

KECK-173

MORRIS ABRAMS

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RUSSIA, 1899

AGE 9

PASSAGE PROBABLY ON A HOLLAND-AMERICA LINE SHIP

EXACT SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

GUMB: This is Dan Gumb, and I'm speaking with Mr. Morris Abrams
on the 28th day of May, 1986. We're beginning
this interview at 3:20, and we're about to interview Mr.
Abrams about his immigration experience from Russia in the
year 1899.

ABRAMS: --arrived here 1899.

GUMB: Right. Mr. Abrams--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: If we could begin, where and when were you born?

ABRAMS: I was born in Russia in a very, very small town that contained very few-- I mean, in a small town period. The, uh, the largest city near to that town was a city called Slonim, S-L-O-N-I-M, Slonim. That town, that Slonim, was a city of great learning and it had, had great, you know what a Yeshiva is, you know what, what that is?

GUMB: Yeah.

ABRAMS: A school. You see, that had great Yeshiva down there, and great rabbis came out of that, out of that particular city, you see. But the reason I mention that is because before we, before we left the town that I was born, which is called Rezhnoy, doesn't matter, (?).

GUMB: Could you spell that?

ABRAMS: And, uh--

GUMB: Could you spell that town?

ABRAMS: How you spell it?

GUMB: Yeah.

ABRAMS: Yes. R-E, R-E-S, (?). I can give it to you later. I have it over here. I'll give it to you. You can put it in-- But it sounds (?). It's R-E-S-H. I'll give you the right spelling. And before we left-- To, to begin with, my father came here, in this country, in 1896. That's the beginning of our, our going to America. He came here first to earn some money, and then he sent, he sent, uh, passage cards for us. You know, passage tickets. And then we went to, we went to America. Before, but before we went there we uh, stopped in, in that city of Slonim. Of course, we had, I had an uncle living there, see, so he wanted us to stay with him for a little while, and then we, then we went. We. we left from Antwerp. That's where the ship took us. It was a Rotterdam American [sic, probably Holland-America Line] liner at that time. see. And we got on a ship, you know, and there we went to America. And of course, and of course, at that time the people said, "Oh, you're going to, you're going to, to the Golden Medina."

You know what medina is. Golden, a golden land, you know. You know, land, gold. Well all right. At any rate, it took us, it took us about sixteen days to get here, see. It was one of those slow ships. But we got to America. Then, of course, we landed at Ellis Island. And then my father came to Ellis Island to take, to take us, uh, to take us home, see. And then, and whatever, whatever, if you're asking me whether I remember who was there, or anything of that kind, I couldn't remember. I was only a youngster, see. And besides, the whole, the whole thing was entirely out of proportion to, from the town, from the place where I came from. I came from a town that had, that had very little-- I mean, it's a small town, very small. One of the small towns.

GUMB: What part of Russia is that town in?

ABRAMS: Well, it's, it's near Poland. It's near the border of Poland. Originally, many, many years ago, that part of, uh, Russia was actually, belonged to Poland. But in, but in, at certain times, the Russians took it from them, or whatever it was. But it's, it's near the border of Poland.

GUMB: Okay. What did you father do in that town?

ABRAMS: When he came here?

GUMB: No. In Russia.

ABRAMS: In Russia, his family had a, had a, a flour mill. But unfortunately, it was a flour mill where he had to grind flour by, by hand. You know, it was, going back such a long time. And he couldn't make , he couldn't make both ends meet. So he said, "Well, you keep, whoever's there, stay there, do whatever you can with it, I'm going to America and try to earn some money, and then I'll have you come, too." And that's what happened.

GUMB: Why couldn't he make both ends meets?

ABRAMS: Well, he couldn't earn enough money. That's what I mean, you know.

GUMB: What was the problem? Do you, do you have any idea?

ABRAMS: Well, if your talking about while he was in Europe, you mean?

GUMB: Right. While he was in Europe.

ABRAMS: Well, yes. Well, the problem is that if you have a flour mill and you, and you, and you try to make, ground, grind flour by hand, or whatever the case may be, you can't get very far. That's the idea. I mean, it was a small, it was a small business which, which, uh, which was left to them by, by his father, see. By my grandfather, see. My father, grandfather had originally, that goes back, even further back, I don't know how many that goes back. But that's, uh,-- So we decided to come here to America, that's all.

GUMB: What do you remember about this small town? What was, uh--

ABRAMS: What I remember about it? Well, it was, it, it had, all it had was a Shul gasse. Shul gasse. Shul means, shul is a , a temple. Shul is, in Yiddish a shul is a, a house of worship, see. Shul gasse meant there were two buildings. One was a school building which was open and used every day in the week, and the other one was a synagogue, which they used only on Saturdays and holidays. That was the whole thing. And the people lived around there, and they used to come to services and shul and that's it. That was the whole story, what I can remember.

I can remember that when I was a youngster I used to go to, to Hebrew school, and that's what, that's what-- And that's all, that's all I learned, at that time, was just what they, what the teachers taught me. And I used to go to the, go to the, uh, to the school, uh, to that school where they had their prayers and all and, you know, just go in like a youngster, you know what I mean. I didn't do very much there. So--

GUMB: So it was a Jewish town?

ABRAMS: Yes. Jewish town. But it was also, also non-Jewish living there, see? And those non-Jews, by the way, they had, people ask me many times, "Had you learned to speak Russian?" I said, "No." The fact is that those people living there spoke a different dialect altogether, you see what I mean? Altogether different dialogue You see, they spoke something, it wasn't Russian, it wasn't-- (He laughs.) I don't know what it was. But it goes back in those years.

GUMB: Then what language did you speak?

ABRAMS: What was that?

GUMB: What language did you speak?

ABRAMS: Yiddish, Yiddish, Yiddish. Nothing else. Yiddish. You know what Yiddish? Can you talk Yiddish? You understand Yiddish?

GUMB: No, I'm afraid not. I know some words, though.

ABRAMS: Well, that's all right. When I came her I spoke Yiddish. Nothing else. Just Yiddish. I don't know-- They asked me, "Didn't you talk Russian?" I said, "No, no, because whole, most, most of the town was all, was all Jewish except in another part of the town, you know, there were, that's where the Christians lived, see what I mean. It was, they, they, it was one of those small towns, going back almost a hundred years, you know, see. And that town itself was, I don't know when, when it, but it's been there a long time.

GUMB: So, when you were living in this small town--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: --what did you hear about America? What did--

ABRAMS: I, no, as a youngster you don't hear very much. All I know is that they were talking about, about going there. People wanted to go there, see. And, of course, if anybody who went from there, naturally they thought that he has, he has a great opportunity now to go to, to go to the of America where everything is supposed to be, uh, what do they call it, gold on the sidewalks. But that wasn't true. When we got here, when my father took me, took us off-- I came here with my mother and sister. When he came to take us off from Ellis Island and, uh, and he had an, he had an apartment for us on Delancey Street. Are you acquainted with the east Side at all?

GUMB: Yeah. Right.

ABRAMS: Delancey Street.

GUMB: Yeah. I know about that.

ABRAMS: Yes. So he had an apartment for us on Delancey Street. And, uh, it was a, it was a two room apartment on the fifth floor. And people asked me, "What kind of apartment did your father have for you?" I used to, I told them, you know, facetiously, "He had a penthouse for us, on the top floor." And you know what? We walked, we had to walk, and we had to walk up and down the whole time, see what I mean? So that was, we lived, and by the way, the building is still there. You can imagine how old that building, it was an old building then, when we came, but the building is still on Delancey Street and it's at 122 Delancey Street. That's where, the building is still there but a bank, there was a bank in there, see. In later years, the bank took it over and they cut down the upper floors, they didn't want any tenants there, see. So that's, that's it.

GUMB: Yeah. How old were you when your father left for this country?

ABRAMS: He left, I was, well, nine and a half, about seven, seven, eight, something around there, about seven, yes. Seven.

GUMB: So, do you remember him leaving?

ABRAMS: Well, yes. Oh, yes. Well, I mean, as a youngster, you know, your father go away, naturally you say goodbye and so on and so forth. But, uh, uh--

GUMB: Did he have plans as to--

ABRAMS: What?

GUMB: Did he have plans as to what job--

ABRAMS: No. He didn't, no. He didn't, plans for what he was going to do there? No. He just came, hoping to find something to do. And he was, he became a tailor, that's all. See, he became a tailor and he was able to, you know, sew by hand, and so on and so forth. And that's how he, he earned whatever money he earned, and then he sent, uh, for us to come here, that's all.

GUMB: For a man to leave his family like that, he must have been pretty desperate.

ABRAMS: Well, look. He was a young man and to stay there and not do, not getting anywhere, at least he had enough courage to be able to get, to go away. See, that's what I mean. He decided there's no use in staying here, so he just went to America to see whether he couldn't do better for his family than by staying in the small town. You see, but, of course, all being, at that time I was a little bit of a boy, you see, and I didn't, a lot of things he didn't consult me, with whether he wants to go or not, see. He spoke to my mother. He said that' he's going away and that's it, see. So he went. They didn't, they didn't discuss matters like this while I was running around, you know what I mean.

GUMB: Do you remember hardship, uh--

ABRAMS: Do I remember what?

GUMB: Do you remember hardship, you know, hardship or poverty?

ABRAMS: Well, we were poor, yeah, poor people. Very poor. Yes. We, you know, just got along. They way it is, you

have, after he left for America he sent some money to my mother and she was able to do better than when he was there, because some of the money that he sent here was able to be used to buy things and get along, see. Then, of course, then I had an aunt living in the same town. You know, I used to go there, you see what I mean. But we got along. In fact, the fact that I'm here shows that, that it was all right, see. At least it was a good beginning for me. I can tell you that.

GUMB: So what did, uh, what did they say, what did your father say in his letters? Do you remember, uh, what his impressions were?

ABRAMS: No. Gee, when you're, if he wrote a letter to his wife, to my mother. I'm a youngster, she might have told me, she says, I've got a letter from, from your, from Pop, from Papa, and he's, he's sending some money, and he's doing this. But to remember what he said, couldn't imagine. Couldn't. But I can tell you that during the year that he was there he was working. He was a tailor. That's all. He was a tailor. He got in a shop. You know, in those years, shops and they, and they worked, and that's all there is to it as far as he was concerned, see. And as the

years went by it was, uh-- Naturally, as I grew up, as I came there, then when I, when I, when I came, when he took us off to, to Ellis Island, we went to live on Delancey Street and I immediately, soon as, soon as I, after a week or so I went to school, see. I went to grammar school. And the school, by the way, is Public School 160, and it's still there. I haven't seen it for a long time, but years ago I passed by that area. And, mind you, it was an old school then, and they still have the same building there. There was a walkup and-- And I graduated, and I graduated from grammar school. See, originally he wanted me to go to, did you ever hear of the Hebrew Educational Alliance on, on East Broadway? The Educational Alliance? It's a settlement house. See, he wanted me to go there, but I said to him. "What's the use of my going there? Down there they'll, they teach you in Yiddish. And if I want to get a job here, I got to be able to talk English." So he said, "Look," so he said, "You're right." So he sent me to public school, and there I graduated in 1904, from grammar school, and through the, through the luck of a, you know what a landsman is? A landsman is like as, like a good neighbor, put it that way. Somebody from the town who, who lived, who lived in the same place, in the same area that I lived,

see? And he, and he was, he was, he came also to America, you see? And, uh, so when, when I graduated from grammar school I was looking for a job, so I said to him, I said, "Do you know anybody that, where I can get a job?" So he said, "Wait, I think I'll have something for you." And his, his son-in-law, that is, his sister was married to a man who had a, who had a, basement store selling gas fixtures. You know gas fixtures and mantles, you know what that is? You see, you wouldn't, you see, this has to do with, when I came to this country, electricity was just beginning to, was just beginning to, to, bringing to come in only certain areas. Otherwise we had gas. Just plain gas, where we had to drop in a quarter in the meter in order to get the, to get the, to get the gas, you understand? And, and, a mantle, he was selling gas fixtures, but a mantle was some kind of a, some kind of a, like a, something that covered the light, and it gave more bright, see what I mean? It's like a, like a, you take a, you take, you put a bulb into something that's bright inside, and it makes it, and it gives you a brighter light.

See, I, I remember this, you see. And that's it. and I worked, stayed with, I stayed with man, and I worked with him. And, on and on. I mean, I mean--

GUMB: Okay, we'll go--

ABRAMS: The thing is, you want, see, you want my impression what Ellis Island was. I couldn't give you that, see, because I was only, you know, a little boy, and what, and I was probably hanging onto my mother's skirt or something, or hand, holding on, until we came here, that's all.

GUMB: Just, you know--

ABRAMS: You understand?

GUMB: Yeah. Right. Well, uh, in 1899--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: --when, uh, you came over here, do you remember if your, did your father send your mother money, or a ticket, or--

ABRAMS: Yes. I just told you, yes. That's why he came to America, to earn some money so he could send tickets so we could come here.

GUMB: Oh. So he sent tickets.

ABRAMS: Oh, yes, yes. Tickets. You know, uh, they called it, they used to call it shifcanten, or whatever. They were tickets, that's it, tickets. You know, passage, passage, uh, cards. Like you get a, you buy an airplane tickets. This was a, this was ticket for the ship, to be able to get on the ship. and that's it.

GUMB: Do you remember having to say goodbye to people in your village?

ABRAMS: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. My grandmother didn't want me to go. She said, "If you go to America," see what I mean, "you will sort of lose some of the Jewishness." You know, at that time, they spoke nothing else but Yiddish and naturally, and she-- So I said, "Well," I said, "Grandma," I said, "My father sent for us. My mother and my sister, we're all going. I'm going with them." And of course I can tell you right now that I'm glad that I went. (He laughs.) I'm glad that I went. And, of course, during the years, as the years went on, I can tell you one thing, that I came at a time in this country when it began

to develop. The first car that I saw over there was a Ford, see. A Ford car.

GUMB: The first car in Russia?

ABRAMS: No, no. Forget about Russia. All you saw in Russia was horses pulling the wagons, that's all. Talking about here. And, in fact, when I was in Russia, of course, as a youngster, you don't, I don't-- What could a boy of three years old, when I started to go to the school. So, you know, you just go and stay there and you, you listen to the rabbis teach you this and teach you that and do this and this, and then you go home. That's all you can-- It isn't like today where youngsters go out and they, no matter what age they are they take them in carriages and they, they see the world before them. But at that time it was altogether different.

GUMB: How did you get from, maybe, you described your trip to this country.

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: I'm wondering how you got from your small village.

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: How you left your small village?

ABRAMS: Well--

GUMB: Was it in a train, or--

ABRAMS: Yeah. Sure, sure. By train we went to the city of Slonim, see, Slonim. That was about, that was about fifty miles, maybe ,ore, see. It was, we had to go by train, see. Then we got there, we stayed with my, I stayed with my uncle, and then he out us on a train and we went to Antwerp. You heard of Antwerp? That's where the, uh, the ship left, from antwerp. You heard, Antwerp is in Belgium, I believe.

GUMB: Right.

ABRAMS: That's where the ship left, for America. Well, that's it. Once we got on the ship, well, of course, they asked me what kind of accommodations we had. So I used to tell them, people, talking , laughing, this is why. We had first class passage in the steerage, you understand. In

the steerage. That means they had more people on the ship than it was really even safe for it to take it. See what I mean? You know, they, that's the way it was in those years, anyhow, see.

GUMB: What family members were traveling together?

ABRAMS: Oh, yes, family members were traveling together, oh, yes, oh, yes. Each family. I had, when I went, my mother was there, my sister, and myself, see. We all stayed together, of course. But there were other people that we knew, and naturally you talked to them and you, "Where are you going?" and so on. It's, you know, they're all together, and it was all right. It took a long time to get here, but it didn't matter. We got here, that's all. That's the thing. Just like everything else, when you go away from a place where you're, where you want to go, you want to go away because of conditions, because you want to better yourself. So naturally they were talking, "This one went to her aunt, this one went to her sister, this one went to somebody else." and when they come through, when they came to Ellis Island, they were all there to take them home, you see. And, of course, the, what, what the, what

impression I have of Ellis Island, I could not tell you much. All I know is that we came in there, we had to sit down and wait until they called us, and then when they called us they want, they asked me questions, where was I born, I gave them the, I gave them the dates in Yiddish and they had a, they translated and they had a, what do you call it? They had a, from Yiddish they had it in English, so the man at the desk can put down the right, the right, the right dates when I was born. And that's the way it was.

GUMB: You remember answering questions?

ABRAMS: What's that?

GUMB: You remember answering questions?

ABRAMS: Well, I, he never asked us. I mean, not me. See, he asked my father and my mother because they were, you know. But as far as asking me anything-- When I was in Ellis Island I was just staying near my mother, waiting for my father to, to go through the formalities of being admitted, of admitting us. Of course, he was here already.

Admitting us to the United States. and then we, then we took a horse, a horse and carriage, or whatever was waiting. You know, we had to cross the, cross the bay, because Ellis Island was far out. And once we got to the Battery, I don't know what it was then. Of course, then it was, a lot of horses and carriages were there. And he hired a horse and carriage and took us home, that's all. I remember riding down Broadway. In those days we had signs lit with gas. And, you know, for me it was a novelty, you know what I mean. Here I'm coming to-- (He laughs.) Here I was, in a town the size of a peanut, and here all of a sudden I come to a, to a metropolis, with all people, with all the noise and all the excitement. And the greatest thing, the greatest of it was when we, we arrived here December 31, which was New Year's Eve, And all the excitement and the noise and the-- It was, it was something of a, well, put yourself in, put yourself in the place of a youngster on nine and a half years old. And all of a sudden everything-- Down there it's quiet, nothing there, and all of a sudden you come into a place where the, where the people, especially on New Year's Eve, where they, you know, they yell and they, and they do all kinds of, whatever they do on New Year's Eve. And in those days they

used to, they used to have firecrackers and noise and all that. You can remember that, you see.

GUMB: It wasn't only New Year's Eve, it was--

ABRAMS: Huh?

GUMB: It wasn't only New Year's Eve, it was a new millennium--

ABRAMS: Yes. Of course. Of course, see, I don't know that. All I know is there was a lot of noise and a lot of excitement. Of course, as, as I got older I, my father explained to me what it was, that it was New Year's Eve and also the, the 19th, the 18th century past, we're in, on, we're in the 19th century and on the way to the 20th. See, and how long, how far away are we now from the 20th? Fourteen years we'll be there, see? So, that's it. But I also want to tell you that during that year, President McKinley, you remember that he was, President McKinley was elected president with Theodore Roosevelt as his vice-president. And a year later, I remember that, that he was killed, shot, he was assassinated in Buffalo. And, of course, that was, at first, it was a lot of excitement

then. See, I was, you know, how Theodore Roosevelt took over his job, he took over, I mean, he became, he took over the presidency. And then, and then, uh, in 1904 he was elected president on his own. I don't know if you can-- This you have to, you (?) hear that, but it's written in the book, in the history of the United States, you can read all of it. He was, he became president, and then he started to, he wanted to make some reforms in the United States. At that time the, the railroad industry was, was in the hands of only a very few people, see. Very few people. It was like a, like the, something like the, like when Rockefeller had the oil company. One, he controlled all the companies, and then he was ordered by the courts to, to break it up, see. At that time, that's what Theodore Roosevelt wanted, the railroad monopoly. That's a monopoly, to break it up, so that it can be free, freer, a freer, a freer way of handling things. And by the way, and they warned him, they said, "If you insist upon us trying to, to break up our companies, we'll close down the railroads." And that's what he did. I suppose you don't know that in 1907 there was a panic here. Maybe, but it's in history. The 1907 panic was the time when the railroads shut down and people were just walking the streets trying

to find work. But to, but that's, that ended and, of course, uh--

GUMB: Okay, all right.

ABRAMS: Of course, things began to get better. And that's, that's what I was involved in because this man, who I worked, he was in the, I said, he had a stand with tools. And the, the job that I got through his brother-in-law was to stand, to stay near the stand and collect the money when a man comes in and buys a tool, see. He takes a tool and gives me the money. That was my job, and I liked that because it was being outside, see. Otherwise I would have had to go and look for a job in a factory, which I didn't want, see. And, by the way, this particular, uh, place that he had was right across from the olds tombs. I don't know whether you, you probably, you wouldn't remember, but you know there was, there was the old tombs and they had there, and right next to it was the Supreme Court.

GUMB: Yeah, where the prison is.

ABRAMS: And in between there was the Bridge of Sighs.

GUMB: Yeah, the Bridge of Sighs.

ABRAMS: You must have read about it, see. It must be there, because at that time, already, I was-- Fourteen years when I got the job, fifteen years. And during that period, you probably heard about the, about the, about Harry Thaw shooting the great architect Stanford White. You probably heard of that. I'm sure you must have. Well, so you see, I had, so at that time, being that I was right across the tombs, I had a front row seat where I could see Mrs. Thaw, the mother of Harry Thaw, drive up with her, with Harry Thaw's wife, Evelyn Elizabeth Thaw, coming out of a, in an electric car. That's what they had then, an electric car with a, with a man sitting up in the back and a footman and all that. (He laughs.) Well, that's it. And I saw all those things. You see, these things I remember because they were of great interest to me to see what was going on. And I can remember to this very day just what happened in those days, see. You know, Stanford White was a great architect. And they were, they were, they were, the old Madison Square Garden. Do you know where that was? On Madison Avenue, near 26th Street. And

the, and Stanford White was probably, was probably talking to his wife, or whatever he was doing, and he shot him for, he became jealous, or something of that kind, I suppose. That's another story altogether. But I'm just telling you, these things I've known. That's how I happened to be there, to see these things. And naturally, when you're right there across, across the tombs, people come in, they tell you just what happened. You see, I wouldn't have known it, but he told me, that man is in there because he shot Stanford White because he tried to make, to talk to his wife, or something, whatever it was.

GUMB: Okay. You talked about, you mentioned the steerage--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: --uh, in the voyage over.

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: What was that like? What was? What was--

ABRAMS: Was what?

GUMB: What were the accommodations like in steerage?

GUMB: Well, just the, uh, they weren't very good. You know, you had beds down there, you used to sleep down there. Children slept on the beds, and so on and so on. I mean, they, they were, there wasn't an open space. But it was, there were partitions in between, you see what I mean. It wasn't like having a separate room with a, with a nice couch, a nice bed, and some of the rooms that you have either a shower or a bath. It was all like a, there were showers there, but for, for everybody. If you want a shower, you had to wait till the, till one gets through, then you go in, then the next one went in. It wasn't the best kind of traveling, I can tell you right now. But for me, as a youngster, it didn't make a bit of difference. I got up and I washed myself and did whatever I can. But I do remember that, of course, the older people that, uh, they had, they had curtains in between and they used to sleep together and so on and so forth. It wasn't the best kind of travel. I can tell you. I traveled on, since then, I traveled better places, in better-- (He laughs.)

GUMB: Okay.

ABRAMS: Go ahead.

GUMB: This is the end of Side One.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: This is the beginning of Side Two. Okay, uh, Mr. Abrams,
we were talking about steerage.

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: Do you remember anything about the food, what kind of food
you had to eat?

ABRAMS: (He laughs.) Well, to be honest with you, I don't
remember. All I know is that whatever they gave us
to eat was good. I mean, the food was all right,
everything was all right. I mean, I can assure you, I can
assure you one thing, that we didn't get any steaks or

anything else of that kind. It was food, you know, just that, we had breakfast, probably. Whatever it was. I don't even remember what they gave us for breakfast, to be honest with you. Nor for lunch or for dinner. All I know is when breakfast time came, we all went, we stand up around a big table and my mother and my sister was all there, they gave a plate of this and some of this and some of that, you see. This, to remember what I ate. But I can tell you one thing, whatever I ate must have been good, because I'm here. Otherwise, if it wasn't good, I wouldn't be here, you see.

GUMB: Right.

ABRAMS: That's, that's, that's the idea. No, it wasn't, it wasn't a case where you went on a ship where children would play together, this and that kind. No. It was, you know, it was, you were able to go up on deck. I don't even remember that, to be honest with you.

GUMB: Right.

ABRAMS: You see, it's hard to remember when, when so many people

are in, are in one area, see what I mean. They had, they had better accommodations higher up, but it probably cost more money. See, that's the idea.

GUMB: Right. What, do you remember anything about what the family was carrying with it? What kind of possessions you had?

ABRAMS: Well, just, we had nothing of any great value. Here's a case of bringing mementos from the old country, or beautiful clothes, or anything of that kind. It was all, it is what we call-- We were poor people, and our possessions didn't amount to very much, I can tell you that right now, they didn't. But we had, you know, we had our clothes we wore. I had whatever I wore, whatever my mother wore, or my sister. You know, we went. But nothing, nothing of any great value. You're talking about anything of great value no, nothing.

GUMB: Special mementos, anything that you--

ABRAMS: What's that?

GUMB: Any kind of special mementos that your mother would bring?

ABRAMS: Well, I couldn't, well, see, I personally don't remember anything special that we brought from the other side. I don't remember at all. Because we, we were, as I said, we were in a small town and there was nothing that you can accumulate, or do anything of that kind. And going away at the age that I did where, where my, my knowledge of anything, of being great or valuable, or anything, something that, that you want to hold on, I don't remember. I don't remember.

GUMB: As the, uh, ship was approaching land--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: Do you remember that? Do you remember--

ABRAMS: Oh, yes. We went out, everybody went outside to see, especially when you passed the Statue of Liberty. Everybody went out to, to see it, you see what I mean. I went out, too, but what it was I couldn't, I don't think I was able to, get, I was able to see it. You know, the people were all, all, I was a little bit of a fellow, and here the people are all standing, they're coming into the country, there's the country, and her you

are. This, you know, you know, happy to see that they're, that they're approaching the land that they wanted to go to. And, of course, everybody's, you know, full of, full of satisfaction, full of joy. You know, I mean, you can, you can hear it, you see what I mean. But, you see, my hearing of it is different than a man who's older. As a boy, especially being brought up in a small town, your, your ability to understand things is not as good as it is today, not as good as it is for children who are hear. I don't mean today. I mean even fifty years ago, or sixty, seventy and so on. See what I mean.

GUMB: Right.

ABRAMS: It wasn't like, like I have a great-granddaughter, this Susan, that you'll read in this paper. Her, her, she has a little girl, she's eight years old, see. And by God, there isn't a thing she doesn't know, see what I mean, because she's, she's, she's living in a different world. She goes to a school that's a school. Even if I went to, even if I went to grammar school, it still was, wasn't what it is today. See what I mean. She goes to, it's different, you see what I mean. I don't mean now, even fifty years or forty years being in this country, once you get in here, you're, your entire outlook changes. You talk about-- I just want to give you an instance. You talk about airplanes. In those years they had comic books. I wish to God I saved one of them, you know. And on, on one of those comic books, the man that, who was the, who was the, whoever published it, he

showed, he showed on, on the cover page, a flying machine. I'll never forget that. Somehow that's always in my mind. He showed a picture of a flying machine that, similar to what you see in, in the, on the airplanes today. A long, that man had vision that someday there's going to be flying machines.

GUMB: When was this?

ABRAMS: Huh?

GUMB: When did you see this comic book?

ABRAMS: When I came to this country. Then I began to read, to learn English. When I came here I couldn't read a word of English. But I went to grammar school and, you know, if you, especially a youngster who wants to learn, and wants to listen. And then, of course, you learn English, and you're able to read well and so on and so on and so on.

GUMB: How much time do you think you spent on Ellis Island? How much time in total?

ABRAMS: Well, well, maybe, I couldn't tell you. It was a good part

of the day, I can tell you that. We arrived there in the morning and-- Don't forget, we weren't the only people, see. There were an awful lot of people. By the time we got out of there it was dusk already. You see, because the reason I remember that, as I told you, as I rode down Broadway, there were, the signs were lit with some, with gas lights, you know what I mean. So that means we spent there the whole day. The whole day. We got there in the morning. I mean, I don't know what time in the morning. It was in the morning. And you had to wait and wait and, of course, you know, each person has to, takes time, and I don't know how many people they had taking care of them, but to me it didn't make a difference because I was sitting on a bench and I sat. (He laughs.) Maybe I walked around a little bit and came back and sat down again. It was up to my father to give them all the information necessary. They didn't ask me how old I was or anything. They asked my father, "How old is your son?" And he told them, born on this and this date, nine and half years old. That's all. So my recollections of Ellis Island, as a whole, would be very limited because what did I do? I came over here with hundreds of people and I stood in line. I went up, I sat down, as a youngster. I was

tired of standing. I sat down, and that's all. You see, when a person comes to Ellis Island who was, say, fifteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, he gets, he, his impression of what's going on would be better than mine, see what I mean? Because, as I said, at my age, I, to me it was all, it was all new. It was, it was wonderful. It was something that I haven't seen at no time. When, over in, in the town that I was born, you saw the same people all the time, you see. Here you saw so many of them, you see what I mean. It' shard to express what feeling I had at that time. All I know is that I was walking around and sitting down and then finally my father said, "We're finished. Come on, let's go home." So that's it. From then on, of course, from then on it was a different story.

GUMB: Yeah. Do you remember anything about checking, checking you, doctors checking you, or any kind of medical exam?

ABRAMS: Well, the-- I'm sure, I'm sure they must have examined me, see. But to remember explicitly, I could never remember. There's no question in my mind. They wouldn't admit anybody here without examining them, see. Now, see, I don't remember that because for some reason or other they

probably got a hold of me and looked at me and probably, whatever they did, they probably saw right away that I was a youngster with bright eyes, with eyes, with a head of hair and with hands and they said, "Okay, go ahead." That's all. See, if I was sick, then it would be a different story. Then you'd be, of course, then you'd have to wait until you're examined and so on. But I was well. I was a very healthy boy, that's all. The proof of the pudding is that I'm here, you see. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. If I wasn't healthy when I was young, you surely don't get healthy when you get older. You realize, you know that, see. And you know how old I am, don't you now?

GUMB: Right. Ninety--

ABRAMS: 96. This July 4th I'll be 96. So that's, so that's, well, that's a long time to be in this world, you see. And naturally I can tell you now that from the very beginning, when we arrived here, I saw almost everything, how the world advanced in every field, in every science, in every activity, in, no matter what it is. In the years when the little radio came out. In my home, at that time, that was in the early years. I thing we had, no, that was,

yeah, we had a, some sort of a, first it was this little crystal set, and then they had something with a horn. But the years went on and on, you see what I mean. And everything is developed and developed and developed. And, of course, at any rate, the years went, and here they are. They were all great years. But the idea is, for people like you, a lot of these things is ready made for you, see? You're hear-- How old are you?

GUMB: Thirty.

ABRAMS: Thirty. Well, thirty years old, you were born, you had almost everything. You didn't have, probably, computers. That's one thing, that's another thing, but otherwise you almost had everything that you, that you want. Everything. I mean, by how much you have, I mean absolutely everything, you see what I mean. You didn't have any of those, those, uh, those flying, what do you call those, uh, shuttles going to the moon. I think thirty years ago they were just beginning to develop it, I think. And why the devil they were in such a rush to get up to the moon, I couldn't see even yet why they couldn't have waited a little longer. Everything, people want to do everything right away, you know. The reason I mention that, about this great catastrophe that happened recently. You know, that was, that was a terrible, terrible thing.

GUMB: Do you remember any customs that you mother and father brought from Russia and that your family continued to, uh--

ABRAMS: No, there wasn't anything special. There wasn't anything special in customs. I mean, you know, there was Shabbas. You know, Shabbas. We had Shabbas, and we went shopping. When Saturday came it was, everything changed. And there was, you know the customs, you put the nice things on the table and you bring out your nice dishes and you have your candles lit on the table and your, and you serve a nice, a nice dinner, you know what I mean. That's a custom, that's all. Nothing. You go to Shul, synagogue, before, then you come home and then that's the way it is. I mean, there wasn't anything special, special customs that, that, uh, that isn't, that isn't carried on even today. There are plenty of people that do the same thing today. Saturday is Saturday, see.

GUMB: So you moved in, your first, uh, home--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: --in the new land was the five story--

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: --house on Delancey Street?

ABRAMS: That's right.

GUMB: Uh, how did that, I mean, it must have been a big shock for a boy coming from a village--

ABRAMS: Of course. No question about it. It was, indeed, it was, it was unbelievable, of course. For me, for a youngster, especially, walking down the stairs didn't mean a damn thing. Even, my father wasn't, didn't like the idea, but that's, that's all they were able to get then, you know what I mean. Of course, it's quite, like nigh and day. You're, you go here, you go there. Over there it was altogether different. It was absolutely different. But, but as you, as you keep on, uh, living, as you keep on going you, you still wonder how, how these things developed, you see what I mean. How things began to develop, begin to develop, and on and on and on. Naturally

it was, it was exciting, it was of great interest to me as a boy because, you know, as a boy, when I was fourteen years old you already knew things, you see what I mean. And you realize that you, that you're living, that, if I would have been in Russia, I wouldn't have seen any of these things here, see. If I would have been way behind yet. Over there you, you don't, you fall in line with the things that were there, that were available at that time, you see.

GUMB: How, how long did it take for you to feel like an American?

ABRAMS: How long?

GUMB: When did you start feeling like an American?

ABRAMS: That's an answer which I cannot tell you. All I know is I can tell you that when I came to this country that's it. This is this country. I felt like I'm home because I've got things here that I didn't get over there. You see, I couldn't get to where I got here, over there, see. Although I had to sell newspapers after school to earn a few pennies, or whatever you earn, but that was part of

the, part of life at that time, see. But you were free to do what you want. It was entirely, it was, it was entirely different. It's hard to explain, for me to explain to you how I felt when I was a youngster. When I was, when I was ten years old, ten and a half or eleven, I had, I had to go and sell newspapers in the afternoon so that I can, so I can give a few dollars, a few pennies, or whatever I made at that time, to my mother. And when I started to work, two dollars a week. And that's what I wanted to tell you.

With the two dollars, bought an awful lot of stuff, you see, a lot of stuff. I used to go out with a friend to, you know, go out and have a, to go out and have a good time. I used to say to a good friend of mine, I used to tell him, "Look, look--" One of my friends was called Martin Sherwin. I says, "Martin, I got ten cents. Come on, let's take a walk around." What do you thing we got for ten cents? Two bananas for a penny, two apples for a penny, a glass of soda for a penny. I mean, you, you spend a day with ten cents. That's the idea of these olden times, of these olden days, for people like us. Of course, there were people, rich people in those days too, you know.

All the (?). As far as, as far as I personally was concerned I never had very much when I was young, as a

youngster. But I, but it was all right. And so I was satisfied. Of course, I was able, I was able to get as much as the next youngster got in my area because I had a lot of, a lot of people came from the same town from where I lived, see. One of them came, we came in, in 1899. Some came a few months later then-- A lot of them came from my town. And they used to live around the same, the same street that I lived on. Across the street or here or there, a block away, or two blocks away. And I used to know them, see.

GUMB: Can you, can you, when you first arrived in the Lower East Side, can you tell us what Delancey Street looked like, what the scene was like?

ABRAMS: Well, how can I, how can I tell you? I couldn't tell you. It was streets full of people, it was people walking on, the sidewalks weren't even good sidewalks at that time. They had to make new ones, they had to make it. But Delancey Street was a, a street for business. Had stores there all the time. That's, had down the end. And as the years went by they fixed everything up, and then they built a, uh, then they had the, the horse cars running on

Delancey Street, see. It was right in the middle of the street. And then, when the horse car was finally abandoned, and they gave it up, they made it sort of like a walk for people, which is still there. You know, in the middle of the street. It's still there. I think it's still there, I'm not sure now. Maybe it isn't. I don't know. But I think it is. I think it is still there, because it was a very wide street. They purposely did it that way. But it was nice. It was one of the main streets at that time. See, Delancey Street was one of the main streets. The next one was, was a good shopping street, was Grand Street. In between was Broome Street which was not, which was more residential, see. They had a store here and there but they, t but the stores-- On Delancey Street was every store had a business, from beginning to end, and the same thing was on Grand Street also, stores. And it's, it's, it's, as it kept on growing up, naturally, you became older and you, and you, and you saw things a little different than they were a couple of years before and, and, then, of course, and then we moved away from there. We didn't live there all the time, see. We used to live, we moved to Broome Street, to Norfolk. You know, we moved around, that's all. But it was, it's hard to, uh, describe

exactly just how it was. But you, you simply, we moved from, finally we moved to Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, see, and we lived there for some time. The fact is, we lived a long, I lived a long time over there.

GUMB: When did you become a citizen?

ABRAMS: Uh, I'm just trying to think now. Actually, you see, I, you see, that part, that was, you see, I had, I had, I can give you the date. I got--about 19, 1914 or 1915, something like that. '16. Around that age. Because if my father would have been a citizen, then I wouldn't have had to take any papers. see, then I would have been a citizen, see, even though I wasn't born here, see. That's what I understood. But my father didn't become a citizen until, until Lord knows how much later, you see. And then, of course, I--

GUMB: Why did you become a citizen early?

ABRAMS: Why should I become a citizen? Well, because I wanted to be a citizen of the United States, that's all. For a while I didn't have anything special, uh, special

things to do. But when it came to vote, you cannot vote if you're not a citizen, you see what I mean? So I did, uh, actually, I did, uh, when it came, what year was I able to, twenty-one, that's what I think it was, twenty-one. Now it's eighteen, isn't it, or nineteen?

GUMB: Yeah. I think so, yeah.

ABRAMS: Well, at that time it was twenty-one years old. Now, when I reached that age, and I and I, probably, at that time, just maybe a year or so before, people went to vote, and I says, why don't even the, why don't I go to vote. Well, of course, you can't unless-- So then I, but I took, I think, I think my papers were taken out maybe a year or so before. Of course, if you want the exact date I can find it for you here.

GUMB: Okay. Well, yeah. Just the--

ABRAMS: That isn't necessary, but I'm just telling you. I had to go to the, to get my citizen papers. I got them, that's all. They ask you questions, can you write, can you read, can you do this, can you do this. Well fortunately

for me I was able to read and write. (He laughs.) And very well, too. So that's it.

GUMB: Okay. Did it feel different being a citizen? Did you--

ABRAMS: Did I feel different? Of course. Naturally, you go to the polls and you meet your neighbors, who were older than I was, and they were citizens, and I come down there, naturally it's, I think it's a great privilege to be one, I can tell you right now. A lot of people don't take advantage of it. I mean, they can't do much. But their vote counts. If they go in, if they feel a man isn't the right type of man for, for what he's supposed to do, he should use his, his vote to, to vote for him or against him, whatever the case may be. And there are thousands that don't care. And that's, even my daughter and I, we talk about it. We say why, why shouldn't they take advantage of it. Instead of saying this is no good and this is no good, you can, if you can put a man in who will, who will do things better for you, why don't you go vote for him? Then some say, well, it doesn't make a bit of difference if he gets in or doesn't get in, things will be the same. But that is not the way to feel, it's not the

way to feel.

GUMB: You mentioned going to the public school.

ABRAMS: Huh?

GUMB: You mentioned going to the public school when you first arrived in the Lower East Side.

ABRAMS: Yes.

GUMB: Was there some kind of special class for immigrants?

ABRAMS: No. No, no, no. I don't remember any special classes. There might be a class to begin where maybe the, maybe, after all is said and done, the teacher would talk to me in English right away. There might have been a class where, where you get started with the, you get a, you know, you get a, to begin, you know. They might talk Yiddish, and then translate it into English. And little by little you catch on, and so you get, you have to write things and you have to, you have to, you got to write, and you've got to read. And gradually you, you, that's part of, that's the teacher's job, see, to teach me. And, uh, and I did, you see. And I did, uh, I did it as good as any, any boy that went there. I can tell you that. I did as well as

I could. And, of course, I wanted to, see, I wanted to learn English, see. That's why I wouldn't go to that Educational Alliance, because I knew they spoke more Yiddish than English. And here, once I, once, it was better. I did the right thing for myself, I can tell you that. Better that way.

GUMB: Do you have any idea of what would have happened to you if you'd stayed in Russia?

ABRAMS: (He laughs.) Well, I can tell you one thing. Whatever would have happened to me wouldn't have been very good. The first thing, I would have to go in the Army. That's number one. You know, they take boys down there when they're about twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old. They're conscripted to go in the army. They don't, they don't make them do things right away, you know what I mean, but they, they, they enroll you and you've got to come there. But I didn't, I didn't, uh, see, I was too young, see, in for any problem, see. So I don't know. But, uh, if I would stay in Russia I don't know. I couldn't really tell you what would have happened. But one thing I can tell you now, I'm glad that I didn't, regardless of what I would have been. See, it's, the opportunity is there, but very limited compared to here, see. So, naturally, this is

a good. That was one good thing my father did is to come here, that's all. What would have happened to us in Russia? This, nobody knows. I can tell you right, nobody knows what would have happened. Nobody knows. And there are a lot of people that, who stayed on there, stayed on there. And the time came when you haven't even heard from them. So it was, uh, well-- That's the way it is. But, uh, all in all, I can say to you that america treated me very well. No complaints whatsoever. And the fact is, the opportunities here are so great that if anybody doesn't take advantage of them it's their own fault, that's all. Here you have great opportunities. You've got to, and you've got to, you can't sit on a chair and wait for it to come to you. You've got to go and do it that's all. That's all. The same thing happened to me when I was working for this man. I worked for him for seventeen and a half years, you see. And the time came when my, I had, I was married in 19, I told you, when I was twenty-four years old. This was-- Twenty-four. Year, 1914. That's right. 1914. And then my family began to grow. I needed, I wanted more money. And he thought he was paying me, paying me enough and I thought no. So, what did I do? I left him, and I went into business for myself, see. That was

what, that's what I did in 1922, see. Because I, I felt that I. see, the advantages-- I said, if I want to give my children the advantage which America is able to give them, you've got to have something to, something to have it. See, you've got to, you've got to, I know what I went through, see. But if I can improve the quality of living of my children, that was my job to do. That's exactly what I did. And this, this, this Dr. Herbert Abrams, he's the youngest, and he's already sixty-five. Then I have another son, Mason. You might have heard, Mason, he's in, you can see, did you ever see the Lou Grant Show at any time?

GUMB: Uh, yeah.

ABRAMS: Ever hear of it?

GUMB: Yeah, sure.

ABRAMS: That was about, you know, it ran for five years and then they took it away.

GUMB: Right.

ABRAMS: Well, he was, he was, he was in that show.

GUMB: Oh, really?

ABRAMS: Yeah. He was the, if you remember, do you remember any of the characters at all? If you have any recollection?

GUMB: Not really.

ABRAMS: No. Well, anyhow, if you watch it once or twice it doesn't make any difference, but there was, Ed Asner was the managing editor. No, he was the editor, not the managing editor. My son was the managing editor. And you could see him walk around. Mason goes under the name of Mason Adams. And you can probably see, you can see him on TV, you can see him and hear him, you can hear his commercials on the air, too, see. He was--

GUMB: This is the end of the interview with Mr. Morris Abrams.