

EI-974/MINDY HAPEMAN

EI-974
MINDY C. (MELINDA) HAPEMAN
BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 7, 1975
INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 17, 1997
RUNNING TIME: 1:00:18
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 3/1998

STUDENT INTERN WITH THE ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
SEPTEMBER, 1997 THROUGH DECEMBER, 1997

LEVINE: Today is December 17th, 1997 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Mindy Hapeman, who has been an intern here for this past semester and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Maybe if we could start, Mindy, by just your saying, well, let's start at the very beginning, your birth date.

HAPEMAN: My birth date is September 7th, 1975.

LEVINE: And where did, have you, were you brought, born and brought up in the same place, or...?

HAPEMAN: Yes, I was born in Saratoga Springs, New York. I was raised in Saratoga Springs, New York. I went to college there as well. So my whole life prior to this, moving to New York for this experience has been in

Saratoga Springs, which is a town of about thirty five thousand people about three hours north of New York City by car.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Okay. Well, now, and when did you, when did you start here, at Ellis Island?

HAPEMAN: I started, I started here at Ellis Island on September the 8th of, of this year. I remember because it was the day after my birthday (she laughs), which was a Monday. And I've been here throughout working between three or four days a week from that date until this date. Today is my last day.

LEVINE: Okay, now, maybe you could talk about the circumstances by which you came to be working here.

HAPEMAN: Well, I studied American Studies at Skidmore College, which is where I will be getting my degree upon the completion of this internship. And when it came time for me to graduate, I was actually scheduled to graduate in 1997, May '97, but I was behind credits because I lost, I think, eight my sophomore year because I was sick and I needed to pull out of a

semester, which at the time seemed like a horrible disaster. So when it came time for me to pull together credits and look to see when I'd be graduating, I realized that I was still behind I think six credits, and it was clear that I wouldn't be finishing in time. So I was looking for outside things for me to do to finish those credits without having to stay in Saratoga, 'cause, as I said, I, I had been there my whole life and I was, I was antsy. I wanted to get out and I wanted to see something different. So I was talking with my parents and my faculty at Skidmore about what I could do and Paul Sigrist's name came up, who is the director of the Oral History Project here. He was also an American Studies major at Skidmore and made quite an impression apparently (she laughs), and my step-mother knew him as well because they sang together in a chorus in Saratoga Springs while Paul lived there for quite a, many years after he, he graduated. So they had a relationship. And then my faculty had a relationship with him. So I contacted him, told him of my interests and my background and he said that, great, he'd love to sign me on and that's how I came to be here.

LEVINE: What were your interests that you mentioned?

HAPEMAN: My interests had been somewhat eclectic but what really drew me to the Oral History Project is an interest in memory and how people remember their experiences and how the brain processed those experiences and then they're retold in a way that is used by people as history. But, at the same time, a lot of people don't take into consideration the way the brain remembers things. And that's, I think, a very interesting thing that needs to be taken into consideration. So, when I heard about this oral history project, it seemed like a clear connection to, to memory and to how people tell their stories and how that affects what we know of our immigration history. So that, that was the real draw to this project for me.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And, so, when you came, was your first meeting as to what you would do, was that on that day in September when you first arrived here or was there something before that?

HAPEMAN: Actually, there was something before that. Paul came up to Saratoga, the Saratoga area, to do some

interviewing, which he has been doing for quite a number of years, apparently. And during that last trip that he made, he, he decided to make an effort to come and meet me and, so we could at least introduce ourselves to each other and become familiar with each other's faces at the very least. And when, as plans came together for that, he also wanted to interview my grandmother, who came through Ellis Island from Sweden [Elsa Hapeman, EI-918] so, and she lives up in that area, in the lower Adirondacks in New York State. So, when it came time for him to come up, we met. He came to my work up at Skidmore and we, we just briefly talked about what I wanted to accomplish. He, he told me that I'd have the chance to do some interviewing and I'd do some transcribing. Just, just a, a game plan of sorts. And he also filled out the numerous forms of paperwork that needed to go through the Skidmore system so that the, the internship could be approved. And then we were, the second time that we met was to go and actually interview my grandmother. We were going to do that together the day after this initial meeting at Skidmore. That meeting was, uh, had to be put off because I had given myself a concussion the night before (she laughs) we were supposed to meet and

I had to have a friend meet Paul in the parking lot of
the music building, that he was very familiar with
from his years at Skidmore, and tell him that I was at
the hospital having a (she laughs) CAT scan on my
brain. So this is the first time, you know, that Paul
and I were going to go do something somewhat professional
and I was in the hospital. (she laughs) I was very
embarrassed but he was great. He actually told
the, my friend that told him of my being in the hospital,
that he, instead of cancelling the interview he would
like to come to the hospi--, instead of going on the
interview without me, going on with the interview
without me, sorry, he would like to come to the
hospital and sit and wait for me to make sure
I was okay and then reschedule the interview so that
I could be there, which is what ended up happening.
So when I got out of this CAT scan, there was Paul and
not my friend. So I thought that was very nice because
he didn't need to do that and, you know, we didn't
have that much of a history that he needed to be waiting
for me after my CAT scan (she laughs). Anyway, we did
go and do the interview with my grandmother, the, I
think the day after or maybe two days after. I'm not
clear on how many, how much time was in between. My

are, you know, whatever...

LEVINE: The ones that stand out.

HAPEMAN: The ones that stand out. (she laughs) So I'm, I'm, you know, concerned, a little bit concerned but mostly I was excited for it 'cause I knew this is what I'd be doing. And the thing that made me the most nervous, I remember, is that he told me, once we got to my grandmother's house, the interview is actually at my other grandmother's house (she laughs), so we, it was my grandmother from my mother's side and my grandmother from my father's side, and it was my father's mother who was being interviewed, Paul and I, all together in this room. And Paul had told me that I should feel free to interject any questions or statements that I might have, and that made me very nervous because I felt like I, I needed to prove myself, you know, like I could ask a good question. (she laughs) So that's what I remember most. That, and my, my grandmother, my mother's mother, filed her nails throughout the entire interview, which Paul had told me in the car that everything is picked up by the microphone and, you know, the traffic outside and the birds tweeting,

and my grandmother is filing her nails. (she laughs)
I was so embarrassed. I was like, "Gram, stop," you
know, but...(she laughs)

LEVINE: So, did you, did you talk with the grandmother who was
interviewed before the interview? Did you explain it
to her?

HAPEMAN: I did try to explain it to her. Paul had talked to her
on the phone first. And, actually, that was a comfort
to my grandmother, because she came at a very young
age, at the age of three, so she was feeling like she
didn't remember enough. And she was feeling very self
conscious about the interview, so Paul was explaining
to her that he was interested not only in information
from the home country but also in information about
assimilation in America and, and, so it was okay,
it was not unheard of that she be so young and still
be interesting. And, so he was really the one that
explained it to her and I talked with her a little
bit about it, but Paul had suggested that we not talk
too much about it so that she didn't give all the good
information and then feel like she didn't have
anything else to give. So we were sort of waiting to

hear her stories. And I had heard them as I was growing up, in bits and pieces, but this was the first time I actually heard her sit down and talk in a life narrative kind of way, you know, from, from birth to where she is now. So it was very interesting.

LEVINE: And how about after the interview? Did you talk with your grandmother about how she felt about having done it?

HAPEMAN: Yeah, I talked with her about it. She, she felt very positive but the thing that she said the most was that she thought Paul was a very nice, young man and was glad to know him because I'd be working with him. It was a grandmother's reaction, you know, both of my grandmothers thought that. So that was their, both of, their first reaction, but my grand--, the grandmother who was interviewed was, I think, comforted by, by Paul's attempt to make her feel like she was interesting, because she was very, very ner--, worried about it. And when they talked on the phone, my grandmother said that she settled in Brooklyn when she came to America and Paul said, "Bay Ridge?" because that was a big Scandinavian area and that

made my grandmother feel very important, much better,
because he knew this background. So that helped a lot,
too. And that's the things that she remembered. She
also remembered and was impressed by how Paul could
remember her brother's names throughout the whole interview
and would ask about brothers. There were two brothers
that were very young and actually went back to Sweden
and she doesn't have that many memories about, of,
but she was impressed that he could say their names.
So, those were the things we talked about afterwards.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So now was there a period of time, I guess
there was, between the time of that interview and when
you first came here and then did interviews of your
own?

HAPEMAN: Right. That, that first interview was an introduction.
I'd never seen anything like it before. I'd done two
oral history interviews for our classes in Skid--, at
Skidmore but they were much different than, than this.
They were amateur, I guess. (she laughs) So, there was
all of August and the beginning of September before I
did an interview again.

LEVINE: Uh huh. What, what was it about this interview that, that made it more sophisticated or whatever?

HAPEMAN: Well, the recording equipment, for one thing, was more sophisticated. The DAT machine and the microphone that was pinned right on, on to my grandmother and the fact that my grandm--, my other grandmother's nail filing and the birds tweeting could be picked up, I thought that was pretty, you know, sophisticated. (she laughs) Because I was working with a Fisher Price tape recorder, sort of. So there was that. And Paul just presented himself in a very professional way and he, he, like I said, could ask all these questions without really being confused about details or, he, he had a way of remembering things that, about what the interviewee was saying that I did not have the capability of doing. So I thought that was very impressive and felt like he really knew what he was doing because of that. And he had a way of making the interviewee feel comfortable because he was clearly comfortable in what he was doing. So, that, that had a much higher sense of sophistication than, than the interviews I had seen or done myself prior to the ones I've done here.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So when you first came here in September,
what did you do before you did your own interview?

HAPEMAN: Well, the first two weeks, I would say, were spent
acquainting myself with the museum, the exhibits,
talking a lot with Peter Hom who was here doing the
recording stuff. And he was leaving when I got here,
so he put himself in a very gracious position for me,
of, of helping me learn all the things that, that
happened here. And I think it was good for him
because he was leaving and it was sort of a rite
of passage kind of thing. So, he really took me
around. He took me to the Islands Two and Three that,
the abandoned parts of the island, so I could see
that, which made me feel very special right away.
Here, we did that on the second day. (she laughs)
And he just took me around to the exhibits and suggested
that I go periodically down to the exhibits and on the
floor as I'm learning things here because the exhibits
will be all that more meaningful as I learn things.
So I took that advice and I've done that several
times. And I just became familiar with the computer
system that, that the Oral History Library that holds

the, about one thousand interviews and listened to
different interviews and read different
transcripts to become familiar with how the interviewing
was done and, so that I could be in the position
of interviewing somebody on my own.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how was the, the first person that you
interviewed, which in our archive is EI-947, which is
Maddalena Teso.., Teso..

HAPEMAN: (assisting Dr. Levine with the correct pronunciation)
Tes-ori-ero. Tesoriero.

LEVINE: Tesoriero.

HAPEMAN: Yeah, I rem--, (she laughs) That was the hardest
thing about that interview. I really struggled.

LEVINE: Tesoriero.

HAPEMAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: What, why was she chosen or how...?

HAPEMAN: Well, yeah. The reason she was chosen is, Paul had decided that, that I was ready to do an interview, that we should make an interviewing trip somewhere before Peter left so that Peter could be with us to go through with the recording equipment and just be there in general to sort of pass along the torch, even though I don't do any of the things he did, but just as far as an intern kind of thing. And, so, this interviewee was in Brooklyn, Sheepshead Bay, and then there was another one, another interviewee named Phoebe Shulman [EI-948], who was also in Sheepshead Bay, so Paul and I and Peter just contacted the people. Paul actually contacted the people, and the reason that we chose her is because of her location, essentially. And Peter was there, so Paul wanted to go into Brooklyn 'cause there were three of us and we were just going to go because Paul, neither Paul nor I were that familiar with the, with Brooklyn or the subway system or anything. So Paul, Paul knew more than I did because he had done interviews out there but it was just a big trek that we decided to make. And Mrs. Tesoriero was first in that day and then Mrs. Shulman was second. So, that's, that's how it came about.

LEVINE: So you, you conducted your first interview and then
you, that same day, had occasion to observe Paul....

HAPEMAN: That's right.

LEVINE:conduct an interview.

HAPEMAN: That's right.

LEVINE: And was that a good arrangement?

HAPEMAN: It was a very good arrangement, actually. I'm glad it
went that way and not the other way. I think I would
have been very nervous, more nervous than I already
was. Because I, I was very nervous the night before,
the day before (she laughs), you know, as soon as I
knew that I was going to be doing it I was nervous.
And I put together some questions, with the help of
Paul, and I, I am glad I had the opportunity to do
it first because once I was done I could relax and really
concentrate on his interview, which was a difficult
interview. So it was an interesting thing to watch.
(she laughs) Mrs. Tesoriero was also a difficult
interview, so it, it was interesting to have that

be my first experience.

LEVINE: What was difficult about Mrs. Tesorio's [sic, Tesoriero] interview?

HAPEMAN: Well, a couple things. She, she came from an island off the coast of Sicily at the age of seventeen or eighteen in 1930 [sic, she was twenty seven years old when she came to America in 1930], and, oh no, sorry, in 1930 at the age of twenty nine or thirty [sic].

And, so she was quite old, so her accent was quite thick. When, you know, she was almost thirty when she got here so she had had thirty years of speaking Italian, so her accent was very, very thick. And she was, I think, ninety four years old, so she, she was more elderly than the people I had been used to being around. My grandmothers are in their mid-eighties and they, they are both very active, peppy grandmothers. (she laughs) So she had a much older look to her and her voice was very, as Paul says, "elderly sounding." It was kind of high pitched and her accent was very think. So much of the things she was saying to me I had no idea what she was saying. I'm trying to ask her questions and she's talking back. And she's very

excited about doing the interview. That's another thing. So she would, her, she would get very excited and, and her voice would raise octaves and I would have no idea what she was saying. So I was afraid that I was asking her questions, asking her about things that she had already answered and then she thought I wasn't listening to her. But the thing that made the interview even more difficult was that she had two of her children present for the interview, one of which, the daughter Elena, was, had been conducting a family history. She had written a family history and had put it all together in a photo album, complete with pictures and family trees and all kinds of things. But she was also writing a musical comedy about her mom (they laugh), excuse me, about her mother's experiences, so this was a family that was very much enthralled with this whole process. They thought that this was the big, big stuff. So the, Paul was the one who said that, that it should be Paul [sic, Peter], the son, whose name was, also named Paul [sic, Peter], and Elena, the daughter, in a different room because it would be too distracting for the interview; for me the interviewer and the mother the interviewee. So it was set up, we were set up at a kitchen table with

Mrs. Tesoriero, myself next to her and then Peter
set up at the end of the table, Peter Hom. (she laughs)
And, so, Peter Hom was doing the, the recording equipment
and then Paul, Elena and actually the son, whose name
wasn't Paul. It was Peter. Sorry, I'm mixing up
on the details. Two Peters and one Paul. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Okay.

HAPEMAN: So they were in the other room. But as Mrs. Tesoriero
was answering questions, the mother would come, I mean
the daughter would come in with her, she was wearing
these slippers and they would scuff and they, they
are picked up on every, all the tapes. The tapes all
sound like there's a scuffing woman in the background.
(she laughs) And she'd come over and she would open
up the, the book, the book that she had written on the
family history, when there was a detail that was missing
or when I asked Mrs. Tesoriero to spell her father's
name, which is Pietro, she couldn't spell it. So the
daughter's coming in and saying, "Oh, here's
Pietro." And, you know, there's all this background
talking and I'm trying to get them away and tell them
that I'd love to see the book afterwards, all the tricks

that Paul taught me to say. They weren't working.
(she laughs) And, and another thing that the son Peter
would do when, when he thought the mother was being
a little bit long winded, he would kind of do things with
his hands, gest--, you know, gesturing like, you
know, "Come on, Ma, speed it up a little. Like this
is boring the people." So Paul had to ask him to
not do that. So there was just all these distractions
and, (she laughs) a very difficult first interview.
So I didn't even know what she was saying half the
time and then, when I finally could figure out what she
was saying, I had to deal with these other distractions.

LEVINE: Wow. Trial by fire.

HAPEMAN: Exactly. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So, so then you, you heard Mrs. Shulman, is that what
you said?

HAPEMAN: Yeah, Mrs. Shulman.

LEVINE: Mrs. Shulman was in the afternoon.

HAPEMAN: Yup, yup. And she, she was a difficult interview. She didn't seem to know that we were going to be there until we were there, even though Paul had called her several times. And we actually came to her door the first time and she, nobody answered, so Paul had to find a pay phone and call her. And she said she was there, she just forgot that we were coming, or something. And finally we got in there and she was very conscious about how she looked. She, she said that she wished we'd come back tomorrow because she could go to the beauty parlor and Paul kept saying that it was not a video tape, that it was just an audio tape. But she, she was clearly very upset about it. And she also had this cat that would, that she would address several, numerous times throughout the interview. And the cat came up and was wandering around this kitchen table that we were all sitting at. (she gestures) It was Paul conducting the interview, Mrs. Shulman, myself and Peter all around this (she laughs), this kitchen table. And the cat's wandering around, pulling at the microphone, you know, it was, she, nobody was, the interview just wasn't working for a lot of different reasons. She, she didn't want to be doing it, I don't think, or she was, she was too

self conscious to be doing it. She kept saying how
she used to be much prettier than she was now, a much
more beautiful woman as a younger woman, and it,
it just didn't fly for some reason. So it was interesting
to see Paul handle it, who was the pro compared to me,
who with all these other, with the Tesorieros I didn't
feel like I knew what I was doing, so...

LEVINE: Right. Did, did you have any sense that you were happy
 you had done the interview (she laughs) who you had
 done or would you have preferred Mrs. Shulman, with
her set of circumstances?

HAPEMAN: Well, I definitely preferred Mrs. Tesoriero. I thought
 that Mrs. Tesoriero had a nice rapport, at the very
 least. She, I told her from the beginning this is my
 first interview and she said, you know, that's fine
and she was very, very grandmotherly to me, you know,
she, she wanted to hug me. She kept telling me she hoped
I found a nice husband. (she laughs) She said that
 probably twenty times. (she laughs) So she was very,
we liked each other. It was, there wasn't a tension
 there at all. It was just a very complicated, there
 were a lot of complicated elements that were thrown

in there. But with Mrs. Shulman, I felt like she didn't really like having any of us there, you know, she didn't, she wasn't upset. She didn't feel intruded upon, but she just didn't know what she was getting into, maybe. And, and Paul was trying to make her feel like her story was very interesting and, and to help her to get into it a little bit and it just wasn't working. She, she kept wanting to serve us cookies and, and different, you know, teas and, because she felt like she was a horrible host because she hadn't, or hostess I guess, because she hadn't offered us anything. So she kept interrupting the interview to say that. She just wasn't comfortable. So, I think Mrs. Tesoriero was very comfortable. Her thing, I think, is having an audience so it worked for her very well, even though I didn't know what she was saying, she was happy with it. Mrs. Shulman, I don't, I don't think it was a good experience for her and therefore it wasn't for us either.

LEVINE: How about Mrs. Tesoriero's interview, when you had occasion, did you actually transcribe that interview?

HAPEMAN: I didn't transcribe it. Nancy Vega transcribed it as

one of the Italian women that were funded...

LEVINE: Oh, uh huh.

HAPEMAN: But I did correct the transcription. I just did that recently, which was very interesting to, to hear it, because I hadn't listened to it in a long time. And in going back, I said to Paul just recently, it's better than I thought it was, you know, when it was hap--, when I was doing it at the time, I felt it was completely out of control. (she laughs) Like there was no information of any worth that was coming out of this interview and mostly it was just the scuffing slippers and (she laughs), you know, the son and, but it's not that at all. It, there are some interesting stories. She had a very interesting immigration experience because she, she was an adult and she was pregnant when she came over, so she, she had some good stories that I actually, I don't think even knew she had until after I read the transcript, so...

LEVINE: I find that's often true.

HAPEMAN: Uh huh, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. So then, two days later (they laugh), you got to interview Peter Hom [Interview EI-952], who was leaving.

HAPEMAN: That's right, yeah.

LEVINE: And, um, how did that come about and what were your impressions of doing that interview?

HAPEMAN: Okay, well, Peter had been working here for the Oral History Project I think since 1990. He started as an intern, I think, in 1990. So he'd been here for seven years, on and off, because he did go to college and do a few other things, so he had been here for a very long time. And when he was leaving to go work in Manhattan Sites, the National Park Service Manhattan Sites, it seemed clear that he should be interviewed because he was around for so much of the project, the Project, really, since its conception as the EI Series. So, when it was decided that he would be interviewed, Paul asked him who he wanted to be interviewed by and he had chosen me, I think because I was new and, and could not only offer me another interview experience

but also because I was obj--, I was...

LEVINE: Objective.

HAPEMAN: Yeah, objective, yeah. I was detached from being right here. So, we sat here. It was right here in the Oral History Recording Studio, which was my only interview in this studio. And it was, it was very interesting for me because I was still new enough here, you know, less than, had been here for less than a month that I was very interested to hear his impressions about the place that he was leaving because I was just coming on. So I, I felt like it was very interesting in that way.

LEVINE: So you were asking questions much as though you were having a conversation about things you really were curious about.

HAPEMAN: Right, right, exactly. I told Paul that it felt more, and still felt like this compared to all the other interviews, that it felt more like talking in a bar or something (she laughs) because it was, first of all

Peter is much more my peer, you know, he's only a couple years older than I am. And, so, it, it, it had a, just a different feeling. I felt like he was sort of giving me the inside scoop of, of, sort of what he'd been doing since I got there, but just in a recorded way for documentation. But it was, it was very interesting in that way.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And just for information on this tape, the interview with Peter is EI-952. So then there was about a two month period when you were doing other things. What were the other things that you did while you were here?

HAPEMAN: The other things I, I would do, I spent quite a lot of time in the Oral History Library assisting visitors who came with the computer system that's in there. One of the things that I did fairly frequently was to entertain, that's not really the right word, but to host school groups who came to learn about oral history and immigration. There were, I think, four or five fourth grade classes that came from the Dalton School who wanted to know a lot about oral history and immigration and they wanted to hear the

interviews. So I gave about a twenty minute talk on oral history and that included question and answers that the kids had. And then I helped everybody listen to the interviews on the, on the tapes (correcting herself), or on the computers. And then, in some cases, we came to the recording studio to give a tour of the studio, just to see what the professional studio looked like. So I did that. I also gave a tour to a group of senior, of senior citizens that were from a nursing home residence that we had interviewed at. I think there were sixteen of those. That was interesting because eight of them were in wheelchairs and about five were in walkers, so I wasn't, I'm used to going, I've given tours at Skidmore since I was a freshman and, you know, these high paced, fast tours. And this much more leisurely. So that was interesting. (she laughs) And then I was just helping researchers that came in and, and sitting at the desk for Jeff a lot (she laughs), Jeff the librarian [Jeff Dosik], so that's, that's what I was doing.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here so Kevin can turn over the tape and then we'll continue.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay, we're continuing here on side B, an interview with Mindy Hapeman. You were saying about the things that you did here in the Oral History Library and everything and when you said you explained to children about oral history, what, did you prepare something about oral history itself, or this project, or how did you do that?

HAPEMAN: Well, I experimented a little bit because I did have, like I said, these four or five classes. I think it was five classes because they came on five different occasions. The first time, I made some work sheets to help the, the kids extract information from the interviews that, that, that we have. For instance, helping them find a person, a person from Germany who was ten years old. Like, I made a list, essentially, of people that were about their age when they came, and from different countries. A whole smattering of different backgrounds. And then I also made a list of things that these children, immigrant children, brought

with them from their home land to America, because I was informed by the teacher, the first teacher who was, I think, the one that was most instrumental in this whole relationship between the Dalton School and Ellis Island. She had told me that the reason the kids are engaged in this project in oral history at their own school is because at the Dalton School you go from, third grade is, K through third grade is in one school and three through six is in the "big" school and so going into the fourth grade is a big deal because you're an immigrant. This is the idea that they use, an immigrant going from the little school to the big school, so they have a green card and have to take a citizenship test, which is the equivalent to their American history lesson. That's how their getting their American history lesson. And they have to, they make, they made a museum exhibit with the things that they brought with them from the old school, to remember the old school by, to the new school. So I made a list of things that young ten year olds brought from their home countries to America just...

LEVINE: Which you got from the interview tapes? Is that how you...

HAPEMAN: Yeah, yeah, from the transcripts. I just extracted information, with the help of Paul. So, I, I did it that way so that they could see different things that, that they brought. (microphone disturbance) And another time (she sighs), in the other times, and I did that for this first teacher because she was so enthusiastic. She had written a book about how American history should be presented to elementary school age children, so she was a very enthusiastic teacher. The next teacher I had wasn't quite as enthusiastic. (she laughs) So, I geared that talk more around an explanation of what we do here, what's been done here for, since 1973, and how many interviews we have and the different kinds of interviews and what you do when somebody doesn't remember and what you do when you can't understand somebody's accent (she laugh), which I could very well attest to. And I actually played the interview with Mrs. Tesoriero so that they could hear somebody, supposedly professional, you know, trying to navigate this interview where you didn't know what was being said. So that was interesting, I think. So, it, it depended a little bit on the classes but mostly it was a discussion of, of the reasons

for oral, oral history and why it's important to preserve the immigrant heritage and why, what we're, what we're doing by collecting these interviews throughout the country. So that was the gist of it.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how about the researchers with whom you worked? Were there any particular researchers whose projects were of special interest to you?

HAPEMAN: I think, my impressions of the researchers more is how eclectic (she laughs) they were. There were so many different projects that I wouldn't even have thought of to use this material for. And, and it's not that this, well, this material is so vast. There's so much of this material in the Ellis Island Oral History Collection, you know, so I know that there's a lot that can be done. But some of the things that, that people were researching or looking into were, were things that I just never even would have thought of. So that was interesting to me. I learned, for instance, I helped one intern from the Lower East Side Tenement Museum research Sephardic Jews because she was going to be doing a living history as a Sephardic Jew. And that was fascinating for me because I didn't know anything

about Sephardic Jews. My, my upbringing was somewhat homogeneous because of Saratoga, is a very homogeneous town. Or at least my, my section of it, where I was growing up. And Skidmore is the same way. So to, to be introduced to different cultures like that through these researchers, or even just through the visitors. I love the visitors that come from other countries, and talk with them about, you know, what their impressions of America are and stuff. But learning about, about things like that or hearing about the pogroms in Europe and things like that, the Holocaust, is wonderful for me to learn about that. So completely educational in a way I never would have thought of.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So the visitors who came into the Oral History Library were also sort of an interest that you hadn't anticipated...

HAPEMAN: Uh huh.

LEVINE: ...that you would learn something from.

HAPEMAN: Yup. In fact, there were two young men who came from Sweden, which is where my grandmother came from, and

talking with them was very interesting and I'm blessed that so many people in this world know English because I wouldn't be able to communicate with them if they were speaking Swedish, or anything other than, a little bit of French (she laughs), and I, I just have learned to feel comfortable asking people of other countries about their perceptions of America or their perceptions of their own country because it helps me to learn because I haven't had the opportunity to travel abroad yet in my life. So I'm, I'm always extracted information from all different sources (she laughs), which sort of began by some German and Dutch friends that I made a couple years ago. And since then I've been just asking everybody who I run into (she laughs) what their country is like. And, and this experience has provided a wonderful opportunity to talk with people from all over the place. And I find that the, the people that do make it up to the Oral History Library are ones that are willing to sit and kind of chat a little bit. So, I, I've met a lot of interesting people.

LEVINE: Uh huh. I'm sure they're glad that you were there...

HAPEMAN: (they laugh) I don't know.

LEVINE: And how about Margaret Weiss, EI-970, your next interview on November 18th?

HAPEMAN: Yeah, there was quite a, a bit of time between the interview with Peter and the interview with Mrs. Weiss. And that was, I, I think in some ways good because I could, I felt much more prepared for that interview. By that time I had been reading a lot of transcripts, a lot of interviews, when I was sitting in the Oral History Library. When visitors weren't in the, in the Library I'd be reading transcripts and just becoming familiar with the material. And in doing that I became much more comfortable with the kinds of interviews, the kinds of ways interviews could go by reading the different kinds in the collection. So, when I met her, she (she laughs), she was a lot of fun, actually. She, she was, she wearing this really pink dress, this orangey pink dress, and her hair was dyed the same color to match. And she was just, had a whole different tone about her than the different interviewees, than the different interviewees I'd listened to or conducted or, she spoke in a

very elegant way. And she had a very elegant way
with words and hand gestures and a laugh that was very
elegant. She, she came from a fairly wealthy Hungarian,
it wasn't really that that they were wealthy. It
was that they had, they had had money and then they had
been, her father had (she laughs) been a tailor for
all kinds of royalty in Europe and he had trained in Paris
and Vienna and Berlin to be a tailor. Apparently,
he could make a suit like no other. (she laughs) I don't
know. But, so she had a whole different way of speaking
and it was very interesting. Paul was also present
for the interview and it was really almost a dialogue
between the three of us because she, she definitely
looked at Paul as being my supervisor, the one in charge.
So when she didn't know the answer to something,
she'd say, "Paul, what? Paul, what's the answer?"
And Paul would, in some cases, answer and sometimes
try to let me answer just to continue having control
of the interview. But, it was, it was very interesting
in that way. Much, much, much different than Mrs.
Tesoriero.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how about Josephine Scola [EI-971], who
came not that long after?

HAPEMAN: Yeah, Josephine Scola, that interview was done in
Maplewood, New Jersey. And Mrs. Weiss was also in
Brooklyn, just for the record. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Okay.

HAPEMAN: But Mrs. Scola was in New Jersey, and that interview
didn't go as well as I would have liked. That one (she
clears her throat), Mrs. Scola also had a lot of family
members present, I, a lot more than Mrs. Tesoriero.
She probably had seven or eight family members there.
And when we got there, Paul said that he was going to
have to suggest that they all move into another room
because of the microphones and everything. And they
did that, so it was really just Paul, Mrs. Scola and
myself. But, one of the first things I realized about
that interview is that I was very allergic to their
house. I have very bad allergies, so I was, for the
first time dealing with not feeling my finest. And
it really kind of threw me off. I didn't feel, I was,
I was worried about sneezing throughout the whole
interview (she laughs) and coughing and doing all
kinds of things like that. And I think that it, it made

me want to rush the interview more than I had wanted,
had done in the past. The interview with Mrs. Weiss
is almost two hours long. It's very leisurely paced.
The one with Mrs. Scola, to listen to that one, it feels,
it seems much more rushed. I was, I had a tendency
to give her (she laughs) sort of multiple choice questions
and ask, you know, asking questions like, "Did you come
on a ship or did you come...", "Did you leave from
Naples or was it Genoa or was it..." (she laughs), you
know, so, just hoping to speed her along because she
was a very slow, a person who took a long time to
develop thoughts. And since I was feeling like I
was going to break into an asthma attack or something,
I was trying to speed her along. And it, it didn't
go well, something that Paul picked up on. And he,
at one point, interrupted the interview and, and suggested
that I not answer, not try to answer the questions
for Mrs. Scola. So I just felt shook, shaken by that
one. I didn't feel like it was that good. But then I
did t transcribe that one and when I listened to it in
retrospect it's not as bad as I thought, you know,
it's not a disaster. It's just not, it doesn't have the
same gentle flow as the other ones had. It seems
a little interrupted. Although I didn't feel as tense

as Paul perceived me to be. He said that he thought I was very tense. I didn't feel tense. I just felt (she pauses) just not right. There was just something not right, so I guess that does come through in the interview, although I think Paul thought I was angry with the woman or something, which I wasn't at all, so...

LEVINE: You were just trying to speed it up a little.

HAPEMAN: Yeah, yeah. I think, I, that's what I've, the conclusion I've come to. I don't even know if I was aware of that at the time but in listening to the interview I think that that's what I was trying to do, was to speed it up because she was such a slow speaker. And I think Paul was perceiving that I was upset about the, the lack of information she had, like she didn't have a lot of information, which I didn't, it wasn't it. It was more that I was worried about (she laughs) a lot of things and I just wanted to be done with it, so...

LEVINE: Uh huh. And that one, by the way, was EI-971. And then you did EI-973, Reba Milano...

HAPEMAN: Right.

LEVINE: ... and that was your last interview. And how was that one for you?

HAPEMAN: That one was very nice. I said to Paul in the car on the way home that I'm glad that I did that one because, although the Scola interview wasn't a traumatic experience (she laughs), it was nice to end it really upbeat in the way that Mrs. Milano let me do. She was, she's ninety nine. She lives in New Jersey, and we drove to her house. Her son came into Ellis Island. We were, Paul and I were supposed to go to the Jewish Heritage Museum on the Wednesday that we did this interview, but her son, her seventy nine year old son, came into the Listening Room and just struck up a conversation with me. We were talking about his ninety nine year old mother who came through Ellis Island and how she's sharp as a tack and, and of course, a lot of sons say that. You don't really know (she laughs) what to expect. But I went and talked to Paul and Paul said, "Let's see if we can do, do this interview, you know, right now," because this, they lived in

Palisade[s] Park, which isn't that far from, from
Jersey City where Paul lives. And it just worked
out for us to be able to come and, the thing that made
the interview with Mrs. Milano so easy is that she was
incredibly gracious. She felt very proud to be an
the American and felt like America had turned her into
a wonderful person that she was. And that this was
giving back. She had made her whole life sort of
a tribute to giving back to America. She did all
kinds of things for the troops during the wars, entertaining
and trying to give back to America. And this
(referring to being interviewed) she considered as
a help to America. So she was so gracious. She kept
saying it was an honor to have us there and, so what's
not to like about that? I, I felt like we made her
day, you know, and she made my day. She made my
experience be, she made me be able to tie it up in
a nice bow, you know, because it didn't leave it kind
of frayed. It, it felt very nice, so...

LEVINE: And then, did you transcribe and/or review that
interview after you conducted it?

HAPEMAN: I haven't, I haven't done that yet. In fact, I don't

even think that it's been brought over to cassette...

LEVINE: Oh, it's not a cassette yet, right..

HAPEMAN: ...because it's just happened. The Scola interview I did, I did transcribe. The Weiss interview I'm still (she laughs) in the process of transcribing. I don't, it's very long, as I said. And I told Paul that I don't think I'll be able to have that done until January sometime, till after the holidays. And he said that was fine. I, I just consider it an excuse to keep in contact with you folks over here. (they laugh)
So...

LEVINE: Well, you don't need any excuses. (they laugh) Well, but it would be interesting because that is the one interview you felt most good about...

HAPEMAN: Uh huh.

LEVINE: ...and it will be interesting to see how you feel about when you read it...

HAPEMAN: Uh huh, I agree, I agree.

LEVINE: ...as compared with...

HAPEMAN: I asked, I asked Paul what he thought of it, because I, because he's the one who listened to it, you know, the night he went home and he tried to extract good quotes from it, or, you know, things in his head and he said he thought it was very good. But I, I really want to listen to for it myself because it, it's sort of the product of a short but, I think, important evolution that I've had. You know, it's only been four months and the difference between the interview, the comfort, my comfort level between Mrs. Tesoriero and Mrs. Milano complete--(she laughs), they're not even in the same scale, you know, so, I think that that must make a difference. Even though Mrs. Tesoriero was a wonderful interview, I felt very good about it even though it was so complicated, I, I was nervous. I was very nervous. With Mrs. Milano, I felt like she was like my grandmother's friend or something, you know, it had a whole different feel. And she knew that, I think. I think we felt very comfortable with each other, so...

LEVINE: Uh huh. Well, you mentioned the comfort level with

each person, and I guess that's really an important part of the whole interview.

HAPEMAN: Yeah, I think when you're beginning, especially.

LEVINE: Well, talking about your evolution in this short period of time but, is there anything that you can say about how you think you've evolved as an American Studies major with this being your final, is this your final project before you get your degree?

HAPEMAN: Yes it is, it is. I could say a lot (she laughs) really. The thing, the first thing that I want to say is that I'm thrilled I did this and, for a lot of reason. Not only because it seems like a good thing to do but also it really has worked itself out in a lot of wonderful ways that I didn't anticipate. The experience has been educational, not only because I'm introduced to things I'm not ever known before but the layers of that are so deep that I couldn't have ever imagined. Even from, you know, having to take the subway to work, or the boat to work, you know. That's one thing that to me is a wonderful thing because of my, the cloistered town I came from. But then to be

out here in this wonderful American landmark and I
still walk around the halls and, you know, down in
the Great Hall and just say, "How did I end up here?"
It, it, it amazes me. It makes me feel very proud of
myself in, because it's been a, a fight, just like
anybody, it's been a fight. So...

LEVINE: It's been a fight to, to get here or to be...?

HAPEMAN: Not to get, not to get to Ellis Island, because that
worked out really well. (she laughs) Not to get to
this internship, but to get to the point in my life,
in my academic career, that I feel like I earned this
as, you know, it was not conventional for Skidmore to
let students go three hundred miles away or whatever,
two hundred miles away, to do an internship. This was
something that I had to go, make special arrangements
for and something I know they let happen because they
trust me and they believe in me and wanted me to do
this. So, that was something in itself. But then
to come here and to try to make the best out of this
experience because there, there's so much that I
could have gotten out of this, you know, there are so
many different angles to pursue that I didn't, the

first couple weeks I didn't even know what to do with
it all. (she laughs) And that was, that was okay
because that's what I should have been doing,
just been relishing in, in how much there is that
I didn't even know about and, you know, in, little old
Saratoga Springs was a very small microcosm. And, and,
so coming here allowed me to take what I learned,
I think, and try to apply the theory to actual
practical application and, and learning that that doesn't
always work and that there's a lot of things that you
learn along the way that you just learn because you're
in a situation and you either have to go one way or
another and you pick the one way and it either works
or it doesn't. So, that was interesting for me to
learn, too, because my life has been in a classroom
since I was, you know, four years old, so this is really
the first time that I've been out there trying to take
something that I've learned, something that I adore,
American Studies is something that I adore, and, and
use it. You know, it's not just a way for me to get
a Bachelor's of Arts anymore. It's something that I'm
using. So that's been wonderful.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how about the, (she clears her throat) the

idea of people's memories and how that affects history as, as it comes down to other people? Have you, have you (she laughs) anymore insight, I guess, into that?

HAPEMAN: Yeah, this project was really the right place for me to come for that interest, as far as that interest goes. In my own interviews, something that I was very interested in was the, the input that the family members would have (she laughs) on, on what, on the, for instance, in the Tesoriero interview her daughter would come in if Mrs. Tesoriero was saying something that the daugh--, that didn't correspond with how the daughter had it in her head. She would come in and, you know, sort of point at the book or talk with us after the interview about how, "That's not really how it happened at all, " but there not her memories. And, you know, it was very interesting to me to see how family lore evolves into something greater than what it really is. And how Mrs. Tesoriero's memories weren't even her own anymore. They were her, her daughter was writing an opera about them, (she laughs) a musical opera, com--, com--, you know, comedy about it. So, that was interesting to me. There was also a story that Paul told me about an Irish interview [Michael

Broderick, EI-939] he recently did with Roger [Herz], another volunteer here, where the interviewee said before the interview even started that, "Just so you know, I'm probably going to lie throughout this, this whole thing." (she laughs) You know, I'm sure that happens a lot, that there are times when an interviewee changes, you know, the story for glorification or to hide a family secret or something like that. But it was just, blew my mind to see, have somebody say that because I've, I've learned to, you know, believe in what is supposed to be historical and this is oral history. So, you know, it just was shocking to me in a, in a strange way. It was just one of the many ways that school, one of the many things that show me that school doesn't provide, doesn't prepare you for everything, you know, so...

LEVINE: Uh huh.

HAPEMAN: Does that make sense?

LEVINE: Uh huh. With the shock of that, that, that someone could actually lie in an interview, did that give another perspective on what you are hearing generally

in an oral history?

HAPEMAN: Definitely. And I, one, one, Paul, Paul and I shared a professor at Skidmore who, named Mary Lynn, who always, the thing that she really harped on was to have a critical eye with everything, okay? That was her, her, her song. (she laughs) And that's something I have always done and it's something that I've done with these interviews. But when something like that happens, when somebody says at the beginning that they're going to lie, but that's not in the interview. So it's just put into the collection, you know, like every, everybody, with everybody else's interviews. And then some researcher could come and want to research Italian [sic, Irish] men and come across this interview and think that this is the jackpot interview when nothing that the, that the guy is saying or a little or some of what the guy is saying isn't actually even true. I just think that that's, that's interesting. It, it makes me wonder about all research (she laughs), you know, and, you know, how careful you have to be to find creditable sources and to consider the possibility that what is pri--, printed on a piece of paper is not carved in stone, you

know. That, that
conscious or
where
might not even see
researcher, I guess,
laughs) you come
one, how do you
So I just found that
projects that I have
career have been given
"Here's a topic, you know,
in topic but there's the
Pick what you want to do,
and then go and do it." And
has, you know, a limited
those sources and you come
its over with. But here,
the whole research
is sort of a big archive
everything that you're,
make it less
reason that that man
is significant in its
want to do that? What,

there is room for error, whether it's
unconscious, there is a lot of places
discrepancies can seep in. And you
them and, but it's the job of the
to find them but if, but if (she
across an interview like this Irish
know because it, it doesn't say.
interesting because most of the
researched in my undergraduate
to me by a professor saying,
not, not, there's a choice
general vein of research.
what's interesting to you,
you go to the library, which
number of sources. You use
back with something and then
it just seemed to me that the,
opportunity, or that the world
and that you can't really trust
that you find. But that doesn't
significant. That interview, the
said he thought he wanted to lie
own right, you know, why did he
you know, what does that say about

his experiences and his personality. It just, it gets deeper and deeper and deeper.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And how about, you're, are you going to be writing now a thesis?

HAPEMAN: No, I've already written a thesis, actually.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

HAPEMAN: Strangely, because of these strange credits I already had my senior year, you know, this is my senior year but my last semester. This is, for me this is a post undergraduate experience, you know, it feels like a post undergraduate experience. The graduate schools are even looking at it in that way, which is, which is nice because it is a different kind of experience. But I do, I have to write some, some papers, a summary experience of what I've learned here and, it's actually very little. It's not a big deal. I've been keeping a scrap book of all that I've been doing and then I'm doing a separate paper for an independent study that I've been working on, which is about Italians.

LEVINE: Now, uh huh, now what about the, was this your, did you have an undergraduate thesis that was, that was based on biography and....

HAPEMAN: No. My, my undergraduate thesis was on architect--, material culture, architecture specifically, of African-American slaves and how, and, and their masters in eastern Virginia. And how it evolved over a period of about one hundred and fifty years from the slaves living right within the house with the masters to the slaves living in an equal house in a house right next to the masters to the slaves living in the backwoods somewhere and, and what does that say about the relationship between master and slave and how it evolved. So it, it, and how, and how the fear of rebellion and the heated issues of slavery that preceded the Civil War are really manifested in this architecture, on these architectural changes. So it was very complicated and, and that doesn't really do it justice but that's a brief idea of what it was. So it doesn't really have anything to do with autobiography or, or biography or memory or anything, anything of that sort.

LEVINE: I see.

HAPEMAN: It was just, but these were really my two interests; architectural material culture and memory. I'm now still finding a way to merge them...

LEVINE: I see.

HAPEMAN: Something with monuments and memorials maybe. (she laughs) I don't know.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Was there anything about architecture in the immigrant interviews that, that struck you?

HAPEMAN: Well, not, yes and no. Most, not really in the ones that I conducted. The interviewees, well, Mrs. Weiss had a very good description of where she lived, as did Mrs. Milano. And that, they were interesting because they were different than than very small houses with one room or with, I had been hearing the same thing over and over again. Whereas with Mrs. Weiss and Mrs. Milano, they lived in these very elaborate apartments with several different rooms and they would, in the day be like a work, like a tailor shop. They were both,

their father's were both tailors and then at night
the kids would, would sleep in the same room that the
people were sewing. And that was interesting to
me. I find that interesting. But not really anything
more than finding any inf--, any information about
the home country interesting. Does that make sense.
It was all interesting to me.

LEVINE: As a result of, we're practically near the end of the
tape, but as a result of your previous research and,
and this experience, is there some thing or some
question or some line of inquiry that you would
think, perhaps, significant enough to include in questioning
people who immigrated to this country through Ellis
Island that relates to your interest in the
architectural, material cultural aspects?

HAPEMAN: Well, the thing that interests me that I wish I saw
more in the interviews, and this is, just depends, I
think, on how much time is left at the end and things
like that is where the immigrant settled in America.
Now, of course, we have details about, "Oh, I went
to Hoboken," (she laughs) or whatever but exactly where
did they settle and what were the very specific details

about the neighborhood and the house and the, I don't know, the area that the person moved into. Because I, I miss that in a lot of the interviews. I, you get some of it but I wish it was deeper than that because I find that that might be important in understanding American society, the way American societies have formed. Not really in understanding immigrant experience so much but in, in understanding different sub-cultures and factions that blend together because so many immigrants would, would settle together. But they would settle together with clusters of other immigrants altogether. And how, how does that all mesh together to form a sub-culture that, that might seem unexplainable otherwise. So that, that interests me.

LEVINE: Well, I think we're going to end here. And I just want to say thank you for a wonderful interview.

HAPEMAN: Thank you.

LEVINE: And, as part of the Oral History Project I think we have been very fortunate to have had you here as an intern for this period of time. I'm speaking with Mindy Hapeman, and this is Janet Levine for the

EI-974/MINDY HAPEMAN

National Park Service on December 17th, 1997

signing

off.