

**EI-799**

**JULIA LITVINOFF SLOANE**

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**RUSSIA, 1912**

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- **RUSSIA: ODESSA**
- **US: SPRINGFIELD, MA; DETROIT, MI**

**NOTE: EI-800/Sloane is a supplement to EI-799/Sloane.**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service.  
Today is Saturday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1996. I'm in the city of Springfield,  
Massachusetts and I'm here with Julia Sloane.

SLOANE: Right.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Sloane came from Russia, 1922, 1922, she's not exactly sure. She  
believes she was nine years old at the time. Not? Lower? Lower. Well,

I'll let her explain it. Anyway, Mrs. Sloane, thank you for letting me come. Can we begin by giving me your birth date please?

SLOANE: January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1912.

SIGRIST: 1912. Now, if you came in 1921, approximately you would have been about nine years old.

SLOANE: Yeah, this is my guess.

SIGRIST: And what was your name as you were born in Russia?

SLOANE: My maiden name?

SIGRIST: Well—or even your first name if it were different.

SLOANE: My—my first name in Russia?

SIGRIST: Yes.

SLOANE: Yulia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

SLOANE: It spells like Julia.

SIGRIST: J-U-L-I-A.

SLOANE: A—I presume that that's—that's how it's the -- translated.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

SLOANE: Litvinoff. L-I-T—you want to write it in?

SIGRIST: Please.

SLOANE: All right. L-I-T-V-I-N-O-F-F, like in Frank.

SIGRIST: Where in Russia were you born?

SLOANE: Odessa.

SIGRIST: In the city of Odessa?

SLOANE: Right, Black Sea.

SIGRIST: Do you—do you know anything about your birth? About the circumstances around your birth or the actual delivery?

SLOANE: [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you?

SLOANE: Oh—oh, yeah. I came too short a time after my sister. There is—there are only eleven months between us and I expect—I-- I was certainly was not planned. I'm sure about that. And I probably wasn't welcome because it's difficult for a woman in those days to have one kid right after another. But of course, I didn't know anything about it. But the difficulty showed itself because of the historical period in which we were living, wherein—

SIGRIST: While you're talking, I'm just going to fix your microphone.

SLOANE: Yeah. Wherein, Mama had to go to the market to exchange a dress a skirt or whatever for a chicken or some eggs so we could eat. We never went hungry because between my father's ingenuity and my mother's ingenuity, we survived. The purpose was to survive. Um, am I getting too detailed?

SIGRIST: No, no, this is exactly the kind of information.

SLOANE: Okay. Okay. Okay. I remember—of course, you know, I—I thought I was five, seven. I must have been—must have been older. We—when we had no food and mama couldn't swap whatever she had left, all we had was flour. So mama browned some flour in a frying pan, no oil or anything of course. In other words, it did not become a white sauce or anything. Just the flour that was browned and we took spoons and we ate that. And I remember—I must have been quite young because I remember being very proud that I could—I had enough saliva to wet that flour before I started to cough. All the adults were coughing and all the rest of it. You know, you take dry flour. And I imagine my mother had a—had a sense of humor or a willing to survive or whatever it took because that was fun. It was fun for me. Of course, it was fun for me because I was so good at it, you know. It was -- I finally accomplished something. So we survived.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about where you lived in Odessa?

SLOANE: We rented a part of a very large apartment from a general's widow. The rooms were, you know, very high and large. Of course, I was small, but even discounting that; they were still large and small [sic]. The windows were big. You know, everything was big when you're small. It was a kind of a prestigious place because when we started to look for an

apartment when we came to America and, you know, our background was where we came from. That kind of an apartment. The only thing that vaguely approached it were mansions. Who could afford a mansion? It was quite a change.

SIGRIST: Did you live right in the city of Odessa?

SLOANE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Right downtown.

SLOANE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how many rooms your—your flat had?

SLOANE: Our part of the apartment was? Well, see, we had a very large bedroom, living room, kitchen. You know, it was just a part of an apartment, so we had maybe four rooms, five rooms, but they were big.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece—a piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind that you remember vividly from your childhood in the apartment?

SLOANE: Oh, God, the only thing that I remember is the samovar, and how mama used to make tea.

SIGRIST: Can you describe how a samovar is used?

SLOANE: Oh, yes. Samovar is a very—you know what it looks like. It's a very large urn. In the middle is a pipe. On the bottom is a soup sized—soup plate size area where you have charcoal and your maid takes it outdoors. Of course, you put the water in the—in the s--s--furc--, the big

container. Your maid takes it out in the yard becau--and puts the pipe on the top of the—[coughs]—excuse me. Samovar, so that you wouldn't have smoke in the house, and she lights the—the charcoal. And when the water begins to boil, she douses the—the furc-- so-called furnace. Or I don't know what she does, but it isn't burning anymore. And she lugs it into the house in the dining room and she puts it on the large metal tray, silver coated probably.

Anyway, Mama serves tea by having an essence tea pot, where she has, you know, a handful of tea and she pours the bubbling water and puts it on the top of the—the samovar, so it's hot. And she takes the cup and puts in a few teaspoons of that very, very strong tea essence and then puts it under the faucet in the samovar, and she opens the little faucet and there is your cup—glass of tea.

SIGRIST: And what time of the day would you have tea?

SLOANE: Oh, God.

SIGRIST: Or for what occasions would you have tea?

SLOANE: All the time. [Laughs] Oh, I have to tell you this. At the time of—of—what do you call it? At this point, my development, my maturity, I lose words. Famine. At the time of the famine, sugar was a rarity and of course papa, being a genius, etcetera, etcetera, we had some sugar and mama would give us a lump, and we'd break it in half and put it in our tea and and stir it and she says [whispers], "Shhh, don't stir it so loud because the neighbors will know that we have tea." And there was a funny comparison going on in the neighborhoods, you know. How to save—if you had a little sugar, how to save it. Some people said well you just put it in your mouth and don't dissolve it. Just drink the tea

through that lump and this way and that way and the other way. Papa devised a way of—he would put the lump of sugar in the front of him and he would look at it and drink his tea with no sugar, and he had a name for it, which would be meaningless translated from Russian.

SIGRIST: But say it anyway, please, if you know it.

SLOANE: *Pritsel naskvoz* [through sight] or something like that. It translated would be like “through the eye,” you know. He would look at the lump of sugar and drink his tea. I drink a lot of tea now and I drink it without sugar because that’s how I like it.

SIGRIST: Were there other types of food that were hard to come by, other than sugar? I mean were there other things that were very difficult to get in Odessa at that time?

SLOANE: Everything.

SIGRIST: But what is everything? What?

SLOANE: It was famine.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about the famine a little bit and what you—?

SLOANE: We did not experience it because of what I just mentioned about my father and my mother. Hmm. And of course, we kids, we didn’t—that’s—we didn’t know any different. You know, that’s how it is. There are hungry people here in America in Springfield today and they are painfully aware of it because other people have food. They see things on TV and this is gonna do th-- we didn’t have that.

SIGRIST: How did your parents cope to—to acquire foodstuffs?

SLOANE: My father was what he called apolitical. He did not belong to any particular party. They didn't root for one or the other. He was a survivor. He was gracious to—he was in international trade in his business. He was dealing with the dry goods, yard goods and stuff like that.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

SLOANE: Isaake.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SLOANE: Isaak? Ew, your guess is as good as mine. I-S—I know it has double A. I-S—or maybe even double S, too. I-S-I-A-K. Isaake. It's Isaac.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

SLOANE: Okay, Isaake. Isaake Litvinoff. When we came to America, oh, he'd have to go through this kind of a song and dance every time he—he'd be introduced, and that wasn't for him.

SIGRIST: Talk about him in Odessa and his business and what he was doing and that sort of thing.

SLOANE: I did not know. I was a little girl. I wasn't supposed to know that stuff. Beside which, I really didn't know. He was—I—my interpretation was that he was a salesman for international trade and he was working for a dry goods establishment and this is what he dealt with. When we came to America, by the way, this is the first kind of work that he did. Well, of course, first we had to learn the language.

SIGRIST: Well, let's keep you in Odessa for—for right now. Let's not get to America yet. What are your recollections of your father in Russia? What do you remember about being with your father at that time?

SLOANE: My father, like every—every kid's father, was the most handsome man in the world. He had a little red moustache. You know, the turned up, the what do they call it? Handlebar?

SIGRIST: Yes.

SLOANE: And a goatee, red goatee. There is a guy here in the neighborhood who's growing a moustache and he could not figure out how the heck to keep that shape of the so on and so forth, and I remembered at that point. My father had a contraption, I don't know. It looked like a very small brassiere that he would shape his moustache, wax it, of course. How else, you know? And put this thing across his upper lip over his ears and that's how he would sleep. And of course, it kept its shape and it was beautiful and all the rest of it.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you do with your father when you were a child in Russia?

SLOANE: Not a thing! He was the father and when he was sitting at his desk and doing whatever it is that father's do, we had to keep quiet. This is how my sister and I became artists—not artists, but anyway, we started. What do you do? You draw. We developed a method where my mother had large scissors and large scissors have large ovals for handling. You know, the handle thing? We would make a row of these ovals and fill them in with faces of different expressions and so forth and so on.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did your father like to do for himself? When he wasn't working, how would he spend time to please himself?

SLOANE: He would probably read or something. Read the paper maybe or—I don't—he was—this is—this—this is how impressed I was with his activity, you see. I can't even think of it. He would sit at his desk. One time he—he developed a system of translating weights and measures from Russian to—he was in the international trade—into weights and measures of European—other European countries. Which consisted of, you know, a chart where you make two and two is four and you meet in the middle, etcetera, etcetera? Well, this is what it was and this was supposed to be a—a thing of genius. And he—he got a lot of credit and so forth for it, and in that time, by the way, there was no money, you know. Paper money, or anyway, we didn't have it. What was I going to say? Um—well, this was this trade, of course. I—I can't—just—it slips me.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

SLOANE: Elizabeth. Lisabetta.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that in Russian?

SLOANE: Elizabeth!

SIGRIST: But you said it—is it spelled differently in Russian than in English?

SLOANE: No, I think—

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

SLOANE: Rosenwasser. Rose water.

SIGRIST: R-O-S-E-N-W-A-S-S-E-R.

SLOANE: Something like that.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Tell me a little bit about what you remember of your mother and her personality.

SLOANE: My mother was the most beautiful woman in the world and she was. My mother was an actress and—[coughs]—she tragically gave up her acting when she married my father because she had children. [starts to whisper] And when my father let us—for instance, he would let me know that I misbehaved. And I did something terribly dreadful—I must have been five or seven. He would insult me by saying, “Don’t,” speaking out, “don’t be a child!” I didn’t know enough to say, “But I am.” We were young ladies from year one, I think. I don’t know. I have pictures of my sister and me. I should have hunted it up. Beautiful picture, you know, in little—in little lace dresses with little socks, little white shoes.

SIGRIST: What’s your sister’s name?

SLOANE: Valentina.

SIGRIST: And was she older, younger?

SLOANE: She was eleven months older.

SIGRIST: That’s right, you said that earlier. Is there a story that you could tell me about—?

SLOANE: Oh, God!

SIGRIST: You and your sister in Odessa? Something you did together?

SLOANE: My sister—[voice breaking up]—I can't think of her as yet. She died of Alzheimers.

SIGRIST: I'm sorry.

SLOANE: But it's been five years—but—and we were not very close in anything, really.

SIGRIST: What about as children, though? I mean were there—

SLOANE: That was it.

SIGRIST: Things that you shared in—in Russia?

SLOANE: Well, we drew faces and we were supposed to be quiet in the house. You see, my sister was a gorgeous, beautiful child, girl and woman and my mother never f-- let me forget it. But she was. She truly was. She had—we both had red hair. Hers was blond red, mine was darker. And mine was coarse, heavy hair which was terrible. But it was, you know—it was very good hair because it was so heavy. We both had long hair until she had typhus. You know, there were any illness going around, she was a—a delicate creature. She would get it and she had to—don't ask me why, but that's what it—that's what had to be done, had her head shaved for whatever reason. And of course, you know, they grabbed-- they sat me on the chair and took off my hair, too. And after that, I must have had—anyway, it was funny how I had bumps in my head. It wasn't egg-shaped. But anyhow—

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about when she had typhus and that whole period?

SLOANE: Oh, yes. It's not only that she had typhus. Val would pick up anything that—that was going and there were all kinds of illnesses and she had everything. One of my sons, you know, is—when he was growing up, if somebody sneezed three blocks away, he'd come down with pneumonia. Not that—you know, I'm exaggerating. I'm always exaggerating.

SIGRIST: She was very susceptible to illness.

SLOANE: Oh, God, she was a very delicate creature. She became a dancer. She was very attractive, but she had mannerisms so she didn't fit in any particular group like Martha Graham or Anna Sokolov [PH] or somebody like that. She did study with all of them then. [coughs]

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about why your family wanted to come to the United States? Whose decision was it?

SLOANE: Mama needed—she—she evidently was insecure or something and her mother and half brother were here in Detroit, and you have to be—I don't remember what the—what the terminology is. Somebody has to bring you over. So Uncle Dave did and so we came to—to Detroit.

SIGRIST: Well, how did your father feel about it?

SLOANE: Well, mama was not—she was under such a colossal pressure, you know, in this change of environment and the government and who --

nobody knew what was coming the following day and it was pretty—  
pretty bad.

SIGRIST: This is the period of the Bolshevik revolution.

SLOANE: It was just the beginning of the revolution.

SIGRIST: But what do you remember about how your life was affected by those events?

SLOANE: Well, this—this is what I'm trying to recall. So mother was under great pressure and she became a little bit odd because it was too much for her.

SIGRIST: But—but how was your family affected—I mean why—why was that great pressure for her? What was going on that made it difficult?

SLOANE: Well, you know, she had to supply a meal and all that stuff. There—there wasn't any. My sister was a sickly kid, as I mentioned, and she had to have chicken, wholly—chicken breasts.

SIGRIST: Where was your father at this time? Was he still part of the family?

SLOANE: Oh, yeah. My father never left. And see—oh, yes, about the money. Even, you know, in where he worked, import-export concern, they didn't pay him in money. There wasn't such an animal around much, but in goods. For instance, I had the most magnificent lovely Swiss watch -- which was part of papa's salary. I had it for many, many years.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the other things that he was paid for—paid with that you had around the house?

SLOANE: With? Matches. You know, when the electricity was out --like it is in North Carolina right now where my—where one of my—my baby is. You know, you had candles and stuff like that. They didn't have the flashlights. Matches. We had lots of matches. You couldn't eat them, that's the point.

SIGRIST: Is this where the sugar came from? Was he ever paid in sugar? Is that why—

SLOANE: Yes, this is how we had a little bit of sugar. Oh, that was a—a godsend. Ah, things like that, you see. But mama still had to go to the market and change her clothes or whatever it is, for—or pots and pans she would give to the farmers. We had nothing to cook, so we didn't need that many pots and pans. But you know, they had their stock in chickens and so forth.

[End of Side A]      [Begin Side B]

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your father felt, though, about having to leave his home? And how did—initially, before you go to—

SLOANE: Well, I can tell you how I felt.

SIGRIST: Yes, okay.

SLOANE: Because another person—I can't crawl into another person's heart and brain. I felt terrible ---because we had a fountain where we lived in Odessa. It was dry because of the water shortage, whatever, but we would play around it and in it. And when my sister, years—years later and years ago, went on a trip, she went to Odessa. And she went to

where we lived, [unclear] and she wanted to see the fountain. Oh, we had different memories of that fountain. I know that it was round, but she quote, knew, that it was oval. So part of her mission, she left the group. You know, she had a trip sideways to go to Odessa and she went to that building where we lived, that compound building. It was sort of a compound around a big, big courtyard and the fountain was there. And she came and there was no fountain. So she wanted to know what happened.

She asked this one and that one and the other one and so forth, who knows, you know. And then somebody's, "Oh!" There was an old, old hag a hundred and five years old, whatever it was. And they went and anyway, they got—and—and Val's Russian was very good because she was reading when we left. I was just learning to read. So her Russian was, you know, very fluent. She spoke to this little old lady and she asked her about the fountain and the old lady couldn't remember the way I don't remember now. and she finally said, "Oh, yes. Uh-huh. Oh, that was blown up. We were bombarded during the Second World War and so it was blown up. So they cleaned up the place. It's nothing." You know, it didn't mean anything to her, you know.

It meant a lot to Val, and when Val came back with the pictures, there was the entrance to that courtyard and there was a gargoyle on the top of the decoration of the entrance, which I completely forgot. But when she showed me that snapshot, I had a deep and—and great reaction. It was very meaningful to me, home. No, mama wanted to come. You know, her mother, her half brother were here. Well, that was sort of an excuse because she wanted to get the hell out of there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about getting ready to leave Odessa? What did the family have to do before they left Odessa?

SLOANE: Well, we had to—oh, yes. We had to pack, take practically nothing with us, and we couldn't take money or jewelry or anything like that. And Mama was a very honest woman, but this is where she lived and she was also not a dummy. So I think I mentioned this. She made herself a blouse with [coughs]—with a bunch of little buttons and snaps underneath, but the buttons were not functional. They were not functional because she had put a diamond in each one. And when we were leaving and the first leg of the trip—no, the first leg was on the—on the Black Sea. It was a very rough ride and the only person who never got seasick was me. Well, I still have never gotten seasick. But anyhow—

SIGRIST: You were talking about putting the diamonds in the buttons.

SLOANE: Yeah, she had diamonds and then she also made us little—she got little bitty dollies for us, which hadn't pla---we hadn't played for dollie—dollies for years. Couple, three years because we were, you know, bigger girls and she made a little—all little beds for them and so forth. And when the conductor went through examining the stuff, we were to stretch out and quote, sleep with our hand over that little dolly with the mattress and the pillow full of money, which we did not know.

And her little blouse that she wore at Ellis Island when the men and women were separated and examined physically for any contraband, anything hidden, and of course the most fruitful place for women to hide whatever it is would be in their brassieres, especially well-busted women. And of course, mama just opened up her blouse and she said, "See," and she, you know, shook her brassiere, nothing there because everything was in the buttons. And everything in the little dolly beds and

pillows was probably paper money. I have no idea what was there, but we learned to act very well, especially the act of sleeping.

SIGRIST: When—when you left Odessa, where did you travel to?

SLOANE: We went to Sophia and from there—no, we went on the Black Sea to Sophia and then I don't remember how we got—we went to Germany. I think it must have been on a train, but I don't know. Whatever.

SIGRIST: You have no recollection of that particular journey?

SLOANE: Well, from—from I think it was Hamburg. When we went from Germany into New York, that of course was by water.

SIGRIST: So you got on the ship at Hamburg, is what you—

SLOANE: Probably. Probably.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

SLOANE: No.

SIGRIST: No. Do you remember during—do you remember how long it took from the time you left Odessa to the time you got to Hamburg?

SLOANE: Oh, it was a long time. It wasn't like taking a plane and landing the—that evening. No, it was—

SIGRIST: Weeks, months?

SLOANE: And we stayed in Sophia, I think, either overnight or a couple of nights, days or whatever before our train, bus, whatever—whatever took us to the next lap.

SIGRIST: Were there any other complications along the way that you can recall?

SLOANE: There were no complications. Everything was smooth. Even mama's blouse and everything, it was smooth.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about when you saw the ship for the first time? Of course, you'd been on a ship—you'd been on boats before, if you went—didn't you go on a boat to get to Sophia on the Black Sea? Did I hear you say that?

SLOANE: Yeah. Yeah, the Black Sea.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the ocean liner in Hamburg?

SLOANE: No, I tell you, there were very few things that impressed me and the least of all that I remember was a great disappointment. We were looking forward to finally seeing the Statue of Liberty, that great, big—it was just a little—little statue, you know. I guess we were more sophisticated than I—than I thought. I don't know, but anyway.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being on the ship coming to America?

SLOANE: I liked it.

SIGRIST: Yes, why?

SLOANE: Well, I like water. We were brought up—we would go to the Black Sea every morning in the summertime and we would walk back. There was a certain place you could smell it two blocks away, where we had our lunch, which was borscht. Do you know what borscht is? It's a beet soup, either cabbage or beet and it's very good.

SIGRIST: But about being on the ship on the Atlantic, what—what sticks out in your mind about that experience? You said you enjoyed it, but what did you do that you enjoyed so much while you were on the ship?

SLOANE: Just the water, looking at the water.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept on the ship?

SLOANE: Yes, we had—we were sleeping in hammocks. It wasn't in the cots that were stable. So the hammocks would move with the—with the flow of the water and I liked that. Oh, nobody else liked it because they were seasick. No wonder, you're not very happy when that happens.

SIGRIST: Did your parents get seasick?

SLOANE: My mother did, of course, and Val of course. I think they all did, if I remember correctly.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long the ship took to get—to go from Hamburg to New York?

SLOANE: Oh, it was a long time. It was a long time and Val and I would walk on the deck. And, of course, we were always to call attention. Because two little redheads and we were trained to curtsy if an older person spoke to us. So we would dip like two little mannequins or fish or something. It

was quote-unquote, cute I imagine. Of course, I didn't know it at that time. We were doing the proper thing. That's, you know, we were brought up in a very old-fashioned European way. 1890's way. Mama was a very prudish, sensitive woman and she was beautiful.

SIGRIST: And young ladies were expected to behave in a certain way.

SLOANE: Young ladies were young ladies. They weren't kids. God forbid, you know. But nevertheless, in spite of all of that, I used to jump rope and enjoy it. But when it came to—what is that game called where you draw with the chalk on the sidewalk?

SIGRIST: Hopscotch.

SLOANE: Hopscotch. Hopscotch really wasn't for young ladies. You know why? Because on the spaces that are—you know you have one two and three. So on that, you have to part your knees. That wasn't—that wasn't ladylike.

SIGRIST: You mentioned when the ship came into New York you were disappointed the Statue of Liberty was smaller than you had expected.

SLOANE: It was a real statue.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the ship docking and going to Ellis Island?

SLOANE: Ah, not much, but I remember Ellis Island quite vividly because that was the first spot, *Amerika*. It was the dome impressed me. Does it have a dome? I remember it having it.

SIGRIST: It has a vaulted ceiling.

SLOANE: Yeah, a vaulted ceiling. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you see there? What did it look like?

SLOANE: Well, at that time when we embarked, it was crowded with people because the whole ship, you know. Consequently, we didn't see very much and the aim, the purpose was not to lose sight of our Mama and Papa. We probably might have even held hands because that's what we generally did.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your mother had to open her blouse. Do you remember what you had to do as a—as a girl during the examination?

SLOANE: We did—it was meaningless to me. I had nothing to hide. I was a little skinny malink [sic]. But this was not—if I recall, this was not in the island, but as soon as we came out in the New York, big, big station, ah. Papa, of course, went wherever men go with important papers and, you know, showing his documents. Mama and we looked around where to sit down on the bench and there were a lot of people sitting around, and there was one bench that had a Black woman with her baby sitting in one end and there was the whole space. So we sat down there and Mama looked at this little baby. The girl must have been two years old or something. Oh, and she was cute. She was adorable and Mama looked at her mother and she wanted to tell her that, you know, she had a beautiful little daughter, but she did not have any words that the other woman could understand.

So she did the natural thing. She bent down and kissed the little girl. This was in what, 1921, '22, whatever and the mother moved away and

then she took her little girl and I told my mother, [whispers] “Mama, we d-  
- they don’t do that here.” She looked at me like, crazy fool, and she  
said, “You don’t kiss babies in Amer—in America you don’t kiss babies?”  
and I tried to tell her that in America there was a differentiation in the  
color. And mama didn’t say it, but she looked at me like, you know, it  
didn’t make sense and ever since then, I have been wondering and  
wondering and wondering where the hell did I get that idea. I had never  
seen a—a—an African American before in my life, but this is what  
happened. Of course, since then, Mama and I have changed places,  
but—but I cannot for the life of me imagine what prompted me to say  
that. It had been bothering me all these years that I came from a—an  
environment where there weren’t any people of any color but pink, us!  
Or, you know, white, but what is called as a Whitey.

SIGRIST: And where did you say that this incident took place? You said you didn’t  
think it was at Ellis Island.

SLOANE: No, it was just as we came out. It was in the New York Station.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

SLOANE: You know?

SIGRIST: The train station? The train station?

SLOANE: Uh, yes. Yes, that big—

SIGRIST: Where were you going? What—

SLOANE: We were going to New York to go to Detroit.

SIGRIST: And is that what you did?

SLOANE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. What do you remember about going from New York to Detroit?

SLOANE: Oh, we took a train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that?

SLOANE: No, it was just like all the other—it was like European trains or anything else, except we didn't have a language.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about what it was like to learn English once you got here?

SLOANE: Oh, I can tell you. It was hard. It's easier for children than it is for adults, but papa told us that "Unless you can speak the lang—the native tongue, you're nonexistent," and we had to work at it. First of all, you know, somewhere like papa or somebody, we heard that American, the language is a dog's language, meaning it was hard. But what do I know? Dog's language is it sounds like dog. So Val and I—Val, my sister, would practice saying "How do you do," and we would do, "Howww do you—howww do you," you know, make it sound like—. But eventually, I think I'm speaking to you in English. [Laughs] Oh, and I imagine that it was harder for my parents. They never lost the accent. I lost the accent, but not the intonation, but that's okay. That's why I suppose people can always tell on the phone who's calling. [Chuckles]

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about being put into school?

SLOANE: Oh, yes, that was also very hard.

SIGRIST: And that was in Detroit?

SLOANE: That was in Detroit and we were, let me see. Val was close to nine, so I was—you know, I don't know the exact age. If—if I'm repeating myself, stop me.

SIGRIST: No, go right ahead. This is interesting —

SLOANE: No, because we always were taught, we learned, we knew our age was a couple—at least a couple of years younger than the actuality.

SIGRIST: And why was that again, can you explain that?

SLOANE: The original development of that prevalent, you know, use of it I suppose was because to keep boys from being conscripted into Tsarist Army at the right age, which was quite early. At least to give them a few more years, but the girls, I imagine, it was just to keep up with the boys so that eventually they could marry the kids their own age or whatever. Anyway, we were always younger, so it was difficult to know. What was that—?

SIGRIST: You were talking about going to school. Being put in a different school.

SLOANE: Oh, yes. So [clears throat] even being all that much younger, we were very much older than the—the first graders or was it—no, it wasn't kindergarten. It must have been the first grade, but we came there with no language, and unlike today where this is a consideration, you know, we had -- we were on our own. And here we were with kids for the first time in a long time. At least, you know, that's how I felt, but you couldn't

talk to them because it was difficult. But you know, every day when we came from school, we would settle with the books and—and practice, practice, practice and learn vocabulary.

SIGRIST: What about you were treated in school? Not learning English so much, but just relating to the other students.

SLOANE: I remember an incident that really hit me between the eyes. That was in my early school years. We were supposed to recite a poem, which is what I did since year one, I think. My mother was an actress and she used to-- you know, TV or anything like that forget it -- entertain by reciting poetry and she was sentimental and gorgeous. And, of course, you know I at the age of five, seven, whatever it was, was a copy of Mama because that's the way, you know, I saw. This is how you do it. I'd be put in a chair and—and-- and you know, to--. So when we were in the—must have been the first grade and, you know, it was dramatic.

So I had memorized a poem about Columbus. I don't remember it now, but there is a part where it says "In the break of day he said, 'Sail on, sail on,'" you see. So, in the—you know, you had to be—that was a dramatic thing, and who knows what it meant "in the break of day was dawn," but the day breaks, you know, that's dramatic. I gave it all I had and when the—the kids giggled, the teacher indicated and then she tried to explain it to me. But you know, what did the teacher know? When it says "the day breaks," it's a drama. You just don't say, "In the break of day, he said, 'Sail on, sail on.'" That was my experience, but I learned.

SIGRIST: Did you find that the kids ever made fun of you personally because you were an immigrant?

SLOANE: Um, I don't remember being pained by any of that. I imagine not. I would guess, and this is strictly a guess, that the teacher might have mentioned, since they never had a foreign student, that this little girl, or this big girl doesn't know the language. And so if she tries to—to, you just help her and explain or something, because the kids weren't bad. Or if they were bad, I did not know it, but that—that wasn't my problem.

SIGRIST: Did your parents, that you know of, have any trouble with people making fun of them because they were immigrants?

SLOANE: No, but you see, I had the kind of a European pride that did not permit too much familiarity. My mother's neighbor would call her by her first name, I think, and I was incensed. And I told this neighbor that my mother's name is Mrs. LitvInoff and if you can't say—if you can't—if that's too difficult for you to pronounce, you idiot, you just call her Mrs. L. But you know, you don't address this big gorgeous woman. Mama said, "Eh, don't worry about it," you know.

SIGRIST: Did your parents attempt to learn English?

SLOANE: What?

SIGRIST: Did your parents attempt to learn English?

SLOANE: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What job did your father get? You said he went into the dry goods business in Detroit, also.

SLOANE: Yes. You see, he started as a -- just a clerk because he couldn't talk, but eventually became a salesman and eventually was the best

salesman and he got prizes of silver, a ten dollar thing or whatever. You know, whatever the business, and so he was a big shot. He—he'd be a big shot wherever he went, at least we thought so.

SIGRIST: So he didn't have any particular troubles that you know adapting to the United States?

SLOANE: Oh, of course he did.

SIGRIST: He did?

SLOANE: Language. It's very difficult.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about your parents attempting to learn English?

SLOANE: Ah, well, of course, they always spoke with a Russian accent. Papa maybe he worked harder or he gave it more attention or whatever it is. [coughs] He got it much, much earlier than Mama. Mama, well, she didn't study it as much. We spoke Russian in the family always until—excuse me, until I left at age eighteen, I spoke Russian.

SIGRIST: And that was the only language?

SLOANE: In the family?

SIGRIST: Yes.

SLOANE: Of course. This is why, you see, today I have the—the hangover from my very early experience of the people ---of forcing the Americans—the advertisements, you know. Grocery stores, it says the same thing in

Spanish. At one time I was going to learn—try to learn Spanish just because, you know, I wanted to take a course and why not Spanish. You know, so much of it, but it wasn't that way. Oh, my father, when he—when we first came, he started looking for a job even before, you know, he had much of the language. He said, "You know, this is a crazy, crazy language." He was given an address where they needed whatever it was and he couldn't find this street. So he asked the—the man, "Where is Gretchy One?" "We don't have such a—such a street as Gretchy One." "Yes, see, it's Gretchy One." Grashon [PH], that was the name of the street, Grashon. So the—these little incidents, as I remember now.

SIGRIST: When did you become a citizen?

SLOANE: We were supposed to be here whatever number of years and so papa became a citizen. We were derivative citizens from papa.

SIGRIST: So he did it and then because—you and your sister both?

SLOANE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

SLOANE: The family.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Sloane, what we're going to do, because I want to talk about your experience with the WPA at Ellis, but I want to put that on a different tape than this.

SLOANE: Okay.

SIGRIST: So we're going to sign off here.

SLOANE: All right.

SIGRIST: I'm going to pop in a new tape and then we'll talk about that. So this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Julia Sloane on Saturday, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1996 in Springfield. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]