EI-618
EMILE NATHANSON
BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 15, 1910
INTERVIEW DATE: May 29, 1995
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 85
RUNNING TIME: 1:19:50
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

FRANCE, 1916
AGE: 6

SHIP:
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here at Ellis Island in the Oral History Studio. I'm with Mr. Emile Nathanson, who came from France in 1916 when he was six years of age. This is your first visit back since that time?

NATHANSON: To Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, so this is—this is the first time that Mr. Nathanson has been back here and I'm looking forward to whatever you can remember. I remember as a six year old, it's quite young, but anyway, we'll see what we can manage to remember about it.

Okay, let's start at the beginning. If you would give your birth date. Again, just for the tape, your birth date?

NATHANSON: January 15th, 1910.

LEVINE: And where in France were you born?

NATHANSON: Paris.

LEVINE: Paris, and did you live in Paris up until the time that you left France?

NATHANSON: Six years. We—we spent a little while in Spain, but not very long. But most of the six years I spent in Paris.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and were you—you were living with your mother and father?

NATHANSON: And my sister.

LEVINE: Okay, and what was your father's name?

NATHANSON: David. David Natchitz.

LEVINE: Okay, and that's N-A-T-C—

NATHANSON: C-H-I-T-Z.

LEVINE: Okay, Natchitz. And your mother's name?

NATHANSON: Rebecca.

LEVINE: Rebecca, and your mother's maiden name, do you remember that?

NATHANSON: M-O-L-L-E-T, Mollet.

LEVINE: Mollet, okay, and your sister?

NATHANSON: Cecile.

LEVINE: Cecile. And so it was just you and Cecile?

NATHANSON: No, there was also an Albert. Now, these—there's a story about Albert. I don't know how I can describe it. The custom in Paris in those days was to send a child, two or three years old out to the country for the summer because it was too hot. So in 1914, they sent him out to a farm and a month later the Germans walked in. So he was a prisoner of war from 1914 until 1920, until he was six or maybe right after the war, 1918-19. Then they brought him back to Paris where my uncle was living. So that was the three of us,

me, Albert and Cecile and my brother I didn't see until he was six years old, when he came over. Somebody brought him over. We were here at that time, and somebody brought him over and that's when we finally got together again.

LEVINE: Wow.

NATHANSON: So it's a story there. It's quite—it was in all the newspapers at the time. "Little Prisoner of War." He was six years old and coming home.

LEVINE: Would you—it's very interesting. Would you like to say any more about his experience?

NATHANSON: He could do much more than I can. It's too bad he lives in California, because he could tell the real story. But then he was that young, too, so I don't think he remembers too much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, I see.

NATHANSON: But that's—you wanted to know who was there. That was the three of us, with my father and mother, but my brother I didn't see until he was six.

LEVINE: I see. Now, how much older than you—

NATHANSON: Three and a half years.

LEVINE: He was three and a half years, and your sister?

NATHANSON: About three and a half to me. I was six. She was about nine, past nine. I was in January. She was born in June 1913, I would say.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and so and Albert were close in age?

NATHANSON: No, because she was the oldest.

LEVINE: She was the oldest?

NATHANSON: I was next and Albert was the youngest.

LEVINE: You were next and Albert was the youngest. Okay. Well, hopefully, I'll get a chance to interview him some day.

NATHANSON: I know he'd be interested, if he knew it was going on, but unfortunately he's in California, so he can't do nothing about it.

LEVINE: I see. Okay, well, how about grandparents? Did you have any grandparents?

NATHANSON: All I can remember is a grandmother in Paris. Originally, the whole family came from Austria. Not I, but my mother, father and my grandmother and uncles and aunts were originally living in Austria, and they all immigrated to Paris and that's where I was born.

LEVINE: Do you remember where they said in Austria they were living?

NATHANSON: I'll have to think. Ben knows because he was there and he interviewed the people that were there. My father's place was Dubno, D-U-B-N-O, which was alternating between Russia and Poland. So she's either Polish or Russian. He's one or the other. But I can't seem to remember the name of my grandmother's place. I always knew, but it's just now I can't remember.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we'll see if it comes—if it strikes me, you can tell—

NATHANSON: I know Ben would remember because he was there.

LEVINE: Do you remember your grandmother?

NATHANSON: Yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with her?

NATHANSON: No, except she took me by the hand, but that's all. I wouldn't remember because—I remember grandma, that's all. Her name was Ethel, if you ever want to know her name.

LEVINE: Okay.

NATHANSON: And then we had a couple of uncles. My mother's brothers were there. They were living in Paris, too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What do you remember about life in Paris? Do you remember anything?

NATHANSON: I'll tell you one thing, the most disappointed kid you ever saw was me because I left a very clean, beautiful, spotless Paris and came to the dirtiest, filthiest New York I ever saw with dirt in the streets and garbage, and I said to myself, "If I were any older, I'd take the boat and go home again." Because Paris was so clean. It was so nice there, as far as I can remember, anyway.

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: The difference was so great.

LEVINE: Yeah. Can you remember anything you did there as a little boy?

NATHANSON: I went to school.

LEVINE: Oh, you did go to school?

NATHANSON: Yeah, I went to school when I was three years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Your mother's name was Brody? Your grandmother?

NATHANSON: Mollet. There's the name. Brody was where she was born.

LEVINE: Brody was where she was born in Austria.

NATHANSON: That's right. How did you come to it?

LEVINE: Ben gave me the sign here.

NATHANSON: Ben, I told you.

LEVINE: Okay, so we have that straight.

NATHANSON: You've got the name.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay, so let's see.

NATHANSON: What happened in Paris while I was there? I can remember very distinctly. First of all, I remember it being 1914 and the soldiers were marching in the street. The war had broken out. I was four year olds and I was just as high as my uncle's saber. Because he was in the—the things with the metal things. I don't know what they called them.

LEVINE: Like armor?

NATHANSON: The cavalry wore metal—metal—

LEVINE: Shields?

NATHANSON: No, just across their—they still have them today. If you ever see a parade in Paris, you'll see them. They have a name. I don't

remember the name. But that I remember. Also, I remember buying French Fried potatoes on the corner from an old lady for one soux. I'd go there and she'd have a kettle burning with potatoes and for a penny she made a little coronet out of a piece paper and we had—that I remember.

I also remember, if you want to know—

LEVINE: Oh, I do, yeah.

NATHANSON: Going for a walk with my father and mother to one of the woods outside of where we lived, not far. It wasn't the Bois de Bolognese because that was much further south, and the thing that I remember, which is stupid, I know, but as we went for a walk, I found a little toy train. [Crying]

LEVINE: Okay, just take your time.

NATHANSON: A little toy train, and I picked it up. It said, "Made in Germany," of course. It said it "Made in Almagne," of course was German. And I looked at and it said, "Made in Germany," and as a four year old, I was already so inborn for my hatred for Germany that I said, "Look, pop," in French naturally. I said, "Look." He said, "Yeah, that's a German." I took it and I threw it away because it was made in Germany. That was a Bosch, German toy. That I remember.

Now, let me see. I went to school and I wore a little apron because we all wore aprons in those days and we took our lunch. We never had any milk which is why I had trouble with my teeth all my life. We had no calcium, and for lunch they gave us a little bottle of watered wine. That was for our lunch. That I remember. It's too bad that Ceil isn't here. She would have remembered much more.

Let's see, what else do I remember about Paris? Well, anyway, in 1915 my father left for America and we went to Spain and we spent a couple of months there.

LEVINE: I see. So when your father left for America, the rest of the family went to Spain at that time?

NATHANSON: The three of us, four of us. The three of us. Ceil, I and my mother went to Spain. Why I don't remember exactly. Whether you had to go there to get—you see, this was the beginning of the World War.

LEVINE: Yes.

NATHANSON: And if I remember correctly, I think he was being drafted as a soldier, and since he didn't consider himself a Frenchman, he

decided it was time to go. So we went to Spain. I don't know just what the event was, why, but we went to Spain for about six months.

LEVINE: So your grandmother and your uncles remained in Paris?

NATHANSON: In Paris, yes. So did my Uncle Charles, which was my father's brother. When Albert came, when he came back from the war, he went to Charles. That was my uncle. And one of the delicacies—that's stupid.

LEVINE: No, it's not. Tell me.

NATHANSON: It is, and I talked to him, "What is it you liked best when you came?" because he lived on whatever the Germans gave him for feed because they were actually prisoners behind the German lines. He said what he liked best was that his uncle gave him a cup of tea and he put bread in it. White bread, really, and that he remembers that that's what he ate, which wasn't nothing to do with me, except that I remember what he said.

LEVINE: This is when he finally got back to Paris?

NATHANSON: When he got back to Paris. He was about five, six at the time, and we were already here.

JL Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Is there anything else that you can think of about Paris, before you left for Spain? Do you remember the street you lived on? The house you lived in?

NATHANSON: Yes, I do, very well. It was quatre van deux rue Marque d'ai. It was in the Parsoniez section. It was more or less a French ghetto for Jewish people. All Jewish, like the east side became later. This particular place was mostly Jewish. Mostly, but that's where we all gathered together.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

NATHANSON: My father was a tailor and he got a job tailoring and I remember him sitting on a table with his feet across sewing. That was his job. Now, what else do I remember about Paris? Let me see.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in?

NATHANSON: Oh, yes, it was a tenement house. We lived on the first floor and the funniest thing. I remember some of the things that my mother told me in French that I remember to this day.

LEVINE: Could you say them in French and then say what they mean.

NATHANSON: Yes. She said, "[French]" "Don't touch the curtains." I was three years old. And [French]. "Go shopping for me." So she sent me to the grocery. So those things I remember. Why, I don't know. I don't remember much more, what happened in the United States when I got here.

LEVINE: Well, when you went shopping, can you recall any of your shopping expeditions?

NATHANSON: Yes, I do. The most important thing is we bought a chocolate bar and my mother chopped it up and made chocolate—we didn't drink coffee, so we had chocolate instead of coffee.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

NATHANSON: Then there's another thing I remember. It sounds very dim now to me, but when I went on my commission, I went downstairs and I was looking for my father and he was in the saloon where they were playing dominoes. I remember that stupid thing. What I remember most distinctly, the odor of the wine in this saloon. They were playing dominoes at the table and drinking wine. So that I remember.

About Paris, what else? Funny thing, I remember a lot about Paris. Much more than I could say—but not exactly, no. I was going to say that I remember more about Paris than I did when I came to this country, but I remember a lot when I was six, seven, eight years old about New York at that time, which was an awful dirty place.

LEVINE: Yeah, we'll get to that, but just before we leave your life in Paris, so you went for chocolate and did you go to other like little shops?

NATHANSON: No.

LEVINE: No.

NATHANSON: I was only three, so I came down the flight of stairs and I went to the grocery and the saloon and came right back. And I bought a long bread. We bought bread, those days were very long breads,

which I carried under my arm. Did you ever see a French bread? They have them these days here, too.

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: That I remember buying.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you have friends? Did you have playmates?

NATHANSON: I don't remember any. My sister was the only one I really associated with. I was only a youngster, although I do remember one thing, which I regret the fact that my sister passed away before I could ask her. We naturally had no bathrooms, so when we had to have a bath, we went to a bathhouse. For one cent they give you a big wooden tub and you took your bath in that wooden tub. And it just came to me the other day, it just occurred to me, only I was never able to ask my sister about it. She would have remembered.

LEVINE: So like the whole family would go?

NATHANSON: Yeah, and we had the bath in these wooden tubs and it costs a penny, which was a lot of money in those days. A whole penny.

LEVINE: How about your clothing? Did your father make your clothes?

NATHANSON: No, he worked for a factory. I don't exactly remember what he made.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

NATHANSON: I do remember wearing a little sailor suit that he bought for me, which I wore when I came over to this country. If you saw my passport, I was wearing the little uniform at that time. I don't know if you have.

LEVINE: I have, yeah. Well, we'll look at that.

NATHANSON: You got the passport? I don't see a passport.

LEVINE: No, I guess I don't have that. So how about any other food that you remember besides the long bread and the chocolate? Any other foods that you remember as a small boy.

NATHANSON: Spaghetti. Spaghetti we ate. I don't remember the meals much, tell you the truth. I don't remember anything what we actually ate,

except the chocolate stayed in my mind because we looked forward to it so.

LEVINE: Do you remember your father at all, from your days in Paris, before he left for the United States and you went to Spain?

NATHANSON: I remember Pop was there, but exactly—I don't remember much about my father. My grandmother I remember because she came every day and took me by the hand and we went for the walk. Almost the same as Rebecca is today. As a matter of fact, Rebecca's my mother's name.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And—

NATHANSON: I was—I don't remember. I'll tell you this one thing I do remember. I got it written down here. When we came over and we decided we were going to leave, Pop called us from wherever it was, from Spain that he was leaving. So when we came back to Paris, we got ready to leave to go back to America—go to America and there's two distinct things that I remember. I had cousins. You mentioned people. I did have cousins and one played a joke on me, which I remember to this day. He gave me a little red pepper, told me to chew on it and it burned my tongue and I got so upset that I sat down, and my mother had a box of candy. So I sat on the box of candy. That I remember, and I squashed all the candy, all the chocolates.

I don't remember the trip from Paris to Le Havre, but I do remember being on the boat.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember anything about going from Paris to Spain, before you came back?

NATHANSON: I remember being there, and there's quite a lot I remember about Spain.

LEVINE: Oh, why don't you give whatever you remember about Spain.

NATHANSON: Well, the most important things were the things that were very distinct. They had what they call a beach. Now, I don't know if they have something like that in Canada where the tide goes out and all of a sudden the tide comes in in a rush. So they were having some kind of a celebration and they were blowing balloons, and the two of us, Ceil and I, went out to get the balloons and before we knew it, someone was yelling, "Hey, hurry. Hurry, hurry." What was happening, the tide was coming in and if we hadn't rushed back in time, we would have drowned.

And they had cabins, little cabins that you got undressed and got your bathing suits. And there was somebody there, his name was Miguel and he collected clams. So I remember the smell of the clams that he would carry in baskets of clams. But as far as living there, I don't remember anything.

LEVINE: Do you remember where in Spain you were?

NATHANSON: San Sebastian. It was right on the border, I guess. We didn't get in that deeply.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Now, do you know why the family went to Spain?

NATHANSON: I think—I'm only surmising. I think that my father had to go to Spain to get a passport to leave Europe because conditions must have been pretty stiff because the war was on at that time already, and they weren't letting people out. He was only thirty at that time. He could have been a very good soldier. As a matter of fact, he was a soldier. My father served in the Spanish—not—in the Japanese Russian War. I think he went—I shouldn't mention it, but I think he went AWOL and he left and he went across the border into Austria, where he met my mother and that's where they got married.

LEVINE: I see.

NATHANSON: So that's the story about Pop, anyway. But as far as remembering him, I don't remember too much.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Let's see, so when you came back to Paris to get ready to go to the United States, then you were there just for a short time?

NATHANSON: Very short time.

LEVINE: And then you remember leaving Paris to go to Le Havre to get the ship?

NATHANSON: The only thing I say, as I remember, being on the train and getting that red pepper and sitting on the box of chocolate and the rest of the trip, I don't remember.

LEVINE: When you were leaving for the United States, were your cousins or uncles or anybody else—

NATHANSON: No, just the three of us left at the same time. Nobody came with us, that I can remember. If they did, I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember goodbyes or actual leaving?

NATHANSON: No. I remember being on the train and the next thing I remember being on the boat, looking out and watching the lights dimming in the distance, as we got out into the ocean. It's all written on there, if you get a chance to ready it.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, it's good to have it in your words, too, on the tape.

NATHANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: How about, do you remember anything your mother packed and took with her?

NATHANSON: No, nothing at all.

LEVINE: And did you personally have a toy or bring anything besides your clothing?

NATHANSON: No, I didn't. Don't remember that.

LEVINE: Okay.

NATHANSON: There was one thing I remembered. While being on the boat, I mentioned it to a dozen people already, I was very seasick and I couldn't keep my, ah, things down. One thing I did do, I went down to the cook, the steerage downstairs where they were doing the cooking and he got a big Swiss cheese. I keep saying that all the time because—and every morning I'd go down and he'd give me a slice of cheese from the big one, and I'd go upstairs and eat it and then promptly get it overboard. But that I remember. Why, I don't know.

And I mentioned it to Ben. I don't know, he thought it was funny. When we went to the bathrooms, you didn't have to pull a—

LEVINE: Chain.

NATHANSON: Because the ocean, it dropped into the ocean.

LEVINE: Oh.

NATHANSON: And you managed to get a nice bath in the wrong places at the right time because the water surged up. I don't know where the

bathroom must have been, right downstairs at the bottom of the boat. That I remember. Stupid.

LEVINE: Say the name of the ship for the tape.

NATHANSON: Lafayette.

LEVINE: Lafayette, and were you in the bottom? Were you in steerage?

NATHANSON: We were in second class.

LEVINE: Second class. So what do you remember, anything about the ship? I know you wrote it down, but anything you can mention.

NATHANSON: I remember having bunk beds. We slept in bunk beds, but I don't remember much about the trip at all. Although it take, it must have taken at least seven, eight days. I do remember that we had drills. At a certain time during the day they yelled out everybody should go to a certain place, because they thought they saw a submarine, and we were afraid of being sunk. That was 1916, right in the middle of the submarine war. That I remember, about the people saying, "Submarine! Submarines!" although I didn't know for sure what it meant.

But that trip I don't remember anything, except that I remember eating Swiss cheese and vomiting over the sides.

LEVINE: And do you remember your mother at all during the trip?

NATHANSON: Very little. I don't remember. I don't remember—until we got to Ellis Island and we were—we had our passports and all that.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

NATHANSON: No, I never saw the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: And what was your first impression of Ellis Island?

NATHANSON: Awful dopey. Or dumb. A lot of people running around. We were whatever you want to call it, but the other people coming from Russia and Italy, people with different costumes and beards. Very, very unusual and I thought, "What a funny place. Where the hell are we?' Which was—I got to Ellis Island, as I say. They fed us and I saw my father behind the other bars. [Coughs] I don't remember leaving it, leaving Ellis Island, but when we got to the Battery, we took the elevator to my aunt's house. She lived on East 6th Street. That I do remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you ate at Ellis Island?

NATHANSON: I can still you. I remember the green pea soup, which I ate with a fork because it was hard as a rock. [Laughs, Coughs] I think I had tomato herring.

LEVINE: Really?

NATHANSON: The meals were so unusual. We never ate things like that before. So I remember those meals.

LEVINE: Do you remember the examinations you had here?

NATHANSON: No, I don't. We had no trouble, so I mean there was no—we went right straight through when it was ready.

LEVINE: I see, and did you see your father soon after you arrived here?

NATHANSON: He was there.

LEVINE: He was there when you arrived.

NATHANSON: He was there on the other side of the bars. We must have taken the ferry to the—what do they call that place?

LEVINE: The Battery Park?

NATHANSON: The Battery Park. But I don't remember that. I don't remember leaving Ellis Island. I do remember going upstairs and taking the elevator, which was unusual enough that I remembered that.

LEVINE: Do you remember at all what you thought or felt on that elevated train?

NATHANSON: Crazy. What the heck was this? I was afraid the thing was going to fall up. It was all the way upstairs. It was a short trip. It was from the Battery to East 6th Street, so it wasn't that long.

LEVINE: And this was now your mother or father's sister?

NATHANSON: My mother's.

LEVINE: Your mother's sister. And what was her name?

NATHANSON: My father never had a family.

LEVINE: Oh?

NATHANSON: He had no brothers, except for one brother and that's all.

LEVINE: One brother in Paris. What was your aunt's name on East 6th Street, do you remember?

NATHANSON: Gussie.

LEVINE: Gussie.

NATHANSON: Gisha called her because that was the Jewish name. We always called her Aunt Gisha. Yeah, and she had a three-room apartment where she lived with her daughter and her son, and we all moved into the three-room apartment. I mentioned some of the things there.

One of the meals I do remember that she made is called mamalaga. It was made of corn, corn mashed like we make oatmeal today and it was the most horrible thing I ever ate. Of course, it wasn't bad enough, but she had to put jelly in it, and I can remember eating that. There's a lot of things I remember about the East Side when we first came over.

LEVINE: Well, any—that would be most interesting because the East Side at that time—

NATHANSON: Yeah, was the East Side.

LEVINE: Yeah, was the—

NATHANSON: Was the real East Side, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what do you remember? Can you remember any firsts? Things that you hadn't encountered before that you encountered there on the East Side?

NATHANSON: We're finished with Paris?

LEVINE: Yeah, finished with Paris.

NATHANSON: We're on this side now.

LEVINE: Right.

NATHANSON: Well, I remember one thing which stuck in my mind. They had Orchard Street there was pushcarts and it had snowed the day before, so the snow wasn't taken away and the pushcarts were going like this. And it was full of dirt. There was dirty. It was so dirty, I couldn't get over. Even to this day, I can remember the dirty New York with all the—and cats, and mice and everything else. That I remember.

So when we came to my aunt's house, in the back there was a synagogue, which I had never seen before with people wearing falasum and things. We had gone to temple. The Rothschild's had a temple in Paris, which we had gone to, especially during the high holidays, which I don't remember at all. Except I know that we went to a temple, but never to a real synagogue and nobody wore those taluses that they wore, and that stuck in my mind.

And we were there a short time and then I remember the fact about this, I mention it there, about the merry-go-round that we used to get on. I was six years old and the old man came with a crank and he cranked the—and the little wagons went around. The horses went around.

LEVINE: It was on a wagon?

NATHANSON: A little merry-go-round on a wagon and the man that owned would come outside and crank it, so that the merry-go-round would go around. That I remember.

LEVINE: Now, your aunt's apartment, it was in a tenement?

NATHANSON: Yeah, first floor tenement.

LEVINE: First floor?

NATHANSON: That's right. And then one thing I do remember, which wasn't unusual. I guess it was. We came over. We couldn't speak the language naturally, and everybody was saying, "Say something. Say something in French." So I did, which they didn't know what I was saying, because I couldn't speak any other language except French at that time. One thing I do remember and they asked me, "Say something," and I said, yeah, "Patti poof," and they found out later *patti poof* meant a fat man. It sounded funny enough to be able to tell them, *patti poof*.

But I just don't remember when the English disappeared—the French disappeared and the English came. Maybe when I started going to school.

LEVINE: Did you go to school right away?

NATHANSON: I was six years old, so I must have gone. On East 1st Street they had a school. It was a most unusual school because I remember to this day, it wasn't exactly a school. It was a big auditorium and when classes were formed, they'd push the sliding doors together and make little tiny rooms, and each little room was a school. But when in the auditorium they pushed the doors away and we sat there. So it wasn't really what you'd call a school like we would have today.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

NATHANSON: And that I remember. And then I do remember when we left my aunt's, we—you want to know this? This has nothing to do with it.

LEVINE: No, this is good.

NATHANSON: We moved to St. Mark's Place, which was East 8th Street. It's still called St. Mark's Place, near 2nd Avenue and it was there that my brother came and it was there that my sister Shirley was born. So at that time, my father came over with two children and suddenly found himself with four, in a couple of minutes. Somebody torched the building, and we all ran out, naturally. We got out. The place was burnt right through to the roof, and my father was a very careful person. He made sure he locked the door, so when the firemen came, they had to break in. He locked the door so that nobody would come in, but he didn't realize the fireman would have to come in, which wasn't important. But all the four of us got out safely and then the worst part of my life that I can remember, we moved to a fifth floor tenement. A terrible place. And then my father had gone out to East New York and bought himself a little house, so we all finally got out into civilization.

LEVINE: Okay, I think maybe this is a good point. We'll pause here. Kevin will turn the tape and then we'll continue.

[End of Tape One, Side A/Start of Tape One, Side B]

LEVINE: Well, I find what you're saying very interesting, so I'm sure other people would, too.

NATHANSON: Yeah, but I did write this because Michael, who was going for literature at Brooklyn College, wanted me to write something. So I wrote him the history of my first day in—I call it "My First Day in New York."

LEVINE: Wonderful. Well, I want to say this will be in the folder with your name and it will be kept here in the Oral History Library. Before we leave the Lower East Side, let's just see if there's anything else that maybe you—any light you can shed on life in the Lower East Side in 1916 and '17.

NATHANSON: 1916 we were in that school and they were having parades and all the different immigrant kids were in the parade and I was the only one with a French flag because I was the only French kid there. Who comes from—who comes from France to the United States? Why? Beautiful there. Why should you want to come here? Still liberty there.

LEVINE: And you have no recollection of going to school before you knew the language and how you felt about school?

NATHANSON: I remember going to school. My trouble must have been terrible because I couldn't speak English and I just could speak French, but I must have caught on very quickly. I got to—I have a very good mind for languages because I forgot my French after a while and now I speak it fluently. I made up my mind to get it back. Maintenain je parle Francais, comme—like a Frenchman. Comme un Francaise. I got it all back again. I read French regularly. I read mostly French these days and I speak it very well.

LEVINE: Do you have someone to speak it with?

NATHANSON: That was my problem. I had nobody to talk to, so I talked to myself. But I read and I speak it. I had a little business here years ago and they knew I was French, so I had a lot of French people coming in talking to me. So I did have a little way of people to talk.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we—is there anything else about the Lower East Side—do you remember games that the kids played—

NATHANSON: No.

LEVINE: In the Lower East Side?

NATHANSON: Oh, yes. I remember games. We lived on 6th Street and they had a trolley car running. So we used to take pennies and put them under the trolley car. So when a trolley car went over it, it became a brown dollar. It became big. Then we had the Arlington Hall across the street. That was a Polish, where you had weddings. I remember that.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of those?

NATHANSON: Which?

LEVINE: Like the weddings, what was—what were—

NATHANSON: A lot of noise. I didn't go to any of those things. I heard a lot of noise. But—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Any other games or songs that you remember learning when you were first learning the language?

NATHANSON: No, I don't remember anything like that. All I know is the language came to me very quickly and before I knew it, I couldn't speak French anymore, but I could speak English.

LEVINE: How about in your home? What was being spoken?

NATHANSON: We started off French and then we came back to the Yiddish and since they spoke only Yiddish at that time because nobody spoke French and they couldn't speak English. This was the East Side and everybody spoke Yiddish, and I picked it up very quickly. I was the only one, with my sister, that learned to speak Yiddish fluently. So there was another language I learned. I couldn't read it very well, but I could speak it, which was the only way we could talk with my parents.

LEVINE: Did your parents speak Yiddish in Paris?

NATHANSON: They must have. I don't remember. I don't remember how they could ever have spoken at all, if they didn't speak Yiddish. But they did speak French because she sent me, told me to go different places, spoken in French. I don't remember how long they were in Paris. I don't remember when they came over. I do remember that my sister was born in 1913, but I don't remember how long they were in Paris before they decided to come to the United States, which I never remember why. I do remember why, but I'm sorry they did.

Anyway, one thing I remember about the East Side very distinctly. In 1918 we had a big parade and we had the Kaiser in a glass coffin and we were yelling and screaming. The war was over and the Kaiser was in the glass coffin. I remember that distinctly. Was very funny.

And then we had a bakery on the corner of 2nd Avenue, St. Mark's place and the first time I ever got to eat cake, we got crumb cake. Very good, too. Better than we get today. And then I do

remember going on the East Side with my parents to the Jewish theaters. Thomaskevksy and Maurie Schwartz and those people, on—I don't remember the street. Where all the Yiddish theaters were at that time. That I remember.

But between coming over to this country and going to East New York to live definitely after awhile, I don't remember too much.

LEVINE: So how long did you stay on the Lower East Side then?

NATHANSON: Two years.

LEVINE: Two years.

NATHANSON: Or maybe three years. That's where my sister was born.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember the birth of your sister?

NATHANSON: Yes, very well. As a matter of fact, I was helping my mother diaper her one day and she had a box of talcum powder on there and so I was helping, but instead of putting it where it should be, I put it in her face and everybody got so excited I was blinding her. Stupid, wasn't it. Another thing I remember distinctly. We were eating French Fried potatoes and—what exactly happened? Anyway, it turned out that my mother thought I was eating—biting my tongue because I bit my tongue while I was eating the French Fries, and she thought I bit my tongue off. Silly, wasn't it?

I do remember one thing, that we went, Ceil and I went to the movies the night my sister was born. Why we went to the movies? I guess we went because she was born and she was born in the house. Didn't go to the hospital or anything like that at that time.

LEVINE: Was there a midwife, do you remember?

NATHANSON: Must have been.

LEVINE: So you went to the movies?

NATHANSON: And she was born.

LEVINE: And you came home and you had a sister.

NATHANSON: When we came home, there we were, we had a sister, yeah. It's too bad we don't have a picture, she was cute. Cute little girl. She still is cute.

LEVINE: What's your sister's name that was born there?

NATHANSON: She was born there, originally Sylvia and she didn't like it, so she changed it to Shirley, which is silly because I think Sylvia is much prettier. And I called her Sybilla, which is Yiddish for onion. Little Sybilla.

LEVINE: [Laughs] And do you remember what movie you saw the day your sister was born?

NATHANSON: No, I don't. I remember one thing, there was a fight in the movie theater and there was a lot of fighting and yelling and they got me as a witness and I went to court to tell them what I remembered. That I remember, being in court telling them what happened in the theater. But they didn't even give me anything. Should have at least given me something, I was a witness. I remember that. I remember the theater was on 2nd Avenue and St. Mark's Place.

LEVINE: Do you remember any either theater performances or movies that you saw when you were little that stuck in your mind?

NATHANSON: Yes, I do. We'd go to the movies, at that time, and as a treat, we got an orange to take with us. And we went, go to the movies, they had billboards showing what was playing, and I remember there was one there where a man was laying and a man was being stabbed and blood was coming out and that stuck in my mind. This billboard, but the movie itself I don't remember.

Well, if you want to know something—I don't know if it's important enough, but when I was four years old, Ceil and I went to the same place, the same farm that Albert went to a couple years later. And the farmer's wife's name was Madame Appolini, and she had a farm and they made their own cheese. Made their own cheese. We slept in a little bunk in the wall, Ceil and I, but this thing that stick to me, all these years I can remember is that we went for a walk through a cemetery and I got scared because all the statues were with their hands up and I kept thinking it was people. And there was a wedding going on at that day, and as we ran, they threw us little candy, almond candies. That stuck in my mind.

But when we came to Paris, I don't remember anything at all. Those things stuck.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about the farm that sticks in your mind?

NATHANSON: Yeah, she gave us Tartines. We ate them. To this day I remember them because we do them today, big slices of rye bread

with jelly on top. They were called Tartines. That I remember. Funny, I don't remember eating anything else. That I remember.

LEVINE: Was this a farm? Were there animals?

NATHANSON: Really a farm. No, no farm animals. Maybe there were. I don't remember any, but it was a farm. It seemed to be one of the things she did as a living, having children brought to there. They do it--they did that and it was quite customary in the summer to send your child. Did you ever read Madame Bovary?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

NATHANSON: Do you remember what Emma—was that her name? Emma's the little girl.

LEVINE: That sounds right.

NATHANSON: They sent her to that farm and she lived there for a while. If you remember the story. So it was custom. It was customary to send a child to spend a summer there. Why he was the only one that went at that time, I don't know because we had been there before.

LEVINE: Were there other children at the farm when you went?

NATHANSON: No. No, just the two of us. My cousin Emile, he was my uncle's son, had just left and as we came—we came all by ourselves. We took the train. As we got off the train on the platform, we saw Emile on the other side and he waved to us because he was going back to Paris. That I remember. Funny, isn't it, the things that you remember?

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: Silly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, do you find you're remembering more and more now?

NATHANSON: No, the things I remember, I still have them definitely. The things I forgot, I never got back except taking a bath in the tub. That just came to me recently. And I do remember during the war, zeppelins came over dropping bombs and they dropped a bomb about three, four blocks on a factory not far from us and there was an explosion. That was in 1915, I imagine. That was during the war. Outside of

that, about Paris, see, I don't remember too much except these few little things that stayed in my mind.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

NATHANSON: But I do remember that Paris was so damn clean. Paris was clean. It was clean. The concierge came out and she washed the sidewalks and she swept and cleaned. There was no dirt, and then I came over here and I said, "Pop, I want to go back."

LEVINE: And did you want to go back for a long time after you came?

NATHANSON: I wanted to go back forever. Or did I want to go back?

LEVINE: Yeah, did you keep wanting to go back?

NATHANSON: Yes, I always did. To this day, I'm very sorry I never managed to get back because the house is still there. I don't know if Ben saw the house. I think he went to the house. I have a cousin, Ethel Rose, lives there yet with her mother, and whenever the boys go to Paris, they go to visit her. She's still there. She's the only one I remember that's still there, of our family. Ethel Rose.

I never managed to get back, which was a big disappointment to me. I think my problem was that I had trouble getting a passport because I wasn't—I don't remember why I couldn't get a passport, but I didn't. Or whether that was just my excuse for not going back, I don't know.

LEVINE: How about your mother and father, were they glad they were here?

NATHANSON: I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember?

NATHANSON: They couldn't be very glad to live in those tenement houses that we lived in. Which Paris was a tenement house, too, but it was a hell of a difference. But the terrible things that happened here, it happened there, too. It happens even today. The communal bathroom, toilet where everybody on the floor used the same toilet, and you had to stand in line to wait until somebody got out, so you could get in. We had that in Paris, too, but I don't remember. It was terrible.

But about Paris, we went to Van Courtland Park one night, the four us. The only time my father ever took us anywhere, and Sylvia was a little girl and Albert was six and I was nine and Ceil was thirteen, and we got home late that night from Van Courtland Park

and that's the night that fire broke out in the house, and we had to run for our lives. That stuck in my mind.

LEVINE: Did everyone get out? I mean everyone in the building?

NATHANSON: I don't remember. I know we all—somebody gave us blankets and we stood outside. Stood outside watching the firemen putting the fire out.

LEVINE: So then was it shortly after that that you moved away?

NATHANSON: To East New York, to East 1st Street, on the fifth floor of a tenement house, which was the only thing my father could get in that short a time. But he did go to East New York right after that and bought this little house on New Jersey Avenue in East New York.

LEVINE: And how did you like that?

NATHANSON: That was wonderful. Of course, East New York in 1919 was all lots. No houses, except a house here, a house there. There I made a lot of friends, but it was open. There was grass. There was trees. On the East Side, you had nothing.

LEVINE: So you must have been, what, about ten?

NATHANSON: I was nine when we came to East New York.

LEVINE: Nine. So now what do you remember your friends in East New York? Do you remember—

NATHANSON: Well, we went to school. I had a very unusual experience. I shouldn't mention it, but kids are very cruel, especially at that age, and unfortunately, my very common name in Europe was a joke in this country. It was Natchitz. Now, any kid hearing a name like that would have the time of his life yelling, "Nat Shits. Nat Shits," and so I ran and they ran after me yelling, and that I remember. That's how I managed to get our name changed.

LEVINE: Oh, when did you do that?

NATHANSON: It must have been a short time later. I kept insisting, "I can't live like this anymore." So my father had the name changed, otherwise I would still be a Natchitz, which would not be bad today, but when you're nine, ten years old and you're going to school with a lot of goyum and you're the only Jewish kid on the block, and your name is Natchitz, you won't forget it too easily. East New York was nice

though. I liked it. I went to PS-173 and our principal used to come every morning in her horse and carriage. We watch and then she'd come riding up in her horse and carriage and come out of the carriage. That was our principal.

LEVINE: Do you remember her name?

NATHANSON: No, I don't. I do remember the name of my high school teacher. When we went to high school, Thomas Jefferson High School was opened. We were the first ones to go there and his was Elias Lieberman. We opened the school, Thomas Jefferson. I guess you've heard of it now.

LEVINE: Yes.

NATHANSON: That's where they shoot each other in East New York. You've heard of kids being shot? It's all Black now. At that time it was a nice school.

LEVINE: Do you remember like being the first class in Thomas Jefferson? Do you remember like going to the school and what everything—

NATHANSON: No, I don't, but we did have a parade. We—all the kids marched in the parade, the opening of Thomas Jefferson. I do remember one thing. My love of music I got there because it was the first time I had heard an orchestra play and the school orchestra was playing, and I remember to this day what they were playing. The—a Hayden, a Hayden symphony. The Clock Symphony. Tic toc, tic toc. I remember and I got my love for music just at that time, which I have kept all my life. But unfortunately, for me, I didn't stay at Thomas Jefferson too long because my parents needed me. When I got to be fourteen, I went to work.

LEVINE: What was your first job?

NATHANSON: I went to New Lots Evening High School, it was called. And my first job was a very unusual job. I don't know why I'm talking so much.

LEVINE: It sounds terrific. Everything is very interesting.

NATHANSON: This job was a place where years ago, if you remember, they used to have little house slippers for children with little Indian heads on them. And our job was the artist would give us the cardboard and a brush and a paint and we'd walk along back of each other, each one painted his little part of it in, which they do today in Japan. That's in Taiwan. That's how you get these ten dollar paintings

today. The paintings are made by sixteen different people at the one time. Did you know that? Didn't know that? Did you ever see these little ten, twelve dollar paintings?

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: Well, they're made by seventeen, eighteen people, each one painting a little tiny bit. So that was my first job. We used to paint those little heads, Indian heads.

LEVINE: You mean you would have one part of the head that you painted?

NATHANSON: That's all. Yeah, like I'd have the feathers and I'd have red paint. So as I went along, I put the thing on there and I put my red paint and kept going, one after the other.

LEVINE: And somebody else came along—

NATHANSON: And somebody back of me would put another one, and that's how it was done. Very—what do they call working in a factory these days? Years ago, Ford's factory, what do they call that?

LEVINE: Assembly line.

NATHANSON: Assembly line. That was an assembly line. And I worked there a while, and then I did pretty good. I went to work for Clement Roosevelt, of all people. I got a job working for the US Line. It was called the Roosevelt Steamship Line at that time, and Clement was the president. Theodore Roosevelt's son was the president of the company. I think—I think he was slightly anti-Semitic because when he interviewed me, he asked me, "What nationality are you?" I said to myself, "If I say I'm Jewish, he's not going to give me the job," because I couldn't even register in where you got jobs these days. Where do you have them today? Where do you go to get a job?

LEVINE: An employment office.

NATHANSON: The employment agencies. So if I went there and I wrote Hebrew, they'd throw it in the garbage. I never could get a job, but fortunately they sent me out to Clement Roosevelt and I worked for the Roosevelt Steamship Line.

LEVINE: So you said you were French, is that what you said?

NATHANSON: That's right. He said, "What Nationality are you?" and I said to myself, "If I say Hebrew, he's not going to hire me," so I said, "I'm French," and he saw my name, Emile. He said, "There must be a connection." How many Emiles are in this country, spelled the way I spell mine, E-M-I-L-E. So it came to me that I must be whatever he thought he was. But I did work for Clement Roosevelt a couple years and it was a good job. I could have traveled around the country, if I wanted—around the world because I could have got a job as a ship's boy there, but I didn't want to.

LEVINE: So what did you do then for him?

NATHANSON: I was the office boy, ran errands, things like that. And there was the butt of the office, naturally, being the only Jewish kid in the office. My most dramatic period I can remember was Passover. My mother was a very religious woman, and God forbid, if I had a piece of bread, I'd get a sin. I was getting sins all the time. God was up there doing nothing, giving me sins. So she'd give me an egg and a piece of matzos. So I had to find a place where I could hide and eat it, so nobody'd see me eating that. I remember that, yeah, but it was a nice job. I liked it and then I got a better job.

LEVINE: What was that?

NATHANSON: I worked for Isadore J. Kressler. You wouldn't remember him. He was president of the United States Bank and when it folded during the Depression, I think he went to jail. But I worked for Isadore J. Kressler. It was a nice lawyer's office. I enjoyed that very much. A very nice office. I really thought I—my mother had it all figured. I'm going to be a lawyer. I'm going to be a lawyer, you worked for a lawyer. Unfortunately, when I got to be sixteen, I got a sickness. I don't know if you ever heard of it? Syphilis? Face breaks out in scars. At that time it was morbid. Most people didn't live through it. I managed to live through it. I was sixteen and I lived through it, but I lost my job.

LEVINE: Were you hospitalized?

NATHANSON: No, didn't believe in hospital. I didn't have a doctor. This was a case of hit and miss. If you're lucky, you'll life. If you don't, you'll die. And I think at that time, a certain time during that time I thought I was dying and I had a very funny sensation. I had a rubber ball in my hand and it was like clay, like rubber and it kept coming through my fingers. I said to myself, "If I don't hold it, I'm going to die," and I kept holding it, holding it. I finally got it back in

good shape. It might have been my imagination. At that time I wrote a play. In my delirium I wrote a play.

LEVINE: What was it about?

NATHANSON: About the World War I. "Medals for Valor." I remember the name of the play. I was sixteen, I was able. I wrote the play in my mind. I didn't write it out because I didn't have the—but I survived that.

LEVINE: Do you remember the gist of it, of the play?

NATHANSON: I only remember the generals were getting medals and soldiers were getting killed. That was the theme in my play. I don't think even Ben knows this story. This is—nobody knows it. There's nobody left to know. I'm the only one left.

LEVINE: Is there anything else about it that you remember?

NATHANSON: No.

LEVINE: About the play?

NATHANSON: I remember in my mind I was writing this play.

LEVINE: Do you think it was connected with the fact you thought you were dying? Is it—

NATHANSON: Oh, I don't know. I don't think so, but I managed to get through it. But I lost my wonderful job, which wasn't wonderful because he went to jail after awhile, anyway. Isadore J. Kressler. And after that, I got a job working for Hennin and Son, the shoe people on 5th Avenue. They had a store opposite St. Patrick's Cathedral. I worked there. I was a shipping clerk there. I worked there a few years. A shipping clerk in Hennin's. The first time I got a real pair of shoes. Up to then I didn't get real shoes. I got—they were all kits that you had to clip up. There I got a real pair of shoes and a real pair of socks.

LEVINE: What were you wearing up until then? I don't remember—

NATHANSON: Kids wore shoes that were only halfway, and further up you had little hooks that you had to hook them on. You wouldn't remember that. It's before your time.

LEVINE: Like spats?

NATHANSON: No, they were shoes. Real shoes, but they weren't the shoes that you would think of a shoe today. They don't wear them anymore. Then I heard that they were making Oxfords. I said, "How could they make Oxfords? They're only halfway. Shoe falls off." That's when they stopped making those shoes.

At that time, I don't remember what Rockefeller Center looked like, but I remember we had the store right opposite the St. Patrick's and we saw all the parades going past. We'd sit in the window and I'd go to Central Park to rowboat during my lunch hour. And then I quit. I thought I was old enough to become a junior salesman, and since Mr. Gottlieb wouldn't give me the job, "I said the hell, I'm quitting," and I quit. Right after I quit, they pulled the building down and they built Rockefeller Center. That was in 1928, and in 1929, two months before the Wall Street Crash, I got a job, which was very unusual because right after that, Depression started.

I got a job with an importing company called Stormheir and Opp, and they imported olive oil, sardines, from Italy mostly, and wax. Carbona [sic] wax. They used to polish automobiles. They used carnauba was. The one thing about carnauba wax I remember distinctly, we had two customers. One was Ponds cream and one was the shoe polish. What was the name of that shoe polish again? I can't remember. And they both bought the same carnauba wax. I thought to myself, "How they can they both use the same wax?" and they did. One made shoe polish and one made cold cream.

LEVINE: Face cream.

NATHANSON: Out of the same wax. And then unfortunately, but I don't know whether I should mention it, I also was the only Jewish kid on the job. While I worked for Clement Roosevelt, I learned how to type with two fingers, so I got a job typing. I stayed there about four years, right into the beginning of the Depression in 1932 because I was there when the Prohibition was over, and I was never happy because I never got anywhere there because I think—I'm blaming it the fact that I was Jewish, but I don't know. No Jewish ever got a job there, anything better than what we got? Are you Jewish?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

NATHANSON: Yeah, so you know what I'm talking about. Because at that time, 1920s, getting a job, a Jewish kid getting a job was impossible. And I was very unfortunate enough to—I don't know, what am I babbling for?

LEVINE: This is wonderful.

NATHANSON: Yeah?

LEVINE: Keep going, yeah.

NATHANSON: I went to high school, New Lots High and I passed everything. We had a very strict rule at that time that you had to have eighteen Regent's points to graduate.

LEVINE: This is now in the evening you were going?

NATHANSON: Yeah. New Lots Evening High, and you won't believe this, but I passed all my Regent's except one, my French. I failed my French. As a result, I couldn't graduate. In those days, if you didn't have your eighteen, you couldn't graduate. So I never graduated. So I couldn't get a job civil service, which is what most of my friends did. They all graduated. They all went to work for—became teachers or things like that.

But a very funny thing happened while I was there, and I think that's one of the reasons I never got anywhere. Six months after I got the job, old man Stormheir died and he handed money out to all the help and I was only there six months and they gave me a check for five hundred dollars. I was earning eighteen dollars a week at that time, so that made—in their reasoning, as a matter of fact, they were all Germans that owned this place. Stormheir was the owner. They reasoned if I got five hundred dollars, and I was earning eight hundred and ninety dollars a year, I got five years' salary increase right there, so I wasn't entitled to any. So I never got an increase and I stayed on my eighteen dollars all the time I was there. But it was good.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to continue.

NATHANSON: Is that one over again?

LEVINE: But we're going to stop here, yeah, and put on another tape.

NATHANSON: So when do I get lunch?

LEVINE: [Laughs]

[End of Tape One, Side B/Start of Tape Two, Side A]

LEVINE: This is the beginning now of Tape Two and I'm speaking with Emile Nathanson who came from France in 1916 at six years of age, and we were talking about—well, I guess when we stopped, we were

talking about you being the first class at Thomas Jefferson high school.

NATHANSON: Right.

LEVINE: And how you—was that the parade where you heard the music that you—

NATHANSON: No, that was in school already.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

NATHANSON: I was on the balcony and the orchestra was playing the Clock Symphony. I remember the Clock Symphony to this day. I never liked Hayden anyway, but this one I liked, except his last six symphonies I liked because he wrote them in London? Know anything about Joseph? Well, he worked for—had nothing to do with it.

LEVINE: Okay, well, let's talk about you more.

NATHANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Let's see. You got the job for the German company during the early Depression time, right?

NATHANSON: I got the job a month after the crash.

LEVINE: A month after the crash.

NATHANSON: The Wall Street Crash, which was lucky because there wasn't many jobs after that, for a while, anyway, until the Depression started.

LEVINE: And then how long did you stay on that job?

NATHANSON: I stayed from 1929 to about 1932? No, it couldn't be '32 because I was there when Prohibition. It must have been 1934. No, it wasn't 1929, either. That's when I left Hennen. So I must have got the job in 1930. I was there about four years.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about Prohibition?

NATHANSON: I got my first bottle of booze because we imported liquor, this company. We were the first ones to get liquor licenses and for the first time in my life I saw a bottle of wine, because up to then there

was no wine. At least no whiskey, anyway. So I bought three bottles of wine and I went to a New Year's party and I got drunk and I insulted a policeman. We were all trying to run around the streets, my friends and I. We got all undressed and we were all in shorts, we were all drunk. And everybody drank from the three bottles of wine and we were insulting people, which has nothing to do with it.

But I stayed in Stormheir for about four years and after that, my life started going down. I shouldn't say that. I guess he isn't here because that's when I got married. I had no job. I married a wonderful person, but she was just as poor as I was and it was a very difficult we had there for three years of our marriage.

LEVINE: What was your wife's name?

NATHANSON: Dinah. It's not Dinah, it's De-nah. D-I-N-A-H, it's pronounced Dinah.

LEVINE: And what was her maiden name?

NATHANSON: Goldberg.

LEVINE: And how did you meet?

NATHANSON: We had a social club. We talked about Danny Kaye. And that damn miserable thing happened to me. We went to dances, and they had a thing called the Hebrew Alliance Society. We went to dances there and there was the cutest little girl there. She wore a red bandana. She had her down to her, and I started dancing with her and she said her name was Dinah, and that's where I met her. Unfortunately for me, she lived out in Hollis and I lived in Coney Island and traveling from Coney Island to Hollis was three hours. On Farmer's Boulevard. So we were married. I don't think I should say these things. I don't think they know the stories.

LEVINE: Well, it would be good to have them down.

NATHANSON: Oh, I don't know. Everybody's going to look at me and say, "What the hell happened to this guy? He never told us these things." Anyway, we were married in 1936. It will be sixty years next month—a year from now, and we couldn't live together because I didn't work. She had a job making sixteen dollars a week in Jamaica working in a millinery shop, which you don't have these days. So for three years, we were married and nobody knew it. Then she being plucky, went out and got an apartment. I'll never forget what happened. I packed a suitcase and I left my house to

live with her. That was in 1939. That was awful. Anyway, in 1939 we lived together, we started living together and 1941 my son was born. Saul, this is the one we're talking about now that's outside. But the worst thing that could ever happen to me happened to me. I used to think years ago that if only I had dropped dead. I couldn't get a job, although I had fifteen of them, all crap jobs. Salesman selling—I had a job selling lard to bakeries and butcher shops and they kicked me out when I came in. They gave me a little piece of lard and I was supposed to sell it.

The worst place I went to was a place where they were killing horses, and they were canning horse meat and I smelled the place a mile before I got to it. Now, I didn't take that job, either.

But then the worst thing that could happen to me happened. My father in-law, I don't remember exactly the story, bought a little trimming store from somebody and I think he bought it for his daughter. His daughter was going with a boy at that time and he wanted to set him up, but when they saw the trimming store, they didn't want any part of it. It's really fate is a funny thing. My father had a tailor shop across the street from this trimming store, and he didn't know that my father in-law had bought it. Sounds like fiction. So he came across one day and he knew that I was looking for something and went to find if he could buy the business. So there was this father in-law there.

So they arranged to buy the damn business and I had it for 1975. Thirty-five years I worked there. It was the stinkiest, lousiest business anybody could have. It was a trimming store, which was just a simple part of the business. The best part of the business was making buttonholes on the buttonhole machine and hem stitching on the hem stitching machine. Well, unfortunately, the man I bought this business from was an old man and his business was also old and the machines were even older, so they were always falling apart, and I didn't know anything about it, so I started making buttonholes for a living and I did that for thirty-five years. My nephew insulted me. He used to call me a tailor. [Coughs]

LEVINE: So now where was the trimming store?

NATHANSON: [Coughs] The trimming star was in Benson Hurst.

LEVINE: Benson Hurst.

NATHANSON: And that's where we moved when we moved from Coney Island. When I was nineteen years old, we moved from Coney Island to Benson Hurst and my father bought a little tailor shop. Why do I remember this? And we started living in—the first time in my life I ever had steam heat. I was nineteen. We had never had steam

heat. There was a lot about Eastern New York I don't even want to talk about because it will take two hours, but one thing I do remember. The only heat we got in the house was from a coal stove and my father would get up early in the morning and make the stove, so we'd have a little heat. How come we lived like that? Today in Harlem, if they didn't have steam, they'd yell blue murder. We had no steam for ten years of my life. So he'd make the coal stove, and I remember—this I remember. It was so cold that when I went to go to school, I got dressed under the covers. I put my long socks we wore with knickerbockers and we came out, there was no steam or heat. Terrible winters we had in those days. Snow was piled high and this was a little shack. Two family wooden house.

Oh, there's so much. Oh, God, I don't even want to remember it. I'm glad Ceil isn't here. She remembered it. Tough. Tough.

LEVINE: Well, what do you feel most proud of that you did? What makes you feel satisfaction that you—

NATHANSON: I have such a wonderful son. My son was the apple of my eye. He was a wonderful kid. We went all places. We went to Statue of Liberty when he was six years old. But otherwise, the business was so degrading, it was so miserable. I hated it. I hated it from the first day I walked into that damn thing. Especially since the machines were breaking. One day I took that machine that weight forty-five pounds and I carried it out to the East Side to have fixed. I carried it on my shoulder. It never worked. Maybe that's why I hated the business as much as I did. And I hated it for the simple reason, amongst others, that being a buttonhole maker was a big joke. Did you ever hear the joke? You never heard the joke about buttonhole makers?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

NATHANSON: [pause] I don't remember exactly why, but there was a joke. When I went to the East Side and I told them I was making buttonholes, they laughed. And I had it for thirty-five years and I couldn't get the hell out of there. I couldn't get out of that thing. I finally did, when I almost died of emphysema, although I didn't really get it. I got lung trouble and I knew it was a case of either dying or getting out of that dopey business. So I went to California. Unfortunately, that didn't work either.

LEVINE: Well, did you continue to work or you were retired when you went there?

NATHANSON: At that I retired. I made over five thousand dollars. I was rich. I worked very hard at that business. During World War II there was a lot of factories that made dresses, but nobody had a machine. So they gave me the buttonholes to make, so I made a lot of money. So I was able to quit. Otherwise, I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't. No one told it to these people. They shouldn't know all this. Maybe Rebecca should know twenty years from now.

So anyway, I went to California with my son. He was four at that time and I couldn't find anything to do there because I was sick there. I got asthma, and when I got to Hollywood it was the time the smog was coming in and I was very bad. I finally got a doctor who told me to "Get the hell out of here, or you won't live long." So I went to Tujunga. That's up in the San Gabriel Mountain. There I felt good, but I couldn't work because there was no way to travel from Hollywood. I got a job in Hollywood, from Tujunga.

So I had to leave California and sponge off my family. They were in Miami. Shirley, my mother, my father and Rosie. I went there for a while in Miami. So I was lucky. The Everglades started burning, so I got my asthma back. In Tujunga I was very well. I felt very good.

LEVINE: Tell me, did your mother and father become citizens at some point?

NATHANSON: My father became a citizen, I think in 1926 and I became a citizen under his papers. I never really went up. My brother did become a full fledged citizen, but I didn't. But I was able to become a citizen under his papers.

LEVINE: So after you left Florida, you came back here to this—

NATHANSON: To this horrible city, and then we had no place to live because that was 1940s. It was before the end of the war. There was no places to live, so we got a room in Seagate, but I had asthma then. I was very bad with asthma, coming back. From Seagate we moved to Neptune Avenue. From Neptune Avenue we moved to Ocean Parkway, always rooming. Just a room. And you don't want to listen to this, do you?

LEVINE: Yeah, well—

NATHANSON: No, that's not important.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about this time in your life, this phase now.

NATHANSON: That I am in now?

LEVINE: Umm.

NATHANSON: In 1975 I retired and that's it. What can I say?

LEVINE: Well, how is this phase? This time of your life?

NATHANSON: it's awful.

LEVINE: It's awful?

NATHANSON: Umm.

LEVINE: Do you have things of interest that—

NATHANSON: How do I describe it? We moved to my father in-law's house in Jamaica and since I never liked the bastard and the rest of the family, I moved there only because my wife and my son and my daughter and my dog had a place to live. Well, we lived in Flatbush on the second floor and I moved there. I always try to remember why I moved there, since I didn't like these people. But I felt that my dog had a back yard and my daughter had Jamaica High around the corner and my son had his own room and my wife had a piano to play, so we moved there. And we've been living there for thirty-five years. June 1st it will be thirty-five years, and I hate it ever since and I still do.

LEVINE: Well, tell me. I think you started to talk about this, but the tape was off. About how you feel about being, you know, French and American. Like what do you consider your French side or the part of you that's French?

NATHANSON: Up to just a short time I considered myself French. If anybody asked what my nationality was, I said, "French." Why I don't know because I was only six, but there's something about the French air, that if you're born a Frenchman, you'll never forget it. I think that's the reason. But unfortunately, I was never happy in America. Maybe because of my circumstances. Anyway, after I left Stormheir and Opp, I got this [unclear] business and I was there for thirty-five years and I didn't like it. Then my son was born in Coney Island. That's where we finally, after getting all these stinking little two by nothing rooms, my wonderful sister was able to get us an apartment in Coney Island where Trump Village is today. So we lived there, but we also didn't have a bathroom. It seemed to be my luck, I never had a bathroom. I had to share bathrooms.

LEVINE: Your son's name is Saul?

NATHANSON: Yes.

LEVINE: And did you have other children or just Saul?

NATHANSON: I was going to come to that. Then Ethel was born, a couple years, six years later Ethel was born. She was born in Coney Island, and then we moved to Flatbush, Lincoln Road. But I still had the business. No, I didn't. When I sold the business in Benson Hurst, I found a guy that owned a buttonhole machine. See, I couldn't get away from it. It was stuck to me. The buttonhole machine, I hated the damn thing, and I figured, if he had a buttonhole machine, maybe I could start business again. So I did. So he was a machine mechanic and I made the buttonholes, and then he moved to New York and I started this new business again making buttonholes again. But fortunately, this time I got a brand new machine, so at least I was lucky with that.

LEVINE: So do you have grandchildren?

NATHANSON: Four. I got thee granddaughters and a grandson. Saul has two granddaughters and Ethel has a grandson and a granddaughter, and her name is Stacy and his name is Greggie. She's gone to Oneonta College.

LEVINE: Tell me about your memories, like we're talking about early memories all that. You mentioned before, but there were certain things that always stuck in your mind.

NATHANSON: Right.

LEVINE: But as you talk about these things, do more things—

NATHANSON: Of course.

LEVINE: Fit together into the big picture?

NATHANSON: Sure. You see, one of my hobbies is when I can't sleep at night, I start to relive my life. So I start with my Parisian life, right up until we moved to East New York, where I got to run away from those kids because they were yelling at me, and I had to go Pines Pills—what was the name of that apple—made apple cider? So half the time I was outside that place fighting with the kids because they were calling me names. But my ten years in Eastern New York were really difficult. Very, very difficult. Fortunately, for me, I had my brother and so we managed to get together, and we were very

poor, which has nothing to do with it, but I was that kind of a kid that built wagons and things like that. So one of my jobs was to go to the Burns coal place. We couldn't afford to buy coal, and when the coal truck went by, pieces that fell off, we picked up and put in the bag and we came home with a bag of coal. But Albert was with me at that time. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, why don't we—unless you can think of something else? I think we should end on a positive note. How about some very fond memory?

NATHANSON: I don't remember any, except for my son. When he came, I had somebody to go with and do things with. So we went together quite a bit. We went to Statue of Liberty. We went to all different places, and that's my fondest memories, the first six years of his life. After that he didn't need me anymore. So we're finished?

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you can—I know there's a lot more that.

NATHANSON: Oh, there's an awful lot, but you don't want to know it. I mean, you wouldn't want it for this. I was born in Paris, came to the East Side, most to East New York and moved to Benson Hurst and moved to Jamaica, and that's my life. Very little else. Of course, there's a lot, if I wanted to go to the trouble of writing it, like I did that. I could really write, but I don't feel like writing any more.

LEVINE: Well, if you could write the way you speak, I think it would be most interesting.

NATHANSON: Yeah, I know it would, but I wouldn't want to.

LEVINE: Yeah.

NATHANSON: It's not happy. Not a happy life that you'd want to recite. Of course, there's probably a lot of people around that have more unhappy than I.

LEVINE: Well, let me just say that it's really been a pleasure because this is very, very interesting.

NATHANSON: You got a bunch of garbage there.

LEVINE: No, it's very interesting and I really appreciate you coming in.

NATHANSON: I'll say one thing, you won't get another. I think I'm one of a kind. Where you going to get somebody else that's going to do that kind of crazy talk?

LEVINE: You're one of a kind, yeah. [Laughs] Well, I appreciate it. It's been my pleasure.

NATHANSON: All right, sorry I talked too much.

LEVINE: No, don't apologize. Thank you very much.

NATHANSON: You're welcome.

LEVINE: I've been speaking with Emile Nathanson and this is the 29th of May, 1995. Mr. Nathanson is eighty-five years old at the time of this interview.

NATHANSON: It doesn't look it.

LEVINE: And doesn't look it, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

NATHANSON: Good.

LEVINE: Thank you.

NATHANSON: Now I want my lunch, where is it? [Laughter]

[End of Interview]