

**EI-093**

**GLADYS (KATYA) SLOBODSKY HELMAN**

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**US: BROOKLYN, NY**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today, Friday, September 20, 1991 with Gladys Helman. Gladys came from Russia in 1923 at the age of two. So, welcome. Very nice to have you here today.

HELMAN: Lovely to be here.

LEVINE: And I'd like to begin by asking you your birth date.

HELMAN: April 29th, 1921.

LEVINE: Okay.

HELMAN: Now the world will know. ( they laugh ) I've hidden that one pretty good for years. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: And where were you born? What was the name of the town?

HELMAN: When I was born, the town was called Yekatarinaslav, named after

Katherine the Great. And when the communists took over, they wanted to destroy any reminder of that era, and they changed it to Nepatraovsk, which is located on the river of the Nepa river.

LEVINE: Now, could you spell that first name, and also the later one?

HELMAN: Yekatarinaslav, well, I have to write it out phonetically. ( she writes ) Just a minute. These are long words. Yekatarinaslav. That was the original name of the town, and it was changed to Nepatravosk.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, could you describe that town? You, of course, wouldn't remember it. Apparently you remember from your mother and father's descriptions.

HELMAN: My mother came from a very comfortable family and her father had his own boats and he shipped lumber. And she grew up in a house where before I was born they ordered a carriage from Germany for me and a nana. So that gives me an idea, and since her father was Jewish and he had money, he educated his girls the same way he did his boys. And my mother's older sister became a doctor, and she delivered me. Last time I saw her I was two years old, when we left her, and the next time I saw her was 1974 when my husband and I took a trip to Russia. She was alive,

she was ninety-one years old, and it was a reunion in Moscow that I will never forget.

LEVINE: Oh, beautiful.

HELMAN: And my Russian name is Katya.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

HELMAN: K-A-T-Y-A. And she just grabbed me, and we stood there for ten minutes hugging, crying and kissing, and all we had in the interim were some photographs where we showed advancing years and a few letters, because the communists had a way of stopping mail after a while. They would not let mail continue.

LEVINE: Okay, well, let's go back to, now, you lived with your mother and father.

HELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And you had other family members in close . . .

HELMAN: All my mother's family. She had sisters and brothers. She came from a family of nine, and her father had remarried because my mother's mother died very shortly after childbirth with the last child and he remarried, and they had a very good life. My mother loved it, never thought she'd ever leave it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, what was your mother's maiden name?

HELMAN: Chertok. C-H-E-R-T-O-K.

LEVINE: And her first name?

HELMAN: Anya. A-N-Y-A.

LEVINE: And what about your father, what was his name?

HELMAN: My father's name was Frank, or Feyda, Russian, F-E-Y-D-A, Fedya Slobodsky, S-L-O-B-O-D-S-K-Y. And he was a jeweler. He has his own business, which was a man of means. He was on a main prospect, so to speak. And watchmaker, jewelry, and it's interesting, he had three other brothers, they all came to the country, became barbers, opened up their shop. And my father was a jeweler but he learned how to give haircuts for his brother. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, did your father's family live in the same town as you did?

HELMAN: Yes, close by, because it was very close-knit. And when they moved they all came to New York and moved to Brooklyn.

LEVINE: I see. So in the small town in Russia, was it a small town?

HELMAN: No, not really.

LEVINE: Or was it a big town? Could you describe what that town was like?

HELMAN: Well, my mother said they had a gymnasium, which was equivalent to our high school possibly and two years. Her sister, of course, my mother told us, she was interested in boys more than education, but her sister, she went on to become a doctor. Now, that was a remarkable feat for a Jewish lady in those years. And because he had money, he could do those kind of things for them. But my mother loved her life there.

LEVINE: She did.

HELMAN: Absolutely. And if it weren't for Communism, we wouldn't be having this dialogue. I'd be in Russia someplace.

LEVINE: Tell me about that. What was it that . . .

HELMAN: Why she liked it? Because they had servants. My mother never cooked until she came to this country. And more credit to her that she never complained bitterly because she knew this was where she had to be, and my father says, "It's only for two years. Communism can't last." Well, it seems his idea was good. His timing was a little off. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, do you remember what you were told about your father's attitude toward living in Communism, under Communism?

HELMAN: My father said he would rather come to America, wash the floors, sell newspapers, do anything he had to. He would not live as a free man, if he could not be

a free man, in Russia, under those conditions. And he told my mother, "I know you're leaving your family. We will come back when the Communists leave." There was no way he was going to do that. He says, nobody could tell him as a free man how to live his life, what to do, who he should vote for. It was just unconscionable to live a life like that. And he was not a forceful man. He was not what I would call political when he came to this country. And when he saw me reading things even smacking of Socialism, he'd say, "I left Russia, I want a democratic way of life." And he just, anything that deviated from that was offensive to him.

LEVINE: What kind of a man was he like apart from that?

HELMAN: Quiet. As verbal as I am, because I had a very vocal mother. He was very quiet, with a delicious sense of humor, and loved his life. Probably the most, what could I say, sensitive, caring, without, what, an envious bone in his body. He was just so grateful that he was free to pursue his jewelry. He had a healthy family. He had two daughters. My sister lives in California. There are just the two of us.

LEVINE: What's your sister's name?

HELMAN: Roslyn Saunders. She was in theater, so she changed her name. And he loved his life. And he, I mean, to show you his sense of humor, when my mother would say, "I think you need another suit, you know, you just have the two suits." And he says, "With all his money Rockefeller could only wear one suit at a time." I mean, that

was his attitude. He never envied anybody. He made a good living always, and when he needed to make more money he was not ashamed to put a barber chair in the front room and turn it into a place where he could give haircuts.

LEVINE: That was in this country?

HELMAN: In this country, because he learned that from his brothers, but he never did that as a profession, but that was kind of moonlighting for him. And his neighbors and friends used to say, "But you don't go to synagogue on the Sabbath, you go to work." My father says, "God wants me to take care of my family. And we pray and we believe in our own fashion, but it's more important to put food on my table and clothe my family." And he told me if I never walked into a synagogue and I lived according to the Ten Commandments and I did charity, I would be living Jewishly and as a person. And that's the kind of upbringing I had from my father.

LEVINE: Wonderful. And how about your mother? What was her religious life?

HELMAN: My mother was flamboyant. She was exciting. My father thought she was the most beautiful woman, and she was. She was an extremely beautiful lady. And she was way ahead of her time. If she, when she came she would be considered a hippie. She had bobbed hair. She had polished nails. Her nails, well, almost till the day she died at eighty-four, were long and gorgeous. She wore slacks because she used to climb up on the mast. And her father said, "If you're going to act like a boy, you can't

wear skirts, people will look up." So he made her wear pants, because one day she fell off the mast and she lost this part of her finger ( she gestures ). But she was a devil. And she lied about getting me into school because my father's niece said, you know, "She can't go into first grade, she has to go into kindergarten." And my mother said, "I don't need her to play. I need her to learn to read and write." So she's going, "You'll have to change her birthday." My mother said, "So we'll lie." And how did I know this? When I needed a visa, I had to write to the school because I had no birth certificate. The first time I wanted to leave the country on a passport even, they sent my birthday in October, and my mother lied so I wouldn't go into kindergarten and play. She said, "She plays on the street. I want her to read and write." And she wanted to learn with me, and she went to night school and made my father go for a year.

LEVINE: Well, now, back in Russia, before they left Russia, was your mother a religious person?

HELMAN: Never. No, she brought up in a house, and she was not one who liked regimentation. She was a very free-spirited lady, which was incredible for that time. That her, my father's sisters, ( she gasps ), "She's smoking!" And my father says, "That's what she likes to do." And she smoked in the street. Now, in '23 and four, ladies didn't do that very obviously. But that was she, she cried a lot, she missed her family. And when I went with my husband, who's no longer alive, we asked my mother if she wanted to come, and she was always afraid because she had a heart condition,

and she was afraid of leaving this country because she knew medication is not great there. She would hear from her sisters and her nieces. They can't get medicine. So she never came. And when I came back and told her, I had a reunion with her sister, it was just great. And I now have a cousin, a grandson of my aunt, and his wife and two children. I brought over, last year I brought over his twenty year, no, what was she? She was twenty years old. I paid for her passage. She came and spent a month with me in Florida and I then took her to Maryland to spend a week with my daughter, and then she went back to school. She goes to the University of Moscow. And then we brought her mother over, who speaks English and teaches English in Russia, and she stayed almost a year. We were able to get her here so she could earn money and go home. And she walked back home right into that whole chaotic thing that was going on with the change of government and Yeltsin and Gorbachev. And she got a passport to come to this country up until, back and forth until '93. So she is coming back to earn some money so she can go back and have to buy food on the black market.

LEVINE: Let's go back to when the decision was made to leave Russia by your mother and father.

HELMAN: By my father.

LEVINE: By your father.

HELMAN: Only my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your mother's attitude toward his decision?

HELMAN: Could he go, she said, for a little while. If this doesn't last then she'll come. My father said, "No. We all go together. I'm taking my mother, my wife and my daughter." He says, "And we will go together, and we will come back." And my father, who is not an adamant man about many things, this was one area he would not budge. He said, "We will come back. We will make money. We will save money. We will make a trip back." And there was no question. She went with my father.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember the packing to leave?

HELMAN: No, no. I do not.

LEVINE: Do you remember what your mother did take with you when you went?

HELMAN: They did not take very much, as I recall. My father took some books, took his tallith. He took his trillin which, incidentally, you know the phylacteries that you put on on your forehead. You say your prayers in the morning which incidentally in 1974 I brought back to Russia. And I said to my mother, "How about I bring it back to the synagogue in Moscow and let somebody use it?" And she said, "Absolutely." Whatever clothing they could carry, cups. Now, have you ever seen, have you heard the word, bankus?

LEVINE: No. How do you spell it?

HELMAN: B-A-N-K-U-S, I guess, bankus. These are glass cups, almost egg-shaped, and it's applied to the body with kind of wrapped cloth thing that you dip in alcohol and you set it on fire and you put it in the cup and you apply it and there's suction. Now, this was used to pull out the impurities in the body when you have the flu. My mother was always suffering from kind of pleurisy. So I have that original bag with the cups. My sons says he doesn't care if I sell everything in the house, I am not to sell those. ( she laughs ) He's a collector of that kind of memorabilia. So they did bring that.

LEVINE: So you would have several of these cups?

HELMAN: Oh, yes, several. You put them all over the body. And then when you take them off, the part that has the most infection turns the deepest purple. And it was the kind of thing that pulled out impurities. Now, doctors, when they see my mother, because then she had my father's brothers, all barbers, for some reason, they came to this country, applied cups and they made house calls to do this. When the doctor, first I remember going with my mother, "What is that?" They thought it was a disease. And she said, "You think you're modern in America? This is very good." Interestingly enough, not too far back, I read where doctors didn't think this was such a barbaric thing, that it served a purpose even better than just putting medication into the system, this pulled things out. So we still have that kind of thing. I have it in my house. We don't use it, but in the original bag that that came in. Because that was kind of a

preventative, you know, to ward off all the other problems that she might develop.

LEVINE: Well, can you remember how the, or do you remember hearing how the arrangements were made for your family to come here?

HELMAN: We went, my father said we went, like, from border to border, which was not an easy thing to do, especially with a child when you're trying to keep a child quiet and not cry. And there is a Yiddish expression, "Ganvenin da grenitz." In other words, "Stealing the border." In other words, "Sneaking across the border."

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

HELMAN: Oh, grenitz, border, grenitz. G-R-E-N-I-T-Z, grenitz.

LEVINE: And what was the first part?

HELMAN: Ganvenin, to steal. That's a Yiddish word, to steal.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

HELMAN: Ganvenin? Ganvenin. ( she writes ) Ganvenin. G-A-N-V-E-N-I-N.

Ganvenin means "to steal." And my father was stopped travelling with his mother who was about, what, seventy-three at that time, I think. It was not easy because at seventy-three, I mean, I am presently seventy, and I think of my grandmother at seventy-three. My father says he always remembered her looking old. It's such a

weird, I can't relate to it, so it's hard. He had to pay to get across borders. That's what the diamonds in my lining were.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell that story?

HELMAN: Well, the way he would say it, as a matter of fact one night we spent in jail. And my father got the guard and he said he has a baby and he has an old mother, and we have to get to Riga because our boat is leaving from Riga, Latvia, and there was a designated day. I remember it was July 23rd or something. I'm not sure. I have the passport. And he said, "I am prepared to pay." And he said, "What?" And he said he had two diamonds that he took out and gave it to him. And my father said we were released the next morning to go on about our journey. And it took us a while to get from our town, our city, to Riga. Several weeks.

LEVINE: Several weeks.

HELMAN: Several weeks.

LEVINE: Now, were you put in jail because you had stolen a border?

HELMAN: Yes. Because we had stolen across a border without legal papers. When we got to Riga, my father had to establish that a resident of Riga Latvia on his way to America, and that's how we got passage aboard a German ship, which was the Resolute. I remember that.

LEVINE: Resolute, uh-huh. Well, now, tell me about the diamonds. How . . .

HELMAN: I don't know how big they were. I don't know. My father just, to this day, because of what he raised me with, diamonds have never played a great part in my life. My father used to say it's not important. It's nice to have. And he says, "But if you want to just do it to show off," he says, "it's not important." I got married without an engagement ring ( she laughs ) only because my father asked me when, he says, "Come shopping with me. Show me what kind of rings you like." And I showed him. And he says, "Well, you're looking at two carat minimum." He says, "That's a lot of money. Go home, get married, furnish an apartment. You can always buy diamonds." So his values were always like that. He never talked about the size of the diamonds, but he knew that would get him through because people needed money, and that was a very solid way to have it. Because every country that you passed, that was a common money exchange. You could always use diamonds, which was better. And he had twenty-five dollars for my grandmother, for himself and for my mother, and he was able to convert that into dollars. And that was . . .

LEVINE: Before he left.

HELMAN: A few, but not all of it. But he had to take what was equivalent in Russian rubles. And it was accepted in this country, and we were all ( she knocks ) thank God very healthy, so we never stayed over. And the very first recollection I have is living

with his brother and he, his older brother in Brooklyn, and we lived there exactly one week. My father had his nephew look at the papers, find him a place, and his brother paid the first month's rent. And the third day we were in this country my father had his nephew read the paper and tell him, "Is anybody looking for a jeweler, diamonds, anything with jewelry, gold?" And he found him a job in Canal Street.

LEVINE: Let's finish with the voyage. Do you remember anything that your parents told you . . .

HELMAN: No, except what they told me that, my mother was worried that I wasn't getting fresh milk, and she started to feel bad, and they told her she could go up and get a breath of fresh air, because we were coming steerage. And a German couple spotted me and they were attracted, you know, the way you get with children. And they wanted to know do I get enough to eat. My mother said, she says, "No." She says, "I can't get fresh milk, so we do the best we can." She says, "We're in first class. Would you let us have the baby, and we will feed her." And my mother was delighted, and she says, "Yes." And she says, "May we meet?" You know, she wanted to know could she meet every day until we get to port and get to America so that she could see me. She said, "Oh, absolutely." And they worked that out, and the woman was teaching me German on the voyage. I don't remember right now how long it took. Uh, it was considerable days, and she asked my mother and father would they be willing to adopt me and she would give them money and start them off in America and my father said there was

nothing she had or anybody had that would replace me. So there you go. That was part of the interesting voyage, they told me. That they were glad that I had good food, because I was up in first class. I came down at night to sleep with my parents.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember anything else that they told you about the voyage?

HELMAN: Uh, my mother was sick a lot, and it was, she was very un-used to it, and she was trying so hard to make a good deal out of a rotten bargain, because they had my, her mother-in-law who was old and getting seasick, and it was crowded, and she was nauseous most of the time, and she didn't enjoy it at all.

LEVINE: And, of course, she really didn't want to come . . .

HELMAN: She didn't want to go to begin with. And my father said when they came to this country, and he saw Ellis Island he cried. He says, "We may not have anything now, but we're free." And that was the most important thing in his life at that point. And he made a wise decision. ( she is moved )

LEVINE: So then did he mention anything else about Ellis Island in particular?

HELMAN: No, except that it was very easy for them, because they went through the medical things and everybody, they were a little nervous about my grandmother, and he said it wasn't bad for them because he felt sorry. There were people, he remembered, that had to go back. They coughed or they had bad vision, or for whatever. For me

what was interesting, as I grew up and got older and I said, "Don't you have enough money? Don't you and Mom want to go take a trip to Russia?" My father said, "I left because of Communism. I will not go back, under any circumstances, as long as Communists are in power." And my mother, of course, with getting letters, knew that it was not a good thing, and she was afraid to go back at that point, years later. My sister and I were in our late teens, and my father says, "Never." And I told him, "When I am old enough, I am going to Russia." And I did. The first time my husband and I left the country, we went to Russia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was there any anti-Semitism in Russia at the time?

HELMAN: Yes. Yes, it was. Uh, as a matter of fact, my mother tells the story. On her street, now, her father was very unusual. He was six six. The gentile people of the village, or the city, called him "Jew-and-a-half." He was a very imposing man. And he was a very kind man and treated everybody well. He would invite for the Jewish holidays or any kind of big, festive occasion, Gentile neighbors, because you shared, and that was a way of trying to combat it. And then there was a time where they came through the city and they were at random picking houses and they went in and shot a man and his wife living near my grandfather's house, and they were about to come in and somebody said, "That's Ephraim Chertok house. Leave it." And they walked on, shooting people at random, down the street.

LEVINE: Hmm. Now, what was the word you said, Ephraim?

HELMAN: Ephraim. E-P-H-R-A-I-M. Ephraim Chertok. And he was a man who was friendly and close because he did business with Gentile people in the city, so they knew him quite well, and he was saved and his family was saved. And this is a quirk of fate.

LEVINE: Well, now, what was the population? Were there a lot of Jewish people in the town?

HELMAN: Yes. Yes, there were. And when the Communists rode in, listen, the Cossacks did it as well. There was no love with the Cossacks. It's just that, fortunately, my father was in a different financial strata, and my mother's family was, so they were a lot better off than other Jewish people at that time.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, I think maybe it would be good to pause here, and we'll turn the tape over.

HELMAN: Okay. Fine. God, I talk too much.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

HELMAN: I have pictures of him that are . . . I don't have it with me, I don't think.

LEVINE: Okay. We're about ready to start.

HELMAN: Go ahead.

LEVINE: Okay. So did your, uh, when you got to New York, then, were you met by someone?

HELMAN: My father's older brother and his younger brother. They were both at Ellis Island waiting for us. And they took us to Brooklyn, and my mother was very disappointed. She says she didn't show it with my father's family but she cried when she went to bed, she cried herself to sleep that night. They had this small, tiny apartment. The bathroom was in the hall. And I remember that, for whatever reason, that stuck in my mind. And when my father told us when he found an apartment about a week later, he says, "That bathroom is not in the hall. It's in the house." So that was a big thing for my mother. Oh, she just thought it was so humiliating. That she had all these comforts that she took for granted, and here she is in America. My father said, "But I'm going to work. I have a job." He stayed at that job maybe about two months, he tells me. And then he found another job. Four -- what is it? 21 West 46th Street. He worked at that place for the rest of his life.

LEVINE: Really?

HELMAN: Yep.

LEVINE: So that's in the jewelry, in the diamond section.

HELMAN: In the jewelry exchange. An incredible contribution. He wanted to ask my father. He says, "Frank, you ought to retire." He says, "Don't take away my job. I'll give you my social security check. You just let me work three days a week." And he did. He says, "Because you're correcting all the mistakes that the young jewelers make, but the union wants me to let you go so we can make room for new people." My father says, "Okay, then I won't work five days a week. Let me work three days a week. I don't have, he didn't have hobbies. He just loved working. And going out, of course, the weekend, he looked forward to. But that was a need for him. You know, he never developed, you know, real big outside interests, and he didn't even go as high in school as my mother did, but he had such great common sense. He gave me a set of values that have stayed with me.

LEVINE: What are the values that you remember and attribute to him?

HELMAN: Values, number one, he said, "Don't look at what somebody is doing that you think is so remarkable. When you close the door, they may be worse off than you." He says, "So learn to appreciate what you've got." He says, "And if you want better things, do it because you have achieved it." One of his regrets is that he couldn't send me to college, and I was pretty smart girl at the time. And he says, "But I will tell you, if you have the ambition, many people go to college at night, and they work during the day. And if you can't do that," he says, "you have enough common sense to last you the rest of your life, and you will never stop learning. As long as you have in your mind

that you want to improve, you can learn as long as you live. When you stop learning, then you're stupid." And he encouraged that with everything. He says, "What is it you need?" He made life very uncomplicated. When I was getting married I says, "I don't know how to cook." He says, "Are you stupid? Can you read? Nobody is born a cook." He says, "Number one, do you want to learn?" I said, "Of course." He says, "Then you will. You go to the library, you buy books. Your mother gives you recipes, your aunt gives you recipes, your mother-in-law gives you recipes. You can read, you follow. Nothing is difficult. If you want to do it." He said, "If you hate cooking there is nobody who can teach you how to cook." He's right. But he would do that with most things. And he was not a very verbal man. He was quiet, and he'd be succinct. And he could say maybe three sentences what he felt. It would take my mother all day until she got to the point. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: Well, how about your mother. How did she adjust to being here? Did she come to like it?

HELMAN: She did, very much. Very, very much. She became very active. She went to night school, and she learned that there is a system in this country. It's called politics. And each section had a leader, and they joined the Democratic Party. My mother was, my father was not political. My mother learned you work within a system, and she became a member of the party. And she was not, she used to write phonetically, so she made a lot of mistakes, and every time she'd write a letter to

someone, and she wrote, so anybody could understand it, but it was phonetic. P.S., spelling don't count. Everybody's letter, P.S., spelling don't count. And then, what was it, I don't, first time they came into this country, that they were going to have a children's section in the movies. Now, we lived in Brownsville, Brooklyn. And we lived near a big, beautiful theater that they build, the Loews Pitkin which was, I mean, grand for its time. And she went to the manager and she said, "I want a job in the children's section." And my father said to her, "Why do you want to do it?" She says, "We could use the extra money, and I can go home for lunch, and I can walk. It's very comfortable, and it's not difficult to do." He says, "You may have to stand on your feet." "I don't mind," she says, "I want to do it." A woman who never worked in her life, she took the job. She was a matron at the Loews Pitkin. When she wanted to learn how to cook, we didn't have, they didn't have bakeries in those early years where you could go in and buy. And she came to my father's older brother and asked his wife, "Teach me how to bake. It's my husband's birthday. I want to make a cake for him." And I just think, in her own way, she was a pioneer, because the first time she wanted to make potatoes for my father, she said she bought five pounds and ended up with three potatoes. She just didn't know how to peel them. And then she became an incredible cook. So, and she loved America, absolutely loved it. That when relatives, like cousins, came, and they never integrated with the American people. They looked for Russian dentists, looked for Russian doctors. And she says, "But you're missing the whole experience. You're not an American." They went for their papers. My father did, as soon as he was able to.

That to him was, I can't tell you how great that made him feel that day.

LEVINE: Can you remember the day he became an American citizen?

HELMAN: That, oh, I remember his studying. I would sit there and read whatever I could with him. And my, his nephew or his niece, they would come and rehearse with him. It was very important to him. That was his goal. I mean, he says, "This is it. I'm an American. I will always be an American first, and then a Russian." And he felt that with all his heart. And I became a citizen on his papers.

LEVINE: And your mother?

HELMAN: My mother went for her own papers. She had that independence. She says, "I'm not a citizen on your papers. On my own." And she went and, my mother had trouble reading. She was such a devil, and she was so pretty. She, we went to the judge's chambers that day where he was giving out who was going to pass and who isn't. And he asked my mother a few questions, and she answered them, and then he said, "Can you read?" And I'll never forget this. She winked at him. "Now, what do you think, your honor?" And she had a Russian accent. He said, "Oh, I'm sure you can." And she never read for him. ( they laugh ) And she passed. But, you know, like everything else, if you're pretty enough, I guess you get away with a lot. But she learned how to read. She loved to read.

LEVINE: So then your family stayed living in Brownsville, in Brooklyn?

HELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And your . . .

HELMAN: The family always lived in Brooklyn. We moved, in those years my father moved every two years because he hated a paint job. And there if you moved you got two months' concession, a month at the beginning and a month at the end. And he said he was always ahead of the game if he did that. So you had to move in a little kind of radius where you could get to your brothers and sisters and the cousins. We were always together, at least one day out of the whole weekend.

LEVINE: I see. So you really lived close to your extended family in Russia and also here in Brooklyn.

HELMAN: Yes. Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HELMAN: And now my son lives in San Francisco, my daughter lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. My sister lives in California. ( she laughs )

LEVINE: Now, your sister must have been born in this country?

HELMAN: Yes. 451 Hopkinson Avenue. She was born on my birthday. I resented her for that because I couldn't have a party. And my mother, she had me at home

because her sister delivered me, my aunt. And she had Roslyn at home because she broke her water and my father called the doctor. And we didn't even have a phone, he went into the street, into the candy store and used the phone to call the doctor to please come, he doesn't think he could get my mother to a hospital. We didn't have a car, either. The doctor came and I was playing ball on the stoop, and I remember that as clear as anything. I missed my birthday.

LEVINE: How old were you?

HELMAN: Four. And that was the day I was four, and she was born. And the doctor said, "I'm going to bring you a baby." I said, "I don't want a baby. I want a party." And as soon as he walked in the house, ten minutes later we heard a cry, because the windows were open. It was April, it was a lovely day, and I was playing ball, and my mother made me a party a week later. Now my sister and I forever after had birthdays on the same day. It was a big deal. My mother was the biggest kid in the world. We all wore paper hats. Her birthday, my father's birthday, and my sister and I, we always had a birthday. It was strange because I have friends who never had a birthday. My husband never had a birthday until I made a party for him. And we never missed a birthday ever, ever, for anyone.

LEVINE: Can you remember the kinds of games that you played as a young child in Brooklyn?

HELMAN: In Brooklyn. Well, we always had the donkey. I always remembered pin the tail on the donkey. And then we would go out and play and make the hopscotch. We'd have games outside. And jacks, we would play a lot of jacks.

LEVINE: And do you remember like, did you have little rhymes that you said, like when you played ball or jumped rope?

HELMAN: Oh, absolutely. ( she sings ) "A, my name is Anna, my husband's name is Abe. We come from Alabama, and we sell apples." I'm teaching these rhymes to my grandchildren. Absolutely. You go through the whole alphabet. And my mother learned, to her credit, every facet of my life my mother took as a personal learning experience. She learned See Dick Run, Dicky Dare, "Moo Moo," said the cow. She would read it over and over. And then say, "Okay, now you read it."

LEVINE: I see. So she did your homework with you and she learned while you learned.

HELMAN: Correct. And I was a rotten math student. My mother was a whiz. She can add three columns in her head. And if it weren't for my mother, I never would have passed math. She would work the problem out in Russian and have the answer, cover it, and then show me how to work the problem. And then, not until I did my answer, she says, "Did you get this?" You did it right. If I didn't, she says, "No, I'll show you again, you've got to come up with the answer that I have." She got me through math. ( she

laughs )

LEVINE: Now, were the people living in your neighborhood in Brownsville, were they mostly from Russia?

HELMAN: Uh, Russia and Poland.

LEVINE: They were mostly Jewish, were they?

HELMAN: Mostly Jewish, and then we had a few, uh, little, around us, Italians, but mostly a Jewish neighborhood. It was a ghetto. Absolutely.

LEVINE: And, let's see. Then when did you move out of the neighborhood yourself?

HELMAN: Oh, myself. The first time I left home, see, I used to ask my father, my mother walked around with the proverbial brown paper bag because all my friends were married by age twenty-one, some of them at nineteen, and I wasn't married. As a matter of fact, I didn't get married until I was thirty years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What does that mean, the proverbial brown paper bag?

HELMAN: Oh, ashamed to hold her face up. She's got a daughter like twenty-four, twenty-five and she's not married? My God, you throw yourself into the river, or you light a candle or something, you know. Uh, it's not that I wasn't in love. I met my

husband, one of the, I was eighteen-and-a-half when I went to work, and I was very taken with him. And he was going with somebody and I was going with somebody and we both broke up. And he wasn't ready to get married even though he was five years older than I, but there was a war that started to come in '41, and he was exempt because we were in the paper business, corrugated board, and that was a very vital industry, and he was the only one, his mother had been widowed, so he lived at home, so he kept getting exemptions. But finally he couldn't stand it any more, and he went and enlisted, because everybody he knew in the world was in the army or navy. But this I will say. When I said to my father, my father sat down with me, he said, "Are you talking about getting married before Cy goes off to war?" "I thought about it, but I don't know." So he says, "Okay, I'm going to give you advice. You will either take it or not. You're twenty-four years old, twenty-five going on." He said, "A very bright young woman. If, in those years, if you were engaged, you never went to dinner with another man, you never even went to a movie alone with another man. And I loved to dance. My husband was a great dancer. And he says, "If he goes away and you're left alone and you're engaged or married," he says, "you're not a widow, you're not wife. You'll be very lonely. You're too young to stay home." He says, "Write letters. If it's meant to be, he'll come back safe and sound to you. And if it's love, time won't change it." That was his advice. And I talked to my then-love of my life, and we wrote and we corresponded, and we got married, not right away, because when he came back he needed to get himself established and re-oriented. And then I travelled. I got a job. I travelled and

went on the road because I figured if I stayed home I'm not going to get out of this rut. So at least let me do something. And I got a very interesting job, and then when I left the state and I travelled, then he started to miss me and send me all kinds of letters and call. "Please come back, I was stupid to let you go." And we moved to Queens.

LEVINE: Well, now, was he born in this country, your husband?

HELMAN: Yes, yes, he was. He was born in Harlem. And . . .

LEVINE: So then, you have children?

HELMAN: Yes.

LEVINE: What are their names?

HELMAN: Joan Helman Magin. She lives in Maryland and has three children. And my son Lawrence Helman lives in San Francisco. He's not married yet, and a honey and a doll. And we're all close, which is great. Everybody's just a phone call away. I just came back. I spent a week with him. The fact that he's not married, he says, "Come on, we'll do something together."

LEVINE: Great.

HELMAN: So it's a good family. And they heard about this, they thought this was just wonderful. He says, "You have no problem talking."

LEVINE: Oh, no. It is wonderful. Well, is there anything you'd like to say as a kind of summing things up as your experience in . . .

HELMAN: I took my son to Russia. My husband died in '88. '89 my son said to me, "I know you've been to Russia with Dad. Would you go with me? I'd like to meet some of our family." By that time ( she sighs ) my Aunt Masha had died. She died at ninety-four or ninety-five. And her daughter lived in Moscow. Her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. And he says, "I read your letters, I'd like to meet these people, and you'd be a good guide." See, my folks always talked Russian. And even though, you know, they learned English and Yiddish, I never got it out of my head. I always heard it. And since it was my first language, I can't believe how much I retained. And my mother would talk Russian to me occasionally, and she couldn't tell me father secrets without sending me out of the room because now I could speak Russian. And I knew enough so that I understood a lot, and my son was delighted. We could kind of walk off independently, and then he got to meet my family. And he was so taken with them and so warm and he's now going to college at San Francisco studying Russian. And he reads it and writes it. And he says I know more than he does, but I'm illiterate because he reads and writes and I never learned to read and write. So now I'm going to take it up. Maybe we're going to go down to Florida. I'll go to F.A.U. If they offer Russian, I'm going to do it.

LEVINE: Well, that brings it full circle, doesn't it?

HELMAN: It does, and he absolutely, he was going to go back on another trip with his class this past winter, and then with all the insanity that was going on, and with the Russians not having any food he says he could not go and eat and be comfortable in that situation. He says it didn't make sense to him. He says, "So we will go back when things simmer down in that country." So I did get to take my son, and that was lovely.

LEVINE: Great. Wonderful. Okay, well, thank you very much. It was a pleasure talking with you.

HELMAN: It's easy talking to you. ( she laughs ) Very easy.

LEVINE: Thank you. This is Janet Levine, signing off for the National Park Service.