

EI-809

LILLIAN HADGI

BIRTHDATE: SEPTEMBER 20, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 27, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 90

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: DOUGLAS TARR

RUSSIA, 1906

AGE: 3 MONTHS

SHIP: UNKNOWN

PORT: ROTTERDAM

RESIDENCES: BOSTON (MATTAPAN), MASSACHUSETTS

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, September 27th, 1996. I'm at the Jewish Nursing Home in Long Meadow, Massachusetts, and I'm here with Lillian Hadgi. Mrs. Hadgi came from Russia in 1907. She was just a baby at the time, about three months old, and she's going to tell us experiences that her parents had told her. Her mother had told her stories. I also want to say for the sake of the tape that the ventilation system is quite loud and will probably be picked up on the recording, and a telephone may ring, also. Mrs. Hadgi, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

HADGI: Well, September 20th, 1907.

SIGRIST: 1907, and we should just say for the sake of the tape that your—your son just threw you a surprise party.

HADGI: Yes. My son, do you want his name?

SIGRIST: Yeah, sure.

HADGI: Well, you had it, David Lawrence Sokol. David L. Sokol, S-O-K-O-L.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Because when we were meeting, you were telling me about—

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: The big party that he had thrown for you.

HADGI: Yes. [coughs]

SIGRIST: Yeah. You were born in 1906 or 1907?

HADGI: 1906.

SIGRIST: 1906. September 20th, 1906 and your family came to the United States in 1907?

HADGI: Well, it was the three months—yes, we came in about December. About that time.

SIGRIST: December?

HADGI: I was born in September.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HADGI: And we must have come here about—I was only three months old when we came here.

SIGRIST: So actually you—

HADGI: So it was about December that we came.

SIGRIST: Of 1906?

HADGI: I don't remember that part. We must have been about that.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, if you were born in September and you think your family came in December of the same year.

HADGI: Just my mother and me.

SIGRIST: Just your mother and you, and you think it was—you were three months old at that time.

HADGI: At that time.

SIGRIST: It must have been December of 1906.

HADGI: Yeah, maybe it was.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Why don't we start talking about your mother? What was her name?

HADGI: My mother's name was T-E-M-M-A, Temma.

SIGRIST: T-E-M-M-A, Temma.

HADGI: A, yes.

SIGRIST: And what was her—

HADGI: Maiden name?

SIGRIST: Maiden name.

HADGI: Markowitz.

SIGRIST: Spell that.

HADGI: M-A-R-K-O-W-I-T-Z.

SIGRIST: And then what was her married name, which would be your maiden name?

HADGI: Yes. Temma Berish, B-E-R-I-S-H.

SIGRIST: B-E-R-I-S-H.

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Which is your maiden name.

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Berish. What do you know about your mother's family background?

HADGI: Well, my mother—most of her family were in New York City when we came to this country, and my father was to meet us in New York at Ellis Island, I believe. But he couldn't make it, so he got in touch with my mother's family. My father was in Boston, Boston, Massachusetts and he lived there with his family, which were relatives, aunts and uncles.

But my mother's family all—they were all in New York City, around that area. So we came to a brother, my mother's oldest brother, which his name was Philip Markowitz and they met us at the boat at Ellis Island. Did you want me to tell you before I got there?

SIGRIST: Yes. Well, actually, what I'd like to start is talking about what you know about your mother's background. Her life in Europe before they came.

HADGI: Oh, she had a beautiful life. My mother was a gorgeous, beautiful, young lady and I have pictures of her in my room when she was a little older, when she was in this country. Here—

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me in words what she looked like?

HADGI: Well, she was blonde. A towhead, beautiful blue eyes and a beautiful young woman and she was nineteen years old when I was born. And my father at that time was already in this country, and he had to run away from the Bolsheviks, or else they would have called him into the service. And he and a friend went underground, how they got to this country I'll never know. He never did tell me that part, but they came to New York, which must have been Ellis Island, I'm sure. [clears throat] My mouth is all dry.

SIGRIST: That's quite all right. Take a sip of water, if you want. [pause]

HADGI: And—and after my mother's brother met us at the whatever—Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: At Ellis Island. We're talking actually about your father coming to the United States first.

HADGI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How many years before did he come?

HADGI: Well, he left my mother pregnant, so it must have been about five or six months. [clears throat] And therefore I was born in Russia.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

HADGI: Yes. [chuckles] When my mother came home from work, she was working in a beautiful designer's shop where they made beautiful shirts for the peasants and for soldiers that are in the service. And she used to do beautiful designing work and she was a beautiful lady and she became—when she became pregnant, she worked for a little while and then she stopped, and then she went back again to work. And she didn't

want to come to this country until she was over her problem, having a child. So when she felt that she was ready to have that child, she still worked in this designer shop and she came home that evening and it happened to be the night before our New Year's, which was called Rosh Hashanah, and she fell on the doorstep and they had to call the doctor, or the midwife because I was ready to get into this world. And they carried her into the house and there's where I was born, into her mother's house, and I was—they delivered me, and I was a very beautiful little baby. Also, light hair, light face, plump. I once had a picture but my aunt—one of my aunts stole it. I never could get it back.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you how you behaved as a baby?

HADGI: Beautiful, but this is what I want to talk about. The part that we—when we came to the—we arrived in Rotterdam. That's a part of Holland, I believe, and there was a lot of people on the deck on the—what do they call that?

SIGRIST: The deck of the ship?

HADGI: The deck of the—not the ship. Before you—

SIGRIST: The dock?

HADGI: The dock.

SIGRIST: Before you get on the ship.

HADGI: And I had on a gorgeous little white cape and my mother carried me in her arms and a beautiful—it was in September. No, it was in December. I was dressed warm, but beautifully dressed. My mother made this whole outfit for me, and I was a very pretty baby. There was a gentleman on the dock who was an older man, but he used to love to come and see the people going and coming from different countries. He came from Holland and he spoke with an accent, a little bit of Jewish, something like that. It wasn't English, I'm sure. Mother didn't know English. And he said to my mother, "You have a beautiful child," in his language, and my mother got frightened. She was afraid of him. He had a beard and he looked dressed beautifully for an old man from an old country, and she was a beautiful lady. Beautiful lady, and when he approached her, said he wanted to look at the baby, could he hold the baby for a little while, and my mother, "No, no, no, no, no." In other words, she couldn't speak his language, so told him in her language, "Go away. Go away." And he said, "No, I just want to look at the baby for a little while, do you mind? She's so pretty." My mother said, "No, you can't see," in her language and he said, "If you let me hold the baby for a little while, maybe you'll let

me keep the baby for twenty years and after twenty years I will send her back to you. You will give me your address and where you're going to live, where you're going to be and I will send her back to you after twenty years. I will pay you a certain amount of money for letting me have the child," and my mother started hollering, "No, go away," in her language. "No, go away. Go away. You frighten me. Go away. Oh, no, you can't have my baby. I don't—get away from me!" And he insisted on standing near her, wanting to hold the baby. My mother was scared, frightened. So somebody had to come along and take that man away and they did. Told him to mind his own business, to go about his own way. But my mother was really scared and she kept the baby—she went to steerage, down below the deck and she got seasick. So she had to lay in bed most of the time and she had—I was with her in bed and she said she was nursing me the whole time we came to this country, because she was afraid to let go.

SIGRIST: That's a frightening story, really.

HADGI: Yes, yes. [coughs] I'll never forget that story. My mother told it to me. She cried.

SIGRIST: Do you happen to know the name of the ship that your mother came on?

HADGI: No.

SIGRIST: No. Tell me a little bit of what you know about your mother's parents and maybe her younger life.

HADGI: [coughs] My grandfather was a cobbler in Russia and my grandmother was a little old lady, a little lady. [coughs] They were both very beautiful people, and her family were all very pretty people. Her sisters, but she was the prettiest and the smartest of all. [coughs]

SIGRIST: That's all right, take your time.

HADGI: Oh.

SIGRIST: Do you want another sip of water?

HADGI: No, it's that—[coughs] It's a little something I developed in here.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you stories about when she was growing up with her parents?

HADGI: Yes, she had a wonderful life. [coughs] There were three sisters and two brothers and they were all wonderful people. Wonderful family.

They kept together. The father was a very smart man. The mother was a little old lady like—no, real little Russian lady, but a beautiful little lady. Therefore, most of the family was short, but my mother was about the tallest of the girls. She was five-three. I'm only five feet. And—and my sisters are taller.

SIGRIST: What—was your mother from the same town where you were born, or had she come from somewhere else?

HADGI: No.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the town?

HADGI: It was called—if I remember correctly, it was called Polona, P-O-L-O-N-A, and if I—if I remember once, she told me it was not far from Poland. It was called Polonikabelny, which is supposed to be the city or I don't know exactly, close to Poland. And my mother was very bright, very smart, very intelligent. They all were, the family.

SIGRIST: Could she read and write?

HADGI: Well, yes, her language, but when she came to this country, she went to school in this country.

SIGRIST: In Europe, what language did she speak?

HADGI: Jewish and Russian.

SIGRIST: Jewish being Yiddish?

HADGI: Yes, Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HADGI: Yes, and a little Hebrew. She used to read Hebrew. They were very religious. Her father was a very religious man and he taught these little children all he knew and he was a very fine gentleman. [sniffs]

SIGRIST: Did your—when you were growing up, did your mother ever teach you maybe a prayer?

HADGI: A what?

SIGRIST: A prayer?

HADGI: A prayer.

SIGRIST: Or a song? Something—

HADGI: Many, many, many but I couldn't remember any.

SIGRIST: Nothing that you remember now.

HADGI: But I will tell you something about myself. After we came into this country, my father came to Bo—came from Boston to New York to her brother's house. That's where her brother picked us up from, at Ellis Island, brought us to his home and my father came there and the next day we went back to Boston with him where he had already rented an apartment in Boston in the West End of Boston where his relatives lived. Not far, and that's where we lived.

SIGRIST: What's your first memory? The first thing you can remember in your whole life?

HADGI: I remember seeing my father, who was a very handsome man, and he had a moustache, which my mother didn't see. Before he left, he didn't have a moustache before he left and he didn't have a tan, either. He wasn't tanned. He was white, and while he was in this country, he went to work as a carpenter on the outside. Therefore, it was in the summer by that time and he became tanned, sunburned and all that, and he had a moustache and she couldn't recognize him and she didn't like him that way. She liked him when his skin was white, instead of tanned up, you know. And she was a—they were a wonderful, beautiful couple. My father was a very handsome man and my mother was—

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good time to talk about your dad.

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

HADGI: His name was in English, William.

SIGRIST: William. What was it in—in Yiddish or—

HADGI: In Yidd—well, that was English. Well, how could—Volka. V-O-L-K-A. Volka, that was what—

SIGRIST: That was his name in Europe.

HADGI: Yes, in Europe, but when he came to this country, they started calling him William. They translated it as William.

SIGRIST: Now, you said he was a handsome man. He had a big moustache, as you remember.

HADGI: Not very big.

SIGRIST: Oh, just a—

HADGI: Like what you have right now.

SIGRIST: Right, just sort of a regular moustache.

HADGI: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what his personality was like?

HADGI: Terrific. Wonderful. Handsome man. A wonderful person. He--I loved that—my father. I loved my father.

SIGRIST: When you were a small girl in this country, what were some of the things you enjoyed doing with your father?

HADGI: I'll tell you a little story about me. After we were in this country for a little while, I had trouble with my eyes. Therefore, with this eye I was blind.

SIGRIST: That's your left eye.

HADGI: My left eye and I couldn't see very well. It affected my right eye, too, and I really was blind. I couldn't stand the daylight. I couldn't stand the sunlight. I had to be in a dark room all the time for five years and my mother and father had taken me to all the doctors and the Mass[achusetts] Eye and Ear Infirmary. I was there for a week. They had a test and they couldn't find out what the disease was on my eyes. Then my mother wrote a letter to her mother who lived in New York with her family, New York City, to find out if they have a good eye doctor there. If they know of somebody that is good in that field, that she would like to come and have me examined by somebody there to try to find out what is wrong with my eyes. It just so happened that someone from Germany who was an eye specialist was—my grandmother found out that he was coming into New York to an infirmary there to visit or something, I don't know, from Germany. And she told—called my mother. She told my mother to bring me to New York and she will try to get an appointment for me there. [sniffs] This is terrible, the way I am.

SIGRIST: Just take your time. [pause] So your grandmother—

HADGI: Well, anyway, yes. But my—when we arrived there, my mother took me the next day to the infirmary and we did see this doctor. He looked at me. I was a very pretty little girl, had beautiful hair. Light brown hair with curls and my mother had a big white ribbon. [sniffs] And he examined my eyes and he told my mother there's nothing terribly wrong with it, but he'll give—going to give us some drops and if I don't feel any better, to come back the next day. Well, anyway, he put drops in my eyes and he gave her a little bottle of drops in there, medicine, and we came home to my grandmother's house and we had dinner, and my mother took me for a walk outside. And by that time, I was already four or five years old. She took me out for a ride at night. Not a ride, a walk, at night, and when I looked up at the sky, I put my hand up and I saw the stars and I saw the—the sky, how beautiful it looked and I said to my mother, "Mama, what's that up there?" My mother let out a scream, "Oh, my God. She saw something up there and her eyes are wide open." The doctor had put drops in my eyes that day and it was such a big thing that I had seen—my name was Lena at that time, as a little girl.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

HADGI: L-E-N-A.

SIGRIST: L-E-N—

HADGI: N-A, yes.

SIGRIST: Is that the name you were born with?

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Lena.

HADGI: Lena. I was born with Leah.

SIGRIST: How do spell that?

HADGI: That's—I don't know. Leah, L-E- H--

SIGRIST: L-A-Y-A?

HADGI: No, it must have been Lee, like Leah, L-E-A-H.

SIGRIST: L-E-A-H.

HADGI: Yes, I was named after my father's mother, who was gone. Well, anyway, when I looked up and I saw the sky and I saw some stars and I

saw some other little things, and I said—yell, started to yell, “Mama, what is that? What—what’s up there?” My mother got all excited. She let out a scream and the neighbors came out. My mother said, “Oh, my God, my darling little girl can see. She can open up her eyes. She’s not afraid to open her eyes.” Well, that was a big thing in my life and my mother told me about that. From that time on, my—put drops in. I came back to this country. She never knew what the story was, what the sickness was, and to this day I don’t even know what it was. But it must have been one of those diseases that—that children get eyes—with their eyes or something. I don’t really know what it was.

SIGRIST: You mentioned you had a grandmother in Brooklyn. Was it in Brooklyn? In New York?

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Whose mother was she?

HADGI: My—my mother’s mother.

SIGRIST: Your mother’s mother.

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: When did she come to the United States?

HADGI: Oh, that I don’t know.

SIGRIST: Was it—

HADGI: She came after me.

SIGRIST: She came after you guys had been here.

HADGI: After my mother. Yeah, yeah. Because her—her brother was there before—her son. Her oldest son was there first and he brought the rest of the family in.

SIGRIST: I see. But she lived in New York and you were off in Boston with your dad.

HADGI: Boston, yes, because that’s where my father’s family was.

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier that your mother’s mother, you remember as being a little old lady.

HADGI: A little old lady, my mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little more about your grandmother and maybe—

HADGI: I didn't know too much of her.

SIGRIST: You didn't—

HADGI: Because I didn't see too much of her. But when we lived in Boston—we lived in Dorchester—Mattapan. That was a little city.

SIGRIST: Mattapan?

HADGI: Mattapan—M-A-T-T-A-P-A-N.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HADGI: Mattapan. That's where I lived most of my life, my young life. And I'm trying to get [unclear]. Let's see now. What else about—

SIGRIST: We were—were going to talk—actually, I was going to ask you a question about ways that your mother held on to her Old World culture here in the United States. What were some of the things that your mother and father did that were the same as they had done in Europe?

HADGI: No, my mother was too modern a lady. She learned very fast how to become an American citizen, not really American citizen, but to live the American way, and my father too. But after a little while, my father got his first papers. In those days you needed first papers and second papers, from what I understand. Therefore, he had lost his second papers and he was—he just had his first papers. It took a long time before he came a citizen. And therefore, I was not a citizen until—until I was married. I didn't know that. I didn't even think about it. I was too busy. I was a young girl full of life for—

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father studying to get his citizenship?

HADGI: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that?

HADGI: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What were some of the ways you said your mother—your mother was very modern.

HADGI: Oh, very.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that she did to be modern at that time?

HADGI: Well, she loved—she loved pretty clothes. She was a designer and she used to make all our clothes, all mine, especially. I had to be a beautiful girl. My other sisters were taller than me. My brother was tall. I was the little one in the family, looked more like my mother.

SIGRIST: Were all your brothers and sisters born here?

HADGI: In this country.

SIGRIST: They were born here. You were the only—

HADGI: Yes. The only one.

SIGRIST: —the imported one.

HADGI: Right.

SIGRIST: [laughs] The rest—

HADGI: Exactly.

SIGRIST: —all came from here.

HADGI: Exactly, yes. And—

SIGRIST: Do you remember a dress that sticks out in your mind that your mother made for you when you were a little girl?

HADGI: Yes. Well—

SIGRIST: Can you—

HADGI: —not a little girl. My mother used to make us these little gingham dresses.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what they looked like?

HADGI: Little gingham dresses with the gingham hat. We always had to have a hat made, especially in the summertime, to match the dress. That's what Mother used to make. But I was the one that had the best. The other kids were little and they were beautiful. But I was the most favorite one. Because I was sick with my eyes, my father used to favor me a lot.

But he loved me more than he loved the other children. Why, I don't know. But he always loved me so much that, even when I was married and I went to work after my first husband died—and I went to work, he wouldn't eat a meal without me, a dinner without me. I went to work and all he wanted to do was have dinner together. And that's the way—that—by that time, my son was going to college. I had one and only child. I couldn't have any more than one.

SIGRIST: When you were a young girl, do you remember a present that your father gave you?

HADGI: [sighs] I had so many presents that my father and mother gave me, and his family. They all—and his friends. I had a—a room full of dolls.

SIGRIST: Do you remember one of them that sticks out in your mind?

HADGI: Well, I remember one particular doll that his very good friend, who—with whom he came to this country with, came and brought me when I was about a year old at that time. My mother told me about it. I loved that doll. It was about that big, she said.

SIGRIST: It's about a foot and a half.

HADGI: Real big, yeah. And then my mother brought me a carriage to go with the doll. But I was the favorite one in the family. And my—I was my father's pet, really. And—

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever talk about wanting to go back to Europe?

HADGI: No, never. They didn't want to go back at all. But my son someday will go back to Russia just to see where I was born.

SIGRIST: Um-hmm.

HADGI: That's—my son is a little bit—

SIGRIST: It's recording. The tape recorder is recording.

HADGI: Well, he loves me an awful lot.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HADGI: Loves me too much.

SIGRIST: And he wants to go back to see where you were born?

HADGI: See where I was born.

SIGRIST: Would you want to go back and see where you were born?

HADGI: No, but I can feel it. I have an idea in my mind, according to the way my mother told me about it. It was a little home, a little wooden house, and it had one step to go into it. It was a beautiful little home. And outside of that little home, my grandfather had a little store where he was a cobbler. And it repaired shoes and made new shoes. And he did—when he came to this country, he continued his work that way. He had his own little store and everything.

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself, how do you think of yourself in terms of nationality? Do you think of yourself as being Russian or American or Jewish? How do you think of yourself?

HADGI: I think I'm an American Jew and I love what I think. But I've had lots of wonderful friends. I've even had two—two ladies who are Irish. We named them our Irish sisters. To this day, one is living and I just received a beautiful present from her on my 90th birthday.

SIGRIST: That's right, which was just recently.

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HADGI: She's still a beautiful woman. She remembers the memories. [coughs] They were schoolteachers. The older one was shorter. The other one was taller. They were Irish. They taught school in Dorchester. You've heard of Dorchester, Massachusetts? Well, Mattapan was right close to Dorchester but it was a much prettier place than Dorchester. And we lived way up on a hill called Wellington Hill. Beautiful, beautiful home, we had right on a corner. It was gorgeous. My mother bought the home and I went in partnership with her. That was after I was married. And she had someone move from the bottom floor, so I got the bottom floor after I was married, of course. And she lived upstairs. And we had a wonderful life.

SIGRIST: Are you happy that your parents came to this country?

HADGI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah?

HADGI: Oh, sure. Of course. I love this country. I love it. I have wonderful memories of this beautiful country. I traveled with my—well, let's not go into that. When I was young, I was the life of every party. I loved dancing. I was little and full of life, very happy, lucky person and—much more than my sisters who were—I don't know. They were wonderful. My one next to me—my sister next to me was gorgeous. She still is a beautiful lady.

SIGRIST: Well, this is—this is probably a good place for us to end. You've told me some wonderful stories. And I appreciate you taking the time to—

HADGI: All right.

SIGRIST: —let me ask you questions.

HADGI: Now, what do you—

SIGRIST: I'm just going to sign off. We're all done.

HADGI: Oh, all right.

SIGRIST: We're all finished.

HADGI: Okay, fine.

SIGRIST: You can—you can relax now. [laughs] This is Paul Sigris—

HADGI: Okay.

SIGRIST: —signing off with Lillian Hadgi on Friday, September 27, 1996 in Long Meadow, Massachusetts. Thank you very much, Mrs. Hadgi.

[END OF INTERVIEW]