat docked, perhaps?

RUTH: When the boat docked he came on board before we were taken to Ellis Island because he probably was trying to get us off.

SIGRIST: What was that like? This is the first time you've seen Dad in a long time.

RUTH: I was so happy because like any little girl I worshipped my father, and my father really was a very handsome man. He had blonde hair and blue eyes and he was striking looking. As a matter of fact, he had joined the theater here, you know, as a hobby. He was with the Jewish theater. And, uh, we were overjoyed. I mean, there was no question. I remember that very clearly. I remember the excitement. Do you remember that?

SIGRIST: Let me just say something. When you ask Herman a question, please do it full voice, not half voice. It's not necessary to cover the microphone. But let's only do it sort of one at a time here, because it will be very hard to transcribe otherwise. ( to Herman ) Do you remember seeing your father?

RUBIN: Do you remember, when you came to America, seeing Papa for the first time? How did you feel?

HERMAN: I was ecstatic to see my father.

RUBIN: Speak louder. What did you say?

HERMAN: I was ecstatic.

RUBIN: He was ecstatic. Two years.

HERMAN: Yes, for two years.

SIGRIST: Did you cry?

HERMAN: Yeah, yeah. I cried and all.

SIGRIST: Did Dad bring gifts to you?

RUTH: Oh, he had, I think he had some candy in his pocket.

He did, he was just, it was a very exciting time. But, of course, then, when we had to be detained, it was like a shock. But, uh, he was there for us. He was always there for us.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you found out that you had to go to Ellis Island? How did that happen?

RUBIN: I guess it was a normal thing to go to Ellis Island. We went to Ellis Island. We were processed . . .

SIGRIST: How did you get there?

RUBIN: I don't know how we got there. We got, probably . . .

RUTH: A ferry.

RUBIN: A ferry brought us, or whatever. I don't know if we docked on the west side or at the Battery. Do you recall?

RUTH: No. That I don't remember.

RUBIN: But we went to Ellis Island and, uh . . .

RUTH: I think that they examined us on the boat and that's

when they found that you had the ringworm on your head, and that's why Papa couldn't take us directly from the boat home, and we were transported to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So Rubin had ringworm.

RUBIN: I had the ringworm, which was considered very contagious at that time. And they took us to Ellis Island. Why they kept the rest of the family there six weeks I don't know. But they kept me at the hospital end of Ellis Island.

RUTH: I remember going to see you in the hospital.

RUBIN: And they came to see me every day. And the nurses were crazy about me because I, really, they . . .

RUTH: Cute little boy.

RUBIN: I was a good-looking boy. I was cute. And it was, I had a wonderful time.

SIGRIST: Let's start off by talking about Ellis Island by, let me ask you, Rubin, what do you remember about being a little kid in this place?

RUBIN: I remember being in the hospital running up and down in the wards, and everybody being good to me. I had a wonderful time. The nurses, I learned how to speak English very quickly. Everybody . . .

RUTH: By the time we left there, he was speaking like a native American.

RUBIN: When I left Ellis Island people couldn't believe that I wasn't born American.

SIGRIST: How did you learn it? Who was . . .

RUBIN: The nurses, the nurses. All I had was the ringworm. There was nothing wrong with me other than the ringworm. But they took my hair off electrolysis, and they told my mother, "Your son will never have hair again." And to this day I have a bald spot here, and my hair has been the same way for 60 years. It hasn't changed. All my friends got bald, but I never got bald.

RUTH: You had more hair than you have now.

RUBIN: A little more, naturally.

RUTH: He had platinum blonde hair, which never came back. It came back like light brown.

RUBIN: Anyway, I had a wonderful time. I ate good. I helped people. I went over to all the patients and I was making them laugh and they all loved me. And I had a great time. My poor father was laying in Manhattan in the Lower East Side waiting for the family to come up, and they couldn't come up until I, until the doctor said, "Okay, he's cured."

SIGRIST: Describe to me where you stayed at Ellis Island.

RUBIN: I stayed at the hospital in a ward.

SIGRIST: Describe what that looked like.

RUBIN: Just a ward with a bed and I was in the ladies side because I was too young to be on the men's side.

RUTH: Besides, he kept them entertained singing songs.

RUBIN: I wasn't with the men at all. I was with the women. And maybe to this day that's why I like women. ( they laugh ) But . . .

SIGRIST: Were there lots of other kids here at that time?

RUBIN: I didn't see any children. I saw just young ladies, middle aged women, old women and the nurses. I didn't see any other children. But it was a nice six weeks for me.

SIGRIST: Where were you fed?

RUBIN: I was fed in the ward.

SIGRIST: What kinds of food? Anything new and different that you had never seen before?

RUBIN: I don't remember that, to be honest with you. I just remember running around our ward, and laughing at everybody, and everybody laughing at me.

SIGRIST: I'd like to ask Herman what it was like to visit you.

RUBIN: When I was in Ellis Island Hospital, how did you feel to come see me? What did you feel? Did you come every day to see me? Did you come every day to see me? Did you like to come to see me?

HERMAN: Of course.

RUBIN: Okay. Was I with the women, or only, where was I in the hospital?

HERMAN: I don't remember.

RUBIN: What did you do in Ellis Island? Where did you stay in Ellis Island? Do you remember?

RUTH: Where did you sleep, ask him.

RUBIN: Where did you sleep?

HERMAN: Where did I sleep?

RUBIN: Yeah, in Ellis Island.

HERMAN: On a cot.

SIGRIST: On a cot.

HERMAN: Yes.

RUBIN: The family was together.

HERMAN: Oh, the family was together.

RUBIN: The family was together. Okay.

SIGRIST: Well, and Ruth, let me ask you sort of the same line of questioning, because you're sort of a little girl in all of this. What was it like to be here? Was this a scary experience for you?

RUTH: Yes, yes. I think that I hung onto my mother's skirts practically all the time ( she laughs ) because I was a very, from what my mother tells me, or reminds me, that I was a very quiet child and it was seeing people from all, I mean, the first day, especially, my brother who left said, "If you want . . ." He remembers that when we came to Ellis Island . . .

SIGRIST: This is Nat you're talking about.

RUTH: Yes. That we were hungry. And my mother said she didn't know where there was food, or what, you know, what to do. And we were sitting around waiting for something to happen. And all of a sudden some man got up and he yelled, "Manga." And everybody started following him. So my mother said, in Yiddish, "Let's go too, let's follow him and we'll see what happens."

And that's how we got to the dining room the first time.

SIGRIST: Talk about eating in the dining room. What was that like?

RUTH: A lot of tables, long tables, with a lot of people. And, of course, there were new foods. However, we ate because we were hungry, and we spent our first Thanksgiving in America at Ellis Island. So I think we must have had turkey for the first time.

SIGRIST: Did Ellis Island do any kind of holiday presentation?

RUTH: Yes, because I remember Thanks, that it was a holiday. That Thanksgiving was the holiday. But I don't have any other impressions, I have to tell you the truth. Because most of the time it was just, you know, waiting for him to be released and to leave.

RUBIN: Ruth, do you remember if the food was Kosher or not Kosher, because Mama was a Kosher person. Did they have special food for . . .

RUTH: I don't remember.

RUBIN: I'll ask Herman. Herman, when you ate at Ellis Island, everybody ate together. Was the food Kosher?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUBIN: Kosher food? Italian people had different food?

HERMAN: No.

RUBIN: Everybody had the same food?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUTH: So how could it have been Kosher?

SIGRIST: There was a Kosher kitchen.

RUTH: Oh, okay. So we must have had the Kosher food.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it wouldn't surprise me.

RUBIN: ( to Herman) Long tables?

HERMAN: Family, with the family. Long tables, yes.

RUTH: But we sat together, right?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUBIN: The family sat together. Okay.

SIGRIST: Talk about your father coming to visit you. Do you remember your father coming to see you while you were here?

RUBIN: I don't remember my father coming to see me at the hospital, to be honest. He probably did, but Ruth would remember that.

RUTH: Well, I remember that he was there. That, you know, he couldn't come every day because he was working. He already had a business of his own. But he used to come, and he didn't, we never knew when we were going to go home. But when they said okay, he's being released, my father came on a Saturday because as soon as we got permission he came that Saturday and took us on the ferry and then he took a cab. He had an apartment first in Manhattan. And as we were riding in the taxi, I said to my mother, "You know, we're riding on Saturday." You know, Orthodox people don't ride. So she said, "We're allowed to today."

SIGRIST: Let me just ask you, through this whole Ellis Island ordeal, what do you think your mother's thinking about, having to be here? What do you think is going through her mind?

RUTH: Our mother just accepted it.

RUBIN: I don't know. Knowing my mother, she accepted everything and she . . .

RUTH: She coped.

RUBIN: She was such a person. I'm sure she must have been thinking about her family in Europe, and her husband here. And, uh, she loved him dearly. They were very close. So I think that she probably, like any person, she probably said, "Did I do the right thing leaving him here? Look what, my children, my little boy's in the hospital, we're staying here, we don't know what's going to be." So she must have been very, very concerned of what's going to be with her life.

SIGRIST: Had she been told what was wrong with you? Did she know that it wasn't that serious.

RUTH: Yes, she knew what it was.

RUBIN: But she, what we couldn't understand, in retrospect, is that fact that they had to shave my hair off with electrolysis and tell my mother that the hair will never come back again, and why they had to, a little ringworm, why did they say it's so contagious. It's not a contagious thing.

SIGRIST: I see.

RUTH: They didn't have enough knowledge about it at the time.

RUBIN: No, but the Ellis Island . . .

RUTH: They used extreme methods.

RUBIN: The Ellis Island people were vicious to the immigrants. They weren't very nice to them.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about leaving Ellis Island. You were here for, you said, five or six weeks, some time around then. You said you had a great time.

RUBIN: I had a great time. I had a wonderful time. And I remember we moved to 13th Street.

SIGRIST: This was going to be my next question. Where did you go . . .

RUBIN: Oh, I'm sorry. It was 13th Street between First and Second Avenue.

RUTH: 336 East 13th Street.

RUBIN: My sister remembers the address. And I had a wonderful time. And the next thing I remember is my neighbor asking my mother, my Yiddish neighbor, so my mother said, "What name should we call him in America?" She said, "Rubin." Well, next I remember Ruth and I were going to P.S. 19 to school. We went to register for school.

RUTH: We arrived on Saturday, and on Monday the next-door neighbor, with my mother, took us to register us at the school.

RUBIN: P.S. 19 on 14th Street.

RUTH: On 14th Street between First and Second Avenue, and the registrar named us. I was Rochel, I became Ruth. He

was Chiam, he became Herman, Nusin became Nathan and Rieden became Rubin. That's how we got our names.

SIGRIST: I see. Had your father already learned English since he had been here for a while?

RUTH: Sure. He was business . . .

SIGRIST: Did he insist that you, of course, you already picked it up.

RUBIN: No, on the opposite. My father insisted that we would retain our heritage. He insisted that we learn to read and write. At least I, I don't remember Ruth, we had to retain our heritage, learn Yiddish and read and write Yiddish. And he said, "English will come."

RUTH: We went to the Workmen's Circle School for Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Which is what?

RUTH: It was a, they had a Yiddish school. You know, like two or three times a week after school. But, and he insisted that my mother speak Yiddish to us in the house, he said, "Because you'll never speak English

perfectly anyway, and you want them to remember." But he himself would speak English to us. ( she laughs )

RUBIN: But my mother did go to night school to learn English.

RUTH: Yeah. Well, she learned, because we all spoke. Within two months my mother came to school, open school week, and she was apologizing to my teacher for not speaking very well, that she had just come here. And my teacher, I remember her name, said, "Well, how come," she said, "your daughter was not born here?" We picked up the language very quickly. Within two or three months nobody knew, no one who didn't know our past knew that we had been foreign-born.

SIGRIST: I see. That's interesting. Can you describe the apartment for me?

RUTH: Yes, I remember it.

SIGRIST: We'll start with Ruth, and we'll go to . . .

RUBIN: Go ahead. Describe it.

RUTH: I remember my father brought us into the apartment and

there were friends and relatives and everybody was busy making a big party. I can even remember my, their friend Molly Kaplock at the sink washing dishes and Tanta Leah, and everybody was there. And he took us around the apartment. It was a five-room apartment with steam heat. It was in the winter. And, you know, an inside bathroom, and I, he says, "This is your room," to me. And I said, "Oh," to my mother, "you know," I says, "in Opoczno they would consider us rich." I knew we weren't rich here, but it was right, like, coming, you know, do you remember that? ( to Herman ) Do you remember when we came here coming into the apartment on 13th Street. So big, and everything was very, very happy, and there was a nice happy atmosphere. By Monday we were in school and my mother was helping my father sell eggs. He had, he rented space in front of a store on First Avenue where he sold eggs.

RUBIN: He was an egg merchant.

RUTH: Right. Eventually he went into an indoor business. But there was the elevated, you're not a New Yorker,

are you? Okay. But there was an elevated train running on First Avenue at that time.

RUBIN: It was called the Second Avenue El, which came down Second Avenue and turned east on 23rd Street and then south on First Avenue to Hanover Square in New York. And the elevated train was running right above my father's stand. And I remember when the merchant, when he was selling eggs, and the train came by, you couldn't hear what was transpiring because, "How much did you say?" ( he laughs ) We had to put up with it. But after a while you didn't even realize the train was there.

SIGRIST: Sure, he just got used to it after a while. Rubin, what do you remember about the apartment. Did you have your own bedroom?

RUBIN: I slept with my sister. We lived in the same bedroom.

RUTH: We had, we shared a room and the two older boys fit in.

RUBIN: We shared a room. We, my sister and I even bathed together. My mother . . .

SIGRIST: How did that happen?

RUBIN: There was no shame.

RUTH: We were little children.

SIGRIST: Did you have a bathtub, or did you . . .

RUTH: There was a bathtub in the bathroom.

SIGRIST: There was a bathtub in the bathroom.

RUTH: Oh, yes.

RUBIN: And we bathed together because we have no shame, young,  
I was four-and-a-half and Ruth was six-and-a-half. It  
meant nothing.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like?

RUBIN: It was a multi . . .

RUTH: A lot of Italian people.

RUBIN: Italians.

RUTH: Some Ukrainians.

RUBIN: Some Ukrainians and Jewish people. Mostly, I would say, mostly Italian.

RUTH: On 13th Street.

SIGRIST: What about in your building.

RUTH: Mixed.

RUBIN: They were very mixed. They were building the New York Telephone Company on the corner of 13th Street and Second Avenue.

RUTH: It's still there, right?

RUBIN: And so, at the time, it's still there. And so as they were building it, as boys we used to play ball against the little telephone building. ( referring to Herman ) And he protected me. All the Italian boys said, "Yeah, let's beat up on the little Jewish boy, the little Yid." And he used to fight for me. You always fought for me.

RUTH: He was our protector.

RUBIN: He chased the Italian kids because I was a little

frightened boy, but he was the one who protected me. So we got used to having these ethnic fights, and it was part of growing up in New York at the time.

RUTH: Not too much. It wasn't too much. Maybe you felt it more because you were a boy.

RUBIN: That's true.

SIGRIST: Did Herman enjoy school? Did you like school in America?

RUBIN: ( Addresses Herman. ) When you came to America did you like to go to school.

RUTH: I'll tell you about that. He was originally mainstreamed into P.S. 19.

SIGRIST: Herman was.

RUTH: Right. And they had at that time, you see, Ruby was put into kindergarten, and I was put into first grade. But they had special classes for the older children who had had schooling, to see where they could be placed. So he and Nat were in those classes. Nat was

eventually placed in a grade, you know, his grade level, and he was sent to a school for the deaf on 19th Street? The School for the Deaf?

RUBIN: 23rd Street.

RUTH: What street was it on? No, the first school.

HERMAN: The first school?

RUTH: 23rd Street or 19th Street.

HERMAN: Oh, P.S. 47.

RUTH: P.S. 47, on what street?

HERMAN: 23rd Street.

RUTH: 23rd Street.

RUBIN: It's still there, by the way.

RUTH: Right. He was sent to that school, the School for the Deaf, where they didn't sign.

HERMAN: I went to the School for the Deaf in White Plains.

SIGRIST: After 23rd Street.

RUTH: At the New School, at the school . . .

HERMAN: Uniform.

RUTH: He went to a military school eventually.

HERMAN: Like West Point.

SIGRIST: Ooh, very rigid atmosphere?

RUTH: Well, what happened was he was sent to the public school where they didn't use sign language. And then a few years after that, my parents gave permission for them to go to the school in White Plains, a military academy. By that time he was about seventeen years old. But he wasn't too happy there the first two weeks, because he didn't know how to sign. He said it was giving him a headache. But he eventually learned how to sign, and he was a member of the football team, and loved it.

SIGRIST: ( to Herman ) You were very athletic?

HERMAN: Yes.

RUBIN: Yes. He loves to swim. He still swims to this day, and he played football for the team. He was the athlete, and he's the strong one of the family, the most agile.

HERMAN: There I was three years.

SIGRIST: Three years. Oh. No one else is athletic?

RUBIN: I was athletic. I played with the boys, but I never was . . .

RUTH: Ping pong. ( they laugh )

RUBIN: We played, I played baseball and football, but not like he. Not scholastically.

HERMAN: It was a very good school.

SIGRIST: Yeah, you were.

RUTH: He said it was a very good school, the school that he went to.

SIGRIST: I see. In our few remaining minutes, I just want to ask a couple of questions about your parents. One, the

most important question is was your mother happy that she came? I think it's obvious your father knew he made the right decision to come. Was your mother happy? Did she agree that this was the right decision?

RUTH: Yes. Yes, in the long run, because the opportunities here for her children. She missed her family, and of course luckily I would say, her father died before Hitler got to Poland. But, of course, when the war hit Poland in 1939 and we stopped hearing and everybody vanished, it was a very sad time for my father and mother. My father, I think, even more so, because he lost both parents, his eight brothers and sisters, and all the extended families. Even his grandparents. My father had a grandfather who was ninety-six years old. And, you know, I think there are one or two people that we heard from eventually. But my mother used to tell me he wouldn't talk about it. He used to have nightmares about what happened to them.

SIGRIST: I see.

RUBIN: From what I hear through some relations of my father's, that his, my father's father, my grandfather and my

father's brother, who were the two richest men in the town that we spoke about earlier, when the Nazis came in, they hung them in the middle of the town.

RUTH: Well, the asked the Poles.

RUBIN: They asked the Poles who were the richest merchants in town, and they pointed out Mister, the two Baretsky, the father, and they hung them. And getting back to my mother, I think the saddest time that I remember was the fact that she wasn't in Europe when her father died. That could have been, because I remember, the tears in her eyes at the time. And then she sat shiva? I remember her sitting on a box here in America for a week because her father died. After that . . .

RUTH: She didn't hear for a month. We were living on 15th Street at the time, Ruby.

RUBIN: Yes, I remember that, but after that she . . . Excuse me. After that, she became acclimated and liked America. But I think when her father died it was the saddest time.

SIGRIST: It was a hard adjustment for her.

RUBIN: Yes. Very much so.

RUTH: I remember coming into the house and she didn't have the box yet. She had just gotten the letter, and she realized that her father had been dead a month, and so she was sitting on the floor. And I said, "Mama, why are you sitting on the floor?" And she looked at me, and I was probably about nine years old at the time, and I said, "Zeta died." I realized what had happened. And you're probably right. At that point, the closest tie to Poland was gone.

SIGRIST: I see. I guess my final question, are you all happy that you came?

RUTH: Oh, of course, of course.

RUBIN: Very much so. To think of the alternative . . .

RUTH: ( Addresses Herman. ) Are you happy to be in this country?

HERMAN: Very much.

SIGRIST: It's been good to you.

RUTH: We wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be alive.

RUBIN: Let me say one more thing. My other brother and I said, "Let's go back to Poland and see what it looks like." You want to go back to Poland? To look?

RUTH: Never. I never wanted to go back.

HERMAN: Never.

RUTH: I never wanted to go back.

RUBIN: And Nat to this day says he'd like to go back. I said, "There's nothing to go back for."

RUTH: All, everything, it's, it's not, I mean, there's nobody there. I mean, what are we going to go back for.

SIGRIST: This is your country now.

RUTH: Oh, it was, no, we became Americans very fast, very fast. No question about it.

SIGRIST: Well, I want to thank all three of you for coming up here and doing this for us. I especially like interviewing brothers and sisters about the same

immigration experience because you get a different view from everyone, and this has been especially nice.

RUTH: Oh, thank you.

RUBIN: I hope we can help you and I hope that . . .

RUTH: . . . our input has been of some . . .

RUBIN: Yes, our input.

RUTH: I just want to show you something.

SIGRIST: We'll do that in a second. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.