

EI-625

SELMA (SIMA) RISKIN RUBIN
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LATVIA, 1928
AGE 13
PASSAGE ON "THE MUNCHEN"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Rubin is a childhood friend from Latvia of Naomi Fader, EI-635. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 8/18/1997.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, June 30, 1995. I'm in New York City in the Lower East Side on Grand Street with Selma Rubin. Mrs. Rubin came from Latvia in 1928. She was thirteen years old at that time, and she was detained approximately one week on Ellis Island in 1928. Mrs. Rubin, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

RUBIN: Well, there's a few days discrepancy, because at that time we were under the Gregorian calendar in Europe. When we came here, it's December 17th changed to

December 30, 1914.

SIGRIST: And, because of the difference in the two calendars?

RUBIN: There's a few days, right.

SIGRIST: And, uh, what was your name? What was your birth name?

RUBIN: Sima. Sima, should I spell it?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

RUBIN: S-I-M-A, Riskin, R-I-S-K-I-N.

SIGRIST: And any other names, just for?

RUBIN: No, I have no middle name.

SIGRIST: And where in Latvia were you born?

RUBIN: Riga. That's the capital of Latvia.

SIGRIST: Did, did you ever learn anything about your birth? Are there any stories associated with your birth?

RUBIN: Yes. My mother never failed to say, when I was displeasing to her, she said, "I spent so many hours." According to her, she was twenty-four hours or more in intense labor. So, as if to say, "You gave me

trouble then, and you're giving me trouble now."
That, good-humoredly, but I, I got the gist of it.
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what Riga was like as a city when you were a young girl growing up. What things stick out in your mind about Riga?

RUBIN: Oh, Riga was a phenomenally beautiful city, a mixture of, in those days, called modern and ancient. It was a very, very progressive city. I, as a Jew, never felt discriminated against. And it may have existed but I never felt it. In fact, I was, I attended a Yiddish school. It's a cultural school, not a secular school. It has nothing to do with religion. But in order to keep our traditions, our holidays and our Yiddish language alive, it was a state-subsidized school, we didn't have to go to that school. No one forced us, but it was also subsidized by the state. The reason we went there was, as I said, to preserve our Yiddish culture, our language. But in addition we also learned three foreign languages. We had to learn Latish, which was more or less a new language, because the country came into being around the first World War. I don't know exactly. So Latish was new, not

widely used.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RUBIN: Latish? L-A-T-I-S-H, I believe. We also, because of various periods of history, that particular area, the Baltic countries, were of German domination and Russian domination. So those two languages were practically our mother tongues, German and Russian, in addition to Latish, which I never mastered, because it was relatively new and a very difficult Slavic language. But Russian I knew fluently and German rather well.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever relate to you any information about when Latvia became Latvia? Did life, we life any different for them before and after?

RUBIN: Uh, well, my mother originally was born in, uh, Belaruse, which was at that time an independent country, then became part of the soviet union. My father, too, came from Russia, I'm not too familiar the area where he came, when they were both very young. Voluntarily, involuntarily they were sent to Riga, the big city in that area. It was a big port on the Baltic, and it was very progressive, and probably

had many more opportunities than from the towns they originally came from. so my mother left her home when she was quite young, and my father originally, his parents, his family came from farm folks. They had a piece of land which they farmed. From what I knew then, they also escaped anti-Semitism, which was widely prevailing in the Russian area. And although Latvia was under Russian domination at one time, but not in my time. And also under German domination at one time. It was a battleground, that area, for many years.

SIGRIST: But as you were growing up, which nationality did you identify yourself as.

RUBIN: Um, Jewish.

SIGRIST: Jewish.

RUBIN: Very definitely. But we were given all the freedoms and allowed to practice our language and our culture and our holidays and so on.

SIGRIST: Tell me, we brought up your mother and father. Why don't we talk about them a little bit. You may want to remove your hand from the microphone.

RUBIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) That's okay. What was your father's name?

RUBIN: My father's name, you want the original Jewish name, or . . .

SIGRIST: Why don't you give me the Anglicized and then give me the Jewish.

RUBIN: My father, when he came to this country, became Morris.

SIGRIST: Yes.

RUBIN: His Jewish name was Moishe.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RUBIN: Uh, Moishe is, I would say, M-O-S-H-I-E. My mother, as I said, he came from deep within Russia, but I don't know the exact area. And, um, served in the Russian army during World War One. My mother, uh, came from very orthodox background, but she wasn't a very practicing orthodox, Jewish, yes, but more in the secular style.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

RUBIN: Her name was, uh, Rachel Lazovsky. You want me to spell it?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

RUBIN: Lasovsky.

SIGRIST: And was Rachel how you would say it?

RUBIN: Her name was Rochel. The Jewish name was Rochel. The biblical name, Rachel.

SIGRIST: Yes.

RUBIN: And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Is it spelled the same way as Rachel, or . . .

RUBIN: Uh, no, it's R-O-C-H-E, E-L, I presume.

SIGRIST: Rochel.

RUBIN: Rochel, yeah. Which stems from, (she clears her throat) excuse me, from Rachel. And, uh, then when she came to this country it was Rose.

SIGRIST: Oh, interesting. Um, let's talk about your father for a bit. What did he do for a living?

RUBIN: He was a, uh, plumber and tinsmith, uh, originally.
Yeah, he was that. Um . . .

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you like to tell about your
father when you were a small child?

RUBIN: Well, my earliest recollection of my father is when I
was about four-and-a-half or five years of age. My
mother had extremely, extremely hard times, both
during her childhood, after she was married. She was
married very young to my father, who was immediately
sent as a soldier to fight in the Russian army, and
ultimately ended up as a prisoner of war of the
Germans, where he was kept for roughly three, four
years or longer. And my mother gave birth under the
most poverty-ridden, because there was great,
widespread famine at that time, that part of Europe.
She said, to get a, there were American soup kitchens
established for relief, humanitarian relief. And she
said in order to get a bowl of soup, now, this is, she
told me, I wasn't aware of it, you had to get up, to
get a bowl of soup, early in the morning you had to
get up by two o'clock in the morning to stand on line,
to queue up before, and there were probably many, many

thousands, to get a bowl of soup which, in fact, was a very thin, not very nourishing, however this was the only thing we had. My father, so she gave birth without her family. Her family was still in Russia. Tremendous poverty. It's even hard to imagine such poverty. The famine was widespread. Many thousands of people died of hunger. And she had to give birth and raise me up to the age of four-and-a-half or five, when my father was released. And I didn't know my father. The earliest recollection I have was when this disheveled old man with a beard, and he was very young at the time, uh, terribly, terribly unkept looking. My mother said, "This was your father. Give him a hug." And I shrunk in terror from this terrible person. Who was it? This my father? It can't be. Because he looked anything but decent in appearance or, so that was a very hard adjustment on his part, coming from the prisoner of war camp. Poverty, famine, no work. Uh, it was a rough time. And when I was about eight, eight, I guess, yeah, subsequently two of my brothers were born that at the time, times were extremely hard, you did the best you could to just provide the basic essentials. He, uh, knew he had a sister in New York somewhere who emigrated here

a long time ago, but she came originally from the Russian village where they lived, and they didn't have close contact. There was also a brother in Boston whom we hadn't seen, but the sister, he somehow contacted and asked if she would please send him affidavits. At that time you have to vouch for somebody's independence before you were allowed to enter in the country. So she sent him the necessary papers, and I was about eight when he emigrated to the United States. And I have two younger brothers also.

SIGRIST: A couple of questions come to mind. One is do you remember when he left when you were eight? Were there any circumstances around that that stick out in your mind?

RUBIN: Not really, not exactly. All I knew is that my father went far away, far, far away in America. And after he arrived here, and he had good skills, you know, plumber, roofer, tinsmith, that kind of thing, he started to send us a regular monthly income, a check, our maintenance. Those were the good times! We had enough to eat. We had shelter. We were dressed decently, because my mother used to sew at home. Those were real good times for five years before we

followed.

SIGRIST: You said he sent you a check in the mail. Can you describe first the process of . . .

RUBIN: I don't know whether it was in the mail, or telegraph at Western Union, but I knew we got a monthly income from America.

SIGRIST: The other question that came to mind was did your father in later life ever relate to you any stories about when he was a prisoner of war under the Germans?

RUBIN: No, not really. I think he, he was in a state of denial or the idea of thinking of those terrible days probably was very painful to him. I never heard him speak about it. He may have spoken to my mother, because he certainly didn't look as if he had good care when he first arrived.

SIGRIST: Can you explain to me a little bit about what your person, what his personality was like? What was your father's character like?

RUBIN: Uh, that was really, I don't know my father all that well. As I said, he came when I was about five, when I first got to know him, and he left at about, when I

was eight, about three years. We arrived here, uh, in '28, and he died in '33. So I really didn't know him.

The time when I did get to know him is when I arrived here with my two young brothers in tow. I was in charge of them. And my mother was held back in Bremen, Germany, because she had an eye condition called trachoma, I think. So they wouldn't clear her medically to make the trip. So she was held back there for nearly two years, in Germany. And that's when I got to know my father. A, I had to do the housekeeping. I had to be in charge of my two younger brothers. It was expected of me. I was the "woman of the house," quote. And I had to go to school. It was mandatory, and plus I wanted to. I was so anxious to become American and speak English.

SIGRIST: Based on those few years that you were with your father, what kinds of character assessments can you make about him, things that stick out in your mind?

RUBIN: He was a sort of a quiet man. The thing that I remember with some joy was I think a year or several months after we arrived in this country, and we lived on the fifth or sixth floor walkup in the Bronx. And he was a quiet man, he went to his work, he came home

in the evening and he expected the dinner on the table. No matter how simple it was, it should be a nourishing meal. And I had to take care of that, and also to keep my younger brothers in tow and make sure they went to school, make sure they bathed on time and so on. My father didn't talk much but, one day, shortly, as I said it was months, maybe a year later, he came home with a big radio, a radio with a cabinet this high, and it came, music came forth, conversation, humor. We were glued to the radio. That was very outstanding in my memory, yes.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you some of the same kinds of questions about your mother. Is there a story that you like to tell about your early childhood, about your relationship with your mother.

RUBIN: Well . . .

SIGRIST: Maybe an experience you shared, or . . .

RUBIN: My mother was, as I say, the dominant figure in my life. She probably dominated us all to a degree. She was a very strong woman. And because she had such a hard life from early childhood, it gave her a survivor's, uh, philosophy, kind of. I can take

anything, I can survive. We struggled. She wanted us to get an education. Her primary concern was don't neglect your studies. Go to school, make something of yourself, and no matter how hard it is, that should be your focus.

SIGRIST: Could she read and write?

RUBIN: Barely, just barely. As soon as she came here, you know, which was almost two years after we came here and, of course, she didn't know English, but she used to say, we already spoke English, we were the Americans. And she said, "Speak to me in English. I've got to learn English." Because the only language she knew was some Russian, some German, and Yiddish. But she was gung-ho to learn English. And she used to say, "If I mis-pronounce something, correct me. I want to say it right." She was very anxious to learn.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the everyday chores that your mother had to perform in Latvia?

RUBIN: Washing clothes, I remember very, very, on a, what do you call, a metal, what would you call, a round basin, I guess, a metal basin, washing the clothes. And she was exceptionally, exceptionally clean. Everything

had to be just right. And it extracted praise because she was ill-humored at times because it didn't go her way. And, of course, we were poor all the time. Right after my father died again the terrible, terrible poverty. It was the height of the depression at that time when we came. But she was, she had very strong principles, a very strong work ethic and, above all, wanted her children to get an education, which we tried to get. We didn't become very, very known in the, in any particular way, but we absorbed some of the, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Were there certain rules that she instilled in you about behavior that stick out in your mind, certain things you could or could not do?

RUBIN: Well, I couldn't stay out late, and I remember when I was about sixteen I started using lipstick, very, very minimal makeup. She was tolerant of that because in her day young girls didn't use makeup. My father, on the other hand, was not. He said, "Decent girls don't use paint on their faces!" And she would say, "It's a changing world. You have to change with it. She's a good girl. She doesn't mean anything. A little lipstick doesn't hurt." And she was always in support

of me, yes. And my brothers? Well, especially after my father died, they were two young kids, and even in those days there were behavior problems. Not like we have no in drugs or not criminals, but young boys hung around the pool rooms or played hookey from school. And as busy and as hardworking as she was, she was always there to discipline, to see that they went, they towed their mark that they went to school and did their homework. And she wasn't a literate person, barely so. But she was very, very strong on education and improvement.

SIGRIST: What were your brothers' names?

RUBIN: My brothers' names was, in Yiddish, my Yiddish name?

SIGRIST: Do both. Do the English, and then give us the Yiddish.

RUBIN: My, the one next to me was Irving or Itzak, the Jewish name.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RUBIN: Itzak was, like, I-T-Z-A-K, I believe, which later translated into Irving. My youngest brother, who's deceased for many years, was Zalman, Zalman. Z-A-L-M-

A-N, Nochan, N-O-C-H-A-N, Riskin. As a matter of fact, when what's his name, um, oh, the president of Chrysler, Lee Iacocca had the drive, when they were re-opening or rebuilding the, uh, Ellis Island, I contributed a hundred dollars for my brother's name to be inscribed along the wall there. So my youngest brother, because he was the one who was actually detained. The other . . .

SIGRIST: At Ellis Island.

RUBIN: My older brother were allowed to go home, but because my youngest brother was so young, he was six years old, I was his security blanket. I couldn't leave him there alone. He was frightened as it was.

SIGRIST: How many years are there between you and Irving. He was the next.

RUBIN: Five years.

SIGRIST: And then between Irving and . . .

RUBIN: Five-and-a-half years, two years.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the births of either of your brothers?

RUBIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: All right. Can you tell us, please?

RUBIN: I definitely, especially my brother Irving. My youngest brother, I remember but vaguely. My oldest brother, as I said, my father came, I was, when he came back from the war I was about four-and-a-half, five. And, sure enough, nine or ten months later my brother was born. And he was born at home with the aid of a, uh, what do you call it, midwife. And we had a small apartment, a decent apartment, I might add. When you think of the terrible hovels people lived in in Europe in those days, we didn't. We had running toilet, uh, running water, a flush toilet, and a decent, Riga had a very decent standard of living in those days. Although I must say we were very poor, but we lived fairly decently. My brother was born, as I said, five, I was about five-and-a-half. You know, because his birthday's in March, and mine is in December, so it was close to five-and-a-half years difference. And the first thing I heard, the midwife came out, my father was in the house, and I, and the midwife came out and announced joyously, "It's a boy, it's a boy. Mazeltov." Mazeltov means good luck, and so on. So in my head I calculated that being a boy

was much better than being a girl, because I never heard anyone praise me or be so jubilant over me, so being a boy was better, I thought. And, sure enough, he was the favorite all her life.

SIGRIST: Tell me, were there certain conventions that women observed when they were pregnant in this culture? Um, what do you remember about your mother being pregnant prior to the birth and, and . . .

RUBIN: The birth, prior to my, uh, brother Irving's birth, I don't remember the conditions very much. And my father was there, my, and we, we had enough to eat, I imagine, but nothing more. When my youngest brother was born two years later, I do re--, we had moved to a different apartment in a different area, and I remember my mother being very pregnant, you know, in the last months. And one day I remember in particular there was a fireman's funeral passing our house with music. They made a big parade out of it, you know. And my brother wanted to see what was going on. My, at that time I had only one brother. And we went down in the street to follow the parade, the music, the excitement. And lo and behold I return to the house and my mother says, "where's your brother?" And I

says, "My brother? I forgot all about him." And he marched off with the parade, and I remember my mother being very pregnant. She must have been in the eighth month or so. She ran after the parade, and trying to catch anybody, whether they noticed a little boy, and he was very, excuse me, very blonde in those days, and he was less than two years, just about two years old.

And very vivacious, very active, and very, uh, gung-ho kind of a child. You really have to run after him, but I don't, she said, "I told you to watch your brother." And I forgot. I was carried away with the parade. So she ran for many blocks until someone said, "Oh, yes, I've seen a little boy, and he walked away." She finally located him. But did I get it, and it wasn't compliments either. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Irving marches in the parade.

RUBIN: Of course.

SIGRIST: This brings me to ask you, when the children needed to be disciplined, how was that done?

RUBIN: How was it done? Did you ever hear about a cat with nine lives? I don't know, I've never seen it here, but I heard it. It was called a konchik. A konchik

was a long stick with leather strips, maybe four, maybe five, maybe six. And I don't remember ever being used on any one of us, but the mere fact that you had it in your hand, if you don't behave, if you do this and that, this is what you're going to get. And it was, presumably, very painful. Leather strips, you know, if you swish it with force, you feel it. But to the best of my memory, I never felt it actually, though my mother said I often deserved it.

SIGRIST: So it was more of a sort of a threatening kind of discipline.

RUBIN: Right.

SIGRIST: Can you spell konchik for us, please?

RUBIN: It's K-O-N-C-H-I-K, I believe. I've never heard the word here.

SIGRIST: Okay. Let's, um, let's also talk about practicing your religion in Riga. You said you were Jewish.

RUBIN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how you practiced your religion at home?

RUBIN: We weren't very religious. My mother observed the kosher tradition.

SIGRIST: Excuse me?

RUBIN: The kosherate. You know, the food had to be kosher, especially meat. You bought kosher meat, and had it slaughtered according to Jewish ritual by a slaughterer. He was called a, uh, I forgot, scochet. All animals that have to be slaughtered for food have to be slaughtered a certain way, by religious tradition. So there was food, kosher food, available. We were, we had a kosher home, which meant that you couldn't eat meat and dairy products together. You had to wait a certain length of time. Our diet was adequate. In fact, some things are very, very outstanding in my memory. A lot of fish, fresh fish. Um, fruit was scarce, fresh fruit, very scarce. Occasionally we'd have an orange. Bananas was practically non-existent. But apples, yes. We had a lot of apples and pears, and we lived in an apartment house, but down below, street level, was like a storage area. Every apartment dweller had an apartment usually for storage, things out of season where you can store. You can store clothing, you can

store food, whatever. Each one had like a, what shall I say, a little space where you, with a door with a lock on it. It was yours. So apples and pears, we had plentiful, because that's a good area for growing these things. And, um, but other foods, especially tropical fruits was practically non-existent. But we had meat, and we had, uh, a lot of fish, smoked fish, fresh.

SIGRIST: A specific kind of fish that you remember?

RUBIN: I don't know what they were. But there is one store that I know that maybe, (she coughs) excuse me, others. Do you know of Zabar's in New York?

SIGRIST: Here in New York, yeah.

RUBIN: They carry a certain sprat that comes from Riga, and I bought one just the other day.

SIGRIST: How do you spell sprat?

RUBIN: It's a little sardine, it's smoked and in oil or water, depending on your taste. Now the emphasis is more on water, less oil, and it's delicious. But it comes from Riga. It's a, it's a very well-known product. I don't know how many other things they

export, but this is known. And when I go to Zabar's I always, they carry it.

SIGRIST: How do you spell sprat?

RUBIN: S-P-R, either O or A, T-S. Sprats. Also we had smoked other fishes, whitefish, sturgeon, I imagine. I don't know exactly, but the sprats stand out, and some of them were superior, far superior.

SIGRIST: This, of course, was all after you were getting checks, getting money from your father.

RUBIN: Yeah, when we had a reliable source of income, yes.

SIGRIST: Your father's in America now. What do you know of America? How do you, as a young girl in Riga, think about America before you came here?

RUBIN: I'll tell you what I identify very strongly with. Occasionally my father, I don't know how often he wrote, and I wasn't aware of it, but once we got a picture postcard in, of the building, the Woolworth building had just gone up. It was in the '20s, I think, during his time here alone, early '20s, late '20s, I don't know. But he sent us that picture. And I looked, I said, "Really, they have such tall

buildings?" This was in New York, where my father lived. Um, other than that I didn't have too many pre-conceptions. I knew my father worked hard. There was no gold to be picked up in the streets. That I knew. We lived in a, in a very, not a very desirable neighborhood, but it isn't, it wasn't criminal or anything like that. It was a poor neighborhood, working class, less than working class. We lived in a five floor walkup.

SIGRIST: That's here in New York, right? (?)

RUBIN: Here in New York, in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: But before you got to . . .

RUBIN: New York? The tall buildings.

SIGRIST: That's how you sort of perceived America.

RUBIN: And I, to this day when I see the Woolworth building, I see that picture postcard with it.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother telling you we're now ready to go to America? Tell me about, about that and

what happened immediately thereafter. What were the preparations that needed to be made?

RUBIN: Oh, well, we had, uh, first of all, it was very joyous. We had, we expected to go to America to join our father, and it was, uh, a new life was beckoning to us. And, of course, America, especially a city like New York, was always considered as an extraordinary opportunity, and you were lucky if you were going there. Um, my mother had a, at that time, a sister in Belgium who left the, her home town when she was a little girl, before she went to Riga, she had a brother in London. But for some reason, and she hadn't seen either one of them, and plus they were two younger brothers left with the mother, whom she never saw again. And neither did she see, for some reason, which today seemed so logical, why we didn't go by way of Belgium, which is a port city, I mean, Antwerp is a port, London certainly is a big port, in order to see her brother or sister. Somehow my father gave the directions you have to go through Germany, Bremer, Bremerhaven. Because that's where we boarded our ship. But she could, now it seems so illogical, but that's what we did. We went to Germany by train, from

Riga.

SIGRIST: Explain to me your mother's feelings about leaving Riga and, I mean, how badly did she want to come to America?

RUBIN: Very much, very much. Because my mother, by nature, was very an activist, adventuress. To the point, it was limited. To be sure, she never traveled much, but she had a tremendous curiosity about the world. And learning new, new things, a language, a new way of life, hopefully a better life. She was tremendously excited over it. And we, of course, were, too.

SIGRIST: What did you pack to take to America?

RUBIN: What did I pack? You see those two copper pots?

SIGRIST: Yes, we're looking at a . . .

RUBIN: And the mortar and pestle?

SIGRIST: Yes.

RUBIN: Those were the things . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe them in words for the tape, since this is just an audiotape?

RUBIN: They were, we had a samovar. That's, it was boiled with coal, but now, and one was in copper, uh, copper or, what's the other alloy?

SIGRIST: Brass?

RUBIN: Brass. That was a little one, and we had a big one, maybe twenty-four cups or so one. She sold that, because that's very much prized. She sold that. Everyone said, "In America you don't need this. You'll have better things, and why not sell it?" So she sold that. We had a few, I don't know whether they were oil or copies, paintings, the pictures on the wall. My mother always emphasized an attractive home. No matter how poor you are, the outside world shouldn't know about it. This was a private thing. So we had rather attractive homes, simple, nothing fancy. But she tried, strove to make it as attractive as it could possibly be made. (traffic noise is heard in background)

SIGRIST: So she felt the need to bring pictures and things with her.

RUBIN: Certain things, yes. She brought these two, I personally said, "Throw them out! This is old. We,

in America we're gonna have better things." She said, "This is where I cook my gefilte fish every time, because I suppose the contents heats very well, and this is what I'm bringing with me. And she insisted, and the mortar and pestle, you chopped nuts there, you, other, for other uses I suppose, cinnamon, whatever. That she insisted on taking with her.

SIGRIST: Can you describe those pieces in words for us on tape, please?

RUBIN: The mortar and pestle is brass, and it used to tarnish terribly, but I had it permanently finished with the lack of coating so it doesn't tarnish. The copper pots do tarnish. They need polishing periodically.

SIGRIST: And they have a handle that comes . . .

RUBIN: And they have a long handle that you don't burn yourself, and my mother uses it regularly. Now they're antiques, and I'm glad to have them.

SIGRIST: I should also say for the sake of the tape that a samovar is a large, European water heater for tea.

RUBIN: Right, for tea, right. And you, in almost every home at that time, and I don't know how simple, how humble

the home was, you had a samovar. Because tea was the, the constant there. Like some people have a coffee pot here now all the time, you want a cup, somebody comes in, you want a cup of coffee, there the samovar always provided a cup of tea or, in those days, it was a glass of tea. We drank some tea from a glass.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

RUBIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And obviously the samovar is prized enough where your mother felt she could get some needed cash by selling this.

RUBIN: Oh, yes, especially the big one, which was not silver but probably nickle-plated or something, and it was beautiful, as I remember. It usually had a, where you brewed the tea itself on top it stayed hot, and you had a little bowl underneath for dripping, the hot water coming. It was, and a tray, a big tray it stood on. Silver or, again, I don't know, real compton. But it was a beautiful display piece. The other one was a smaller one, maybe six cup, eight cup, and it was brass. Uh, everyone said, "Why don't, ah, we don't, even in America they don't use these things."

So she sold it, probably for pennies.

SIGRIST: What about you as a young, you know, you're beginning your teenaged years. Was there anything that you took with you that would be a memento of your life in Riga?

RUBIN: I'm trying to think. I had this picture of my mother and myself. But that . . .

SIGRIST: You're pointing to a photograph over here.

RUBIN: Yes. You see that when I was very young.

SIGRIST: Oh, yes. But, I mean something like an object or a toy or some clothing that you might remember taking with you.

RUBIN: I can't remember. I can't remember. I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a goodbye dinner or something . . .

RUBIN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Or you probably didn't even . . .

RUBIN: A few of my classmates in school were envious I was going to America, those that had no relatives here or

possibilities. Everyone associated going to America with a better life. So, of course, everyone wanted it. And also we had, uh, we'd known certain people, neighbors, or with some of the children I went to school with, a few that were also going. Their father preceded them here, and they were looking forward to going. In fact, this Mrs. Fader, she came, and a few months later than I, a few months early, I don't know exactly.

SIGRIST: But you knew Mrs. Fader in Latvia.

RUBIN: Slightly. Our parents knew each other. I didn't know her well. But another young woman, a young girl who since died, uh, she, she was my friend in Riga, and we were also a few months apart, not too significantly. And our parents also knew each other. Uh, she came about the same time when we did, within a couple of weeks. But she had a big family here on her mother's side. So they, they helped absorb the shock of all, you know, by helping with jobs, helping with handouts. My aunt, on the other hand, uh, withdrew from any help. She said, "Here in America you have to stand on your own two feet." And so we did.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the train from Riga to Bremerhaven.

RUBIN: Not very much. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it?

RUBIN: It was either late November or early December. I don't know exactly. Because I, too, and my two brothers were held in Germany for a while, maybe a week or two or maybe more, but not very long, until my mother's status . . . (disturbance to the microphone)

SIGRIST: Careful of your hand on the microphone.

RUBIN: Oh, I'm sorry, I keep forgetting.

SIGRIST: That's okay. (he laughs)

RUBIN: Till my mother's status was firmly established, whether she's coming with us or she has to remain.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, maybe we should talk about that now. You took the train from Riga to Bremerhaven.

RUBIN: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And tell me what happened when you got to Bremerhaven.

SIGRIST: Well, there was a medical, uh, checkup. Not only a checkup, but a thorough checkup. We were cleared immediately, my brothers and I. And my mother, I don't know if it was arranged by the German government or the American consulate. I really don't know who was in charge. But any, we had to clear it before we were able to board ship to go directly to America. And my mother was found to have this eye condition and a, uh, at first they thought they would send her back to Riga with us, the children, as well. Then it was decided, but it took some time. I don't know exactly how long we were there, a couple of weeks. And, of course, the disappointment, the terrible disappointment, and the fear of separating from my mother, because she was the only constant in my life. My father, I didn't know. I was going to him, but I hardly remember having any, any real recollections of him.

SIGRIST: Was this a surprise to your mother?

RUBIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: She had no idea that this . . .

RUBIN: No.

SIGRIST: I see.

RUBIN: No, because of the thorough examination. And those were the days when if you had a contagious illness, or they perceived that it might be contagious, you couldn't enter, period. Or financial liability. If you couldn't prove that you will be independent or that you have somebody to help you, you couldn't enter the country.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you said you weren't sure how long you stayed at Bremerhaven. Were you, um, were you allowed to stay with your mother while you were there?

RUBIN: Yes, we were. But we, it was anything but, it wasn't the hotel, mind you, it was like barracks, like.

SIGRIST: Was it a processing area, do you think?

RUBIN: Yes, I think so. But they were more like barracks, for the best I can recollect. And there were many others, many, many others. We weren't the only ones. People from other parts of Europe were there, held back for various reasons, maybe health, maybe economic, maybe others. I don't, oh, they got sick

there, and they couldn't proceed, so, um, all I knew is that our, our trip was interrupted. And then finally the decision that I and my brothers go ahead was a wrenching, especially for my mother that knew, she didn't even know she would ultimately be allowed to enter. She had to part with her three young children.

SIGRIST: And you're the oldest, and . . .

RUBIN: And I was admonished to take care of them and, so I took that very seriously.

SIGRIST: Well, let's see. If you're, are you thirteen, or do you turn thirteen in December?

RUBIN: I turned fourteen in December.

SIGRIST: So you're thirteen. So Irving is five years younger than you.

RUBIN: Yeah, he was eight.

SIGRIST: He's eight, and the other one is . . .

RUBIN: Six.

SIGRIST: Six, so I mean, these are little kids.

RUBIN: Yes, especially the youngest one, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt about all of this?

RUBIN: Terrible. I, on the one hand I was very, very excited about going to America and to New York. Actually about meeting my father and actually living with him was a little disturbing, too. To me it was, for all practical purposes I knew he was my father, I knew he was devoted, I knew he would take care to the best of his ability, but he was a total stranger in so many ways. And because we weren't very close, or he was a, not a very talkative man, I didn't know how the interaction would take place. And, frankly, he was just as scared of us as we were of him because he didn't have the responsibility to, uh, raise a family, to be always present, to be responsible for them. First it was the incarceration in Germany, and then the, uh, the bad times in Europe. And he, he probably was just as scared and apprehensive as we were.

SIGRIST: And so by your mother not being able to leave with you, that suddenly puts this whole immigration experience into a completely different light.

RUBIN: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Tell me about how you got on the ship and, I mean, what that whole process was.

RUBIN: Well, all I can tell you, I have no recollection of this ship per se, because we certainly went in steerage. There's a below-deck cabin, and that's where we probably were, way, way, below, maybe four, five floors below it.

SIGRIST: Did your mother go with you to the ship, or were you escorted by . . .

RUBIN: She must, she must have, but I don't recall, recollect that. She must have, because it is a port, and you do go to the port to see someone off or so and so, and I'm sure she went to see us off with great trepidation, with great pain in her psyche. But she had no choice. At least we would reach the promised land, you know.

SIGRIST: Was there anyone put in charge of you, in some sort of position . . .

RUBIN: As I remember vaguely another immigrant family, husband, wife, I don't remember them in detail, were asked if they would please look out for us because

we're traveling alone on the oldest and, uh, would they just please take an interest in us. And they promised. I never saw them. But there's a reason. I became violently seasick, and being way below, I don't know how many stories below deck, in a cramped, tiny cabin with uppers and lowers, me and my two brothers, I never saw a deck, I never saw the water. The ship, I couldn't eat. My brothers, on the other hand, they were so rambunctious, they ran all over the ship. And because they were alone unattended, everyone sort of took them a little extra attention, they got a little extra attention. This one gave him an apple, and this one said, "Do you want a banana," and so on.

Traveling alone, he said, "There, my mother, my sister's very sick, she's down below." "Take this to your sister." So I never saw anything, and I couldn't eat. I was terribly seasick, and retching all the time. And I never saw anything outside my cabin walls. When we reached the shores of New York and everybody started running to the deck, they kept saying, "The lady, the lady, the lady." That's when I felt well enough to leave the cabin, and I saw the Statue of Liberty. And that was a very emotional, very emotional.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what time of the day it was?

RUBIN: Yes, it was in the morning. I don't remember the day of the week, but it was apparently, getting into the harbor, before you can visualize anything, it took some time. And then when I heard, "The lady, the lady," I don't know who's the lady, but I had heard about the Statue of Liberty. And at that time I felt well enough to get up on deck and motion, the crying, the yelling, the hugging that took place.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

RUBIN: Munchen.

SIGRIST: Yeah. And, um, if you were sick through the whole thing, now, your brothers, but your brothers sort of . . .

RUBIN: Hmm. And it took twelve or thirteen days in crossing.

SIGRIST: Did your brothers in later life ever relate to you any stories about their experiences on the ship?

RUBIN: All they kept saying that everybody's giving them an apple or a candy, and they were, they were well. They didn't . . .

SIGRIST: They had a great time. (he laughs)

RUBIN: Great time. Because everybody felt a little sorry for them, and they were very loving kids. Rambunctious, outgoing, very excitable.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened once the ship came into New York.

RUBIN: Once the ship came in, uh, my father and my uncle, my, uh, and my father's brother-in-law were awaiting for us, and, uh, then, I don't know how it came about that we, we actually, my older brother was released right away. I was released, too, but I couldn't leave my kid brother alone, because he was a baby, six years old, and terror-stricken in this new place they call America. We were sent off by one of the different ferries or whatever to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So the ship actually docked, and then you were . . .

RUBIN: Oh, yeah. My father was there, my uncle was there. And . . .

SIGRIST: How did you greet your father when you saw him?

RUBIN: He said he was my father. Of course we embraced and

we kissed. But it wasn't the kind of embrace and kiss like you would, you would embrace a stranger who was beneficial to you, who looked after you, and you really meant it. My father was just that kind of a figure. He was my father, but I didn't have any really close contact with him over the years.

SIGRIST: What was it that they feared was wrong with your brother?

RUBIN: He, in Riga that time, if you had any kind of a scalp, a rash or, in those days they had ringworm a lot. And, uh, and he also had scarlet fever when he was younger, and he was in isolation. I remember that very well. And he was kept in an isolation ward in a little island in Riga Harbor, but it was an island for incurables or, uh, what do you call it, contagious diseases. So he was, as a little boy I remember he was kept there for a while. He had a lot of things going wrong for him. And I remember him taking a ferry to go and see him regularly. I don't know how long he was there. Because he had scarlet fever, and it was contagious.

SIGRIST: So he was sick even in Riga then.

RUBIN: Yes. But he recovered. So I don't know what caused them to have electrolysis treatment on their scalp, because it was either a rash or maybe some infection, little infection. And as a result his hair never grew back. It was over-radiated. And part of his scalp was bald, and he was a little boy, so they (?), and the kid had a bald scalp. They were afraid it was something infectious, too. That was the reason he was kept.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me about your recollections of the Ellis Island experience.

RUBIN: Well, we had enough to eat.

SIGRIST: You were chosen to go with him.

RUBIN: I volunteered.

SIGRIST: What happened to Irving? Where did Irving go?

RUBIN: Irving went wight my father.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RUBIN: At that time I don't know whether, yes, my father already had an apartment waiting for us. Uh, my aunt, you know, was concerned, but she had her own family,

no responsibilities. And, uh, there was enough to eat. There was some kind of activities for the children, which I don't recall in detail. But we were so scared, and we didn't know the language, but we were not alone. There were many, many other immigrants. And so, uh, time went fast and, as I said, I don't know exactly the length of, our stay was a couple of days or so.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to stay with your brother, or how was that . . .

RUBIN: I think we lived in dormitories.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the inside of that looked like?

RUBIN: There were bunk beds, and families were kept together. And we had fruit which, as I said, fruit, especially tropical fruit was very rare in Riga. We very seldom saw oranges or apples.

SIGRIST: Was there anything that you had never seen before, food-wise, that you were served at Ellis Island?

RUBIN: I can't recall, no. There was plenty of milk and cereals and bread, all kinds of bread, though we had the best breads there. Our bread is far superior than

anything, because it's all homemade, you know. And more or less not commercialized.

SIGRIST: You mean in Riga it is so good, yeah.

RUBIN: The bread is fantastic and I'm not exaggerating because I visited Riga and Russia about ten years ago, and the bread is fantastic there.

SIGRIST: Were there any incidents that occurred in the dormitories that stick out in your mind as being a young girl?

RUBIN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Witnessing . . .

RUBIN: The young children were with their mothers if they traveled as a family. The older ones were separated with their own age group, the older ones. But I was with my brother.

SIGRIST: You mentioned before we started recording that you remembered a large room with tables.

RUBIN: Tremendous room.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me, please?

RUBIN: It was like a big hall with a very, very high ceiling. If I remember it was an oval ceiling. I remember much. But it was tremendous. And there were long, long tables staffed with people, and at every table there was either an immigrant family or a single person being interrogated. And when it came our turn they, you know, they asked your name, how to spell it, where we're from, who's responsible for us, things like that. But there was always an interpreter at hand, too.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what language you were answering these questions in?

RUBIN: Some were Yiddish. Some were, I think, Russian, I think so. There were interpreters in all languages.

SIGRIST: Um, did you have visitors at Ellis Island?

RUBIN: My father would come with my uncle.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that, was there a special place you had to go, or . . .

RUBIN: Uh, there was like a community room or a day room or something where we would meet. And we were assured that it won't be long and we'll be going home to our

new, our new home. And, of course, we were very anxious to leave, although we were never mistreated in any way.

SIGRIST: Did, um, how did your father take the news about your mother? Did he know that she was held back?

RUBIN: No, no. He was just chalked up as another bad experience, another, um, disappointment, and we've had many in our lifetime. But, um, obviously we overcame it, and it turned out all right.

SIGRIST: Did your brother ever, um, is it Zalman, is that his name?

RUBIN: Zalman, right.

SIGRIST: Did he ever relate to you any experiences that he had on Ellis Island that you may not have been privy to.

RUBIN: No, I don't think it, well, he died at forty-three, that's a number of years ago, never brought it up. He was in the army. He fought the Japanese, Okinawa, and horrible, in the Pacific theater. And was wounded, and then came, coming back and getting married, having a family, he died of cancer at forty-three.

SIGRIST: Well, in our remaining minutes I'd like to talk about life with Father and your early years in New York. Tell me about getting off of Ellis Island and, and . . .

RUBIN: Getting off Ellis Island, as I said, my father had an apartment for us, a walkup, but we had two bedrooms, small. And the kitchen with an icebox, which we did not have in Riga.

SIGRIST: Did he have . . .

RUBIN: We had electric, well, we had electric in Riga, too. And, I said, shortly after we had this magnificent thing come into our home, a radio, we can hear noise and conversation, music, humor. It was just great. I had a, I didn't have too much freedom to explore and to, uh, get to know any real American childhood, but I managed. I went to school. I was a good student. I remember very, do you want me to tell you anything about school?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

RUBIN: I remember my aunt enrolled me in school, and she's the one who gave me the name Selma when she registered

me. She says, "Oh, Sima, it's a European name. We'll make you an American." She said, "Selma," to the registrar. And coming in the first day in school I was put in with, I was an advanced student in Riga, but that for my age and for my capability, and here they put me in with children many years my junior, only to learn English. And I remember we were coming in and teacher said, "Children, this is a new student." She gave my name. "And she doesn't speak English." They said, "Ooh, she's a foreigner." For a long time I heard the word mokey, foreigner and so on. But I must say I was so interested and so, uh, motivated to learn English that I did learn it. I remember my aunt saying, I said to my aunt, "Oh, I wish I could speak English like you." When she first took me to school, she says, "Don't worry. In six months you'll speak better than me." I said, "That's impossible." And sure enough, six months, I did. I recognized that she didn't speak the King's English.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the ways you went about learning English. I mean, what was the process?

RUBIN: Well, in school, for one thing. And then, as I said, we had the radio. That was a great opening for

learning.

SIGRIST: How would you learn English off of the radio?

RUBIN: Well, I heard it spoken, and I used, started to hear, and my father would explain certain things if I didn't. And in the street I very, I didn't have the time. I had to go shopping for food. And once they, we lived in a Jewish neighborhood. So when I asked my father, "Where should I go shopping?" Bread, meat, whatever, he said, "Don't worry, they all speak Jewish here. You'll have no problem." So I picked the only Italian store. I went in, I start speaking English, he says, "No cabice." And I realized there are others, other people besides Jews here. So . . .

SIGRIST: Did your father speak well, speak English well?

RUBIN: Not when I look back now, no. But I certainly spoke a lot better than I did when I first arrived.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she learn English?

RUBIN: She learned, because she was very motivated. Right from the beginning she used to say, "Speak English to me, and correct me, because I want to learn." And for a foreign woman who never attended school here, she,

she didn't speak the King's English, but she made herself understood, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the first word that you understood that, when it all sort of connected?

RUBIN: Well, I heard foreigners so often, a foreigner, so I realized that you're not quite up to snuff. And, but I also learned quickly, and I was more advanced than the kids in my class, because I came from a higher level. So the math or arithmetic they called then, and I was more advanced than they were. But the English was difficult, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you still speak a little Yiddish?

RUBIN: Yes, I speak it very well.

SIGRIST: We have two minutes left. Can you say a prayer or something in Yiddish for us?

RUBIN: A prayer? Well, I'm not very religious. I'm very secular.

SIGRIST: Or a poem or something.

RUBIN: I just want to say that I, I'm expressing my thanks.
(she speaks in Yiddish) Opportunity's not Yiddish,

but to (she speaks in Yiddish) I am very grateful to
be an American in this wonderful country.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Rubin, that's a good place for us to end.
I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you
these questions.

RUBIN: Thank you for coming. And I hope someday I'll
hear . . . Oh, you said I'll get a tape of it.

SIGRIST: Yes, we'll send you a tape.

RUBIN: Terrific.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Selma Rubin on
6/30/95 here in Manhattan. Thanks again.