EI-589
ABRAHAM HONIGMAN
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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE PH.D.
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ROMANIA, 1920
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- **ROUMANIA: NOVASULITA**
- **THE US: NEW YORK CITY, THE BRONX**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. We're here today in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio. It's February 6th, I think, 1995.

HONIGMAN: Correct.

LEVINE: It's February 5th, 1995. And I'm here with Abraham Honigman. Mr. Honigman came from Eastern Europe, where the borders had changed right before you left, and we'll talk about that. But it was in 1920 when you came here from Ellis Island, and you were twelve years old.

HONIGMAN: That's right, June, 1920, yeah.

LEVINE: Today, you're eighty-six, about to be eighty-seven on March 15th of this year.

HONIGMAN: Right, right.

LEVINE: Well, why don't we start at the beginning? If you would say your birth date, and then you can tell where you were born, and how it changed, the borders changed.

HONIGMAN: Okay. My birthday is March 15, 1908, I was born. I was born under the Russian flag in 1908. In 1917, when the Revolution came in Russia, the Allies took it, and they gave it to Romania. The place where I come from is known as Bessarabia.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

HONIGMAN: That's B-E-S-S-A-R-A-B-I-A. That [unclear], and then when I came here, it was Romania. In 1917, it was Romania. And that's the story. And we lived out through the war. From 1914 to 1917, we went through the war.

LEVINE: Okay, and you were in Bessarabia during that time?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you personally remember about those three years, '14 to '17?

HONIGMAN: You want to know about the war? Well, I remember when the war started, we ran away from our town, because we were the border town with Austria. The town of Austria that we came from was known as Chenowitz. And we ran to a different city; they city was known as Lubkon.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

HONIGMAN: L-U-B-K-O-N, something that area. I really don't know. And we stood there about two, three days, then went back to our city known as Novasulita, N-O-V-A-S-U-L-I-T-A. That was Russia. Throughout the war, we fought for the Austrian Army. I actually remember the first bombing that the world has ever seen—I think so, because I looked up and I seen the airplanes. They were throwing down hand grenades from the airplane. And there was a Russian armory in our city, and the hand grenades fell on my cousin's house, and they killed a little child. That was around 1916. That's the story, and then we left Novasulita in 1920, to come to the USA.

LEVINE: What was your life like, let's say, prior to 1914? Do you remember anything from those years?

HONIGMAN: Yes, my father came—left for the United States in 1904. No, no, 1912, when—

LEVINE: So you were four years old?

HONIGMAN: I was four years old when my father left, and I remember it. And when the Titanic went down, my mother thought that he was on that ship. And she cried, and I went over to her, and I asked her, "What are you crying?" So she says, "I think your father was on the ship known as the Titanic." But he wasn't; he was on the ship that we came to this country in 1920.

LEVINE: What's the name of that one?

HONIGMAN: I don't remember the name of the ship; that's one thing I don't. I think Eleanor knows the name.

LEVINE: On here it has Nordam. Nordam?

HONIGMAN: So it was Nordam. Whatever, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Okay, so you remember—well, what was your father's name?

HONIGMAN: Sam.

LEVINE: Sam.

HONIGMAN: Shulum, in Jewish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your mother's name?

HONIGMAN: Yenta. Yetta, in English.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name, do you remember that?

HONIGMAN: Alexandrovich.

LEVINE: Ooh, boy. Alexandrovich?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, Alexandrovich, yeah.

LEVINE: And now you had two older—no, one older brother?

HONIGMAN: I had one older brother, and one older sister. My older sister is dead; my older brother is alive. And my younger—I had a younger brother. He is dead, too. His name was Morthra, in Jewish. In English, it's Max. He was a school teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what about your other brother, the one who--?

HONIGMAN: Isadore. He's still alive.

LEVINE: And your sister's name? The older one?

HONIGMAN: May. Mariam, in Jewish. May, in English.

LEVINE: And the baby was born here?

HONIGMAN: Yes, in 1921.

LEVINE: And her name?

HONIGMAN: Her same is Sylvia, Soia. She's named after my grandmother. Soia, S-O-I-A.

LEVINE: Okay. How--?

HONIGMAN: Her name is Sylvia, and she is a social worker.

LEVINE: How about your grandparents? Do you remember them from Europe?

HONIGMAN: Yes. Soia was my grandmother; I remember her. And my younger sister is named after her.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that grandmother? Any time she spent with you?

HONIGMAN: The most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most gracious woman, [unclear], that's all I can tell you.

LEVINE: Did you ever do things with her, or help her, or did she ever tell you stories?

HONIGMAN: Well, I used to play dirty tricks on her.

LEVINE: Like what?

HONIGMAN: I loved her. Well, you know, it's—she was a beautiful person, and she wasn't old. I mean, you know, poor. My father was here, and my mother took—she was with my mother. She used to be proud of us, you know, and we were proud of her. Very intelligent. Are you a religious person?

LEVINE: No, not in any—

HONIGMAN: No, neither am I. I remember I used to go with her in synagogue. So she used to read for old women, because they couldn't read. So she read for them from the Bible. Beautiful person! And this I remember like today: my mother went over to her and told her, "Mama, I am going to America." In Jewish, she told her. So she said to her, that the Jewish religion is that the husband has to come to the wife. So my mother answered her: "[Unclear] he can't. He sent me tickets to come." That was in 1920. The fact he sent those in 1913—well, the war broke out, and we was stuck in Russia.

LEVINE: Did you go to school there at all?

HONIGMAN: Where? No. We were poor. I didn't go to school at all, no.

LEVINE: How about—now, you didn't know your grandfather?

HONIGMAN: No, I did not.

LEVINE: And you didn't—did you know the grandmother or grandfather on the other side?

HONIGMAN: Yes, I knew them.

LEVINE: What do you remember about them?

HONIGMAN: Well, they were two beautiful people. She was a midwife, my grand—my father's mother. And the stories that I was told--in this country, in the United States, I met people. They told me that she used to come, those that didn't have any money, to take their children from their mothers, without money. The people that they took used to tell me the story, because I was an unpaid officer in the union for fifty years or more, maybe sixty. That's all I can tell you. A beautiful person. And my grandfather was nice. He was a furrier in Europe, too. We come from furriers.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember anything in the old country? What people did for enjoyment? What kinds of observances--?

HONIGMAN: Well, they were religious. They went to synagogue. Hard-working people, poor. We remember it, and that's all I can tell you. Nice, very fine. Most of them were religious, you know—it's a small town. And very fine people, that I remember.

LEVINE: Was this a mostly Jewish town?

HONIGMAN: No. Well, we had seven thousand Jews there, in the town. And we lived on the street known as Gypsy Street. Why was it known? Because about a thousand years ago, Gypsies moved in, and they remained there. Nice people.

LEVINE: Oh, so you grew up around Gypsies?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, I—yes. I mean, not--they didn't observe the Gypsy—but they were musicians of the town, most of them. Beautiful people.

LEVINE: What do you remember? Do you remember any experiences with them?

HONIGMAN: Oh, yes. I remember they work hard people. They used to play music on weddings, on—and some of them were officers in the Russian army. The fact is, oh, I think about ten years ago I went to Israel on [unclear] with my wife. See, my wife was an officer in the union, and all that. So we met my cousin, and I asked him questions about the Gypsies. I had suspicion on me that some of them were anti-Semitic. But she told me different story, that when the fight broke out, and the Romanians started to kill Jews for the Germans, a lot of them joined up with the Jews to fight them, the Romanians and the Germans. That's all I can tell you about that.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Do you remember—can you say anything else about the town where you lived?

HONIGMAN: Nice. Poor town. People were starving during the First World War. That's all I can tell you—look, poverty all over.

LEVINE: What would be—do you remember the house you lived in? Can you--?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, we didn't have a house; we rented. We were poor. We rented, you know, very—what can I tell you? That's it.

LEVINE: So when your father came to the United States, were you living with your grandmother?

HONIGMAN: No, my grandmother lived with my mother. Wherever we lived, she stayed with us. That's it.

LEVINE: I see, okay. So, when it was decided that you would leave, did your mother--?

HONIGMAN: In 1919, my father sent a letter to my mother that he's taking them over. And I had a cousin in Chenowitz; he was an attorney, a doctor. And I went to Chenowitz, I—

LEVINE: Yourself?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, because I insisted with my mother. I was always the one to experience, and I remember very well. A fine person.

LEVINE: So you and your mother traveled?

HONIGMAN: No, I myself went to Chenowitz. I should meet the family, and then they came back, and he gave my mother the tickets that my father sent in 1920. It was 1919 he started, and they couldn't—it was right after the war. And then 1920, we got it, and we left our city to come to the USA.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Just before we talk about your leaving, was there anything else about the war, the First World War, that you saw the first bomb coming down?

HONIGMAN: Oh, killings!

LEVINE: Were there other experiences that you recall?

HONIGMAN: Oh, yeah! The soldiers—in the town, they were fighting. The bombing on the towns. And at that time, they didn't have the bombs. They used to fill the bombs with hand grenades, in 1915, '16, you know. That's it.

LEVINE: So your town was hard hit?

HONIGMAN: Yeah. It was hit by—the fact is, they were aiming at an armory. There was an armory in our little town, and the bomb fell on my cousin's house, and she was killed. I remember that incident. I also remember my mother started a—here they call them taxi drivers. There they were called—they drove the horses. He came and he said the watchmaker's wife was killed. So my mother started to, you know, cry. So a soldier came over to her that was [unclear] and told her, "Lady, don't," because he can hear us. The plane had been low. Now like now. "We don't want the enemy to hear us." So that's the experience I had. That's it.

LEVINE: Were you ever having to hide or anything, during--?

HONIGMAN: Well, I told you we left in 1914 for Chenowitz, for Lubkon, because they told us that the Austrians are going to bomb our little town, Novasulita. So we went to our cousin at [unclear] Lubkon. And then we came back again, and we lived out through the war.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay.

HONIGMAN: That's it.

LEVINE: All right. Well then, when you left, do you remember your leaving?

HONIGMAN: Yes. The whole town came to see us off! This is I do remember. See, my grandmother was a fine person, educated, and they loved my mother, it seemed, and you know, children. I was—my brother was ten, and I was twelve. I wasn't twelve yet, because we came here in June, in 1920. In March I was bar mitzvahed, because March is my birthday, March 15th. And the whole town came to see us off! This I remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember what people said? Did people know--?

HONIGMAN: Yes, they just—my mother and us, and my grandmother was crying, you know, and we left her alone. My younger sister is named after my grandmother. Quite intelligent.

LEVINE: Had many people left from the town to come to the United States at that point, that you knew about?

HONIGMAN: Yes, yeah. Well, we were one of the first, actually. As years to come, they came, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did people—were they happy for you leaving? Were they--?

HONIGMAN: Yes, they were glad, that my mother will have a better life. They loved her. And actually, we were good children, you know. My older sister worked selling, you know, to the soldiers during the war. My mother used to make bread, you know, in order to exist. We couldn't get anything from my father, because the war was on. You know, mail didn't come through. And that's the story.

LEVINE: So your mother was baking bread to sell for money?

HONIGMAN: Baking bread, selling it, and my brother, my older brother—he was two years older—and my sister. She was about six years older than me. My brother is two years or four years, something in that area. He's going to be eighty-nine, and I'll be eighty-seven.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular family member when you were young, when you were over there?

HONIGMAN: Yes, my younger brother Max, Morthra. I loved him. I remember an incident, leaving Novasulita, he was lost. And some peasant brought him all the way in. And I also remember a very interesting thing: one of

the patrols—we were Austrian patrols, Russian patrols. A Russian patrol came over to my mother and told her, "If you see the Austrians don't stop, because they'll start shooting, and you'll be killed in the middle." I mean, that's the story. I remember that, because it was very dramatic to me.

LEVINE: Yeah. Can you describe what you were like when you were twelve years old, when you were just leaving to come to this country?

HONIGMAN: Well, I was a child, daring, doing things where every child will do at that age. But, nothing in particular that I can really say.

LEVINE: What was Max like? What kind of a personality?

HONIGMAN: Very fine young boy, beautiful person. I took care of him as much as I could. And when we came to this country, I made sure that goes through college. And so my younger sister, too.

LEVINE: Okay, so let's talk about when you were leaving, and the whole town turned out.

HONIGMAN: Yeah, most of the town came to see us off on the train. I can say, actually the whole town, as I remember.

LEVINE: Yeah, a lot of people!

HONIGMAN: It may not be so, but a lot of people! As a child of twelve, there were a lot of people.

LEVINE: Okay, so then you boarded a train right in the town?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, and we went from our town, we went to Bucharest. That's Romania.

LEVINE: And did you have to stay there?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, we stood there until we had to get a passport signed. It took us nine weeks to travel, and we came to this country. First we went to France, and then we took a boat, and we picked up the boat going to the USA.

LEVINE: When you were in Bucharest, where did you stay, and what was that like?

HONIGMAN: Well, it was—we stood in a place, in a private home. My mother paid them. I don't know the price, but they paid them. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you have—and so you left from France?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, from France. From Bucharest, we went all over Europe, actually, because it was right after the First World War, so traveling wasn't so good, and went to France.

LEVINE: Probably Le Havre, right?

HONIGMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: Le Havre?

HONIGMAN: No, we came in to Paris, and then [unclear] like that. And from Paris we went. In fact, I had an experience in Paris. We came near a subway station, and I ran—I was always a daring child. I ran down, and I seen the trains—[unclear] it was subway. And I called my sisters to show them the train. That's my [unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. And let's see. Did you have examinations prior?

HONIGMAN: In this country.

LEVINE: Only here?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, there too, we were examined. We were all fit, and that way we came here. My father came with my uncle to take us off.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember the ship? Do you remember the passage in any way?

HONIGMAN: The passage I remember, but I don't remember the ship. We had a lot of Gypsies in our boat, Jews and Gypsies and all kinds of people. It took us fourteen days to travel. The fact my father came on the same ship, in 1912, as we came. I think we were on the—after us, they took off the ship off the water, you known what I mean? It wasn't safe, I guess.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was it like? Do you remember any experiences aboard ship?

HONIGMAN: Well, you know, we went third class. Actually, we got second class tickets, but my mother didn't want to wait, and we went third class. You

know, poor food and whatever it is. But, it wasn't bad, you know what I mean? That's, you know—

LEVINE: Do you remember coming in to the New York harbor?

HONIGMAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What was that like?

HONIGMAN: We were looking out by—we were always right—we had about a week here, and they told us, and we came in. My father came in with my uncle.

LEVINE: You mean you were a week here, in Ellis Island?

HONIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, well when you came in, do you remember anything about Ellis Island, your impression when you saw it?

HONIGMAN: Well, yeah. My mother told me, Jewish [unclear], the Statue of Liberty. So that's the first time I seen it.

LEVINE: Did you know what it was? Did she tell you?

HONIGMAN: Yes, she told me. She told me in Jewish, "You're free. This is—in this country, Jew and Gentile can live happily." I mean, she told it to me in Jewish. She's quite intelligent.

LEVINE: And how about this building, on Ellis Island? What was your experience here? What happened?

HONIGMAN: Not bad. They gave us food, you know, food. And we slept here. And I liked the experience; I enjoyed it.

LEVINE: Do you know why you needed to stay a week?

HONIGMAN: Why is because my father had some problems. I don't know why, but we stood almost a week here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And during that time, were you treated okay?

HONIGMAN: Treated not bad, not bad. Oh, not, you know—poor, they gave you food, slept, and that's it.

LEVINE: Were there lots of different people? I mean, that was new for you, to see so many different--?

HONIGMAN: Yes, yeah, a lot of different people. All religions, people, you know—nice people.

LEVINE: So what was the reunion like with your father?

HONIGMAN: Well, I didn't see him for eight years, but I remembered his face from 1904. And it was quite an experience, because he looked a lot like his mother. And a terrible thing happened in 1914. They came from a little town, and they burned their house. There was a little pogrom, and they came to our house, my grandmother and my grandfather. A beautiful woman. She was a midwife. And I was six years old, and we were really hungry that morning, because we didn't have any food. So I said to her, "Why did you come to us? We have nothing to eat ourselves." And they [unclear] very much from the minute I said it, and I can never forget it. You follow me?

LEVINE: It's forgivable. It's forgivable.

HONIGMAN: What a child can do. The hunger. What I want to tell you is what hunger can bring down to you. I always repeat it to my children when I [unclear]. And I never seen her again after that. She died in 1916. There was an epidemic of—

LEVINE: Cholera?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, cholera. She died. And my grandfather died during the Second World War. And that was it.

LEVINE: So when your father came to Ellis Island, did he come by himself, or was he--?

HONIGMAN: No, he came with my uncle.

LEVINE: His brother?

HONIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you knew him also?

HONIGMAN: No, I didn't remember him. He died quite young; he died when he was thirty-five. See, there were no unions when they came, and they used to work all kinds of hours. And he died of TB in 19—when he was thirty-five years old. In 1925 he died.

LEVINE: What was your father doing here for work?

HONIGMAN: Furrier.

LEVINE: Furrier.

HONIGMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And your uncle, too?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, they'd all come from furriers, because my grandfather was a furrier, too, in Europe.

LEVINE: So, when your mother and father and the rest of the family united again here, where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

HONIGMAN: We went to my uncle's house on Seventh Street and Avenue B. But then, we went to our apartment on Ninth Street, 719 East Ninth Street. We lived there 'til 1925, then we moved to the Bronx.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember anything about your first few days in this country, anything that--?

HONIGMAN: Well, it was nice, to me. We had food. He was a good father, intelligent. He didn't—well, what I can tell you is, look, how my grandfather, and father, my great grandfather—he was a nice person in general. And my mother gave birth to his child, and that's it.

LEVINE: Well, okay, I think maybe this is a good pausing point. We're going to turn the tape over.

HONIGMAN: Do whatever you want.

LEVINE: Then we'll continue about life in this country, okay?

[End of Side A/Start of Side B]

LEVINE: Okay, we were talking about when you first came here, and your uncle and your father picked you up at Ellis Island, and you went to—

HONIGMAN: Yes, and my brother was sitting next to my uncle, and he asked him, "Do you speak Jewish?" No, not my son, my daughter. No, no, although my daughter reads, she's—"How does it run without horses, the car?" See, this is what he asked him. How the car runs without a horse? You see, he was ten years old. A very fine human being.

LEVINE: So then you were in the Lower East Side for five years?

HONIGMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that? What was life like there?

HONIGMAN: Well, poor. To be honest with you, I didn't have to, but I went to work. There was an Eagle Pencil Company on Fourteenth Street. Because when my mother gave birth to my sister, I wanted to have money, and I also wanted to give my brother money. I wanted to make sure that he goes to school.

LEVINE: But you yourself--?

HONIGMAN: No, I didn't want to, because I [unclear] that I seen that if I would help my brother and my sister, I will do better than help myself, because I know I was able to work. I went and got a job at Eagle Pencil Company on Fourteenth Street and Avenue D. I got eight dollars a week for forty-eight hours, or fifty hours.

LEVINE: Were you just a twelve year old then, or was this a little bit later?

HONIGMAN: Well, I was—she was pregnant then. I was twelve and a half, because my bar mitzvah was March, and she gave birth in March, my mother, to my sister.

LEVINE: So what did you do in the Eagle Pencil Company?

HONIGMAN: Cut wood for pencils. And that's it.

LEVINE: And how long did you stay?

HONIGMAN: I stood there until I had to go back to school.

LEVINE: You mean, you--?

HONIGMAN: I was only twelve and a half!

LEVINE: The authorities made you go to school, you mean? You had to go.

HONIGMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And when I was fourteen I got my working papers, and went to work on furs.

LEVINE: Now meanwhile your father was in the fur business?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, he was, but you know, it wasn't too hot. You had to work. And I worked, and I made whatever I could make.

LEVINE: So did you—when you went to school, and when you first went to work, and went to school, were you able to speak English?

HONIGMAN: I learned. I mean, I didn't become a professor, which I still am not! I learned. And that's it.

LEVINE: Was it difficult? Do you remember that period of time when you were trying to learn English?

HONIGMAN: No, it wasn't. It was difficult at first, but I got along. I spoke, because I can—I had a gift to speak. You call me, and it was natural to come out, the things that I felt. And I had a lot of—what can I tell you—feelings for the poor. You understand? I always tried to give. I was not a taker; I couldn't. I couldn't take from my father. I went to work young, and I gave whatever I could to my brother and my sister and my friends, whoever, as much as I could, that's all.

LEVINE: Well, when you—when did you get involved in the union? Did you stay in the fur line?

HONIGMAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And that's where you entered into the union activities?

HONIGMAN: Yes. Well, I got into the union in '26. Yup, and I met my wife in '29. She was an officer in the union, and I married her.

LEVINE: You mentioned before when the tape wasn't on how you came to be, to realize that it was important that there be unions.

HONIGMAN: Well, I once seen a man—I went to deliver some garments for my father, and I seen a man come out crying that his wife died, and he had children, and he was talking that he didn't know what to do, and he had no job. And I said to myself, "Why shouldn't he have a job? It's such a good country." And this is when I went to the union, to try to make it better. And that's how I remained all my life.

LEVINE: So did you stop working in the fur trade?

HONIGMAN: No, I worked. I worked until I retired, in 1960. See, I got asthma and emphysema from the industry. No, I worked 'til I retired, and so did my wife. She had an education, but she wanted to work, and she became an officer.

LEVINE: What were your activities like for the union, on behalf of the union?

HONIGMAN: Well I was, you know, a Council member. I was speaking, organize, without—I worked in factories. I was not a paid official. I did work on my own. That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how did you meet your wife?

HONIGMAN: In the union.

LEVINE: At a meeting, or--?

HONIGMAN: No, she was an official. She was a very pretty young lady, and I went in to her, and I spoke to her, and this is how we started. And we got married very young. She was seventeen and I was twenty-one.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

HONIGMAN: Mildred.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

HONIGMAN: Okin.

LEVINE: O-A-K--?

HONIGMAN: O-K-I-N. Very intelligent, extremely intelligent. It was one of a kind. I'll show you my fiftieth wedding anniversary.

LEVINE: So did you work together, then, on union--?

HONIGMAN: No, no, we never worked—yeah, at one period we worked in one factory. See, this is my wife. This is my daughter, my son, my granddaughter. She graduated Cornell this one. This one is my wife. She's my life. You can see how pretty she was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what else would you say about your working life?

HONIGMAN: It was hard. I was discriminated.

LEVINE: In what way?

HONIGMAN: Because people were afraid I would organize, and you know, I leaned more to the left than to the right. You know what I mean? That time of the period, and that's it.

LEVINE: Did you leave working for your father, then?

HONIGMAN: No, I never worked for my father.

LEVINE: Oh, you never did?

HONIGMAN: Never did. The fact is my father became a [unclear] in later years, and that's it.

LEVINE: So, what was your philosophy behind becoming so active in the union?

HONIGMAN: Poverty, that people should live better, that people need organization. People need guidance. And they needed leadership. And this is the reason. I always had a lot of compassion for people. To me, oh, what can I tell you? It's feelings that you're born with, you know. That's it. What can I tell you? I couldn't eat if I would see you hungry. I had an experience once with my wife. We didn't have a job, we were both [unclear] discriminated. And we walked from Simpson Street downtown. We didn't have no car then, but we had a dime. We went in the automat, and we bought a sandwich. We put it on a table, and as we went for the coffee, a man sat down and he ate it, so we gave him the coffee. That's the experience. And the only reason I came is because Eleanor told me, "It'll do you good." And I wanted to [unclear] that you've got to be human. It doesn't always work out, but you try. And this is the heart of my life. And so is my son and my daughter.

LEVINE: Tell me your children's names.

HONIGMAN: Barbara and Simon. You want my grandchildren?

LEVINE: How many do you have?

HONIGMAN: Oh, I have a great-granddaughter married already!

LEVINE: Oh, so you have great-grandchildren?

HONIGMAN: Yeah. Julie, Jane—this one graduated Cornell. She's working in taxes, and her husband is taking the bar examination. They're quite successful, not rich, poor. And that's it.

LEVINE: What do you think—what kind of an impact it had on you as a person to have--?

HONIGMAN: What?

LEVINE: What kind of an impact do you think it had on you, as a person, to have been born in Russia and then Romania, and then to have come here after the First World War as an immigrant to this country?

HONIGMAN: Well I thought to myself I was lucky that I got out of there, that we could do things for people. I mean, I'm talking about myself. And that's all I can tell you. We did things the best to our ability, that's all I can tell you.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of having done?

HONIGMAN: Huh?

LEVINE: What do you feel most proud of having done?

HONIGMAN: That I married my wife, I have beautiful children, and whatever I did, I didn't make any money. I didn't look for it. I did it because I believed in it. Some of it was good, and some of it was not. We seen what happened all over the world. I mean, you seen what happened in Russia, since I know you're Jewish, what happened in Buchenwald, what happened when they built the cross in Auschwitz. Six and a half million Jews were killed. That hurts me, where you take such a beautiful people, and they are really! I mean, you know. I don't have to—I'm not trying to make the Jews [unclear]. Of course there were some bad, but in general they were fine. [Unclear] I want this to go on tape even. I'm thirteen. They showed you the Warsaw ghetto. Nothing, [several words unclear]. They didn't come. Or they built a church in Auschwitz. That hurts me, because we gave our blood. They killed our six and a half million human beings, and that bothers me. And I say to myself, "Abie, what did you fight for?" You know what I'm talking about, and that's what hurts me, today! You see? So then I say to myself, "Was it worth it, what I did?" Who knows? It seems the world don't—we don't protest, and I think it's something, when they can build a church where they killed. Not I'm against the church, but I know they were Jews! They were killed! And I don't know whether that's good or not, to tell it to you, but that's how I feel about it.

LEVINE: When you say you were fighting, you mean in the union?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, a better life for workers, that's all, that they should live. They should be able to bring up their children properly, which I did for me. And I believed everybody should do it for themselves. That's it.

LEVINE: Do you feel that you have any customs or ways that you are that stem from your roots in Eastern Europe? Do you think you carry certain qualities that extend from there?

HONIGMAN: The only thing that can carry is poverty.

LEVINE: Poverty.

HONIGMAN: That I know when I was hungry, I know the other people were hungry, too. And this is what made me do a lot of things, until this day, that I can't make myself do things which others can do. To give you an idea, my wife is dead five years almost. I can't make myself go for vacation! You know, it's—it's hard even to explain. It's how you feel about it, that's it.

LEVINE: How is this time in your life, in your old age time? What is it like for you?

HONIGMAN: Look, look—I live. I have a beautiful son; I have a beautiful daughter. She's a beautiful woman, this Eleanor, I know through her father. I didn't know her father. My mother lives in my house.

LEVINE: This is Eleanor Gibfell, who's here with you?

HONIGMAN: Yeah, yeah. Her father was a professor at Brooklyn College. That's how I know her. Nice person. I mean, a lot of compassion and feeling, works hard, I mean, you know. And that's about it.

LEVINE: Do you feel there are certain things, maybe you've said them already, but that you feel you want to hand down?

HONIGMAN: Oh, if I could, I would?

LEVINE: That's it's important to pass along?

HONIGMAN: Yes, yes. I speak to my son—he's alive—and to my daughter, that as long as you live, you should live like a human being, and leave your inheritance, that you have somebody to look up to. It's for your own good. See, when I do these things, it's not because for me, it's for them. And I have the same for you feeling, because you don't do this for the money just. You do it because you believe in it. And that's it.

LEVINE: Okay, well now, how do you feel about coming back here to Ellis Island after seventy years?

HONIGMAN: Well, it's an experience. It's a lot of remembrance: your mother, your brother that's gone, your sister that's gone. Look, family, you know, that's it. Frankly, she told me she made an appointment with you. I wouldn't have come, though, because it's hard. I see my mother here, anxious to see my father, you know, and my brothers. That's it.

LEVINE: Well, I'm very happy that you did come. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

HONIGMAN: Well, I'm happy because you're a nice person.

LEVINE: And this tape will now be on file for posterity, and you'll have a copy, and I thank you very much.

HONIGMAN: I thank you, and I thank you for your time. You're a nice person.

LEVINE: You're very welcome.

HONIGMAN: And I believe you do your work is because like I did my work. You do not for the money, you do it because it's history, and I believe it's important. And that's why I came here.

LEVINE: Wonderful! Thank you. This is Janet Levine for the Park Service. I've been speaking with Abraham Honigman on February 5th, 1995, and I'm signing off.

[End of Interview]