

EI-826

ALICE SUTTON SHAMAH

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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PALESTINE, 1927

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PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is October 27th, 1996. I'm here at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Alice Shamah—no, Sutton Shamah.

SHAMAH: Right

LEVINE: Who came from Palestine in 1927 when she was thirteen years of age.

SHAMAH: 1927?

LEVINE: That's the year that you came to this country.

SHAMAH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I want to say that I—you know, I just interviewed your sister, Sarah. So I'm interested to hear your particular unique story about your immigration. If you would say for the tape again your birth date? When were you born?

SHAMAH: I have to say it again?

LEVINE: Yeah, just so it's on the tape.

- SHAMAH: I would say 19—I would say maybe 1913, January 22nd.
- LEVINE: Okay, and—
- SHAMAH: It's either this or the other one.
- LEVINE: It's either the—1913 or '14. Okay. Okay, now, when you think back to Jerusalem when you were a little girl there, what do you remember about it? Do you remember the house you lived in?
- SHAMAH: Uh-hmm.
- LEVINE: You do?
- SHAMAH: Say the neighborhood?
- LEVINE: Yes.
- SHAMAH: Mahana Yuhooda [PH].
- LEVINE: Okay.
- SHAMAH: That's right off Afar Road.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what was it like? What are the kinds of things you remember about your neighborhood when you were little?
- SHAMAH: Was very nice time. Very happy. We were little and the people were very nice and the school was I went to was [unclear] Rothschild and we learned English, which made us lucky, thank God, that on the way in the boat the people—maybe the captain and some of the Navy people, you know, some of them spoke English because most of them spoke Greek. Grecian.
- LEVINE: Ah.
- SHAMAH: So they really had nice conversations with us sometimes and if we wanted something, we could ask them, we got. Not everybody spoke English.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.
- SHAMAH: But we had British rule. Under the British—ah, the English people.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what was your mother's maiden name?

SHAMAH: M-E-Y-E-R-S. Meyers.

LEVINE: Meyers, and your mother was born in this country, correct?

SHAMAH: Right.

LEVINE: Now, why was it that your mother was in Palestine? Was in Jerusalem?

SHAMAH: The way we know, I hear the story that her parents came from—I think Russia Poland and they wanted to go settle in Jerusalem. She had just one brother, which quite a bit older than her, which my thinking mean my mother was born to older parents. I mean they were older. That's all they had, the two children and my mother came with them to Palestine. A uncle came along to settle them and he went back to United States, and after so many years, my mother wanted to come back to United States to see her brother, her family. She had relatives, nieces, nephews and she wanted all of us to come, but they did not give a visa to my father. He was a Syrian subject. They didn't give that time a lot of visas. They—they—I think not the British.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: To my mother they gave. The—the consul gave her the visas to come with her children. Took a year for her to bring my father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and your father wanted to come, too, to this country?

SHAMAH: Well, his whole family.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Already had two sisters and a brother here, came from Cuba. They went to Cuba and from Cuba they came to United States. When we came they were here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your father doing for work?

SHAMAH: I don't really—not much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Not too much.

JL; Uh-huh, and what—what kind of a person was your mother? How do you remember your mother, as—when you were—from when you were a little girl?

SHAMAH: She was a teacher. She taught in the school Evelena [PH] de Rothschild because she spoke English and I believe she was the first kindergarten teacher. They opened kindergarten in that school because she was first teacher there in English for the kindergarten.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: She was very bright person.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and what else do you remember about your mother? What kinds of attitudes or ideas did she try to pass along to you?

SHAMAH: She was very well-liked and every time my friends, my sister friends, all these girls at my house because they were very hospitable, my father and mother.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. So you had—you didn't have an extended family in Jerusalem? It was really your mother, father and your sisters and brothers.

SHAMAH: Right, I had them—

LEVINE: Mostly.

SHAMAH: I had—we were four sisters and two brothers, but my mother had no relatives—no relatives in Jerusalem. My father had—had a few, few relatives, but over there everybody used to be friendly.

LEVINE: I see, so you—it would be almost like they were family, these friends who were living nearby.

SHAMAH: [unclear] We lived on the same block. It's not [unclear] blocks, blocks, but this happens to be one house next to the other and we were all friends. We're all of the same Syrian people. I was not Syrian. My father. So we spoke Arabic. We spoke English. We spoke a little bit French. We spoke Spanish. We spoke good Hebrew and English. We spoke English very well, like I speak now.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Uh-huh. And do you remember any occasions or fest—festive events that happened when you were in Jerusalem? Do you remember weddings or do you remember—

SHAMAH: I was too little for weddings. You don't invite children.

LEVINE: But I mean attend—oh, they didn't invite children.

SHAMAH: Not—I guess not.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: But the holidays we celebrated very well. You could tell it's a holiday, Jewish holiday and Saturdays there's no reason to travel and we wouldn't travel. We're Orthodox.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: But one thing I'll tell you that nothing is new today. The throw—the stone throwing at us.

LEVINE: Really?

SHAMAH: The little--little Arab kids, was nothing new today. When—excuse me [unclear] was not new today. Children—children used to run after us girls. We used to go to school, of course, you know Hebrew school because we were Jews. They run after us, pick our dresses sometimes, because we went to girl's school and they used to take small—there's a lot of stones in Jerusalem. Take stones and throw at us.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHAMAH: But we ignore. We're not going to fight. We were little children. We didn't fight. We did—we ignored. They lived not far from us, some of them. They were nice. The Arabs acted very well with the Jews. They were nice, peace, but the children were not brought up well. So when they came out with that word [unclear] and they throwing stone, right away we said nothing new. Otherwise, life was very good.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: We walked in the street alone because no—nobody followed you. Other [unclear], was very nice. Life was very pleasant.

LEVINE: Do you remember—[clears throat]—do you remember the house you lived in?

SHAMAH: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: What do you—what was it like?

SHAMAH: It—it had just three bedrooms, but walk in all three bedroom. Had two doors, front door and back door and we had a courtyard. Private, not attached. We had nice garden, nice flowers. Jasmine and I mean all those nice flowers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: I went nineteen times I went back.

LEVINE: Really?

SHAMAH: I went eighteen times one year after the other exactly and I went one more time.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHAMAH: I really love it.

LEVINE: You mentioned that the house was right next to a synagogue.

SHAMAH: Right.

LEVINE: What—do you know the name of that synagogue?

SHAMAH: Well, that synagogue was not at the time that my sister mentioned. I don't know what she mentioned.

LEVINE: It came later.

SHAMAH: What—what's that?

LEVINE: It became a synagogue later?

SHAMAH: Because—they became a synagogue while we were there yet, but yeah, it was Sil—Silvera, S-I-L-V-E-R-A.

LEVINE: Hmm.

SHAMAH: They're of Italian but they're Jewish.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. Is there anything else, when you think back to when you were a little girl in Jerusalem are there—are there any other memories that—that you have of your childhood there?

SHAMAH: Yeah, we used to run on the mount—on the hill and run. Not far from us, but there were mixed. Some places were gentile. The gentile, very nice people. Very nice. They were nice and polite and friendly. Arabs were down a little bit further, but there were no—nothing that really bothered us.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: We enjoyed every day that would every minute.

LEVINE: And when your mother decided to come here, do you remember preparing to come here?

SHAMAH: Yeah, sure, for about eight, nine years they kept up saying they're coming here.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: So my school mates always asked me, "You're going to America?" 'Yeah.' "But when?" It took about eight, nine years, six year something and we're happy to come.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember leaving? Do you remember actually leaving your home and going to the port?

SHAMAH: Yeah, we went first after packing. We went to Jaffra. We had some relatives in Jaffra. As a matter of fact, my sister's in-law, my mother—my sister's mother-in-law lived in Jaffra. We stayed there I think over night and then they took us to—to the boat, a sailing—a sailboat or something because the ship doesn't come very close to port. There was no port. Haifa has a port, but we went with the—that ship, the little boat, a row boat.

LEVINE: Really?

SHAMAH: Up to the ship.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: And we went on the ship. It was exciting. Very exciting.

LEVINE: What do you remember bout the S. S. Byron? What do you remember—

SHAMAH: The Byron Line?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHAMAH: Well, I remember the dining room. I don't know if they had kosher food and the captain and somebody else, the chef, gave my mother cans from vegetables. You know what's kosher and what's not kosher, right?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: Vegetables don't have anything that's not kosher. Those cans are permissible. She used to boil the eggs for us, hard boiled eggs, and they brought us fish. They gave my mother fish and she went to the kitchen. They allowed her go to the kitchen and she took something that was not used and fried the fish for us to eat and they gave us tuna fish and sardine and like I said, eggs, my mother used to boil because we are of the Jewish religion. And every—they made us very comfortable on the ship. Very, but like I tell you, we spoke English. Same thing when we came to Ellis Island. We spoke—

LEVINE: So that was an advantage that you already knew.

SHAMAH: It helped us—yeah, a lot.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor? Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island for the first time or the skyline?

SHAMAH: Ellis Island I couldn't tell exactly because we came right into. They asked me now, do I remember the building outside, and this I don't remember. But inside also changed. How we came here, we came up to I think—I think we came—not—the ship didn't dock over here. I don't remember.

LEVINE: It usually docked in Battery Park and then you took a ferry, not unlike the ferry that people come on.

SHAMAH: It could be that. I think so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so what were your impressions of Ellis Island?

SHAMAH: It was like heaven. Beautiful. Really, really beautiful only we were—we felt strange because we didn't bring—we didn't come with my father. My father didn't come with us, so we cried quite a bit on the way in the boat, but the boat was happy, you know, lively. People walking around, people falling and people—and so when we got here, they really tried to make us happy. I remember.

LEVINE: What—and what—what—

SHAMAH: They give me something, I think, to embroider but it was holiday. I didn't—we didn't—gave us some books because we were like, you know, depressed. Only because my father didn't come. It was hard.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So were you traveling steerage or third class? Is that why you came to Ellis Island?

SHAMAH: Not first class, but not the bottom. We had our own room with double deckers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm, and do you remember anything about the food here?

SHAMAH: Well, that's the food that I remember. They gave us tuna fish, like I said. Sardines [unclear], yeah, and my mother helped a little bit.

LEVINE: In—at Ellis Island?

SHAMAH: Yeah—no. On Ellis Island, yeah, they were very nice. First of all, they made prayers. Prayer for the holiday, the New Year, and you know, the Hias, we didn't come with the Hias. I mean they didn't pay our way, but they helped a lot. They made—

LEVINE: How did they help you?

SHAMAH: They still do?

LEVINE: No, how did they help you?

SHAMAH: Oh, well, they made the prayers. Not for us especially, but we—we were there and if somebody needed something, didn't speak English, didn't speak, you know, they used to go to the desk and speak for them. Well, my mother knew how to speak English. She managed very well, but over here were very nice. That's the first time that I saw a frankfurter, but they called it hot dog and I said, "I'm not going hot dog," because you still have kosher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Yeah.

- LEVINE: And is there anything else you can remember? Well, do you remember meeting other people from other countries when you were here?
- SHAMAH: Well, they didn't speak the language, all the languages. They were different people, and I remember the dining room. Outside the dining room there was like a garden and place like to stay a while. Very—very nice scenery. Hmm.
- LEVINE: And then did someone meet you? How did—when you left Ellis Island, did someone come and meet you?
- SHAMAH: From who, the family?
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm.
- SHAMAH: Well, it was holiday.
- LEVINE: But I mean after, when you were able—when you did leave.
- SHAMAH: Yes, they came. They picked us up. My sister was here. My brother was here.
- LEVINE: And—and where did you go?
- SHAMAH: We went to Brooklyn. Brooklyn, 62nd Street and 20th Avenue.
- LEVINE: And do you remember your first night here in—in this country in Brooklyn?
- SHAMAH: Oh, yes. First thing that really attracted my attention was on the bridge was—was close to darkness maybe. On the bridge seeing all those electricity and the lights. I couldn't believe it because we didn't have electric light in Jerusalem. It was first introduced. Our house did not have it. We had the lamps on gas, kerosene. One hanging from the ceiling which gave good light. You put—
- LEVINE: The wick?
- SHAMAH: Wick. Make it high or low. Then you feed it with gas—with kerosene or something. But when I saw those lights, millions of them, I could not believe it and the high, tall buildings. Most I saw in Jerusalem were the third story. Very rare.
- LEVINE: Hmm. And then when you got to your—to your sister's house—

SHAMAH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were there people there to greet you or do you remember what it was like?

SHAMAH: Yes, she has family. She has in-laws. They all came to see us, yeah, and took about two weeks they found an apartment for us.

LEVINE: So when—when the apartment was found for you—did—was it decided that you were going to stay here? Stay in this country?

SHAMAH: Well, up until my father wasn't allowed yet to come, we didn't know what we were going to do. As a matter of fact, you see, in the Jewish law if you go to a country, you don't have to keep—you have to keep your—your customs, your country. Like in America celebrate two days of holiday, Passover and two days, other. In Jerusalem they only celebrate one day, except Rosh Hoshanah. [unclear], two days in Jerusalem, so we had to celebrate two days here. The rest, through the whole year the rest of the holidays we're not celebrate more than one day because our—my father was not here and we cannot—we're not—we don't know if we were set over here or going back.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: When he came, we had to be the same as the United—as the Americans.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So when you got the apartment and you were in Brooklyn, then did you start school here?

SHAMAH: Yeah, right after—shortly after, yeah. I spoke English.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and what—

SHAMAH: Read very well and I spoke very well. The vocabulary, everything. They were going to put me, because I knew, in a lower class and when I read to them, they put me in a high class. It's not promotion, it's just that I was [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how did this school compare with the school you had been attending in Jerusalem?

SHAMAH: Well, the other school had Hebrew. Half Hebrew, half English and then it happened my mother want me to learn a little bit of French. I went to the other school for one year.

LEVINE: In Jerusalem?

SHAMAH: But was—yeah. But was all English and Hebrew. That's why we speak very good Hebrew.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm, and you went to a public school when you came here?

SHAMAH: Yeah.

LEVINE: It was a public school, uh-huh.

SHAMAH: And after that I went to continuation school after a couple years.

LEVINE: In the evening?

SHAMAH: The daytime. Once a week.

LEVINE: In the daytime. Oh, uh-huh. I see. I see.

SHAMAH: I don't know if they still have it now.

LEVINE: I don't know, but you liked—did you like school?

SHAMAH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: We always did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: My mother, like I told you, was a teacher, but not after I was born.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHAMAH: And she was teacher at Evelina de Rothschild where we all went.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: We all learned.

LEVINE: Were—were there certain customs or certain things that you saw here in this country that struck you as new and different when—when you were first new to this country?

SHAMAH: We saw the trains. They were new except when you travel out of town in Jerusalem. And the people—people were nice. Not like today. I don't mean they're not nice today. I mean there was no—you know, you're not afraid to walk out like today in the street. We liked it very much.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: We liked New York.

LEVINE: And what was the community like where you lived?

SHAMAH: Where community?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Where? Here?

LEVINE: In Brooklyn. Here, yes.

SHAMAH: Oh, Brooklyn. Most of them were of our—our kind. They were our kind, spoke Arabic.

LEVINE: Oh, they spoke Arabic. In—in the community in Brooklyn?

SHAMAH: Yeah, they mostly from Syria.

LEVINE: Oh.

SHAMAH: Most of the people came from Syria. We came from Jerusalem. We don't know Syria, but they spoke Syrian and their children spoke English. So we fit in very well.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember when your father came finally?

SHAMAH: Uh-huh, yes.

LEVINE: What was it like having your father back in the family?

SHAMAH: Well, very—were very happy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: A whole year.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: It wasn't complete.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and how did you meet your husband?

SHAMAH: He happens to be a second cousin of mine. My father and his father were first cousins. A father of one and a mother of the other one were sister and brother.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: And it's not that I met him. His sister told him about me. He wanted a religious girl and she told him where he could see me without me knowing in a certain where they give lecture on Friday night in the synagogue. He went and he saw me and after that, my father and his father spoke together. [Laughs]

LEVINE: And did you like him right away?

SHAMAH: Yeah, he's very—he was really top in the community. Every—I mean, if you mention the name Sam Shamah, they would know. Very nice. Very good.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Good things don't last too long. But you hope they do.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SHAMAH: With the others.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, and how many children did you have?

SHAMAH: I have a boy and three girls. A rabbi.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: And three daughters. They were here.

LEVINE: And what—tell me their names in their order of birth.

SHAMAH: Uh-huh. Moses.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: The boy, and then Laura and then Shirley and Joanie.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SHAMAH: Laura for Leah and Moses and Shirley is really for Leah, but Shirley and the youngest one is Joanie for Joseph. My father was Joseph. I didn't know if I'd get another boy, so called her Joanie.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And when you look back on your life, what—what are the high points? What is it that you remember fondly that you think of as being a—a real high point in your life?

SHAMAH: I had a nice life. I had a good life at home. Happy and then I married my husband, which was very good. Very nice. I used to go with my friends, my relatives, visit and everything. Play card, very, very small stake.

LEVINE: [Laughs]

SHAMAH: Like nickels and pennies.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, and when you think about coming to this country as a—as a—as a young girl, as a thirteen year old girl, and living really the rest of your life here, how—how do you think about that, the fact that you did that? Did that make a big difference in the kind of person you—you have been or—

SHAMAH: While we were thinking of coming, I was always very excited. Come to America, and later on I got accustomed very fast. We all did, accustomed and we led very nice, happy life at home and after we all got married.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and how is it for you today, coming back here to Ellis Island?

SHAMAH: Very exciting. Really. After so many years, I wonder. I say I wasn't coming today because I injured my knee, four months already, but than God it's getting better and I was excited to come.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm.

SHAMAH: Then they said I'm going to be interviewed. I said, "I'm not prepared."

LEVINE: You're doing beautifully. So—

SHAMAH: Just telling my life story.

- LEVINE: Wonderful. Is there anything else maybe we didn't talk about that—that you can think of that you would like to say in the interview.
- SHAMAH: Not really much.
- LEVINE: Well, you certainly remember—you remember a lot.
- SHAMAH: Not—every there—I don't have anything special.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how is this time in your life, now that your children are grown and—
- SHAMAH: Well, my husband passed away long ago. Twenty-five, twenty-six years, but my children, God bless them, very nice to me. They don't leave me alone. Now I—now the past twenty years—past about twenty years, I lived with my daughter. She has a two-family home. She lives up and I live down.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- SHAMAH: So at night we don't close the door between us at all. The door's always open like one house. Now I was left alone down the house, so I sleep with my daughter.
- LEVINE: I see. Now, are there any attitudes or ideas or values that your mother and father passed onto you that you tried to pass onto your own children?
- SHAMAH: They're all my customs. [Laughs]
- LEVINE: Like what?
- SHAMAH: Daughters sometimes don't get along with the in-laws. I tell them gotta respect them. Mother-in-law, have to respect it for their husband and if you want your husband to be good, you got to be good to your mother-in-law or [unclear] against you.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- SHAMAH: So sometimes they tell me, oh, he told me not to answer. After a while they say, "good, you taught me that."
- LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to say before we close?
- SHAMAH: I don't—just that you are also very pleasant.

LEVINE: Well, thank you. Thank you. Well, I certainly have enjoyed talking with you.

SHAMAH: Same here.

LEVINE: I want to thank you. I've been speaking with Alice Sutton Shamah who came from Palestine in 1927 when she was thirteen years of age and so—let's see, today you must be eighty-two. Eighty-two years of age at the time of this interview, October 27th, 1996, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

SHAMAH: I—

[END OF INTERVIEW]