

EI-722

SONJA GABRINER SOKOLOVE

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- **RUSSIA: KLETSK**
- **THE US: NORTH ADAMS, MA/NJ/NYC**

LEVINE: Today is November 19, 1995, and I am here at the home of Sonja Sokolove, who came from Russia in 1921 when she was 11 years of age. Today, Mrs. Sokolove is 85 years of age and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and we'll begin here. If you would say for the tape please, your birthday and where you were born in Russia.

SOKOLOVE: I was born um, January 25, 1910 in a small town, near the Polish border. The name of the town was [Kletsk].

LEVINE: And did you remain living in Kletsk until you were 11 years old and left for the United States?

SOKOLOVE: Yes.

LEVINE: Okay. So now, speaking about life in Kletsk. How about first giving your mother and father's name?

SOKOLOVE: (coughing) My father's name was David Gabriner, and my mother's name was Frances.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother's maiden name?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. My mother's maiden name was Ciok. C-I-O-K.

LEVINE: Okay. And would you spell Gabriner for the tape?

SOKOLOVE: G-A-B-R-I-N-E-R.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents who were living near you in Kletsk?

SOKOLOVE: I had grandparents and at the time that we left Kletsk, they were living with us because they had, they had lived on a, in a village, my grandfather ah, my maternal grandfather was a blacksmith. And they lived in a, in a, a village which was like one street. And they, and he was the blacksmith for that village. But the house and the, and the blacksmith

shop did not belong to him. It belonged to the people um, who owned the village, or the head of the village. And at that time, right after the Russian Revolution, they were sent, they were relieved of their duties there and they were sent out. They were expelled actually. And my grandfather and his family came to Kletsk, and they lived with my mother.

LEVINE: Okay. We're pausing here. (pause in tape) We're resuming here after a telephone call. Ah, you were saying something about your grandfather coming to live with you. Do you remember visiting that little village?

SOKOLOVE: Yes I do. Yes I do.

LEVINE: What do you remember? Is there anything else you could say about that village?

SOKOLOVE: When I visited there, I was very young. But I remember the house. It was very nice. It was a sort of a farmhouse. And um, my grandparents had a very large family. They had five daughters and the daughters were all very creative and they crocheted and sewed and everything in the house reflected their touch. They were great homemakers and cooks and they had a lovely little garden out in the back with vegetables and flowers. I remember that. And um, and I remember there was one street. At one end was the ah, the village inn. At the other end was the priest's house. And my mother knew everybody in

town, including the children of the priest. The Russian priests are allowed to marry, I think. They're Russian Orthodox. And she even played with the children of the ah, priest and had a crush on one of them. One of the men, she told me.

LEVINE: Now, was the typical of a small village in that area, that it would have one street and probably what, about twenty families?

SOKOLOVE: (coughing) Yes, yes. And they were, they farmed the land for the um, well, I don't know what you would call them. In Russian I think it's called a poritz, which I think he probably had a grant from the government. So much land that he could till. And he employed um, the peasants who lived there in the little village.

LEVINE: To till the land.

SOKOLOVE: To till the land.

LEVINE: And then he himself worked as a blacksmith.

SOKOLOVE: My grandfather worked as a blacksmith. And all his sons, five sons, were also blacksmiths. That's the way it was. You were what your father was. My father was a shoemaker. So was his father.

LEVINE: Oh. Okay. Now, do you remember anything in particular about your grandfather or your grandmother? Your maternal grandfather or grandmother?

SOKOLOVE: (clearing throat) I remember, I remember my grandfather reading the bible, I guess it was, in the evening. And he wanted to save kerosene because that was hard to get, or expensive. And he would burn a, a very dry um, I think you call it a spell. It's a piece of wood and it would burn very slowly. And he would hold that over the book and he would be reading his portion for the evening. My grandmother wore a, she wore a kerchief all day on her head, and on Saturday she wore a wig. Her hair was gray, but the wig was brown. I remember that. And she was short and stout. And was not very grandmotherly. I don't ever remember her um, being overly affectionate or kindly. Once in a while she would give us a cookie. But other than that, I don't seem to remember having any um, having missed her when we left for some reason or other.

LEVINE: Do you remember the disposition of your grandfather?

SOKOLOVE: Never talked very much. A very silent man. Long, gray beard. But I don't think they were all that old. Because when we left, we left them in our house. What had happened to spur my father to ah, to come, to immigrate at the time was that they had um, built a new home and had borrowed money from various people in town to defray the expenses. I don't think there was a bank, a formal bank. I

think you borrowed money from private people and you gave them I.O.U.'s. Something like that.

LEVINE: So your father had built a new house?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. We never lived in it because we couldn't afford to. We rented it out because we owed all this money. And then they decided that he would go to America and work for a while – two years the most, and he'd send over all the money he earned, and she, my mother, would pay off the bills on the house.

LEVINE: Was the plan that then he would return at some point.

SOKOLOVE: And the plan was that he would return, definitely. But the year was 1913 when my father left, and he left my mother with four children. The youngest of whom was in the cradle. And a year later of course, war broke out and from there on there was very little communication at times. Certainly no money coming through. And all during the war, my mother did everything she could to make a living for herself and her four children. And she did that by sewing, and um, and going out to the villages and buying things like butter or eggs and selling them. In the city. And in that way she was, she was able to sort of eke out a living. It was hard but she did it.

LEVINE: So she would go to a village not unlike the one your grandfather and grandmother lived in, and bring it back to Kletsk.

SOKOLOVE: Yes. And in Kletsk, they had a market day, ah, where all the villagers would come from around the area and bring their produce in. And um, she would go there and set up a little stand and sell whatever it was she had to sell.

LEVINE: How about your grandparents on your father's side? Did you know them at all?

SOKOLOVE: No. They were ah, they died before we were born. I was named after my paternal grandmother.

LEVINE: Sonja.

SOKOLOVE: Yeah. So, I didn't, I didn't know her. I didn't know either one of them. They, my father was ten years older than my mother and had been married before. He was a widower. He had been married to my, my um, my mother's cousin.

LEVINE: Oh.

SOKOLOVE: And the house that they lived in, the little house in the back of the big house, this big new house, was inherited by my father from his first wife's estate. Um,

LEVINE: Did you know anything about her? His first wife?

SOKOLOVE: Well, I knew that my mother went to their wedding. My mother was 13 years old when my father and her cousin were married. And ah, never thinking that eventually this would be her husband. But um, she died. His wife died in childbirth. He had had four children with this, his first wife. And none of them survived. I would ask him now and then, what it was they died of, but he didn't seem to know. Said they all died of different things when they were infants.

LEVINE: Hm. Was it that your mother's cousin, did the fact that your father's first wife was your mother's cousin make it more likely that he would then marry her?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, oh, yes. (coughing) Because when my grandfather would go into town for whatever reason he had to go into town, he would stay overnight at my father's house because that was his niece, um, at that time. And so when my father became a widower, he still would go and he would stay over. And um, one night, he um, he said to my father, you know, I think you should come out for the weekend and be with us. Because you're too lonely. And, and anyway, I would like you to meet Frances, my mother, who was at that time 18 years old. And was the next in line to be married. And her, her younger sisters were sort of behind her pushing, because they wouldn't get married until she got married. That's the way it went. And so he went, for the weekend. And um, my mother was um, I

think she was a little taken aback. My mother always said that ah, he looked so old and he had a beard and um, and he said about her, that she was very pale and very thin, and her complexion was not all that great. They sort of ran each other down. But he went out again, for another weekend, and he brought her a gift. It was a box of face powder. And I remember the box because one of my younger aunts ah, used that powder on her face. It had swans on the cover. And it was pink and blue, some such thing. But, and she, um, when her father asked her if she liked him she said, well, she sort of liked him but she wished that he would cut off his beard. But he didn't comply completely, but he did trim it quite a bit. And six months later, I guess, well, not six months. He'd been a widower for six months when they got married. And she went into Kletsk to live with him. And, and I remember her telling me and my sister, I think, that she would like, she would like it if we did not marry widowers because he was still in mourning for his first wife, and she really had a rough time. She would wake up at night and find him crying. And ah, but, in no time at all, she was pregnant. And he was ecstatic. And very nervous because he had lost so many children. He really was anxious to have a family. And um, and when my older sister was born, and she was a big, healthy, thriving baby, um, it kind of made up a lot for any other discrepancy. And when we knew them, he adored her. But she always tried to make us feel that she was hard to get, and that he was the only one who was in love. But, I did not believe her, because she did tell

me that he was very good looking. And he was. She was not considered to be a good-looking girl. But he was very handsome.

LEVINE: So what was your oldest sister's name?

SOKOLOVE: My oldest sister's name was Rose.

LEVINE: And the other children in the order of their birth?

SOKOLOVE: Rose, Hi, Abe, well, I was – Rose, Hi, Sonja, Abe. And then of course when we came here, a year later, Matthew was born. The celebration baby.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular, of your brothers or sisters?

SOKOLOVE: I was um, as children I was not close with my sister. I was close with my older brother, whose name was Hi. And I remember him taking me whenever he ah, a lot of times when he went like into the forest picking blueberries with his friends, he would take me along and take very good care of me. Because I was a very timid child. And ah, he was the big brother to me. And he always was the big brother to me.

LEVINE: What was life like in Kletsk?

SOKOLOVE: Well, life was a little bit of everything. When my grandparents came to live, with us, they had three children left at home who were not as yet married. An aunt and two uncles. And um, during the war, the two younger uncles were in the army. One of them was taken prisoner in Germany, and didn't come home until after the war was over. And we didn't know where he was or whether he was alive. But they both, they survived. Another uncle who um, was married and had a family, um hid, in a partition in the wall that he had built so that he wouldn't be found and conscripted. But eventually they found him. But that was towards the end of the war and he wasn't gone for very long. Um, schooling was um, not very good. I never had any formal, didn't go to a formal school. My sister did, and my brother, I think. Well, my brother went to Hebrew School. And my sister went to a school where my mother had to pay. But I was taught by my sister or a neighbor. Just a little bit. I learned to read and maybe do a little bit of addition. But that's about all I knew until I came here when I was 11 years old.

LEVINE: What language did you speak at home?

SOKOLOVE: Well, I would say my mother tongue was Yiddish. But I spoke Russian and I read Russian. And um, but shortly after we came here, I was very anxious to be an American girl. And I would not speak anything but English. For years, I did not say a word in any other language. And I forgot all my Russian. I still remember a little bit of Yiddish, because my parents spoke Yiddish.

LEVINE: In this country too?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. Yes, they did.

LEVINE: Do you remember any ceremonies while you were still in Russia?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yes I do! I remember when my aunt got married. I remember the matchmaker coming to the house and talking to my grandparents. And I loved my aunt. I thought she was the most beautiful creature in the world. I used to sit and watch her get dressed to go out. Put on her powder and things. And wet her finger and do this to her eyebrows. So there would be, and then ah, bite her lips and pinch her cheeks.

LEVINE: And do you remember what the matchmaker, what transpired when the matchmaker was there?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. The matchmaker would come and describe this young man she had for her. And then my aunt would listen and then by the description she would tell her that, yes, she would like to meet him or no, she wouldn't like to meet him. And the one she finally met, whom she liked, my grandparents were not all that crazy about. He was a rabid Communist. This was before the Revolution. He was very active (clears throat) in the Party. In the Revolution. And ah, but anyway, she married him.

LEVINE: So in other words, your aunt's parents weren't involved in the initial ah, matching?

SOKOLOVE: They, yes, well, they were there. They, all three were there. They would listen to what the matchmaker had to say.

LEVINE: Mm, hm. Mm, hm.

SOKOLOVE: And, and, um, and they were, they were married. And then the um, the second one, young man, he got married. The, the youngest... I guess all three were married while we were still there.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything that had to do with dowries?

SOKOLOVE: Um, (clears throat), well, the youngest one, I remember. The youngest one married a girl who was called, see um, everybody had a kind of – instead of people knowing your last name, they knew some um, they knew you by a description. Like ah, Janet the shoemaker's daughter. Or So and So, the tailor's son. Or the water carrier's nephew. And this young woman was known as the "[Bezchetnik's] daughter". Bezchetnik is a Russian expression meaning the "childless couple's daughter. Which means that she was adopted. And her father was also a blacksmith like my uncle. And they, he eventually married her and went to live there. And that was their home, but the old people lived with them. But at their death, they were going to own

the blacksmith shop and the house, that was theirs. So that was her dowry.

LEVINE: And how about the wedding itself? Do you remember any of those?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. My aunt, um, the wedding, the ceremony were usually done outdoors under the stars.

LEVINE: Oh, so it was at night?

SOKOLOVE: I remember them being at night. And ah, and then the reception or the ah... was in the house. And there was food and dancing and singing and sometimes there was music at weddings. But I always used to love to do the dancing. The dancing was great. And I was very much interested in their goings on. Whatever was happening in the family. That was of great interest to me.

LEVINE: What other kinds of socializing did the families do at that time?

SOKOLOVE: Mostly the socializing was whatever the family could offer. There were, oh, there were holidays. Holidays were always a time of um, meeting the family and eating together. The young people went for walks a lot. They walked. And they went to weddings where they danced. And um, but, when they walked, they usually walked – the girls walked together and the boys walked together, but

eventually they would meet someplace and talk together.
They would get together that way.

LEVINE: And were the, were they, most of the holidays religious occasions?

SOKOLOVE: Ah, yes. There was, a, um, they were all religious occasions. All the hol-, all the Jewish holidays were religious occasions. And um, a cause for celebration.

LEVINE: Were there many Jewish people in your city? Or what was the mix like?

SOKOLOVE: I think they, there were mostly Jewish people. There was a street that was called, um, Pig's Alley. And that was, I know there were, there were other, there were non-Jews too, because there was a church. And there was a mosque. So there must have been Muslims, but mostly it was a Jewish town.

LEVINE: Did you ever celebrate birthdays or name days or anything like that?

SOKOLOVE: Well, there was such a thing, but we did not celebrate them. I don't know why. I guess because we, maybe we didn't have enough money to buy you know, things that are necessary for... I know that we had very few things to wear.

LEVINE: What did you wear? What do you remember about your clothing?

SOKOLOVE: I remember an incident which I think bears telling, perhaps. I can't remember exactly how old I was, but maybe five years old. Five or six. When my, my mother um, went, took my sister. They got all dressed up in borrowed clothes, mind you. I know that ever stitch my mother wore, and every stitch my sister wore, were borrowed. And they went to have their picture taken to send to my father. And I remember sitting with my brother, my older brother, on the sidewalk, barefooted, and woebegone. And I said to him, you know why she just took Rose and she didn't take us to have the picture taken? Because she's the only pretty one in the family.

LEVINE: Do you remember what he responded?

SOKOLOVE: He was ah, amazed that I thought of anything like that, because he had not. And I th-, I always felt (clears throat) that she was given more privileges than I was. She went to school and she had a uniform and she was pretty. My sister was pretty . And um, and I felt that I wasn't. And because I wasn't, then that's why she wouldn't take me to be in the picture. Because, I said, that Rose was the only one that she wanted my father to see of his children. Because the others were not so pretty.

END SIDE A, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Do you remember what you wore as sort of a daily dress?

SOKOLOVE: (coughing) Um, probably something made out of calico or cotton or something like that, that my mother would sew up. I don't remember having good clothes or Sunday clothes, or Saturday clothes or whatever. We really had very, very few things to wear. And shortly after ah, things opened up and we were able to receive mail, and um, my father sent a package of clothing. He sent shoes, and material for, for dresses I guess, and sweaters, and it was a day of excitement. It really was. The only thing was, my mother didn't know exactly um, I guess the shoes that were supposed to be for her were too small. So then she decided that the shoes that were for the boys were probably for her. And she wore their shoes. But she made dresses for me and my sister. And this was ah, shortly before we came here. Because when my father was able to write, which was now after the war and the Revolution, he wrote to say that he felt it would be better for the children if we all immigrated to America. And he was so right, wasn't he?

LEVINE: So did you wear some of these dresses that were made?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. Yes. There was a pale blue cotton dress that I remember my mother made for me, and the pink was for

my sister. (coughing) My sister by that time had um, had gotten stout. She'd gained a lot of weight for some reason. I guess that was her nature, because she was always inclined to be stout. And ah, I never did get heavy. And so by the time we came here, I felt that I was not quite as ugly as I had thought I was, by comparison.

LEVINE: Do you remember your mother preparing to depart?

SOKOLOVE: (coughing) I think my mother was ambivalent about coming. She, my mother, knew that once she left there she would probably never see her family again. And which proved to be true. And she um, I guess, I don't know. She baked cookies of some sort. Ah, she packed a lot. And she, you know, she organized the trip. I remember that we left um, on a very cold, cold January day in a wagon, drawn by a couple of horses because we had to get to the town where they had a railroad. And that took um, I don't know. It took all night, I think. I remember that um, my younger brother sat on my feet which kept them nice and warm. I remember that. But we had, we were bundled up. And we were, from then on, we were tired all the time. At least I was. I never had a great deal of stamina – I still don't.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything you personally brought with you, or anything your brothers, or sister or mother brought?

SOKOLOVE: My mother brought her sewing machine. Which was a Singer. But it was a hand-operated sewing machine. She was, what else did she... Oh. We lived, we stayed in Poland. In Warsaw, for ah, two months I think it was. Waiting. For two months. Waiting for a visa to be activated. It was very difficult to get into the United States at the time. The immigration went haywire. Everybody wanted to come here. And eventually, ah, they um, they said that oh, women whose husbands were here, women and children, would have preference. So, finally we get going.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about those two months in Warsaw?

SOKOLOVE: I remember that we lived with ah, several other families in um, in a fourth floor walk-up, with the toilets out in the backyard. It was very difficult. However, I do remember that Warsaw was a beautiful city. It had great, you know, shopping. Things that we had never seen before. So that by the time we came here, we weren't quite so overwhelmed by new things.

LEVINE: Can you remember anything in particular that you saw in Warsaw that you had never seen?

SOKOLOVE: Store windows. And mannequins, comes to mind. And the clothes they wore in Warsaw were different than the things that I knew. My mother bought a fur coat when she

was in Warsaw. She bought a black seal coat. And a black straw hat. And (clears throat) she bought a coat for me. And ah, a little hat. Also a straw hat. And fortunately it was sort of fashionable by the time we came here. I remember my oldest cousin saying, you know, you look so citified! I mean, I looked like New York, not like North Adams. Because I did come from a large city. Poland was ah, a very metropolitan city. And ah, I think they got a lot of their things from France.

LEVINE: So when you left Warsaw, where did you go?

SOKOLOVE: (coughing) When we left Warsaw, from there on it was, sort of we zipped right through. I remember that we went through the German corridor. We traveled on a train for two days and two nights, I think. And we wound up in England. Eventually. Where we stayed for two or three weeks. Waiting for our ship. And um, February, March... Um, yeah. Then it took about three or four – we were in transit, on the ship, for three weeks I guess.

LEVINE: And the name of the ship?

SOKOLOVE: Was The Cameronia.

LEVINE: And do, what do you remember about the passage.

SOKOLOVE: Um, my sister and my mother and I were terribly, terribly, um, ill. We were nauseous all the time. My brothers, they were not ill at all. They had a wonderful time. They ate

everything, and they just zipped through the thing like it was a great experience for them. But I was very sick most of the time, and I got very thin and very worn out. And um, so the, the, you know, to this day, I never got on a boat again. (laughs)

LEVINE: Mm.

SOKOLOVE: I fear getting seasick. Then um, (coughs), when we came to Ellis Island, I think the ship was quarantined for a few days. I have a hazy memory of that.

LEVINE: So you remember what ...

SOKOLOVE: It was quarantined.

LEVINE: Do you remember why it was quarantined?

SOKOLOVE: I think they found somebody who had some contagious disease probably, and they wanted to check out everybody. And they checked everybody for oh, if you had lice you couldn't enter! And the Europeans had lice. Hair and body. It was terrible. They didn't make you feel very good or welcome.

LEVINE: What was your impression of Ellis Island?

SOKOLOVE: A very jumbled... It was a very, you know, I remember the skylight. You know, when I went to visit there recently, the

only thing that looked familiar to me was that skylight in the main room. I remember that. Other than that, there were just a lot of people and a lot of noise. And when you're, when you're shorter than everybody, you don't see a great deal.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the examination?

SOKOLOVE: Well, they examined your hair for lice. Oh, along the way, I think it was, when we were in England, my, my mother I had, had long hair. Both my sister and I had braids. And my mother um, offered us a, she said would you like to have your hair cut? My sister said, no. But I said yes. For some reason. So my hair was cut short, you know, and I must have seen it on the street when we were in England. A big bowl on top of my hair, which was very fashionable at the time. Right there. And that's how I came to North Adam. I remember that pale blue, sky blue dress. And that coat that my mother bought in, in Poland. And the, and the little hat. Which was very pretty. And I guess everybody said I was a pretty little girl. So, I was never pretty really, but um, I guess I was growing out of my little awkward stage that little girls go through I guess.

LEVINE: And when you were at Ellis Island, how were you met?

SOKOLOVE: Well, after all the examinations and um, and then ah, we were told to walk through a kind of a walkway that had a wire fence on each side. And there were people on the other side of the fence who were looking through and we

surmised that my father would be out there. He was supposed to meet us. That he would be out there and he would, and, and he would claim us. But it, it didn't happen that way. We walked through and, and my mother looked out through the fence and, and ah, nobody claimed her and her four children. And everybody was, practically everybody was done and we were the only ones left. And this little man, who was a representative of the HIAS – that's the Hebrew what? (thinking) Immigration. Association. Society. Okay? Ah, he came and sort of tried to comfort us. And they brought us back inside. And um, he said, we'll try to contact your husband. So they sent, I guess they sent a telegram. I don't know. I don't think they called. Although my, our relatives did have telephones by that time. But um, my uncle I guess, sent a telegram and we were, it was decided that we'd be put on the train and ah, we would arrive in Pittsfield, which is about um, twenty miles away, and that he would meet us there. And take us home. Because my father was in New York, and he was supposed to meet us but some, and we were supposed to stay with some friends in New York for a couple of days and see the city a little bit, and get rested up a little bit, but it didn't happen that way. He couldn't find us. And so when we got to North Adams, um, on the train, ah, we were very nervous. My mother was very nervous. But there was a woman on the train who was going to ah, who came and talked to her. We had a box lunch and we didn't like anything that was in there. Um, and she said, not to worry. That her son was coming to meet her and if

nobody came to meet us, she would take us to her son's house. So that was not exactly what we wanted. But... So we got to Pittsfield and it was pouring out and it was late at night. It was like 10:30 or 11:00, um, but um, my uncle separated from the crowd and came over and introduced himself. I guess my mother had known him briefly before they had left for ah, America. Shortly after she was married I think. And um, we came to North Adams and were distributed through the family. My father had ah, two sisters and a brother in North Adams. And so um, my sister and I stayed with this uncle. And I remember my, my aunt, we came there, it was close to midnight and she had this dinner cooked for us. With rice and I don't know what all. Course we didn't want to eat. I felt if I didn't ever eat again, it would be okay. Anyway, my oldest cousin who was at that time, must have been in her twent-, early twenties, she stayed in the room and wouldn't leave. She wanted to see us get undressed and see what we were wearing. And ah, we did have odd-looking undergarments on. We had pants that were um, that were open in the crotch. So you didn't have to, if you went to the bathroom you just, moved your pants aside and you went. (clears her throat) We were told the following day that in America, you don't wear pants like that. And they told, they showed my mother, my aunts showed my mother how to make American pants, bloomers.

LEVINE: What was the reunion like with your father?

SOKOLOVE: Well, my mother um, stayed with, with ah, one aunt. And then the boys stayed with the other aunt. So the following day, afternoon it was, sort of late in the afternoon, we got a telephone call at my aunt's that my father had arrived. And that we were to be brought there. So, somebody walked us over there. It was not too far away, and um, I thought to myself, well, now. What does one do when one meets one's father whom one does not remember? Um, so when I entered, my sister (coughing), my sister allowed me to walk first. She gave me a little shove. And I decided that I guessed the thing to do was that I had to kiss him. So I ran from the doorway all the way through this long room, and he was sitting at the table with my mother, and I sort of got on his knee and I kissed him. And you know? I think he never forgot that. I think it made such an impression on him that he ah, ever after, I think I was his favorite child. Because my sister did not kiss him.

LEVINE: So now, where had he been up until that point?

SOKOLOVE: He had gone to meet us. He was there on the other side of the wire. He had looked over all the people and could not find his wife or his children. Of course my mother, in the midst, toward the end of May, was dressed in this fur sealskin coat with this big straw hat. He had never seen my mother in a hat before. He could not, and she was eight years older, he did not recognize her. And these big kids who were hanging around there, were not his little bitty kids. So...

- LEVINE: And she didn't recognize him.
- SOKOLOVE: And she didn't recognize him. They had changed. So that was, you know... I understand that.
- LEVINE: The other thing about Ellis Island, your maiden name, did you feel that it was changed there, or how, was it always?
- SOKOLOVE: I think it ah, I think there was a "u" instead of an "i". Gabruner. G-A-B-R-U-N-E-R. I'm not certain, but I think that's what it was originally. But here they were spelling it G-A-B-R-I-N-E-R.
- LEVINE: Do you remember any things that, on your first few days or weeks when you were in North Adams, that ah, made an impression upon you?
- SOKOLOVE: Not really. I think, I had a cousin, where the uncle I stayed with, who was um, eight or nine months younger than I was, so, to all intensive purposes. But she was a big girl. So we were sort of the same size. And (clears throat) she was not very friendly towards me.
- LEVINE: How did she treat you? Do you remember?
- SOKOLOVE: Very superior. She was very superior. And um, the older kids were a little bit nicer, but eventually, we did find friends among other people.

LEVINE: How long had your cousins been in this country?

SOKOLOVE: The cousins were, well, except for my oldest cousin and her brother, two, three cousins were born in, in Russia. The rest were all born here.

LEVINE: Did you encounter the greenhorn ah....

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Oh, indeed. That's what made me so ah, anxious. Oh! (clears throat) I don't know whether I mentioned this to you or not, but when we got to Grand Central Station, when they brought us there, they left us in the middle of the station there with all our packages and things. We were sitting there on the suitcases and waiting for the train. And I saw this young woman pass by, and I thought, and she had a... She had high heels and she wore a beige suit. I thought she was oh-so-elegantly dressed. And I, she was chewing gum and I had never seen that before. And I thought, oh, this is so American, and I am going to do that first chance I get. I'm going to be American too. That was, my resolve was formed right there.

LEVINE: And ah, how did the living conditions compare with the living conditions in Kletsk?

SOKOLOVE: Well, we had just gotten electricity and, and that consisted of a bare bulb hanging from a wire in the ceiling. And that

was very new and very elegant. Um, the telephone was very new. That was something that we had never had before. So that was new. Running water in the sink and then indoor toilet. That was new. Um, there were, I guess there weren't oh, large things that were new, but small things were new. And then, and then we, when we finally moved into our home, my father had bought a house before we came here. He bought a house and the rest of the money he spent ah, to send for us. And he left a little bit of money for furnishings for the house. So we didn't have, we didn't have a living room, but we had a dining room. And the dining room furniture. And then the boys shared a room. And the girls shared a room. And Mamma and Papa shared the living room. That became their bedroom. And um, and of course the kitchen. And my mother was delighted because she immediate – the first thing she did was go to the um, remnants store and she bought things to make clothes with. School things and aprons and I don't know what. She sewed up a storm. She sewed and she sewed. And she was very happy doing that.

LEVINE: What helped you to learn the language? Was there anything you can point to?

SOKOLOVE: Well, when we came here it was May 21st. And it was decided that we were to be um, to be entered in school immediately. Which was, I think, a mistake. Um, we were taken to school. And I was put into a, where was I? (pauses) Second grade I think. No, wait a minute. No.

No. I was put into the fourth grade. And the teacher asked if anybody knew ah, any ah, Yiddish language. And there were three kids in the room who said, yes, they did. And so the teacher gave them a sheet of paper and a pencil and they told them to tell me... Oh! And she wrote my name on top of this, and she asked them to tell me to copy back on the paper, my name. That's what I did all morning. And um, then out, um, at recess, I met my um, my brother and sister. And they were, so we clung there together, and I guess the principal came over and she um, she took my hand and she brought me over to a group of little girls who were playing jacks. And (clears throat) she motioned to me, did I know how to play this? And I said, you know, I nodded, and I said, yes, I think I did. But I ran into trouble immediately, because the way um, they play jacks, these little girls played jacks was, they threw the ball in the air, they let it bounce and while the ball bounced they picked up the jacks. Where I came from, you threw the ball in the air and you scrambled for the jacks and you caught the ball while it was in mid-air. It was much harder! So we disagreed on that. And there was no language at all. We did not speak a word. So that was several weeks from the 21st of May, or the 22nd of May, until, toward practically the end of June, we suffered without being able to speak a word of English. That was pretty bad. Because then, during the summer vacation, we did not allow anyone to speak anything to us but English. And by the time September came, we spoke English.

LEVINE: When you say we – the entire family?

SOKOLOVE: Not my mother. I'm talking about the children. Especially the two younger ones. My sister, who was fifteen when she came here, she never quite lost her accent completely. You could still tell that she was not American born. And my brother, a little bit. Now and then he would get a little confused between a "v" and a "w". Which is a stumbling block to Yiddish-speaking people. My younger brother and I had no problems. Hardly any problems. I think we probably, or I probably had, I remember going to Sunday school, and there was a girl, one girl in my Sunday school class who, when I was called on to read whatever it was, some little biblical thing. She snickered. And she was roundly criticized by the teacher and all the other kids. And I never forgot her. She was a, I think she was the rabbi's daughter, but they moved away very shortly after that. But for the most part, the kids were very kind. Until we assimilated, sort of.

LEVINE: And what was your mother and father's attitude about becoming Americanized?

SOKOLOVE: (clearing throat) Oh, they approved. We never discussed it, about being American. They knew that we had to work hard. As a matter of fact, there was a while there that we had tutors to bring us up to... When I finally started school the following September, they put me in the second grade. I was 12 years old. You know how a 12 year old feels in the second grade? You feel like you're seven feet tall and

you skip around the desks singing some little ditty or another. It was dreadful. So...

LEVINE: Let me just say we'll pause here and I'm going to put on another tape because we're at the end of this one. Okay. I've been speaking with Sonja Sokolove who came in 1921 from Russia when she was 11, and we're going to continue now with Tape Two.

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. This is the beginning of Tape Two, and I'm speaking with Sonja Sokolove. And we were, we, you were discussing being put into second grade after the summer vacation when you had first arrived here.

SOKOLOVE: Yes. (clears throat) I was in the second grade and feeling ten feet tall among the little, the little children, um, and not being very happy about that. But eventually, um, by Christmas time, I guess, I was put into the third grade. And then at the end of the school year, I went into the fourth grade. Um, then the second year, I spent um, some months in the fourth grade and then was put into the fifth grade, then the sixth grade, and by the end of that year, I was put into the seventh grade.

LEVINE: Which was about with your age group?

SOKOLOVE: Which was about my age group. But, no. Wait a minute. No. I was put into the seventh grade for a very short time. But, as I told you, I had a tutor by that time. We all did.

LEVINE: Now, how did that work? Where did you meet with the tutor and who else was there?

SOKOLOVE: The tutor ah, had this tutoring school. He had been a um, he had been superintendent of schools at one time. He was sort of an old man by the time that happened, and I guess to supplement his meager um, pension, he, he had this little school, night school, tutoring school and we went there. He didn't charge very much because we didn't have very much money. We went there, and he would tutor us a little bit, not very much. But what he did do, was that he hastened our going through the grades, you know, one-two-three, and when I got into the seventh grade in the beginning of May, I guess it was, where my cousin was, at that time, I came up with her. And um, she said, oh, well, I'll be going into the eighth grade in June, but you won't. And I said, what makes you think I won't? And she said, oh! I don't think you will. You don't know enough. So when I told him that, he said, I said, you know, I don't think I'm going to pass into the eight grade, he said, don't worry about it. And he called, and you know, fixed it. So I was. I went into the eighth grade.

LEVINE: What did you learn with the tutor?

SOKOLOVE: Not very much. Really, not very much. But he gave us confidence. He did that. And you know, when they speak about now, this bi-lingual education, I'm inclined to dis-, you know, to disapprove. Because I think that children who are on the bi-lingual education never really get to speak English the way Americans do. And I think that is not a good thing for their ego. I think if they're left alone, to their own devices – no! I don't think they should be left alone, I think they should be provided with a tutor when they need one. But not bi-lingual education.

LEVINE: Can you think of how your ego changed from the time you first came here and as you became acclimated and ah, moved along in school and in life?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yes. There are, when I felt that I, ah, when people could not differentiate between me and somebody who was born here, I felt I had arrived. And I have, I think I have always been very careful about my, ah, my diction. Oh! When I, um, when I was in the eighth grade, I was there um, for a whole year. And the teacher, in the eighth grade was the daughter of this tutor. Now, they were um, she was born and educated in Boston. And I liked the way she spoke. I liked the way she sounded. And I would emulate her. She had a great deal to do with my desire to not even sound like North Adams, which was not the Mecca of the world. Only I shouldn't say these things. I don't know who's going to listen to me. But it was um, her

name was Miss Hall. Ruth Hall. And she influenced me a great deal. And she was always very nice to me.

LEVINE: So you saw her as a sophisticated person.

SOKOLOVE: I (clears throat), she was not a sophisticated person. She was a schoolteacher. And a schoolteacher in Massachusetts in those days was a certain type of person. Was very um, almost like a nun. First of all, schoolteachers did not get married in Massachusetts in those days. They were all unmarried women. Um, so they were regarded as sort of strange, or above the ordinary woman. I only remember one, one married teacher when I was in high school and she was a widow. It was not until after the second World War, when there was a shortage of teachers that they finally took off the ban.

LEVINE: You mean they had to be unmarried.

SOKOLOVE: They had to be unmarried, yes. It was, it was in those days they felt that a married woman was supported by her husband.

LEVINE: Hm. Can you think of ways in which your mother or father, ways that they held on to that were from the old country, from Russia? Or maybe attitudes that they held?

SOKOLOVE: I think they lived their, their life as immigrants. I think they, they never aspired – my parents – did not aspire to be

Americans. I think my mother did the best she could. She tried. She um, my mother was fashion conscious because she sewed and she always had the latest Butterick fashion, little magazine that was given away when you bought a yard of goods. And she sewed for all of us. Until I graduated high school, I never had a dress that was bought in the store. She, and she sewed um, she did not buy three yards of something or other. She found a remnant which she pronounced "remnitch" and she made clothes out of that. And later on in life, she um, always made a little quilt for, for a grandchild. If a grandchild was coming, she immediately went to the store and got either pink or blue sateen or satin or something and made a little quilt for the baby. And I remember um, it was one of the later babies, that she was working very hard to piece out this little quilt and I said to her one day, why don't you – by that time she could have gone and bought several yards of, of ah, cloth. Why don't you go and buy as much cloth as you need for this instead of working so hard trying to make something out of nothing. She said, well, that would not be any fun! It was always a challenge to her, to make something out of nothing.

LEVINE: And how did you feel that, that she was making your clothes up through high school?

SOKOLOVE: I, she and I had some great bouts about clothes when she was sewing for me. And I couldn't wait to get out and earn my own money and buy clothes. I felt that all the things

she made were ill fitting and um, but you know, she had fairly good taste. She really did. Ah, she was sort of artistically inclined. I think my son ah, sort of got that from her. From my mother, my mother and her sisters and brothers were all very creative.

LEVINE: Your son Larry?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. And, and I think he came by it from them. When I think about, now, my brothers um, are all also very creative. My sister and I didn't inherit that. We never could sew a stitch. We weren't interested in crocheting or knitting. We tried but we weren't good at it.

LEVINE: You mentioned earlier before the tape was on, about your father, talking about the food and the bread and butter, would you...?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, oh yes. My father would um, try to comfort his family when they wanted more things than he thought was, that he could provide or that was necessary and he would say, look at what you have here in America. Look at this table. You have white bread. You have butter. You have milk. You have cheese. Long after people stopped thinking of those things as luxuries, but he could not see putting out any money for going to the movies or buying an ice cream cone. That was more than was necessary for the sustenance of life, or even the enjoyment.

LEVINE: What did you father do? In the old country he was a shoemaker. And how about here?

SOKOLOVE: When he came here he um, first I think he sold shoelaces door to door. And then he, when he had enough money, he bought a horse. And he became a peddler. And he, he ah, and all during the war I guess, he was a peddler and that was a very lucrative thing to do during the war, because little bits and pieces of metal and stuff was very precious at that time.

LEVINE: This was during World War I while you were still in Russia.

SOKOLOVE: Yes. World War I. Mm, hm. Yes. And in the summertime he sold ah, vegetables and fruit. And that's what he was doing when we came here. And then, (clears throat) after a while, as I told you before, they had built this house, which they left to the care of my grandparents when we came here. And after a few years, um, they sold the house for them. I can't remember exactly how much money they got for it, but when the money came, arrived here, my father bought some ah, some more real estate. He bought two parcels, I think, two or three parcels of um, land with not terribly expensive stuff, but from, and then he, he gave up his peddling and he made a living out of that. Renting out of – we call him the big real estate tycoon. But, it was enough to um, to sustain them. By that time, they only had their youngest son, who all, all through his school years um, he helped with this property. He, he

was taught how to, or he learned how to paint, put on paper, fix the plumbing, he did all that. And then of course, he was in the Army.

LEVINE: This is your youngest brother?

SOKOLOVE: My youngest brother.

LEVINE: And his name?

SOKOLOVE: Matthew. And Matthew ah, was their ah, Matthew was the true youngest son who was there to take care of his parents when all the others had married and left the home. And he did that. And he was a very loving son. And he cheerfully did all that. And then when he came back from the Army – wait just a minute. We had never owned a car, but when Matthew turned sixteen, they bought a car. And ah, he drove. And so it made life a little bit more interesting for them. And then um, when he came back from the Army, um, he went to college on the GI Bill. He went to Syracuse University, my other, my other brother also was in the, in the Army. Um, and he went to um, let's see. He went to um, Brooklyn, he went to Pratt. Now, I can't remember. No. That was not on the GI Bill. That was before the war. But he graduated Pratt and never could, never could get a job doing what he was supposed to be doing. He wanted to teach, and he couldn't pass the oral test. They said he had a sibilant /s/ or something. So he never really did what he was supposed to, what would have been his milieu.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you can think of about being in an immigrant family in a small town, relatively small town in Massachusetts ah, during the '20's? Were there many immigrant families that had settled there?

SOKOLOVE: There were about um, a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five people or something like that and most of them were immigrant families. Some had come over there much earlier than my father. They had come over here perhaps in the greatest influx of immigration which was in the 1890's, 1880's, 1890s, I think that was around the time when they came and settled there. Most of them. I remember none of my friends had parents who were born here. I think two of my girlfriends had mothers who spoke with (coughing) an American accent. Cause they came here as little girls. They had very little education. Going to high school, when I was a young woman, was, was um, like the goal. Like my oldest cousin and her brother, they never got to high school. They went to work after they graduated grammar school. And my parents felt, well, my sister never graduated high school. Well – she thought she was too old. Because she was sixteen years old when she got out of grammar school and she felt she was too old. No. Seventeen. She was seventeen. And so she stayed around for a couple years. She worked for a couple years. Then she went to New York, and she, she met a man who was um, in the same situation she was in. And they got married. Very nice man. But, when I think,

had I lived in the city I probably would have gone to college. Um, because colleges weren't available here. And I always felt that I um, that it was my parents' fault that I didn't go to school, but when I finally looked at the whole thing, I decided it wasn't their fault, it was my fault. There was a teacher's um, what they called a Normal School, which was a two-year course, and I could have gone there for very little money had I really insisted that I wanted to go. But I was so anxious to get out there and wear clothes, that you know, it wasn't expected of me, ah, then I went to work and um, forgot all about college.

LEVINE: Were there ah, children from other countries aside from Russia that had settled in North Adams at that time when you were growing up?

SOKOLOVE: I don't remember any other immigrants at the time that we came over sort of ah, it was the tail end of immigration for Jewish people. Um, until the second World War. So we were, you know, we were the, we were really the only children who were not, in our generation, who were not born there. All the rest were born in North Adams.

LEVINE: Do you remember the Depression? Do you remember any personal impacts of the Depression?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yes. Yes, I do. Um, there was a time when I didn't, when I was out of work and I couldn't find another job. I think I was 19 or 20. Um, and I remember one summer I had a, a two-piece dress, a skirt and sleeveless top. It was

white. And I dyed it every color of the rainbow, all summer long. And then my mother got a hold of a piece of material and made a little cotton thing for me. I was starving, I was always starving for clothes. (Laughs) I always liked clothes. And, and my mother understood that because she herself liked clothes. And she, my mother was um, I always (laughs) used to say, my mother put on everything she owned, every piece of jewelry. My mother could, um, she wore glasses and she wore earrings, and she wore a necklace and she wore a pin, and ah, and she never looked overdressed. And it was, it was strange because she really wanted to, had she lived in New York, away from, my mother had two sisters-in-law, who intimid-, intimidated her terribly.

LEVINE: How did they do that?

SOKOLOVE: (clears throat) Well, they were um, they were very big, (laughs) they were very tall, and they were big and they were good-looking. And they always, they always, they always took the opportunity to tell me that the first time they met her, they could not understand how their father could have married such an ugly woman. They did that to me. And um, and they were, they were always a little jealous of my mother, because my mother um, the men always did like my mother. They liked her ways. My mother was very feminine, very sweet, um, was, took care of her house. She was never overbearing. They were, my aunts were the modern, what would now be called

women's lib people. One of my aunts always had a business. She had a shoe store. And ah, she um, she was, she was the head of the family so to speak. She should never have gotten married because she really didn't – well, I don't know whether she didn't love him. But I can tell you, she gave him a hard time. She was very, very ah, but so... They would come to my house and they would admire the things, the way my mother did things. Her cooking and her baking and her sewing. So they copied her in a way, but they, they took their revenge by always letting her know that she was, she was not pretty. Which was the silliest thing in the world. These old ladies would ah, but anyway, when in her old age, she, after my father died, my father died and she kind of fell apart. She would never have a well day after he died. She lived for about three or four years but she was ill. She had a massive heart attack. And we brought her to New Jersey to be near us. Um, and when she came to New Jersey (laughs) she had never had her hair cut, because her sisters-in-law didn't approve of bobbed hair.

LEVINE: But she had been in the country now for...

SOKOLOVE: Oh, many years! She never used make-up. I think secretly she did use a little bit of rouge, but ah, secretly. But when she came here, she asked me if, if I thought it would be all right for her to have her hair cut, and I said, it certainly would! If you want it cut, we'll have it cut. That woman, changed so much when she moved to New Jersey. And she told me what she, you know, the things

that she wanted to do. She began to use a little bit of makeup, a little bit of lipstick. Oh! Eyebrow pencil. She loved eyebrow pencil. When she was very ill, in the hospital, I came to visit her one day, she wanted me to get her eyebrow pencil immediately, she was going to put some of that on. Um, and she wore colors like um, my mother had beautiful eyes. She had corn blue eyes, ah much, you know, that were really noticeable. And she was very sweet looking. She had white hair, and ah, actually, I look a lot like my mother. I never had any claims to looks, but I never felt ugly either. Um, and I don't think she did either, actually.

LEVINE: To what do you attribute her new interests when she came to New Jersey, and makeup and...?

SOKOLOVE: I think she was expressing herself. I think that she always felt that she would have looked better had she been able to use makeup. Which is true, because um, she was very pale, and ah, sort of woebegone looking, whereas a little bit of makeup would have, you know...

LEVINE: But she hadn't used it because of her sisters-in-law?

SOKOLOVE: Yes, she was a afraid of them. They were, one of them was very religious. The older one. And um, the other one was just naturally mean. (laughs). I shouldn't say that should I.

LEVINE: So, did your mother or father ever become citizens?

SOKOLOVE: Mm, they did. They both became citizens. And ah, my father always voted. I often wondered how he did that, because he went to night school for a long time but somehow or other, he just never could learn how to read properly. But he said he would study the ballot before and if it was pointed out to him – he was always a Democrat – that this is Roosevelt right over here, or whoever, then he knew how to do that. And um, my mother was much more forward going than my father. She tried things that were, would not have occurred to him. Not, you know, not that she wasn't kosher. Oh, yes. Was she. She never would eat anything that wasn't. But, she got so, for instance, my house was never kosher, because I'd married a man whose family just um, were not, they were not observant Jews. And um, although my mother-in-law confessed to me that she didn't like to cook bacon. She did it, because the children wanted it but she really didn't like it. So, she was saying, now that you're here, you can cook it. But um, my mother never, she was a... But she would eat with us in a restaurant. She would order a vegetable salad or some such thing. And she would even eat at my house, if I had ah, dairy or fish. She would even eat fish, I think. You know, had she lived in the city, away from her sisters-in-law, she would have you know, been much more free with what she was doing. I don't think my mother was ever all that religious. But my father was. Yeah.

LEVINE: And he made, he maintained that.

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. My father was very religious. Although, it was strange about my father too. You know when Dick was marrying Karen, my father knew it, but he made believe that he didn't know about it.

LEVINE: That is, he was marrying someone who was not Jewish.

SOKOLOVE: Who was not Jewish. And had this happened ten years before he would have been tearing his hair out. But I guess he got tired. You know, I think he would get mellow, or didn't have enough fight in him. And my mother was at the wedding.

END SIDE A, TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Now, what did you do? After you left high school, you started working. What kind of a job did you have?

SOKOLOVE: I worked. Um, my first job was for the, I worked at the Western Union telegraph company. I learned how to run that machine, that um, they used at that time. I don't know

what they do now. But they had ah, it was like a typewriter, but it sent the um, it sent the telegrams to wherever they had to go or some point, from where they were...

LEVINE: Dispatched.

SOKOLOVE: Dispatched. To another point. And it worked like a typewriter. And then when it came in, when the telegrams came in, they came on a, you know, um, a ribbon of paper and you pasted them on the sheet. And I took messages over the telephone and things, you know.

LEVINE: And did you stay there a long time?

SOKOLOVE: No-o. That's where I lost my job, when the Depression came. And then ah, I worked for Harry Wein, Gert's father. He had a shoe store. I did all his book keeping, and sold shoes and swept the floor. All for \$10 a week.

LEVINE: This was during the '30's?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. When I worked at the Western Union, um, I earned twelve dollars and ten cents. That was my first check. But I talked to women who were my age in the city and they earned about the same. Unless they were schoolteachers; then they earned a little bit more.

LEVINE: And how did you meet your husband?

SOKOLOVE: Um, I, he came to my sweet sixteenth birthday party with, as the date of one of my friends. She brought him. And um, she had raved about him before. That he was the handsomest and the most suave, and very sophisticated. He was only a year and half older than I was, but we were in the same class in high school. I don't know. He missed out a year – he was sick or something. And um, so, shortly after that – oh, and she was, she would always tell me that um, she had a terrible crush on him, and she had had some dates, or he had an uncle who lived in No-, in North Adams, and also his father didn't drive a car so he would drive his parents to visit the uncle and while he was waiting for them to visit the uncle, he would call her and they would have a little get-together while they were waiting. And a lot of the time it would only be like 15, 20 minutes and she was going crazy with that. So I'd heard a lot about these things that happened between her and Abe. His name was Abe. And um, so then, there was um, the, there was a, a group. The men's club at the community center had a dance once a year, in February. It was a Valentine's Dance, I guess, and it was formal and it was very important. It was THE event of the year. The social event of the year. And (coughs) I had not been to one as yet, cause I was only eighteen years old, or whatever. And so, I just didn't think anything of it. I thought maybe somebody might ask me since I'm now a grown up young woman. But maybe not. So one evening, the phone rang and he, it was Abe. And he's inviting me to

go to this to-do. So I'm completely confused because I think, you know, this, he supposedly is Tillie's boyfriend so I said, well, let me um, let me think about it for a little bit and you call back later. And I spoke to my mother about it. I told her the, you know, that he was supposedly Tillie's boyfriend but he wants me to go to the, this ah, The Ball. We called it The Ball with him and I don't know what to do. So, (clears throat) my mother was very practical. She said, well, he's asking you not her, so go! (they laugh) So I did. Well, that was the beginning of it. But it wasn't until quite a few years later that we were married. We had kind of a stormy courtship because his father died in 1931, and ah, um, his father had had this clothing store, which at one time did very well, but was really limping along, so there wasn't very much money. And um, and he was in no rush to get married, although I wanted to get married. And finally we were married in 1936.

LEVINE: And would you give the names of your children?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. My oldest son is um, Richard. And um, my second son was Larry. And my daughter's name is Jane. And I have five grandchildren and one great grandchild.

LEVINE: When you think back about coming to this country at age 11 and making your life here, do you think the fact that you came here as an immigrant, as a little girl, made a difference on who you became? Or how you saw things? Or other aspects of your later life?

SOKOLOVE: Not really. Not really. Because, for me, it didn't. Because as I said before, somehow or other, I always wanted to be an American. I never um, I didn't think that anything I had left behind was, was um, anything that I wanted to keep with me.

LEVINE: Do you know what being an American meant to you?

SOKOLOVE: (clears throat) It meant, I think it meant, America First. Now whether this is true or not, I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe being Jewish first. But to me it's synonymous. I think you can be Jewish and you can be American.

LEVINE: Whereas in Russia, you couldn't be Russian and be Jewish.

SOKOLOVE: You could not. No. I always, when I came to New York, or the New York area, I would often hear my um, one of my sister-in-laws would ah, have an expression, "oh that's very goyish", and I always resented that. Because that was supposed to be not good. And I could not equate that with, with anything that was, that meant anything to me because I knew people who were goyish who dressed um, better than I did and had taste that was impeccable. It did not have the connotation to me that it did to her. Are you familiar with any such feeling?

LEVINE: Um, yes. Uh, huh. Yeah. That's kind of a prejudice....

SOKOLOVE: It's a terrible prejudice that I disapprove of.

LEVINE: When you think back over your life, what makes you feel satisfied that you've done or that you feel proud of?

SOKOLOVE: Um, I think probably my children. What else do I have? I don't, I never was terribly career minded. I did work, when my husband died. I worked in a drugstore selling cosmetics and, cause my, my brother owned a drugstore so I went to work for him. And then when I moved into the city I worked um, part-time, for a magazine. What I did, little odd jobs and things. Bookkeeping and stuff. Nothing important. Ever.

LEVINE: How was it that you came to move to New York?

SOKOLOVE: Well, when my, when my husband died, um, I lived in Adams, you know, a small town. The boys, ah, the older boy was in college and the younger one was having a terrible time in school. He was giving everybody a rough time. And so my brother, my brothers all lived in the metropolitan area, although my, my parents still lived in North Adams, but for me there was nothing left in Adams. I really didn't want to stay there anymore. I felt, ah, very vulnerable. I felt that all, when people see me, they see me as Abe's widow. And somehow or other it, it made me feel very, very sad. And I thought maybe if I lived in a place where nobody knew that I was anybody's widow, I

could, I could get along better. But that's, that is a whole other story. Um, because when I came and I lived around where my brothers, especially my older brother who kind of took over the running of me, and mine, and I had to fight his constant surveillance and influence. Which my children resented very much.

LEVINE: Do you think you've retained anything that you would call Russian?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. Oh, yes. I think there's a core of me that responds to Russian. The language. Um, the people. I, I have a feeling. For instance, I, (clears throat) during the war, or right after the second World War, there was a um, let's see, um, a factory in the where, Schenectady, New York. They did business with ah, Russia. Um, and they taught their people ah, how to get along with the Russian people. They taught them a little Russian. And that was on television. They had Russian lessons. But they were very technical because they were um, I think it was, it was um, what company was that? It wasn't the Sprague, because that was in North Adams. Anyway. They um, so, I decided that I wanted to, to listen in on this program. But it went on at six o'clock in the morning. And my husband encouraged me. As a matter of fact, he bought me a book. A little Russian primer. And I would get up at six o'clock in the morning before I got the children up for school, and I would come downstairs, make myself a cup of coffee and I would take notes on this little lesson. And um, and then I

would call my mother. (laughs) And I would say, you know what I learned this morning, Mom? I learned, you know, so many words and this and that. And I did, you know, Russian is, it's very easy to learn to read Russian because it's very phonetic. It's not like English. All you have to do is, you learn the alphabet and you just put the words together. But knowing, and then you learn so many words. But then, when you get into the grammar of it, it gets a little more difficult. But for a while there, I played around with it. And um, I was learning all these Russian words and being very proud of myself. So, so I did, I had, I liked ah, I liked Russian. For instance, um, I love the dancers. The Russian dancers. They kind of answer a certain thing in me that still responds, and that, especially the dancing. Cause I've always loved dancing. But um, I, I never did get too far with the Russian. Gave it up after a while. Getting up at six o'clock in the morning was not great.

LEVINE: And how about this period in your life?

SOKOLOVE: Now?

LEVINE: Now that you're retired and you're here in New York and you're children are grown?

SOKOLOVE: I enjoy whatever I can. Whatever little thing I find to enjoy, I do. Because I always say, well, it's later than you think. I'm not terribly well. My heart is not all that good, and I

realize that um, there may be not too much time left. So I try not to think about that, and as I say, I enjoy what I can. My grandchildren, my children. My remaining children. And I try not to get too depressed. If I do, I leave the house. And I go to the store or the library. (laughs)

LEVINE: How did you feel when Ellis Island became a national monument and opened as a museum? Did you feel any personal connection?

SOKOLOVE: I went there, I told you I went there once and I tried to find the name or whatever, however you do it. I could not. They didn't have it. Why that is I don't know. I tried to spell it various ways, so I don't know why that is. But that's the first time I've ever been there since I came through, and the only thing I noticed was the ah, that skylight, which is still there I think.

LEVINE: Mm, hm. Mm, hm. Did you feel like it was somehow a tribute to you and your family?

SOKOLOVE: Not really. I've never, I don't think I've ever sentimentalized it. Although from time to time people ask me questions like I'm supposed to know all about Russia. I guess it's in my bones, and I remember, what do I remember? I remember that we had a big orchard behind our house. That spanned three houses. And each home owned a section, a third of that. And they were apples and pears and cherries and a lot of fruit which my mother put

into cans and things for the winter. And we ate apples and things, fresh fruit and canned fruit. Not cans, but jars. Glass jars. And this is probably what sustained us, the vegetables and fruits that we got from the garden. We always had a cow. So that we had milk. When we came here, we had, my father had a horse, I told you. And my mother insisted that he buy a cow, because what were we going to eat without a cow. And, and we had a chick-, we had chickens. We lived sort of edge of town, and we had a chicken coop there. And she had chickens, so we had eggs. No wonder my father said, look what we have. We have milk, we have eggs, we have, and I guess it was the horn of plenty as far as my mother was concerned. So, um, he was happy about that. Once I remember the cow wasn't, she was, wasn't giving milk anymore and he sold the cow. And we got an idea that he had sold her to the butcher, the local butcher. And for weeks we would not touch meat. Her name was Bessie, because we thought we were eating part of Bessie and we weren't going to do that. So.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of that we haven't covered that has to do with starting out in Russia, coming to this country...?

SOKOLOVE: Well, I'm, I'm, you know, I'm still thinking of your question when you say, did I ever think that I was different because I had come here as an immigrant. But I say no, I don't think so, but I suppose there was a part of me, an

experience that I had, that the others didn't have and did it? Did it impede me or was I more broad-minded because of that, is a question that I don't know. Maybe so. Maybe in a way it made me different, yes.

LEVINE: Did you develop any heroes when you came to this country? People maybe that were in the public light that you, or actually individuals that you, that you had contact with that you looked up to and wanted to emulate?

SOKOLOVE: Well, as I say, my eighth grade teacher was one, and then later on of course, Eleanor Roosevelt was my heroine. Um, I think I probably had the maybe a little bit more of a European um, habit of looking up to people more than the Americans do. And thinking that.... My mother always said, always be friends with people you think know more than you do, because from them you can always learn something.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other attitudes or ideas that your mother or father tried to instill in you? Perhaps you did the same with your children, or not? Any ideas that they, that they thought were important for you to live by?

SOKOLOVE: I'll tell you. I think my mother and father, together with their whole generation, had a pattern of do's and don'ts. And I think they felt do the best you can for yourself. And do the right thing. And always look up, but don't look so far up that you're going to get yourself out of the running. And um, my mother-in-law, for instance, told her son to

marry a rich girl. He didn't, but she told him to. I never did that to my children.

LEVINE: Was your mother-in-law an immigrant?

SOKOLOVE: Oh, yes. Came, she and her husband were married here. They came here as young people.

LEVINE: From Russia as well?

SOKOLOVE: Yes. And I guess they came to New York City, originally. And they were married in New York City and then they came out to Massachusetts, for whatever reason, I don't know. But she, ah, she was, she wanted her son to marry a wealthy girl. I, I never had that kind of European attitude myself.

LEVINE: You think that was European. That attitude?

SOKOLOVE: Oh yeah. Yeah. I think, I thought, oh that definitely, the Europeans, the European Jews are very class conscious. For instance they, they have ah, sort of a, or they had a pecking order. Um, a tailor was better than a shoemaker and a tailor's daughter would not marry a shoemaker's daughter. Some such, you know, thing went on. And I think it held over to some degree when they came here. They sort of tried to... First, you know, in the town where, where I lived in North Adams, they had a lot of people who were related to each other who came here, because they were related, and they married one another. Cousins

married cousins by the dozens and one uncle married his niece and things like that. You know if somebody was nice, they didn't want to let him out of the family. He married so-and-so's daughter or cousin or I don't know what, until they realized that they were perpetuating a few little items that were not so great, such as diabetes. And so they stopped doing that eventually.

LEVINE: That was done a lot in the old country, wasn't it? Or not as much as, as here because ...

SOKOLOVE: Well, here in certain places it was illegal. For instance in Boston, I think it was illegal to marry a cousin. Um, yeah. My uncle, my father's brother, and his wife, were first cousins.

LEVINE: I hear that a lot, about cousins marrying. Mm, hm. How about your attitudes or what you tried to instill in your children? Could you say what that was?

SOKOLOVE: Um, I don't know what I wanted to instill in my children. I think I wanted them to be decent human beings. I wanted them to get as much education as they possibly could. Course they didn't do that, but I wanted them to. Um, I never told them to, I, I, stated my preference. I said that I would like it if they married Jewish people. The didn't. My daughter married a Jewish man. But ah, my oldest son always said, well, I intended to, Mom. It just didn't turn out that way. I might say, as their mother, that the Jewish girls really lost out.

LEVINE: Okay. I think that's a good place to end. I want to thank you so much for a wonderful interview. This has been Sonja Sokolove, and I've been speaking with her on November 19, 1995 in New York City. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm signing off.

SOKOLOVE: ... enigmatic and they go with who might be the best catch for them. Who might be and neither one of my sons looked like they were going to be that. Larry always said, when we talked about it, he'd say, what Jewish girl would have wanted to marry me, and this is true.

LEVINE: Okay well, we're at the end. (break in tape). I see. I've been speaking with Sonja Sokolove and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's November 19, 1995, we're here in New York City in Mrs. Sokolove's home and I am signing off.

END INTERVIEW