

EI-591

ARTHUR TRACY (ABBALA, ABBA TRACOVUTSKY)

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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RESIDENCES: KAMINETZ PODOLSK; PHILADELPHIA, PA

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, February 15, 1995.

I am at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Mr. Arthur Tracy. Mr. Tracy, of course, is a well-known performer, a well-known singer, but he also happens to be an Ellis Island immigrant. Mr. Tracy came from Russia in 1906 when he was seven years old.

Mr. Tracy, it's a pleasure to have you. Good morning.

TRACY: Good morning, Paul, and please call me Arthur.

SIGRIST: Arthur, okay. Arthur, can you please give me your

birth date, please?

TRACY: My birth date was June 25, 1899.

SIGRIST: And where in Russia were you born?

TRACY: I was born in Kaminetz, Podolsk.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

TRACY: Kaminetz is the city and Podolsk the township, or the state.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for us?

TRACY: Yes. K-A-M-I-N-E-T-Z, Kaminetz, Podolsk is P-O-D-O-L-S-K.

SIGRIST: May I ask what your name was when you were born?

TRACY: When we arrived, my dear old father, my God rest him, told me this story. The commissioner, on entry, said, "The name, please." And my father said, "Morris Tracovutsky." And he said, "Come again?" My father said, "Tracovutsky." He said, "Will you write it out for me?" And my father wrote out the name, and he looked at it, and he said, "T-R-A-C-U-V-T-S-K . . . What do you want that middle for? Let's take the

first four letter from the T-R-A-C-V-U-T-S-K-Y, take the T-R-A-C front, and the last letter, the Y, and you come in as Tracy."

SIGRIST: So your parents kept the name as Tracy also, in America?

TRACY: Oh, yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that were relayed to you later about your birth, or your mother's carrying you as an embryo, any of that?

TRACY: Uh, no. Well, I remember a great deal. You see, my father, my father, a very brilliant and highly educated man, and so was my mother. My father made his living by teaching, and he taught mathematics and languages. He was a great mathematician. That's one of my good things, too. And, uh, he had what they call in Russia his own gymnasium, the school is called a gymnasium. And I remember, I remember very well, as I saw later on in Europe when I went visiting, in Europe and Russia the houses were built around a square block, the same as they are here. But the front of the house fronted into the courtyard rather than outside to the street. The back of the house was

on the street. And when, uh, when we came in, when you came into the court, there was a gate. Usually there was a watchman, to see, to be sure to recognize the people that belonged, or the people that are welcome. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you walk me through your house that you lived in?
Can you walk me through the house? Can you describe your house as you walk through it?

TRACY: Yes, I can describe the house. I'll even, I'll even go and tell you one of the things that urged the trip to the United States. The house, it was a beautiful house, and we had, two rooms were devoted to, I remember the desks. They were long tables, high, and the benches, long benches, and the students were seated at this long table. Several, you know, several, uh, tables, rather, desks, and, uh, now the entrance, the house was lovely, and I remember, I remember it was on a Friday night. I used to see at the entrance, or the exit at the door, the front door, so-called, I used to see two clubs. They were like the old, like the old stone days when the men used to carry clubs to protect themselves, and it was a thick club, like a baseball, a big baseball bat at the, at

one end, and just a small handle on the other end. I never asked, and I never knew why there were two of them there. And my oldest brother and my father used them, and they used them, it was on a Friday night, when suddenly neighbors began to shout, "The hooligans are here! Hooliganas[ph]. The hooligans are here!" Now, the hooligans were drunken Russians, the cossacks, who either came in on horse, broke through the gate, came in on horseback, or on foot, wielding swords and all sorts of instruments. And that's when my father, this I remember distinctly as though it happened yesterday, that he said to my mother, "Take the children down to the cellar." It was just around dinner time, at dusk. And he said, "Take the children down to the cellar and, uh, he, he bolted all the shutters of every window to keep the light out, and my father and brother grabbed one of these sticks. I just called . . .

SIGRIST: Club.

TRACY: You know, the club. And they each grabbed a club, and they were out wielding. And there was blood pouring. It was a pogrom, which is a common thing in Russia. And, uh, fortunately they both came back unhurt. But

people were hurt, one or two were killed, wielding, you know, these drunks on horseback, carefree. And that, then on top of that my oldest brother, who was a brilliant, brilliant student, he was also an associate of Dr. Theodore Hertzl, who was the man who created the Zionistic organization, and, uh, who later went, he went to the head of government, be he king or president or whatever, it was Dr. Theodore Hertzl that went to plead because of these pogroms, that went to, uh, to plead for the creation of a home for the Jewish people. Now, my brother was then eighteen years and eight months old. His memory visually is very, very vague, but because he was, he spent quite a lot of time with Dr. Theodore Hertzl in Vienna. And it was on this particular day that he was to leave for Vienna. So he said to my mother, "I'll go and take a dunk in the river," that ran through the city, and it was a hot, a very hot day. I looked it up, I had made some notes that my mother had told me. And it was in the month of August, so it was very hot, and he went to just shrink off a little bit. And there were six students, non-Jewish, who were jealous of his, of his, uh, student, uh, work, of his, the, he was brilliant. He was, he left, I mean, I had so many books that he

had written in several languages, and also a mathematician. He left a calendar that was good for 200 years that was all created. And, anyhow, these boys who were jealous of his status at school, uh, got hold of him, and he couldn't swim. And that's one of the reasons, I guess, subconsciously, that I don't particularly like water. He couldn't swim, but they grabbed him, two boys, one by each hand, and pulled him out into the deep part of the river, and pulled him close to a whirlpool, and they dropped him there.

They swam out, and he was in the whirlpool. He came up three times, nobody on board paid any attention. He yelled for help, obviously, and, uh, and he was drowned. And, uh, this I remember distinctly, too. My mother was sitting at the window in the living room at the time, and she was nursing my youngest sister, may heaven rest them all. And these six guys who committed the murder came parading outside the house, in front of the window. His name was Leibish, and they called him Laibku[ph], and they said, "Laibku[ph] is drowned, Laibku[ph] is drowned." It just, until it finally registered on my mother's mind, "Laibku[ph] is drowned." And then when she discovered what it was, my blood does run cold. When she discovered what it

was, she just abandoned herself and abandoned the baby that she was nursing. And fortunately one of my sisters was standing nearby and caught the baby, or we would have had two deaths in the family. But, anyhow, since my mother's mother and my mother's brother and two sisters were already in the United States, uh, those two incidents of the pogrom and the passing of my brother, were the determination that, that brought us here.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the repercussions of your brother's death? What happened immediately after he died? How did the family react?

TRACY: Well, my, my father had the river dredged until they found the body. They brought it in. In those days there were no, no caskets. I remember the body very vaguely. As I say, I was just a child. I was then about, uh, five-and-a-half, probably approaching six years of age. But I do remember when they brought the body in, and they built sort of a raft-like little platform. They put bedding on it, and the body was laid on that and quilts and so on covering the body. My mother was beside herself. I remember the neighbors, of course, came in to comfort her and

console her, but it was very difficult. And she, I remember them bringing ice, an ice bucket, and dunking her hands into the ice, uh, she was just a nervous wreck, of course. And I don't remember the funeral, but I do remember, now, my father, in his teachings, used to go to a city called Chernovitz[ph] in Roumania, because we were on the Roumanian border of the Black Sea, and he used to, he used to go to Chernovitz[ph] one day a week, same as we have professors here who go to different cities for lectures, for teaching. And, uh, he used to take me along, so that when, uh, of course, let me kick back to the, to the evening of the beginning of the pogrom.

The table had been set, we were ready to go to dinner. And, of course, we were taken down to the cellar, everything was bolted and darkened, the lights out and so on. And then, I can't remember those details exactly, but I suppose we had our dinner. But shortly the decision was made that we would go to the United States. And, uh, we arrived here, uh, and I remember vaguely, I don't remember vividly any particular detail, except what my father had told me, and particularly the name change. And, uh, we, the family that were already here lived in Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: Before we get to you in America, I'd like to talk about Russia some more.

TRACY: Right.

SIGRIST: You said your father's name was Morris?

TRACY: Morris . . .

SIGRIST: Morris.

TRACY: Tracovutsky.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what his personality was like?

TRACY: He was a, he lived to eighty-six, a wonderful human being, so easy to be with, very witty, always smiling, and everybody just loved him.

SIGRIST: Is there a story about your father that you remember from when you lived in Russia, an incident that sticks out in your mind that reflects his character somehow?

TRACY: Uh, no, nothing in particular along that line. But all, all I remember is that people used to come to my father for advice, and the love exuded by those people for him was indescribable, the respect they had for

that man. Not only because he was their teacher, but as a human being. And he was a very caring man and very concerned with his students to see that everything was taken care of for them and so on. My brother was one of his assistants.

SIGRIST: How many children were there?

TRACY: There were nine of us. There were five girls and four boys.

SIGRIST: Can you name everybody for me?

TRACY: Oh, sure. The oldest one, Leibish, who died at eighteen years and eight months, was the oldest.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Leibish?

TRACY: L-E-I-B-I-S-H.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

TRACY: And then came Sylvia. Uh, Simma was, S-I-DOUBLE M-A. Then came Munia, who became Mamie. Munia is M-U-N-I-A. And, uh, then came Becky, uh, who was Rivka, R-I-V-K-A, Rivka. And then came yours truly, Abbala, Abba, Abraham. And then came another girl, Dora, whose name was Dvorah, D-V-O-R-A-H. And then another

girl named, uh, Chana, C-H-A-N-A, who became Anna, or Anita. And then came the youngest child, uh, whose birth, he and I are the only ones left alive. But I just want to, I just want to give you a little poignant incident. Now, there was Leibish, who was a boy. Then came three girls. And after the three girls, my mother told me this, my father wanted a boy. And he prayed, he went to the ark and prayed, and along came a little boy who, unfortunately, lived only thirty days. And then my mother said he went to the ark and he cried and he pleaded, "Dear God, another boy." And I came along.

SIGRIST: You said your name was Ab . . .

TRACY: Abba. A-DOUBLE B-A, Abba Arthur.

SIGRIST: Right. Um, which sibling were you the closest to when you were a young child?

TRACY: Uh, I, well, it's like asking a mother which child do you like the most. Uh, we were a very close-knit family, very close-knit. In fact, I, when I was, later on, we'll come to that, but when I was, spent so many years in Europe, I would have loved to live in Europe, because it was so different from the, from

the, uh, atmosphere in this country. Uh, but it was only, it was only my, my close-knittedness, my closeness to the family, that didn't permit me to do it. And, in fact, when I, when I finally, as The Street Singer, when I got to England on a seven-week contract, uh, which only called for seven weeks' stay, I was welcomed by the then Prince of Wales, Edward, uh, and, uh, I think I'll tell you that story now. I was welcomed by the Prince of Wales, who became King Edward VIII, and, uh, his, I was introduced to his equerry and didn't know that his, this man was his equerry, for some time, until I discovered through the manager of the theater where I was appearing in Edinburgh that, that he was the equerry to the Prince of Wales. And, uh, when I was to be presented to him, there were two other men. There were three of us to be presented. The other two men were the owners of the Irish Sweepstakes, which sold, sold, you know, sold their wares the world over, and there was many, many millions involved. They were asked to pay ten thousand pounds each for the privilege of being presented, and at that time the pound was worth five dollars and twelve cents. So it was over fifty thousand dollars each, and I was waiting outside with

his equerry, whose name was Oswald Barkley, a wonderful old gentleman, and Oswald Barkley, and they called him O.B. Everybody called him O.B. And I was waiting. I was the third one to come in, and (he laughs) I was very, very nervous, and I said to O.B., I said, "O.B., what do I do? How do I behave? And what . . ." And he said, "Oh, don't be nervous." He said, "It's a very simple operation. You will be called in, and one of his adjutants will be standing beside the throne, and he will mention your name, and all you do is take a bow. If he asks you something, you answer. If he asks you nothing, you say nothing. But be sure that you don't turn your back on him. Just bow out backwards." But I must say I had great admiration for Edward VIII, but for one reason, because he was a very democratic man, and I met him, of course, as the Prince of Wales. Now, he stood up from the throne when I was introduced as, "Your Royal Highness, presenting Mr. Arthur Tracy." He stood up and took off his little white pillow and in ten seconds he made me feel like a friend. He shook my hand. He had baby-pink skin, and his hands were very tender. He shook my hand, and he said, "Welcome to our country, Mr. Street Singer." I was introduced as

Arthur Tracy, but he knew who I was, and he said, "Welcome to our country, Mr. Tracy, uh, Mr. Street Singer." He said, "I have every one of your records."

Now, I made about six hundred records, so I would question that, but I thought it was awfully nice of him to make me feel good. And, uh, then he said to me, "How long do you intend to stay with us, Mr. Street Singer?" And I said, "Your Royal Highness, I shall stay here as long as your subjects want me." And I stayed on for six solid glorious working years.

SIGRIST: What were those years, from when to when?

TRACY: From '35, rather, to '41. And I came over, because the war was on. The war was on. But I continued to play. As a matter of fact, Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels, his wife, were over there at the time, too. But my parents were worried, the war was on. And, as a matter of fact, whenever I appeared in London it was the embassy that would warn me that I should leave the country, and, uh, I said, "No, I'm not worried." Whatever, when I appeared in the provinces, whether it be anywhere, Liverpool or, anywhere, anywhere that I appeared, the consul would come and say, "There's a war and we'd like . . ." I said, "No, I'm not

worried." I said, "We have three ships down in the south of France, which is American territory, and I can always . . . But I stayed, eventually, of course, Chamberlain went to visit Mr. Hitler and came back, and I was right there, I saw him and heard him lifting that autograph of Mr. Hitler, and he said, "There will be no war in our day. I have Mr. Hitler's autograph."

But we know what happened, so there's no use going into that.

SIGRIST: We should bring you back to turn-of-the-century Russia for a minute. I don't want to get too ahead of ourselves.

TRACY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

TRACY: My mother's name was Fruma, F-R-U-M-A, which became Fannie here.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

TRACY: Bernstein. B-E-R-N-S-T-E-I-N.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your mother's background, and her history?

TRACY: Uh, this, Paul, I must say, is one of my great regrets. Every time I came to visit my parents, my mother would say, "Abbala, take down, write my history, let me give you the history of my . . ." Of course, one never expects to lose them. And I said, "Next visit, Mama." I kept saying, "Next visit." And the story is this. My father came from a background of rabbis and cantors. My mother came from a commercial, a business family. (he laughs) So much so that I, I, my father was so immersed in studies and learning and teaching and reading that, uh, he was, money was never, money was never, uh, so meaningful to him as it isn't to me, either, thank God. Uh, but he, my father, I believe, could not sell a genuine two-dollar bill, uh, I should say, a genuine five-dollar bill, for two dollars. My mother, on the other hand, could sell a false three-dollar bill for five. And, uh, but we'll come to that later. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What did she look like? Describe her in words.

TRACY: She was a, well, she looked like a grand dame. She was a very handsome woman, uh, beautiful figure, dressed magnificently, and very highly cultured and easy to be with, very informative in conversation and

so on. In fact, it was my mother, my father who insisted that I take certain languages from him. Now, I did later on, as The Street Singer, I used eight languages on the air. And at the time that my father asked me to do those, to study those, including Russian, I said, "Papa, what do I need Russian?" He said, "Son, you have an aptitude for languages. You have a leaning toward them. It's good to know everything. It's good to learn. You never know when you might use it."

SIGRIST: We need to pause just for a second so Kevin can flip the tapes over, and then we'll continue talking about this.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now continuing with Arthur Tracy. You were just talking about your father instilling in you a development for learning languages.

TRACY: Yes.

SIGRIST: You also mentioned earlier that your mother was well-educated.

TRACY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was education very important for you and your brothers and sisters?

TRACY: Very. In fact, his livelihood came from educating others. And, uh, of course, even to this day, I'm a very, very avid reader, uh, but to get back now, my father taught me, of course, Hebrew and Yiddish and German and Latin. And in school I studied Greek. French is self-taught, and so on. Even including Japanese, uh, which I couldn't use, I couldn't converse in Japanese, but I learned it sufficiently that when I used a song of a certain language, of a certain country, it had to be absolutely perfect. If I did Russian, it was Russian, and if I did Greek, it was Greek. I have a little story about the Greeks later on, if we think of it. And to make certain that I wouldn't mess up, he used to take a copy book and sign his name and the date and the subject that I was to study, and do scripture on. And when he got home at night, uh, to make, if the pages weren't, weren't filled with my scripture of whatever, uh, and my mother would always be there to help me in my studies. And, for any corrections, or whatever. If, he was

very strict about that. My father considered himself the czar in the Tracy family.

SIGRIST: What about for your sisters? Was education pushed on your sisters also?

TRACY: Yes. Well, they were, because they were, along with the other students, they were all in school. They were all, I must, I must say, uh, I'm almost embarrassed to say it, I think we all had, because we, because we came from an educated pair of parents, uh, who, who passed it on to us, and we all had the aptitude for study and reading and so on. Uh, the, the diplomas and the awards speak for themselves, right down to this day. Because today my awards are indescribable. Every, I think every flat surface in the house and every space on the walls was hanging awards. But we'll talk about that later.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the Jewish community in this city.

TRACY: Wait a minute. Uh, well, yes, we can carry on. Now, my mother, as I say, the one great regret along that line was that to go into the detail of my parents' lives, including their background and their studies and so on, I never got to that, because it was always

the next trip, the next trip. And today I'd give anything, in fact, I've gone to some organizations, Russian Jewish organizations in this country, to see if anyone, but, of course, it goes back a long time. My father would have been a hundred and forty years old if he were alive today. And that goes back a little bit. Uh, I mean, I just celebrated my ninety-fifth year young, and I'll be ninety-six on the 25th of June. So, so I say I cannot, I do not have any details that I can give you. Except that they were very, it was a devoted, not only close-knit but devoted, very closely devoted to each other, and caring for each other and working together, and so on.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about the city itself in Russia. Can you specifically talk about the Jewish community and how large it was in this town?

TRACY: Uh, Paul, I don't think I could give you very much. After all, I was just six, five, four years old, so, uh, the, the community, the Jewish community, in those days, sometimes among the Orthodox, even today, they huddle together, and the synagogue was the courtroom, if necessary. Nobody ever went, the Jewish people today, uh, try to avoid court. If there's a question

of, a dispute on any subject, whatever it might be, they don't immediately go suing each other. Let's go to the rabbi, and whatever the rabbi said, that judgment was abided by. So, uh, all I remember going to the synagogue are the prayers and the services, and, uh, and home. The home was a very comfortable, big home.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

TRACY: Uh, well, it was, I guess the one word that would cover was, say, a Kosher home. (he clears his throat) My father, another thing about those two people is this. My father was Orthodox, which is the most dedicated to religion sect among the Jewish people. Then there's the conservative, which is midway, and the, uh, reformed, which is, uh, they follow, almost follow the Catholic symptoms in prayer. They don't wear the, the skullcap and, uh, and there are always disputes today, and, again, but, of course, in Russia, everybody was Orthodox, and in time they would go to synagogues three times a day, the morning prayer, the afternoon prayer and the evening prayer. And, uh, everything had to be Kosher, uh, as far as food was concerned, and the cooking. Of course, I can

still remember the taste of my mother's cooking and baking. She used to bake on Friday, every Friday afternoon. She would do her baking for the week. Those cinnamon buns, those jellied cinnamon buns, and the challah, the breads and the cakes, the rankuhun[ph], the big, uh, a metal dish that would bake, that, the ingredients that went into those were just unbelievable. But the cake, her cake and her challah, the bread, or the buns, were just as fresh the following Friday as they were the day they were baked. And this happened every week. And the cooking, of course, was . . .

SIGRIST: What about other food that you ate in Europe? What do you remember about mealtime?

TRACY: Well, uh, mealtime, mealtime was, uh, a family, because everything happened at home, the school was in the home, and we were all at home, and we would eat as a family together. I still vaguely remember, it's like in a haze, but I remember the table that was set that particular Friday night when the, when the hooligans came along. It was mostly chicken and, uh, and, uh, boiled beef. But, but essentially, I must say this, we were, I call myself a dairy baby. I was

raised on dairy food. We used to get, in those days, when we came to this, in those days there, my mother had a goat. That was her pet. And the goat knew her voice, and the goat would be out feeding itself on grass or whatever. And when she came to the door and called, "Baska[ph], Baska[ph]," the goat would come running to her, like a dog would when you, you know. And, uh, I mean, it was a homey, warm family. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Now, did the goat, did the goat provide milk? Did she do something?

TRACY: The goat provided milk, and, uh, and then they had, I don't, that I don't remember exactly. Cow's milk, of course, which was plentiful. But when we got to this country the, in those days there was no grocery store or a supermarket where you could go do your shopping, and stands outside the market would come in on, say, the middle of the week, the farmers would bring in, those who had farms would bring in their fruit and their vegetables. But, uh, the milkman would deliver, and he used to deliver very early in the morning, say, around five, five thirty in the morning. And we had nine children to feed. And, uh, or eight children,

and my parents. There would be seven or eight quarts of milk. Those came in glass quarts. And there would be, uh, two pints of cream, and there would be butter by the pound whenever it was, whatever it was that we ran out of was immediately replaced. And, uh, it was just, it was a house of love, I mean, everything was warm and cozy and friendly and, uh, and we were always together, just a togetherness.

SIGRIST: That reminds me, um, in Europe, was there extended family that lived in your town, grandparents, aunts and uncles, that you remember?

TRACY: Yes, yes, there were. But I say, it goes back so far, uh, my mother had, again, you see, I did not get the detail, but I remember she spoke of another brother who never came here because he was killed in the Holocaust, he and his family. Uh, all the relatives, our relatives, were killed in the Holocaust. But she spoke of this brother who lived in Lemburg which, I think, was Poland. And the rest of the, the rest of my mother's family, uh, I say the one brother and the two sisters and her mother, had been here. I don't know how long, but they were already here, and they came to pick us up at Ellis Island here, where we are,

and brought us to Philadelphia where I spent my youth.

SIGRIST: What about your father's family? Do you remember . . .

TRACY: My father's family I don't, uh, I remember one brother, and I met him when he came here. Eventually I met every, I don't remember how many, maybe half a dozen or eight different people from my father's side who came to this country, all stayed with us. See, we were, then we were, as my uncle was host to us until he got us an apartment or so on, so we were hosts to the people, and they all, of course, most of them the same name, and they all adopted the name of Tracy, of course.

SIGRIST: Before your family left to come to America, what did you know about this country? What ideas did you have about America as a child, in Russia?

TRACY: Uh, I can't say, I don't remember even giving it a thought, because, as I say, we were so contented, during the quiet times everything, because, you see, there was the gate leading into the courtyard, nobody could come in. The cossacks broke through. Nobody could come in unless they were known. And any

community affairs were held right in, in the court, and all the fronts, the housefronts, fronted into the, into the courtroom. The, I mean, you find that still in Italy and in France, in many places, exactly the same structures today. The rear of the house is out on the street, the front of the house is in the court.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of getting ready to leave?

TRACY: No.

SIGRIST: Packing?

TRACY: No, no. I mention that, the reason I mentioned Chernovitz[ph], my father take, when he went to lecture that one day a week, I don't know why, but he used to take me along. We were very, very close. I loved that man, and my dear mother. And he would take me along with him, but it, it didn't really mean much to me. I was, incomprehensible. I mean, I just went with him. He was my father, and I went with him, and so on. But, or those two clubs that were in the, until they were used, I didn't know what they were for. And eventually, give me a question.

SIGRIST: We were getting ready to go, to leave . . .

TRACY: Oh, getting ready, yes.

SIGRIST: What you remembered.

TRACY: Now, this is important, too. Now, when we got ready, it was all hush-hush, because Russia did not let people go. And they kept everybody, of course, you had to have visas and passports and so on. They were not allowed to get them. So they had to sneak out. So I remember the hush-hush, and I didn't know what it was all about until my father said to me, I remember he took some toys and things that were packed, all our luggage. It wasn't luggage, it was sheets and blankets that we put the stuff in. And, uh, and that's the way we traveled, and my father had to pay, at every port. We wound up in Liverpool, eventually. We went, uh, if I remember correctly, we went to Hamburg. We took the route. It was night travel, and every time we got to a port it was, it was schmearing the guards to let us go through without any trouble. And, you know, for a buck you can always get by. And we worked our way, this, the best, my best recollection, we got to Hamburg, and from Hamburg we

got to Liverpool, and from Liverpool we got a boat, the whole family. But we all traveled together. It was, it was huddling together all the time.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long it took from the time you left Russia to the time you got to Liverpool?

TRACY: I don't know exactly but, again, my best memory says it was about a month.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your parents did with the house and their belongings in Russia?

TRACY: No.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection?

TRACY: I think, again, it's just, uh, it was not, it was not a discussion. It just may have been hearsay. We were glad to get out. They just left everything, as they do today. They just left everything, happy to get out alive. They left, they left the gem of the family, the oldest boy, who was brilliant, and so much, you know, they depended on him, eighteen years and eight months, and he was gone.

SIGRIST: How many years was there between the oldest child and

the youngest child?

TRACY: Well, the oldest, the oldest, he died at eighteen, uh, yes, I do. Again, I was told, my mother, they say if a woman breast nurses the baby, uh, they don't conceive for a period of two to two-and-a-half years. We were average about two-and-a-half years apart, two to two-and-a-half years apart.

SIGRIST: So when your brother died, she had a baby.

TRACY: She had a baby.

SIGRIST: There was a baby, so there was almost twenty years among all the kids.

TRACY: Right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything specific that was taken with you when you left Russia? You mentioned bedding and, uh . . .

TRACY: Well, oh, I remember, as I say, some toys he took that were, you know, my toys. And, uh, and it was hush, and it was rather hurried, too. And I asked where, where are we going? Because I was used, used to going with my father to Chernovitz[ph], so I thought it was,

all I thought it was just another trip like we took to Chernovitz[ph]. But as we began to travel, of course, it was explained to me that we were leaving our country and going to America.

SIGRIST: Do, do you remember any incidents that happened somewhere between Russia and Liverpool, anything about that month-long journey that sticks out in your mind at all?

TRACY: No.

SIGRIST: You said it was mostly night travel.

TRACY: No. I was, I was too young, uh, no. I, as I remember, there were hardships in the, you know, sneaking, and waiting for dark, and so on and so forth. But, uh, as a child I fell asleep.

SIGRIST: Well, you made it to Liverpool. Did you have to stay in Liverpool for any period of time prior to boarding the ship?

TRACY: Uh, no. Once we got to England, of course, it was no trouble at all. My uncles, two, the two sisters, my mother's two sisters, were, of course, married. They were, uh, approaching middle age, and they were both

well-off, and my mother's brother was, in those days I heard they were worth a quarter of a million dollars each. Well, they were millionaires. Today a quarter of a million, the poor man today has a quarter of a million, you know?

SIGRIST: It was a lot of money in 1906.

TRACY: So they were, and they were in the real estate business. My, my uncle, my mother's brother and his brother-in-law, her sister's husband, were both in real estate, not structure. I was later in structure. I remember one of the daughters. I loved real estate. I can't explain it, but I had an aptitude of feeling for her. And I remember Rosie, one of his daughters, said, "Oh, you go up," because I said to my uncle one time, "Uncle Meyer . . ." They didn't build, they bought properties and sold properties. They were buying and selling properties. I said, "How does it work? How do you, how do you know where to buy a house? How do you know which house to buy? How do you get a customer to sell it to?" And, of course, it was explained to me. And she said, "Arthur, when you grow up, you'll have a lot of real estate." That was a prediction. And I did. And, uh, I built, I

built, like, in Philadelphia, I built over a thousand houses. In Washington I built the Brentwood Village, which had a thousand apartments. I financed a building in Boston. I financed a building in Europe. And . . . (he laughs) I was robbed of it all, but, anyhow, while I was working, I was financing.

SIGRIST: Did, did this uncle and aunt and the relatives, your mother's relatives in America, did they pay for your family's passage, or did your father pay?

TRACY: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yes. We, I say, we left . . .

SIGRIST: Everything.

TRACY: Everything, just happy to get out alive.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the name of the ship was that you took to America? Do you remember how long the voyage took from Liverpool to New York?

TRACY: I would say roughly about two weeks. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind, if anything, about the ocean voyage? Do you remember where you slept on the ship?

TRACY: I don't remember. It's, I don't remember ever running

on deck. Uh, we were mostly inside. Uh, of course, not the way I was used to traveling later on. But I don't remember a thing because, as I say, as a child, I probably went to sleep early, happy to get food and go to sleep. Uh, and there was, the boats, the boats were not like the boats today, with entertainment and all that stuff. And the cost, I remember, but I don, I don't remember for certain the amount, but it was something like roughly maybe fifty or sixty dollars a head, you know? And a family of eight people would be four hundred or five hundred dollars. Well, it was a tidy sum at that time. And, uh, then, of course, they paid our rent and they found an apartment for us. And, uh, took care of us until my father got acquainted with people and did the same thing here. He was teaching here, and also being a mathematician he ran the books for several corporations, small. So you'd get maybe two dollars a week for running a set of books or something, you know?

SIGRIST: When the ship arrived in New York, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty, or, you mentioned coming to Ellis Island, the name got changed at Ellis Island. Your uncle came to Ellis?

TRACY: I'll tell you why, probably. Again, we were here, I remember we were shipped in with so many other people, dumped into a big room, wherever that was, probably the big hall that I saw. And, and, I mean, we had, we weren't staying here. You see, part of the family that came to pick us up came in. I don't remember whether it was by automobile or by train. I don't remember if they had buses at the time. It was either by train or by automobile. They came in on arrival, they picked us up, and we drove to Philadelphia. So that I wouldn't be on the outside looking around and seeing the Statue of Liberty and so on. And I'd say, at age seven, there are a lot of things you don't even think of. We left that place, and we arrived in this place.

SIGRIST: And you'd seen so many places. (he laughs)

TRACY: And I'd seen so many, oh.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you spent your first night in America. Do you remember how the family spent the very first evening?

TRACY: No, but I remember, I remember this, strange, strange the things you remember. I remember they served some

fruit when we got to their house in Philadelphia. And they served some fruit, and I took a banana, and I started to peel it. And one of my cousins said, "Look at him! He knows he has to, he knows it's got to be peeled!" And I said, "Of course I know it's got . . ." I had a banana in Liverpool. (he laughs) That stands out in my mind.

SIGRIST: You were one up on most immigrants. (he laughs)
You knew how to eat the banana. Where in Philadelphia did they live?

TRACY: Uh, on Fifth, Fifth and Fairmount Avenue.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay with them before you got your own place?

TRACY: Before?

SIGRIST: How long did your family stay with them?

TRACY: Oh. Oh, just maybe a week or so, uh, until they found an apartment for us. Everything was ready. They had everything almost ready for us.

SIGRIST: And would you say, how did they treat you when you first arrived?

TRACY: Oh, very warm, very warm.

SIGRIST: Your mother hadn't seen, is this her sister or her brother?

TRACY: Brother and two sisters.

SIGRIST: And they were all in Philadelphia.

TRACY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Um . . .

TRACY: Yeah, well, they all, of course, came, uh, Saturday nights, uh, we all, at Uncle Meyer's house. He had a big house at Sixth and Spruce and, uh, and we'd all get together there and have comraderie.

SIGRIST: We're going to take about a ten minute break right now so Kevin can put more tape onto the machines, and then we'll continue with your life in America.

TRACY: Kevin, can you hear me? (he laughs) Are you interested? Is it interesting? Have you got enough tape? You'd better have enough tape!

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Wednesday, February 15, 1995. We are beginning Tape Two with Mr. Arthur Tracy, otherwise known as The Street Singer, but who also happens to be an immigrant who came from Russia in 1906 when he was seven years old. Where we left off at the end of Tape One, your family had just arrived in Philadelphia. I had asked you how you had spent the first night, and you said that your, you were very warmly welcomed by your mother's family.

TRACY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I'd like you to talk a little bit about maybe the first couple of weeks here in America, and what it was like to, to adjust yourself to new situations and new circumstances.

TRACY: Uh, well, there really isn't much I can say, because as I think back, of course, we knew no English. We couldn't speak English, any of us, and all speaking Yiddish, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: How did that affect your life when you first came here?

TRACY: Well, uh, it didn't last long, though, because, I say, I have the aptitude for languages. Now, people don't even believe that I was born in a foreign country, because I have no trace of any accent and so on. My sisters, the older ones, had slight accents. My father and mother, of course, had accents. Uh, but I had a very brilliant cousin here, uh, Yale Schechter[ph], who was one of the most brilliant lawyers in the country. But he took over. He was, uh, he was maybe eight or ten years older than I and, uh, in fact, he changed my name, he said, "Abraham Tracy just doesn't sound right. I mean, it just don't fit." He said, "For now on, you're Arthur." And so I became Arthur Tracy. And he, yes, I'm glad you asked that question, because now, I recall now. He took me over and began to coach me and teach me and teach me English, and took me around the city to show certain places and so on. But that's about as far as I can go. I don't remember anything any more vividly. We, it was, it was not for long but it was a confined time, uh, I mean, there wasn't much I could do at age seven.

SIGRIST: Were you enrolled in school?

TRACY: Yeah. Uh, in, well, again, I say, he, he helped me with my lessons. Yale helped me with my lessons and taught me and guided me and so on. But I picked it up one, two, three, you see? And, uh, and I have a love and a desire, you know, I can pick up something now, today. I can pick up any magazine or any newspaper, and if the headline sounds interesting, no matter what the subject or what it refers to, I like to know everything. Just as I did when I first went to England. There isn't a factory where there'd be a bottling place with beer or soda or whiskey or whatever, or a silver factory where they made tableware, or a tobacco, where they made cigars and stripped the tobacco leaves and so on. A steel mill, I remember, I went to a steel mill. And the owner of the steel mill had a beautiful daughter that he was sort of trying to match up, I think. And he said, "Darling, take Mr. Tracy through." And we went into the kiln with the fire burning, and she called one man over, and she said to him, "Harry," or Joe, or whatever his name was. She said, "Take some fire and put it in your mouth, and walk . . ." He pulled out a sheet, like a board of red hot iron from the kiln and put it on the floor, and took off his shoes and walked

on it. He put flame in his mouth. And I wondered, that's the kind of people they use in the circuses. People who are immune to fire. Now, the world doesn't know that. I didn't know it. And, of course, I was, I was alarmed when I saw him put, but there he was. He was just, like there are people who are, who can, uh, one man, I don't drink. If I take one drink, I'm very happy, and having fun and so on, and that's all I need. I don't even finish the whole drink. But there are people who are immune to liquor, and one guy said, "I'll drink you under the table," and he did. He drank a couple of bottles of whiskey. But he was cold stone sober, because he was immune to the alcohol.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what the experience was like for you of when you started school in America.

TRACY: When I started singing?

SIGRIST: When you started school in America, when you were put into school, what sticks out in your mind about that experience?

TRACY: Uh, well, I, very vague, I got in, of course. I say, Yale began to teach me a little English for I don't know how long, maybe a month before I was registered

in school.

SIGRIST: His name is Yale, like the school, Y-A-L-E.

TRACY: Yale, yeah. Uh, so that when I got into, uh, into class, it was, it was a learning process, but I picked it up fast. Uh, because, as I think of it now, now, when I'm studying a foreign tune or something, there's so much similarity, there's so much of the French and the Greek words that were adopted by the English and taken into English, and I just don't want to bother thinking about any words now, but there are, and take a dictionary and see, because the Webster dictionary gives you the derivative from which the English word came, and it's either Greek, or French, or German.

SIGRIST: Did your father speak any English in Europe, being . . .

TRACY: No.

SIGRIST: I mean, he knew several languages.

TRACY: He took, he immediately, he immediately registered in night school. They used to have night school in those days. They probably have it today, too. Uh, went to night school and studied.

SIGRIST: What do you know about his experience in night school?
What do you know about his experience in night school?

TRACY: Not much, not much, because I was not with him. But all I know is he took, he, uh, I still have his dictionaries. He took a combination Yiddish and English dictionary, and he made up, I remember he used to sit and write messages to himself, or just write sentences, and he'd say them in Yiddish, and then look up the translation on the English side of the dictionary, and make up his, and write his sentences, or take a newspaper and read slowly and look up the words immediately, and the English dictionary translated into the Yiddish, to see exactly what the meaning is. And so it was, uh, but he spoke very well, but with an accent.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she make an attempt to learn?

TRACY: The same way, the same. She used to study with him.

SIGRIST: Who was more successful at learning English, your mother or your father?

TRACY: No, I think, my father. My father was, he also had an aptitude for picking up things. Uh, I . . . And that's a gift. It's like people ask me why did you get five thousand dollars for one shot on radio when you first came on, singing, the ordinary songs. And I said, "It's very simple. There are singers, and they call them all singers." Because if you remember there was a horse called Secretariat that was, after it was through racing, I think at about age six, uh, they sold the horse, the owner sold the horse to a group for six million dollars. And its offspring were all racing horses and all made money, and Secretariat himself had made many millions in his (?), because he won every race. (he clears his throat)

SIGRIST: There's some water there if you want some.

TRACY: And, at the same time, you saw a horse that drew an ice wagon that you could buy for fifty or a hundred dollars. One horse sells for six million, and another horse for fifty or a hundred dollars, and they're both horses. And so they call singers singers. Nelson, the old man with a bandana, is a singer, Frank Sinatra is a singer, uh, and Caruso was a singer, and I'm a singer. But there is a difference. Now, why I got

five thousand is because I had an appeal, it was a charismatic appeal of the soul and the spirit and the interpretation, that I put into the same lyric that the ordinary singer that gets maybe five hundred a week, I got five thousand for one shot. They get five hundred a week, or a singer that sings in the saloon for fifty bucks, but yet they're all called singers. So, I mean, you know.

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good time, I think, for us to start talking about your career. Why don't we start with you telling me how you began getting interested in music and singing.

TRACY: Well, uh, it started, I suppose, when I used to go to synagogue with my father weekends, for the Sabbath, Friday night, Saturday morning.

SIGRIST: In Philadelphia.

TRACY: In Philadelphia. And in those days there were cantors with magnificent voices. Oh! Dreamy. And I would listen, and I'd listen to those compositions. There was one cantor, Yosele Rosenblatt[ph], who was very famous.

SIGRIST: What was his first name?

TRACY: Yosele, Joseph. Y-O-S-E-L-E. Yosele Rosenblatt.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

TRACY: Uh, and he used to compose his own, uh, liturgical compositions. And I studied many of them, as a matter of fact, and made some recordings of them. And, uh, so I listened to these voices, and my father discovered I had a voice so, of course, he began, he began to teach me, teach me the rudiments of music, and also to teach me how to project the voice. And every time, after every service, say, on a Saturday, uh, around noon, when the service was over, we'd go home, and he would invite six or eight friends to come and make kiddish, to bless the, a blessing over the liquor. And then he would turn to me and say, "Abbala, sing something." And I would sing. I'd sing maybe one of these liturgical compositions.

SIGRIST: And how old were you, roughly?

TRACY: Oh, cut it off.

SIGRIST: Can we stop the tape just for a moment? (break in tape) Okay. We're now resuming after taking just a

few minutes. Mr. Tracy, when we paused the tape you were telling us about singing with the cantor when you were a child. You were telling us about singing for a cantor in Philadelphia.

TRACY: Oh.

SIGRIST: How you started to be interested in singing.

TRACY: Well, I, as I said, when, after the service, my father would usually invite six or eight cronies to come home for a little powwow, and he'd say to me, "Sing something." And these six or eight men would applaud. That's the first applause I got, and it probably gave me the bug, subconsciously. And then at school, then, of course, my father engaged me into a choir at one of the synagogues, just one time, for one holiday. And I gave it up because the choirmaster said I was a soprano, and my father said, "No, he's an alto." And so my father took me out of there. But as I, now, from that, from that start then, of course, in school . . .

SIGRIST: How old were you at this point?

TRACY: Oh, ten, twelve, and then, of course, I'd be bar

mitzvahed, thirteen. And when I got to school, uh, I was singing, and because of the voice, in the little plays, I always got the leads. And then when I got into school, into high school, uh, the head of the music, the professor of the music section would teach me a song first and sing it to the assembly, and repeat it with me the second time around. And each time I got wonderful applause. And then I began to, uh, do little jobs, do little two dollar jobs. Parties, weddings, and so on. Eventually, uh, I started singing in the, concertizing in the, all the best hotels on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, where they had a trio, cello, violin and a piano, and I would sing in the lobbies, the beautiful lobbies in those days. And again, they'd just, they just took me to their hearts. And with each, with each appearance, the applause would grow, and the number of people would grow. And, uh, at the University of Pennsylvania, where I began my study of architecture, uh, but I wanted to sing. And, uh, I quit after the first year because Dr. Gray came to me and said, "Do you have, do you have a family or friends who will give you commissions?" And I said, "I have two uncles who are in the real estate business, but they don't

build, no architecture." So he said, "Well, I would advise you not, not to stick in this." Because they used to get maybe fifteen bucks a week, uh, for drafting. And he said, "You'll be doing that for fifteen, twenty years, unless you have friends or people who will give you commissions to do some structure work for them." So I gave it up, and that's when I began to sing, and to study. And, uh, I hung around. I was made the only male member of a, of the Philadelphia Music Club, which was a female, a feminine club. And I was the only male member, and Mrs. Watress[ph], may God rest her sweet soul, sort of sponsored me. And, uh, I began to study with a man in Philadelphia who was a baritone, and instead of advising me that I was young and the voice was young, I had already studied a lot of the Caruso arias and so on, instead of saying, "Just do the lyric thing, don't do the dramatic singing," he'd go to the other end of this big parlor in Philadelphia, "Netta," to his wife.

"Get the music, play for Arthur." And he would go to the other end of the room, I was by the piano singing, and he said, "Out with it, Arthur! Out with it!" And we would sing duets. Well, a young fresh voice against a schooled voice, I sang myself out and I lost

my voice completely. A Dr. Fielding O. Lewis[ph], a throat man, examined me. He said, "I don't want you even to talk. You take pen or pencil and paper, and that's where you're going to communicate." So I went to a farm for seven months, and I would come into the city, uh, like twice a month, for Dr. Lewis to examine me, and after the seven months, when he said to me, "Son, you can sing, your voice is back," I couldn't wait to get home to my parents and let them know. I mean, a poor boy, this was my only possession. (he clears his throat) So then I know my father could not afford to pay. I was auditioned by Horacio Connell[ph], who is also a baritone singer, an Eisteddvod singer, a Welshman. And he loved my voice. He thought it had such qualifications and such possibilities, I studied everything. Piano, music, languages, and so on. And, uh, he gave me vocalises and he gave me physical exercises to bring back the quality, and he brought my voice into the mask, so-called, and placed the voice properly in the box, and from then on that's when I began to do my concertizing. And that ended with a sad note, because when I finally became Street Singer, and making big money, and getting such accolades, uh, I wound up in

England, where they sold two million of my records, which brought me over there. I gave Horacio Connell[ph] credit in every interview, whether it be press, radio, television, whatever, and I saved about a three-inch, cut the clippings out of the papers, and saved a stack about three inches high of reviews on me, theaters, television, radio and so on, and I sent it to him in Philadelphia to show him that I gave him credit, used his name every interview, and got a note from his wife, he never lived to see it. He was gone. Which, of course, was a sad note. And from that I went around. Then, uh, then radio came in, and somebody said to me, "You've got a voice. What are you worried about? Go to WMCA," which I did. (he laughs) But that was strange. I was singing, That's Why Darkies are Born, and the girl played Old Man River. She was in a hurry to go to dinner with her boyfriend. And they said, "Okay, next." And I said, "Don't you, don't you want to know my name or anything?" "But we'll call you." "I don't have a phone. Uh, where are you going to call me?" So they took my name, but it didn't happen. Until a man who used to do my club booking, where I used to get fifteen, twenty dollars a show, big money. And he

became the manager of the artist bureau at the station, so he brought me in to Mr. Flam[ph], who had just bought the station, didn't know his ear from his elbow, and I gave him an audition, and he turned to the agent, he said, "Is he good?" The agent said, "Good? He's great!" "Okay, put him on." So I worked for nine solid months, not one farthing. But, then he came to me in the summer. In the summertime in those days they used to close the stations down, uh, because it was too hot to work in the studios. And he said to me, "You go to the mountains and, uh, when you come back . . ." I said, "I'm not going to any mountains. I had an experience there once, and it leads nowhere. I'm going to stay here. Give me fifty dollars a week to tide me over." "No," he said, "you go to the mountains, and when you come back . . ." Uh, in the meantime, there were, I did nine different shows. I was engaged by people who heard me on radio, on the station. Uh, Adam's Hats, Schlossman Furniture, Schwartz Furniture, and so on and so on. And they each gave me five or ten dollars. Then came an extinguisher, a roach extinguisher, and, uh, he came in one day and he said, "I heard a voice yesterday driving home. Who is the voice?" He engaged me for

fifteen dollars a show, Adam's Hats for twenty-five dollars a show. I was making, now, ninety-nine dollars a week. And this man came to me, he said, uh, "I'll tell you what I'll do. You let me collect the ninety-nine dollars, I'll pay you fifty dollars a week, and when you come back, if you go to the mountains, when you come back I'll give you a hundred dollars a week." I said, "I'm staying here." And I, I suffered my hunger, stayed on, had the, worked with the engineer, who got into the control room. He gave me the distance, the volume, and how to study the mike. Cut!

SIGRIST: We're going to take a pause for a moment. (break in tape)

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: Take a few more minutes. (break in tape) Do you want a break? Go ahead. We're . . .

TRACY: So, uh, I said no. I studied the mike and did my ten, fifteen dollar jobs. And then in order to make, then I went to a movie house where they flashed on the screen, "Amateurs every Monday night." And somebody

said to me, a friend of mine in Philadelphia, he said, "Everybody loves you in Philadelphia, they know you, and they applaud you. If you could go to New York and sing before a strange audience, people who don't know you, and you can get the same reaction as you get here in Philadelphia, then you know you've got something."

So he was with me when I saw this flash on the screen, and he poked me in the ribs, he said, "Here's your opportunity." So I took the name of the guy on the screen, and he said, "Sure, join us. No money." You sang for a prize, amateur night.

SIGRIST: What year is this?

TRACY: 1924 or 5. He said, "If you get the same reaction . . ." So I took this, uh, I got, I went to do this amateur show, and the magnificent prize of five bucks. But the next day I got a call from the man who managed this thing, he said, "We have four other theaters. Each one has amateur night. Would you like to do them?" I said, "Why not? It's five bucks a night. I get twenty-five bucks a week." And I won the prize every night in every theater. So he said, "You want to do the route again?" I said, "Okay." Second week, and I'm getting wonderful

reaction, uh, he said, "Arthur, you and I know that you win the prize honestly, because the applause meter shows it. But since you're winning every night in every theater, people think it's a hookup or something. Why don't you go out and be the M.C. for a week?" I said, "Fine." Give me a chance to talk, introduce acts, and so on. And every, by this time they knew me, and the audiences knew me, and I would introduce the acts, and put my hand on the head, and (?) applause would win the five bucks. So . . .

SIGRIST: Shall we pause?

TRACY: Cut.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for a moment. (break in tape)
Okay, and we're back on with Arthur Tracy.

TRACY: So while I'm doing this, uh, amateur thing, uh, and stopping the show cold, and when I didn't sing, when I was doing M.C., the whole theatre was, "Sing a song! Sing a song!" Well, of course, that gave me courage and, uh, finally I did the routes for six weeks, but then I went off. But work was very scarce, theaters were, radio came in and the theaters were slacking, and I'm walking hungry one day along Broadway, and one

of the acts that I had on, where I did an amateur show, saw me, he says, "Hi, kid. What are you doing?"

I said, "Looking for work." He said, "Why don't you go radio . . ." He told me, "Why don't you go to CBS?" And I had a little radio experience on WMCA, "Go to CBS and ask for Ralph Wonders," gave him an audition. So I went, called Ralph Wonders, we set up an audition, and during that audition Bill Paley listened in in his office, and I did a blockbusting set of songs. I was summoned to the office, and Bill Paley said to me, "Arthur, we loved your singing and we loved the program. I will give you six weeks to do or die. If you do, the sky's the limit, if you die it's another audition." I had six weeks in which, before my first appearance, the six weeks was to start six weeks later. So I was building programs for eighteen shows, six weeks, three shows a week. And during that time I thought, "If I could only go on as a mystery, I'd have to have a mystery name." And I'm building my programs and thinking, and I said, "I'll call myself, my work is eight different languages, makes it international, and I do operatic arias and classic songs. I'll call myself The International Balladeer." And I was stuck with it, and I went on

building the programs. Three days before my actual appearance on the air, I read an article in the paper which said, "Freddy Lonsdale just arrived from England with a new play which he sold to the Schuberts. The title of the play is The Street Singer." So I said, "Good gosh. Why didn't I think of that?" And I took it. I dropped the International Balladeer, and I went on as The Street Singer. And for fear of being accused of plagiarism, I added, because the play was on, you see, uh, I added the phrase, "I'm on the air as Street Singer of the Air." Until someone said to me, "Street and Singer are two English words, and nobody can incorporate the English language, so you can drop the 'on the air.'" And I remained Street Singer.

I came on originally because of Street Singer with East Side West Side, which is a street song with Al Smith's theme song. But it didn't fit the style of my singing. So I began to look for a new theme song, went into Marks Music, and there I heard this strain from behind a closed door. (he sings) I walked into the room, "Play it again," and the guy stares at me. An interpreter said, "He doesn't speak English, only Spanish." I said, "Ask him to play it again." I said, "I'll buy the song." Mr. Marks says, "No, you

don't. Demonstration in my office, I buy it." So I've been collecting royalties now for sixty-five years. But it was two million recording of Marta, my theme song, which the two million records that sold in England that brought me to England for the seven weeks, and I stayed on for six glorious years.

SIGRIST: And then when did you return to America from England, what year?

TRACY: 1941. On the last trip of the, of the Normandie. The Normandie, you wouldn't remember, you probably weren't even born yet, but the Normandie was, that was the its last trip, it had an accident and was lying on its side in the Hudson River, they just disbanded it. And I immediately did, now, this may sound strange, when Bill Paley said, "I'll give you the six weeks," and you're on six weeks later, my first program was so gigantic that the six weeks ran into sixteen weeks, four months. And I'm singing on a hundred and eighty-seven stations, CBS, not getting a penny, still pulling my belt tight every day. And then I was suddenly sold to Pillsbury Flour, twice a week . . .

SIGRIST: Who had been the sponsor at the beginning?

TRACY: No sponsor.

SIGRIST: There was no sponsor.

TRACY: No sponsor. That was for, that was the . . .

SIGRIST: For nothing.

TRACY: The, uh, I forget what they call it, a pre-station. And, but I was on to see what, but the reaction became bigger and bigger, and the mail started coming in, two thousand letters a week, and I couldn't afford to answer them. Cut!

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for a moment. (break in tape)
We were just talking, when we start, I'm sorry, you just said that you were sold to Pillsbury. Okay, we're going.

TRACY: So, uh, Pillsbury engaged me for two fifteen-minute shots a week, and they paid me twelve hundred, six twenty-five for each show, that's twelve fifty a week.
I was immediately engaged by the Keats[ph] Circuit on a fifteen-week tour at seventeen fifty a week, twelve fifty and seventeen fifty a week makes three thousand bucks a week to start with.

SIGRIST: And what year is this?

TRACY: 1931, January the 13th, I mean, July the 13th, 1931, was my first program. Now, I must kick back for a minute. My mother, being raised in a commercial family, said, "Look at all your friends," all our friends, theater is so tough, uh, this is when I was struggling. She said, "Why don't you go into business? You've got a good mind, and . . ." I said, "Ma, but I love to sing." And she kept harping business, business. And as she walked away, my father came right behind her and said, "Son, you do the thing that you love to do, and you're bound to be a success." So I stuck to singing. Now, I had Pillsbury Flour, and then after that I had another sponsor. I went home to Chesterfield for a year, uh, I had two nights a week, the Bundle[ph] Sisters had the other two nights, and, uh, I forget the name of the girl singer who had the third two nights a week. And I was just going like a house, a house afire. The mail, I eventually had to have five girls. I put my brother in charge of answering mail, and two, three thousand letters a week, I couldn't answer all of them, but I answered as many as I could. And I have

now maybe four or five hundred letters from personalities who gave me critique, not critic, but critique, raved about the quality of the voice and the rendition and the spirit, and so on, interpretation. And so I have never looked back. And, uh, then eventually, as I said before, I began to do, my money, what do you do with money? You have to invest it somehow. So I began the building. I built at the request of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt the first village of one thousand apartments, called Brentwood Village in Washington, at 14th and Rhode Island Northeast. I was the first one to heed his call, and my village was used by people who were building all over the country. They were brought into Washington to see how I ran my village. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: What was your proudest moment as a performer? What was your proudest moment as a performer?

TRACY: I had no private moments.

SIGRIST: Proudest.

TRACY: Proudest moment.

SIGRIST: What were you, what moment were you the most proud of

when you were performing? An event, or a . . .

TRACY: Well, I guess, uh, no, I'll tell you what. The Jewish people, when they donate a charity, used to give, used to use the number 18, Chai, you know, when they take a drink, to say, "L'Chiam!" Chiam means life, l'chiam means "to life." Chai are the two letters which form the eighteen. One letter amounts to eight, and the other amounts to ten. When my mother, my father earned probably twenty-five dollars a week to feed nine mouths, now here I am the big street singer, from the twenty-five dollars a week that my father earned, my mother always managed to save two or three dollars for her charities. A dollar eighty, or eighteen cents, or whatever she, but she gave her charities, the three bucks, two bucks, whatever. Now here I am making, I started with three thousand, I was up to ten thousand, then I was up to twenty thousand dollars a week income, and I sent bags of money home. And the great thrill to me was when my mother was able to give in charity eighteen hundred dollars a donation. And I continued that as I went through the years. Uh, now, as a result of my appearance, my first appearance at the Palladium, where I think I still hold the record,

uh, I was, and this is, this is a cute little story. Uh, Johnny, he's now Sir John Wolfe. His father was also knighted, for the charities. But C.M. Wolfe was the, the Louis B. Mayer of England. He was the biggest producer. And he left the firm he was with to start for himself. And I was then as hot as a pistol.

So, and the show business, the film business was very bad, theater business, because the radio had come in and caught in, you see? So I was, uh, Johnny, Johnny, Sir John told me this himself recently. He said, "When you did the first film, before you did the film, uh, I came home." He says, "I had a date with my girl." This is the story. And he said, "Darling, we're going, I want you to wear decollete. I'm going to wear a white tie and tails. We're going dining and dancing." She said, "Oh, yeah, we're going to the Palladium." "No," he said, "we're going dining and . . ." "No, the Palladium." "Why?" And she said, "Well, there's a singer there that everybody's talking about." He said, "Okay, we'll go dining and dancing after." So they came to the theater, and after he took the girl home, two o'clock in the morning, his father was asleep, but in the morning at breakfast he said, "Dad, I heard a singer last night

at the Palladium, just tied them up in knots, stopped the show cold." "What does he do?" And he said, "Well, he sings." "Well," he said, "other people sing. What makes him . . ." "But, Dad, he, I can't explain it." He said, "You've simply got to go and hear him." So he came to hear me and sent Herbert Wilcox, his chief producer. And he immediately put his brother on my tail, Charlie Wilcox. And before the week, as the week was ending, on Saturday night, we had a letter of intent for contracts, that I was engaged to do the first film, Limelight, with Anna Niegel[ph]. And it broke every record. There was one song in it that they still request, Whistling Waltz. And from that I went from Limelight with Anna Niegel[ph], I brought Margaret Lockwood in the films, and we did a film called Street Singer, and the third film was called Command Performance, with Lillie Palmer, and the fourth film was called Follow Your Star, with a girl named Belle Crystal, who never made it in films, but she did very well in television. And so I made these four films over there, I had made several films here before.

SIGRIST: What films did you make in the states?

TRACY: The big broadcast of 1932, uh, I did, uh, I can't think of the name. I did another film, but it never saw daylight. I don't know why. But I did about two dozen two-reelers for Warner Brothers, and I did about two thousand bouncing ball, you know, sing along, for Paramount. And those things are still playing.

SIGRIST: Did you do any television later on, in the fifties?

TRACY: Oh, now, when it came to, of course, I, I was over in England, television started, it started here in '48, in this country. It started, it was 1938 when King George V, 1936 when King George V died, and I, I was supposed to be at the funeral since I met the Prince of Wales and so on, but I was in Brighton, and I had a very bad cold. And so I watched the funeral on television. When I came back, uh, the World's Fair was on in New York, and I did, I made appearances when television was only streaks, and you could hardly distinguish that the voice was there, and slowly, slowly I got into, uh, I went back, I did some theater work, then I did a lot of building, you know, the structure, the village, and the houses in Philadelphia and Boston and so on, and I have never quit. And I stopped recording in 1965, I think. Uh, now, to get

down to the present day, when CD's came into the market, I heard so much drivel. I heard so much crash. And I couldn't, I wanted to be on CD's. And it just didn't happen. And I believe, being a fatalist, too, to the nth degree, timing in theater, like timing music, timing is a very important element.

I tried, but it didn't work, because you must have an organization behind you. One swallow doesn't make summer. You've got to have a flock of birds. So at a luncheon two years ago, uh, I met a man who was pointed out as the president of Good Music Records. And he told someone he would like to meet me. So I said, "Well, bring me over, introduce us." And this man said, "Arthur, on my roster I have all the singers. For years I've been wanting to make an Arthur Tracy album. Why I didn't, I don't know. I can't explain it. But now that we've met, I'm going to make one." And, uh, nine months later, which is about a little over a year ago, he issued the first CD. And it went so big, and I said to him, "Ed, are you happy with the way things are going?" He said, "I'm very happy." But I said, "I'm so happy. If you are, I'd like to see Volume II." And he said, "No, no, Arthur, we, uh, we just do Volume I and that's it.

Unless, unless," he said, "you're Michael Jackson."
Oh, God. I said nothing. I changed the subject,
quick. Until about two months ago when he called me,
and, "How are you feeling?" And I said, "Okay." He
said, "Let me give you a piece of good news, make you
feel good." I said, "Shoot." He said, "I'm working
on Volume II." "Oh," I said, "Ed, how can I thank
you? I'm so grateful to you." I said, "You know
something? And I didn't molest a little boy at all.
I just made it." Anyhow, the second one is doing so
well around the world it has not yet been released
here in this country. So they're going like a house
afire worldwide.

SIGRIST: Well, we were wondering if maybe, I know your throat
is a little gunked up in here, but if we played some
of your music, if you would sing along with it on
tape, if you would be willing to do that?

TRACY: Sure, you mean lip sync?

SIGRIST: No, I mean actually sing . . .

TRACY: Oh, no.

SIGRIST: No, you'd prefer not to. Okay. Um . . .

TRACY: You can't. The voice, the voice isn't there.

SIGRIST: What, um, when you look back on your life now, and you've had a long, very full career.

TRACY: I'll tell you what I say.

SIGRIST: What?

TRACY: To my audiences and to everybody. When my eyelids open in the morning, and before they close at night, I look up and I say, "Dear Lord, I thank you, I'm so grateful for my longevity. I'm ready to celebrate my ninety-sixth birthday in June, I thank you for my longevity, I thank you for my good health, I've never been really sick a day in the ninety-five years, and I thank you for the love of the world, and I bless the people who turn their knobs on the television or on their radios, and when they came to Street Singer they stopped." And the love of the world is indescribable.

Paul, I have often shed a little tear of joy. I can't, I can't get over the letters, cassette letters or written letters, that come to me. I read them, or I listen to them. And I am overjoyed.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Tracy, this is a good time for us to end the

interview. I want to thank you very much. It's been my pleasure to have spent, well, off and on, almost three-and-a-half hours now, doing the interview.

TRACY: Paul, I can't tell you how happy you've made me. And I want to thank Barry, Barry Moreno. He contacted me, and I'll tell you what he said. He said, "I never knew anything about you, but I found a cassette in Tower." And he said, "I never heard such singing." He just started to rave. And we corresponded, and here I am, as a result of that meeting.

SIGRIST: Well, and we thank Kevin Daley, also, for driving into New York to get you and bring you out to Ellis Island.

TRACY: Indeed I do. And thank you, all three of you, so much.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Arthur Tracy on February 15th, 1995, at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.