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SOLOMON FEFFER
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SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, September 18th, 1997. I'm in New York City in a very lovely apartment on Central Park West and I'm here with Mr. Solomon Feffer. Mr. Feffer came from Poland in 1916. He was eight and a half at that time. And I believe you were detained overnight at Ellis Island? Yes, detained overnight at Ellis Island. Present also in the room is Bessie Feffer, Mr. Feffer's wife. And I see we have a beautiful view of Central Park—

FEFFER: [laughs]

SIGRIST: —out—out the windows here. Mr. Feffer, may we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

FEFFER: Yes. I was born September 28th, 1907.

SIGRIST: And do you think anything about your birth? Did anyone ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the town that you were born in.

FEFFER: I was born in Warsaw and, of course, I remember living with my father and with my mother, and subsequently with my sister, who was born two years after I was. One of my earliest memories is an arrangement that my father had made for me to be able to drink warm tea during the night when I woke up. Now, I have to explain that. Apparently, I was averse to drinking milk. Therefore, I had to have some other beverage and I preferred warm tea to milk. Now, my father, who had an inventive ability, arranged a holder for a kerosene lamp, which was mounted on the wall. And into this holder he placed a blue enameled pitcher, which I can see in front of my eyes right now after all of these years. And that was filled with tea and it was warming all night, and when I woke up, instead of being given the usual thing, a bottle of milk, I was given a glass of this warm tea. This is the earliest memory of my childhood.

SIGRIST: What are some of your other early childhood memories?

FEFFER: I remember when my father was standing near a table on which we had the typical kerosene lamp. And apparently, the kerosene lamp burst. And my father had prepared a sandwich for me, and I can still see that too [chuckles] in front of my eyes, a roll with chicken fat. And my father examined the roll very carefully to make sure that none of the splinters of this burst kerosene lamp had landed on this roll. The third memory of my childhood is my father's leaving Warsaw to go to the United States. And let me explain something about my father, if I may.

SIGRIST: Begin with his name.

FEFFER: My father's name was Hayyim Mordecai.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

FEFFER: Well, Mordecai in English is M-O-R-D-E-C-A-I. And Hayyim, I suppose, you would spell H-A-Y-Y-I-M.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

FEFFER: Hayyim Mordecai. Now, my father served f—four years in the Russian Army. And you know that Russia was not very loving of Jews. There was a tremendous amount of anti-Semitism. And my

father told the story one day of an officer calling him a dirty Jew. So my father, who didn't like that name applied to him, punched the Russian officer in the jaw. The Russian officer pulled a pistol and, luckily, my father wasn't shot because the squad, or whatever the group was called, surrounded him and the anger of the Russian officer abated and my father's life was saved. But he swore at that time that at the first opportunity he would leave Russia and not be subject to these insults all the time. But he was subject to another insult in 1905. In 1905, my father was courting my mother. They were married subsequently, 1905. And one evening as he was walking away from my subsequent mother's apartment (this was during the tension of the Russo-Japanese war), a policeman stopped him and began to beat him for no reason whatsoever. This was the second reason why my father determined to leave Russia at the first possible opportunity. This opportunity evidently occurred to him in 1912. But my mother saw no reason why my father should leave a well-paying position. He was working for the Carmel [PH] Wine Company, w—which had recently but established in then-Palestine. And he had a good position. My mother had all her relatives in Warsaw. She had a young family and she saw no reason why to give up and go to a strange land. But my father, having suffered from Russian anti-Semitism, was determined to go. And this is my next memory in my childhood, a very sharp one. My mother didn't want to say goodbye to my father so she opened the window and looked out. See, the window was opposite the door. She didn't want to see my father parting and she—she, I suppose, couldn't say goodbye to my father anyway because it was emotionally too tense. So my father left without having really said goodbye in the usual way to my mother. Now, my father had to establish himself here. He had to learn a trade because he had been a salesman at the Carmel Wine Company, and he had to start life afresh. Apparently, he was advised to go up to a shop manufacturing ladies garments. And he learned to become an operator on ladies garments, and learned so well that he became, subsequently, for the rest of his life, the sample maker. In other words, he made the first garment and everybody else copied the way he had made. And so after two years (he had left in 1912), in 1914, he sent tickets for my mother, my sister and myself. And we were supposed to leave Warsaw on August the 1st, 1914. August the 1st, 1914, in the Jewish calendar was ninth day of the month of Av—A-V. The ninth day of the month of Av is a very sad day in Jewish history. It was the date of the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem in 586 before the Common Era. That very date was also the date of the destruction of the second temple in the year 70 of the Common Era. And many other calamities occurred on that day. The expulsion of the

Jews from Spain in 1492 occurred on ninth day of Av. So my grandfather said to my mother, “You shouldn’t sail for an—an auspicious purpose on the ninth day of Av, because it’s a day of great sorrow and sadness. Take the next ship.” Well, there was no next ship because the First World War had broken out. So we were stuck in Warsaw for two more years. In the meantime, my father was able, fortunately, to send money occasionally to my mother with which she was able to help support her parents too, because the situation in Warsaw, you can imagine during the First World War was very dire and drastic. He lost the investment in the first cards, in the first ship cards. We also lost all our possessions because my mother, in packing to go to the United States, had sent everything ahead to Antwerp, from which port we were supposed to sail. You know what happened to Belgium during the First World War? Everything was destroyed and everything that we owned was destroyed with it, together with the loss of my father’s investment in those ship’s tickets. Well, my father sent again tickets for us to sail at a subsequent date. They were lost and he lost the investment too. Finally, after Germany invaded Warsaw and the United States, you know, was not yet at war (United States didn’t enter the war until 1917), we were able to leave. And we were en route for three months. We left about the middle of March and we went in a sealed train, the way Lenin did, from Germany to Russia at the eve of the Russian Revolution. We went in a sealed train from Warsaw to Berlin. We weren’t allowed to leave the car in which my sister and my mother and I traveled. We weren’t allowed to take anything with us, not even food. But I remember, as we came to various stations, people were selling potabrod [PH]. That means bread with butter, a sandwich of bread and butter. And my mother opened the window and called out, and I remember eating that potabrod on the way to Berlin. From Berlin, we were put on a train to Rotterdam in Holland, Holland being neutral at the time. Just outside of Rotterdam, there was a Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society building, in which travelers were stationed overnight or for some other brief period until they were able to make the next ship. And we stayed in this HIAS (you know, HIAS is an abbreviation for Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) for two weeks. And I remember, being a little boy, that I loved playing outside. And I enjoyed very much jumping over the narrow polders. These were very narrow little canals with—with which Holland and many places is interspersed. I jumped. My sister jumped. We ran little races and we had a wonderful time in Holland. They treated us very well. We were the only travelers so everybody was anxious to please us. They would take us on horse-drawn carriages through Rotterdam, through Amsterdam in order to sightsee. And I remember seeing in the morning kerchief-

capped women on their knees in front of the little houses washing the sidewalks with soap and water. It was their typical Dutch cleanliness, which I'm sure, as I've seen subsequently, doesn't exist anymore. Anyway, we stayed in Rotterdam for these two weeks and then we went from Rotterdam to Liverpool via the North Sea in a submarine-choked area. I wasn't aware how dangerous it was, but my mother was. And my mother—this was done at night. It had to be done secretly. My mother sat and prayed all night long. And there was only a single bulk. It was such a small, little boat that there was only a single bunk. And for some reason, my mother placed me in the bunk and my sister and my mother sat on the floor. And I had a very miserable trip that night. You know, the ship tossed and, naturally, I reacted, you know. Finally, we landed safely in Liverpool.

SIGRIST: I think maybe that's a good place to sort of—you're doing a wonderful job in this kind of concise summing up of your immigration history. I'd like to go back to Warsaw, actually, and be much more specific about all these different things. But the first thing I'd like to start with is the actual structure that you lived in in Warsaw. Can you describe—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —the house, the apartment, whatever it was.

FEFFER: Yes. Many of you are acquainted with the apartment houses in Paris. There is a very large gate for the admission of a horse-drawn carriage. Then in this very large gate is a smaller door th—through which individuals may pass. And this had very many apartments and we had a huge room, what you would call now a studio apartment, which had very few amenities. It had a sink for water and we had a coal stove. But the—there was no toilet in the apartment. You had to go down to the yard where there were toilets for the tenants. Would you like to hear a word about my schooling in Warsaw?

SIGRIST: Yeah, but—but keep telling me a little more about—about the structure. You say you had one—

FEFFER: Well, as I said, this large apartment house, which had, typically, one-room apartments—

SIGRIST: What kind of furniture did you have in the house? What do you remember?

FEFFER: I have no recollection.

SIGRIST: Okay. How did you light the in—inside of the apartment.

FEFFER: Kerosene lamps.

SIGRIST: That's right.

FEFFER: Now, if you look at this lamp—

SIGRIST: Yes.

FEFFER: —at my left, this is a kerosene lamp, electrified.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FEFFER: That's exactly what we had.

SIGRIST: How did you heat the inside of the apartment?

FEFFER: Oh, there was a table with chairs, nat—

SIGRIST: Heat. Heat.

MRS. FEFFER: Heat.

FEFFER: Oh, heat. A coal stove.

SIGRIST: Where did the coal come from?

FEFFER: That I can't answer.

SIGRIST: Okay. You said that your mother and father and you lived there and then your sister was born. Then your father went to America. She was born before he left? Correct?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: You told me a little bit about your father's job as the—as a wine seller. Can you be a little more specific about what his duties were and if he had an office, that—

FEFFER: The only thing I was told by my father, but he was relaying the—the past through either us or to other people, that he had an inventive mind. One thing I recall, that some of the bottles, like Italian wine, have to be engaged and cased in wire. And the

Carmel Wine Company in Warsaw used to send those bottles out to some factory where they encased them in the wire. But my father invented the means of doing it right there in the shop, so that he saved the company a large sum of money. And this inventiveness also enabled them to prepare that night tea drink that I had that I mentioned earlier.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's personality?

FEFFER: Now, I'm glad you asked me about my father because, even though I'm his son, I'm objective enough to describe his unusual ability. I'll go back a—a generation. He had a mother, whom I had never met. My grandmother, my father's mother died when my father was 12, but this grandmother must have been a remarkable woman because she used to bake challah, you know, the Sabbath bread, every Friday. She made many, many lo—loaves and sent out her six children, each with several loaves, to be thrown into the windows of the homes of the village in which she lived. To be thrown into the windows because she didn't want to subject these people to the necessity of thanking her children for receiving these charitable gifts. So this charitable woman spent all her life in charity. She also used to endow poor brides with bridal dresses so they shouldn't be ashamed at their wedding ceremonies. And this wonderful woman died when she was 12 and—

SIGRIST: When your father was 12.

FEFFER: When my father was 12 and my father's father, my grandmo—my grandfather, whom I saw once in my life, remarried. And his second wife was the typical stepmother.

SIGRIST: And what does that mean?

FEFFER: Pardon?

SIGRIST: What does that mean? Describe what that means.

FEFFER: I don't know but he suffered so—

MRS. FEFFER: Fairy tales.

FEFFER: —that at the age of 12 he ran from this town called—

MRS. FEFFER: Zaklikov [PH].

FEFFER: —Zaklikov in the county of Lublin [PH], in the gobernia [PH] of Lublin. He ran from there to Warsaw. How he was able to do that, I have no idea. How he lived in Warsaw at the age of 12 until he grew up and began to work, I have no idea. But now I come to the most remarkable thing at all. He stopped schooling at the age of 12. Then as I said, he worked as a wine salesman in Warsaw. He worked as a sample maker in ladies garment industry in New York until he retired at 65. And yet, when he retired he began to teach Talmud. Many rabbis, many students of higher Jewish learning, even though they studied Talmud, are unable to teach it. But my father, from the age of 65 until he died approximately of 88, used to give a lesson in Talmud morning and evening in his synagogue. Now, my own work is that of teaching. I retired in '78 as a professor of Hebraic studies at Rutgers University, I know what teaching is and I know what the preparation for teaching is, schooling and everything else that is required. For this little orphan, who stopped this tender age of 12, to somehow find the time to perfect himself in Talmud is the most remarkable story I've ever heard. And I'm happy to mention this. My father died on a Thursday night and my sister, who lived near him in Brooklyn, called on Friday morning to make us aware of what had occurred, and we went to Brooklyn. You know, the funeral had to be held very early because it was in February. And orthodox Jews have to stop before the Sabbath begins early in February, around four o'clock in the afternoon. So we had a quick funeral. But the rabbi of my father's synagogue, where he taught Talmud morning and evening, insisted that on the way from the funeral parlor to the cemetery, he deliver a—a sermon, a eulogy for my father from the steps of the synagogue in the street, so everybody should hear it because he also felt how remarkable was the achievement of this man in teaching Talmud.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your father enjoyed doing for his own pleasure. You mention teaching and I'm sure that's part of the answer to that question.

FEFFER: My father sat all the time, reading.

MRS. FEFFER: He was aware of his grandchildren.

FEFFER: As a matter of fact, I recall a series of books that he had me read when I was a young teenager by one of the outstanding and remarkable rabbis of then-Palestine. I still don't understand how this man, who didn't earn too much and who was busy morning and evening, you know, working, how he laid his hands on these

books. But it shows that there was such an inbred love of learning that somehow he was able to get in touch with intellectual things.

SIGRIST: It was very important to him.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

FEFFER: Pessa—P-E-S-S-A.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

FEFFER: Bornstein [PH].

SIGRIST: And what do you know about her b—family background?

FEFFER: I remember her father and mother very clearly because, when the war began in 1914, the source of income that my grandparents had, my mother's parents, disappeared. And so they moved into our apartment.

SIGRIST: What was their source of income prior to the war?

FEFFER: My grandfather had no source of income because a man of his type sat all day and studied. So my grandmother, his wife, sold fruit on—

SIGRIST: And—

FEFFER: —on—on a very small scale. Now, my grandfather, my maternal grandfather was a very silent man. I almost never heard his voice. He was in the study. Now, you may not be aware, but the custom among many Jews used to be, perhaps still is, that while they're studying the Talmud they do it out loud. In other words, they don't just study with their eyes but with their eyes and their mouth, as it were. And they chant the various sentences as they occur. But my father, unlike the usual manner, did everything in a very silent way. And my grandfather also rarely spoke to me. And he wasn't quite fond of the way I was being educated. You see, the typical education among strictly orthodox Hassidic Jews was Talmudic; a little Bible, the rest Talmud. My father, before he left Warsaw for the United States, had engaged one of the two progressive day schools in which the language of instruction was Hebrew. And we studied from 8:30 in the morning until 3 o'clock many Jewish subjects, not only Talmud. We studied Bible. We studied Hebrew

literature. And then after 3 o'clock we began to get secular education.

SIGRIST: How old were you when this happened?

FEFFER: I started at the age of five and I studied in Warsaw until the age of eight and a half, except when the Zeppelers [PH] came over Warsaw and we couldn't get out—out into the street in order to go to school. Now, this type of modern education did not appeal to my maternal grandfather, in addition to which he didn't like the way I was dressed. I was not—not dressed in the typical Polish Hassidic manner; you know, very long garment in black with a black hat. I was dressed in what he called the German fashion. In other words, I—I wore the typical American knickerbockers, you know, and jacket and all that. So he was ashamed, actually, to take me to his Hassidic synagogue. So the curious thing is that, while I was in Warsaw, I never attended a synagogue. And my attendance at synagogue began in New York City. Now, the first thing that my father did, if you want me to continue—

SIGRIST: No, actually, I—I want to get back to your mother. We sort of [chuckles]—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: We got sidetracked. Tell me a little bit about her personality, the sorts of things she was doing in Poland at that time.

FEFFER: My mother, like many women in those Hassidic h—households, never got an ed—an education. Their education was the household. They learned to cook. They learned to sew. They learned to wash. They learned to shop.

SIGRIST: Could she at least read and write?

FEFFER: Pardon?

SIGRIST: Could she read and write?

FEFFER: Later on and when she became an adult, she asked me once to read "The Forward." It was a famous Yiddish newspaper.

SIGRIST: Jewish newspaper, uh-hmm.

FEFFER: "The Forward." She asked me to read to her and I began. And then she said, "This is no way of—of living." And she began to

teach herself to read. Without going to school, without doing anything at all, she began to teach herself the she began to read herself.

SIGRIST: And that was in America?

FEFFER: That was in America.

SIGRIST: Right.

FEFFER: When she was already an adult.

SIGRIST: Well, talk about what her life was like in Poland. Did she have a job, for instance?

FEFFER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Okay.

FEFFER: Nothing. She lived on the income that my father brought home when he was in Warsaw and that he sent later on from the United States. I do remember one thing, which may be of interest. Since my mother was not able to read or write at—at that time and she learned how as an adult later on, I was her amanuensis. I used to read the letters that my father sent and I used to write answers. Now, since my father was what they called a boarder—he didn't have his own apartment in New York but he—he rented a—a room with some family and he wasn't sure of his permanent address—therefore, we mailed our letters to my father in care of the Bank of the United States, which was located (I still remember that from the year, 1916) at 77-79 Delancey Street.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

FEFFER: If I'm not mistaken, the shell of that building is still in existence. And I remember that I memorized the address and I used to write it [unclear]—you see, the—to [unclear] Bank of United States. And I remembered the address, Nev [PH] York, USA. And I sent those letters to my father. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: That's a great story. Well, what kinds of things did your mother like to do for her own pleasure?

FEFFER: You mean in Warsaw?

SIGRIST: Yeah, or even later. I mean, just—I'm just trying to get some personality traits of your mother.

MRS. FEFFER: Well, she—

FEFFER: You know, I would say my mother was a very passive sort of woman and therefore, instead of giving out, she received.

SIGRIST: Could—do you have a—an example, that you can tell me of an example when the happened?

MRS. FEFFER: It's curious. It's very difficult to—

FEFFER: No.

MRS. FEFFER: —speak about her. She was so—

FEFFER: You see, she's the kind of—

MRS. FEFFER: —[unclear].

FEFFER: —woman about whom you cannot say th—the things that I said about my father. I loved her very much. I respected her. She was very kind. She was very gentle. And she tried to do the best for her children but in a sort of passive, receptive manner.

SIGRIST: They had very different personalities.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: That's true.

FEFFER: Yes.

MRS. FEFFER: But she made herself be felt.

FEFFER: Yes.

MRS. FEFFER: They knew she was around.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit. We—we've touched on this already—World War I. Talk to me a little bit about how the First World War

affected your family and what you remember seeing and experiencing in those two years before you—

FEFFER: I remember the Zeppelin's coming over, the—over—over the city of Warsaw. And therefore, we weren't able to go to school. So I played in the yard. I remember one incident. You see, all the people in that area were Jews, in that area in Warsaw. The only non-Jew was the strosh [PH], which is the Polish word for a janitor. And I remember one day that I wasn't able to go to school because of the danger of—from Zeppelins. I was playing in the yard and a little boy the same age as I was, the son of the Polish janitor, said to me, "As soon as the war is over, we're going to kill all you Jews." And I remember subsequently, in 1918 or 1919 after the war, when I first became aware of newspapers, I used to look at my father's Yiddish newspaper, "Der Morgan Junau," [PH], the "The Morning Journal," a Yiddish newspaper. And I remember the headline, "[speaking in Yiddish]." "Five Thousand Slain in Pokorov," [PH], a Polish town. You see, when we speak subsequently of the attack by the Germans against the six million Jews, we musn't forget that their willing aids were the Poles. So my recollection of Warsaw, of the Poles is not a very friendly one.

SIGRIST: What about the things that are related more specifically to the war? For instance, food shortages or some kind of experience like that?

FEFFER: Apparently, because my mother received this income from my father from the United States, an American dollar went very far. I—smiling as I think of this, I was a very finicky eater, just as I said when I was a little baby I didn't want to drink any milk. I had to have a tea heated for me every night. I didn't want to eat ordinary lunch. So my mother would buy me, what is called in Polish, a chester [PH], a rum cake. So my mother used to meet me, knowing that I wasn't going to eat the food that was given in the—in my day school so she brought me a chester. And I had these rum cakes ver—very many times during the course of the semester. So apparently, if you had even a modicum of money—how much could my father have been sending from here? Even if you had a modicum of money, you were able to live fairly decently in Warsaw. Speaking of food, I have another recollection, which may be of interest. The war began in August, you know, 1914. And the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, occurs in September. So my mother, feeling that there would be a shortage of food because of the war, decided to buy a large number of Seckel pears. Some reason, she got a good buy on those little Seckel pears, and she filled a rather large box with these Seckel pears and put them under the bed. I don't know. There was no other

way to preserve them so she left them under the bed. And my mother went to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. I didn't. Like a little boy, I sniffed around to see what things were, and I got hold of this trunk full of Seckel pears and I began to eat one after the other, one after the other until I was deathly sick. [laughter] So my mother, naturally, when she came home she had to get a doctor. One of the memories of my childhood.

MRS. FEFFER: [unclear] about the oranges in Liverpool.

FEFFER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: We're not—we're not in Liverpool yet. [laughter] We're going to try to go chronologically if we can, but keep—remember that.

MRS. FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And so I'll—I'll ask. Talk about other types of food. What did you eat on a daily basis at that time?

FEFFER: Frankly, I have no recollection.

SIGRIST: I see. What would you eat on a special occasion at that time? Like a religious holiday or some sort of—

FEFFER: No recollection.

SIGRIST: Okay. You mentioned a—a doctor. Do—do you remember any other occasions where you were hurt or sick or a family member was hurt or sick and was—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —treated in a certain way?

FEFFER: No. Apparently, I had a safe childhood.

SIGRIST: Did your grandmother or your mother or your grandfather have some kind of a—a special family remedy that—that they made to treat some kind of an illness?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Any other recollections of World War I at all? Seeing soldiers or anything—

FEFFER: I do remember that when the Germans came into Warsaw they were greeted very fren—friendily by the inhabitants of Warsaw, by the Jewish inhabitants of Warsaw because they were a relief from the anti-Semitism of czarist Russia. So it's really interesting how different the attitude of—of the Germans was in 1916 and what it became in 1936, how in so short of time the character of the German people changed because of the influence of Hitler. It's really a remarkable exchange of attitude.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—do you have any personal recollections of interacting with the Germans when they—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —came into Warsaw?

FEFFER: Look, I was a little boy and—

SIGRIST: That's right.

FEFFER: —my circle of activity was very limited, from the house to the school and from the school to the house.

SIGRIST: You began telling me a little bit about your education in Warsaw, which was unusual. Can you expound a little bit on that and—and talk about some of the specifics of it, where you went to school, who was actually teaching the classes, that sort of thing.

FEFFER: The school was a private school and was housed in an apartment. The principal (I still recall his name) was a gentleman called Elbaum, E-L-B-A-U-M. And he had a number of teachers and it was a very interesting policy on the part of the principal in the choice of the staff. Since this is was a religious day school, naturally, the teachers of the Jewish subjects were pious men. The teachers in the afternoon, who taught us the secular subjects, were Christians, so that there was no danger of acquiring a faculty, a secular faculty which was atheistic. It was safer to have a Christian than a non-fervent Jewish believer. So we began to study Russian, just as children who go to a Jewish day school in the United States study English in the afternoon. We began to study Russian, but soon the Germans came in so we stopped st—studying Russian and we began to study German. Then I don't remember the political situation very clearly but I do recall that, after a short time, we began to study Polish be—evidently, the Germans per—permitted the Poles—

MRS. FEFFER: That's a vac—

FEFFER: The vacuum cleaner. The Germans permitted the Poles to introduce Polish.

SIGRIST: It'll—it'll get on. Just a minute. Just a second. [tape off/on] Now resuming. Go ahead.

FEFFER: So that in a short time, I learned very little German, very little Polish and very little Russian.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

FEFFER: But I do remember that my Jewish education must have been very extensive. If I can jump ahead a bit, when we came to New York in 1916, approximately June the 15th, what my father thought at first—and this you can understand and delight of what he said about his interest in Jewish learning, he wanted me to go to one of the two Jewish day schools in New York at that time, the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, which was at the time at 165 Henry Street.

SIGRIST: This is all Lower East Side?

MRS. FEFFER: Yes.

FEFFER: On the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

FEFFER: He found an apartment a block away, the closest apartment to 165 Henry Street, also an apartment on Henry Street so that I should be able to go to the day school in the easiest manner possible. Now, the very first day that I came to the United States, we stayed for one day with an aunt in Williamsburg in Brooklyn. In the me—meantime, my father had furnished this little apartment on—on Henry Street and we came in there. And he took me over to the principal of the school, of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School. Mr. Simon, whom naturally, we as kids called Simple Simon—what Simon did, and I recall that to this day, and I'm surprised at myself, that I was able to pass his whole test. He had me translate from Hebrew into Yiddish Chapter 9 of the book of Jeremiah, which is one of the most difficult chapters in the book of Jeremiah. And I, who was eight and a half or so, was able to pass that honorably, and I was put into a very high class, so high that I no longer studied Bible. I studied only Talmud. Well, let me tell you something interesting about the Talmud class. This teacher was

called Mr. Katz [PH], so naturally the kids called him Pussy. Pussy had a peculiar method of instruction. You opened the Talmud. You opened the book of the Talmud. This happened to be the tractate [unclear], if you want to know the—it means the middle gate. It was the middle volume of three volumes. And he would read the text on Sunday morning. You see, we attended school six days a week, Sunday through Friday—Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, a full day; Hebrew lessons until three, then elementary school, and on Friday, only until three. Very short school week, as you can see. He read the lesson, a page of Talmud. And we all were supposed to listen to this. There were some 30 children of—in the class. Then he called one boy. There were only boys in the school, of course. He called one boy without a text, without a book in front of him, "Repeat the page from memory," while the rest of the class was following this in the book. The kids tried to repeat this page. Then after he finished, another kid. You can imagine—see, we weren't aware of it but now, of course, I understand—he called the best kid in the class first, the one that had the best memory, the best understanding. By the time 29 kids had repeated, the worst kid, the 30th kid was able to do it. Now, I remember, and don't take this as boasting, but you're asking me to recall my childhood. Now, I complained to my father one day. When we were sitting in the synagogue, I said, "Look. There are 30 kids in the class. It's much easier if you are number five or number 15 or number 20. I'm always called first. Wouldn't you please go to the principal or to the teacher and tell him to make it easier for me?" So my father listened, didn't do anything. He understood why I was called first. But I kept on insisting. So one day, maybe it was the day that my father didn't have work. You know, they used to be only certain months of the year in which—in which he worked, decided finally to appease me and he went with me to the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, and he spoke to the principal. And the principal explained to him, I imagine. He said it was all right and my father said to me, "Don't complain anymore. This system is—is good."

SIGRIST: Before we hear anymore about America, we should get you there. When you were a child in Warsaw what did you know about America? How did you think about America? Your father's here.

FEFFER: Only one point, I remember, that it was a godless country. And why do I say that? Because shortly after my father came here, in one of his early letters, he wrote to my mother that he probably would go back after the war to Warsaw, because most of the people here, most of the Jews he knew on the East Side were not observant, were not sufficiently pious. But apparently, he changed

his mind. And then my grandfather, my maternal grandfather looked askance at the first picture that my father sent to my mother. He had shaved off his beard and he left only a tiny reminder of a beard just below the under lip. And my grandfather, who wore, of course, a full beard all the time, thought that this was an act of heresy. [laughs]

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the other things that your father wrote back to the family? Descriptions of things he was experiencing when he was in New York?

FEFFER: No. I only recall the beginning and the end of the letter, which even though the letter itself was written in Yiddish, had an opening in Hebrew, which I will translate roughly, “To my beloved and respected wife, whom I hope to find in good health. The same I can report about myself.” This was the typical [chuckles] opening of a letter—

SIGRIST: Can you say that in Hebrew?

FEFFER: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Could you say that in Hebrew as—as your father would have written it?

FEFFER: [speaking in Hebrew].

SIGRIST: Thank you. And would he end the letter in the same way too?

FEFFER: The end of the letter, he also answered, you know, “With love and respect,” and he signed his name Hayyim Mordecai.

SIGRIST: Did he ever send you a present or an object from America?

FEFFER: No. But the only thing which I remember his sending for me was enough money to buy me a—a bicycle. But my mother, being too gentle, thought that a bicycle would endanger me. And to this day, I’m sorry that she never [chuckles] bought me that bicycle.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

FEFFER: I never learned to ride a bicycle since then.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your family had to undergo prior to leaving Warsaw. What did you have to do to get ready to leave?

FEFFER: Well, as I mentioned earlier, all of our belongings, household objects and so forth, had been lost because of what the Germans did in—in Belgium. But my m—my mother took along very little, therefore.

SIGRIST: That's right. We should just, for the sake of the tape, say that you earlier said that you were supposed to actually leave in 1914.

FEFFER: '14.

SIGRIST: And that trip didn't happen.

FEFFER: So everything was—was lost.

SIGRIST: Everything was lost.

FEFFER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you have any rec—

FEFFER: So my mother hardly brought anything to the United States. But I do remember—now, let me go a—ahead and tell you about my trip. We came to Liverpool.

SIGRIST: Well, wait. No, I don't want to go to Liverpool yet. [laughter] You keep wanting to go forward. What—was there anything else that you had to do in Warsaw before you could leave?

FEFFER: Not that I'm aware of.

SIGRIST: Medical exams.

FEFFER: Not—nothing.

SIGRIST: Papers—

FEFFER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: —had to be gathered.

FEFFER: Nothing that I'm aware of.

SIGRIST: That you're aware of. What—

FEFFER: In fact, there was no medical exam, I know, about papers. It had been my mother who would have handled that.

SIGRIST: What do you remember—were your grandparents still living with you at the time when you—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And does anything stick out in your mind about that?

FEFFER: Pardon?

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —about that experience?

FEFFER: No, no. Except that I was very sorry to leave my grandmother that was very kind to me.

SIGRIST: Did—did your grandparents give you something to take with you as a—a remembrance of them?

FEFFER: No, because they—they had nothing. Zero.

SIGRIST: What—what—what did you actually carry with you, the family? Luggage, bags of stuff, anything. What—what do you remember?

FEFFER: There must have been so little that I'm not aware of having to carry anything. So if there was anything that we had, my mother was able to take care of herself.

SIGRIST: And it's your mother and you and your sister.

FEFFER: My sister.

SIGRIST: You're eight and a half. Your sister's six?

FEFFER: Was six and a half.

SIGRIST: And any other family members or tow—anybody else in the town traveling with you?

FEFFER: No, no.

SIGRIST: Where did you have to go? Where was the first length of the—of the journey to get to the ship?

FEFFER: As I explained before, we were put into a sealed car from Warsaw to Berlin, and then from Berlin to Rotterdam in Holland. And from there, as I explained before, we went to Liverpool.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about being in that sealed train? In sealed—

FEFFER: That we were happy to have left Warsaw, that we were on the way to go to my father, and that we had a certain fear because we had experienced bombing in Warsaw. And we thought that during the war there would be bombing until we got to Rotterdam and to Holland, which was neutral and there was no danger of any invasion or bombing.

SIGRIST: How long did the trip take to go from Warsaw, ultimately to Rotterdam?

FEFFER: Probably a day.

SIGRIST: With the stop in Berlin?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed out of the train—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —at the time?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: And did you see anything in there—

FEFFER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

FEFFER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Nothing that sticks out—

FEFFER: Nothing.

SIGRIST: —in your mind about that trip.

FEFFER: It was a typically sealed train.

SIGRIST: What did you do for food?

FEFFER: I told you. The potabrod.

SIGRIST: That's right. That's right. We're—we're going back a little bit—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —into what you've already told us—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —just to kind of put everything into—into order. So be patient with me. You were in Rotterdam and you did tell a story about being in Rotterdam and jumping over the—

FEFFER: Yes, and—

SIGRIST: —canals.

FEFFER: And doing sightseeing in Rotterdam.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Rotterdam before you could get—

FEFFER: Two weeks.

SIGRIST: You were in Rotterdam for two weeks. Can you tell me where you stayed in Rotterdam?

FEFFER: In this HIAS building.

SIGRIST: Oh, you actually stayed with the HIAS?

FEFFER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what—what those accommodations were like?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Do you know if, during this trip, if you had communication with your father?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Only before you left?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Okay. So you were in Rotterdam for two weeks and you got on the ship. Could you say again for me the name of the ship?

FEFFER: I don't—it—that was a little tugboat.

SIGRIST: That's right. You're taking the—the—the smaller boat—

FEFFER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —to Liverpool.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: [unclear]—

FEFFER: Don't forget. It had to be tiny. It shouldn't be seen by the submarines in the North Sea. It was dark; it wasn't lit at night. And it shook like an eggshell. I still remember my having to throw up all night.

SIGRIST: Do you—as a—as a young boy at eight years old, do you remember just how sharp your consciousness was about the war that was going on and—

FEFFER: Yes. I was aware of the danger. I was aware of the bombing. I was aware that people were killed. You know, the adults spoke and little children have big ears, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you witness any of the bombing in Warsaw?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: The little boat goes to Liverpool and what happens when you get to Liverpool?

FEFFER: We get to Liverpool and a remarkable thing happens. See, my mother must have had tickets to go from Liverpool to London.

HIAS in Rotterdam must have taken care of that because my mother, not speaking English, not knowing how to buy tickets, was handed everything by the people in—in Rotterdam, by the HIAS people. We came to Liverpool and I remember the most remarkable thing that happened there. Imagine this young woman who doesn't know a word of English with two tiny children, after all, six and a half and eight and a half, dressed in probably an outlandish manner—to a—a Liverpotlian [PH], this would be really outlandish. Two strange ladies in 1916, in the spring of 1916 at the end of March or the beginning of April when England was suffering—they didn't have enough food—these two ladies buy us oranges. Where those ladies were able to buy oranges in wartime England is something I can't explain. And they saw this young woman with these too tiny, outlandish dressed kids, and they gave them these oranges. That's a memory that I will never forget about England.

SIGRIST: You—you mentioned that you—your mother was dressed outlandishly. How would she have been dressed that would have looked different? What's—

FEFFER: If you'd like to see how I was dressed, my wife will show you a photograph that was—

SIGRIST: Well, we can do it after the interview; after the interview—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —we'll do it. I—I was just wondering what the differences were—

FEFFER: Yes.

MRS. FEFFER: [unclear]

SIGRIST: Oh, good. Well, we'll look at it one more time. How long were you in Liverpool before you got on the ship?

FEFFER: No. W—we went from Liverpool to London. And we were in London nine weeks and we were in a HIAS building in London on Leman Street—L-E-M-A-N. And if we have time later, I'll tell you about that street and the subsequent trip to England when we were a—adults.

SIGRIST: Later on.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about those—that's a long time to spend prior to getting on the ship.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Why did you have to be there so long?

FEFFER: We used to go very frequently to the basement because Eng—London was being bombed by the Germans during First World War. They took us sightseeing a tremendous amount. I was able to read and I spent the time in reading. And there must have been other travelers there because there were other people in that HIAS building.

SIGRIST: Do you know why you were held so long? Why nine weeks?

FEFFER: Because they were waiting for a ship which would take us to the United States. And that ship had to be an American ship because it had to be neutral. See, the United States was the only country which was still neutral during the First World War, with the exception of Holland. So we had to stay there until they wherever able to obtain a ship. Otherwise, there was no reason why we should s—stay nine weeks in London. Finally, we were shipped again to Liverpool. You know, in those days, shipping from England to the United States was from the port of—of Liverpool. And we got onto this St. Louis.

SIGRIST: The ship was called the St. Louis.

FEFFER: St. Louis of the U.S. Lines. The ship was a fairly fast one because it took only a—a week to go from Liverpool to New York. They used to lower very powerful lights every night over the words U.S. Lines so that any lurking German submarines should see that it was a neutral ship. I had a miserable time on that ship because at that time of the year in the—in the spring—it was a—a—the middle of—of June, probably the end of the first week of June, because we came to New York in the middle of June. The seas were very stormy. And I remember with great unhappiness the week that we spent on this St. Louis.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you slept on the ship?

FEFFER: We were in the third class, in the cheapest class. The food was so horrible that I, being a finicky eater (I mentioned before, my finicky habits), refused to touch food. So my mother, with the little money

that she had, bought food from the second class for me so that I should be able to eat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—and you may not—but do you remember how your mother carried the money that she had with her?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: You were very sick on the ship. Was your mother sick?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Or your sister?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever relate to you any of her experiences on the ship—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —later on?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: Did you have an opportunity to go up on deck when you felt better, either beginning or after?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And what could you see when you were on deck?

FEFFER: Not too much because when you're in the third class there's an enclosed deck, and you couldn't see really very much.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of seeing people from second or first class?

FEFFER: Only of the third class. As a matter of fact, my mother subsequently was visited by someone whom she had met on this ship when we lived in New York.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. Tell me again how long the ship took to—one week, you said?

FEFFER: Seven days.

SIGRIST: Seven days. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when the ship came in?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you know—

FEFFER: You can imagine what a sight it was because we all went out to look, you know, and so forth.

SIGRIST: How—

FEFFER: It was a very emotional moment.

SIGRIST: Your—your mother must have had quite a time with two little kids; you know, having to keep track of two little kids.

FEFFER: She must have had some luggage because we no longer, when we came to the United States, wore the garments that we had taken along with us. And I remember just before we left for New York. My mother took us. She must have had money and m—my father must have send enough to purchase a Little Lord Fauntleroy suit for me. It was shorts. You see, in those days in New York, in the United States, boys wore knickers. I don't know whether y—if you ever saw photographs of kids in 1916. I had very short shorts, a white shirt, a collarless jacket and a very wide, stiff collar to be worn over this with a red ribbon as a necktie. That's how I came and was presented to my father in the best possible light. May I jump ahead a bit?

SIGRIST: Well, you know what we're going to do is we're going to pause just for a moment, and I'm going to put another tape in. We've gone an hour and I need to put another tape in. So let's just hold off. And this is Paul S—

MRS. FEFFER: [unclear].

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with tape one with Solomon Feffer.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now beginning tape two with Solomon Feffer, who came from Poland in 1916 when he was eight and a half. And

today is Thursday, September 18, 1997 and I'm in New York City with Mr. and Mrs. Feffer. Mr. Feffer, when we finished tape one, you were just telling me the ship was just coming into New York at that point, and then you—you jumped ahead and told me a story about the—how you were dressed up and—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —shown to your father. Let's talk about Ellis Island. First of all, what do you remember about the ship coming into New York harbor? You mentioned seeing the Statue of Liberty. Does anything else stick out in your mind about it?

FEFFER: I remember coming into Ellis Island. I remember a very huge hall or [unclear], a very huge room. And I remember being examined medically by someone. I also remember being given an oral examination to see whether I wasn't retarded. And I was asked to count from 12 to 0 in 2's; 12, 10, 8 and so forth. Apparently, I passed that test [chuckles] and I was admitted to the United States.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

FEFFER: Also, I remember that in the afternoon they took all of the people who were on that St. Louis ship to watch an opera. Now, I didn't know the name of the opera—was. L—later, when I became knowledgeable about opera, it was "Hansel and Gretel." It was a very charming and very enjoyable opera. And we were there overnight and then we were met by my father. And I was really surprised, seeing my father for the first time. I thought he was a very tall man, very impressive looking. All I—I had known of him was just l—this little photograph of his face. So he made a very good impression upon me. And my father and—took my mother and my sister and myself to Williamsburg where his sister lived in a private house.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island, you mentioned hearing "Hansel and Gretel." Do you remember any specifics about it? Like how people reacted to it or—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —anything like that?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: What about staying overnight? Do you remember anything about where you—

FEFFER: Nothing definite.

SIGRIST: —slept or—

FEFFER: Nothing definite. It must have been pleasant. Otherwise, I would have recalled.

SIGRIST: Right. Okay. So your father took you to Williamsburg.

FEFFER: Williamsburg.

SIGRIST: And tell me how you spent the first night in America.

FEFFER: The first thing that my Aunt Esther [PH] did, (she was an older sister of my father's), my Aunt Esther pulled me immediately into a—a tub and washed me. And I remember being very much embarrassed, being undressed by a strange lady and being washed by her, you know. But everything was so strange that I didn't say anything. And then either she wiped me or I wiped myself and I was put into clothes. Then we sat down to eat and I began to eat. Look, I was in a strange country. I was in a strange house. I was with strange people. They forced things up—upon me, as it were, this bath and this food. And I began to eat. And my Aunt Esther immediately said, "He's already giving up his religion." Now, why did she say that? Because orthodox Jews, when they pray and when they eat, wear a skullcap. Now, I always had my head covered, you know, when I was a little boy. But everything was so strange and everything was done for me that I didn't protest anything at all. [chuckles] But I remember the impression that it had upon me that she said, "He's just come to the United States and he's thrown off his religion." [laughs]

SIGRIST: Were there i—in those fist couple weeks here in the United States, were there new foods that you had never seen before or new things that—that were completely foreign to you that you—

FEFFER: That first summer, I was introduced to two new foods. The—three new foods. There used to be wandering food purveyors, who sold sweet corn. They had iron pushcarts with a stove and they had sweet corn and, for a penny, y—you bought a sweet corn. Also, for the first time, I began to eat, later on in the fall, hot sweet potatoes, also from—l—wandering sellers. And strangely enough, chachi [PH], those little peas. Chachi peas, they used to sell.

They made a—a cornucopia of paper and they put in the peas, hot peas. And especially in the winter, it was very pleasant and you gave the vendor a penny. Bessie, what is chachi in English?

MRS. FEFFER: Chickpeas.

FEFFER: Chickpeas.

SIGRIST: Chickpeas. How long did you stay in Williamsburg before you moved to the Lower East—

FEFFER: Just overnight.

SIGRIST: Just overnight.

FEFFER: Because my father was very anxious for me to be registered in the school.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

FEFFER: You see, to give you an illustration of my father's avid desire for me to start learning, the school was located in 165 Henry. My house was 195. You can see how near so the—

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what the Lower East Side was like in 1916? Just—just kind of—

MRS. FEFFER: Wonderful.

SIGRIST: —des—describe the sorts of things you would see out on the street.

FEFFER: The type of apartment house, which to a certain extent is still in existence there. We had a three-room apartment, which consisted of a dining room, a kitchen and a bedroom. We had no bathroom. Right next door to us with a common hall, there was another three-room apartment, and on the other side of the building, a similar setup. Each two apartments had a common toilet in the center of the building. And the occupants of each apartment took turns in cleaning this toilet, were regular plumbing, you know, and so forth. What did we do about bathing? Not too far from Henry Street on—

MRS. FEFFER: [unclear]

FEFFER: —Rutgers Place, which was one block in a street called Monroe Street. Why this one block was called Rutgers Place, I don't know.

And there was a public bathhouse. So in the winter, every Friday afternoon, I told you in the—in the winter we had school only until three o'clock—I took a towel and soap and went to the public bathhouse and took a shower.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it looked like and how it worked? I mean, did you pay money? How did you—how did it work?

FEFFER: It was free. There was a huge hole, a huge hole lined in marble, floored in marble, and there were booths on either side, double booths on each side. You went into a little booth and you hung up your clothes and then you went into the next little booth and there was a shower. Being rather a careful kid, in addition to the towel and the soap that I took along, I took along a newspaper so that when I left the shower cubicle into the next cu—cubicle and my feet were wet and I didn't want to make them dirty again, I would stand on this newspaper and would wipe myself and get dressed. In the summer, I went twice a week because I wanted to be cleaner. In the winter, I managed with one bath a week.

SIGRIST: Did they have a similar setup for women too? Was this also—

FEFFER: I'm sure.

MRS. FEFFER: I thi—if they didn't, we always had a bathtub. But—

FEFFER: But you see, he's asking—

SIGRIST: [unclear]—

FEFFER: Mr. Sigrist is asking about the public bathhouses. There must have been. I d—I don't know.

MRS. FEFFER: I'm sure. But [clears throat] there's another thing that you must remember.

FEFFER: Right. I doubt it.

MRS. FEFFER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, getting back to the bathhouse—

MRS. FEFFER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was this—was this a single freestanding building or was it part of a group of buildings?

FEFFER: Part of a group.

SIGRIST: Part of a group.

MRS. FEFFER: I think you can still see one on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: Did—and—and men of all ages would go to this [unclear].

FEFFER: Pardon?

SIGRIST: Men of all ages?

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: I see. On—

FEFFER: Although, you see, people who came here as adults and who were accustomed to the European type of bathhouses did not go to this, but they went to the steam baths.

SIGRIST: How—how are they different? What's the difference between a European-style bathhouse—

FEFFER: I went only once to a steam bath with my father.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what you remember about that?

FEFFER: Very faintly, but I will do the best I can. You came into a forecourt. You undressed. You hung up your clothes. Then you went into the steam room proper and there were shelves. And you lay either on a lower shelf or on a higher shelf. The higher you were, the steamier it was. And apparently, the philosophy behind this kind of bath was that a—an abundance of steam purified your pores, which it probably did. And people used to spend hours there after they had the schwitz [PH], as the Yiddish word is, the sweating. See, the sweating out of the pores. They would read. They would talk. They would play cards. It became a sort of social occasion.

SIGRIST: And this was—

FEFFER: And I remember as a child seeing several steam baths on the East Side. And I think they've all disappeared.

SIGRIST: And this was a more European [unclear]—

FEFFER: European type of steam bath.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. In your own apartment, did you have running water?

FEFFER: Yes, but only cold water. And when you wanted to have hot water you heated up the boiler on top of the stove, the boiler filled with cold water. When you heated the stove, it heated up the water so that you got hot water into the faucet. But the building did not provide the hot water.

SIGRIST: And how did you light that apartment?

FEFFER: At first, gas. Gas mantles.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about having to use the gas?

FEFFER: I remember about the gas mantle that whenever you have to change a mantle, or you had to do it every few weeks or every few months, these mantles, as they called them, were so fragile that if you weren't very careful, they broke. So you—I remember you had to fit the mantle in very, very carefully. We had that for a couple of years and—

SIGRIST: Do you remember an accident ever happening—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —with a gas line?

FEFFER: No. We had this for a couple of years. Then they installed electricity and we became modernized.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the installation of the—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can—Can you describe a little bit what you remember about the process of when they converted your house, how it affected you?

FEFFER: The only thing I remember with clarity is that my mother, being very—a very good housewife, required that I paint for Passover the

gas fixture in gold because it tarnished during the year. So I remember painting the gas fixture in gold and no longer having to paint the electric fixture because that was brass or something. It didn't have to be painted. But I do remember painting the icebox. You see, we didn't have any electrical refrigeration. We had iceboxes and you bought a block of ice from itinerant ice vendors, and you put the block of ice in. And then, as the ice melted, there was a pipe from the container—you know, the upper portion of the refrigerator—down to a basin. And from time to time, you had to empty the basin of the water, which had dripped down from the ice. I also remember having to—to go down to the basement in the winter and taking a pail with coal. You see, every tenant was assigned a crib, as it were, where he kept his half-ton of coal for the winter. So living there was a little more difficult than—than it is now.

SIGRIST: What floor were you on?

FEFFER: I was just one flight up.

SIGRIST: Just one flight up. And did your family take in boarders at all?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: No. So it's you, your mother, your father, your sister.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then were there any other children born?

FEFFER: No. Oh, yes. A few months after my mother came, she had a stillbirth.

SIGRIST: We started—we started talking about, you know, the Lower East Side, the neighborhood. And again, we've kind of [chuckles] run off in another direction. If you were walking down Henry Street, just describe some of the things that you would see in 1917 on Henry Street.

FEFFER: The block on which we lived between Jefferson and Clinton had the typical apartment houses, had several synagogues. This is one thing I remember, that every block had quite a number of synagogues. And then as I walked further east, there—there was a very handsome block of 18th century houses, brownstones, which were occupied by the Henry Street Settlement.

SIGRIST: This is like a settlement house?

FEFFER: Settlement. So there were three or four very beautiful houses.

MRS. FEFFER: And a library.

FEFFER: On—on Henry Street.

SIGRIST: Did your—you or your family ever have any interaction with the settlement house?

FEFFER: No, we never went to the settlement houses, see.

SIGRIST: What services did the settlement house provide for the neighborhood?

FEFFER: The purpose was to Americanize and I suppose they had classes and so forth. And don't forget that my father's focus was on Jewish education, which I obtained immediately. So did my sister. She didn't go to a day school. Day schools did not take in girls, as they do now. She went to a public school. Then she went to an afternoon Hebrew school on East Broadway.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

FEFFER: This is very interesting, in view of the fact our p—people speak of bilingual education. I was always a—a reader and I discovered that a block away from my house on East Broadway, 197 East Broadway, at the corner of Jefferson Street, was a public library. So I went there. I began to take out Yiddish books. When I exhausted all of the Yiddish books there, I went to 33 East Broadway where there was another public library in a section which was not very Jewish. And therefore, the Yiddish books there were more available because there was nobody to take them out. So I spent the summer reading Yiddish. And I spoke in my class in Yiddish because the language of instruction was Yiddish, not the way it had been for me in Warsaw; the language instruction was Hebrew. Then when September came and I had to start going to afternoon school, they put me into the 1A, even though I was already nine years old in the fall. My birthday's September 28th so I was near nine. They put me to the 1A with tiny kids because I didn't know English. And Mr. Brown, my 1A teacher, began to write words on the blackboard. The first word he wrote was apple. And he—then he says, "I'd like you to give a sentence with apple." So I raised my hand. You see, I was able to understand the English, that I give a sentence with apple, and I said, "Eat apples."

Now, I—do you know German? In German, in the Yiddish, if you want to say, “One eats apples,” you say, “Man est apfel,” [PH] in German; “Mehr est apple,” [PH] in Yiddish. So I combined my Yiddish and my English. I was rapidly jump—that one semester from the 1A to the 2A to the 3A to the 5A. By the end of the first term, I was in the 5A and I was able to understand and respond to everything that was done in—in the classes, which means that unlike all this fuss now about bilingual education, which as you know has been a failure, we just picked English because we were surrounded by English.

SIGRIST: Now, what was your father and your mother’s approach to learning English? Did they?

FEFFER: They continued speaking Yiddish. So outside, to my friends I spoke English. At home, I spoke Yiddish.

SIGRIST: Did either of your parents attempt to learn English?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: What was your father doing in America? I forgot. I know you said but I—

FEFFER: He was a sample maker in cloaks.

SIGRIST: That’s right. He—

FEFFER: Cloaks.

SIGRIST: He was making the samples.

FEFFER: Ladies—ladies coats and cloaks.

SIGRIST: And was his place of business on the Lower East Side?

FEFFER: No. He worked in different places in the 30s, which was the center of the textile manufacturing area. And I think it still is to this day. Don’t forget, my father had to change jobs very frequently.

SIGRIST: How old was your father when he got to America? I’m just wondering how old your parents were at that time.

FEFFER: I would say in the—in the early 30s.

SIGRIST: In their early 30s.

FEFFER: You see, my father—this—this is interesting—had to change jobs very frequently. Being an observant Jew, he could not work on—on the Sabbath. And the shops and businesses and banks, even, were open six days a week in those days. So on Friday, my father told the boss, "I can't come back." He said, "Then you're fired." So he worked for a week. He was paid for the five days; then he'd go looking for another job. You can imagine what a pleasant life he had, this man who became [unclear] expert. [laughs]

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job in the United States?

FEFFER: No, no. Women did not work.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother's life once she got to the United States? What she did, what her interaction with the outside world was.

FEFFER: She spoke to the neighbors. She spoke to relatives. She was very clean, so she clean a tremendous amount and washed and pressed and ironed and shopped. Everything was in her hands.

SIGRIST: What do you think the hardest thing was for her to get adjusted to in the United States?

FEFFER: The hardest thing to become?

SIGRIST: The hardest thing for her in the United States.

MRS. FEFFER: Nothing. She had a pleasant—she had children. That's all she lived for.

FEFFER: My mother never complained so I can't think of any difficulty that—that she had.

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier the pushcarts selling food.

FEFFER: Yes. There was a street called Monroe Street.

SIGRIST: Monroe?

FEFFER: Mon—Monroe. M-O-N-R-O-E. I said that one block of it was called Rutgers Place—

SIGRIST: That's right.

FEFFER: —which had a bathhouse. But the rest of Monroe Street was, for some reason or other, the scene of pushcarts, food pushcarts. There were two streets which were known on the East Side for their pushcarts, one which exists to this day, Orchard Street, and that other, in those days, Monroe, and that doesn't exist anymore. And a good deal of the shopping was done from the pushcarts. Fruits, vegetables were bought and sold from the pushcarts.

SIGRIST: Only food? Could you buy [unclear]?

FEFFER: Only fruits and vegetables but other foods, of course, from grocery stores.

SIGRIST: And what was the—what was the—the makeup of that neighborhood? All Jewish or mixed?

FEFFER: All Jewish.

SIGRIST: All Jewish.

FEFFER: Except for the—

MRS. FEFFER: The [unclear].

FEFFER: —the police station, Irish cops.

SIGRIST: What about—were these Jewish people all from the same part of Europe—

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: —or different parts of Europe?

FEFFER: No. From all over, and this I can say with definite knowledge, because the different synagogues were named after the towns from which the people came. So when you looked at the synagogue you knew to whom they—they catered. And there were various synagogues, which catered to people of different localities in Europe.

SIGRIST: To the best of your knowledge, was there any tension between any of these different factions?

FEFFER: Actually, no. Now, I must say when I say, "Actually, no," that there was something which you might call tension but it wasn't really tension. You see, Jews who came from Eastern Europe used

different pronunciation for the vowels. Do you know German at all?

SIGRIST: I don't. No.

FEFFER: You see, Yiddish comes principally from German. And the German long a, the "ah" sound, in Eastern Europe was transformed to two different sounds, "ah" and "ooh." Now, the Jews who came from Lithuania were called Lithuanian Jews or, in Yiddish, Lithvakis [PH]. And they pronounced the vowels in a certain way. The Jews that came from Poland and Galesia [PH] were called Galsianer [PH], Galesians, and they pronounced the vowels in a different way. And people just jokingly used to accuse somebody of being a—a Galsianer or a Lithvak [PH]. But there was no tension between them. Now, to give you an example, my wife's parents were from Vilna, which is in Lithuania. And they spoke th—their Yiddish differently from the way my parents, who came from Poland. But there was no pe—tension between them. If you want to hear something humorous, which I may introduce, of a subsequent date—or you want me to s—stick to this period?

SIGRIST: No, you can tell me the—the funny story.

FEFFER: My wife and I got married in 1930 and the Passover before that, before we were married, my parents invited my future wife to a Passover seder. You know what a seder is?

SIGRIST: [unclear].

FEFFER: A festive meal the first and second evenings of Passover. And you read the story of Passover in a book called "Haggadah." Haggadah means tale.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Haggadah?

FEFFER: H-A-G-G-A-D-A-H.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

FEFFER: And you have to read portions before and after the meal. There's a service, you see, before and after the meal. And my father read in the Polish manner. And my wife, being accustomed to the Lithuanian manner, began to laugh at one point. She giggled because of my father's [unclear], because of my father's pronunciation. So my father took it like a gentleman and then he called on my future wife to read. Now, the Lithuanians were

accused of not being careful to distinguish between S and S-H. In other words, what a Polish Jew would read shmar [PH], they would say smar. And instead of saying Shabbos, they would say Sabbos. So my wife, although she's very well educated in Hebrew, for some reason, she read a word pronouncing that S-H as S. So my father had his opportunity to laugh at her but, you see, it was all in good fun.

SIGRIST: Oh, but I mean this was also a way for one person to immediately identify—

FEFFER: That's right. [laughs]

SIGRIST: —where the other person came from. And it's interesting that—that at that time they felt the need to have separate synagogues, you know, that these—

FEFFER: That's right.

SIGRIST: —groups all had their own—

FEFFER: That's right.

SIGRIST: —churches. What kind of interaction did the Jewish community in—on the Lower East Side have with the non-Jewish community?

FEFFER: None.

SIGRIST: None. You mentioned the Irish cops. [unclear] —

FEFFER: That's all. But we had nothing to do with them. I never saw a non-Jew until I was beaten up. [laughs] I must—you want to hear this story?

SIGRIST: Yeah, of course I have to ask. [chuckles]

FEFFER: I told you that I was dressed in this Little Lord Fauntleroy suit.

SIGRIST: Yes, the story I've got here—

FEFFER: I began go—I began going to school and since it was very hot, you know, in June, July, I was dressed just in the shorts, which means I stood out like a sore thumb. I was always interested in seeing new places. From Henry Street, you go to East Broadway. If you look on East Broadway west, you see that very tall building, the Municipal Building. You know, Municipal Building on Chamber

Street. So I began walking and walking and walking. And I got to Broadway and to what I subsequently learned later was Maiden [PH] La—Lane. So it was a hell of a long walk. All of a sudden, I see a group of 30 boys standing and there was a man taking photographs of them. And these boys were dressed in uniforms. Later on, I realized these were—this was a graduating class of a parochial school, of a Catholic parochial school. And like a little kid, you know, I saw something. I want—I went to look to see what the man was doing who was photographing this group. Well, I must have interfered, you know, coming in there so they began to beat me up. So of course, I came home. My shirt was torn. My shor—shorts were torn. That was my first introduction to non-Jewish America. [laughs] I had another non-Jewish introduction. A couple of years later, during Passover—I must mention to you that Passover lasts eight days. The first two days are holidays; the last two days are holidays. The four days in between are called intermediate days, and we didn't have school throughout the eight days, or nine days, also the day before Passover. Being anxious to see different places, during the intermediate days of Passover one year when I was, let's say, about 11, I began going to a non-Jewish neighborhood, Water Street, which is further east than Henry. That was an Irish neighborhood. And I was wandering in Corilear's Hook Park [PH] and some big Irish bum saw me and beat me up so badly that I couldn't talk next morning. When I went to bed, I didn't tell Mother. Who tells the Mother that he was beaten up? I went to bed. In the morning, you know, since I had no school, my mother let me sleep late. My mother starts talking to me; I can't answer. I was so scared, you know, after this being beaten up that I lost my speech for a day or so. So [chuckles] that was my introduction to Christian America. [laughs]

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: When you're being beaten up, I mean, what—what was the man saying to you? I mean, had he identified—

FEFFER: This was a boy of about 16.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

FEFFER: He sees a Jewish kid in an Irish neigh—neighborhood so he beats him up. [chuckles] Logical. [laughs]

SIGRIST: Since this neighborhood is very contained, the Jewish community is very contained, obviously, they're providing their own serves to each other, I assume that it i—includes entertainment also. Can you talk a little bit about what kinds of entertainment was available to the Jewish community on the Lower East Side?

FEFFER: The only thing I remember is a movie. You see, other people also went to the Yiddish theater.

SIGRIST: Hmm, that's what I was—

FEFFER: You see, now, her parents went to the Yiddish theater. My parents wouldn't. You see, such secular pleasure was—was not sufficiently proper for religious—very religious Jews. Now, my father never went to a movie anyway. It was my mother who sometimes took my sister and me to a movie.

SIGRIST: Was it that same attitude that kept your parents from taking advantage of the services offered by the settlement house?

FEFFER: No, they never—they were not interested.

SIGRIST: That wasn't even a consideration for them.

FEFFER: Yeah.

MRS. FEFFER: The Educational Alliance, Sweetheart, they—they had con—concerts. I think [unclear] of the theater in Carnegie Hall [unclear] there.

SIGRIST: And again, organized—a Jewish organization organizing for—for Jews—

FEFFER: You see, there was also on Madison Street—I know that because of my wife—her brother—one of her brothers went to a settlement house called the Madison House. So there were—there were people who were not imbued with Jewish religious education who went to the settlement houses. The more observant Jews, the more pious Jews stuck—stuck to their own [unclear].

SIGRIST: And were perhaps a little less interested in American—

FEFFER: That's right.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FEFFER: That's right.

SIGRIST: It's interesting.

MRS. FEFFER: Well, the American, I think, came for reading. There was a library there. You never [unclear] a—a vacant seat.

SIGRIST: But if you're just reading Yiddish, you're not reading English.

MRS. FEFFER: No, English.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: [unclear]

MRS. FEFFER: English.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FEFFER: My father never read English. My mother never read English.

SIGRIST: Did they have the desire to—to learn, or not really?

FEFFER: No.

SIGRIST: No.

FEFFER: My father, later on, near the end of his life, wanted to become a citizen of the United States. So he learned enough English to be examined, you know, in—in the court. And the reason—this is interesting too—why didn't my father become a citizen until very near the end of his life? My father was one of six children. I mentioned before, my Aunt Esther, into whose house we came after Ellis Island. He had another sister, whose husband had left for the United States, I think years before my father went to the United States, and he corresponded with his wife, with my father's sister, who had two little girls at the time. Then he disappeared. This sister, Gucha [PH], as we called her, her life was very difficult. There was very little source of income. She had to support herself and two little girls. So my father said, "If you come to the United States you'll be able to become a seamstress and you'll be able to earn a living." So he scraped together enough money to bring his sister and the two little girls to the United States. In those days, because of the immigration laws, you couldn't bring just people into the United States. You could bring your wife. So he claimed that this was his wife, and she was admitted to the United States and

the—she got an apartment. Then she began to work and everything was all right. Then my father brought his wife. And he was afraid that if he applied for citizenship they would look up the record and they would discover that he ostensively had two wives. So I told my father, "Look, nobody's going to look at those records. You can become a citizen." And he decided to become a citizen. Incidentally, because my father was afraid of becoming a citizen, I had no citizenship either. Then I took an examination to become a teacher. When—when I was graduated from City College, I took different examinations, to teach English, to teach Hebrew and so forth. They—they introduced Hebrew into the high schools in New York too. So I took both examinations and I passed both. Then all of a sudden, they tell me, "Are you a citizen of the United States?" I said, "No." "You can't teach unless you're a citizen of the United States." So I had to become a citizen. So because of my father's fear of becoming a citizen, I became a citizen when I was already an adult.

SIGRIST: That's a fascinating story about your dad, though. You wonder how many other immigrant men were in a similar kind of situation, trying to help relatives get over and—

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: That's—it's very, very good. Tell me, you—you obviously went through school here and—and actually pursued teaching ultimately as a profession. What was the first job you ever had that you were paid for?

FEFFER: The first job I ever had, which I was very happy to receive, was in my eighth term in high school when I was not quite 17. Dr. Horgan [PH], the principal of the Teacher's Institute of what became later Yeshiva University, which I had just been graduated from, said, "I have a private lesson for you in Williamsburg." And this is while I was still going to high school. So I went—I went twice a week to Williamsburg. On the Williamsburg Bridge, there was a trolley running from the East Side to Williamsburg and you got two rides for a nickel. See, the ride going and the ride back cost you a total of five cents. And I taught a little boy Hebrew. E—for each lesson, I got a dollar and a half so I had three dollars. Now, my father used to give me pocket money. When I began earning three dollars a week I told my father, "You don't have to give me pocket money anymore. And not only that, I'm going to relieve you of giving my sister pocket money." So I gave my sister a dollar and I had two dollars. And I felt very rich.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] And tell me how you met Mrs. Feffer.

MRS. FEFFER: Oh, that—

FEFFER: This was an interesting story. I must have been 21 at the time. I was still going to college. And there was a Hebrew speaking club called Ha-tehiyah [PH], which means revival.

SIGRIST: Spell that.

FEFFER: H-A-hyphen-T-E-H-I-Y-A-H. Ha-tehiyah. The reason I went to that club, one and only time, is that my friend, Stanlicht [PH], said to me, "I'd like you to express your opinion about my girlfriend." He was going to bring his girlfriend to this club meeting. And my dear wife, Bessie, had her friend, Rose, who said, "I'd like you to express your opinion of my boyfriend, whom I'm going to bring to this meeting." So Stanlicht brings his girlfriend. Rose brings her boyfriend and I come to be the arbiter about Stanlicht's girlfriend, and Bessie comes as the arbiter about Rose's boyfriend. P.S. Neither of them married the friend that each one brought. I met Bessie and I married her.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] And what is Mrs. Feffer's maiden name?

FEFFER: Bessie. Oh, Bessie Press.

SIGRIST: P-R-E-S—

FEFFER: S-S.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And did you have children?

FEFFER: Yes. We have two sons. One is called Amnon Paul, A-M-N-O-N Paul. And he lives in California in Los Angeles and he's married to Myra. He's a medical writer and she is a—

MRS. FEFFER: Radiologist.

FEFFER: —a radiologist. And they have three children. Shall I name them?

SIGRIST: If you'd like to.

FEFFER: One, Ethan Daniel, is a lawyer married to a lawyer, who just became the father of my first great grandchild. The second son is Joshua Rayfield, a geologist, married to a—an educational

administrator. He just had my second great grandchild, and then the third one is a—a daughter—

MRS. FEFFER: Rachel.

FEFFER: Rachel Lelona, [PH] who, when she was graduated from high school, went to Israel. And she lived in Israel for several years and now she's back in—in Los Angeles, and she does all kinds of things, a very independent person, very interesting person. My second son, who's six years younger than Amnon, called Jonathan, he lived in New York all these years. He was in shipping. But for a year, until a few months ago, he worked in Geneva, also in shipping. And then that ended and he is in London at the moment. He's in Moscow. He's—he's engaged in the shipping industry. And he's married to a woman working for Elizabeth Arden. She's a marketer of some sort and they have a son, who's now starting his second year at the University of Chicago.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, in our—in our last few minutes, I'd like you to just kind of work me through your professional career.

FEFFER: Yes.

SIGRIST: [unclear]—

FEFFER: Ah—

SIGRIST: —when you graduated from high school, so starting there—

FEFFER: Graduated from high school, began to go to college and I wanted to earn some money so I taught in afternoon Hebrew schools. See, many Jewish children, who go to public school in the morning, go to an afternoon Hebrew school where they pick up Jewish religion and some Hebrew and so forth. So I supported myself that way by teaching Hebrew. Then when that began—when I was graduated from college, I wanted something more permanent, naturally, so I—I was interested in teaching. So I took examinations to teach in—in the high schools. So I got an English license and I got a Hebrew license and I began to teach high school, where I taught Hebrew and French and English. And after a while, see, the city went through a Depression in those days, in the '30s and the '40s. So they did not give examinations for a chairman of the department. But after I'd been the [unclear] for quite a number of years, they gave the first examination in 17 years for chairman of a department. So hundreds of people took

the examination, a very difficult one that took three years to mark different parts of the exam. And they passed 12 ou—out of hundreds. So I became a chairman of a language department. And I went to what was then a very good high school, George Washington High School in Washington Heights, which was a Jewish neighborhood. Now, it became Columbian and all that, full of drugs. But I had five languages, Latin, French, Spanish, German and Hebrew. And then I'll tell you something interesting. The Board of Education, suddenly, under pressure from the blacks, said that every chairman of a language department in the five boroughs of New York City must introduce Swahili. Have you ever heard of this supposed language? It's a nonexistent language. So everybody introduced Swahili. I refused to introduce Swahili because I thought it was a waste of time. None of the teachers knew Swahili. They suddenly manufactured textbooks. It was a failure. I refused to do it out of principle. And I said, "Instead of Swahili, I'm introducing classical Greek." They hadn't had classical Greek in New York City high schools for 75 years. I was an assistant examiner for the board and I had some pull. I said, "I want 60 textbooks, money for 60 textbooks in—in classical Greek." I went to Columbia. I got a Ph.D., who had just graduated in Greek and Latin. I signed up 60 kids for classical Greek. I engaged this teacher. So Rutgers University invites me to open the Department of Hebraic Studies. So I decide to leave the New York City school system. I go to Rutgers. I become a professor of Hebraic Studies.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

FEFFER: In '66, and I did that until I had to retire for age in '78. That was the a—apex of my career. Before that, while I was in high school, I also taught at Jewish Theological Seminary.

SIGRIST: When—

MRS. FEFFER: Well, now, what about Ramah and the—

FEFFER: Oh, yes. I was a director of Hebrew-speaking camps, Camps Ramah in the summer.

SIGRIST: Ramah?

FEFFER: A—R-A-M-A-H.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

FEFFER: For four years, I did that.

SIGRIST: Could you—this is—we're—speaking of Hebrew, could you do a prayer that you learned as a child in Hebrew for me on the—on the—on the recording?

FEFFER: [speaking in Hebrew]. That was one. The famous one, [speaking in Hebrew]. "Here, oh, Israel, the Lord our God is the only God."

SIGRIST: Can you do a prayer in Yiddish for me?

FEFFER: Men did not pray in Yiddish.

SIGRIST: It was simply a speaking language.

FEFFER: Speaking language. And women did.

SIGRIST: Women prayed in Yiddish.

FEFFER: Women did—did have special prayers in Yiddish. I remember the opening of one of them. [speaking in Yiddish]. "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." That's all I remember.

SIGRIST: What did you do in your life of which you're the most proud?

FEFFER: What I did in my life of which I'm most proud. What I mentioned before. You see, I believe of sticking up for your principles. I thought it would be a waste of time for kids to spend time in Swahili. So I refused to obey the Board of Education. And let me t—tell you something else I refuse to obey on the part of the Board of Education. I'm a product of the Depression. I was graduated in '29. Everything died. People sold apples on the street for five cents an apple, which nobody could afford to buy. I took exams and I passed and I began to teach. I had to wait until I was appointed to a regular position in the high schools. I had a wife and I had two children. And to get a full, regular position with a monthly check and a pension and all that was like entering paradise. I began to teach five classes, four in Hebrew and one in French. The principal sends up an order that I should notify the Board of Education how many of my Hebrew students, four classes of Hebrew, I had, were Jewish. Every teacher of Hebrew in New York City answered that all of the students were Jewish. I refused to answer. I went down to the principal. I said, "I don't know the religion of my students. How can I answer such a question?" He looks at me. He says, "You're right." He calls up the Board and they tear up the questionnaire. The principal admired so much my courage to disobey the Board of Education

that I began to be relieved of all kinds of things and became an administrator in the school. And I'm very proud of the fact that I endangered my job twice because of principle.

MRS. FEFFER: [sentence unclear].

SIGRIST: Also—also, as a matter of principle, when I was at Rutgers some crazy government departments sends me a letter—sent a letter to all chairmen of departments in all universities, "How many members of your staff are minority members? I had then a department of three or four teachers. I said, "All." I wrote, "All," because I feel that Jews are a minority, a smaller minority than blacks. So I refused to answer according to them but according to my principles.

MRS. FEFFER: Tell him about the Prozdor. The Prozdor. The Prozdor.

FEFFER: What about that?

MRS. FEFFER: About your opening the Prozdor.

FEFFER: Oh, yes. I opened the special high school. You see, in New York City, there was a special high school, which still ex—exists, called Townsend Harris [PH]. When I was at the City College, Townsend Harris was in the—in the same area of City College. The top students in New York City were admitted to Townsend Harris, the top boys. And instead of attending high school for four years, they made it in three years. And the faculty was the faculty of City College. When I was teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I was asked to open such a high school for Hebrew Studies. So I opened such a high school, which is still in existence at the Jewish Theological Seminary called Prozdor. Prozdor is a Greek word adopted into Hebrew, which means foreground.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it, please?

FEFFER: P-R-O-Z-D-O-R.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

FEFFER: So I've done some interesting things in my life.

SIGRIST: Really. This has been a wonderful interview. I think this is a good place for us to end. I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions. We have certainly covered your entire life.

FEFFER: And I enjoy talking. I enjoy talking. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: And I appreciate Mrs. Feffer's patience through it all.

FEFFER: [laughs]

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Solomon Feffer on Thursday, September 18th, 1997 here in New York City. Thank you very much, sir.

FEFFER: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]