

EI-941

SOPHIE PERCHONOCK

BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 25, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 18, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 91

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

RUSSIA, 1926

AGE: 19

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay. Today is September 18th—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —1997.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: I'm here in New York City with Sophie Perchonock—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —who came from Russia in 1926.

PERCHONOCK: Right.

LEVINE: And you were—at that time, you were 20 years old?

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PERCHONOCK: Well, not quite.

LEVINE: You were 19 years old.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, something like that. Yeah.

LEVINE: Because you came before your birthday on—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —that year.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So you were 19 years. [clears throat]

PERCHONOCK: And at the time of this interview, Sophie is 91 years of age, 91.

WOMAN: [unclear].

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

WOMAN: Excuse me. Are you [unclear]?

LEVINE: We're stopping the—[tape off/on] okay, we're resuming here. Sophie, if you could the name you were born with and your birth date again, because we're—

PERCHONOCK: Okay.

LEVINE: —have the tape on now. The name you were given when you were born.

PERCHONOCK: Elene [PH]. They called it Saint Elei [PH]. Saint, it was for Sophie [chuckles] and—and Elene is for Elei, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. And your birth date.

PERCHONOCK: My b—my birth is December 25th, 1906.

LEVINE: And the town you were born in?

PERCHONOCK: Tolochin. At that time, it was Witteskuge Bele [PH]. It was not far from Moscow. You know, it's a few hours' ride with the train.

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LEVINE: And it was between—you said before it was between Moscow and—

PERCHONOCK: And—and—

LEVINE: Kiev?

PERCHONOCK: No, not Kiev. Kiev is—is in the Ukraine. It—it—it's in Minsk. You know where you go from Minsk towards Moscow?

LEVINE: Okay.

PERCHONOCK: It's on the—the way that it is [unclear] and, you know, other town. But you know how it is in the government. After wars, the territories changed.

LEVINE: Right.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: So it's changed somewhat. The map's changed somewhat since that time.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, Sophie, so [clears throat] when you lived in Tolochin, which was—is spelled T-O-L-O-C-H-I-N—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: What kind of a—a to—was it a city, a town, a country place?

PERCHONOCK: It's a small town.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about it?

PERCHONOCK: And—and th—there was some Russian people and s—some Ukrainian people living there, and Jewish people. And there was no—no business there. Everybody had their little house and a little garden and a couple of fruit trees. [chuckles] And—

LEVINE: What kind of fruit trees?

PERCHONOCK: Cherries, pears, apples.

LEVINE: And what did your father do?

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PERCHONOCK: My—my father had no trade. He—he was one of three sons and his father had a—a little dry goods store, you know, in a small town where they used to sell things for produce and—and make a—a living. And they had their little grocery store. They sold herring and, you know, things like cheap—and especially dye. They used to dye their cloths, used to have their cloth and—and—and—and—and dye it and—and sell it back—back to, you know, to sew something.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you've—

PERCHONOCK: It was a p—a poor—poor living, a very small town. There w—there were—there were—well, there was one high school f—for the children. And there was a—a—a synagogue there for the Jewish people. And of course, there was a church, a Christian church, and there was a—for the Polish, a—a [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, [clears throat] what was your father's name?

PERCHONOCK: Salman [PH]. Sam. They called him Sam.

LEVINE: Sam. And your—your grandfather, do you remember him?

PERCHONOCK: My f—grandfather wasn't alive when I was born. I was named after my grandmother, my father's mother. And my sister was m—named after her—her—her mother's—

LEVINE: Mother.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. But neither one of them were alive when—when we were born.

LEVINE: How about your grandfather on your mother's side? Was he alive? You had no grandparents at all?

PERCHONOCK: No, no.

LEVINE: No.

PERCHONOCK: No.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

PERCHONOCK: Esther.

LEVINE: And do you remember her maiden name before she was married?

PERCHONOCK: Goldberg.

LEVINE: Goldberg. And were your mother and father from Russia from a long time back?

PERCHONOCK: Yes, yes. Yeah, they had a long history here, no? About 50 years ago, I—I got a c—a communication for the—the record—the records are kept of the population. And they said that my name has a—a very interesting history. And they suggested that to sell it to—to me. But it was at that time between 30 and 40 dollars, a—and, you know, 60, 70 years ago, 30 or 40 dollars for people like us [chuckles] and we were so poor that we—we couldn't—I was very much interested in it. Generally, I liked history and I—I was good in school. But we couldn't. We didn't have the money.

LEVINE: Well, who—who contacted you? Who was the letter from?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, this is from the government statistics, y—you know.

LEVINE: In Russia?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. They said that I have a very interesting history and they urged me to—to buy it. And if I can't pay once, I—I can buy it on installments and pay it out for a period of so many years. But the point is that poverty was terrific. Nobody had any money.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, what do you remember about the poverty when you were in Russia? What—what was life like?

PERCHONOCK: I—I remember we never had any money and we always wore old clothes. My mother could sew a little bit, put together for the—for her three children. And we ate very poorly.

LEVINE: What did you eat?

PERCHONOCK: We n—we never bought meat. We never had da—dairy products. That was too expensive. But we used to have vegetables, pick up—we always used to go near the orchards and the gardens and pick up the fallen fruit and clean it up, cut it around, spice it up somehow a—a—and eat it. And then we always watched where the fences near the gardens were broken, so the children could crawl under and pick up the fallen fruit from the trees. Y—you know, the peasant had the [unclear] tree of different fruits and berries. We used to go to the woods and pick berries and l—life was very simple, very poor but we didn't know how to be disappointed. We thought we—we were—all we knew is poverty. You see, the children were born into poverty and lived alone in this. The only good thing was there was a school.

LEVINE: And what was that like for you?

PERCHONOCK: Well, I—I attended high school and I'm g—I—I don't want to say it because it'll sound like bragging, but I had been, you know, a good—and then when I graduated school, I was chosen to represent my school, high school to develop cadres. The—you see, there was no electricity in the country. There is no pavement around the street, you know. And the—it was very—very, very poor living, very—and so they—they—they tried to e—educate the—their pupil. I was chosen for my high school to—and another—and a—a boy my age to represent our high school. And they—they organize in—and in—on a location in the Ukraine a—a school to train cadres.

LEVINE: And what—and what did they train you to do?

PERCHONOCK: Trade professionals, especially engineers, doctors, teachers, to raise the level of the country life, because most of the people were il—illiterate.

LEVINE: And what did you get trained in? You? What training did you get?

PERCHONOCK: I didn't have a chance to get any training. I left. I was 19 years old. I was just about a—more than a year out of high school and I have a—I had a good record in high school for math. I—I—I—whatever happened, I used to represent the school in mathematics and geography and algebra, and I was good at that.

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LEVINE: What was it like for you to—to be able to go to school and—and to learn mathematics and—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, I—I—my mother said I never fell asleep. I never w—went to bed before I solved all the schoolwork of that day. And you know, we didn't have electricity. You know, we used to scoop out a very large potato and put some oil in and a wick, and I used to hold it a—and read by it a—and wri—and do the math puzzles, you know, because I had a very good record in school. And I participated in social work in school.

LEVINE: What did you do when you partic—

PERCHONOCK: We had a group event, little artists. We used to—on the holidays, we used to put on the plays and—and—and—and read poetry, you know, poets—poetry and write real poems. I u—I—I never had that [unclear]. I used to spend my time reading, sitting summers in the shade in a corner in the summertime and—and—and—and read.

LEVINE: What—what, in particular, did you like to read?

PERCHONOCK: I liked to—to read. I read the Syevsky [PH] and Tolstoy and [unclear] and all of the famous writers. I—I—I didn't write—I didn't read [unclear] stories, like other kids.

LEVINE: Hmm, uh-hmm. Now, was it a—

PERCHONOCK: I—I was a more serious child.

LEVINE: Was it unusual for a girl to go as far in school as you did?

PERCHONOCK: It—it was unusual. It was unusual. But I was a serious type of child.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And th—the—the o—the only play I knew is I used to play ball with the boys.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, you had a brother and a sister?

PERCHONOCK: I had a brother and a sister. I had an older sister, two years older and—and a brother, younger.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

PERCHONOCK: My sister's name was Galena [PH] but they call her Gala [PH], you know. A—and my brother was Manny [PH], you know.

LEVINE: Okay. And what were the—the celebrations that you remember, growing up?

PERCHONOCK: I remember mostly [unclear] celebrations, anniversaries, you know, at one—big demonstrations. And they used to get together in a hall and there was singing and the children did then sing. And it—it was nice. And the school used to [unclear].

LEVINE: I see. How about religious events?

PERCHONOCK: Religious ev—we—we—we didn't follow reli—[unclear]. But there—there was a synagogue in—in—in—there was a church, a Russian church, and there was a—a Polish church. And there was a—a Jewish synagogue.

LEVINE: Okay.

PERCHONOCK: And—

LEVINE: Just a second, Sophie. Let me pau—[tape off/on] okay, we— Sophie's roommate has left the room. We're going to resume here. Okay. So you were—you were talking about—there was the synagogue. And did your family observe? Did they go to the synagogue? Was your—

PERCHONOCK: I never went to synagogue but my—my parents believed in God.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And my father w—was one of three sons and they were all teaching. The older son had a h—a high school for Jewish children. And—and the one son had the—they called it the [unclear]. It is elementary school where the boys come to their teacher's house and they—they teach them read, to write and religion and things like that. And my—o—only my father stayed with his father. They had the little store, a little business.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And they used to sell it so the peasants, you know—and then collect—they used to get paid with produce.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: You know.

LEVINE: So did your father have a garden?

PERCHONOCK: Well, yeah. We—we have—we had the little houses but we didn't keep it long. We couldn't keep it up. So we had a little room with—with a couple, who had no children. They had the little store. They sold fish, flours, especially dyes. They used to dye their—

LEVINE: Cloth?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, cloth. And they had the machine that made—you know, it was sewing, make the things for the children, for grownups. They used to dye play clothes for—in colors for—for clothes.

LEVINE: So your family lived with this couple? Your family—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —moved in with this couple.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. My family consisted just of my mother [chuckles] and my sister and my brother, and my sister and my brother then die. So it was just my mother and myself.

LEVINE: And where was your father?

PERCHONOCK: My father was here. You see, there was a—another f—a—a— pogroms and anti-Jewish feelings. And they put all—all—all the blame on the Jewish, all the trouble, the—the poverty, you know, a—and all that. And the—the Jews got the—the [unclear].

LEVINE: Well, do you remember what—what was—what was it that was said about the Jews? How were the Jews blamed and what were they blamed for?

PERCHONOCK: They said that the—they—when they buy the things from Jews they overcharge. And—and they can't get credit, you know.

LEVINE: Were most of the stores owned by Jews?

PERCHONOCK: Well, there weren't many stores—

LEVINE: Hmm.

PERCHONOCK: —in—in—we lived in a small town. So the—there was a couple of small grocery stores, you know, food, herring, anything [unclear] kind.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: W—w—when I came here, I—I never had milk or butter or cheese or any of the kind. We didn't have money to buy these things. If there was, only few peasants and few better off Jews, who had a cow and had some milk or made a p—a—a little [unclear], you know.

LEVINE: In—in Russia.

PERCHONOCK: Y—yeah. But we didn't have anything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you experience prejudice against you for being a Jew in Russia?

PERCHONOCK: N—no. Well, I was so young. You know, I was in school and I was treated very well in school because I was a good student. They always brought me up as an example. They—that there was a—the holidays, you know, and I used to read poems and th—participate in our play. And I was always [unclear] kind, you know. They were looking up at the more—there's—to—to me as an example for the children and—and especially. I had good marks.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And I was—I was one of the two, a boy next to me, that were chosen for the special school to train the cadres.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Now, you said your—your brother and sister, did they both die in Russia?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. They are both buried in Russia.

LEVINE: What did they die of?

PERCHONOCK: What did they die of? My sister had a very bad heart and she had diabetes. And she—she had many sick years, you know, before she died. And my brother, nobody knows what he died for. He died when he was a child yet, and they said he have a stroke. Nobody know. We—because we—we had no doctor. We had a felcher [PH].

LEVINE: What was it?

PERCHONOCK: A felcher is like a—a helper, you know, no graduation, no scientific training.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What kinds of treatments did people receive when they were ill for—

PERCHONOCK: [unclear] that they used to have some kind of m—medicine. Maybe it was aspirin. So who know—or some kind of a power there.

LEVINE: Did they use folk medicines, like herbs or—

PERCHONOCK: No, we—we have—we had a little drugstore from—from a bigger town. They used to bring in thing and say, “If you have a stomachache, take a spoonful of this. If you have a headache, take a—a—a—a—some powder,” you know.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PERCHONOCK: But they really didn’t know anything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Because the town didn’t have a doctor.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: They didn’t have a hospital.

LEVINE: What about childbirth?

PERCHONOCK: But the—but—but when there is a—a—a—a ty—typhoid epidemic, they emptied the stable. They cleaned it up and they put all the people on the floor.

LEVINE: Do you remember a typhoid ep—epidemic?

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PERCHONOCK: Yeah, yeah. I—a whole—everybody had ty—I had typhus.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: So were you in the stable?

PERCHONOCK: They fixed it up for a hospital, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: The pu—they didn't have beds. They put them out on the floor and a member of the family used to come to help them, keep them clean, clean them up, you know. And the—the member—my sister was near my mother. She was nine months in the—in the hospital, sick. My sister stayed with her.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: She was on the floor near her, you know.

LEVINE: Wa—

PERCHONOCK: Taking care of her.

LEVINE: Was there any treatment? Did—were people given—

PERCHONOCK: They used to bring from our biggest city some kind of a medicine, you know, give them a spoonful, used to—a little powder, you know. There was no food.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And it was, of course, the survival of the fittest, you see. There were families who had eight children; they remained with none. And—and—and—and the other hand, there were fa—there were cases where they—they was sick and they survived. You know, it was survival of the fittest.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Yeah. Now, you said there were pogroms. Do you remember any—any pogroms?

PERCHONOCK: Yes, I remember what they—they used to keep you there because they—they were afraid of riots, of killings because people commuted from one village to the other by horse and

wagon, you know. And there was always cases of somebody got killed. They were followed through the woods, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you—

PERCHONOCK: It was a very hard life.

LEVINE: Did your father have an experience like that? Is that why he left?

PERCHONOCK: Is that why what?

LEVINE: Why your father left? Did your father have a bad experience?

PERCHONOCK: My father left during the time of pogroms. They—you know, when time got bad, they started, asked them for more money to pay, you know, in the government and that. So they started to blame the Jews. They said the Jews [unclear]. They're smart and—

LEVINE: So they were making the Jews pay more taxes?

PERCHONOCK: More taxes? Well, there was nothing to pay taxes on because there—there were few working when, you know, here and there, a tailor, a—somebody who makes shoes, somebody who fix floors. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Everything was on a very small scale, you know. Everything was poor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-hmm. Do you remember anything your mother or your father tried to teach you? Any values they tried to instill in you, growing up?

PERCHONOCK: N—no, no, really. They [unclear] that was [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: We—

LEVINE: So—so—

PERCHONOCK: We had—we had teachers and—but they depended on the school.

LEVINE: I see. So when did your father come to America?

PERCHONOCK: My—my father came—he was here 12 years before we came. And we came in 1926, my mother and I.

LEVINE: I see. And—[clears throat] and what did he do when he came here? What was he doing?

PERCHONOCK: He was a—he had no trade. He had—he didn't know the language. But at that time, the automobile industry, you know, [unclear] were developing. And there were thousands of people, you know, t—thr—doing unskilled work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: And so they used to hire them just for plain labor, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Most of the things were done by hand and you needed a—you needed the strength to—to do that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Where was he living? Where?

PERCHONOCK: Where? We—we were living in a small town.

LEVINE: W—in this country?

PERCHONOCK: [unclear]

LEVINE: No, your father. Where was he—

PERCHONOCK: Oh—

LEVINE: —when he came?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, y—yeah. All—all was there. All was there in Russia for generations back.

LEVINE: And then when he came here, where did he go in the—in the United States?

PERCHONOCK: He lives in New York.

LEVINE: Oh.

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PERCHONOCK: Because my mother had a brother here, who was here. He came here. He got married here. He had four little children. They were—when my father came. And when my father came, he stayed with them to save o—on the rent. He used to have that corner in the kitchen where he slept. In the early morning, he used to go on a job and earn—earn a few dollars and try to save up something for the family to bring here.

LEVINE: Do you remember any letters that your father wrote when he was here?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, yes, yes. Yes, I remember where this—I remember my mother corresponded with my father in Jewish language.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEVINE: Did you speak Yiddish—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —in the home?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. My mother spoke Jewish to us. But outside, of course, the school and whatever activities the town had was in Russian.

LEVINE: I see. D—do you remember anything your father wrote when he was here in America and when he wrote back? Do you remember anything he said in his letters?

PERCHONOCK: In—no, n—not much. At that time, the Jews were afraid to express themselves and they say our own word. And you are punished by everything.

LEVINE: Wh—what kind of punishments did Jews get if—if—if they said something wrong? What would happen to them?

PERCHONOCK: Well, I don't know. In my family, we kept quiet and we didn't get into trouble. My mother was a quiet woman and sh—she didn't like gossip, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And she sees [unclear] that we should stay out of trouble. And, like, from school, when we came in from school, if there's something, and she used to say, "Keep quiet. Don't say anything to anybody."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Wh—what are your fondest memories of Russia? When you think back to Russia, what are the things that make you feel happy?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, I think of the people that—I—I believe that the Russians were nice, respectable people. They didn't look to make trouble for anybody and they minded their own business. And the point is they—they were not complaining. No matter how hard life was, they adjusted to it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Are you talking about the Jewish people or the Russians or who?

PERCHONOCK: No, I'm talking in general about the population. As I said, in our town, we had the Christians. We had Ukrainians and we had Jews but that they got along. They saw that they have the same problems, problems to get something to eat, a problem took over their bodies, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Some clothes. And my mother used to have a hem machine on the table. She used to make children's clothes for—for their little—but my family was the only Jewish family there. And there was 60 families in that village.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PERCHONOCK: But they got—they got a—they learned to live together, you know, like neighbors.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So did you think of yourself as Russian?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

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PERCHONOCK: I like the Russian people and I have no bad memories. The only thing I remember, there—there was—there was a—a ri—riots some [unclear]. And there were bad—some bad Russian people that [unclear] so agitate. I can't say Jews and [unclear]. The Jews fall and they tried to make money on the Christians and, you know. Well, the—the—there were all those troublemakers and there were always killings, you know, passing the woods.

LEVINE: What's in the woods?

PERCHONOCK: On a horse and wagon.

LEVINE: Oh, the woods, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, there was casualties.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you ever hear about Cossacks?

PERCHONOCK: About—Cossacks?

LEVINE: Cossacks.

PERCHONOCK: Oh, we had Cossacks.

LEVINE: What do you know about—

PERCHONOCK: Th—th—they—they used to ride around. They—they had special uniforms that [unclear] their horses with the whipping, with—

LEVINE: Whip?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. [chuckles] Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh.

PERCHONOCK: And the children were afraid of them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: They used to [chuckles] [unclear] in the [unclear].

LEVINE: Oh. Okay. Well, then, finally, your father saved up enough money and he sent for—for you and your mother?

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PERCHONOCK: My—my father went to the—get the money. Whatever they had, they—they sold some clothes, you know, changed to cross the boarder. You had to bribe the guards.

LEVINE: Oh.

PERCHONOCK: That's how they cross the boarder and leave the country, by bribing.

LEVINE: I see. Who did he leave with?

PERCHONOCK: Hmm?

LEVINE: Did he go by himself?

PERCHONOCK: A—a group, you know. A—a few Jews got together and decided that—that—that they want to make the—the change. And through the night, they used to walk the woods and, you know, see layout.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And then when—did your father send you and your mother money for the ticket to come here?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, oh, yes, at the beginning. My father used to save up and sent—he used to send us a package of clothing for the children. And he used to send a couple of dollars. But he was trying very hard to save up as much as—he—he lived with my uncle, slept in the kitchen somewhere, wintertime, slept on the—over [chuckles]—so we [unclear] to save the dollar, so—so when Mother and the children would come, they'll be able to get a—a—a place to li—to sleep. It was a very poor living.

LEVINE: How—and how did your mother get along when he was gone? Did she work?

PERCHONOCK: My m—my mother was—she used to sew something, you know, for a couple of cents. And we used to pick up throwaway fruit, throwaway—I mean, we ate plenty garbage,

LEVINE: Hmm. Do you remember getting ready to leave?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Wh—did you want to go?

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PERCHONOCK: I—I didn't want to go. I want to go to school because, as I said, I was chosen as one of the best, the—pupils to attend this school. They want to train us, doctors, engineers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Electricians. They—they want it very badly [unclear]. But you couldn't have your choice.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: You had to accept whatever came along.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So do you remember your mother preparing to leave?

PERCHONOCK: Yes.

LEVINE: Did she—what did she do? What—

PERCHONOCK: She—she—she bought some clothes and they—and she had a little machine and she made a couple of sh—shirts, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: A—a blouse, you know. I only had two dresses when I came here—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: —that my mother made. You know, flour used to come in sacks,

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: So my mother used to tear them apart to make clothes. And—and—and, like, make a dress for herself and for me. And this is how we came.

LEVINE: Wow.

PERCHONOCK: [sentence unclear].

LEVINE: Do you remember saying goodbye to people?

PERCHONOCK: Yes, yes. It was very hard. There was a—a—one family that we were—I attended school with one of their gir—girls. And we were

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very close and at—she was sick, having me leave. I was her best girlfriend and we studied together.

LEVINE: Hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And it was very hard.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: We were the closest. We were good neighbors.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So how did you leave town? How did you leave Tolo—Tolochin?

PERCHONOCK: Tolochin? We leave by horse and wagon.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Or by horse and wagon. We—we had from straw, you know, the basket, and whatev—whatever—all things we had, we packed it in there and—and put it on the horse and wagon and take it to the train.

LEVINE: Hmm. And what—

PERCHONOCK: A—and then, we—we—we travel. We were in Moscow and we were in Ber—Berlin and we—we were in—in other places where we stopped off. And we stopped off in the [unclear] among the immigrants. They—they had big halls and community eating, you know. And I—I think there was some charity involved from the localities. I don't [unclear]. I was too young to know everything at that time.

LEVINE: W—where was this? Where were these halls?

PERCHONOCK: In Holland.

LEVINE: In Holland, uh-huh. Uh-huh. And—and did you get—

PERCHONOCK: We were—we were in a big place in Holland, like a big hotel and the community eating, you know.

LEVINE: And were you examined? Did you have examinations, physical examinations in Holland?

PERCHONOCK: In—in—what kind of a—

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LEVINE: In other words, did they examine you to see—

PERCHONOCK: Y—yeah, yeah. Yeah, th—they had the clinics that took care of the immigrants.

LEVINE: Okay. Okay, Sophie, why don't we stop here? Because it's time for your lunch.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then we'll come back after lunch.

PERCHONOCK: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay?

PERCHONOCK: All right. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here. [tape off/on]

PERCHONOCK: In the—you know, where the immigrants are—are. And then we went to Berlin.

LEVINE: And what ship did you take? The name of the ship?

PERCHONOCK: I'll tell you. I have some—I—I don't remember the name but I can show it to you.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here. [tape off/on]

PERCHONOCK: I—

LEVINE: Okay.

PERCHONOCK: I manage—I manage up to now. I'm here 70 years.

LEVINE: Well, let's talk about when you came. When you left, you left from Berlin? Did you le—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, w—when I left Russia? No, I left the small town near Moscow where I lived all my life—

LEVINE: No, but I mean when—where you took the ship from.

PERCHONOCK: Oh, the—the shi—the ship in Holland.

LEVINE: Oh, you left from Holland?

PERCHONOCK: Hmm?

LEVINE: You—you left from Holland.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what—do you remember anything about the voyage?

PERCHONOCK: Y—yes. I—I have pictures from th—that too. I kept all the pictures.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Okay.

PERCHONOCK: If you have time, you can look them through.

LEVINE: Okay. We'll go over those—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —at—soon.

PERCHONOCK: All right.

LEVINE: But tell me, well, what do you remember about the trip, coming here?

PERCHONOCK: I remember they looked at us like strangers, like they wanted to hear and see who we are and what our intentions are, why are we going. And—but I had a [unclear] and that reason, because my father was here. And my father couldn't come back and he didn't want to come. There was nothing to come back to because they were illegally—[unclear] legally to avoid the persecution. Mmm.

LEVINE: So when—do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

PERCHONOCK: Yes, yes. I remember it came in on—on a [unclear] weekend. So th—they had a—a lot of [unclear]. The—the relatives, friends came, y—you know where the ships come in there and to meet the newcomers.

LEVINE: And did you go to Ellis Island?

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PERCHONOCK: Yes.

LEVINE: And what do you remember? What—how did Ellis Island strike you? What do you remember about—

PERCHONOCK: They were friendly to us and they—a—almost everybody had relatives that—that came.

LEVINE: And did your father come?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, yeah. My father came and my mother's brother. My mother had a brother here and he had a—the family. He had a wife and four children and—a—and they—they came to meet us. Yeah.

LEVINE: And were you examined at Ellis Island?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, yeah. Yeah. You know, they had a bath that they—they actually cooked us. [chuckles]

LEVINE: They what?

PERCHONOCK: Cooked us?

LEVINE: You—

PERCHONOCK: [chuckles] I—y—you know, th—they sprayed the head with some kind of a soap and then washed it out. T—they made sure if—if—if there are lice somewheres, you know, to clean us out.

LEVINE: And so how did they ma—

PERCHONOCK: And then they sprayed us with kerosene [laughs] and water.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Oh, yeah. They cleaned us out. And they fumigated our clothes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: They didn't have much but whatever they had, they made sure to clean them out.

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LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have to stay at Ellis Island?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. We were there either 9 or 12 days, something or other.

LEVINE: And what was the reason you stayed so long?

PERCHONOCK: What did we eat?

LEVINE: No, why did you stay at Ellis Island?

PERCHONOCK: Th—they—they—they checked the family here, whether it's legitimate, you know, whether nothing went wrong in the—in the [unclear]. And then the doctor's records—they sent us to the—is like [unclear]. They didn't want to bring in people with chronic illnesses.

LEVINE: W—

PERCHONOCK: And they—they wanted to make sure we were clean people, you know.

LEVINE: Mmm.

PERCHONOCK: The—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Not thieves. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Not thieves, right. They asked questions.

PERCHONOCK: Y—yeah. They asked questions. They checked us and I h—I had a very good record in school.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did—was—were you or your mother—did they suspect you had some chronic disease?

PERCHONOCK: My mother was sick already. She had trouble with the heart. But they kept on checking and there was nothing con—contagious, you know. Heart disease is not a contagious disease. It's not TB or anything. And then we had a good record in—in our town.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: We were quiet, ni—people and we didn't bother anybody.

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LEVINE: Did—did you or your mother have to go to the hospital at Ellis Island?

PERCHONOCK: No. We didn't go to the hospital. We—but we were—they sent us for checkups to doctor's offices.

LEVINE: I see. I see. Then do you remember when you first saw your father?

PERCHONOCK: Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like?

PERCHONOCK: You see, we came in on a—on a weekend so a—Sunday all day was visiting. My father came with my mother's brother. So they—they—they wore the things that you put on the shoes [chuckles].

LEVINE: Galoshes?

PERCHONOCK: No, not the—

LEVINE: No.

PERCHONOCK: —galoshes.

LEVINE: Oh, spats.

PERCHONOCK: Huh?

LEVINE: Spats?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, and then they wore straw hats. And each one had a cane, though it was Saturday, you know, it was re—a weekend. And th—they—they both looked nice and my mother introduced—I asked her wh—which one is my father. And so she introduced me to my father, to my—and to her brother. And—and—and then we had a nice walk.

LEVINE: How did you feel about your father when you—when you saw him after so many years?

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PERCHONOCK: I—I didn't know my father. They said, "That's your father." So—so I said, "Hello." I said hello in Russian. [chuckles] But he remembered Russian. He spoke Jewish though, spoke Jewish.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: With my mother, spoke Jewish.

LEVINE: And was your mother excited and happy to be here?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. Yeah, my mother wanted the family. My father was here alone 12 years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: And—and maybe 12 years, we didn't know about each other, whether they're—are they alive or what are doing. But—but it—it turned out to be all right. My father stayed with my uncle's family. The idea was to save few dollars. So then we'll come. My father had rented a four-room apartment. Of course, it was a cold flat. The ba—the bathroom was in—in the hallway. But it didn't matter. There was no steam or anything. But it was a very nice, roomy, four-room apartment on the sixth floor, walkup.

LEVINE: Where was it?

PERCHONOCK: Vedensberg [PH]—near Vedersberg Bridge, as you get on Vedensberg Bridge.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn?

PERCHONOCK: No, in New York.

LEVINE: Oh, in Manhattan.

PERCHONOCK: In Brooklyn, yeah.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: In Brooklyn. We used to come b—by train to Essex Street, you know, and from there, take the—there was a trolley that close, where we just [unclear]. So it came in from New York [unclear].

LEVINE: What struck you New York when you first came here as a 19-year-old girl?

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PERCHONOCK: The—the size of it, the—the tall buildings, you know. I came from a small town, [chuckles] 3,000 population. You know, little houses like this. And here you come in [unclear]. And our first apartment was in Vedersberg, just crossing Vedersberg Bridge. We used to take any train or trolley and go to Essex Street and take the—the bus across the bridge.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Sometimes walk it to save the cab fare.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: [laughs]

LEVINE: So—so when you first came here, what did you do? Wh—did you go to work right away or—

PERCHONOCK: You see, I had a high school diploma, graduation. And on it, I had a good record as far as schooling is concerned. So—and my father—thanks to my uncle's chil—my uncle's children were already through in college the through in the high school. So they—they influenced him to buy a [unclear]. And they advised him, you know, how to look for the job [unclear]. They were a great help [sniffs] and—and so I looked for work, not brain work but, you know, like here a high school girl graduate [unclear] work. So w—when I got a job, it was from the electrical industry that they got a stu—a student from the high schools who had a—good records in the—in the—in these subjects, like physics and chemistry and arithmetic or, you know, all—all that. [sniffs] And they took me in and—and, fortunately, there was a man there that came from Russia years ago but still remembered the Russian. So he—he helped the engineers. There were—two engineers made—a German and a—and a Frenchman. He introduced me to them and he helped me work with—with them, you know. They were teaching me. So—and right away, they took to me. They liked me because I had a good record in school. You see, the record spoke for me. And—and they saw that—that I was a serious little girl. I wanted to learn. And he—he is a—he—they understood. My father is a poor man and I have to learn a trade and—and go to work. [sniffs] So they—they were very nice to me a—and—and there were only, you know, a couple of dozen younger boys and girls who just graduated high school. So I was—it was stuck at training ground for me, y—you know? Even there—there was nothing to do. They—they didn't produce yet.

They were in the verge of learning how to assemble things. They, themselves, had to learn, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: So—and—but the company never laid me off.

LEVINE: Now—[clears throat] now, this company, Sophie, it took in several—like a dozen girls and boys, who were bright and who had just—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: —finished high school.

PERCHONOCK: Th—they had the higher engineers and—and somebody who know technical—t—technical work, how to prepare people to work. It was like a school.

LEVINE: Yeah.

PERCHONOCK: Schooling but w—working, you know.

LEVINE: I see. I see. Hi.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wait. Here comes your roommate. Let's pa—[tape off/on] okay. We're going to continue here in a more quiet room.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: You were talking about [clears throat] when you were selected with the other dozen boys and girls, who were good in the—in school—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —for this engineering company that was just getting started. Now, could you talk a little more about—what did you do? What did you learn about when you first started to work or get training in that company? The electronic company?

PERCHONOCK: Th—they—they asked me a lot of questions. They—they were—were interested not only what I think of—of the pieces there, but generally, you know. Yeah. They were nice.

LEVINE: And how was learning English for you?

PERCHONOCK: I didn't bother to learn. I just listened. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So you didn't really study English.

PERCHONOCK: No.

LEVINE: You learned it naturally a—as you were doing—

PERCHONOCK: No. I didn't have a chance to have a teacher or s—somebody. You know, I had a sick mother. When I came home, I—I had to see the house is clean or to cook something, you know, or attend some others, you know. My father had very long hours, you know, and unskilled laborers.

LEVINE: Say that again.

PERCHONOCK: He was an unskilled—

LEVINE: Unskilled.

PERCHONOCK: —laborer.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: And h—he used to go to—at the crack of dawn, he already dressed and went. He used to come very late and very tired. I couldn't—I—I really felt sorry for him. I tried to make it as—as—as much of my responsibility as his. I didn't want him to be, you know, knocked down.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: I shared with him all the responsibilities.

LEVINE: Because your mother was ill.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. For the sake of my mother, and my father was a very nice man too.

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LEVINE: What was his personality like? What was your—what was your father's personality?

PERCHONOCK: He—he was a quiet person. He always spoke the truth. He was not the—the boisterous type, you know. And he always respected somebody else's feeling. And he believed in sharing. When we had to attend to something, he would always say, "I'll do it," you know. He—he w—he was not—he had nice poise about him.

LEVINE: Do you think you take after your father?

PERCHONOCK: Hmm?

LEVINE: Do you think you took after your father? Do you think you were like your father? Similar in personality?

PERCHONOCK: Well, a little bit, little bit. I think I'm more like my father than—than like my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: I'm—in the sense that I'm not the selfish person.

LEVINE: And—uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: My—my mother, [chuckles] God bless her memory, she's—she—she would think first of her—[chuckles] of making it easier for herself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. [chuckles]

PERCHONOCK: Not my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: He was—he was a nice—I liked his [unclear].

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: I got along very nice with [unclear] father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: With my mother too, for that matter.

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LEVINE: Now, this man who spoke Russian—the man in the company—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —spoke Russian. Did he help you with learning English?

PERCHONOCK: Y—yeah, yeah. Th—they were nice. They noticed that I need a job and they—they—they saw that I have nice, quiet parents. And we weren't those boisterous people, you know, selfish. And that's why I would—we followed instructions. We wanted to learn.

LEVINE: [clears throat] How—

PERCHONOCK: They—they were nice to me.

LEVINE: How long did you stay with the company?

PERCHONOCK: With the company? It took them about two and a half years till they started to produce something, you see, because they themselves were learning. [sniffs]

LEVINE: And then, did you keep working then?

PERCHONOCK: And then I—yeah. Yeah, I—I remained with them and they had already 700 people working with them, 400—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: Okay. We're now on tape two and I'm speaking with Sophie Perchonock, who came from Russia in 1926 at the age of 19.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And now, we're talking about once you were already in this country—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —and you were living in Brooklyn.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you were telling about the neighborhood and about—I had asked you if you had coal delivered.

PERCHONOCK: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: And you were saying that your father—did your father go and get coal? Is that what he did?

PERCHONOCK: Did my father what?

LEVINE: We were talking about your apartment—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —where you lived and coal. Coal—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —for the—for the stove?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did somebody come and deliver that to you?

PERCHONOCK: No. He used to go to the market and buy a—a bag of coal. It used to come in big bags, you know, and bring it down on the back.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: A—and put it in the cellar. And every time we had to make the—the stove—you know, we had the—those stoves that stood on the ground.

LEVINE: Was it like—

PERCHONOCK: Iron—iron stove a—and you have something that you lifted it, that the—that the parts open up so you can put the part down.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I—it was like a—a cook stove?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yes.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: I know what you mean. Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And [clears throat] did you have electricity?

PERCHONOCK: Ye—yeah. We—we had a—a—like a wick. We didn't have a lamp.

LEVINE: Kerosene?

PERCHONOCK: We had kerosene too but a—a—after that, we had just the wires, y—you know. And we didn't need any liquids.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: You know, it was improving gradually.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. How did—how did your first apartment compare with where y—how you lived in Russia?

PERCHONOCK: It c—c—compared favorably with anything because [chuckles] in Russia, we didn't have anything. We—we had a little room like this in somebody else's apartment and where I slept is, there were two—two broken boxes and a board. [chuckles] [unclear]. That was [unclear] and—and I slept with my mother in there, a broken down little bed. Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: But, you know, we weren't used to anything good so we didn't complain.

LEVINE: And how about the neighborhood? Can you say anything more about the neighborhood in Brooklyn?

PERCHONOCK: They were nice people. Th—they were friendly.

LEVINE: Did you have any social life? Did you go to dances or did you—

PERCHONOCK: No.

LEVINE: No.

PERCHONOCK: No, no, no.

LEVINE: Did you make friends? Did you get friends in this country?

PERCHONOCK: I didn't have a chance to meet people on a friendly basis because I—I worked hard. You know, six o'clock in the morning and my mother used to wake me and—and I would put on a couple pieces of clothing and go out. The d—the days were very long. The work was hard and the pay was next to nothing, you know. So you concentrated mostly on keeping going, you know, just staying alive.

LEVINE: Did you try to become like an American?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. I—I—I tried to, like, wherever I was, I was—I wasn't much for talking. I was listening. I wanted to learn, you know. And—and on the job, I always tried to do it right.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: And I—learn.

LEVINE: How many years did you stay with that job? How long?

PERCHONOCK: About 11 or 12 years.

LEVINE: And then they moved to the South.

PERCHONOCK: They moved to the South for ch—

LEVINE: And what—

PERCHONOCK: —for cheaper labor. They wanted to take me along and use me as an instructor for the—for the young people, so do the assembly work, you know, and do all that stuff. And they wanted to pay me wages. But I couldn't take it because, you see, at home there was one expense but here, you had to pay rent there, pay rent for the parents in New York. And I—I couldn't do that.

LEVINE: Your mother was still ill?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, my mother was still ill.

LEVINE: Now, [clears throat] so where did you go for work when that company went to the South? What did you do for work?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, I picked up the papers. I learned to read the—these—the signs, you know, and pick up the paper and looked for something to do where they—they asked—I—I knew what I learned was to

tell them my experience and—and then that's how I managed. Someplace, I worked longer. Some were shorter, depends.

LEVINE: So what was your field? What would you—you say if somebody said, "What do you do for work?" What—what would you say?

PERCHONOCK: I used to tell them, "I—I—I work in a place that makes this or that," you know, tell them wh—what I make.

LEVINE: It was electrical.

PERCHONOCK: What I do.

LEVINE: It was electrical—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —things.

PERCHONOCK: Y—yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Electrical things.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —so, Sophie—

PERCHONOCK: —it was el—electrical as—assembly. Mmm.

LEVINE: Wh—what would you say were the high points of your life?

PERCHONOCK: To learn how to get along, to learn how to look for a job. I—I—I had to learn how to get around, you know, people. And once I got around, I had to behave well so I'll be always welcome on the job. I—I—I wasn't a snob.

LEVINE: And what were the low points? What were the low points in your life?

PERCHONOCK: The low point is that my mother was sick. She was going down. Yeah, I understood that.

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LEVINE: And how was—how did the Depression—how did the Depression affect you—you and your family? In the '30s? The Depression?

PERCHONOCK: The—oh, the Depression was bad. Yeah, in the '30s, in the middle '30s, especially.

LEVINE: Hmm. Wh—how did it affect you and your family?

PERCHONOCK: It affects—I—I don't know. I, personally w—when I got that job, I tried very hard. I worked hardest.

LEVINE: So you were working at that job all through the—the Depression?

PERCHONOCK: I—I worked on the—this in the industry. But there was no so such a thing as working on the same job very long.

LEVINE: Were you ever out of work? Once you started working, were there periods—

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. There was sometimes a Friday, they used to finish and—and the foreman would say, "Sorry. We have no orders," and they have to lay low for a while and all that stuff. Yeah. So what do you think? Monday morning, I was in the market. [chuckles]

LEVINE: And did your father get laid off too during the Depression? Your father?

PERCHONOCK: Y—yes. But my father didn't work in a—in a factory at that time. My father had a job delivering sodas, beers, seltzers. And he used to pu—you know, put the boxes on the shoulder and—and the driver used to drive, and he would go up and down the stairs delivering the—the—you know, at that time, they—it was different than now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. And remember when the Second World War—do—do you remember any war efforts in this country around the Second World War?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. Do I remember what?

LEVINE: Yeah. Any—and d—any war efforts that were made in this country when it was this time of the Second World War?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything connected with that? How it affected you?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, I remember. I—I—I [unclear] the industry right away. You know, I had a [unclear] job where they—they made instruments. They made radios and a—all that. B—but as soon as they—they [unclear] the war, they—they closed it. They stopped production and they gave me a j—because I was experienced and they liked my work, they gave me a job in the—in the war industry. And—and I started wor—working for the—for the people who flew the airplanes, you see. I—I worked for—for them.

LEVINE: Hmm. And do you remember—

PERCHONOCK: I, all through the war, I—I had the—the—the job.

LEVINE: A—

PERCHONOCK: A—and—and after, they—they gave me two certificates for meritorious work and—and for skilled leadership, because I—I—I taught new people, young boys and girls. There were some who left high school, you know, and—and came to work out of p—patriotism. And—and we also had some in—intellectuals too, some women writers or, you know, th—this type of educated people came as helping the war effort.

LEVINE: And you trained them?

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. I was a good worker. My whole heart was in it.

LEVINE: When you think about coming to this country as an immigrant and making a new life here, do you think that that fact of coming here made a difference in the kind of person you are? Had an influence on you?

PERCHONOCK: I believe that it had a—some influence.

LEVINE: In what ways do you think it influenced?

PERCHONOCK: In one way, we have responsibility towards something, not only your personal, but something that affects many people and affects all society.

LEVINE: Was this—I mean, did you feel there was a big difference, living in America, compared with living in Russia?

PERCHONOCK: Oh, yeah. You see, I came from a very small town, something that [unclear] or anything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah. I—I knew I had to adjust myself through all kind of circumstances that come up.

LEVINE: Did you become a citizen?

PERCHONOCK: Huh?

LEVINE: Did you become an American citizen?

PERCHONOCK: I automatically become a citizen because I was under—underage and my father was a citizen.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

PERCHONOCK: See, my—my father was a practical man. As soon as I c—he came here, he started—he went to evening school and studies and prepared himself. And he became a citizen. So when I came, I—I was already a—a daughter of a citizen, you see. My father just put me on his paper.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: I was underage.

LEVINE: Did that—did that mean anything in particular to you—

PERCHONOCK: Yes.

LEVINE: Being a citizen?

PERCHONOCK: It helped me. It helped me. You see, the word citizen, it meant a lot.

LEVINE: What did it mean to you? What did it mean?

PERCHONOCK: It means that it's—it's sort of your responsibility and it gives you a right to—to put up a little bit of a dem—demands, you know, to share with everybody else.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And—

PERCHONOCK: I—I was proud of the fact that my father was a citizen.

LEVINE: Joyce told me that you—that you voted in this primary election.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, sure. I always voted. I voted every—I never missed the presidential drive. I used to join the election committee and go out canvassing from house to house, distributed leaflets. But this way, you know, [unclear] meetings. And yeah, I participated all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, that's wonderful. Is there anything else? Is there—what would you say has made you most satisfied about your life?

PERCHONOCK: That I was able to help my family to support themselves. We were never [unclear] relief, and no matter how bad times were, we earned our living. And we never complained that we worked so hard. You know, you want to eat, you want to live, you have to work.

LEVINE: Do you—did you feel—how do you feel now about having to leave Russia when you were selected to be one of the students—

PERCHONOCK: Oh, the—

LEVINE: —after high school?

PERCHONOCK: I'll tell you, I didn't feel bad. As—as long as I knew I am doing something useful, I didn't feel bad. I didn't work for my own honor, you know.

LEVINE: And how about this time in your life? How—how is your old age time? How is this for you?

PERCHONOCK: I'm always sorry that I have no family. I have nobody. I'm alone. Nobody cares for the [unclear].

LEVINE: Well, I think there are people here who care about you.

PERCHONOCK: I—I—I don't know. Among them, there is always a rat.

EI-P941/PERCHONOCK

LEVINE: Say it again.

PERCHONOCK: I say, when you come in a big place, you'll find there is always somebody—a—a rat in the home. But what can you do? I have no illusions. I don't suffer because of it.

LEVINE: Good. And—and you have not seen Ellis Island since you came through in 1906. You haven't visited.

PERCHONOCK: Well, I went on—on excursions sometimes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, I didn't separate from it. It was always part of me, you know.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

PERCHONOCK: I—I just tried to come up to the general standard, you know.

LEVINE: Well, we're going to look forward to your trip to Ellis Island.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: That will be very nice.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah, that'll be interesting.

LEVINE: Good. Okay. Well, Sophie, let's stop here.

PERCHONOCK: Okay.

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much for a most, most interesting—

PERCHONOCK: I'm—I'm very glad I had a chance to talk to you.

LEVINE: Well, now, your voice will be preserved for posterity.

PERCHONOCK: Because—because there are some Americans who think that a person like him to—like myself don't count.

LEVINE: Oh, well, you're the kind of person that Ellis Island celebrates and honors.

EI-P941/PERCHONOCK

PERCHONOCK: And I try to be honest. I try to be simple, y—you know. I try to live up to the standard of the American living. What else could I—

LEVINE: Well, it's been a pleasure. I want to thank you very much.

PERCHONOCK: You're very welcome. My pleasure to meet you.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Thank you. Okay. I've been speaking with So— Sophie Perchonock, who came in 1926 at 19 years of age from Russia.

PERCHONOCK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And at the time of this interview, which is September 18, 1997, Sophie is 91 years of age.

PERCHONOCK: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]