

EI-65

ROSE SIEGAL ALBER LEVINE

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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Oral Historian's Note: This interview was recorded during a heavy rainstorm which can be heard through a nearby window throughout the duration of the recording. The interviewer is positioned a good distance away from the microphone and can occasionally be heard only faintly. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 8/26/1993.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 20, 1991, and we're here in the Brighton Beach area of Brooklyn with Rose Levine, who came from Russia in 1921, when she was eleven years old. Good afternoon.

LEVINE: Good afternoon.

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

LEVINE: My full name? My maiden name? Okay. My maiden name was, in Jewish, when I came from here, from Europe? Raizel Siegal.

SIGRIST: Now, can you spell all that for us, please?

LEVINE: Well, Raizel, R-A-I-Z-E-L. Siegal is S-I-E-G-A-L. They spell it in America that way. Maybe in Europe it was spelled a little different, I don't know. And my married name, I was married once before, so it was Alba. Rose Alba. And then my, now my name is Rose Levine because I was remarried in 1955.

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

LEVINE: Uh, January 1, 1910.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you want to explain a little bit about . . .

LEVINE: Well, about my date. The date, I'm really not sure whether it's January 1st. Because my mother told me in a Jewish month, it was Shavat.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

LEVINE: S-H-A-V-A-T. Shavat. That's the Jewish month. Now, Shavat is, when you look up on an English calendar and compare it to the Jewish, it's either January or February. So the exact date I don't know. (she laughs) And as far as, the year is 1910, that's what my mother said.

SIGRIST: Okay. Where were you born?

LEVINE: In Russia.

SIGRIST: Where in Russia?

LEVINE: Ruvna, Voliner Gubernia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell all that?

LEVINE: Oh, I have to do the spelling. Ruvna is R-U-V-N-A. That was the city. And Gubernia means the state. Gubernia means the state. The state was Voliner Gubernia. V-O-L-I-N-E-R. Voliner. Voliner. Sounds like right, right? Because if I write it, it would be easier for me. But if I have to sit and spell it's different, okay.

SIGRIST: It's harder that way.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about this town that you were born in? Was it a big town?

LEVINE: Well, I'll tell you. It was a city. It wasn't a small town. It was a pretty big city. They even had a prison there that I remember, and they had nice, nice trees. I used to pick those, what do you call them, those chestnuts. I used to

run around by the trees and pick chestnuts. As far as I remember it was nice. And they had nice stores. It wasn't a big city, but it was a mediocre city, Ruvna.

SIGRIST: Were there big buildings in this city?

LEVINE: Not very big buildings. Not that I remember big buildings, because . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about the prison. You seem to remember . . .

LEVINE: Yeah. They used to say there was a prison there. I don't know where it was, but it used to be. But I remember there were theaters there, and they had shows, Jewish shows. I was a little tyke like this (she gestures), five years old. I used to run away in the evening and run and push in with the people to the theater, and my mother used to run around looking for me. Is that what you like to hear?

SIGRIST: Sure. I love to hear that.

LEVINE: All right. So I used to run away. It wasn't too far. And I'd sneak in with the big people. I'd sneak in, they wouldn't even see me, I was so tiny. (she laughs) And my mother used to run looking for me, and then she'd give me a good spanking because I ran away. I used to run away. We didn't have no money to go to theaters. And I was a little devil. So

that's what happened. All right.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother, since you brought her up. What was her name?

LEVINE: Mother was named Sura. Here it's Sara.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Sura?

LEVINE: S-U-R-A. And in America it's Sara.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother. What was she like?

LEVINE: Okay. Oh, my mother was a beautiful woman. You can see on the pictures here. I got her on pictures here. Well, when my father went, I'm going to talk about that. Because what I remember, I was about four years old.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit, before you do that, talk about how your parents met.

LEVINE: How my parents met. (she laughs) I don't think I would know because my father was, lived in a smaller town, Alexandria. And how they met I wouldn't know. And we lived in the big city. You know, my mother lived in the bigger city, Ruvna. And she was working for other people. I don't know what, she was a cook or whatever. And how they met, I don't

know. And then I was born . . .

SIGRIST: Are you the oldest?

LEVINE: I'm the oldest.

SIGRIST: And who are your other . . .

LEVINE: And then my other brother is Motel. In America it's Max. But in Europe, when we came here, it was Motel.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

LEVINE: M-O-T-E-L. Motel. (she laughs) Okay. Now, one brother I had was born here in America.

SIGRIST: I see. Was there anyone else born in Europe?

LEVINE: No, no, no. That's all.

SIGRIST: Just you and Motel.

LEVINE: Me and Motel that came from Europe with my mother.

SIGRIST: What year was he born?

LEVINE: Motel was born probably 1909? No, he's younger. He's younger than I. He must have been 1913.

SIGRIST: So he's a few years younger.

LEVINE: Yeah. I'm about a few years older. He must have been 1913. My father must have leave about 1914.

SIGRIST: Your father came to America first.

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: All right. What was your father's name?

LEVINE: Moisha. Morris Siegal. In Europe it was Moisha.

SIGRIST: That's M-A-I-S-H-A?

LEVINE: M-O-I-S-H-A. Moisha, Moisha.

SIGRIST: What was your father like?

LEVINE: My father was a very nice man. When he left Europe we were two tiny children, my brother and I. I was about four years old, and my brother was about two years old when he left us.

SIGRIST: Why did he go?

LEVINE: He went away because of the war. They were going to draft him. So he went to America. And then they couldn't write, they couldn't correspond because the First World War started.

SIGRIST: Were there already relatives or someone here before . . .

LEVINE: Yes. My father had two brothers here, and he had a step-mother, and he had a few sisters here, step-sisters, half-sisters. And the two brothers were natural brothers.

SIGRIST: Did your father get work when he came here?

LEVINE: Oh, yes. When he came here they taught him to be a presser. So he worked downtown. They lived downtown on the East Side. And they worked there, and he worked there, the press iron, you know, hard work, hard work. And he couldn't even send us any money in Europe because of the war. And so my mother used to go to work, and she went, when she left us, two little children, and we lived in a bedroom by somebody and when my mother went to work we were all alone, the two of us, two small children, as I say, the two of us. And we didn't have no food in the house, so it was a store, and there was this landlady that was there was not normal.

SIGRIST: Why?

LEVINE: She was not normal.

SIGRIST: What was wrong with the landlady?

LEVINE: She, her husband used to come home, he worked as a moving man, he used to carry heavy things. And he'd come and bang on the door and he'd yell at her. Her name was Sasha. "Sasha, let me in, let me in." You know, in Jewish. You know, it's all Jewish. I'm just repeating it in English. "Sasha, let me in." And she would sit there, wouldn't budge. She was not normal.

SIGRIST: Now would she, you said that you were in a bedroom by someone.

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was this in the landlady's apartment?

LEVINE: In the apartment.

SIGRIST: So she was sort of babysitting for you?

LEVINE: No, no. Not really. We were . . .

SIGRIST: You were sharing a wall basically?

LEVINE: No, it was like a bedroom here, and the rest of the apartment was over there. Slightly I remember, you know. Well, anyway, one day we didn't have, we were hungry, my brother and I. And there was a big snow outside, and cold. And I knew where my mother was working. So we went out barefooted, without

shoes, without clothes, you know, just what we wore, no coat, and we ran to the store where she worked. And when she saw us she almost fainted. She took us in and she yelled at us why we went out of the house. So we told her we were hungry. We went to Mama. Well, anyway . . .

SIGRIST: What job did your mother have?

LEVINE: She was plucking geese. She was working with geese, ducks, you know, fowl.

SIGRIST: Was this in a poultry shop of some sort?

LEVINE: Fowl, fowl. It was one of these, where they sell ducks and geese, you know. It was a store like that where they were selling it. So that's what I remember.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about exactly the space that you lived in.

LEVINE: Well, as I said, that was the space. We had one bedroom. As far as kitchen, I don't remember whether my mother had, was allowed to use the kitchen. I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: So you were basically just boarding.

LEVINE: Boarding, right. We didn't have no other apartments, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you have furniture in this room?

LEVINE: Yeah. I remember a bed, I remember a chair probably. Maybe two beds. My brother and I were sleeping in one bed, and my mother must have been sleeping on a cot.

SIGRIST: Was this in a big building? Were there lots of apartments?

LEVINE: No. No big buildings there. No, no. Not that I remember big buildings. Because when I came to America, I'll tell you why I think there's no big buildings there. Maybe it was two floors, three floors the top.

SIGRIST: Was there a yard, a big yard of some sort out back?

LEVINE: Not that I remember. Not that I, no. Not that I, it was in the street. From the house you go out in the street.

SIGRIST: Well, that would be my next question. What was the neighborhood like?

LEVINE: Well, the neighborhood, you expect me to remember the neighborhood. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Was it a Jewish neighborhood?

LEVINE: Oh, sure, sure. We didn't have no Christians there.

And the houses were close by, near each other, and all the neighbors knew each other. But I was a child. I played with children. What else I'll tell you? I used to have, my mother wanted me to learn, you know, Jewish and Hebrew and write. So a rabbi used to come in to me and teach me. Maybe I was three years old or so. That I remember, too. And I would want to run out and play, how do you call this game when you throw a thing and you shovel with the foot? How do you call that?

SIGRIST: Jacks?

LEVINE: Jacks? Maybe. Something like jacks. No, jacks you pick up by the hand, no. This was, you put like a penny, and you shove it with your foot.

SIGRIST: Tiddily-winks?

LEVINE: You know. Well, anyway, I used to run around to do that, to play, and my mother used to yell at me to go and learn by the rabbi. So I learned.

SIGRIST: How often did he come?

LEVINE: I think it was once a week. I think it was once a week. Because she had to pay him. My mother did not have enough money because my father was here. He couldn't send no money. It was the war.

SIGRIST: Now, did your mother have other family in this town?

LEVINE: No. Her family was in a small town, Varkovich. That was the town my mother was born in.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LEVINE: I've got to write it. It's easier for me.

SIGRIST: All right, just, pronounce it slowly.

LEVINE: All right. V-A-R-K-O, Varkovich. V-I-C-H. Okay. Varkovich. So she was born there. So she had her family there. She had brothers and sisters.

SIGRIST: Was this a long way away?

LEVINE: No, not really. Because before we went to America, my mother went to see her father. I remember it was my grandfather. And I saw her family. That was the only time I really saw her family. She had two brothers. You want to know the names, also?

SIGRIST: No, that's okay. What about your father's family?

LEVINE: Wait, wait. So my mother's family, so we went to see them before we went to America, and I saw my grandfather. That was the last time. And my uncles and cousins, you know, they

were bigger. They were older than I. And then we went home and it was raining. We went on a wagon with a horse. So it was raining. We went back to our city. It was raining. I remember as a child, I remember that it started to rain, so the driver went off and he grabbed a sack from another wagon and covered us over. I remember that. He covered us over we shouldn't get wet. So when we came to our city, Ruvna, we went back to, we had a different apartment, and we had like, we moved from that woman because she was crazy. She chased us out many times, you know. And we had a different apartment.

SIGRIST: Now, this is right before you came to America?

LEVINE: Yeah. Before we came to America because we probably had a few places, but I don't remember all the places.

SIGRIST: Now, your mother's family is in this small town, but your father's family . . .

LEVINE: Was here.

SIGRIST: Oh, they were all in America. So he had no family left in Russia.

LEVINE: No. They took, they took him out. His brothers, they were younger. And my father was the older one. So they took him out before the war, just before the war. When the war

started they took him out here. And he lived with them.

SIGRIST: So your mother really had no one.

LEVINE: No one. Because they were in a different town, her family. And they were poor people, too. So then when we were able to get a letter, my father was able to send some money.

SIGRIST: This would have been after the war.

LEVINE: Yeah. So then they started corresponding, and he sent some money. So we, my mother felt rich already. And when I got sick she bought me a little doll. Only when I was sick. (she laughs) I was able to get a little doll.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that doll? Do you remember what it looked like?

LEVINE: Oh, a tiny little doll, maybe six, five inches. Four or five inches, a little tiny little doll. And I used to love to sew. I still like to sew. I have a machine. I still love to sew. So I used to take a needle and make a little dress for the doll. As a little child I used to love to sew. I used to make a little dress for the doll. Now, when they said America, now we're coming, going to America. Okay?

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a couple of more questions about . . .

LEVINE: Europe, okay.

SIGRIST: You said you were reasonably poor, right? It was hard to make ends meet.

LEVINE: Sure.

SIGRIST: What did you eat?

LEVINE: Want to know what we ate? I got news for you, I think I was starving. (she laughs) Crumbs from the bread, whatever's left over at times, we had the bread, so we ate it today, then the crumbs were left for the next day. Whatever. And whatever my mother was able to get from the place where she worked she brought home. So that was, it wasn't a childhood like in America. I can assure you.

SIGRIST: Did you have lots of, were there lots of little kids in this neighborhood? Did you have a lot of playmates?

LEVINE: Well, I had a little Russian, she was Jewish. She was a richer kid than I. So she, so when I learned from the rabbi, she went with the same rabbi. So whatever I learned, she didn't want to do her homework. So she used to pay me to do her homework. So I did homework, she used to give me a piece of cake, a piece of nice challah. You know what challah is? She used to give me cake, challah, a penny. So I was friends with

her, she was friends with me. She loved me because I did her homework. So she was stupid and I got smarter. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And richer, too.

LEVINE: Richer, too.

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

LEVINE: My religious, well, as I said, I was, my mother was, wanted me to learn from the rabbi. So all he taught me was Jewish, you know, how to read Hebrew and to write a few words, you know, in Hebrew and Jewish.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue nearby?

LEVINE: Yeah, there must have been. I don't remember. I don't know, there must have been.

SIGRIST: What about holidays? Do you remember celebrating Passover or anything like that?

LEVINE: Yeah, sure. Passover, sure. There was slightly, very slightly. Sure, we ate matzos, yeah. We were kosher, strictly kosher. And then when we started about America, you want to know about America, going towards America? So we went to Warsaw first.

SIGRIST: Wait. Now, let's, before we get to Warsaw, your father's sending money back and forth.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Things are obviously very hard for your mother.

LEVINE: Very hard, yes.

SIGRIST: So do you remember your mother telling you, "We're going to America."?

LEVINE: Oh, sure, sure. We were very happy when she got a letter that they're going to send us passes, what do you call it, passage tickets. It was through an agent. You know, those years you had agents to take you over, like. The agent would have, they would give the agent the money, and the agent would transfer you from, you know, from here to different, anyway . . .

SIGRIST: What did you know about America as a little girl in Russia?

LEVINE: Wait, wait. I didn't know anything about it. I remember, I'm going to talk to you about that. They used to say, "In America there's a chair," in Jewish it's a schtiel, "A chair that you fly up." Fly up? (she laughs) I'm jumping

ahead, you know. So when I came to America and we started walking four flights, I said, "Where's," in Jewish, you know. It's all Jewish that I was talking. I said, "Where's the chair that you fly up? I'm tired." (she laughs) We kept on walking four flights. I wasn't used to walking. That's why I say, we didn't have no high buildings. Maybe they had, the rich people, I don't know.

SIGRIST: So when you were in Russia you really knew very little about America.

LEVINE: I didn't know anything about America. All I knew, ooh, I'll have dolls and I'll have good things, and I'll have wonderful things. That's all I knew about. All right. So anyway . . .

SIGRIST: Did you pack? What did you take with you when you were packing?

LEVINE: Oh, my mother bought me earrings. My mother bought me earrings, which I still, I gave them away here to a little niece of mine. I had earrings. She bought me a beautiful dress, I remember, lace. And certain things she bought to take along, and somebody stole it on the way.

SIGRIST: Oh.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, let's get on the way.

LEVINE: Okay. Anyway, we went to Warsaw.

SIGRIST: How did you get there?

LEVINE: I think it was by train.

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

LEVINE: I think so.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of it?

LEVINE: Well, it was a train, riding on the train. What else can I say? It was riding on a train. Finally we got to Warsaw.

And Warsaw, the HIAS was there. And my mother had to go for a passport, for things, you know, to be able to go to America. So I walked with her on the street. She always took me along. My brother, somebody must have been watching him. So she took me along. So I went with her, and on the way a man came over and he said, also there were a lot of thieves. They knew the immigrants that are going to America, they have money with them.

So he said, "Ooh, I got some beautiful things for you to buy to go to America. You bring to America." So he, Warsaw had big, big, um, buildings, and big, um, how do you call them, yards,

where you walk into the yard, and there's the building, the entrance. So she went with him and he wants to show her things, and he said, "Where's your money?" And I was such a smart kid.

I'm stupid now, but I'm such a smart kid. I says, "Mama, Mama, no, no, no, come, come, come, come." And I pulled her away. I pulled her by her skirt. I pulled her. I didn't like that man.

(she laughs) I pulled her away, and we went away. That was one. Now . . .

SIGRIST: Your mother was very innocent.

LEVINE: Very innocent. She believed, because going to America, she'll buy, he had a big bargain for her. So I didn't like, and I pulled her away. I pulled her away, I remember that. Then another time we were, so we got the passport. Also we lived with another family.

SIGRIST: Who were these people?

LEVINE: In Warsaw they were Jewish people.

SIGRIST: But how did you know them? How did you get hooked up to stay with them?

LEVINE: That I don't know. It was arranged somehow.

SIGRIST: By HIAS, maybe?

LEVINE: Through the HIAS, maybe? I wouldn't know that. Well, anyway, there was another family that was going to America that also lived in that house, in that apartment. They had a room, we had a room. It was like boarding. And there it took some time. It took in Warsaw also a couple of months.

SIGRIST: So you were in Warsaw a long time.

LEVINE: Yeah. A few months, about. Maybe three months. I'm just, you know, surmising it must be two or three months that we were in Warsaw. And there my mother was able to cook, you know, make us meals. It was nicer, it was better. It was a big city, Warsaw.

SIGRIST: Was she paying this family?

LEVINE: Sure, definitely. And then we got, my mother had to go to the HIAS a few times, you know, to get the transfers or passports or whatever it was, I don't remember, for traveling. And then we went already. It was time to leave. So we, they took a train, and we were riding on a train to Antwerp. Antwerp is the, Antwerp is Belgium. Is that Belgium? Yeah. If I remember, it was Belgium, Antwerp. We were riding a few stops. No, we had to change trains. To Belgium we had to change trains. So my mother went in the train. The doors closed, and my brother and I were left on the platform. And we started

screaming. But the adults took care of us, and my mother stopped on the next stop. And the adults stopped with us, you know. So they saw we were outside on the platform. The doors closed so fast, and finally we came to the next stop that my mother took us.

SIGRIST: Oh, your mother must have been horrified.

LEVINE: Horrified. Sure she was horrified. She was horrified, she wanted to get out, and we wanted to get in, and that's how it was. I remember these things.

SIGRIST: That's a very dramatic thing.

LEVINE: On a child's mind these things are there for the rest of the life. So those things I remember.

SIGRIST: How long of a train ride is it from Warsaw to Antwerp?

LEVINE: I think it was a long ride, yeah, I think.

SIGRIST: Overnight?

LEVINE: I don't remember. I think from where we were it was overnight to Warsaw. It was overnight maybe a day and a night, I don't remember. And from Warsaw to Antwerp it was another distance, long distance from Warsaw. I don't . . .

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay in Antwerp for a while?

LEVINE: No, no. There we just walked out from the station and we were anxious to see the city, but we, that was already to take the boat, see. That was already to take, so we went out from the train and they were supposed to go to the boat. So I looked around, you know, at the stop there. I looked around but there was nothing to see, just buildings, you know. But I know I was there. And then we took the boat.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

LEVINE: Ah, that's what I want you to find out. I don't know. I don't know the name of the boat.

SIGRIST: What was it like being this little girl from Russia looking at this boat?

LEVINE: Oh, no, wait. We went on the boat. This is interesting. We went on the boat. We don't know any English. And mostly there are refugees. Not refugees, immigrants. We were called immigrants. Mostly we were immigrants, and it was, we were in the third class. And I remember, I walked down, I wanted to look around. I was a nosybody, I want you to know. I went to the theater myself, so I wanted to see what's underneath. So I went down. I remember I saw the engines from

the boat. (imitates noise) I remember the engines. And I was scared, and I walked up back to where we were. And then they had, they didn't have much food. They had herrings and they had, I don't know what they had in drinks, water, I don't remember. Anyway, all the adults got sick, and all the children were playing cards. We knew how to play cards. We learned, one learned from the other. And we were playing cards, and all the adults were so sick. Terrible. They had bouts where they were, excuse me, throwing up. And my mother was laying in bed sick, and the other women were yelling, "Oh, we wouldn't make it. We'll die here. We'll die here." So we used to run, the children, we used to run to the sailors. All we knew was ice. They wanted, the people that were sick wanted cold water or ice. We knew how to say, "ice", and ice is in English, too. So we used to run to the sailors and say, "Ice, ice, ice." So they used to give us a bag of ice, and we gave it to the sick people. I'm sorry I'm facing only him. (referring to the fact that she was facing Mr. Sigrist with her back to Brian Feeney and Peter Hom, also present.) Anyway . . .

SIGRIST: So you didn't get sick.

LEVINE: No. None of the children were sick. None of the children were sick. We were playing cards, and we had a lot of fun. We were running around and we were having a lot of fun.

But when I looked out on the deck and I saw those waves going up and down, I was frightened. I was afraid to go on the deck, so I stayed inside.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you in the boat?

LEVINE: Like I said, I don't remember exactly what. Herring, I remember.

SIGRIST: Where?

LEVINE: Oh, where? On big tables, I think it was. Big tables.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a little bit the accommodations, where you slept?

LEVINE: Oh, the accommodations were horrible. They were horrible. Like bunks, you know, bunks, one on top of the other. That's how, that's how it was that I remember.

SIGRIST: Was there any running water or anything like that?

LEVINE: I don't remember that. I don't remember that. But I know that we went to the sailors and we yelled, "Ice, ice." Every five minutes we'd run to. And they used to tell us in English. We didn't understand what he was saying, what they were saying. But they used to laugh at us, you know. And we

used to say, those people that were very sick, all they wanted was something ice cold, you know, something cold to suck on. They didn't eat. They couldn't eat.

SIGRIST: You know, Mrs. Levine, I forgot to ask you, how did you feel about leaving Russia? As a little girl, what was . . .

LEVINE: I was very happy because I was going to my father.

SIGRIST: Whom you hadn't seen since, you probably didn't even remember really what he looked like.

LEVINE: Yeah, I remember. Another thing, my father had a beard in Europe. Wait, I'll tell you when we came here. I'll come to that. Anyway, we're on the boat and it was Hanukkah. You know what Hanukkah means, when they burn the candles? The candles, every day a candle? That's Hanukkah. So we were on the boat Hanukkah. And then I don't know how long it took, whether it took two weeks on the boat, I don't remember how many days. We were youngsters, you know. And then we finally reached America. Everybody was yelling, "America, America."

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

LEVINE: I was going to come to this. I don't remember. Everybody was standing in front of me, and I was a little kid. I'm tiny now, you can imagine how tiny I was then. I couldn't

see the Statue of Liberty. I don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty. Then in Castle Garden, it was Castle Garden. It wasn't Ellis Island. It was called Castle Garden. You know about that, don't you? All right. Finally we came to Castle Garden, and my mother had to show papers. But this desk, I don't remember if they were doctors examining us. I don't remember exactly, but I think they were.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Doctors examining and asking questions, you know. And each desk had something else to ask about. And my mother showed them all the papers, whatever. She took care of that. And we were near her. And I thought it looked like a barn. Castle Garden was not like today, like I saw it. Like a barn. And they had these bunks, you know, one on top, metal bunks, one on top of the other, if I remember correctly. It reminded me, when I was in Ellis Island I saw them, too. So it reminded me, bunks. And wooden benches, and a lot of people would be detained, you know. This one had this problem, another one had a different, I don't know their problems, I don't know. But we didn't have no problems. So after my mother got through with all the papers, a man runs over and grabs her, and her hat fell off. She wore a hat. And I didn't know my father. She didn't

know her husband. My mother didn't know my father because he had a beard in Europe, and here he shaved off the beard. (she laughs) He became Americanized and shaved off the beard. So she didn't know him. Anyway, my uncle came, an uncle of mine came, and that's his sister's husband. My father's sister's husband came with him. And then we got off, they took us off, and we were on a bunk.

SIGRIST: What was it like to see your father after all these years?

LEVINE: I was ashamed of him. To me he was a strange man. I was ashamed of him. I was ashamed. You know, like a child does. I hid, you know.

SIGRIST: Did he bring presents or anything?

LEVINE: No, no, no, no. Wait. We didn't even have an apartment yet. Wait. Those years you couldn't get an apartment because all the immigrants came and they had no apartments. And this was downtown in 336 Henry Street. I remember the address because that's where we lived when we came here. Anyway, it was on the barge. I didn't know it was a barge. It was sitting, like, on a bench. And I said, "So where's America?" You know, I was, "Where's America?" So they said, "All right." Right away. Anyway, we got off that barge, and I didn't know it was

the barge, I thought it was the ground. We got off the barge. Afterward I learned, you know when I learned it was a barge? When I went to Ellis Island. (she laughs) They, the guide told us all about it, said it was a barge. I didn't know till today it was a barge. I thought it was underground. And then they took a taxi, and we went to the house. That's where I said, I started walking. That's where I said, "Where's the chair where you fly up?" (she laughs) And they laughed at me. Anyway, the next morning, so we slept there.

SIGRIST: Whose place did you sleep at?

LEVINE: Huh?

SIGRIST: Whose place did you sleep at?

LEVINE: That was my father's grand, my father's step-mother. So there was his sister and her husband, and a single sister, and my grandmother. That's a step-grandmother. My father and I, and my mother. We were all in those four rooms. And it was a railroad flat. And so my father slept on a, now it's a couch. At that time it was a lounge. We called it a lounge. And my mother slept with me, and my brother slept with my father, and they had a bedroom, the couple, you know, the sister and brother-in-law. His sister and her husband had a bedroom, and the single girl with the mother had a bedroom. That was her

mother, my grandmother. And that's how we lived there.

SIGRIST: Did they have a dinner waiting for you or anything?

LEVINE: Probably, yes. Yes, we had dinner there, sure. We came, it was already evening, like you say, dinner. Dinnertime. And then we went to sleep, and the girl, the single girl, the sister, my father's sister, came in from work. So she had these, they wore these, (she laughs) I must laugh. Those years they wore their hair with two buns over here. (she gestures) When I looked at her I got scared of her. (she laughs) So, it was my father's sister, a younger sister.

SIGRIST: What job did she have, do you know?

LEVINE: Uh, not really. I think she worked in a factory. And then there was another sister with a husband who lived elsewhere. But in these four rooms there was the single sister, and married sister with her husband, and my grandmother and my mother and I and my father and my brother. We all lived in those four rooms.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay there?

LEVINE: My father was waiting for an apartment in the same building. See, he was promised an apartment. It took about two or three weeks till we got the apartment. So then they went and

bought furniture and we had our own apartment. Now, in our own apartment the bathtub was in a bedroom. (she laughs) It was two bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room, which is, at that time was a dining room, they called it. And then there was two bedrooms. So in the last bedroom was the bathtub, in the bedroom. Now, the facilities, the bathroom, you had to go out in the hall. Now, I was once scared, this was in Europe yet, in that place where we lived in that one room. My mother once put a black blanket on the bed and in Europe when somebody dies they put him on the floor and they put a black blanket on him and they put candles behind the head on the, well, when I was a youngster, a child, I walked in and I saw that, and that scared me somehow. So this time was much later. When she went and put a black blanket on the bed and I went to sleep, I got so scared I started screaming. It's a wonder I'm okay now. (she laughs) I started screaming. I was so frightened, I thought a dead body was laying under that blanket. Anyway, I was frightened from that for a long time. So when we came to America and the bathrooms were in the hall, was afraid to go in there. I was frightened, and I was afraid to go in. My mother had to take me. All right.

SIGRIST: Was there electricity in this apartment?

LEVINE: No, no, no. Gas, gas. A mantel they used to call it,

a mantel. You know, a thing that burns was a mantel. And you had to put a quarter in a box in order for it to burn, something like that. Anyway, I was afraid to go to the bathroom. My mother had to take me, because I was scared from that, from that blanket, the dark blanket. Then I used to, yeah. So the next one, I'm going backwards. The next morning, when we came to America, was let's say the evening. The next morning I said to my brother, he was nine, I was eleven already, so I said, "Come, come. Let's look around America." So my aunt said to me, my aunt said, "Go down and stay on the stoop." You know, the stoop. "Stay on the stoop and don't go nowheres, because I'll come down. I'll go with you." So I said, "I'm not going to wait for her." I said to myself. I said, "Motel," to my brother. "Motel," in Jewish, all Jewish, you know. "Motel, come. We'll look at America. We'll see America. Well, we walked down to the East River. It was a few blocks to the East River. We walked down, but I was smart enough to make a sign. How are we going to get back, I didn't know. There was a barber shop with that thing that turns. You remember that? So I made a sign like that, we'll come back. My aunt goes down, she's looking for us. She's going crazy. (she laughs) We disappeared, she's going crazy, she's looking for us. Finally we come along. She starts yelling, "Where were you? Where did you go? How can you come back here?" I said, "I made a sign."

She says, "What's the sign?" I tell her the thing that turns. She said, "Every block has a thing that turns." (she laughs) She says, "Every block has a barber shop. That's a barber shop." She says, in Jewish, you know, she told me. "It's a barber shop. What do you mean you made a sign? You could have walked down another block and there's another one like that." I said, "But I found it, what do you want?" (she laughs) Okay.

SIGRIST: What was the neighborhood like? Describe the neighborhood.

LEVINE: The neighborhood was all Jewish, and the school was on the next block. So we were here, we were supposed to go to school. So my aunt said, "We can't register them in school yet." She said to my father, or whoever, "We can't register them to school." Not direct to us. "We can't register them to school because it's Christmas week." See, so that's how I remember. So we had to wait till January the 2nd to register, be registered.

SIGRIST: This was in 1922, right?

LEVINE: What?

SIGRIST: This would have been 1922.

LEVINE: Yes, 1922, sure. So we registered school. And that was on Henry and Jackson Street. The school was a little way over on the next block, like. We lived on Henry and Jackson, and this was, this was Madison and Jackson, something like that.

SIGRIST: So tell me what school was like.

LEVINE: It was P.S. 12. It was P.S. 12. I remember. So this was already, you know, cold. It was January. So they let in the vestibule, the children, to stay in the vestibule, not inside, you know. Now, this little girl was a Jewish, they were all Jewish people, but she was an American kid. Just a, oh . . . (break in tape)

SIGRIST: You were telling us about school.

LEVINE: Yeah. So we went to school. Of course, I had to have a teacher that knows how to speak Jewish. So they put me in the 1-A. Because I didn't know, I didn't go to school in Europe, so I didn't know anything to write or read or anything, except the Jewish, like my mother called the rabbi. But in school I never went. So I didn't know anything really, of Russian or English. English surely not. Well, anyway, I had a Jewish teacher, Miss Critel. She was very nice. And she spoke to me in Jewish and explained, you know, when she was teaching. It was in 1-A.

SIGRIST: Were there other immigrants in the class?

LEVINE: Oh, most of them. Most of them. They were some American children, too. They were six years old, and I was eleven. But I must have been as big as they are, or as small as they all.

SIGRIST: How did you feel as a little girl, well, you weren't really a little girl, a young girl. Not only being in a strange school, but being with so many young kids?

LEVINE: I felt good because I was learning. I wanted to learn. I was anxious to learn. I was small. I wasn't big, you know. I was like their size almost, a little bigger. Excuse me. There were people, you know, children grow, American children grow big. Some of them were even bigger than I am.

SIGRIST: So how did you learn English?

LEVINE: Well, most of the children were immigrant children. So how did I learn English. I was very anxious to learn. So I learned, I got good marks. Whatever I didn't know she explained to me in Jewish, and I went home and I, (she laughs) this I'm going to tell you, it'll be funny. One of my uncles says to me, "What did you learn in school today?" I said, "Whhh." (she laughs) He said, "What?" (she laughs) He said, "What do

you mean, whh?" You know, the sound. That time they taught the sounds first, before. He said, "That's a 'W.'" I said, "No, it's a whh." (she laughs) Well, anyway, till I knew what it was I thought he was wrong. I didn't know he was right.

SIGRIST: Did you help your parents learn English as you were learning?

LEVINE: Well, no, no, no, no. Not really. My father was busy working. My mother, after a while, started going to school herself.

SIGRIST: What job did your father get?

LEVINE: As I said, he was a presser.

SIGRIST: Oh, right.

LEVINE: Anyway, he worked there. It was The Messing Building, I remember. You know, the name Messing that they used to make breads and all that? Well, downstairs was the Messing factory where they made bread, and upstairs was clothing, men's clothing, boy's suits. That's where my father worked, upstairs. It was not, it was near the house, not far.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job?

LEVINE: No, no, no, no. Those years women didn't work those

years, no. Anyway, whatever he made, they got along, that's all. You get along. Those years the women didn't go around buying things that they don't, that they can't afford. They only bought what they can afford.

SIGRIST: Tell me about moving into your own apartment.

LEVINE: Now I'm going to tell you. Well, anyway, let me tell you this. When I was here two weeks we still lived upstairs by my grandmother. So they bought me a present. You're talking about presents. They bought me a pair of skates, rollerskates. I learned how to ride rollerskates. I learned how. So my uncle was standing downstairs, and a friend of his passed. So he says, "Oh, meet Raizel." My name was Raizel. "Meet Raizel." He said, so he says to me (Yiddish). That means, "How are you?" I said, "All right." He said, "Look, she's speaking English already." (she laughs) I said, "All right." So he said, "Look at how she's speaking English already, being two weeks in America." And I went skating again. And one day I fell with the skates and I, oh, we're talking about, you want to know when we moved in our own apartment. So they got new furniture, they got a dining room with a buffet, and my uncle brought us two cut glass dishes on the buffet. And we had a kitchen set and a dining room set.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own bedroom in the other apartment?

LEVINE: Yes, yes. One bedroom, like I said, was, no, no. I don't think so. I think my brother and I slept in one room and my parents had another room. And that's when I, we went to school, you know. Well, anyway, one day I went to school and it was very windy, cold and snowy. So all the kids pushed into the vestibule. Remember I said that? And the kids, the American kids pushed us back like this, see. Pushed us back. So some of them said, "Why are you pushing?" And all that. They started having an argument, and she pushed us again. I pulled her down. I pulled her down, and I hit her. I didn't know how to get revenge otherwise. I couldn't argue with her, and I hit her. I didn't hit her. I scratched her. Naturally she complained, and my teacher took me to the principal. Took me to the principal. I was not scared, because when I'm right, I'm right. Because she pushed us all, and we all fell, and we all got hurt. So I explained to my teacher in Jewish what she did, and why I had scratched her. So she said, so the principal said, "Okay, we're going to get a hold of her, and we're going to give it to her." Meanwhile she said I should get a lesson, too. So my teacher put me in the back of the room, so I studied from the back of the room. No problem. (she laughs) No problem. And to make it short and sweet, with school, I loved school, and they

skipped me. They keep skipping me. In five years I made the whole eight years of school, in five years. Of course, I was older. My grasp was better than a youngster, you know. And I graduated in five years. Now, on the boat, I'm going back to the boat. On the boat, when we were playing cards, all the kids, boys and girls, we were all playing cards. So one boy started up with me. So what do you think I did? I gave him a beating. I scratched him, too. So he hit me. He hit me first. So I scratched him. He went off with a scratched face to America. (she laughs) And that was on the boat. All these little things that I remember.

SIGRIST: Sure. Quite the scrapper you are. I want to ask you a question about your mother. We don't have that much time left. How did your mother adjust to America? Did she like it? Did she not like it? Was it hard for her?

LEVINE: She adjusted because she didn't have to go to work and she bought things and she cooked and she made dinners and we had, it was easier.

SIGRIST: You said she went to night class.

LEVINE: Later on, later on.

SIGRIST: Much later on.

LEVINE: Much later on. So we had everything. But I wanted a doll. I thought I'd get a doll. I thought I'd get, you know, things for kids, you know. I was still anxious to get, but no. They didn't have that much money. Anyway, there, we lived there about maybe '25, '21, oh, we lived there about three years, and then we moved. So we moved to Cannon Street. We moved to Cannon Street, Cannon. C-A-N-N-O-N. Cannon Street. And that was on the fifth floor. My mother walked up, and I went with her. Beautiful corner rooms. There was dark, you know, where we lived before was dark and was on the second floor, it was in the back. Here was a corner, four rooms, with a stove, you know. A coal stove. All the time was a coal stove, I want you to know. And all the rooms that we had, you know, in those years, was coal stove, where you put coal in and wood, you know, things like that.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity on Cannon Street?

LEVINE: On Cannon Street? I think we did. I think we did. It was a coal stove.

SIGRIST: So it was a much nicer . . .

LEVINE: A nicer part, four rooms, beautiful, on the corner. And each room was separate like nicer than I have now. But it was on the fifth floor. And there my mother was pregnant, see.

So she walked up and down, you know, the five flights. And when she had to give birth, that same day she walked up five flights. In those years you didn't go to hospitals. You had a doctor coming to the house. So the doctor came in, and then she gave birth.

SIGRIST: Was that exciting? Do you remember that?

LEVINE: I remember a little bit. I don't remember when she gave birth, somehow. Either they took me out, or they locked me up, I don't know what. But I remember when she was laying in bed, and it was in July. My brother was born July 7th, my younger brother. He was born July 7th. So the doctor came in, and I was sleeping with my mother on the bed. It was about four or five days later. It was Saturday and it was very hot, and I was laying like this here, backside up. And I felt a smack on my back. I woke up. He said, "What are you doing in your mother's bed? You're not supposed to be here." The doctor, a man doctor. And I ran out. (she laughs) I ran out. Anyway, then they made the briss. You know what a briss is? It's not confirmation. Confirmation is something else. Circumcision is what it's called.

SIGRIST: How soon? How old was your brother?

LEVINE: Eight days.

SIGRIST: Oh, very soon.

LEVINE: Sure. The circumcision you make within eight days.

SIGRIST: When you came to America, this sort of goes along with this, did you maintain a strong religious life?

LEVINE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue in this neighborhood?

LEVINE: Oh, sure, sure. My father was religious, and my mother, too. They kept a kosher home, and very religious. Very religious, sure. And Saturday, you know, they used to put on, the light should burn all, until Saturday night. You're not supposed to make lights.

SIGRIST: So you were brought up very religiously.

LEVINE: Yes. I was brought up religious, right. I'm still religious. I'm still, but not as years ago, but I'm still religious.

SIGRIST: We need to wind this up, so let me ask you a couple of questions. One you've already sort of answered. Your parents were happy that they made this decision.

LEVINE: Oh, sure. Sure, they were happy. And my father got

sick in 19, oh, then we grew up. I graduated school, I went to work. When I graduated school it was also in January. It was very cold, and I went to look for a job. I took up lampshade making in school. We had certain classes that we, except the learning English, we had certain classes that, occupational classes. So I took up lampshade making. So I went to, I went for a job. It was a miserable, bitter day. And the foreman wasn't in. I had to come the next day. Meanwhile I was going home, I was walking home, and I see, that was downtown, Greene Street. Downtown Manhattan on the east, on the East Side, I think. Anyway, I walked, and I see a sign "Girl Wanted." So I walked upstairs. I was cold. (she laughs) So he said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I didn't do anything. I'm coming from school. I know how to make lampshades, but the guy wasn't in, so I don't know." I was speaking English, don't forget. So he says to me, "Well, this is underwear. If you want to work I'll put you to work." "Yeah." So he puts me, it was an underwear place. Littman and Wolfson, it was called. And he says, "Okay." So they made underwear, and I had to examine them, cut off the cotton, things like that.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

LEVINE: Oh, I must have been about sixteen. So . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you made?

LEVINE: Yes. I remember everything. So he says to me, they were piecework. So he says to me, "Look, I'll pay you fifteen dollars a week. But if you make more by doing piecework, it will be yours. But if you make this I'll give you fifteen dollars." That was in 1927, January 1927. Maybe this was February already. So I said, "All right." You know, I was cold. He says, "Come in tomorrow." And tells me eight o'clock, we had to be in eight o'clock. Those years you had to work from eight to six, and maybe a half hour for lunch. Anyway, so I worked. And in the week, the whole week, and I intended to go back for the lampshades, but I was lazy. That was uptown. Anyway, I made twenty-seven dollars. So he says, "Rose, you did wonderful." (she laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a lot of underwear.

LEVINE: Yeah. Anyway, then I worked about two years there. I took up all my friends. They didn't, couldn't get no jobs or anything. I took them up, and then the forelady, yeah, and then they gave me the whole lot, with the number and everything, whatever lot he wanted he called me. He said, "Give me the number of so-and-so." And I kept all the lots separate. So he said I'm doing good. So the forelady was getting married. Who

do you think he picks another forelady? Me. (she laughs) So I became the forelady there.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you just climbed your way to the top.

LEVINE: Yeah. I became the forelady there, and I had to mark all the girls work. I had to give them the work and mark the work and all that business. First of all, I didn't want to. I said, "That's too big a job for me. I'm not experienced." He said, "You'll do all right, don't worry." So I did all right. I worked . . .

SIGRIST: This seems like a good spot to ask my final question to you.

LEVINE: I worked till six years and I got married.

SIGRIST: I see. And what year, you were married in what year?

LEVINE: 1933.

SIGRIST: I see. And that's to Mr. Alber.

LEVINE: Yeah. A-L-B-E-R.

SIGRIST: Right. Let me ask you my final question for you. Are you glad your parents came to America? Are you glad that you came?

LEVINE: Of course, no doubt about it. Why shouldn't I be glad. I love America. It's my country, 'tis of thee.
(Mr. Sigrist laughs) After all, sure. I learned English and I, and I got married and I had a child.

SIGRIST: You had a good life.

LEVINE: Yeah. You know, and then not so good. Then my husband died and I had to go to work, and I worked twelve years and raised a child until I got married again in 1955. I got married in 1955 to Max Levine. And I lived with him till he died in '86. April 1986 he died. We lived together about thirty-three years, thirty-one, thirty-three years. My second marriage.

SIGRIST: So you've had a very long and very full life, there's no question about that.

LEVINE: I had a full life. It wasn't always a happy life. You know, to lose a husband and go to work. (she laughs) For twelve years again, and raise a child yourself. It wasn't easy. But now, since I'm alone, I joined the center and I'm a volunteer, and I go every day to the center and I serve lunches there and I do arts and crafts. And that's it. I'm alone.

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much for having Brian and

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Peter and I out to your house today and for letting us record your life's history.

LEVINE: I'm very happy to do it.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.