EI-064
BLANCHE (BLUMA) ESKOLSKY ROTHSTEIN
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RUSSIA, 1929 **PORT: LE HAVRE**
AGE 13 **RESIDENCES: BELARUS: MINSK**
US: NYC, LOWER EAST SIDE

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 20th, 1991. We're here in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn with Blanche Rothstein, who came from Russia in 1929 when she was thirteen years old. Good morning.

ROTHSTEIN: Good morning.

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

ROTHSTEIN: Okay. My full name now is Blanche Rothstein. My maiden name, when we came from Russia, was Bluma Eskolsky

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ROTHSTEIN: B-L-U-M-A, and Eskolsky, E-S-K-O-L-S-K-Y.

SIGRIST: I see. And what is your birth date.

ROTHSTEIN: My birthday is December 25, 1915.

SIGRIST: I see. Where were you born?

ROTHSTEIN: I was born in Minsk, Russia.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about Minsk. I know it was a fairly large town.

ROTHSTEIN: Well, when we came it was a fairly large town. When we came here it was pretty primitive. We didn't have any electricity. And we, we didn't have any bathrooms indoors. Everything was outdoors. And, you know, we lived pretty, it was a very tough life.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about Minsk. Was it an industrial city at that time?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, at that time they were opening up factories. My father had a little bakery with one helper. And then they opened up a big factory, bread, you know, baked goods. And my father happened to be a very Orthodox Jew. At that time if he was going to work in the factory he had to work on the Sabbath, and he wouldn't do it. And this was one reason why we packed up and left the Soviet Union.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

ROTHSTEIN: My father's name was Abraham Eskolsky.

SIGRIST: And . . .

ROTHSTEIN: And he had many, his whole family was already in the United States.

SIGRIST: Was he originally from Minsk?

ROTHSTEIN: No. He was born in a little town called Mir, M-I-R. And his father was a miller. And the peasants used to bring flour, and he used to make, the peasants used to bring the grain and he used to grind it into flour. Maybe that's why my father became a baker, because he comes from that background.

SIGRIST: Did he become a baker after he went to Minsk, or did that happen before?

ROTHSTEIN: Before he worked for someone. He was an apprentice. He was an orphan, so he had to go to work when he was about twelve years old.

SIGRIST: How did he become an orphan?

ROTHSTEIN: Uh, his mother died at a very young age. First of all, she had ten children, one after the other. And I suppose she was run down, she got pneumonia, and so she died very young.

And the ten children scattered after that. The older ones went, probably went to America as soon as they could. There were ten children, and my father was the last one to come to the United States.

SIGRIST: I see. Did he move to Minsk before or after he married your mother?

ROTHSTEIN: I think he moved to Minsk when he married my mother, and he had to make a living, and so he opened up a little bakery at that time.

SIGRIST: How did they meet?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, it was a shadchen if you know what a shadchen is. It's a matchmaker.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

ROTHSTEIN: Shadchen?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ROTHSTEIN: S-H-A-D-C-H-E-N. Shadchen.

SIGRIST: So they were matched.

ROTHSTEIN: They were matched. That's the only way, because my mother lived in a very small town. I don't know if it's, what

was it called? Yes, it was called Magildnahy yet, on the River Nemen. It was a very small town. There were not many Jewish people. It was mostly peasants living there. And the only way to get married was for a matchmaker to come and match up. He was from a different town, my mother was from another small town, and so they were matched up.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your mother's name?

ROTHSTEIN: My mother's name was Fruma Norbinovich.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, here in America they changed it to Rabinowitz. R-A-B-I-N-O-W-I-T-Z.

SIGRIST: And what was her first name?

ROTHSTEIN: Fruma, F-R-U-M-A.

SIGRIST: I see. When your father was baking in Minsk, did your mother work at all?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What did she do?

ROTHSTEIN: She was right there weighing the bread for the customers, you know. She worked very hard. Besides, she had

four children, you know, to raise. And we lived in one, in a one-room apartment, and the bakery was behind the living quarters.

SIGRIST: Describe that one room to me.

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, gosh. It was a very large room. It had tables and chairs and it had, maybe, two beds. It had a little stove, and we, and then there was a little tiny room behind that and six people occupied the quarters. And the bakery was behind the living quarters.

SIGRIST: You said it had no running water. You had no running water.

ROTHSTEIN: Well, in the bakery there was some running water, but to drink we used to go outside. There was a pump, and we used to pump the water and drink it for drinking.

SIGRIST: You said there was a small stove. Was this for cooking or for heating?

ROTHSTEIN: The small stove was for heating. The main stove we used was in the bakery. That was a big, you know, brick oven where my father used to bake. And that's how we kept warm, too, in the winter, when it was very cold.

SIGRIST: The winters were cold in Minsk.

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes. Very cold. And we had an outdoor bathroom, so you could imagine in the winter to use the outside facilities, you know.

SIGRIST: Was it just a small outhouse, or was it . . .

ROTHSTEIN: An outhouse. That's all it was.

SIGRIST: I see. The building that the bakery and your apartment were in, was this a larger building. Were there other living units in this building?

ROTHSTEIN: There were a couple, the landlady and two of her daughters in the other little compartments that they made, so it was not a very large. We didn't have any large buildings at that time, very few. Maybe the biggest, maybe about three or four stories.

SIGRIST: Talk about your brothers and sisters. List them by name.

ROTHSTEIN: Okay. I was the oldest one. And my, I don't know if I should give you the names in English or in the original.

SIGRIST: Do it in English, if possible, for us.

ROTHSTEIN: Okay. I was the oldest, and my name was Bluma, and the next one was my sister Edith, then there was my sister Sarah. She's still alive and living in Brooklyn, too. And my brother, Barry.

SIGRIST: I see.

ROTHSTEIN: Eskowsky.

SIGRIST: And how much between them? How many years?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, not many. I would say two or three years between.

SIGRIST: Talk about being a little girl in Russia and maybe with your brothers and sisters. What sorts of things did you do?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, the, I remember, I think, when I was five or six years old. It was a very difficult time in Russia. They were going through the Revolution and Counter-Revolution and all that. And it was very difficult living. We were afraid to go outside. We constantly heard the shooting, you know. And the thing I remember most, I went across the street to play with a little girl my age. The doors had to be locked completely, so the entrance was through the window. And finally when I wanted to go home, you know, they opened up the window a little bit and

I tried to crawl through and I heard, there was shooting in the distance. I was so scared. And all of a sudden the window broke and all the glass crashed all around me, and I still remember that because I was so frightened. And there were many, many years that my father couldn't find work and we were living very poorly, you know. We were hungry.

SIGRIST: So he didn't make a whole lot of money in the bakery.

ROTHSTEIN: That time we couldn't have the bakery because everything was in such a turmoil. Nothing was normal at that time. The bakery was when I was seven years old. He finally opened up again.

SIGRIST: Oh, so this is before that. I see.

ROTHSTEIN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Why is there so much turmoil? Are these pogroms that are going on?

ROTHSTEIN: No, no, no, no. No, no. Don't you see, when the first, there was the war, the First World War.

SIGRIST: Right.

ROTHSTEIN: Then came the Revolution in Russia. That was 1917.

Then there was Counter-Revolution. Because not only were there, they were called "Reds," the Bolsheviks were Reds, and then there were "Whites" who were against them. But also England and the United States and all that sent in soldiers to fight in the Revolution. So it took many years until things stabilized in Russia. And so we went through very hard times in those years.

SIGRIST: So it was a very tense atmosphere growing up.

ROTHSTEIN: A very tense atmosphere. I think that's why my whole family is so nervous, because we went through so much.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you go to school at all?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that?

ROTHSTEIN: In the beginning my father did not want me to go to the Soviet schools, you know.

SIGRIST: Why?

ROTHSTEIN: He was very Orthodox and he figured, you know, that they were anti-religious. So I had tutors. I had a tutor for Russian, and another tutor for math, and another tutor for Hebrew, you know. Then I wanted to go to school after that,

because I wanted to be like all the other children my age. So I registered for school, and I went to school there, and I had to go to school on the Sabbath. Sunday and Saturday is no day off there, only during the week. So I had to go against my father, and I did, and I went to school on the Sabbath. And to this day I feel guilty that I hurt him so much.

SIGRIST: He was very upset by that.

ROTHSTEIN: Of course he was. So I remember coming home from school, and he was sitting by the table with the rest of the family. He didn't speak to me. After that I think he made up his mind that he has to leave the Soviet Union, you know. So that was the main thing that forced him to leave.

SIGRIST: So your father sort of saw a changing world around him.

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: And he was clinging to an old-fashioned kind of way, a traditional way.

ROTHSTEIN: To him it wasn't old-fashioned. To him that was his life, you see. And it, in a way we were saved because of that, because in 1941 Hitler came into Russia. He destroyed the rest of my mother's family, and I think we were saved because my

father made up his mind to leave.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your mother and what she was like as a person. Was she very traditional also like your father?

ROTHSTEIN: She was also very traditional. And I think that we couldn't communicate very well with my mother. She was very traditional, and I wanted to go the other way. Of course, I came complete circle now, but I wanted to be away from religion. I didn't, and that lasted a number of years.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about some of those traditions that your parents held on to so tenaciously that you all maybe didn't . . .

ROTHSTEIN: Well, it was a very strict observant kind of life, and, you see, I was already indoctrinated going to school. That was two or three years into the Communist way of thinking, while I was there. Because they really do a good job of indoctrinating children, you know, in their, in the way they think, against religion. Religion is poison. So that's why I had a very hard struggle, you know, about religion. But, as I said, now I came complete circle, and I feel that my parents did the right thing.

SIGRIST: Did your brother and sisters sort of have the same feelings that you did? You know, were they . . .

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, they were younger than I was, and in the beginning my brother was sent to a Yeshiva, which is a Hebrew school. I don't think my brother is observant. And the sister that's still alive, she observes, and so do her children.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little more in detail about what your religious life was like specifically at that time in Russia. Was there a synagogue?

ROTHSTEIN: In Russia? Oh, yes. There was a little synagogue, and my father had very good friends. And it was very, it was a very joyful kind of observing, you know. Especially I remember a Simchas Torah, which is the day when they're joyful about giving, having gotten the Torah. They used to have so much singing and so much joy in that little synagogue. I remember going with my father to that little synagogue.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that synagogue to me?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, it was a little wooden building, you know. And the women used to sit up on the balcony, and the men were downstairs. And it was, you know, the services were very nice, and my father conducted the services, you know. He was very

learned. He used to study Talmud and learn a lot. And the children were in the yard, you know, playing around and making friends, and it, you know, it was something that's gone, that will never come back again. The feeling, you know, and the joy that they had together.

SIGRIST: Was there a large Jewish population in this town?

ROTHSTEIN: In Minsk? Quite a large Jewish population, yes.

SIGRIST: Did they all live in your neighborhood, or were they . . .

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, no. They were scattered. But in my neighborhood there was, where my father had the bakery then there were little stores, little grocery stores, and they used to buy the bread from my father and sell it to individual people. But we also sold from the bakery directly. We also sold the bread. And it was a, it was a community kind of life, you know.

SIGRIST: Primarily a Jewish clientele at the bakery?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

ROTHSTEIN: It was hard work. My mother had to work very hard.

SIGRIST: Long hours.

ROTHSTEIN: Long hours.

SIGRIST: Did you, as children, ever help out in the bakery?

ROTHSTEIN: I think we were too young, really, to help out. And, you know, it was a brick oven that kept the heat from Friday to Saturday night. And I remember people used to bring in the food, you know, for the Sabbath. They used to bring in so it should be kept hot in the stove, and then they used to take it out on the Sabbath.

SIGRIST: We should talk a little bit about food, actually. You said you had some slim times. What kinds of things did you eat?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh. During, you know, during the times when we didn't have any peace in Russia, you know, the years between, I would say, between 19, after the Revolution, until about 1923, it was, we had very lean times. I remember people used to even, they used to take the potato peels that somebody, you know, peel the potatoes, and we used to use that to make soup. I remember I once, we once had apples, somebody gave us apples. So I hid the apples. My mother told me later I hid the apple in the drawer to have it for the next day, you know. And she asked me,

"Where is the apple that you got?" I said, "Well, I'll have it tomorrow." She started crying. So we were hungry. We were poor.

SIGRIST: Did you grow any vegetables or anything like that?

ROTHSTEIN: No. There was no place where we were. We were in a, you know, a very small room there during those times, and there was no yard where you could go or anything, you know. It was, it was hard.

SIGRIST: As a little girl in this environment, can you say you had a happy childhood?

ROTHSTEIN: Not very, because we were so limited in everything, you know. We couldn't have many friends, and there were very few people that had anything. I remember a visit with somebody and she had a beautiful little doll, you know. And I came home crying. I was a child. "I'd like to have a doll," you know. So my mother took some rags and a towel and, you know, wrapped it up for me. She said, "Here's your doll." You know, and that was my doll, my treasure. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What, as a little girl, what kinds of things could you do for fun, you know, just to play? What did you do?

ROTHSTEIN: Uh, we didn't have much play. You know, we had a

big yard. We'd go out in the yard, maybe, and play a little ball. And we didn't have much of a good life. But the only good thing started when we moved and was later. I was seven years old, and that's when my father opened up the bakery. And so we had more food, you know. And there was an open market. My mother used to go and buy the meat there. I used to go with her. And very few vegetables. I remember I once saw an orange. I didn't even know what it was. And . . .

SIGRIST: But things got better for you after the bakery.

ROTHSTEIN: It got better, because I started learning, you know, and I started having friends, and they're going to school, you know. And it did get better.

SIGRIST: So your father is seeing this world sort of changing around him, and he decides that he really doesn't want to be there any more. Talk a little bit about that, and his decision to come to America.

ROTHSTEIN: Actually, he had a chance to come to America in 1923. His brothers tried very hard. His brother, one of his brothers was a famous rabbi here on the Lower East Side. And he tried very hard. It was very difficult to leave Russia at that time. And there was a senator, I think his name was Dixon, at that time. He tried very hard to get Jewish people out of

Russia. And so through him my uncle the rabbi got, somehow got permission to get a visa for my father to leave Russia. That was in '23. And my father refused to go. He said, "I have friends here, you know. And who knows. America is not a kosher place. It's the (?), you know." And he didn't go at that time. But then later on he had regrets, and finally by 1928 we got the visa to come out. It was very difficult to get out. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What did you have to go through to get the visa? Do you remember?

ROTHSTEIN: The visa was sent to us, but it wasn't sent to us from the United States. It was sent as an exit visa to Mexico. The United States we couldn't go in because we were Soviet citizens. And so we left, and it took us a long time to travel, you know, because of the way transportation at that time was.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about getting ready to leave. For instance, what did your father do with the business?

ROTHSTEIN: Okay. The business, he couldn't sell. We tried, my mother tried to collect some of the money that was outstanding from the people from the grocery stores and they claimed they didn't have any money. So we had very little money to live. They sold whatever furniture they could sell. They sold even

some of my clothes so that I only had one dress to come to America. And we left.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing? What did you take with you?

ROTHSTEIN: My mother was told to take feather beds, which was a very stupid thing to do, because that's what they were told to take, the feather beds. So they took the huge feather beds. They also had some candlesticks which were, you know, passed down from great-grandparents. They were silver candlesticks. So when we came to the border where we had to cross over to leave Russia, we had to declare everything we had. So my mother declared the silver candlesticks and they wouldn't allow her to take it. She was brokenhearted.

SIGRIST: Do you remember leaving Minsk? Do you remember how you felt about that?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes. I felt very badly. I wanted to stay with my aunt. At that time I just didn't want to leave Russia. And my aunt said, "Okay." But then, of course, at the end I went with my parents. We left Russia, it was a very cold winter day, full of snow. And a sled with horses, a peasant came with a sled and horses, and we took our little possessions, and we went to the station, you know, to the railroad station.

SIGRIST: And it's you and your mother and father, your two sisters and your brother.

ROTHSTEIN: Right. And we came to the railroad station, and it was a very long journey. From the railroad station we went from Minsk to Moscow. In Moscow we stayed about a week to get some other permits, whatever they had to do.

SIGRIST: How long did it take you to get from Minsk to Moscow?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, it was a long trip. It was at least two days.

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you'd been on a train?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Describe what it was like to be on a train for the first time.

ROTHSTEIN: I don't know. I guess us children, we just tried to fall asleep and not pay too much attention. But it wasn't the kind of trains they have now, you know. Then in Moscow we stayed about a week or so in the hotel, and my parents had to go out. And they locked us in, we shouldn't go out of the room, you know. So we were locked in. And from Moscow we traveled through Germany.

SIGRIST: Did you also live in one room in Moscow?

ROTHSTEIN: Of course. And not only did we stay in one room but it was, on the other side there were two more beds. So the daughter and a father stayed on the other side, without a partition or anything.

SIGRIST: Why did you have to stay in Moscow a week?

ROTHSTEIN: I think my father had to go and see, get more permission or something, or get a stamp to leave Moscow, whatever. There was, you know, a bureaucracy.

SIGRIST: Of course, Moscow is a big city, too. Is this the first time you'd been in a big city?

ROTHSTEIN: And I was very sad that I wasn't able to see anything there because they locked us into the room. I had to watch my other brother and sisters. And so then we left Moscow and travelled to Berlin.

SIGRIST: By train?

ROTHSTEIN: By train.

SIGRIST: That must have been a very long trip.

ROTHSTEIN: And through Paris. No, wait a minute. From Moscow

we went to Riga, Latvia. And we went to Riga, Latvia to really get the permission to go into America. That's where my father had to see the American ambassador.

SIGRIST: In Riga.

ROTHSTEIN: In Riga. And in Riga we were really stuck for about two months, at least.

SIGRIST: Oh. Where did you stay?

ROTHSTEIN: We stayed where other transient people had to stay, you know, while they were waiting to leave. It was a big building. I think it was two flights up. Also one room, we stayed in one room. There were about five or six beds in that room. You can imagine it was like a long room. And it was very uncomfortable, very miserable. And I spent my time reading, and reading and reading. I read one book after the other.

SIGRIST: Where did you get the books?

ROTHSTEIN: The books they happened to have. The people that lived there, you know, they had the books. I mean, that's the only way I could really function is to just forget the environment and everything and just get into my books.

SIGRIST: Did you, what exactly did you know about America up

to this point?

ROTHSTEIN: Very little. Absolutely nothing. It was a capitalist country. That I knew. They oppressed workers, that I knew. (she laughs) And I didn't know the alphabet, I knew nothing. I didn't know one English word when I came here. And . . .

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember what books you were reading?

ROTHSTEIN: Russian books. Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky and Chekhov.

SIGRIST: So you liked to read, as a kid?

ROTHSTEIN: I still do, you know. My eyes are not as good, but I still do. I read a lot. And it was very hard staying in that place, you know, shut up. Oh, yes. I used to go out with my mother to the little shopping thing. In Riga they have beautiful fish, you know. I forgot on which river it is, and the winters were maybe even colder than in Russia. Very cold winters. And finally, finally my father got his permit to come to America.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you at this building where you were staying?

ROTHSTEIN: They didn't feed us anything. My mother had to go out and buy any provisions she could get.

SIGRIST: So you had a little place where you could cook in this room, or . . .

ROTHSTEIN: Not in the room. They had, outside, a little kitchen. They had an indoor toilet, finally. And they had no bathing facilities at all.

SIGRIST: You said there were lots of people there, though. Other people . . .

ROTHSTEIN: There was another family that I knew. They were from Poland, and they were going to Canada, so we became a little friendly. They were also delayed, you know. And, as I said, we were, I was very happy that finally we left the place. My father got permission. That was already in March, and we left Russia in January. And then started, we started travelling towards Havre, Le Havre, where we left for the United States. And we travelled, as I said, through Germany, and then we came to Paris, and from there to Le Havre. That also took weeks, I suppose.

SIGRIST: Again by train?

ROTHSTEIN: By train. Then I remember very well the trip that

we had on the boat coming over here.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Le Havre?

ROTHSTEIN: In Le Havre we stayed, I think, a couple of days, until we were ready to board.

SIGRIST: With all this train riding, you and your family must have just been very happy to see the boat, finally.

ROTHSTEIN: We were happy to see the boat, but were we sick on that boat. I mean, we weren't used to the motions at all, and my father was deathly ill. He was in bed the whole five days that we were there. And we couldn't eat, and we were nauseous and we were very sick. And it took us about five or six days. And we went to, we came into a storm. There was a big storm on the ocean. And at that time of the year usually, you know, you have a lot of storms. And finally we saw Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat?

ROTHSTEIN: Yeah, Paris.

SIGRIST: Paris. And can you . . .

ROTHSTEIN: It was an old boat at that time.

SIGRIST: And can you describe your accommodations in the

boat?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, there was a small, what do you call it? We were all, of course, in the same room, and there was one on top of the other, one bunk on top of the other. And most of the time I spent away from there, you know. There were other people. We were talking, and we were, we'd go take a walk upstairs, you know. And it was very stormy. I remember the waves hitting against that little window in the room there. And . . .

SIGRIST: Did you say you were sick, too?

ROTHSTEIN: Not to such an extent as my parents. We were sick also, yes.

SIGRIST: Were they confined to the cabin, or did they go to the hospital on the ship?

ROTHSTEIN: I don't know even if they had a hospital on the ship at that time. They were confined to the cabin. They could hardly, my father said, "I'm dying." He just couldn't take that motion, the constant rocking and motion of the boat.

SIGRIST: Was there a dining room on the boat?

ROTHSTEIN: There was a dining room and only my father wanted to

eat, he didn't trust that it was kosher, the food. So all he wanted to eat was potato and herring, you know. Even that, to hold it down was very difficult.

SIGRIST: Hold for a second. (break in tape) Were there any kind of organized activities on the boat for people to do?

ROTHSTEIN: No.

SIGRIST: Did you have any safety drills or any kind of emergency instructions?

ROTHSTEIN: Not that I remember. Don't forget, it wasn't a luxury boat. It was an old boat. We just were happy to come across . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: You said it took about six days, five days, six days.

ROTHSTEIN: Stormy days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

ROTHSTEIN: I tell you, even if I saw it, at that time I didn't even know exactly what it was. The harbor, of course, I

remember. I remember getting off, the way we got off at Ellis Island. I don't know if it was directly on the boat, or maybe we went on the ferry from the boat. And, of course, I saw Ellis Island before they even made it into a museum because I was anxious to see what it looks like a number of years ago. And, of course, it brought back memories, you know. The benches where we used to sit and wait, and upstairs the bedrooms where we.

SIGRIST: Because you were detained at Ellis.

ROTHSTEIN: We were detained because my sister had a minor illness, you know. She broke out or something, and we were detained for about a couple of weeks.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Let's talk about what that experience was like.

ROTHSTEIN: All right. Oh, I remember that at that time there were many, many immigrants that came in, and we were sitting on the benches waiting to be called. My father was very anxious, you know. And I think they were very nice to the children, because we were given chocolate bars and we were allowed to go outside, you know, and play a little. And . . .

SIGRIST: Was your sister in one of the hospitals?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: So did you visit your sister?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, yes. We used to visit her. And . . .

SIGRIST: What was it like where she was?

ROTHSTEIN: It was a room with quite a few people who were not well. There was a nurse there, you know. Of course, when we came to Ellis Island we were all examined.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

ROTHSTEIN: How did they do it? They had people, you know, waiting on line, family waiting on line, and they went through everything. They went through the hair to see, your eyes, especially, to see if you have anything, any marks or anything, if you broke out in anything. And then, of course, they gave, there was a bathroom and I finally got a nice warm bath.

SIGRIST: How did that feel?

ROTHSTEIN: It was wonderful. It was like heaven. (she laughs) And then I, there was a school there, and I remember I went to school to learn a little bit of English, you know.

SIGRIST: Oh, talk a little bit about that. Where was the

school, do you remember?

ROTHSTEIN: The school was in one of the upstairs rooms. And they tried to teach us a little, "Good morning," a few phrases in English. And then there was, of course we had very few clothes, only what we had on our backs. So there were, some people contributed some clothes, and so we were given some things, you know, to wear. And . . .

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep?

ROTHSTEIN: We slept, they had, upstairs they had bedrooms. We didn't have, men slept separately and the women were separate, and it wasn't any private accommodation. It was just a room for a lot of people, you know, who slept, strangers. So . . .

SIGRIST: Did they feed you at Ellis?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, sure they did. They gave us meals. Of course, I don't remember what we ate, but they gave it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the room looked like where you ate?

ROTHSTEIN: That I hardly remember. Don't forget, it's been a long time. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You said they let you out.

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes. Our relatives used to come and visit us, you know, and talk to my father and get acquainted, because my father hasn't seen them for many, many years. So he met his brothers. And it was a very emotional reunion. I remember he cried.

SIGRIST: When he first saw him.

ROTHSTEIN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: That's right, because he hadn't seen him in a number of years.

ROTHSTEIN: Of course, since they were children, practically. Because after the mother died they all scattered, you know.

SIGRIST: Where did they meet? Where were you allowed to meet visitors?

ROTHSTEIN: In the same room, I think, they used to come.

SIGRIST: Were you separated from them somehow?

ROTHSTEIN: No, no. Maybe they got permission to come in to see someone, but we weren't separated. I met my uncles that way, you know, my cousins who I never knew. And . . .

SIGRIST: When you said they let you out, I assume they let

the children out, or are you talking about adults and children?

ROTHSTEIN: I think adults and children, you know. We got a little fresh air when we went out. And I remembered looking across the harbor, you know, and seeing the buildings across, and I was wishing already that we were there, you know.

SIGRIST: What do you think your father is thinking while you are detained at Ellis Island?

ROTHSTEIN: I suppose he had many thoughts about what he left behind and what he'll find in the future, you know, what the future will be. You know, different thoughts that people have when they come to a different country and have to start a new life. So I imagined it was very hard for my parents. For us children it was easier. We went to school and, you know, right away we went to live, you know, a new life. But for the parents it must have been much harder.

SIGRIST: Sure. You said that you had relatives visiting you at Ellis Island. Now, are these the relatives, did they eventually come to take you off the island when you could leave?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You said you were there for three weeks?

ROTHSTEIN: About two or three weeks the most.

SIGRIST: What exactly was wrong with your sister? Do you know?

ROTHSTEIN: I don't remember. Maybe it was something she became allergic to. I don't know. But we were let out, finally.

SIGRIST: Was that exciting, being released?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I remember the ferry taking us across. I felt so good at that time. Finally I felt maybe all these hardships are behind us already.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about what happened after you left Ellis Island. Where did you go, and with whom?

ROTHSTEIN: Okay. After we left Ellis Island we went to my uncle's, my uncle was a rabbi. They lived on East Broadway downtown in Manhattan. We went to their home, and they invited us for dinner. And we had dinner there, and then they took us to a tenement on Monroe Street. It was a third or fourth floor walkup, and they took us to our apartment there.

SIGRIST: They had procured one for you.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was that apartment like?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, there at least we had a couple of rooms. There was the kitchen and we had about three bedrooms. And they got for us some old furniture, second hand furniture. And we had a place to sleep, you know, and our own place. And then my cousin came after a while to register us to schools.

SIGRIST: Let's see. You came in December.

ROTHSTEIN: No, we came here in March.

SIGRIST: In March, March of '29.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, right before Passover. And then we registered to school and our life here started, you know. It was very different, of course.

SIGRIST: Talk about those first couple of months. What was it like to be a little girl, or a young woman, from Russia, being in the middle of New York City. You know, what did you see that you hadn't seen before?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, I remember the first or second day we were here my cousin took me on a subway to the Bronx, because that's where my other cousin lived. And I was just looking out of the window all the time and trying to read the signs and looking at

the buildings. I just stood all the time by the window. And then we came to visit my cousin. Of course, I only spoke Yiddish because I, you know, and Russian. And what was it like? I didn't get too good an impression about the tenement on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: Why? Why didn't you?

ROTHSTEIN: It had, there were rats running around in there when I was there, and it was just, you know, for a few months after I came here I really cried. I really wanted to be back, you know, where I came from.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like around Monroe Street? You said there were rats running in the alleys, but what was the . . .

ROTHSTEIN: The neighborhood was diversified. There were Italian people living there, and that was the first time I heard about the Mafia. I never knew what the Mafia was, and there was some kind of Mafia there. I tell you, in that tenement building where we lived at that time there were a lot of immigrants, and they were very sympathetic towards each other, and we all, they all tried to help each other, you know. They told my mother where to shop, you know, and they were really helpful, you know. They cared for each other.

SIGRIST: Was it primarily Jewish?

ROTHSTEIN: The building where I lived, yes. It was primarily Jewish. Also, my education, also, started with The Educational Alliance on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: How soon after you got here did you start?

ROTHSTEIN: Very soon. And there they had, they taught me how to sew, how to use a machine. There was Hebrew lessons there, and there was, there were services on the Sabbath for the children, and there was a choir teacher and I was in the, I joined the choir. And they took us out sometimes on an outing on a Sunday. We didn't stay too long on the Lower East Side, about a year-and-a-half.

SIGRIST: During that year-and-a-half, did your father find, was your father comfortable in this environment? He left one environment because . . .

ROTHSTEIN: Well, he was very happy to be reunited with the family. But it was just before the Depression and it was very hard for him to find work even though he was an excellent baker.

SIGRIST: The Crash hit in October of '29.

ROTHSTEIN: That's right, and we came here March, so. I

remember I was in school at that time and one of the young women that was also in that class, she was maybe about twelve. She came in crying at that time. And I said, "What's the matter? What happened?" It was in October. She said, "My parents lost the few dollars that they had, they lost. They closed the banks and they can't collect." We didn't even have a few dollars in the bank so it didn't affect us at all, but this is what happened, you know.

SIGRIST: Did your father have a job before the Crash?

ROTHSTEIN: He maybe had a day's work here and then they, we had relatives in Boston, he went to Boston and worked a little while there. Then we had some relatives in New Jersey, Perth Amboy, he went there and worked for a little while. It took a long time until he was able to join the union and get steady employment. So it was hard.

SIGRIST: Did your mother work?

ROTHSTEIN: No, my mother never worked. She wasn't, I don't think she was trained to do work. First of all, in my mother's time, no women used to go to work.

SIGRIST: But she used to help him in the bakery.

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, yes. That was something else, you know. But to

go out to work, not many women did.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about, you alluded to it already, but in more detail, about learning English, how you picked up the language.

ROTHSTEIN: It was very difficult for me to pick up the language. As a matter of fact, I didn't want to go to school here because in Russia I already had, I was in the, when we were left I was in the sixth grade. It's not the same like here. In the sixth grade I already had two years of algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry. You know? It was a little bit too much for me because I remember in the sixth grade I was already not doing so well. But here they started me off with baby things, you know, like, you know, the beginners' books, and I was very bored. So I didn't go to school. I stopped going to school. And all of a sudden there was a knock on the door one day, and the truant officer. And the truant officer came in and he said to my parents, "How come your daughter doesn't go to school? You know it's against the law." My father turned to me and said, "I want you to get dressed and go to school right now." I went to school.

SIGRIST: So is that basically how you learned English, or did you . . .

ROTHSTEIN: This is how I learned English.

SIGRIST: It just took a long time.

ROTHSTEIN: It took a long time. Because they skipped me after they realized how much I knew. But I went to junior high school and I went through, and then, because times were so bad here, it didn't get better until, I don't know, the late '30s, maybe. So I went to night school to finish high school, and during the day I went to business school to learn bookkeeping, typing and all that. And after I completed all that I still couldn't find a job. I worked in a factory for ten dollars a week. Even that wasn't steady, just whenever they needed the work they called us and then there was no more work and we were out.

SIGRIST: How did your parents learn English, or did they learn English?

ROTHSTEIN: Very little. They learned enough to become citizens. And they only spoke Yiddish at home. Even in Russia, they only spoke Yiddish to us. They never learned enough English to speak to us in English.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things could they say? What did they learn?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, my mother did go to night school. She wanted

to know more, you know. But what did they learn? About the government, of course, about voting and . . .

SIGRIST: So they basically knew enough English to get them by on the street.

ROTHSTEIN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father ever feel comfortable in America?

ROTHSTEIN: Yes. They felt very comfortable, and my mother cried bitterly that her whole family remained in Minsk. She knew eventually something's going to happen to them, and it did. Like I said, the only one that was saved was my cousin, you know. And he's here. He just came in 1973, because he was disillusioned with the Soviet government.

SIGRIST: So your parents never wanted to go back.

ROTHSTEIN: No, no, no. Oh, no.

SIGRIST: Did your sisters or your brother, of course, they're a little bit younger, I realize, did they ever go to work to help meet ends, make ends meet?

ROTHSTEIN: Well, first of all, I went to work. And when they could get a job, they got work, they were working too, of

course.

SIGRIST: Was the factory job your first job?

ROTHSTEIN: The factory job was my first job.

SIGRIST: And how old were you?

ROTHSTEIN: I was still in school, so maybe sixteen, seventeen.

SIGRIST: And what were you doing in the factory?

ROTHSTEIN: One factory I was packing ties and little handkerchiefs, you know, in the boxes. And that didn't last too long. The second factory, it was a curtain and drape factory, and I used to fold the curtains, a dollar a day. I was still in school at that time.

SIGRIST: High school.

ROTHSTEIN: I was still in high school at night and business school during the day. So eventually, of course, I got a job in an office, much later. And then I got married and had my two children, and after they were, I was able to, I went back to work for the New York State Department of Labor, and I retired from that.

SIGRIST: And just one more question concerning your parents,

did they continue a very strong religious life once they got here?

ROTHSTEIN: Always, always. They never swerved.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me maybe a Passover celebration once you go to America?

ROTHSTEIN: Oh, sure I can. I'll tell you about the last one that we had. We used to get together, the whole family, you know, my married sister, my brother and the children.

SIGRIST: This is when you were an adult later on.

ROTHSTEIN: Yeah. And we sat around and my father used to conduct a beautiful service. And I still miss it to this day. And we sang, you know. It was, we read a whole story of the Passover, and we sang songs, and there was the usual wine and matzos and all that. And we had a lot of fun because the children used to enjoy it very much. So we, it was a wonderful celebration, and we all miss it. Until this day children talk about it.

SIGRIST: So you have very fond remembrances of that part of your life growing up. I guess my final question for you is are you happy that you came to this country?

ROTHSTEIN: I wouldn't be alive if I didn't come because they finished off the whole family on my mother's side that was left there. I'm happy that I'm here. There's no perfection any place, you know. There's no hundred percent any place, but I'm happy that I'm here. I had a good life. I did the best I could all my life.

SIGRIST: Your parents made the right decision to come?

ROTHSTEIN: Of course they made the right decision. I'm so happy that they made that decision. Had they waited much longer it would have been too late, you know.

SIGRIST: Sure. Well, I want to thank you very much for having us out to your house.

ROTHSTEIN: You're very welcome.

SIGRIST: And this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.