

EI-61

MINNIE AMRON LAKEN

BIRTH DATE: JULY 26, 1896

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 7/1992

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 3/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 5/2007

RUSSIA, 1912

RESIDENCE: GOMEL, BELARUS

AGE 16

RESIDENCE IN US: NYC

PORT OF EMBARKATION: RIGA

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Laken insisted she came in 1913 when she was fourteen and a half but the immigration papers supplied by her daughter stated the year as 1912 when she was sixteen years old. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 3/6/1995.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 6th, 1991. We are here at the Menorah Nursing Home in Brooklyn with Minnie Laken, who came from Russia in 1912.

LAKEN: 1913.

SIGRIST: 1913, when she was fourteen and a half years old.

LAKEN: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Laken, can you please give me your full name and include your maiden name in that.

LAKEN: Yes. My name is Minnie, Minnie Amron. Now it's Laken.

SIGRIST: Could you spell your maiden name for me, please?

LAKEN: The maiden name?

SIGRIST: The Russian.

LAKEN: A-M-R-O-N.

SIGRIST: A-M-R-O-N.

LAKEN: N.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth?

LAKEN: Birth was, uh, August the 26th.

SIGRIST: What year?

LAKEN: What year was it? If it's now for a hundred, it's now
95...

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: 1896 she was born.

LAKEN: 1896.

SIGRIST: 1896.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: And it was July, not August.

SIGRIST: July. Let's talk about where you were born in Russia.
What

town were you born in?

LAKEN: I was born in Gomel.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

LAKEN: White Russia.

SIGRIST: Spell the name of the town, please.

LAKEN: I don't think if I should spell it.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: G-O-M-E-L.

SIGRIST: G-O-M-E-L. Can you tell me anything about that town?
What

the town looked like, maybe?

LAKEN: Yeah. The town was a big town with a lot of stores.
Main

street with a lot of stores and I was working as a salesgirl
there for

a while.

SIGRIST: When you were still in Russia.

LAKEN: Yeah, when I was still in Russia. And then I went away
here.

I didn't know what to do.

SIGRIST: Did the town have big buildings in it?

LAKEN: Very big buildings, yes.

SIGRIST: So, it was a good size town. A city.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: It's a big city.

LAKEN: Yes, very big town. A nice town. And I lived there all the
time. My parents lived there all the time, too.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your parents. What was your father's
name?

LAKEN: My father, his name was Isidor.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

LAKEN: He was a wholesale butcher.

SIGRIST: Talk about his profession a little bit.

LAKEN: Yes. He used to buy cattle ten at a time and sell them
on the
market but he didn't have a butcher store.

SIGRIST: He just did the wholesale end of it.

LAKEN: He was a wholesaler, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was your mother's name?

LAKEN: Mary.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

LAKEN: her maiden name was, wait. I'll remind myself. (to her daughter) What was my mother's name, Esther? You remember?

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: I can remember my other grandmother's maiden

name but...

SIGRIST: Well, maybe we can come back to it.

LAKEN: Lipshitz was the name, her maiden name.

SIGRIST: Lipshitz. What was she like? What did she look like?

LAKEN: She was a very, really lively girl. Good looking, healthy

person.

SIGRIST: Did she work in Russia?

LAKEN: No. When she came here, when my father died, she had to make

a living for all of us.

SIGRIST: But in Russia she didn't work.

LAKEN: No, my father was supporting us all.

SIGRIST: You say "all." How many people were there in your family?

LAKEN: We, I had six brothers and one sister. We were two

girls and
six boys.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me their names?

LAKEN: Yes. The Russian names were Mendel and Philip. Philip
came
here to America, the first one.

SIGRIST: What year did he come?

LAKEN: What year was it? It was before the war.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: It was the early 1900's.

LAKEN: In nineteen, yeah.

SIGRIST: O.K., so there was Mendel and Philip.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And who else?

LAKEN: And Louie and what, uh, Louie and who else? Wait.

SIGRIST: Well, that's all right. We'll come back to that. So
you
had a house full of people.

LAKEN: Yeah, we had a big house.

SIGRIST: Talk about your house. Describe what it looked like to us.

LAKEN: We had, we rented an apartment of four rooms. Two bedrooms

and a dining room and a kitchen and that's where we lived all. But

when my father died two boys were here in America already , so we

wrote to them and they said they would take us over here.

SIGRIST: The house that you lived in in Russia...

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was this the first floor or second floor?

LAKEN: No, it was one floor, like a plain house with a big yard.

SIGRIST: Did you have a garden out back?

LAKEN: Yeah. We had in there a big garden in the back but we didn't

take care of the garden. The owners took care of the garden and supplied us if we needed something because we lived there for a long

time.

SIGRIST: Now, you said there were four rooms.

LAKEN: Yeah, four rooms.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how the house was heated? How did you keep

the house warm, do you remember?

LAKEN: We had an oven, like, we called it an oven there and put in

wood in there and that's how we heated.

SIGRIST: Were the winters cold where you were?

LAKEN: Oh, yes. Was cold. We used to go on a sled with a horse.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of foods that you ate in Russia?

LAKEN: Well, we ate because we were in the butcher line so we ate

most meat, calf's meat and plain meat. That's what we ate.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your family?

LAKEN: My mother did.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

LAKEN: Well, not so good but I tried to help. I wanted to learn

everything and what I wanted I did it. If I wanted to learn something, I did.

SIGRIST: Who taught you how to cook? Did your mother teach you?

LAKEN: No. I took my own recipes and I tried and I made it and when

we came here to this country I truly had to do it myself because to

save money. I was here eight months and we sent for my mother and

three boys to come here.

SIGRIST: In Russia, did you have to take care of your brothers and

sisters?

LAKEN: No.

SIGRIST: Your brothers were...

LAKEN: My father did and they worked with my father. I didn't have

to take care of them.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go to your father's place of work?

LAKEN: No, it was too much for me. That was for boys things.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did a young girl do in Russia?

LAKEN: Nothing. I was just a saleslady in a store.

SIGRIST: What kind of store was it?

LAKEN: It was a yard goods store.

SIGRIST: Yard goods?

LAKEN: Yes, and that's where I worked.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of young ladies who had jobs like that
in

this town?

LAKEN: Yes. yes. The young ladies had these jobs. In Russia
it

wasn't so nice. A girl should work and my father wouldn't let
me go

to work there because he made himself a nice living and he used
to

have a teacher home to teach us Russian and Jewish and that's
how we

learned. When I came here, and when I came here I said to my
brother,

"What will I do here?" He said, "Don't worry. If you know how
to

read and write you'll be all right." I said, "Well, I have to
go to

school." And I went to night school.

SIGRIST: In Russia,...

LAKEN: Here, here.

SIGRIST: I know. I'm just bringing us back to Russia.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: In Russia you lived a very comfortable life. Your
father
made a good living.

LAKEN: Yes, we did. We had everything what we needed. It was
comfortable for all of us.

SIGRIST: Now were there other members of your extended family
living
in this town? For instance, grandparents?

LAKEN: Yeah, we all lived in the same house. The boys worked.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: I don't think she understood what you
asked
her.

SIGRIST: For instance, did you have grandparents living in this
town?

LAKEN: No. I don't remember any grandparents.

SIGRIST: Any other kinds of relatives that lived there?

LAKEN: No, just a cousin. My father and mother raised a
cousin. It

was my mother's brother that died and he had no parents. He had
a
very young child so my parents took him in our house and they
raised
him.

SIGRIST: So he grew up sort of like one of your brothers.

LAKEN: He grew up with us, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you...

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: Excuse me, could I just--Mother, what he
means
about family in Gomel...

LAKEN: Yeah.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: Did you have any cousins or aunts and
uncles
there?

LAKEN: I had but they didn't live in our house.

SIGRIST: No, but I was just wondering if there were other
people who
lived in the town that you were related to?

LAKEN: Oh, in the town? We had cousins, yes.

SIGRIST: So were both sides of your family, your mother's side
and

your father's side, from the same town?

LAKEN: Yes, yes. Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Talk a little bit...

LAKEN: From the same town.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your religious life in this town.

You were Jewish.

LAKEN: Yes, we were Jewish.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in town?

LAKEN: What?

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in town?

LAKEN: Yeah, there was and my parents used to go Saturday to the

synagogue and they wanted the children should go, too. Of course,

the boys went to a Jewish school to learn Jewish and they did and my

father had to pay for it, for everything.

SIGRIST: But the girls, but you were not educated in a Jewish school.

LAKEN: No.

SIGRIST: Did you go to any kind of school in Russia?

LAKEN: No, because it was very hard for Jewish to get into a public

school. My father had a private teacher in the house. He used to

come and teach us Jewish and Russian.

SIGRIST: How often did this man come? Once a week?

LAKEN: He used to come every day.

SIGRIST: Every day.

LAKEN: Yes. He paid a lot of money. My father made a very nice

living and when I came here to this country I met from our town a man

and I told him I have to make a living. He says, "Well, I'm surprised

that your father allowed you. He sent you here to make a living?" I

said, "My father is not here anymore so we have to make a living now."

And he took me in. He had a private, he was a private ladie's tailor

and he taught me how to sew. I never knew how.

SIGRIST: You never learned in Russia.

LAKEN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did your mother sew in Russia?

LAKEN: No, she didn't. She didn't. We used to give away everything

to a dress maker.

SIGRIST: I see. I want to ask you, can you sort of describe to me

maybe a Passover celebration in Russia? What was it like?

LAKEN: Yes. When we had a Passover celebration we had new dresses

for the girls and new suits for the boys but we used, but my mother

used to give away to, to a tailor to make it all.

SIGRIST: Did you have Passover at your house or did you go somewhere

else?

LAKEN: No, we had in our house and my father was a religious man. He

was an educated man and he knew how to control the Passover holiday

and the boys had to sit near him and do it with him.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you have other relatives come to your house or

was it just the immediate family?

LAKEN: The immediate family we had.

SIGRIST: I see. Let me ask you, you said your father died.
Now,
you're still in Russia when your father died?

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

LAKEN: He had cancer but there nobody knew it was cancer. He
was
sick. They didn't know how to cure him and he died. He died a
young
man.

SIGRIST: How old was he?

LAKEN: He was about forty five.

SIGRIST: And how old were you when that happened?

LAKEN: I was about ten years old when this happened and my
mother had
to go out and make a living for all of us. So people who knew
my
father, they knew that we were pretty well off there so they
tried to
help my mother and they said that she has to work and we have to
help

her.

SIGRIST: So they got her a job?

LAKEN: Yeah. They made her a butcher store and she tried to make a

living there but she couldn't do much. They helped her and the older

boys were here. The young girls didn't know how.

SIGRIST: So it was difficult for your mother.

LAKEN: It was very difficult so we went away here to this country and

we used to send money to my mother.

SIGRIST: She was still in Russia.

LAKEN: She was still in Russia.

SIGRIST: You said you had brothers that came to America.

LAKEN: Before, yeah.

SIGRIST: Before. But that was after your father died.

LAKEN: They came before my father died.

SIGRIST: They did. What did they do when they got here?

LAKEN: They didn't do nothing. One went to school. He went to

National Farmers School, near Philadelphia it was and he was learning.

SIGRIST: Did you already have relatives in America?

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did your brothers come or how did they come?

LAKEN: We had cousins here and they came to them, to the cousins.

And when I came they kept me, also. They helped me. I didn't have to

pay for rent and one cousin had an appetizing store and they had, it's

young people, they had a baby so I used to be with the baby. She had

to go help her husband.

SIGRIST: When you were in Russia, what did you know about America?

LAKEN: We heard because we had here the relatives. We heard so much

about America, that here when you come and you work you could make a

living. So we were anxious to come here.

SIGRIST: So tell me a little bit about how you decided to come. Why

did you decide to come?

LAKEN: Because my father died and my brothers wrote us we should come

here to America and then we will take over the rest of the family. So

I went with my sister, my older sister.

SIGRIST: Did they send money to you? How did you pay for the trip?

LAKEN: They sent like a ship's card, they called it. It's a ticket

to come here. So we came with a ship.

SIGRIST: You said your older sister Clara?

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did she have a job in Russia? Was she a salesgirl, too?

LAKEN: No, she didn't do anything. She was not working, for work.

SIGRIST: You were just an enterpriser. (he laughs)

LAKEN: I was the one, you know. And if I said I wanted to learn

this, I did.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing in Russia? Do you remember what you

brought with you to America?

LAKEN: I just brought one dress, one skirt and one blouse. And
when

I came my cousin made me another blouse.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying "good-bye" to your mother and
you

family?

LAKEN: Yes, I did. (she is moved) My mother says, "Make sure
you

don't forget me!"

SIGRIST: Which you never did.

LAKEN: No.

SIGRIST: So you and Clara went from the town in Russia to
where?

Where did you get the boat?

LAKEN: We, in, uh, in Riga we took the boat. We took the
"Russia"

(she pronounces it "Roosaya") in Riga.

SIGRIST: From Riga. How did you get to Riga?

LAKEN: By train.

SIGRIST: Was that a long train ride?

LAKEN: Yes, it was a night.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of that? What was that like?

LAKEN: I remember. (she is moved) I was in train and a woman
said to

me, "Little girl, where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to
America!" She says, "Well, you have somebody there?" I said,
"I have

two brothers." She said, "They are single?" I said, "Yes." So
she

says, "Oh, I'm sorry to tell you but it's bad if you're going to
single boys." I said, "I'm not worried. I'll try to make a
living

myself." So I did.

SIGRIST: You were very strong.

LAKEN: When I came back I said to my oldest brother, he was in
school, I said, "How can I make a living here?" He says, he
says to

me, "Don't worry. You'll make a living." I says, "I want to
learn,"

and I went to a factory to learn on a machine and I learned, I
did.

And I went to another factory and I said, "I'm experienced
already."

I could sew and they paid me. I worked during the day and at
night I

went to school. I says, "I have to learn here the language. I
must

know how, how to read and write."

SIGRIST: When you were in Riga, how long did you stay in Riga
before

your boat came?

LAKEN: We were there a week.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay?

LAKEN: We stayed in a place where they kept all the travelers,
the

what do you call it?

SIGRIST: The immigrants.

LAKEN: The immigrants.

SIGRIST: Was this an area, uh...

LAKEN: It was very big.

SIGRIST: Did they give you examinations or anything in Riga?

LAKEN: Yes, they did. They asked me where I'm going and how
and what

and I told them everything.

SIGRIST: And so you were there for a week.

LAKEN: I was the speaker. My sister was older but I was the
leader.

SIGRIST: She was shyer than you.

LAKEN: Yeah, she didn't do much things I used to do.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat that you came on?

LAKEN: Yeah, it was "Russia" (she pronounces it "roosaya"),
Russia,

Russia. A Russian boat. A very big boat.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, what was it like being a young
girl from

this little town in Russia or big town, city, town.

LAKEN: Yeah, we had a really big town. We lived in a very big
town.

SIGRIST: But what was it like to see this huge ocean liner?

LAKEN: Well, it was nothing new to me because I was used to it.

SIGRIST: You had seen things like that before.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about the boat ride.

LAKEN: The boat ride. We were about fifty girls in one room.
In

one big room only girls.

SIGRIST: What kind of beds were in this room?

LAKEN: There were upstairs a bed and downstairs a bed.

SIGRIST: Like bunk beds, sort of.

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And who were these girls? Where did they come from?

LAKEN: They came from different countries. We met in Riga,
all.

Everybody stopped there to wait for a boat and, uh...

SIGRIST: And what was the voyage like?

LAKEN: The voyage was very long and very hard, hard for me. I
didn't

like it.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

LAKEN: I got sick on the boat. I didn't go out from the room.
But

we had a family from our town went there to and that woman used
to

take care of me because she used to say "little girl" she called
and

they took care.

SIGRIST: I see. So there was someone with you that you sort of

knew.

Do you remember what they fed you on the boat?

LAKEN: They did like herring and potatoes and all this and when
I

used to go in the dining room I smelled the smell of herring I
couldn't pass. I couldn't go no more to the dining room. I
says,

"No, it's not for me."

SIGRIST: Now, did you keep kosher?

LAKEN: Yes. My mother kept kosher.

SIGRIST: Did they supply kosher food for you on the boat?

LAKEN: Yes. That was supposed to be kosher.

SIGRIST: So, do you know how long the boat ride, you said it
was a

long time, do you know how long it was?

LAKEN: I was a week on the boat and when I came here to America
my

brother came from Philadelphia to take us off the boat. We need
somebody should come and take us off.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

LAKEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

LAKEN: And when we saw the Statue of Liberty we were kissing it
that

we are here in America already.

SIGRIST: So that was a happy moment on the boat.

LAKEN: It was very happy and we were dancing already.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you this question...

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Again, being a young girl travelling with your
sister...

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What's going through your mind during all of this?
Are you

frightened? Are you excited?

LAKEN: I wasn't frightened. I was sure that I'll make a living
myself. I says, "I'm not worried about it."

SIGRIST: Were you happy to leave Russia?

LAKEN: Yeah, because I tried to help Mama with the other
children.

SIGRIST: So you pull into New York Harbor and you end up at
Ellis

Island.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what happened at Ellis.

LAKEN: So Ellis Island they asked us where we are going. I
gave my

brother's address in school, "It's Philadelphia." They had to
send

me to the train to Philadelphia, so they gave me a ticket and
they

asked me for money and they gave me money. We had to show fifty
dollars that when we came in. So my brothers had money in the
boat

the night before. It was just Christmas Eve when we came in and
we

thought we'll have to stay there overnight, over Christmas
already.

But they work Christmas also and they took care of us.

SIGRIST: Did your brother come to meet you at Ellis?

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing your brother?

LAKEN: He came with a uniform that we couldn't recognize him
and he

sent up in a basket up the ship. It was a very big ship and he
sent

up bread, white bread, and he put in some money there and I took
it.

I took care of it right away. I hide away the money. Nobody
should

take it.

SIGRIST: Where did you hide it?

LAKEN: A pocketbook I had of mine and I said to my sister, "I'm
taking care of it. And they asked us, we have to show for what
they

gave us to eat for the day. They didn't know my brother will
come.

So I had to pay. I took out and I gave them fifty dollars. And
my

brother came. I says, "Look, here is the money." I gave it to
him

and he counts. He says, "It's fifty dollars missing." I says,
"I

gave it to them for the food," so they gave him back the money.

SIGRIST: Why was your brother wearing a uniform?

LAKEN: I don't know. Because he was in the school then, the
school

uniform.

SIGRIST: I see.

LAKEN: That was the school uniform and just happened the man sitting

there, he was in the same school, finished. And when he saw him he

says, "Oh, I was in the same school," and he took us care right away

on him.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people at Ellis Island?

LAKEN: Oh, yes. Some went to New York. Some went to Philadelphia.

We had to go to Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: How long had it been since you saw your brother last?

LAKEN: Well, I didn't see him about five years.

SIGRIST: Were you happy to see him again when you finally recognized

him?

LAKEN: Yes, I did. I saw that he was very nice. He likes to be

educated here, too, and he was.

SIGRIST: So tell me what happened after you were all done at Ellis.

Then what happened?

LAKEN: It happened that this man said to him, "You better run, hurry

up, because you'll miss the ferry. It's the last ferry." And
he took

us to my cousin's house and we were going on a train. I said
to him,

"Where are we going now?" He says, "We're going to this
cousin." He

gave me the name. I knew the name.

SIGRIST: This was in New York City?

LAKEN: Yeah, in New York. That was on 80th Street and Park
Avenue.

They had there and appetizing store and that's where they lived.

SIGRIST: I see. So you got on, you went up by subway up to
their

apartment.

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

LAKEN: No, that was a, we were sitting in the subway and some
people

were chewing something. I said to my brother, I had to know

everything, I had to know. I said, "What are they chewing all
the

time?" He says, "Don't worry. You'll be here a little time,
you'll

chew, also."

SIGRIST: And what were they chewing?

LAKEN: And that was chewing gum they were chewing.

SIGRIST: And that was the first time you had seen chewing gum.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So you went up in the subway and you went to your
cousin's

apartment.

LAKEN: Yeah, we came there. Then we had to take a bus to my
cousin

and it was Friday night. It was very nice. They took us up
very nice

and...

SIGRIST: Did they feed you?

LAKEN: Oh, yes. They made a nice dinner for us, a Friday
dinner, and

we were happy. They gave me and my sister a room right away and
I was

the one that was the worker. I said, "Don't worry. I'll help
you."

I knew that she had to help her husband in the store. Saturday
night

she had to go down and help. I was with the little boy in the
house.

SIGRIST: Sort of babysitting for them.

LAKEN: Babysitting, yeah. And I did everything that they had
to do

in the house for them.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay with them?

LAKEN: I stayed 'til my mother came. Eight months.

SIGRIST: Oh, so a good chunk of time.

LAKEN: I was here eight months without my mother.

SIGRIST: All right, let's talk a little bit, were you sending
letters

to your mother or sending money to your mother?

LAKEN: I send letters and money because I worked already and I
had a

little money. I used to send here and "Don't worry," I used to
write

her. "I'm making a living. When you come we'll be all right."
When

my mother came, she made like a restaurant, private restaurant
but it

didn't go too well.

SIGRIST: But that took a little while. She didn't do that
right when

she got here, did she?

LAKEN: No. My brother finished with the farm school and he was
on a

farm, so they took my mother to the farm and took there a house.
It

was cheap and that's where my mother was and I went there.

SIGRIST: And you were still living in New York until then.

LAKEN: Oh yes, with the parents. I was a very lively person
all the

time.

SIGRIST: Yes, I believe that.

LAKEN: I made a lot of friends here and we used to go around
Saturday

night and dance and be happy.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Tell me how you learned English.

LAKEN: I went to night school all the time and I was between
American

people all the time because I wanted to learn the language here.
I

want to talk like where I am. I should know when they talking
and I should talk to them.

SIGRIST: Describe night school for me. I've heard so many say
me,

"We went to night school," but never, no one has ever really described

it. Could you just tell me what it was like?

LAKEN: Well, we had a teacher special for night school people and

they taught us from Russian to English.

SIGRIST: And it was just a Russian class? Just everyone in that

class spoke Russian.

LAKEN: Yes, yes. And we had tests and they gave us tests.

SIGRIST: How long did you go?

LAKEN: I went until my mother came, about eight months I went to

night school.

SIGRIST: The other people in the class, were they your age? Were

they older?

LAKEN: My age boys and girls. After school we used to go out together and go around happy, be happy.

SIGRIST: Now earlier you started telling me about how you started to

work.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Just sort of refresh my memory.

LAKEN: Then I met this man that knew my parents where I come from, so

he says, "If this girl has to come here to America and work, I have to

help her!" He was married, had a nice home. Was a private ladie's

tailor. He used to sew for rich people, so he taught me how. I used

to take with me lunch. They used to take me in and make some tea or

coffee for me. I used to bring some appetizing bread and that was my

lunch.

SIGRIST: Was it hard for you to learn how to sew?

LAKEN: It wasn't hard because I wanted to know. If you want to know

it, it's not hard. I was very anxious to learn.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you sew? What were you making?

LAKEN: I made the dresses for ladies. That time they used to wear

blouses a lot. I used to, I made blouses so I learned a little.

SIGRIST: Tell me about Clara. What happened to Clara? Did she
get

a job?

LAKEN: She had a job but she didn't make too much. She wasn't
much

of a worker. She got a job on children's thing where you don't,
you're not so particular.

SIGRIST: Did she learn English, too?

LAKEN: She didn't go with me to night school. I was with, in a
different atmosphere.

SIGRIST: You wanted to be an American.

LAKEN: Yeah. She didn't care too much about it.

SIGRIST: I see. I want to ask you a couple questions about
once your

mother got here. Did she find it very hard to adjust to
America?

LAKEN: Yeah, well, she came with the boys. The boys started to
work

and they helped her. We all helped. When my mother came I had
eighty

dollars already.

SIGRIST: Save up.

LAKEN: Yeah. And we took an apartment and again the people
from our

town bought a store for my mother, a butcher store, and he was
good

for it. They used to send in for a week meat and she sold it
and used

to pay and that's how she made a living. And the boys helped
her

taking out orders to people.

SIGRIST: But this shop didn't last very long or it didn't, you
said

it wasn't successful, ultimately.

LAKEN: Yes, it was. The boys were very hard working boys.
They

tried to help my mother.

SIGRIST: I see.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: The store lasted a long time.

SIGRIST: Long time.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: It was the restaurant that didn't.

SIGRIST: Oh, the restaurant. That's right. I'm sorry.

LAKEN: First the restaurant she didn't make too well, so it
wasn't

good. So was the butcher store all right.

SIGRIST: Did your mother like America?

LAKEN: Yes, she did but she didn't know the language.

SIGRIST: Did she try to learn?

LAKEN: She used to speak Russia if she thought, "If they don't know

me, I'll speak Russian to them," so she did and they didn't know what

it means Russian. But we were between Jewish people, so we spoke

Jewish to them.

SIGRIST: The neighborhood that you were living in, was that a Jewish

neighborhood?

LAKEN: Yeah, in a Jewish neighborhood she got this butcher store and

we lived on the third floor in the same house where the butcher store

was.

SIGRIST: I see. And do you remember the address?

LAKEN: Walk up. 1412 it was, on Saratoga Avenue.

SIGRIST: Saratoga Avenue.

LAKEN: On an avenue.

SIGRIST: And did you and Clara live with your mother? Did the brothers live there, too?

LAKEN: Yeah, we lived together. That's right, yeah. We lived together.

SIGRIST: So you went from one house full to another house full.
(he laughs) Kind of a lot of people.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I guess my final question is, I want to ask you about your mother again. You said she liked America. She still had relatives, of course, in Russia.

LAKEN: Yeah. Some of them came a little, not all together, you know.

And I had cousins that worked with me in the same store who lived in a

small town, not in our town. And they came here to America and right

away, when they came, we had an eye on one another and my cousin, that

was a second cousin, and we were out always together.

SIGRIST: They liked to have fun, too?

LAKEN: Yeah. We used to go out together, you know. Like summer we

used to go to Coney Island to bathe and then we went to Broadway to a

show. He was working already. He made money and he was able to spend

to take me out.

SIGRIST: Sure, you wanted to go dancing, right?

LAKEN: Oh, we went places. We didn't sit. I didn't sit still.

SIGRIST: So, this is a good time, let me ask you my final question;

are you happy you came?

LAKEN: Oh yeah, I was. I kept company with this young man for about

fourteen years and when the war came out his family couldn't come, so

we had they all come, his mother, and we couldn't get married. So we

kept company and he was a good, learned, also the work. He was a

furrier, in the fur line.

SIGRIST: So you had someone at least that you were having fun with

all the time.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: She married him!

LAKEN: Oh yeah, we used to go, I used to go out a lot. We used to go

out, ball, ball, the Russian balls, used to dance a lot of dances. I

used to dance so much and I used to tell him, "You have to learn it.

You have to learn, also. When you are here you have to be like they

live here." That's what I did.

SIGRIST: Wild. (they laugh)

LAKEN: I was a little.

SIGRIST: You were wild.

LAKEN: But my mother didn't say anything to me that. The only thing

she was worried because all my brothers got married and I was not.

I'm not. I was keeping company with this young man because he couldn't get married yet. He says, "We'll get married when I'll be

able to bring my parents and make a nice living." I said, "I'll go

to work." He said, "No, you're not going to work when we'll get married." So we were waiting and then, when his mother came, we got

married.

SIGRIST: When was that?

LAKEN: His mother came. I don't remember what year it was.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: It was after the First World War. It
was in

the 20's.

LAKEN: After, just after the First World War.

SIGRIST: 1919, 1920.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: It was in the early 20's because...

SIGRIST: 1921.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: There was no immigration after that.

LAKEN: She couldn't come in the war time. They sent for her
once

tickets and it was lost and they couldn't come so we had to wait
again. I was satisfied to wait because I loved him and I said,
"I'll

wait." And my family said, "He is," he was also a lively boy,
so they

used to say, "He'll never marry her. She took in her mind for
him and

that's all." Boys used to come to my house and they used to
talk in

to me I should go with them and I used to tell my mother, "You
don't

pick me anybody. I do that and if I say 'no,' I'm not going
with

them." And I was waiting and then his mother came, took an
apartment

and we got married and we took an apartment for us and he had to
fix

up his family. His sister was single. He made her, he fixed
her up

a house and we had the same furniture for us and his sister.
And he

fixed up the houses and we got the, when we didn't make a fancy
wedding, we just went to a rabbi. His mother and my mother and
one of

my brothers and one of his brothers and we got married and we
went

away for a honeymoon.

SIGRIST: Where did you go?

LAKEN: We went travelling. First we took a ship to Albany.

SIGRIST: Oh, up the Hudson. You took a steamer up the Hudson.

LAKEN: We were a day in Albany. Then we went again. We took a
train

and we went to another town where we didn't like it. We went on
and

we decided, he was in business already, he had his own shop, and
we

decided that we'll stay a week in, where was that, uh?

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: Saratoga Springs?

LAKEN: In, uh, where they have now the gambling.

MRS. LAKEN'S DAUGHTER: Atlantic City.

LAKEN: Atlantic City. We took a very nice hotel to stay there
a

week.

SIGRIST: So, you had fun.

LAKEN: Yeah, and we were there.

SIGRIST: And what was the date? When did you get married?

LAKEN: I got married June. June the twenty fourth.

SIGRIST: What year?

LAKEN: 1924, was it?

SIGRIST: 1924.

LAKEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, it sounds like you've had a very full life, an
interesting life.

LAKEN: I have, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, I guess this is probably a good time to thank
you very

much for having us come out...

LAKEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And recording your immigration experience.

LAKEN: And then I lived a very nice life for my husband and I
had two

girls and I had my first daughter. She was beautiful. She was
blonde

and the doctors came into my room to see the mother, who the
mother is

of this baby. And I had jet black hair. They said to me one
doctor,

"How's that you have a blonde baby?" I said, "She resembles my

husband. My husband is beautiful," I said. And they gave a
smile and

they went away. And then, eight months later I had this one.
(she

gestures to her daughter) This is the younger one. So, of
course, we

wanted a boy and when I gave birth he was downstairs waiting.
The

doctor came down. He says, "Doctor, how is it?" He says to
him, "You

have a lot of money?" He got scared. He thought he's asking if
he's

got a lot of money, we need more doctors. He says, "What is it,

doctor?" He says, "Well, I'm asking you if you have a lot of

money?

Answer." He says, "Yes, yes, doctor, what is it?" He says,
"So, you

have another girl." So he says, "I'll take it." He says, "It's
all

right." And that's that. And this one was very dark.

SIGRIST: (to Mrs. Laken's daughter) Black hair like your
mother.

LAKEN: Black hair like the mother.

SIGRIST: Black, thick hair, too. Nice hair.

LAKEN: Well, and we had these two girls and we tried already to
educate them also like we were. Send them to school and one
decided

she wants to be an accountant, my older daughter. And this one
says

she wants home economy and we both didn't like that. My
husband,

"What is it an accountant for a girl? It's for a man." She
says,

"No, Dad. I like it and I want to be an accountant." So she
went

as an accountant and this one is home economics. And they
didn't give

the course in public school. We had to go to private school.
She

wanted to go out of town, so we weren't happy about it to send
her out

of town. We said, "You're older sister is going to City College
here

and you'll go to private? No, it wouldn't be good." So she
says she

wouldn't mind. My older daughter says, "I understand that."
And they

both took what they wanted and after that they were satisfied,
happy

about it.

SIGRIST: Well, we can continue talking about this in a minute.
Thank

you very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the
National Park

Service.