

**EI-979**

**DAVID BENJAMIN SPRINSON**

**BIRTHDATE: APRIL 5, 1910**

**INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 7, 1998**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 87**

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**UKRAINE, 1921**

**AGE: 11**

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**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

HERZ: This is Roger Herz for the National Park Service. Today is March the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and I'm at the home of Dr. David Sprinson in Leonia, New Jersey, who came from the Ukraine when he was 10 years old.

SPRINSON: Eleven.

HERZ: Eleven years old. Dr. Sprinson, why don't we begin by you giving us your full name and your date of birth?

SPRINSON: David Benjamin Sprinson—S-P-R-I-N-S-O-N.

HERZ: And your date of birth?

SPRINSON: Well, April—the exact—exact date may not be known. But it's April 5, 1910.

HERZ: Is there a reason why it might not be known?

SPRINSON: Well, the calendars, switching calendars between—the Gregorian calendar in—in Russia and the American calendar and the re—the—the calendar in vogue here. In addition, the Hebrew calendar was involved. And although I tried to coordinate these into what is absolutely correct, I never succeeded. And—but it's pretty close. It may be correct.

HERZ: Where were you born?

SPRINSON: In a small town called Raigorod—R-A-I-G-O-R-O-D. Very small hamlet.

HERZ: And where was that?

SPRINSON: In, I guess—I don't know what they called it—Oblost [PH], which may be the word for region. There was a region in the Ukraine called Padonia [PH] and which is fairly close to what is the Romanian border. In other words, it's in southeast Ukraine—southwest Ukraine.

HERZ: Can you describe the town for us a little bit and the house you grew up in?

SPRINSON: Hmm. The—the town was essentially a—a one-street town, unpaved and, hmm, I—I wouldn't know what the population was but it couldn't have been more than a couple of thousand and was essentially a Jewish town surrounded by Ukrainian peasant farms.

HERZ: And you remember the house that you were born in?

SPRINSON: The house was—and that jumped to a larger house, which was owned by my mother's—by my grandfather on my—my matern—my—my maternal grandfather, who had a large drive-in vestibule where a hall—whole wagons—several wagons and their horses could drive in. So people who came by and had to spend the night were housed in—in this—in this overnight stay. And he and his wife lived in the main house close, ad—adjoining, actually joined to this—let's call it garage. [chuckles]

HERZ: Was this in the nature of a hotel or an inn that they—

SPRINSON: Not really. It was—it was in the—only—only used by peasants who would drive, would be one village—at some distance between one village and another and had to spend the night for one reason or another.

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HERZ: So the little town where you grew up in was—was at a crossroads or on the—

SPRINSON: It was on the river Bug. Bug—B-U-G, which is not the Polish Bug but there is this Ukrainian. It had a—a railroad coming through and it was a large wheat-growing area and was used—the railroad was used to transport. And for all I know, the—a—a lot of the wheat could have been—the wagons used to transport the wheat could have been housed in this house that I described. Now, we lived—my mother and father and e—eventually, two years after I was born, my sister lived in the small—smaller adjunct to this main house surrounded by a vast garden with dozens of lilac trees. That's very common in the Ukraine.

HERZ: What were you—

SPRINSON: And acacia trees.

HERZ: What were your parents' names?

SPRINSON: Moses and Rebecca. Rebecca Skolnick—S-K-O-L-N-I-C-K.

HERZ: Can you tell us a little bit about your father?

SPRINSON: He was a scholarly person in—in the—in the sense of those days, knew quite a bit of Talmud and—and of course, biblical—biblical works.

HERZ: Do—do you remember him studying a lot when you were a child? Did he study with you?

SPRINSON: Eventually, eventually. I—I s—my mother tongue was Yiddish but I also learned a little Hebrew and, eventually, I learned Russian. I spoke pretty fluent Russian when we—

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: —when we left.

HERZ: And was your mother also scholarly?

SPRINSON: Not really. He came here just around the turn of the century, around 1898.

HERZ: Your father.

SPRINSON: Yeah, to earn some money and to wait until my mother's father would approve marriage.

HERZ: Hmm.

SPRINSON: And when he came back they did get married. I don't know. Are you interested in all this?

HERZ: Sure.

SPRINSON: [laughs]

HERZ: Can you tell us a little bit about the town, as far as school and was there a shul there that everybody—

SPRINSON: Yeah, there were two synagogues, I think, and quite an ornate church and, of course, a Jewish cemetery and a Greek Orthodox cemetery.

HERZ: And school?

SPRINSON: I don't think there was a—there was not a government school. I learned Russian from a private tutor. And where I learned the multiplication table, I really don't know. Probably at home, maybe from this tutor.

HERZ: Was there a great separation in not only the town but the town and the surrounding area between the—the people who lived in the town and the peasants between the differences in—in peoples?

SPRINSON: It was quite a separation culturally. Quite. But of course, my father dealt in collecting wheat from large growers who occasionally were Poles, because the Ukraine was, a long time ago, really part of a much greater Poland that stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. And there were Polish—large Polish landowners of large estates. And he dealt with at least one, who I know was frequently around, with whom—from whom he collected wheat for shipment, I guess on the railroad. Yes.

HERZ: Do you remember having contact yourself with children of peasants or—

SPRINSON: N—I—

HERZ: —was it a fairly isolated existence?

SPRINSON: Yeah, I was in contact with Jewish children. By then—I don't remember—you see, there was no school. There was no secular school and Jews had a five percent quota of admission to the higher schools so that very few went on to higher education. And two relatives of ours—at least one relative, a woman, made it to the gymnasium [PH] and went away to study.

HERZ: Was this a large event for the town?

SPRINSON: Not that I know. Must have been within the family, yeah.

HERZ: So when you grew up—[clears throat] excuse me—you lived with your grandparents and your parents and—

SPRINSON: Yes.

HERZ: Do you remember some things about the household? Who did the cooking? What kind of foods were cooked?

SPRINSON: Well, was typical Eastern European cooking, a mix of various dishes, this—especially Ukrainian dishes, such as borscht and kasha and cornbread, that sort of thing. The Sabbath meal was prepared in advance and brought over to a bakery, I suppose, where a large oven kept the meal warm and then brought back for the Sabbath service—for the Sabbath meal, brought back by a non-Jew.

HERZ: Sabbath [unclear].

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: Th—that's a fairly frequent story that we get, that there was a central location where a lot of—

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: —cooking or whatever was done. And then—

SPRINSON: Yeah, I remember—I remember that vaguely, as more or less as to what part of town it was.

HERZ: And you—you—you lived through—at least your first 11 years—through a fairly interesting political part of—

SPRINSON: Yeah, actually, first nine years. It took us two years to—

HERZ: To—to go—

SPRINSON: —to get there after we literally escaped from—from Ukraine. But, let's see. Say that again?

HERZ: Well, I wondered if you remember a lot about the political situation.

SPRINSON: Oh, yes. In—I remember in 1917 when the first revolution took place, the—what is probably referred to as the Menshevik Revolution or—yeah, I guess it could be referred to, as opposed to the revolution which took place later, which was a Bolshevik Revolution. And Menshevik, meaning less. Bolshoi [PH] means big, you see, so in other words, they're larger mens and smaller mens, maybe.

HERZ: Large?

SPRINSON: There were a large displacement—

HERZ: Oh, really?

SPRINSON: —of society compared to a small displacement.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And the first revolution was quite favored by most people in the town. And there was—there was a parade through the town, people wearing green bands on the left arms.

HERZ: People from the town.

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: And the peasants too?

SPRINSON: I don't—maybe. I don't know. Doesn't come to mind.

HERZ: What do you remember about the parade?

SPRINSON: I remember there may have been a brass band. There may have been some music and was a long and impressive parade and there was a lot of, I thought, partisanship towards the changing government.

HERZ: You were quite young at the time, but do you remember conversations?

SPRINSON: I remember being in the parade.

HERZ: Do you?

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: With the fervor and the enthusiasm or—

SPRINSON: I doubt it.

HERZ: —as a six- or seven-year-old—

SPRINSON: Don't forget—

HERZ: —[unclear].

SPRINSON: —I was really a baby. In 1917, I was just seven years old.

HERZ: Do you remember at all conversations between your parents about what was going on, or your parents and your grandparents? By the way, these were your maternal grandparents in the house, not your paternal grandparents.

SPRINSON: No, these were maternal. I do remember my paternal grandfather vaguely but he died soon after I was born.

HERZ: Uh-hmm. But do you remember conversations in the house in [unclear]—

SPRINSON: [unclear] conversations, not really. No, I don't remember that. But I remember one thing, that when the—when the Bolsheviks took over, the—see, I'm not giving you this in chronological order. When they took over, the—it turned out that my Russian teacher, the teacher who taught me Russian (perhaps arithmetic too, I don't know), turned out to be a communist. And since he was being paid by my father, he assumed that he was well to do. And we always—we talked about it afterwards a lot, but it was he who suggested that we pay a—a contribution of 5,000 rubles towards the local government or whatever—tax, something.

HERZ: Can you remember other changes in the town about this time when—when the revolutions were—

SPRINSON: You see, this was very complex. 19—you see, the war broke out in 1914. In 1917, there was this big disruption. Of course, the Russian Army was defeated a good deal earlier.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And the Germans actually took over a good part of the Ukraine. And the German soldier was stationed—I think only one soldier was stationed in the town to oversee, so to speak, to—to that German government's control and to act as an—as a source of information, perhaps, and also—

HERZ: Information to you or about you?

SPRINSON: No, no. To the Germans.

HERZ: Right, about the town.

SPRINSON: About the town, right. I—and—but he was very friendly and got along. He was practically a—so far as I recall, he was the only occupant, so to speak, in the town. But it was really occ—officially, occupied by Germany. And then there was this confusion, the peace in 19—not long after the Bolsheviks took over they signed the Peace of Brest Litovsk [PH], if you know, which stopped the war with Germany. They pulled out and then Ukrainian nationalists—nationalists blossomed out under the banner of Alita Culpatura [PH] B-E-T-L-U-R-A, and the strongly nationalistic and anti-Semitic, and they were instigating on—you didn't have to do much to instigate pogroms against Jews in Ukraine.

HERZ: These were the Ukrainian nationalists.

SPRINSON: Yes.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And there was a—an invasion of our town by a bunch of peasants, led by whom, I don't know. And the—the Polish landowner who dealt with my father became aware of it and warned us and hid us and took us into his house and hid us in a—a sort of like a ravine. But it was more ho—it was more manmade, I think. And—and we could hear the clamor of the—as we were hiding there, the clamor of the peasant or maybe soldiers too marching and looking for Jews.

HERZ: When—when this took place, including your grandparents? He hid your grandparents also?

SPRINSON: I—I don't think they were alive anymore. I don't think so. But I'm not too clear on that. I do remember before the war being taken to a wedding in the town about 20 miles away where a brother of my mother got married. And he was there. He—

HERZ: Your grandfather?

SPRINSON: Yeah, the grandfather. Danced—danced with—with rubbers on his shoes so as not to wear out the leather. That was—that was the tale.

HERZ: That's a good story. Wh—when this man hid you and your—and your sister was already born, I'm assuming—

SPRINSON: Oh, yes.

HERZ: Did you know—did your parents already know that you would have to leave?

SPRINSON: Oh, that—that's when they made up their mind that this—and it was clear that there was no possibility for education. And under those conditions—

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: —there was no—it was very difficult for Jews to get an education anyway beyond—I don't know. You see, in the larger cities there may have been schools, elementary schools. I—I have no knowledge at all of those.

HERZ: Just as a sidelight, do you remember having interest in—in science at that time?

SPRINSON: Oh, no.

HERZ: No.

SPRINSON: No. I didn't—didn't know that much, didn't know what science was.

HERZ: Had you heard about America?

SPRINSON: Well, not long after the Bolshevik Revolution—I guess it was late summer—no, the Bolshevik Revolution was in November of '17. Wait a minute. I'm wrong about that. You see, we stayed until 1919 in Russia.

HERZ: In your town.

SPRINSON: In the town.

HERZ: Uh-huh.

SPRINSON: And all these events, you see, I didn't—you know, you'll have to rewrite it.

HERZ: Okay. [laughter]

SPRINSON: The—these events I was telling you about, the pogroms, the—the anarchy that existed, the Germans not—being thrown out and—and the communists still not having taken over—they didn't take over in all of the Ukraine until a good deal later.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And for a time the—the Ukrainian Nationalists held sway. So there was this confusion and so on that we lasted there till 1919. And that's when we decided—that's when my parents decided that we had to leave.

HERZ: Okay. Before we stop the tape for a minute, do you remember at that time having heard anything about America? United States?

SPRINSON: Probably. I don't remember much about that. But I certainly remember once—well, what happens now?

HERZ: No, just go ahead. I'll—

SPRINSON: Well, I remember that we—for various reasons, we had to hide under straw in a—in a wagon and to be driven to the Dniester [PH] River, which at that time separated Romania from the Ukraine.

HERZ: Right.

SPRINSON: See, now it separates the Moldovian [PH] Republic from the Ukraine.

HERZ: Who made the decision to leave? Was it your parents?

SPRINSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

HERZ: Both wanted to go?

SPRINSON: Oh, yes. Yes, my—my father had a sister here.

HERZ: In the United States already?

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: Uh-huh.

SPRINSON: Oh, yes.

HERZ: Where?

SPRINSON: In Newark. And my mother had a brother—had a brother in—in Boston.

HERZ: We're just going to stop for a minute, turn the tape over and continue.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

HERZ: This is Roger Herz. We're continuing the interview with David Sprinson.

SPRINSON: So [clears throat] we drove at night through the Ukrainian villages and crossed the Dniester at night.

HERZ: So you—you left your little village very quickly with not much preparation?

SPRINSON: There must have been some preparation because we took along quite a few items.

HERZ: Can you—what did—what kind of things did you take along?

SPRINSON: Bedding, covers, things like that.

HERZ: Pillows?

SPRINSON: Pillows.

HERZ: Do you remember taking any personal items yourself?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: And—and who was it that—that helped you to—to get away?

SPRINSON: You know, I don't know. I don't think anybody—somebody must have known or must have been involved. But I don't—this was not—I don't remember ever hearing—hearing any discussion about that.

HERZ: Do you remember yourself what it was like to leave?

SPRINSON: No, no.

HERZ: No goodbyes to—

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: —family or—

SPRINSON: I don't remember. There m—there may have been. It may have been surreptitious throughout, for all I know. Maybe not. Then my father hid some rubles in his shoe and, unfortunately, the boat, when we crossed, something happened. Then he had to jump out of the boat into shallow water or something. And the shoe got wet and, of course, they—the story went in our family that the value of the money was lost because there was a lot of attention in those days to the quality of the paper and so on. It wasn't—it may not have been worth much anymore anyway, for all I know.

HERZ: But they—they tried to take as much money with them as they possibly could?

SPRINSON: Oh, yes.

HERZ: So you left the little village under straw in a—in a wagon and crossed the Dniester. Do you remember anything further than that? Which port did you go to? Or—or you said the journey took about—in its total, about two years. Do you—what—

SPRINSON: Oh, well, we stayed—first of all, we stayed in Kishinev [PH].

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And we were—I think at that time we may already have been under the care of HIAS. And—

HERZ: Just for the record, tell us what HIAS is.

SPRINSON: It's Hebrew Immigration—

HERZ: Aid Society.

SPRINSON: —Aid Society. Yeah. And they lodged us in a room, which was part of a flour factory. That is, HIAS maybe did. I don't know how else we could have contacted anybody in—in Kishinev. And then my

parents—my sister and I were left there during the day and they went out selling pants. [laughs] Pant—pantaloons.

HERZ: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Do you remember what your life—just your daily life was—

SPRINSON: But—but you see, we—we no sooner crossed into Romania when both my sister and I contracted scarlet fever. So there was a big epidemic then. And we were quarantined for six weeks or something. It was terrible.

HERZ: In Kishinev?

SPRINSON: No, no.

HERZ: Oh, different?

SPRINSON: In—right across the border in—in—in a small town. Maybe if I looked at the map I could remember the town but I don't know offhand. But eventually, we ended up in Kishinev. And we stayed there for essentially two years until my parents' relatives were contacted and money was sent over for transportation and so on.

HERZ: Do you remember any of your daily life as a nine- or a ten-year-old in—during those two years? Was there any schooling involved?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: Religion?

SPRINSON: No, not—n—I can't remember a thing. It's strange. All I know is that we just played.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And when my parents came back we were delighted. We had a meal. It's a funny existence.

HERZ: Do you remember being amongst a group of people similar in the same—in a similar situation as you?

SPRINSON: No, not in Kishinev.

HERZ: No.

SPRINSON: But—and—but then we began. Finally, we had to save up enough money to bribe an official to give us a passport, a Romanian passport so as to get a visa and come to the United States. And incidentally, I had that passport for many years. I don't know what happened to it—with a picture.

HERZ: Oh.

SPRINSON: I may have kept a picture of all four of us. And anyway, the—we then traveled, once there was enough money or whatever, enough contacts—we traveled into Bucharest and stayed in Bucharest for a shorter time, was maybe several months—two—two mon—maybe two months, maybe one month, whatever. A relatively short time compared to the two year [unclear]. See, we didn't get here till May, 1921. So—

HERZ: When you say here, you didn't get to the United States—

SPRINSON: Yes.

HERZ: —direct—okay.

SPRINSON: So then—and finally, we got everything together and boarded a train to go from Bucharest to Antwerp. And that was something because Romanian soldiers on the train decided to lock the immigrants in—in what amounted to a boxcar. And they decided not to let anybody out. So there was no way of going to—to a bathroom. And there was—it was just awful. I remember this—this whole thing. But then when we got to Germany it was different. It was altogether different. I remember we stopped in Cologne. I don't remember whether we changed trains or whatever. We probably—probably had to. Then we got to Antwerp—

HERZ: But what—excuse me. You said that it was different. The conditions under which you traveled were different.

SPRINSON: Yeah, were different. And then we were lodged perhaps in Bucharest as well as in Antwerp in a—in a common—in common housing with other immigrants. You know, one—one mattress after another mattress in one room, you know.

HERZ: Men and women together?

SPRINSON: I think so. I—I—that, I don't remember. And we had to prepare to satisfy the American Consul that we are in good health and deloused. Women with long hair, as my mother was, made sure to go to the—

there were certain places where you went to get the proper shampooing so that you could pass muster at the consulate. Then we boarded the ship of the Red Star Line.

HERZ: Which—now, which year—this was 1921.

SPRINSON: This was 1921. This was in May of 1921. It took about 10 days to cross, if not a little longer.

HERZ: From Antwerp?

SPRINSON: From Antwerp.

HERZ: Do you remember in Antwerp yourself going through medical examinations or anything of that sort?

SPRINSON: N—not really. But I must have. I must have gone through.

HERZ: Do you remember things that might have been new to you, that you met new people, ate new foods, anything that was—

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: —sort of a wonder because you were a 10-year-old on a big adventure.

SPRINSON: But that—that's a good question. I mean, in a—were we—were we essentially under house arrest?

HERZ: [chuckles]

SPRINSON: Or were we free to look—walk along the streets of Antwerp? I don't really know. But I'm almost sure HIAS took care of—of us. Then we came to Ellis Island.

HERZ: Let's just talk about the trip over.

SPRINSON: [laughs] In steerage.

HERZ: In steerage.

SPRINSON: [laughs]

HERZ: I notice you—you skipped that k—point.

SPRINSON: And I was as sick as a dog—

HERZ: Uh-huh.

SPRINSON: —most of the trip. My sister was not.

HERZ: Parents?

SPRINSON: Parents did fairly well, I think.

HERZ: You don't remember the name of the ship, though?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: And wh—what was it—what was the trip like? I know you were sick but do you ever remember things like where you stayed, other people on the ship? Did you have a chance to play, meet other children?

SPRINSON: Well, we met other people and, occasionally, there was a definite gate, so to speak, between steerage and the other classes. But we came in contact with them on deck or something because I re—I remember one passenger, whether it was I or some other p—I think it was another passenger (I was only 11 then) saying to a man in second class or something, "Look. Your dog over there is better off than we are in steerage." Somehow, that always [laughter]—

HERZ: Stuck in your head. So the voyage took 10 days. Do you remember—

SPRINSON: Hmm.

HERZ: —incidentally, the date that you left?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: No. But it was in April of—

SPRINSON: It was in May.

HERZ: May of 19—

SPRINSON: In May. We got here on May 21<sup>st</sup>.

HERZ: 1921.

SPRINSON: 1921.

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HERZ: Just going back—

SPRINSON: Whether we left—I'm not sure whether we stayed—we m—must have stayed a day or two on Ellis Island until we were processed. And our relatives had to come. My brother's—my—my aunt—that is, my father's sister, who lived in Newark—her husband and his son—it was not her son. It was a—

HERZ: Stepson.

SPRINSON: It was from a previous marriage. These two, her s—in other words, our uncle and his son came to meet us. And I remember they're standing before the judge, raising their hand and swearing that they will be responsible for us.

HERZ: The judge was on—not on Ellis Island though?

SPRINSON: Yes, on EI—

HERZ: The judge was on Ellis Island.

SPRINSON: On Ellis Island.

HERZ: Let's just go back to the ship for one minute. Do you remember what it was like seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: Or any of the excitement when you came close?

SPRINSON: Oh, must have been. Must have been. What a relief.

HERZ: [chuckles]

SPRINSON: But—

HERZ: You remember being taken to Ellis Island from the ship?

SPRINSON: No, I don't. But my—my only good definite memory of Ellis Island really is appearing before the judge, the four of us, with these two relatives.

HERZ: You were on Ellis Island for about two days. Any—

SPRINSON: Something like that.

HERZ: —remembrances of the—

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: —food?

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: Medical examinations?

SPRINSON: No. No, I don't. And then they took us to Newark.

HERZ: And what was that like, being in this—

SPRINSON: Well, [chuckles] it was—it was new. [laughs]

HERZ: And here you were, an 11-year-old who had come from a tiny little village in—

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: —in the Ukraine and—

SPRINSON: Oh, you got adjusted quickly. Very quickly. Yeah. My parents bought a laundry and in—in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

HERZ: Hmm.

SPRINSON: 191 Moore [PH] Street where we moved to that same year.

HERZ: Where did they get the money?

SPRINSON: Must be from the relatives and which must have been paid back, I think, although I wouldn't—I don't know about that. And we used to visit our family in Newark quite often on the tubes, on the Hudson tubes.

HERZ: So you were living—you—you—after about—

SPRINSON: I began going to school immediately.

HERZ: —within a year. And what was that—

SPRINSON: Immediately.

HERZ: —like?

SPRINSON: Wonderful. Wonderful.

HERZ: How so? What was—what was wonderful?

SPRINSON: Well, teachers were great. Immigrant children were taught English separately. Very, very high standards. [clears throat] And intensely. I learned English in no time.

HERZ: Do you remember if your parents learned English? Did they go to school at all?

SPRINSON: They learned English, not too well but they learned. They may have gone to school but I'm not sure about that. They had to work. But the schooling was wonderful. And then I went to Boys High School in Brooklyn which was, at that time, just terrific. Maybe you know about it.

HERZ: A little bit. What I'd like to talk about that for just a few minutes, you know, how your education progressed and how you became interested in science and—

SPRINSON: Oh, it was very simple. I had good teachers and ch—I had chemistry in high school. I had two courses in chemistry. I had quite a bit of math, trigonometry, solid geometry. Of course, nowadays, kids take calculus so I don't know. But—

HERZ: [chuckles] Some do. Some have more diff—

SPRINSON: And, yeah, it was—and I also went to Hebrew school in the afternoon.

HERZ: I was going to ask about that. Was this a very religious neighborhood, a very Jewish neighborhood that you moved to?

SPRINSON: N—not really. I don't think so. But it was certainly not black, and it is now. I just wonder what Moore Street is like now. But there was no synagogue, really. And for the holy holidays, tickets were sold to—for prayer in some kind of a—of a temporary setup, you know.

HERZ: Where did you go to Hebrew School?

SPRINSON: Oh, I went to school in—on Delancey Street.

HERZ: In Manhattan [unclear].

SPRINSON: In Manhattan.

HERZ: You had to come from Brooklyn.

SPRINSON: I took the trolley. [laughs]

HERZ: How many—how often? Once a—once a week? Twice a week?

SPRINSON: Oh, no. It was about three times a week. Yeah, it was very interesting, very—again, very outstanding faculty. Teaching was superb.

HERZ: Did most of the Jewish children from the neighborhood do this or was this—

SPRINSON: I don't know. This—this has puzzled me always. How come I went? Nobody forced me. And I lost contact. I—I assembled quite a Hebrew library, which I discarded in—oh, in the early '30s. I lost interest in—in nationalism, in Jewish nationalism, which my father—of which my father was a protagonist, not strong you see. When I was not quite 14 I told him I stopped believing in putting on the [unclear] every morning and so on. "I don't want to do it anymore and I don't believe in it." He said, "Oh, that's your problem."

HERZ: But he continued. I was going to ask you whether he brought his books and his things with him and—

SPRINSON: No, no.

HERZ: No.

SPRINSON: No, he became what amounts to a laborer but he ran his own business. My mother worked too.

HERZ: But he didn't continue his studies and his religious—

SPRINSON: No.

HERZ: —practices even on his own?

SPRINSON: I—[sighs] I can't remember. The high holidays were—were observed.

HERZ: You were bar mitzvahed?

SPRINSON: So was—oh, yes. That's what I mean.

HERZ: Yeah.

SPRINSON: I mean, I was nearly 14 when I gave up. But we celebrated Passover and the orthodox way and the other important holidays. We closed the store and so on.

HERZ: Was this a very mixed neighborhood as far as ethnicity was concerned? Italians, Irish—

SPRINSON: I think so. I think there were Italians too. Italians.

HERZ: Did you have friends in that community or—

SPRINSON: In school, I did. I don't think so much in—see, I went to Hebrew. I made friends in the Hebrew school.

HERZ: Hmm.

SPRINSON: Yeah, and became interested in girls. [chuckles] There were very attractive girls there. See, this was coeducational. Boys High School was not.

HERZ: Uh-huh.

SPRINSON: Maybe that's why I went. [laughs] Hey, is this for publication?

HERZ: This is for publication. [laughter] Can you tell us just a little bit about your experiences in high school and then applying and wanting to go to college?

SPRINSON: Well, there was no—again, there was no pressure at home. But I became interested in chemistry. I knew I wanted to learn more about—about many things. And—and I wanted to go to college and there was no question. I just took the subway up to City College and since I had more than a 75 average and that—at that time, that's all you needed.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: Mr. Gotchall [PH] looked me over. He was the registrar. Boy, what a guy. And I became a student.

HERZ: How old were you?

SPRINSON: Seventeen.

HERZ: So this was about 1928—

SPRINSON: '27.

HERZ: '27, '28.

SPRINSON: Yeah, I started in the fall of '27.

HERZ: Well, if you wouldn't mind spending just a little bit more time, could we talk about CCNY in the '20s and '30s?

SPRINSON: Well, you see, at that time—the first two years, for residents of Brooklyn, were spent in Brooklyn College. It was already called Brooklyn College but it was really housed in a—in an office building but were—there may have been a chemistry lab. But after two years, I went uptown to the main campus. And—

HERZ: In—in Manhattan?

SPRINSON: In Manhattan. And then I commuted. But then things got pretty complicated. My mother became seriously ill and my father developed asthma. And he had to give up the store and spend the—a good deal—spend some years in a—in those days, the—the main idea was to escape from the city. And he spent some time in Lakewood, I think. Is that—New Jersey.

HERZ: I just want to interrupt for one minute. I'm going to turn the tape over.

SPRINSON: Okay.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

HERZ: We're on side one of tape two. The interview is being done with David Sprinson and it is March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998. So we were at Uptown CCNY and it was about—

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: —1929, I remember.

SPRINSON: Yes. And our family—my father was still alive and my fa—my mother had died. And my sister went to live with family in Newark. And I stayed with a cousin in Brooklyn and continued studying at City College.

HERZ: This was about the time of the Depression.

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: The Depression started. Do you remember what the ferment was like? What was some of the social issues surrounding you and embroiling you at that time?

SPRINSON: I—I don't remember much. I wasn't terribly involved y—at that time. I became interested later on during the Spanish Civil War, which was in '36. And I graduated in '31.

HERZ: C—you graduated C—City College—

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: —in '31.

SPRINSON: '31. And even though there was a Depression, I managed to get—I worked in the post office. I delivered mail for a summer and I had applied earlier for a laboratory position in the chemistry lab at—see, I majored in chemistry—

HERZ: Right.

SPRINSON: —at City College.

HERZ: Uh-hmm. Do you remember some of your—your professors and—

SPRINSON: Oh, yes.

HERZ: —who—who were great—influences you?

SPRINSON: One was Prager. He was a professor, a lecturer in chem—in organic chemistry.

HERZ: Could you spell it?

SPRINSON: P-R—P-R-A-G-E-R. And there were others. I can't remember too many names. I tried to take—I took a course with the famous Professor Cohen in philosophy but didn't do very well.

HERZ: But at—at CCNY at that time none of the ferment, the political upheaval was going—

SPRINSON: There was no—there was no—not much yet. That came later when—

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: —Robinson, the president, did something stupid. I don't know what. He—he—he tried to beat the students with an umbrella or something during a demonstration. And that—but that was later. I was out by that time, before then.

HERZ: And where did you go after—

SPRINSON: At that—at that time, I went to many concerts at City College. You know, the—the—you know, that famous—that famous—mmm—amphitheater.

HELEN: Excuse me. Are you two caught up or would you like [unclear]?

SPRINSON: Mr. Herz, my wife, Helen.

HERZ: Now, we're going to take a break for a minute. [tape off/on]

SPRINSON: But that was—I wasn't all that much involved politically, socially in anything. Let me think about this though. See, I had other interests. I joined a—a Hebrew Scout organization in the mid—let's see. I [unclear] still in high school or later, maybe when I was still in high school. [several words unclear], it was called, meaning "The Young Guard," or something like that. And I spent whatever free time I had wi—in the company of the young people there.

HERZ: Where did you go after you left City College?

SPRINSON: I got a job at Montefiori [PH] Hospital in the chemistry lab. And I studied—I studied—I couldn't get into graduate school because I needed a fellowship and I couldn't get one. And so I—but I took courses and got a master's degree at the New York University in the Bronx. They had a campus uptown—

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: —in the Bronx at that time.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And published some papers, did some lab—I was able to do lab work at night at Montefiori Hospital and published some papers with the professor there [unclear]. And—and then in 19—19—I don't know.

We'll have to look that up somehow—1940 or '41, I happened to come to a lecture at the College of Ph—Physicians and Surgeons.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

SPRINSON: And a man who was doing his Ph.D. work there asked me if I was interested in the job in the laboratory there, because he was finishing up and starting medical school. And therefore, there was an opening in that lab. And that's when I began doing my graduate work for my Ph.D.

HERZ: When did you meet your wife? Or your future wife?

SPRINSON: Yeah, I met her in—at—at the—at the hospital dining room. We were introduced by a mutual friend and—in the end of 1942. And we got married in '43.

HERZ: Children?

SPRINSON: Yeah, we had three—we have three children.

HERZ: You've had a—quite an illustrious academic career. Could you just—

SPRINSON: I was lucky.

HERZ: And good. Can you just tell us a little bit, specifically what—what some of your accomplishments have been?

SPRINSON: Well, I became interested in the biosynthesis of certain amino acids, which—m—mainly in organisms—cannot make. There are three of them, which seem to have a common ancestry, and nobody knew how they were synthesized. At that time, someone discovered bacteria mutants, which couldn't make these and, therefore, accumulated various products, which they were able to make but were unable to convert to the final product because they were mutated in the middle. So I be—I began studying these mutants and collaborating with—in collaboration with the man who discovered them. And that [chuckles] took about—took about 20 years. And then I—I taught medical students about the cholesterol formation in the liver. That's where it's really made in large quantities. See, we make lots of cholesterol. And I thought I'd take a crack at that and I got involved working on this problem on the—on the last stages. The early stages were well known but the final stages of the chemistry on the formation of cholesterol was—was not known and it's still not altogether clear. And I made a few contributions there. I'm still writing a little paper on the work [unclear].

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HERZ: You've had quite an illustrious and full life, from a small village in the Ukraine to where—

SPRINSON: Yeah.

HERZ: —we're sitting today. Are there any final thoughts that you might like to share with us on—on your journey in—

SPRINSON: Oh, I never thought about it. [laughs] You got to work hard and you got to make sacrifices. Sometimes, you have to relax too. But there has neighbor considerable focus.

HERZ: Do you keep in—

SPRINSON: I was not one of those that was really completely focused and aggressive about his work. But I tried.

HERZ: And succeeded.

SPRINSON: And—and I was lucky. I got elected to the National Academy, to my great surprise. So—yeah. Yeah, this is—this is the proceedings.

HERZ: Uh-hmm. Well, I'd like to thank you very much, Dr. Sprinson, for spending the time with us.

SPRINSON: You're very welcome.

HERZ: This is Roger Herz. This interview has been done on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998 with Dr. David Sprinson for the National Park Service. Thank you.

SPRINSON: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]