

**EI-687/FINE & KROOP**

**EI-687**

**JOSEPH FINE & TILLY FINE-KROOP**

**BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 22, 1912; DECEMBER 8, 1909**

**INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 14, 1995**

**RUNNING TIME: 56:41**

**INTERVIEWER: LEVINE**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND**

**ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 3/2007:**

**COUNTRY, YEAR: LATVIA, 1922**

**AGE: 10, 14**

**PASSAGE ON:**

**PORT OF EMBARKATION: LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND**

**OLD COUNTRY RESIDENCE: REZEKNE**

**UNITED STATES RESIDENCE(S): CONEY ISLAND, BROOKLYN,  
NY**

LEVINE: Today is October 14<sup>th</sup> 1995 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Studio and have the good fortune to be talking with a brother and sister. It's Mr. George, originally, Joseph, Fin, who became Fine at Ellis Island.

FINE: Correct.

LEVINE: And his sister, Tilly, originally Toba Fine Kroop. And we are here today. And this is the second visit that you've made, right? I mean the first one was when you came from Latvia.

FINE: That's right. That's right.

LEVINE: You came from Latvia in 1922. Tilly was thirteen years of age and George

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was ten years of age at that time. Well, I'm delighted and I look forward to anything you can remember about this whole experience of immigration.

If we could start at the beginning, Tilly, maybe you could say your birth date for the tape and where you were born.

KROOP: Okay. I was born in Rezekne. That's 1909, December the 8<sup>th</sup>.

LEVINE: Okay. And George?

FINE: Well, I was born in the same town, Rezekne, on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1912.

LEVINE: And can you spell Rezekne?

FINE: R-E-Z-K-N-E.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, was there--? Were either of you ever told any, any story about your birth? I mean was there anything unusual or anything that your mother ever told you about the time you were born?

KROOP: No, no, nothing really.

FINE: Really not. My mother had a bakery shop and she was always too busy working and making a living, you know, for us to remember. And then--. I wouldn't--. Even if we did—

LEVINE: You wouldn't remember.

KROOP: And our father passed away quite a long time ago, so we don't know much, much to tell you about him.

LEVINE: Was your father alive when you were living in Latvia?

FINE: Yes.

KROOP: Yes. That's where he passed away there.

FINE: He passed away when I was about seven.

KROOP: I don't know—

FINE: Or eight.

KROOP: We were younger children, yeah.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

FINE: Morris.

LEVINE: Morris. And what--? Do you remember when he died?

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: Yes he died in about 1917, '16, somewheres in there.

KROOP: I don't know.

LEVINE: Do you remember the incident? No. Okay. And your mother, what was her name?

KROOP: Mary.

LEVINE: Mary. And do you remember her maiden name?

KROOP: Miller.

LEVINE: Miller. Okay. And so did you have other brothers and sisters in Latvia?

FINE: Yes.

KROOP: We had two, two, two more brothers. Right?

FINE: Three brothers.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't you—

FINE: Well, we had—

LEVINE: Say the names of the children.

FINE: The family had three, four males, four brothers, myself—

KROOP: And three sisters.

FINE: The boys are myself, George. Then I had a brother, Harry, and Phillip, who came to America with us. But my brother—

KROOP: Isaak, Isaak. He was—

FINE: Not Isaak, Isaac.

KROOP: Isaac.

FINE: Isaac remained in Russia because he was not living at home with us. He was

in the Russian army at the time. So he, he chose to stay in Moscow, in that area.

LEVINE: And, and what—

FINE: We were in Latvia. We were living in Latvia then.

LEVINE: Okay.

FINE: See, we lived in Latvia. Born in Latvia and that's where we lived. But our brother was in the Russian army and at the time he was stationed in Moscow. So, and also there was an older sister was with him. She moved--. Eventually she moved there, too.

KROOP: She was there ahead—

FINE: And that was the only two siblings who never migrated to this country.

LEVINE: I see. So what was, what was your sister's name, the one who went to Moscow?

FINE: Mariah.

KROOP: Mariah.

LEVINE: Mariah. And—

FINE: [Unclear]

LEVINE: And you had another sister?

KROOP: Another sister, Rose.

LEVINE: Rose.

KROOP: Yes.

LEVINE: Now where did you two fit in the birth order? Were you—

FINE: I'm the youngest.

LEVINE: You're the youngest.

FINE: She's the next.

LEVINE: The next. So you're the two youngest.

KROOP: We're the two youngest.

FINE: Everybody above us is gone.

LEVINE: Oh.

KROOP: Yeah. [Unclear] to tell you.

LEVINE: Okay. Well when you, when you think back to your life in, in Latvia and you remember your mother, how, what memories do you have?

KROOP: My mother was a hard working woman. She used to bake. She was a bake--. I used to sell the stuff. She baked goods. She used to bake stuff like breads and all that stuff. Hard working woman. My father, my father when he was alive, he was a carpenter.

LEVINE: Did he build houses or—

FINE: No.

KROOP: No, no, just, just—

LEVINE: Fixing things.

KROOP: Fixing things.

FINE: General carpenter.

LEVINE: Do you remember any, any times where you went places with your mother or father?

KROOP: No.

FINE: No. We didn't travel too much. We--. I think it was hard times.

LEVINE: I mean like maybe to the market or just locally.

FINE: Well, now, not I much because I was the youngest so you know--. But we had--. Our older siblings would go to the market.

KROOP: It was a different way of living.

FINE: You know it's real country. It's country. It's country in that you know you didn't live in a house on top of each other. You had the house and the next house in the neighborhood'd be a block away or so, you know. It's a, it's a—

LEVINE: What do you remember about--? If you describe as much as possible, what it was like living in that small town.

FINE: It was hard. We--. I remember during World War I our town was besieged and we were captured by the Germans. And Tilly and I were at the time in Hebrew school. You remember that, do you?

KROOP: No.

FINE: Yeah. Well, she doesn't remember. I'm younger than she is.

KROOP: [Unclear]

FINE: I remember that because not only was our town bombed but we lived near a bridge, not very far from a bridge over a river. And they came around and told us to cover our strips of paper across our windows, crisscross, in the event of an air attack so the glass wouldn't shatter. And, and the bridge was mined. If the enemy got near the bridge they were going to blow it up. And we were living fairly close to that bridge. So I remember that.

And I also remember we were at Hebrew school when the Germans attacked and captured our town. And so we couldn't go home until way at the end of the day. And on our way home—this I remember—the big craters from the bombs that fell in the town.

LEVINE: Do you remember people? Do you remember like your Hebrew teacher or the other children?

FINE: Let's see. The Hebrew teacher was an old man with a beard. We used to go to his house.

LEVINE: Oh, how many children?

FINE: I don't know how many he had there. He didn't have many. And then, of course, another thing that I remember is the American YMCA had a branch there. And they were living in a house at the head of our street. Do you remember that?

KROOP: No.

FINE: No. Anyway, I remember them. And what impressed me with them, about them was they used to play baseball with a hard ball and used a glove to catch it. And that was pretty strange to us because we used the rubber balls.

And we had many pogroms in our town. And we were always saved by the Germans, not the Germans, the embassy. The embassy would not permit any, anybody to get into our street when the pogrom started. I guess the Russians who--. What do you call them? We had a name for them. The Cossacks. When they, when they had, you know, rioting it's nothing [unclear]. And they would, they would stand across the street and wouldn't let them in. And they wouldn't fight with them. That's the way. They were Americans.

LEVINE: This is the American Embassy?

FINE: Yes. YMCA, we used to call it [unclear] YMCA. And I remember that vividly. And so we were spared. But sometimes we had to leave our house for the pogroms.

LEVINE: And what would you do?

FINE: Hide--. Go out and hide in the forest. You know, it was in the country somewheres. And the pogrom never lasted days, hours. It was a riot, hit and miss. And then when all was clear we'd come back.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of that, Tilly?

KROOP: No. I just seen them like they used, they used to kill people and they used to hide in the, they used to hide in homes and all that. But nothing else really. I don't remember.

FINE: Another incident during World War I when the Germans occupied our town, the Russians were retreating and they passed our house. So a group of squatting soldiers and they left about a five gallon glass jug of vodka and told us not to touch it because they were going to come back and pick it up.

And we had such a hard time keeping that downstairs in the summer. My mother and brother would say, "whatever you do don't get near that because if it breaks and they come and find it's broken then we'll have hell to pay" literally. So I remember that. But, but I don't remember what happened to the vodka. I don't think they ever came back for it. Of course I, I--. These are things that pop up in my mind, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Wonderful, wonderful. Well, was there--? Was this a community of all Jewish people?

FINE: No, no, no. We didn't have a ghetto.

KROOP: Mixed, mixed, mixed.

FINE: It was mixed. In fact, we, we, we had a lot of Jewish people there. We had Easter Pesach, Easter, High Easter. We used to have a community matzo bake.

KROOP: Yes. I used to go there. I used to go to a big bakery and bake the matzo, roll the matzo and bake it [unclear]—

LEVINE: You remember that?

KROOP: That I remember, yes.

LEVINE: Tell whatever else you remember.

KROOP: Well, I remember I used to help at the baking, nothing else really. I don't know. You forget, you forget—

FINE: Well, I remember--. I remember more than she does, I think, because I—

KROOP: You know a lot more.

FINE: I remember my two brothers working there. And I don't remember you but maybe you did work. But my job was--. You know, when the--. Are you familiar with matzo?

LEVINE: Yes.

FINE: Well, you know the ridges, the little holes. Well they rigged up a little round wheel. [Unclear] There's a name for it. It's got points on it.

LEVINE: Oh I know. I think I know what you mean. It turns and it has like spokes sticking out.

FINE: Exactly. A spoke wheel, a small one. They lay it up on a stick. And my job was after they, whoever rolled out the dough for the matzo, I would come with the spoke stick and make a hole.

KROOP: Yes. We had no machines to make the matzo.

FINE: [Unclear] by hand. And we used to bake enough for the whole Jewish community.

LEVINE: How, how did you feel? I mean what--? What was--? How did that feel like—

FINE: I just felt I was helping. You know, I was part of the crowd. That's what, that's what it amounted to being, part of the crowd.

LEVINE: Now were your mother and father present when this was happening?

FINE: No.

KROOP: My mother was.

FINE: Maybe mom was [unclear]. I don't remember my father too much. I only remember when he died.

KROOP: Father died when he was younger.

FINE: Very young.

LEVINE: But do you remember that?

FINE: Yeah, I remember that.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

FINE: I remember that we used to sleep on the floor in the house. And we had a basement. In the basement was a trap door with a ring on it to lift the door up. And we slept down there. And I think my father wasn't feeling well. He was a

sick man. And he got up during the night for one reason or another and in walking past us he tripped.

KROOP: He fell.

FINE: And fell and hit his head up here in the temple.

LEVINE: Temple.

FINE: And he must have messed up his, his, his, his scalp and that's why he died. He died I think about two or three days later.

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: I remember. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did--? How did--? How was the funeral handled? Do you remember?

FINE: Now that part I don't remember. Isn't that funny? I remember my mother's funeral but she died when I was twelve and a half. She didn't live that much longer.

KROOP: And remember she died in this country.

FINE: Yeah. She died here.

LEVINE: But do you remember any other like rituals or ways of, of, of either religious observance or—

FINE: Oh, we observed.

LEVINE: Anything different in Latvia than the way it's done here?

FINE: Of course, it's different because we, we used to cook our Shabbat meal on Friday, you know, before sundown. And then it would stay in the over all night, the [unclear] stayed in the oven all night.

KROOP: That's right. You didn't cook on Shabice.

LEVINE: What kinds of food do you recall from then?

KROOP: Well, lots of things.

FINE: Potato pancakes, my favorite. It still is my favorite.

KROOP: Potato pancakes. We used to--. We used to bake challah for Shabice. We used to make that. We used to cook like [unclear] overnight. And we used to bake in there, bake bread. Mother was a baker. She used to bake--. Mother used to bake--. In fact she used to be a baker [unclear] used to sell this stuff. Yes.

LEVINE: And do you remember any of the dishes that your mother made that you particularly liked?

FINE: She used to make poutcha. Do you know what that is?

LEVINE: How do you spell poutcha?

FINE: Oh that's--. I don't know how to –

KROOP: That's, that's, that's like we make the pig's feet. You know they chill the stuff. You cook and then you chill the stuff. It's like a jello. Yeah. That's how.

FINE: It's from cows hooves.

KROOP: It's a cow's feet. Yeah. That's what—

FINE: We used to put hardboiled eggs and slice them up.

LEVINE: And how was that—

FINE: She used to make good gefilte fish.

KROOP: That's right. The old-fashioned way like [unclear] carrots, potatoes. We had no sweet potatoes. We used to use regular potatoes.

FINE: We used to go to—

KROOP: And put meat in there and that would be, that would be a meal. Gefilte fish, that was [unclear] fresh fish. Take the meat off and chop it up. So [unclear]. Herring, a lot of herring.

LEVINE: Did you help your mother—

KROOP: Yes.

LEVINE: In cooking and with the house.

KROOP: I used to help, yes. I used to help cook, clean. You know, used to wash clothes. We used to go to a lake and wash clothes.

LEVINE: Do you remember washing?

FINE: The river.

KROOP: Yes. We couldn't wash clothes in the house. We'd go to the lake and wash the clothes. We used to have a heavy stick like and used to bang on that.

FINE: Beat the clothes on a rock.

KROOP: Beat the clothes up, wash it out and rinse it out. And that's how we used to dry it outside on the grass or something.

LEVINE: Did you go--? Did you go--? Would it be a social occasion? In other words, would there be a lot of women there cleaning their clothes at the same time?

KROOP: No, no. Everybody used to do it different days, yeah, different days. No special day. They used to observe Saturday, Shabice, and that was a holy day.

LEVINE: And were--? Were you a particularly religious family would you say?

KROOP: Oh we kept up the holidays, yes.

FINE: We were, we were orthodox. We were orthodox.

KROOP: We kept the religion.

FINE: We knew no other. We knew no other. You know, Shabice was Shabice. And no matter--. Well, now it's what, religious, reformed, ultra religious—

LEVINE: It's different Everybody who was—

FINE: Creates a different religion in America.

LEVINE: Yeah. But there everybody who was Jewish was orthodox.

FINE: Right. Right. Right. I knew [unclear]. She's been dead for years after we left.

KROOP: Things change like—

FINE: I got to explain something to you about our house.

LEVINE: Let me take this because it's going to pick that up.

FINE: We thought about when we thought about the cooking for the Shabice, we used to have a big oven. In Europe houses had ovens.

LEVINE: Describe the oven.

FINE: Ovens. We used to heat them with wood, with wood. And all the cooking and baking was done in these ovens. The big, big oven hearth in the house. And ours had the little space at the end of the oven and the wall where you can walk in it and then there was a shelf on top of the oven. And we used to sleep there sometimes in the wintertime when it was real cold. There was heat coming through. And there was two or three of us would get up there and sleep.

KROOP: That's right, to keep warm. That's right.

LEVINE: How big was it?

FINE: Oh, [unclear].

KROOP: Like a couch, you know, inside.

FINE: You know when you go into a bakery today that has an oven. It's small but it's very, it's very, very effective because they use electricity, you know, electric,

mechanically. This was a big hearth—

LEVINE: You mean the oven was--. What was the oven made out of?

FINE: Stone. It was built from stone.

KROOP: Brick.

FINE: Bricks and stone. And it was the only means you have of keeping--. Now there was no steam heat. No, no, furnace to, to put the coal in. They didn't have coal furnaces.

LEVINE: Did you have--? Did you grow any food or did you have any animals?

KROOP: No, no. We had no animals, no.

FINE: We didn't grow food but we had access to vegetables, fruits. We could go to orchards.

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: People who had orchards, had small gardens. Sometimes a farmer would pass a house and passing out by our house on a Saturday morning with their wagons loaded with bags of—

KROOP: Like what they call a peddler here.

FINE: Yeah. With the market--. The market--. When we were [unclear] mischievous we'd go, we'd run in back of the little wagon and cut a hole in one of the bags and take out a few apples and potatoes and bring them home and that was it. And sometimes they'd chase us. [Laughs] But we had--. In those days, of

course, there was no refrigeration so everything was fresh. You had to have everything fresh every day.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other things you did for fun?

FINE: Well, yes, played stick ball. Yeah. Played a lot of stick ball.

LEVINE: Oh, the same way they play it here?

FINE: Well, no, football. What we called football in Russia was soccer. When I came to America it became better known as soccer. But soccer [unclear] to us that was football. And we used to, you know, play the typical boys' games, girls, mostly boys—

LEVINE: How about you Tilly? Do you remember what you played? Did you have girlfriends?

KROOP: Yeah, I had friends.

LEVINE: What did you do?

KROOP: Went to school. I mean, we all went to school every day. We had school. We had Hebrew school.

LEVINE: Did you only go to Hebrew school or did you also go to public school?

KROOP: No, no, no, public school, learned the languages. Yes, learned the language, yes. And had very nice teachers just as he said. Teachers [unclear] Russian language and Hebrew school [unclear]. I could still read or write Hebrew, Jewish.

LEVINE: And what did you speak in the home?

KROOP: Jewish.

LEVINE: Yiddish.

KROOP: Yiddish, our language. Yes, our language, yeah. And Russian because we—

LEVINE: So you had Russian, and you had Hebrew and you had Yiddish—

KROOP: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: And then English.

KROOP: English. No, English, no, no.

LEVINE: I mean when you came here.

KROOP: When I came here, yes. Yeah, I got the English language. But for there Russian and Yiddish, these two languages because we used to go to Hebrew school.

LEVINE: When you think back of your life there in Latvia, do you have any memories that are the kinds of things you think of when you think of that place?

KROOP: No.

FINE: Well—

KROOP: It's much better here. It's much better here.

FINE: Memories—

LEVINE: I mean are there any things that I guess persist in your own mind about that time.

FINE: Hardship.

LEVINE: Hardship. Do you remember it that way, too, Tilly?

KROOP: We used to go wash clothes. We used to go to a lake like to wash clothes. And [unclear]. Then we used to dry it on the grass, put it on the grass to dry it. Yeah.

FINE: [Unclear]

KROOP: It's so hard to remember. It's a long time, you know. It's a long time to remember all these things.

LEVINE: Oh, I know.

KROOP: We want to remember good things now.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Well you remember going swimming?

FINE: Oh yeah. Oh—

LEVINE: Where did you go?

FINE: In the river.

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: You used to run down take your pants off and go swimming.

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: Never wore anything.

KROOP: No, [unclear] naked, yeah.

FINE: I don't remember vaguely. But from talking with sometimes the guy who said let's sneak up and watch where the women went swimming or something. But there wasn't too much of that. I think there was more talk than anything else. But we were active.

LEVINE: Do you remember why it was that your family decided to come to America?

FINE: Hardship.

KROOP: Well, hardship. They had--. Some of the family like [unclear] my brother and a sister was in American already. And we had a lot of cousins and aunts in Providence, Rhode Island. And they were, they were like on another side.

LEVINE: It was your brother and sister on your mother's side or your brother and sister?

KROOP: They were here already, yes. And then all our family they all got together. And that's how we got to this country because they all got together and scraped the money together and made enough money to send for the family. That's how we got here.

FINE: After World War I things got very hard for us especially being Jews, which didn't help. And when my sister came over here--. I don't know what year

she came here. But I wasn't--. See I was born after she came to the United States, my older sister.

LEVINE: Is this Rose?

FINE: Rose, right. But when she went--. When they--. When that whole family came, the brothers of my father, my father was very stubborn and didn't want to leave Russia.

LEVINE: Why didn't he want to?

FINE: I don't know. Well, he was a carpenter. He was doing well. My mother was running that bake shop and he said he doesn't want to go. Anyway, this is the story I got. I don't remember.

LEVINE: Right.

FINE: And that's why. We were the only ones left. And after World War I it became very difficult for us with the pogroms. And it was hard to live. We were really paupers. So the, the sister that was here--. And then there was my father's two brothers and my mother's two sisters.

KROOP: Sisters, yes.

FINE: They were all here. All left. We were the only ones that didn't go because my father didn't want to leave. And so—

KROOP: So they got together and they sent for us. That's how we came to this country.

FINE: And they sent us our fare tickets. So we came over in steerage.

LEVINE: Now who was traveling? Who was traveling with you?

FINE: Okay, my mother, two brothers, Harry and Philip, my sister, Tilly, and I.

LEVINE: Do you recall the preparations to leave?

FINE: Tremendous. The anxiety, the excitement. Neighbors fixing us baskets of food.

KROOP: And the clothes we packed with the pillows and blankets [unclear] with some blankets and pillows with the feather pillows and all that. You know, it's a—

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else your mother packed?

KROOP: I know she packed some homemade jelly. And right going out of the boat the jar of jelly broke. My mother was a good cook. She was a good cook see. And [unclear]. You don't know. You take it and not realizing that was not the thing you have to take. But she took that. And I'll tell you there was a lot of talk about—

LEVINE: And when you were leaving, do you remember did people gather to see you off or how did that—

KROOP: No, no, not exactly. I don't remember that.

FINE: I don't remember that part. You know I see movies where people are moving and the neighbors come in. And see that's all, that's news to me, new to me. I don't remember getting--. You know you want to know if we had a big sendoff. I'm sure that there were some people who envied us because we were getting out. See we had a place to go and everything—

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGINNING OF SIDE B, TAPE 1

LEVINE: Had many people from your little town come to America before you?

KROOP: Not that I--. No, no. I don't remember this.

FINE: That I don't remember.

KROOP: No, not too many.

LEVINE: Did you have any idea of what America would be like? I mean I know you were children.

KROOP: Well—

FINE: Garden of Eden. That's a fact. Garden of Eden. We're coming to America.

KROOP: To America—

FINE: Garden of Eden. I have no regrets.

KROOP: No. We're happy. We're happy that we're here and that's it.

LEVINE: Well, well, now when you left, what did you take? What kind of transportation did you take and where did you go first before you got to the port?

KROOP: Well, well, the family got there. They were the ones that sponsored us there, to go there. But we went to my sister's house.

FINE: No, that's coming here. What she wants to know is we went by train from Riga.

LEVINE: So how did you get—

FINE: To, to--. No. From Rezekne we went by train to Riga. And then from Riga we went by ship to the port of Lebau. And then we went to Hamburg. It was in Hamburg, Germany. And I remember the Germans being very strict.

LEVINE: What incidents do you remember?

FINE: Well I remember that for the least little infraction—if you dropped a piece of paper or something—there was hell to pay. They were very strict about cleanliness. And, of course, I guess they didn't like Jews anyway. So we were there and coming over. And that was sort of a short stop because we were--. What we were heading for was Liverpool. That was our port of embarkation.

KROOP: Yes.

FINE: To America.

LEVINE: And how did you get to Hamburg to Liverpool?

FINE: Well, we went from Riga we went by small boat to Hamburg.

KROOP: I think it's a small boat, yeah.

FINE: Yes, yes. A little hazy to how we got there. But I know that we took a small boat from the port of Reger to go to, to Hamburg. And in Hamburg--. I don't know how we got from Hamburg to England. Had to be a ship. Had to be a ship of some kind.

LEVINE: Do you remember Liverpool?

FINE: Yes.

LEVINE: Did you stay there for any length of time?

FINE: In Liverpool I think we stayed one or two nights maybe. But it was nice. We had good food. It was clean. Oh, it was wonderful.

LEVINE: You stayed in a hotel?

FINE: That I can't remember. Do you remember?

KROOP: I don't know. You know more than I do.

FINE: I can't remember where we stayed. I do remember--. It could have been a hotel, I think, maybe of some of kind. But I remember--. Of course I was very impressed by the good food.

KROOP: It was--. I mean if we had to stay over [unclear] the rest of the crowd that traveled that way. They all stayed in the--. Everybody had to stay together.

FINE: I don't know how big our party was at the time.

LEVINE: Did you--? When you left Reza, Reza—

FINE: Rezkne.

LEVINE: Rezkne. Did you, did you travel with other people from the town?

FINE: No.

KROOP: No.

LEVINE: Just your family?

KROOP: Just the family, just the family.

FINE: You know as you travel groups come.

KROOP: You get acquainted, yes.

FINE: You may not even know traveling the same place and get acquainted. But I know--. I remember

very little of that. The only thing I remember after that is a very hectic crossing in the ship. The boat--. See the boat we took was a small ship. It wasn't--. We were supposed to be on a bigger boat but for some reason—we either missed it by a few days or it was late. And we had some bad storms.

LEVINE: Do you remember the voyage?

FINE: Yes, the voyage. It was very difficult because we were in steerage.

LEVINE: Describe steerage.

FINE: Steerage. Steerage is what you, what you show here in your films.

LEVINE: How was it in your experience?

FINE: In fact I remember we stopped in some port. And they were unloading. They

were carrying a load of something. And it looked to me like something to eat, nuts or raisins. I don't know.

KROOP: Well they fed us, they fed us a lot of herring on the boat, a lot of herring.

FINE: I'm watching them load this and once in a while a bag would break and stuff would come down. So one day I, I got a lot of strings tied together and put something at the end of them. And [unclear] so I could bring it up. But what they did was they pulled the rope away from me. [Unclear-laughter]

KROOP: [Unclear]

FINE: The trip was very difficult. As I say, it was steerage. We slept like, oh—

KROOP: It took us a long time to get, a couple of weeks.

FINE: It was a long time [unclear-microphone jostled]. And then [unclear-microphone obscured] storm was really bad. We were playing football on deck and I almost fell off  
of the, off of the side of the deck. And some guy grabbed me by my feet. See I remember--. These things I remember. But when we arrived at Ellis Island and that was it.

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

FINE: Oh yes.

KROOP: Oh yes.

LEVINE: What was that like for you?

KROOP: It was happiness. Everybody was happy. Yes.

LEVINE: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

FINE: Oh yes.

KROOP: Oh yes.

FINE: That was a big thrill, big thrill. I remember, you know, we came my sister and broker-in-law who were instrumental in bringing us over. They live in Coney Island and that's where we came to stay. So I remember when the, when the when the ship came through the narrows I could see the homes and [unclear] Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you--? What was your impression of Ellis Island?

KROOP: Well—

FINE: Very bad.

KROOP: I don't remember seeing all these buildings. It was just like one room. We were going in and out and that's it. We were like--. We were like locked in, you know. It was no freedom. It's just everybody had to be together like--. There was no freedom to get around.

FINE: It took us a long time to get off the island.

LEVINE: Why is that?

FINE: For some reason. I don't remember which one but one of us was sick, had a rash of some kind. I think maybe they found something, something in my

scalp. I don't remember. I remember it was something about my hair.

KROOP: And then they kept you. They kept us back for a few days.

FINE: They kept us back because--. In fact they said if they don't clear it up we'd have to go back.

KROOP: They said we had to go to quarantine. You know you have to get—

FINE: Yeah, but, we stayed here I don't know how long. And I know that my sister and brother-in-law were very upset because they were there. There they are waiting for us to come off the boat. But it took a little while but we--. Obviously we made it.

LEVINE: Now you had the rash so did you go to the hospital?

KROOP No. No. Just stayed longer, just stayed longer.

FINE: I don't remember being--. Somebody just kept us longer. And we really--. For a while there we were worried about it.

LEVINE: So they were watching the rash to see what it was going—

KROOP: That's all. Yeah. That's it. Otherwise they--. They didn't put him in the hospital or anything, just kept us a little longer.

FINE: Then I remember the first trip to my sister's house—

LEVINE: Well before we leave Ellis Island, do you remember anything about the food, the accommodations, how you were treated by the staff—

KROOP: Well, they gave us food. They gave us a lot of herring and bread. Nothing fancy just—

FINE: You know when you, when you—

KROOP: You [unclear] because you were hungry. You ate whatever they gave you and you were happy with it. We were happy with that. We didn't expect a—

FINE: [Unclear] steerage. You know it's a bad experience. And for some reason--. I'm not going to say I remember for sure. But for some reason I think it carried over into the island here, when we got off the ship here. And you know, the way that, the way the crowds went. Those were very busy years with, with, with, you know, aliens coming in. And I remember that we weren't mistreated but maybe we were--. I was expecting--. I was ten years old. What am I expecting? Now I'm in America. Things are supposed to be good in America. See, that's the thing. But I guess it's a child's thing.

LEVINE: In other words, you, you--. It felt like an extension of the, of the ship experience—

FINE: Exactly.

LEVINE: And it wasn't.

FINE: And that's why I equate with that. But it's mixed feeling. But I tell you, I don't regret it. I'm a proud American.

LEVINE: Well, now tell me what happened when your brother-in-law and sister actually came and met you. What was it like to see them again?

FINE: I never saw them.

LEVINE: You didn't remember them. Did you remember them?

FINE: My sister never saw me.

KROOP: My sister, I can't remember that too much—

FINE: She didn't know our brother-in-law because, you know--. But my sister didn't know me because I wasn't born when she left.

KROOP: No, none of us knew because she left. We were younger children. And she didn't know it but we didn't know her because we left when we came to America.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother and her reaction to meeting her daughter?

KROOP: Oh my mother, oh my mother, she was thrilled. She only, she only lived here two years and she passed away. Yeah. My mother was very happy to see the family.

LEVINE: So what, what did you do? They met you and you, and you came to Battery Park and then what?

KROOP: We went to my sister's house. It's a—

FINE: On a train, on the subway.

KROOP: They took us. I don't know—

FINE: to Coney Island

KROOP: Went to Coney Island. My sister lived here with her house and we stayed with

her.

FINE: House full of food, wonderful food. I remember food. I must be a chow hound.

KROOP: With my sister we stayed there for years—

FINE: We stayed a couple of years until we got our own place—

LEVINE: Do you remember things that struck you when you first got here that you never saw before, anything that you can think of?

FINE: Everything we saw we never saw before because, don't forget, we were--. Where were we? In the little town of Rezkne. Rezkne, as it's spelled. It's Rezknaein, in—

KROOP: Latvia.

FINE: Latvia. And so what did we have? Our first modern city we saw was Riga.

KROOP: That was the capital, capital of Latvia.

FINE: Yes, it's a very modern city. But that, that, that was the beginning of our, of our, of our living because in Latvia we were existing.

LEVINE: Do you remember any new foods or any things in the apartment that were—

KROOP: Well, when we stayed with my sister she used to, they used to feed us there. And of course things they gave us which we never ate before, you know a lot of the canned stuff like saw tomato, herring or something like that. You know, it was something different. And then we stayed for a while. And after that we

got an apartment, my mother—and just singles ones—we got an apartment.  
Lived close to my sister.

LEVINE: In Coney Island.

KROOP: In Coney Island. Yes. And I had a couple of rooms. And my mother lived close to a shul. She liked to go to shul every Saturday. She used to go. And she only stayed three years and she couldn't enjoy it.

LEVINE: Did your--? Was your mother happy that she had come here?

KROOP: Yes, yes, she was happy. She was with the rest of the family. She was happy. But happiness didn't last too long.

LEVINE: And you, how about you, did you start school right away?

KROOP: Yes, I used to go to school. I went to school, yes.

FINE: First grader ten years old.

KROOP: Yeah, I went to--. We used to sit with the bigger children and we were little people. Plus it was different grades.

FINE: We didn't speak the language so—

KROOP: But we caught on to everything. The teachers were very nice. And we were really treated nice. And finished school then [unclear] ways to go to work. I went to work. I used to travel by train.

LEVINE: Where did you go?

KROOP: In New York, uptown New York, I used to go. I worked there. Yeah. I made dolls' clothes. I used to sell dolls' clothes. And really worked there for years go on trains. But after that I—

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the place where you were working?

KROOP: I don't remember, no, no, no.

LEVINE: And do you remember any experiences about learning English that, that comes to mind.

FINE: Well, I think the best experience was the fact that when we, when I went to school I had to speak English otherwise—

KROOP: That's the only way we learned the English language.

FINE: [Unclear] speak my language. That's why we learned fast. I did.

KROOP: Well he went to higher grades. I only finished up in the eighth grade and then I, then I was already of age to go to--. I worked. I worked in a factory. I worked to make the ladies' underwear. I remember on Broadway I used to work there. And I had a good job working on a machine, sewing machine. I used to sew underwear

LEVINE: Was this before you sewed the dolls' clothing or—

KROOP: No, it was after, after that. Dolls' clothes was just a beginning for me to learn how. And I had a salary. I don't remember what I made. Didn't make a lot but it was enough for me to get along. And then, and that's it.

LEVINE: And how about you, George? You stayed in school—

FINE: I stayed in school.

KROOP: Yes. He went to school longer than all of us.

FINE: Well I'm the youngest so everybody took care of me, you know. I went to high school, went to CCNY in New York. I went at night. And of course 1942 I went into the Army. Put in four years for Uncle Sam.

LEVINE: And where were you when you were in the Army?

FINE: I fortunately I was drafted. When I was living in Buffalo, New York I was working up there. I was with the National [unclear]. And our first camp was at Aberdeen, Maryland, Ordnance. Aberdeen proving grounds. And there's where I met  
my wife. She's from Baltimore.

LEVINE: And what's your wife's name?

FINE: Ruth.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

FINE: Her maiden name is Mazaroff. M-A-Z-A-R-O-F-F.

LEVINE: And how did you meet?

FINE: Okay. Very interesting. I was a mess sergeant. And I used to volunteer my mess hall to the Jewish boys on Friday night. We used to have Sabbath services on Friday night.

LEVINE: You donated the mess hall?

FINE: The use of the mess hall. I left it open. And you'd retain a crew there to take care of it, take care of things. They used to have services. You're not--. Do you know anything about the Jewish people?

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the services. That would be interesting.

FINE: Okay. The services--. Jewish people on Friday night had after services it's called—

KROOP: Kiddush.

FINE: Kiddush, Oneg Shabbat. Then you get the services, you have a little wine, a little

sweet things. So when I--. I volunteered the use of my, to keep my mess hall open on Friday nights for the Jewish boys' services, my wife would come out from Baltimore with her aunt from the Jewish Welfare Board. And they would bring out the Oneg Shabbat, the food for the boys after services. And so they would

set up a table in my mess hall. And then because the chapel's where we had our services right next to the mess hall. And they used to bring in all the goodies. And I used to prepare hot water for them for their tea or coffee, whichever they want to make. And I kept a few KPs to help me clean up. And that's when I met my wife.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Wonderful.

FINE: And I married her.

LEVINE: How about you, Tilly, how did you meet your husband?

KROOP: Well I met him--. I used to go to clubs. They used to have these clubs to go,

singles go. I used to go to dances

LEVINE: Were they--? Were they ethnic clubs? In other words, were they people coming from Eastern Europe that would go there or were they—

KROOP: Well, we used to meet the people. But at that time—they don't have it now--. It's used to call like a landslide vote together.

FINE: Landsleit is a Yiddish word meaning temple, see. So you would go where all the [unclear] Jewish people or Italian people or Irish—

KROOP: I used to go. I used to go with some friends. We used to go to a dance, used to dance there. And that's how you went to meet some fellows there. Sometimes you'd meet someone decent. Sometimes you'd just take a chance and go. And that's how I was. No trouble traveling alone in those days. We weren't afraid to go on the train. We used to travel on the train. And I met my husband later on and married.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's name?

KROOP: Jack.

LEVINE: Jack.

KROOP: Jack. Yes. I married and my husband died twenty-five years already.

FINE: Already?

KROOP: Yes, it's twenty-five, yeah.

LEVINE: And did you have children?

KROOP: I have three children.

LEVINE: And their names?

KROOP: Susan and Mervin, two children. I have two. I have five grandchildren. And I have a lovely family. Thank god for that.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about you, George, do you have children?

FINE: Oh yes. I have two and I'm blessed with five grandchildren, two children and five grandchildren, a son and daughter.

LEVINE: And their names, son and daughter?

FINE: My son's name is Mark, daughter's name is Marietta. She's here with us today. And I have five lovely grandchildren.

LEVINE: Wonderful

FINE: And the oldest is twenty-one years old, the next one is twenty. Getting old. I've got to relate something to you about my sister in Moscow. I guess her going to Moscow is like youngsters here go, leave the country go to the big city, leave the farm to a big city. And while in Moscow she met a young man—

KROOP: In the army, in the army. He was in—

FINE: No, no, not yet.

KROOP: Oh no.

FINE: She was keeping company with a young man who turned out to be a spy against Russia for a foreign government. And he was sentenced to die. He was convicted to be executed and she was also convicted. See, because she was his girlfriend. The execution squad, the firing squad, who was going to carry out the sentence, the commander was a Jewish fellow, Russian. My sister was a beautiful girl.

[Pause]

LEVINE: She must have looked like you, Tilly.

KROOP: No, she was beautiful.

LEVINE: Well, how—

FINE: Anyway, he saved her life and he married her.

LEVINE: Oh, that's how you know the story.

KROOP: Yes. And they had children.

LEVINE: Wow. That is really dramatic.

KROOP: There's a whole lot in the family, had a lot of happiness and—

FINE: She had--. Let's see, she had—

KROOP: She has three children.

FINE: Four.

KROOP: Four children, two boys—

FINE: Two girls.

KROOP: And two girls.

FINE: Yeah. Yeah. She--. I guess she's been gone a long time, too, now, hasn't she?

LEVINE: So she came to this country—

KROOP: No, no, no. She lived in Moscow.

FINE: She went over twice to see her.

KROOP: I went to Moscow to visit her.

FINE: And I went there once. And now she's gone but she's got a daughter here and a son.

KROOP: That's right.

FINE: Who lives on the West Coast in California. And she had another son who died. Then she had another daughter who lives in Israel.

KROOP: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you went back did you go back to Rezkne?

KROOP: No, no, no. That was—

FINE: I went back to Moscow to see my sister.

LEVINE: Yeah, but you--. Okay.

FINE: I had no desire to go back to Latvia.

LEVINE: No.

KROOP: No, no.

LEVINE: Why is that?

FINE: It's that—

KROOP: We were glad to get out of there.

FINE: Because I had a bad memory of Latvia. Persecution, all I knew was persecution and hardship.

KROOP: Many time we used hear there was a pogrom and We used to go see [unclear] killed in the basement. A lot of pogroms used to go on there. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well when you think about, you know, coming here, excuse me, coming here as young people do you think the fact that you immigrated from another place and started life again in this country, do you think that had an impact? In what way do you think that affected you in your personality and the way you live your life?

FINE: I'm living.

KROOP: It gave us an uplift.

FINE: It's like a rebirth.

KROOP: That's right. Something we didn't have. And we have a little more here.

FINE: It's an experience. I'm tell you, I still talk about, you know--. I get into conversations or discussions and I say I'm proud to be American.

KROOP: We worked hard. We worked hard here to make a living because it was hard. It was not easy. But we got by alright, you know.

LEVINE: What makes you feel most satisfied about what you've done in your life?

KROOP: Together with the family. I made a big change that I'm here and that's it. I have a nice family. Thank god for that.

LEVINE: How about you, George? What makes you feel really satisfied about anything you've done in your—

FINE: I must have done--. It must be good because I'm eighty-three years old.

LEVINE: You look great.

KROOP: We're the two youngest. He's the youngest one.

FINE: Yeah. We're the only ones left.

KROOP: We're the only--. We were seven children.

FINE: But, you know, time goes by and here we are.

LEVINE: Do you think you retain any ways about you that come from the old country?

FINE: I think maybe subconsciously, subconsciously. Sometimes, you know, some expressions we use, things like that. But other than that I don't regret leaving at all

KROOP: No, no.

LEVINE: What's it like coming back to Ellis Island? Does it--? Did you have any emotional reaction to coming here today or—

KROOP: Yeah.

FINE: Yes, it is. How can I explain it? I didn't think it would be so hard in getting in once we got here.

LEVINE: You didn't think it would be—

FINE: Be so hard getting, getting my foot off on Ellis Island. [Laughs] You know, I, I, I didn't know the ways of the world when I was young. I was ten years old. And I was a kid. And I figured we're coming, we're here, we're going to America. There's movies about that, coming to America, or something like that. But then I didn't, didn't realize all the [unclear] and, and, you know, tests and to test to see if you should, if you should [unclear] to see if you could stay. I don't know what percentage were sent back but I know some were sent back

LEVINE: Two percent.

FINE: Yeah, two percent. Even one percent is too much to go back on that boat. You see the movie that we saw today? It said the guy threatened to jump off the ship if they sent him back. It's true. It's very hard over there in those years. It's probably just as bad now, I think. I don't think it's any better. How could it be better when we had that massacre in World War II in Europe?

KROOP: Well, we're happy here. I'm happy here. We had bad times, too, here.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Depression here?

FINE: Yes.

KROOP: Of course. We were here.

LEVINE: Well how did, how did—

KROOP: But we made it. We made it because we did our best. We did our best.

FINE: We're hard. We're hard workers. Well—

LEVINE: Let's see. If there anything else that you can think of relevant to your immigrating to this country that maybe we haven't covered.

KROOP: Well, we're very happy

FINE: Well, let's--. You know, I'm sure that by the way I'm speaking that I'm happy to be here. And I think this country did a good job in accepting us.

LEVINE: I think that's a perfect place to end. I want to thank you both so much for a very, very interesting interview. I've been speaking with Tilly Kroop and George Fine. But we forgot to tell, George. Just tell briefly how you, how your name changed at Ellis island.

FINE: Well, most people come to Ellis Island change their name by dropping something off their name. With me they added a letter to my name. My name was spelled F-I-N and I came out spelling F-I-N-E.

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KROOP: It's pronounced Finn, see. And now it's Fine

FINE: So I, so I gained every way. Coming to this country and also them changing my name to the tune of one letter.

LEVINE: You gained an E.

KROOP: Yeah.

LEVINE: At Ellis, for Ellis Island. Okay. Thank you very much.

KROOP: Thank you. Thank you. It was nice meeting you.

LEVINE: Very nice meeting you. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on October 14, 1995 and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW