

EI-973

REBA (REBECCA) SCHAMLOWITZ RECKLER MILANO
BIRTH DATE: APRIL 18, 1898
INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 10, 1997
RUNNING TIME: 1:01:20
INTERVIEWER: MINDY HAPEMAN
RECORDING ENGINEER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1998
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

RUSSIA, 1904
AGE 6
PASSAGE ON "THE PATRICIA"

HAPEMAN: Good morning.

MILANO: Good morning.

HAPEMAN: This is Mindy Hapeman for the National Park Service. I am a student intern for the Oral History Project from Skidmore College. Today is December 10, 1997, and I am here in Palisades Park, New Jersey, with Reba Milano, who came from Russia in 1904 at the age of six. We are in Mrs. Milano's home, and her son, Henry Reckler, is also present today. Paul Sigrist is also present. He is the recording engineer today. I should say for the sake of the tape that we are in a residential area and there may be some traffic or neighborhood noises that are heard on the tape as well as some other noises. Let's begin by having you state your full name, Mrs. Milano.

MILANO: Reba Milano.

HAPEMAN: Okay. What is your date of birth?

MILANO: Uh, April 18, 1898.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And what was your maiden name?

MILANO: Rebecca Schamlowitz.

HAPEMAN: Could you spell the last name, please?

MILANO: Schamlowitz?

HAPEMAN: Yes, please.

MILANO: S-C-H-A-M-L-O-W-I-T-Z.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And where were you born?

MILANO: In Kiev, Russia.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Tell me about that town. How big was it?

MILANO: It's one of the biggest cities in Russia, Kiev. I was born there in 1898, April the 18th, and I lived in Bershoiavutzl Kovsky[ph]. It's one of the biggest homes in Kiev. It's the biggest center. It's the, the main street, the main avenue in Kiev where the cities, cities, uh, national buildings were there. And the, and the, uh, czar's picture on the main, uh, company, was in there, and that my father had a business in that, on that street.

HAPEMAN: So that name that you mentioned a moment ago was the name of a building.

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: That was the Russian name.

MILANO: No, it wasn't exactly the name. Kiev is the . . .

HAPEMAN: Right, Kiev is the name of the town.

MILANO: And Bershoiavutzl Kovsky[ph] was the main street.

HAPEMAN: The main street, I see.

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: I see.

MILANO: The main avenue.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Could you spell that name? Do you remember how that was spelled?

MILANO: No, I don't think I can.

HAPEMAN: That's fine, that's fine. What do you remember about the building that you lived in? Was it an apartment?

MILANO: Yes. The building we lived in was immense. My father had the entire, the entire floor on the street. It was a round building with a big, like, something like in the United States they have a building all around, and we had the entire floor. We had eight rooms, because my father was in business, and he was a tailor. He, we had four men living in, who worked with my father, and three servants who lived with us. And we had, at the time I'm talking about, we had three children in the house, I, my brother and my other brother, two brothers and myself. And we had three servants, a girl to cook, a girl to clean, and a girl to take care of the children.

HAPEMAN: What was the relationship between these servants and the people in your family?

MILANO: They were all Russian people, and they lived with us for years,

ever since I was born, until I left Russia. And we left the whole house to them when we left.

HAPEMAN: Can you give me a physical description of a part of the apartment that you remember, a room that was yours, perhaps?

MILANO: Yes. When we walked in, we had a little reception room. When, from the reception room was a large room where my father had a big table where they were, they were working on. They were four men and my father working on coats and suits and dresses, and then there was a big, on the other side, was a big oven, a built-in big oven that they cooked in, and on top of the oven was a place where the children would put on big, uh, cloths to sit on when it was cold in the winter time. And on the right side of that big room, there was, oh, I can't, it was about as big as this here, these two rooms, and the table was on the side. And the table was right against a big wall where the windows, and the windows faced a big yard, uh, a garden. And the servants' apartment was on one side, and the men's apartment on the other side, because in Russia they cannot go every day home, so they lived in wherever they work.

HAPEMAN: Do you remember anything else about the apartment layout?

MILANO: Well, when it came to Saturday, my father did not work, but they used to take the table and put it outside on the, in the garden with a big samovar, you know, for tea, and cookies and things, and a lot of families and friends used to come, and we'd have a lot of parties out there.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things did you grow in the garden?

MILANO: Well, there was only grass and trees. It was no, there was no

garden that was for any food, because food we already bought.

MILANO: What other memories do you have of the town itself? Do you have anything that sticks out in your mind about Kiev?

MILANO: Well, I did go to school there, and the school was in the next block, but we'd go through an alley, and they had, I was the only Jewish girl in that school, because they didn't allow any Jewish girls in there, only gentiles. And . . .

HAPEMAN: And how did it come to be that you were allowed . . .

MILANO: Because my father was a very famous man. He used to do a lot of work for the army there, and for the generals there that, and they gave me the permission to go, so I was the only Jewish girl in that school.

HAPEMAN: What was that like, to be the only Jewish girl?

MILANO: Nothing. I was treated very beautifully. Even when we went to, in the morning, you know, what do they call it again? When all, everybody went to the, to the school, and the, uh, priest used to bless . . .

HAPEMAN: Chapel, or . . .

MILANO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. The assembly, the assembly.

HAPEMAN: Assembly.

MILANO: The assembly. That's what it was, yes. And when I was there the teacher used to say to me, "You just sit quietly and let them do." I had a lot of Russian friends.

HAPEMAN: We talked a little bit about your father. Can you tell me his

name?

MILANO: Yes. Samuel Schamlowitz.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And he was a tailor.

MILANO: A tailor. And he used to work mostly for the generals. He used to go to the furrier, kill the animal, take the skin and bring it to my father, and he would make, uh, coats for them.

HAPEMAN: Do you have any other stories about your father's work with the soldiers?

MILANO: No. He only worked for, mostly with big people, mostly.

HAPEMAN: Generals, and . . .

MILANO: He wasn't a general tailor for everybody, mostly for those people. And they were really good to us, because a time, when it came to the time when I was six years old and we had that big pogrom in there, the general took us, and took us up to his house to live in his rooms so they wouldn't kill us because we were Jewish.

HAPEMAN: Can you give me any more information on the pogrom that you were just talking about?

MILANO: Yes, yes, I can. Well, at the time my mother happened to want to go and buy some things in the big stores, and all of a sudden we heard soldiers coming down the hill where, I went over to the, uh, to the door. We had a big gate to close in the door because they, the apartment where we were was in the back of the gate, and there was a big yard with trees and things, and then it was all big, uh, what do you call it, houses built, you know,

apartments outside and inside. And in the middle was a big yard.

So I walked over to the gate. It was closed all of a sudden. And then my, the street where we lived, one block this way came down the street, and one this way, and one that way. And we lived down there, we could see the whole street. And we saw the soldiers coming down with their knives open and if anybody came, crossed them, and they knew they were Jewish, they would kill them. And then all of a sudden we'd hear this family, Jewish, was killed, and that one was killed, that one was killed, and the Jews were all afraid. So my father, when he went up to the general's house, he took a big cross and he put it on our door, and our girls were all Christian, and they stayed in the house. And when the people came in they said, "No Jews here, all Gentiles." So we were saved there. Then somebody squealed that they were saving us, so we went down into the cellar and we stayed in the cellar for a week. (disturbance to the microphone) After that it quieted down. (break in tape)

SIGRIST: We're now back on tape.

MILANO: All right. Now, what was I saying?

HAPEMAN: You . . .

SIGRIST: Hiding in the cellar.

HAPEMAN: Right. You were talking about hiding in the cellar after being found . . .

MILANO: Oh, yes. We were in the cellar for about a week, and our girls, at midnight, used to come down and bring us the food that they, they, uh, cooked, and we ate it, and we stayed there until everything quieted down for a while. Then my father said to my

mother, "You know, it's no use staying in this country. Let's try and go to America." So my mother said, "Oh, I'll leave my mother, I'll leave my father? Oh, no," she said. He said, "Yes, that's what we're going to do." So my father went ahead and he got his passport, and then we had to try and escape from Russia because it was still very bad. So two of our girls called in their husbands, and they brought a big, big wagon with hay in the, in the wagon, and four horses. And my father took all the clothes that we needed for ourselves. We put everything into the wagon, and we got dressed, and we closed up the rooms, and we gave everything to the girls and the boys in there, left everything. But my mother took her samovar with her. She didn't want to leave that. So, anyway, we got into the wagon, and they covered the children with hay, and my mother and father, and the men took us at midnight. It was New Year's Eve, when everybody had to go to church, so they could escape. So they quietly, they took us away from the house, and we escaped from Kiev.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Before you continue on with that, I'm going to ask you all kinds of questions about your escape from Kiev.

MILANO: All right, yeah.

HAPEMAN: But first I just want to ask you a few more questions about your father and your mother. First, what was your father's personality like?

MILANO: Oh, he was a wonderful man. I have a picture, later I'll show it to you. He was a little bit shorter than my mother. My mother was tall and a very wonderful looking woman. You'll see their pictures later.

HAPEMAN: What did your father look like, besides his short height?

MILANO: Well, I'll tell you something funny, he looked almost like my husband.

HAPEMAN: Now, you're pointing to a picture of your husband, but remember that the people that are listening to the tape can't see the picture.

MILANO: Yes, yes.

HAPEMAN: So could you describe in some words for me what your father looked like.

MILANO: Well, he was, he was shorter than my mother. My mother was tall, and he had a lovely face. I can't, how can I explain it. Henry, Henry?

RECKLER: Yes?

HAPEMAN: That's okay, we'll . . .

MILANO: Get the picture of Mama and, of my mother and father. (voices off mike) It's inside.

RECKLER: Later.

HAPEMAN: I'll look at the picture after the interview. I would love to see it.

MILANO: All right. Okay.

HAPEMAN: Okay?

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Tell me about your mother's personality.

MILANO: My mother was tall, good looking, a wonderful woman, very, very kind to people, and always, was always, uh, religious, very religious, and what else can I tell you? She was a wonderful mother, a wonderful woman.

HAPEMAN: Okay. You mentioned before your, your siblings, your brothers and your sisters. What were their names?

MILANO: My brother's name, the oldest brother was Irving. The other brother was Max. And one was Hymie.

HAPEMAN: Hymie.

MILANO: I had three brothers and a sister, and my sister's name was Francis.

HAPEMAN: Francis. Okay. And your mother's name, I didn't ask you that.

MILANO: Lilly.

HAPEMAN: Lilly. Elizabeth. (voice off mike) Okay. All right. I just wanted to get all that straight before we moved on.

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Did your mother work at all?

MILANO: No. She just took care of the children.

HAPEMAN: Do you have any memories of her, as you were a very young child in Russia, anything that sticks out in your mind?

MILANO: Yes. When I was born, and was about three years old, I remember we lived with my mother, grandmother and grandfather. They had a very big house, and they had all their children living there, my

aunts and my uncles, and my grandfather was living there. And when I was three years old, see, my grandmother used to work, because my grandfather was a soldier in Russia, and when he came home he was blind, because in the hospital he got blind. So he was a blind rabbi, and my grandmother took care of the house, and all my aunts and uncles and my mother and father and the children all lived in that one big house. My grandmother used to have a big business in the, uh, yard, in, a big place where they had all kinds of businesses, and she used to have a business of chickens and eggs. And when she used to come home, we would, late in the afternoon, in the wintertime, I remember we'd put her on the bed and put a big blanket over her, and then she'd take off her apron where the money was all in, and we'd all put the money in separate places and put them into little bags for her, and let her go to sleep. And when I, when my mother and father had already three children, then we moved out into our own house. And my grandfather died when he was in Russia, and I had another uncle who died in Russia. But the others were alive.

HAPEMAN: So there were grandparents and uncles and aunts, the whole family was in Kiev.

MILANO: The whole family, yeah.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Tell me about your religious life in Russia.

MILANO: Well, we went to synagogue every Saturday, and when it would come to holidays, like Yom Kippur or Easter, we used to be exactly the Jewish way of living. We were really a religious family.

HAPEMAN: Was, did this include the whole extended family, too?

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: Your aunts and uncles?

MILANO: Yes. We always got together on holidays.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things would you do on holidays?

MILANO: Well, we had a big dinner, and we'd just sit around and talk and have friends come in and have nice times.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things would be served for a holiday dinner?

MILANO: Well, I suppose you know in Easter we had matzohs, and, uh, have our seders. In fact, I have them here, now, too. And, uh, that's it.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: We always took care of our own religion. In spite of the fact that I'm married to an Italian. (she laughs)

HAPEMAN: Were you aware of the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish population?

MILANO: Oh, yes, very much. I really did. And still I had a lot of Gentile friends in Russia. We never divided religion, but other people that had that kind of a feeling, we couldn't help that. It's the same thing here. Isn't it?

HAPEMAN: We talked a little bit about school for you. Is there anything else you remember about school that you want to . . .

MILANO: No. I knew one thing, that I went to school, and I studied in Russia, and I was very able to write letters for my father, but that was all. And when I was six years old I had to quit, because I left Russia.

HAPEMAN: Could your father or mother read or write?

MILANO: Yes, yes, yes.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And you talked before about, uh, the servants that were living in your home.

MILANO: Well, I really don't, I know we had three girls working for us. And they were, one was for the children, one was for the house, and one was baking and cooking for everybody, and cleaning the house.

HAPEMAN: Do you have any specific memories about the girl, as you say, that worked with the children?

MILANO: No, I don't. Nothing really important.

HAPEMAN: And what kind of things would be, would the person that did the cooking, what kind of things would she cook on an everyday basis?

MILANO: Everything that my mother would buy and tell her how to cook it, she'd cook. They had a big oven, you know, and they put it into the oven with coals, you know, and that's the way they'd cook. They made wonderful dinners.

HAPEMAN: Were you, as children, expected to help around the house?

MILANO: No, nothing at all. But I was the one that was the oldest, and then I had a brother that was after me, and another brother that was, so they were really small. They were really infants.

HAPEMAN: Do you remember a specific game or toy that you liked?

MILANO: No, I don't. In fact, I was more interested in books than I was in toys.

HAPEMAN: What kind of books?

MILANO: Any kind of books that my father used to buy for me I used to read.

HAPEMAN: Would you like to add anything about the childhood before I move on?

SIGRIST: No, just your mother's maiden name.

MILANO: My mother's maiden name was Eliza, Elizabeth Rosbach.

HAPEMAN: Rosbach?

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: How do you spell that? Do you know?

MILANO: R-O-S-B-A-C-H.

SIGRIST: Great, thanks.

HAPEMAN: As a little girl growing up in Russia, what did you know about America?

MILANO: Well, I really didn't know very much about America, to tell you the truth. I knew that there was an America, and that my father always spoke about it, but my father always used to say, "Some day we'll go, some day we'll go." And I remembered that.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Earlier you were telling me a very dramatic story about escaping in the wagon.

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Is that how you went from Kiev to across the border?

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: The Russian border? Is there anything else you can tell me about that New Year's night that you were escaping.

HAPEMAN: Well, when we went in the wagon, we rode the entire whole night until we got to the, uh, to the German place.

HAPEMAN: Border?

MILANO: Yeah, border. And then our men took us and put us into another room to sleep for the night, and they went and made arrangements to let us go into Germany. They, they got money from my father, and they paid out the men that were watching the, the . . .

HAPEMAN: The border?

MILANO: The border, and, uh, they got permission. And so five o'clock in the morning they took us and put us into the wagons again and took us into Germany, and we got into Germany, and we went, we went to the place where they have the ship board, you know, the ships come in. And, uh, they took us out of there, and my father paid money to put us into a room, and we had to stay there a whole week until the ship came in, and my father had bought the tickets for the ship.

HAPEMAN: Where in Germany was it, do you know?

MILANO: Gee, I don't, I can't remember.

HAPEMAN: That's okay.

MILANO: I can't remember.

HAPEMAN: That's fine, that's fine. What did you do while you were sort of

living in Germany?

MILANO: We just had to stay right where we were in the room until somebody brought us in food, and when the ship came, the ship's name was Patricia, we came, we went into the ship, we got into the ship. Because my father had already bought the ticket.

HAPEMAN: Your father had bought, all right. You were six at this time. Is that right?

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And the men that you were talking about that helped you were the husbands of your servants?

MILANO: I, the girls at work. Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Okay. I'm just trying to get it straight in my head.

MILANO: You see, we gave them a home, we gave them the furniture and everything, and left money for them, so that's why they did that for us.

HAPEMAN: Okay, okay. Did you have to have any kind of medical testing while you were in Germany before you got on the boat?

MILANO: I don't remember that. But I know we got on the boat, and we got into the steerage, you know? And my father didn't like it, because everybody slept in one big room. So he went ahead on the ship, and he got hold of the, one of the men, and he spoke to him, and he gave him money, and he said, "Can you get us a room upstairs?" So they went ahead. One man took my father, and he showed him the room upstairs on the second, uh . . .

HAPEMAN: Floor, or . . .

MILANO: The second class. A big room with beds, you know, up and down, but he said, "You can't go in to eat in the dining room, so I'll bring you your food here." So my father and my mother and us three children, we stayed in that room, and he used to bring us breakfast, lunch and supper. And we stayed there until we got to America.

HAPEMAN: How did you feel about leaving Russia?

MILANO: I didn't care. I was tickled to death. I was very, very, very looking forward to being in America.

HAPEMAN: Do you know how your mother felt?

MILANO: My mother felt bad because she left her mother and her father there, but then by the time we got to America, her father had died, and they buried him in Kiev.

HAPEMAN: Before she left, or while she was traveling?

MILANO: While she was traveling.

HAPEMAN: How long were you in steerage before your father made the other arrangements that you were talking about?

MILANO: A week.

HAPEMAN: One week.

MILANO: Yep.

HAPEMAN: Do you know how long the voyage was?

MILANO: Yes, ten days.

HAPEMAN: Ten days, okay. What do you remember about steerage?

MILANO: Well, I really can't say very much about it until we reached Ellis Island, because we weren't allowed out.

HAPEMAN: Right. When you were in the second class, you weren't allowed out, and you had your meals brought to you. Is that correct?

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things, what kind of foods were brought?

MILANO: Very good food. It must have been good, because everything was all right. While we were traveling, we had a very, very nice time. Plus we did our own entertaining in our own room, but it was good.

HAPEMAN: What kind of entertaining did you do?

MILANO: Well, I mean, we'd sing and we'd dance, and we'd . . .

SIGRIST: Thirty minutes. (referring to the taping of the interview)

MILANO: Children, would you mind if I just asked my son to give me a glass of water?

HAPEMAN: Sure.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a moment.

MILANO: Would you like some drink? (break in tape)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

HAPEMAN: We were talking about the ship that you traveled to America on, and before we talk more about that, I want to ask you, what did you bring to America? What did you pack?

MILANO: Well, all our clothes, and the only thing that my mother brought was the samovar. That's the only thing. All the clothes. Nothing else. We didn't take, oh, of course, jewelry, or whatever.

HAPEMAN: You did bring jewelry?

MILANO: Oh, yes, yeah.

HAPEMAN: What kind of, how did you carry it?

MILANO: In our pocketbooks, and nobody bothered us.

HAPEMAN: Did you as children bring anything special?

MILANO: No, nothing at all.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Is there anything else about the boat that you remember?

MILANO: Well, the only thing I remember is when, when we got to, we were going to Ellis Island, we were, everybody came out, and some of the Jewish men put their talis on. You know what a talis is?

MILANO: Uh, a shawl that is supposed to be worn like your priests wear their, that's the way they put the talis on, and everybody started praying, thank God that they reached America in good faith, you know, that everything was fine. And we saw the Statue of Liberty, and it was, everybody started to sing and pray and thank God for everything, and that was the biggest, everybody went outside on the, on board, and Jewish and Gentiles, everybody was praying and laughing and singing and thanking God for their safety.

HAPEMAN: Were you aware of other people on the boat, even though you were

kept in your . . .

MILANO: Oh, yes. We, we talked to everybody. Everybody was nice, you know? There was no such thing as Jew or gentile. Everybody loved each other because everybody felt free.

HAPEMAN: So was there an opportunity for you to roam around the boat?

MILANO: No, no, no. My, we stood right near my mother and father, because we were three children, and we were held near them.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things were people singing when they saw the Statue of Liberty?

MILANO: Well, I don't know. They were singing all kinds of . . .

HAPEMAN: All different languages?

MILANO: Yeah. Religious songs, and thanking God for their faith, trip. Because, you know, our ship took a whole week to go, and generally it doesn't take that long, but they were afraid of being sunk or something. I don't know.

HAPEMAN: And this was in 1904?

MILANO: That's right.

HAPEMAN: Just to have that clear. Okay. Okay. Now, what do you remember about seeing Ellis Island for the first time?

MILANO: Well, we walked in, and two of my uncles who were in America came and waved to us. But we came in, and we were asked questions. I was very, I was a very, I used to butt into everything. So I started talking to the man in Russian, and that's why they have my name in, in Ellis Island on the. I talked to him, he wanted

to know how old I was, and what I was going to do in America. So I told him I didn't know, but I'll do everything I can, and I'm going to love America. And, believe you me, I lived my entire life with, here in this country, and I gave them everything I could in this country to thank them for what my life was. I had a very big, busy, and a wonderful life in this country, and I always thank God for it, and my name is all over the United States.

HAPEMAN: Wonderful. I forgot to ask you, this is something I wanted to ask you. Who was in America before you?

MILANO: My two uncles. They're both gone.

HAPEMAN: On which side of the family?

MILANO: On my mother's side.

HAPEMAN: And where were they living?

MILANO: In the Bronx.

HAPEMAN: And when did they come?

MILANO: They came, when they heard when my ship was coming in, they came to see if they had to say something for us, but they let my father go through because my father had plenty of money with him, and they told him who he was and who he had here, and they didn't stop us at all. We walked right through?

HAPEMAN: Did you have any medical exams before . . .

MILANO: No.

HAPEMAN: And you didn't, did you have a meal at Ellis Island?

MILANO: No.

HAPEMAN: You just went right through.

MILANO: We just came right though, and my uncles picked us up and we went, we, we took the elevated from there into the Bronx where they lived.

HAPEMAN: How long had they been in America?

MILANO: About five years.

HAPEMAN: And what were they doing?

MILANO: I don't remember what kind of work they were doing, but I knew that they were doing good work.

HAPEMAN: So you went to stay with them in the Bronx?

MILANO: They had already got a three-room apartment for us, 102nd Street and Second Avenue.

HAPEMAN: Tell me about that apartment.

MILANO: Well, we had a bedroom, a living room and a kitchen. And, uh, and a bathroom, of course. That was all. And we lived there for quite a number of years, on 102nd Street.

HAPEMAN: What did you think about it as a little girl of six?

MILANO: Oh, I just thought it was beautiful. It was, I made friends with the children in the house, and we started to, teach me how to speak English, and by the time I went into school I knew a little bit of English. But I remember going into school and, and I brought my dresses that I used to wear in school in Russia, you

know, black dresses with white aprons, they wore, and, oh, the teachers all used to come in, and there were some Russian teachers there, and I always spoke to them, and they were so nice. I had a wonderful time there.

HAPEMAN: So you made friends with young children who lived in your building.

MILANO: That's right.

HAPEMAN: Were they children of immigrants, or were they, uh . . .

MILANO: Just a few of them, but the others were all Americans. And they all tried, and the little girl that I'd made friends with tried to teach me how to speak English. So when I got to school, I really knew a little bit of English.

HAPEMAN: Were there other Russian families around?

MILANO: One, one. In that place.

HAPEMAN: In that building. Did you have any interaction with them?

MILANO: Well, uh, not very much, because we used to keep to ourselves until we found ourselves a little more accommodated with the country.

HAPEMAN: What kind of furnishings did the apartment have?

MILANO: Well, we had a bedroom, so my mother had a big bedroom for herself, and the children had small beds in the dining room.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: With a big, long hall. (she laughs)

HAPEMAN: Okay. What about the neighborhood? What was that like?

MILANO: Well, it was really a very quiet neighborhood at that time. But at the end of that street was a market. All across the, uh, street there was a market of all kinds of stores and things like that. We lived there quite a number of years until my father moved to Lexington Avenue, and he went into business.

HAPEMAN: Okay. What was it like, do you think, for your mother, now that she was living in America without the servants that she was used to?

MILANO: Well, she didn't mind. My mother was very, very good, and I used to help her. Even though I was six years old, I used to do a lot of work in the house.

HAPEMAN: What kind of things would you do?

MILANO: I mean, wash dishes or set tables, or did whatever she wanted me to help.

HAPEMAN: You were an assistant. Yeah. Um, what did your father do when you moved to the Bronx?

MILANO: He went to be a tailor in a factory, and then about a couple years after we were in America we moved to Lexington Avenue and he moved to a place where they had a store in the front and an apartment in the back, and he went into tailoring. At that time, that was a couple of years already after we came to America. At that time, I was able to talk English already, so I was with him in the store, and I would translate English to my father.

HAPEMAN: Were you also in school at this time?

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Did you have to change schools when you moved to Lexington Avenue?

MILANO: Yes, I did. I had a school right near where I lived, on Lexington Avenue.

HAPEMAN: Are there any memories or stories that you have about the first school that you went to up until the ones you've already . . .

MILANO: No, they accepted me, and they took care of me, and tried to translate everything to me. They were very, very nice.

HAPEMAN: Were there, was there ever a problem of being made fun of because you were an immigrant?

MILANO: No, none at all. They accepted me, and then I made up my mind that I was going to love America, and I did a lot of things in this country.

HAPEMAN: What about the second school. Do you remember anything?

MILANO: The second school, when we moved to the Bronx, I went to a school where I, I was then already in, I think in the third or fourth class, and I stayed in that school till I graduated.

HAPEMAN: This is the school that you started attending once your father moved you to Lexington Avenue? Is that right? Okay. Do you remember any stories from that school that stick out in your mind?

MILANO: What, the first school?

HAPEMAN: The second school.

MILANO: The second school? Well, the second school, I was already in the third or fourth class, and I had a wonderful time there. And we had, uh, we used to have all kinds of dances, and I became a dancer and a singer there. But I used to sing, I had an uncle that, the youngest uncle of mine, who was an opera singer, and my family was known for singing.

HAPEMAN: Do you want to sing anything for us right now?

MILANO: I can't no more.

HAPEMAN: No more, huh?

MILANO: No more.

HAPEMAN: Okay, okay. What kind of dancing did you do?

MILANO: Uh, let me see. Tango, two-step, and waltzes. I was a professional dancer.

HAPEMAN: You started learning through the school?

MILANO: Yep.

HAPEMAN: But then you went and did it outside of school as well?

MILANO: Yeah.

HAPEMAN: Okay. And at this time you're also helping your father in the store.

MILANO: That's right.

HAPEMAN: Are you doing this after school?

MILANO: Yes.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Do you remember any, uh, people making fun of you in the second school because you were an immigrant?

MILANO: No, nobody. Everybody accepted, and everybody tried to help me. That's why I love this country, and that's why I worked so hard for this country ever since I was here.

HAPEMAN: What about religious life in America?

MILANO: We had our own religion. We went to a synagogue. We belonged to a synagogue. We always had religious connections with our synagogues.

HAPEMAN: Do you remember if there were other immigrant families at the synagogue that you went to?

MILANO: Oh, there probably were, but I don't remember how many or what. But there were a lot of people that we used to talk with about Russia and this and that, you know?

HAPEMAN: Did you ever experience any religious bigotry in America?

MILANO: No, no.

HAPEMAN: What did you do once you graduated from high school?

MILANO: That's a big story. Well, let me say this. I used to dance very good, and I used to sing very good. So when I lived in the Bronx, I met a woman that was an actress, and she introduced me to five boys and girls that were professional dancers and singers, and I started to sing and dance with them. And I became a professional dancer and singer, and when I used to dance, my father went ahead and made me a dress like one of the very famous girls on, on television.

HAPEMAN: What did the dress look like?

MILANO: Claudine, pleated straight. I forgot her name. So, I used to dance her dances for them. Well, when I, let me get this straight. I don't want to, yeah, when I joined a group, we joined a group of five dancers and singers, and we would go and entertain. When, by that time, when I graduated, the First World War came along. Well, I made up my mind that I was going to give America everything that they gave me, that I loved this country and that I would absolutely do whatever I can to help. So when the very first World came along, I took my company, and we went to camps, and we used to entertain, and after entertaining we'd help in the dining room. So wherever camp there was, we went to all those camps. By that time I was already about eighteen years old, and when I got through there, the First World War got finished, thank God, and I made up my mind that I was going to do something more for America, so I went ahead and made a ball in, in a very big place in the Bronx on Third Avenue. I think it was called The Palisades Ball, or something like that. Anyway, I made the ball, and we, we sold tickets, and we entertained, and dancing with big band music. We made five thousand dollars profit from that whole ball. There was hundreds of people that came, because it was a ball to thank God the war was over. And when I got that five thousand dollars, I went to the hospital in the Bronx, the Kingsbridge Hospital. My son told me now that that's not there any more. And I gave the five thousand dollars to that hospital for the soldiers that were wounded, and I thought that I was, my, thank God for giving me the privilege of being in America. And I made up my mind that as long as I lived that's what I would do, and I did.

HAPEMAN: What was the reaction of the hospital when you gave them this money?

MILANO: They couldn't believe it. We entertained there, and I gave them the five thousand dollars, and that was it.

HAPEMAN: What was it like to have interaction with the soldiers at the camps?

MILANO: Oh, I had loads and loads of friends in the camp, loads of friends, all over. I never had to worry about friendships. I always had a wonderful time, a wonderful place.

HAPEMAN: Is there any memory that sticks out from entertaining at the camps that you want to share?

MILANO: Oh, I had a couple of boyfriends. Who hadn't? Let's say, young girls, you know?

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: I had one boyfriend who was a brother to one of my girlfriends, and I thought I'd get married to him, but I didn't.

HAPEMAN: After the ball, you were about eighteen at this point?

MILANO: That's right.

HAPEMAN: What were you doing? Were you still entertaining with your company, with the dance company and the singing company?

MILANO: Well, that was my Saturday and Sunday thing. I went to work. I worked in the dress shop, and then my father and my brother, my oldest brother, were manufacturers in New York City, dress manufacturers. So I worked for them, and I worked in their place

until I met my girlfriend that lived in the same house with me, took me one day to, uh, her aunt's house. And I met her cousin, and we both fell in love. I was then about twenty-one years old, by that time, and we got married.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: So that was my first husband.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: A Jewish fellow.

HAPEMAN: Okay. I'm going to ask you about him in just a moment, but first I want to know exactly what you did at the dress shop. What was your job?

MILANO: I used to be the, uh, the head of the department where we used to finish up the dresses and put them away on, on the side for shipment. I was the manager of that department, in my brother's and father's factory.

HAPEMAN: And how long did you work there before you were married?

MILANO: Oh, about five years.

HAPEMAN: And what was the name of your husband that you first, the first husband that you met?

MILANO: Wilson Reckler.

HAPEMAN: Okay. Could you spell his last name?

MILANO: R-E-C-K-L-E-R. (she laughs)

HAPEMAN: Okay. And what was his position? What was his job?

MILANO: Well, he worked in the office, but when I was married to him, I worked as a manager in Union City in a dress store. So I, and my, my, uh, owners opened up another store in, I was in Union City, and they opened up a store in West New York, in New Jersey. So I told them to give my husband the managership there, and he was a manager in that store, and I was the manager in the Union City store.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: I stayed there until the, uh, something happened with the, uh, banks, and they closed up. So my, my owners, who had four stores in Brooklyn, and our two stores, they said they were going to close my store and his store. So we went away, they closed the stores, and we stayed home for a little while, and when the banks opened up again after that, I went into business myself. I went, in Union City I opened up a little dress shop.

HAPEMAN: In what year was that?

MILANO: Oh, God, I don't know.

HAPEMAN: That's okay.

MILANO: I can't remember. (Mr. Sigrist speaks off mike)

HAPEMAN: Okay. So . . .

MILANO: I worked for the stores five years in Union City.

HAPEMAN: Okay, and then . . .

MILANO: And after that, the sixth year I opened up my own business.

HAPEMAN: Do you remember the year that you got married?

MILANO: The first time?

HAPEMAN: The first time.

MILANO: I was twenty-two years old at that time.

HAPEMAN: You were twenty-two. So that would have been about, uh, 19 . . .

SIGRIST: Twenty?

MILANO: '20, yeah.

HAPEMAN: Yeah, something like that. I can't remember numbers.

MILANO: 1920. Now we know. (she laughs) Okay. So tell me about going into business for yourself.

HAPEMAN: Well, I, one of my girlfriends worked with me. We were very, very close, and she said to me, "What are you going to do now that the store closed?" I said to her, "I'm going to go in business." She says, "What the hell? You ain't got no money." I says, "I'll get money, don't worry." She says, "All right. If you go in business, I'll work for you for six months free. I'll go in with you. It's okay." And then she comes back the next day, she says to me, "Reba, I found a store." I says, "Where?" "In Union City, the next block. The man is giving up, and you can get that store." So I says, "All right, I'll go adn see." I went over, took alook, and the man used to get fifty dollars a month. When I wanted it he wanted a hundred. so I said to him, "I can't do it." He said, "All right, I'll tell you what, I'll give it to you for seventy-five dollars a month for one year, and the next year it will be a hundred." I said, "Okay." So I went into this business. I went to New York, and I said to my brother

and my father, they were in business in New York, I says, "I'm going to take some of these here dresses, put them in the store, and I want to go and get some more of the dresses, but the people who will give me, because I haven't any money." So my brother had a very, very good name in the market at that time. He said, "All right. Go to this manufacturer." And he got all kinds of dresses, and you can take whatever you like, I'll guarantee him the money. I said, "Okay." So I went, and he got all the dresses I needed, I opened up the store, and I went like fire. Two girls came in to work for me that I worked with, and two seamstresses walked in and we got machines, and we opened up the store, and the store was a gem. We had a wonderful, wonderful time. Somewheres I have a picture of it. I don't know where, I have a picture of it.

HAPEMAN: What was the store called? What was the name of the store?

MILANO: Reba's, always Reba's. Always is. My store is still working there. Not there, it's working here in North Bergen.

HAPEMAN: And what was your husband doing at this time?

MILANO: Nothing. He was a womanizer. (a doorbell rings)

HAPEMAN: I think we'll talk a moment here and pause. (break in tape)

HAPEMAN: We were talking about your business. I want to know about when you got your citizenship.

MILANO: I don't remember.

HAPEMAN: You don't remember?

MILANO: Who was that? What's that? Flowers? (Mr. Sigrist speaks off

mike)

HAPEMAN: You don't remember getting your citizenship?

MILANO: I don't remember when I got it. It was a long time ago.

HAPEMAN: Do you remember the ceremony, the process of getting your citizenship?

MILANO: NO, nothing.

HAPEMAN: Tell me about, uh, whether or not you had children?

MILANO: Well, I had a son with my first husband, and a daughter. Nothing with my second husband.

HAPEMAN: What are the names of your children?

MILANO: Henry Reckler, and Thelma Rolan[ph]. She lives in Emerson, and she has a husband, and a daughter. My daughter is seventy-some odd years old, and my son is seventy-nine.

HAPEMAN: Okay. What was the name of your second husband?

MILANO: Eugene Milano. That's him, right there.

HAPEMAN: Which year did you get married to him, do you remember?

MILANO: Well, let's see. My son, at that time, was thirteen years old, and he's seventy-nine now, so figure it out.

HAPEMAN: Okay. I'll figure it out. (they laugh) Okay. And what did he do?

MILANO: He used to be a butcher. This is his mother's and father's home, house. His butcher shop was in the front room there. When I met him after my husband, my first husband left me, I met him through

a friend of mine, and we stayed friends for about seven or eight years, and then we got married when the second World War was declared.

HAPEMAN: Okay.

MILANO: Now, what was the question?

HAPEMAN: Um, I wanted to know what his work was, but you told me.

MILANO: He was a butcher, but after we got together I taught him my business and he was with me, he was in business with me for forty years. He did everything for me that I needed him to. He took care of the back room with his, he was wonderful. He was absolutely an angel.

HAPEMAN: We have just about a minute or two left, and in that time I want to ask you what is the thing that you've done in your life that you're most proud of?

MILANO: I'm proud of being an American. I'm proud of being able to help. I was, when the Second World War became, my son and my husband both were in the army. My husband was a sergeant and my son was a sergeant. When they went over, when they went into camp, I gave up everything and I went to stay with my husband in his camp. I worked in the camp there. I took care of the men. I cleaned, I cooked and I did everything. And he was the butcher in the camp, and he took care of everything. When my, when they were finished training, I was in, uh, in California. When I, when my husband was in California camp getting ready to leave, getting his training, I went to work for J.C. Penney. At that time, J.C. Penney did not employ Jewish people, but when I started to talk to the manager, he said, "You (?) is easy to

leave. You can come and work in my department." When I worked in there and I saw how they were working, I said to the manager, "You have very good people working for you, but you don't have good products." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Your dresses are not worth working for." He says, "Why?" I says, "Why don't you put better dresses in? Now people have money. They'll buy. He says, "Will you buy them for us if we sent you?" I says, "Sure." So they sent me to the manufacturers. I bought dresses that were selling for about forty, fifty, sixty dollars, and we put them into there, and we did a big business with them.

HAPEMAN: That's wonderful.

MILANO: And when my husband . . .

HAPEMAN: We need to end the tape for now, because it's going to run out. So I'm just going to sign off. This is Mindy Hapeman for the National Park Service on December 10, 1997, and I'm signing off with Reba Milano.