

AKRF-46

ELIZABETH REPSHIS

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INTERVIEWER: EDWARD APPLEBOME

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LITHUANIA, 1913

AGE 16

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome, and I'm speaking with Mrs. Elizabeth Repshis on Friday, October 11, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 10:55 in the morning. We are about to interview Mrs. Repshis about her immigration experience from Lithuania in 1913. Mrs. Repshis, where and when were you born?

REPSHIS: I was born in Lithuania.

APPLEBOME: In what year?

REPSHIS: Oh, in 1980, no, 1896.

APPLEBOME: 1896. And what do you remember about your childhood

in Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Oh, I remember a lot of things. I don't know if I have to, you just ask which part I should tell you, from what age, because I, many things I remember when my mother told me, you know. When I was born, I was born in the, in a village . . .

APPLEBOME: And the name of the village was . . .

REPSHIS: It was Ledaggi [ph]. And, uh, my daytime, in the wintertime, twelve o'clock in the daytime. And my father was at a funeral singing and my mother was all alone and she, uh, banged the window to some passerby to go to the funeral and tell to my father that his wife is giving birth. So, uh, when she went there, he was, we was singers, so was singing behind the table, so she motioned to come to come, and when he came to her, you know, she said, "Go home as fast as you can. Your wife is ready to give birth." So when he came home there was no midwife.

Everybody from the village was at the funeral. So this old lady that called him up, she was almost, oh, I think she was about ninety years old, so he asked her to help him out. So both of them, they

handled me out, they, that's the time I was born, on the coldest day of December 1921 [sic].

APPLEBOME: Was it . . .

REPSHIS: And, uh . . .

APPLEBOME: Was this your mother's first child?

REPSHIS: That was, uh, I was the first child.

APPLEBOME: You men 1896, right?

REPSHIS: 1896.

APPLEBOME: What did your father do for a living?

REPSHIS: Oh, he did a lot of things, you know. And, on a farm, because all those forty families of the Ledaggi village . . .

APPLEBOME: There were forty families in the village.

REPSHIS: Yeah, the forty families, only, and the city was nine miles away. They had land, like farmers, but not only one piece, in stripes, you know, those land. And then he used to help them get the work over there, all other things, you know, on the farm. And, eh, my father himself had only one, I think

you would call, about two acres or three acres land, so where he used to plant, uh, vegetables. That, eh, was not enough to support, uh, me and, of course, the, later on my brother and my sister was born. So um, he had to go, in the wintertime he had to go in the woods to chop the woods for a lot of people and for himself, and in summertime work on the farm. The pay was very little. Anything else you want to know?

APPLEBOME: Um, can you tell me a little bit else about what life was like in the town. Did you go to school there?

REPSHIS: No. There was, oh, when I grew up, there was, uh, no school, nobody from our village went to school. Maybe some of them before I grew up, you know. But, um, when I was about, um, oh, seven years old I wanna read, you know, like I used to. Of course, my mother knew how to read, and father, and they taught me how to read.

APPLEBOME: How had they learned?

REPSHIS: Oh, they just learned from the book where they, I don't know how you call the book that goes to

church, takes to church, you know, this, um, when you go to church, you know, you carry a book over there.

APPLEBOME: A prayer book or a hymn book?

REPSHIS: Prayer book. Yeah, that's right. I'm sorry, you have to correct me. And, um, so, um, they learn, you know, their parents taught, I think, but they, nobody taught them how to write because there was no school for nobody, you know. Then, um, there was no school for me. Oh, yeah, there was a school in the city, about nine miles . . .

APPLEBOME: What was the name of that city?

REPSHIS: Pandelys. That's our, that we go to church, and we belong to that city. So, um, then, uh, you have to pay, and everything was under the Russian government. Lithuania belonged, that time, to the Russian government. So, uh, we had to pay, that my father had no money to pay. And then in the wintertime my mother had no horses, my father had no horses, horse, you know, nor anything, he has, he used to walk nine miles to the church. And when I grew up, we were a bit older, I used to walk too,

you know. So, uh, in the wintertime there was a lot of snow, nobody cleaning up roads, so, uh, we just can't go to the city to the school. And my father said, my mother want me to be educated, you know, to read and write, you know, but my father said, "Well, she's not going to be professor. She's not going be writing or anything. She don't need to learn how to write. She better learn how to be a seamstress." He was trying to get men to teach me how to sew the clothes, you know, to make money.

APPLEBOME: Did they send your brother to school?

REPSHIS: (she laughs) No, they didn't, I didn't go, because I didn't want to be seamstress . . .

APPLEBOME: But what about your brother? Did they ask him to go to school?

REPSHIS: Oh, my brother was only five years old as I remember, I left him as I was going to United States and before he was not even born, you know that. So, um, then, uh, then to learn how to write I just asked one of the girl that I knew from neighbors, you know, that lived on the bigger farm, and she used to come and be like a maid in some, our

village, owners, so, uh, to write a song, so I could look at the letters and learn how to write. So she did, and she gave me some papers, and I was keep copying and copying that, everything on the little lines on the . . .

APPLEBOME: What language was this in?

REPSHIS: Lithuanian language. Lithuanian. So, then, I get short of paper, so my mother looked at the father's papers that he had in the box, big box, and she saw there were empty papers so she, um, clipped it off, you know, those empty, with the names of something, and she gave to me and I kept writing. And my father saw me one day on the table that I was writing on his document papers, the name was document and the stamps was document, she didn't know the difference, you know. So she, he almost killed my mother, you know. He was so mad because he said, "You spoiled my documents," you know. Because that piece of land, you know, that he had, you know, was documented, you know. So then some woman came up from outside and saw me writing and she said to my father she is doing very well, you better get the paper for her, you know, and

everything. So, um, then, of course, he didn't listen to her, so he said take all those things where you brought them, ink and pen and everything, she brought them from the rich family where she used to go and work once in a while. So, um, then I was crying, you know. So she stood outside and watched the window if I persuade my father forgive. So he was laying on the bed and I went and I kissed his feet. (she laughs) You know, so he could let me read. So he said, "Okay, call the mother back." So I call up my mother, you know, bang the window, you know, I says, "Mother, come back." I could bring the ink and bottle and pen and everything. So she brought them. And then he went to the city and brought me paper, you know, bought paper, and then I kept writing. But nobody show me grammar, nor anything, so I came to the United States like this, not knowing how to read good, not knowing how to write good.

APPLEBOME: Why was it that you didn't want to be a seamstress?

REPSHIS: Oh, I don't know. That was silly things, you know.

I just didn't like anything to do sitting all the time, you know, so.

APPLEBOME: Were other women in the village seamstresses?

REPSHIS: Oh, no, there was a man seamstress, he used to travel from village to village, you know, and he stayed in one house for a while, then he sews everything, then he goes on another house and sews anything, everything, you know. So, uh, I didn't want to do that job.

APPLEBOME: So you decided that you didn't want to stay in Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Oh, I decided, uh, when I was about, uh, see, uh, nineteen, when I was thirteen already I went to that rich family to take care of a sick daughter, you know, to keep her company and do a lot of work over there.

APPLEBOME: This was a family in your village?

REPSHIS: In my village. Yeah, that was, kind of rich, where your children, I don't know how they get education, but they were educated, you know, boys and girls, boy and, he was a very high class carpenter and father, mother didn't know how to write, but the daughters, two daughters, one was sick, then, I had

to do a lot of work over there. Used to, in the summertime, for one year they paid me thirteen dollars a month, I mean a year, and food and clothes.

APPLEBOME: And you lived in the house?

REPSHIS: And I lived in the house, for one year. And then, of course, in the summertime I took care of the, used to milk their seven cows, feed about four pigs, you know, make food for them, and then take care the chickens, you know, about twelve chickens and, um, catch them all and see when they're gonna lay the egg, or not egg, or many eggs, in every day, they lay, you know, in certain chickens. And then in the spring I had work on the yard, in the garden, to plant those beets and all kind of vegetables.

APPLEBOME: Did you, did they give you your own bedroom?

REPSHIS: No. I used to sleep on the stove, in the corner of the stove.

APPLEBOME: And what about the meals? Did you eat with them?

REPSHIS: Oh, the meals, I used to eat with them, you know.

APPLEBOME: With the family.

REPSHIS: They were kind of progressive. They, the village people, the other families used to call them socialists, so they used to get, um, magazines and newspapers from the United States. I used to read already. And then, of course, from Russian, Leningrad, they used to read about the government and about certain people when they were persecuted by the czar, and they, money, my mother and father, on Sundays, they used to pray, twelve o'clock Sunday, they won't do any work, but used to pray, twelve o'clock. But they never pray. So I liked it. I didn't have to pray. I used to write. I said that's my praying, you know, because I didn't have to do any work on Sunday, and I'm not gonna pray and I'm just going to keep writing. That was the, and then, what did you ask me before?

APPLEBOME: You were going to tell us next, I think, what prompted you to leave Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Oh, then, of course, after I worked there, then I worked in another three families. See, because that time, I was telling you, when I was thirteen. Then

when I was fourteen, in another family, I did almost the same kind of job, and then the last job I had, far away, about three miles from my house, so, from my village, but over there the mother was sick and had twins. I had to take care of her, and I had to take care those twins. And the father and their grandfather used to go and, in the wintertime, in the woods, you know, to chop the wood., I had to feed those horses and chickens and cows and take care those two babies and the mother was laying in bed. I don't know why she was sick, you know, and prepare the meals. And I did everything, you know.

One baby was getting so sick, you know, that the father made the coffin and laid it on the table with the pillow, and we was waiting until he dies. But one morning when I was cooking the meals, he start to cry, so I pulled the . . . (break in tape)

APPLEBOME: Now you were telling us about the last job that you had had.

REPSHIS: Oh, the last job, about that baby, was very unusual, because the baby was dying, and then, what I said, I, um, when she cried, in about third day or something, and I pulled the bottle from the other

twin, you know, and gave to her, you know. Imagine the sanitation. So, uh, she drank all that little half the bottle of the milk. I says, I thought to my self, "My gosh, she gonna live." So I began to feed it and the baby lived.

APPLEBOME: Okay. Let's talk about now why you decided to come to the United States.

REPSHIS: Then, it was a hard job because, as I told you, I had to do everything. Mother was still in bed, you know. So, um, one day, on, um, (?), I was washing diapers and my mother came up and she said now the father decided to give you money and you could go to United States. I dropped everything over there on the (?) and left and I came home and I stay at home for about a month until all the papers were made, and then I, my father took me, uh, to the city, Kupiskis (?), where the trains comes. Pandelys, I told you, the trains don't come there. Kupiskis the trains used to come up.

APPLEBOME: Is this the first time you'd ever been to a big city?

REPSHIS: No. I never saw the train. (she laughs) That

was the first time I saw.

APPLEBOME: What had you heard about the United States before traveling?

REPSHIS: Oh, the United States, this, those people that I worked, those rich family, they were my mother's friends. So, uh, they used to have that magazines, all kind of magazines and newspapers.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember the names of any of the magazines?

REPSHIS: No, I don't remember. I just remember the, what happened in United States, in one newspaper they were writing about one priest was, uh, in love in United States with another, brothers, wife, so he killed his brother and then, uh, he had, uh, wife, of course, he was arrested. So I remember that because it sticked to my head, you know, reading.

APPLEBOME: Had any other people from your village left for the United States?

REPSHIS: Oh, the lot of them, my one of my mother's, um, uh, brother came to the United States. But he never used to write. But something happened that he came back, and then he told me how beautiful in United

States, he said, he was in the village, I used to walk with him. So, um, he said, uh, see, we are going through this mud, in United States you don't have to go in the mud. You walk, nice sidewalks, you know, and everything. So that's all he used to say. And the rest of the things I used to read in those, uh, newspapers and magazines.

APPLEBOME: Now you boarded the train, in what city were you heading to, to get a boat?

REPSHIS: Uh, that's Liepaja.

APPLEBOME: Was your father still traveling with you?

REPSHIS: Oh, no, that was the city that I took the train, was twenty-seven miles. So my father took me there and, uh, I had a little basket prepared already with my clothes and shoes and everything and, um, he, was kind of heavy so, uh, my father said, I said I carry, no, he said, "I'm gonna put, so he put on, uh, whatever you call over there, the, the, somewhere to weigh, and then he said, uh, "I am paying for it, they're gonna take care of you until you go to Liepaja, you know. You don't have to worry about that, you know." And that box was made

just like a basket, you know. I meant to look up in dictionary how you call it when they make those like . . .

APPLEBOME: Like a suitcase.

REPSHIS: Like suitcase, but it's made of, uh, the material like baskets, you know.

APPLEBOME: What else did you have besides clothes with you?

REPSHIS: I had two bottles of wine, homemade wine, blueberries, mother made two bottles, and about six, six, um, uh, cheeses, you know, those that they make on farms, dried cheese, you know. And, um, uh, my skirt was made by special, uh, dressmaker and, uh, blouse, pink blouse, and, uh, my father wants to buy me shoes, but I know he had no money much, so I said, "Father, don't buy the shoes, you know. I get shoes when I get to United States. And my shoes was made by my father. Each shoes weighed maybe about three pounds with the patches around and everything. But I didn't care. I thought to myself I just get to United States, I get what I want over there.

APPLEBOME: Why do you think your father had arranged for you to

leave?

REPSHIS: Well, my, my mother always want me to go, you know, somewhere, because there was no hope in that village that I, be progressive. So, uh, she used to hire some people that had already their daughters in the United States to persuade my father to give money to me and let me go. And finally he agreed. So that's why, it was the reason.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember what they said to you when you left?

REPSHIS: Oh, well, of course, they said, father cried, I never saw him cried, because my father was stout man, you know. His father was in the Russian Army for about forty years, in the queen's, you know, in the Russian Queen's Army, so he was only son and he was very good looking and stout but, um, he was kind of cruel, you know, strict, very strict. So, um, when I saw him crying I said, "Oh, my gosh, he likes me." You know, because, I thought to myself, because that's the first time, otherwise he was very strict with me. So, uh, that's, uh, my father. What else you wanna know?

APPLEBOME: We can talk now about the boat trip over to the

United States. You were traveling by yourself, do you remember the name of the boat?

REPSHIS: No, because even when I had to take my sister's papers I had a tough time to find out the name because it was a Russian name, everything in Russian.

APPLEBOME: What port did it leave from?

REPSHIS: Well, and in Lebava, see from Kupiskis that, that took about one hour or two hours to get to Lebava [ph], but we travel all night, I think. And in Lebava, when it was, the boat was not there. So we, uh, we had about a hundred people on, seems to me about two hundred people we, lay on the cots in one building and day, nighttime, and, of course, daytime we used to go in the city and walk and do anything we want to. We waited for the boat, one or two weeks, I don't remember exactly, you know.

APPLEBOME: How old were you at this point?

REPSHIS: At this point I was, uh, over fifteen going on sixteen.

APPLEBOME: And traveling by yourself. He'd given you the boat

ticket?

REPSHIS: Uh, the, the father, went to agency, and he paid the agency everything, you know, that he needed, I needed. And the, uh, agency promised that they gonna put me to this place where, address, where my cousin lived. So it was paid. I didn't have to pay anywhere except that he gave me, I had to have fifty dollars with me to show in United States that in the beginning I had money. And, uh, in Liepaja, as I told you, uh, we waited and when the boat came up and, uh, all of us we, were going in a boat and many people were crying, saying goodbye to their parents and relatives . . .

APPLEBOME: How were you feeling?

REPSHIS: I was laughing. I was so happy. And, besides me was very good looking boy and he was laughing. I says you are my friend. and the rest of the crowd was crying and we were both laughing. Then life began in the boat. Fourteen days we were in the water. We used to dance, you know, I was in the third class. The food was just a herring and white bread. I love white bread, I never, I never had

enough white bread in my house, always black. So, uh, we used to, stew, I think, most of the time. But, as I told you before, one girl I met and this girl was my companion. She made companions with the first class people from the first, we were in the third class. And she bribed the one sailor when he was giving us, uh, beds so we get on the top bed, and one man . . .

APPLEBOME: How did she bribe him?

REPSHIS: Oh, she gave so many capatas, you know, pennies or something to him, you know, money. She gave him money. And, uh, he gave us nice beds right by the door. The rest of the people would be way back and we were by the door so we get fresh air, you know. And in the corner, there was a booth where the first class to sleep, there, the wall was not near so ceiling, there was a space, so he used to bring us all kind of foods from the first class. But, he kind of had something in his bag, when he began to ask me if I come, when the boat comes to United States, I should carry suitcase. He want to run away. But I was afraid, I says, "Boy, if they catch me doing something like that I get in trouble." So

I refused to take his suitcase. Then I said goodbye to him and the boat came to United States.

APPLEBOME: Did you say there was dancing on the boat?

REPSHIS: Oh, yeah, always, only three days we didn't dance, because was terrific, in the middle of the ocean, terrific waves, the water used to come all over, you know, on the first, on the outside, outside, when you go outside, and there's a big space to dance, you know. So, uh, we can't go outside on the boat because, uh, the water used to go all over, you know. So we stay inside. That time I get sick, you know. And, boy, the toilets was terrible those three days. Seems to me that nobody was fast enough to clean up.

APPLEBOME: Was . . .

REPSHIS: Excuse me, I'm telling you that. (she laughs)

APPLEBOME: That's okay. What was the music that you danced to?
Did people have instruments?

REPSHIS: Oh, they, some people, they carried harmonicas and, um, but, um, oh, I think I told you before, you know, that, uh, this girl had an officer and he used

to go there where this saloon was in the corner, you know, and all those officers comes up with the white uniforms, good looking ones. She was good looking, too. Tall, you know. So I was . . .

APPLEBOME: Where was she from?

REPSHIS: I, I never ask her where she came from. So, um, I used to, she used to take me, so I sit between the tables somewhere in the corner, and she was dancing, I just watching her. And I have scarf on my shoulder, I looked real peasant woman, you know, as a girl. So one day this sailor came up and would have liked to kiss me, but I got so scared that I left my shawl and my documents that also I carry, went on, jumped on the tables and went away into my room, you know. Finally she get my scarf back and my documents and everything. That was excitement on the boat, that I was scared, you know. Otherwise was everything nice and happy.

APPLEBOME: And, was this the first time, I suppose, that you were seeing people from other countries or other towns?

REPSHIS: Oh, yes, positively, everything was, oh, in Liepaja,

we used to go for walks by the seashore, and I liked the city Liepaja very much, the streets were very clean and, um, saloons very nice. I don't drink, you know, she used to drink, you know. And, uh, there were two boys and we are two, you know. So then, um, uh . . .

APPLEBOME: This is the end of side one of tape one of the interview with Elizabeth Repshis.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: This is side two of tape one of the interview with Mrs. Elizabeth Repshis. Now, you were telling us about seeing other people from different villages.

REPSHIS: Yeah, that's on, we used to walk on the beach, we used to go in Liepaja in the saloons and they were very nice and, on the streets, I used to watch the stores, they were very nice and clean, and beautiful dresses and everything, and I thought to myself, boy, I could, in the United States, I think I could see much better than over here. But, um . . .

APPLEBOME: On the boat, where were the people from who were in

steerage with you?

REPSHIS: On the boat they were all, a lot of Lithuanians, all over the, Lithuania, and the Russia and some other ones. Some beautiful girls, I don't know from where that they, they were Lithuanians, most of them.

APPLEBOME: The girl that you had made friends with was a Lithuanian?

REPSHIS: Oh, yeah. She was Lithuanian because at that time I didn't speak any language, just the Lithuanian language, you know. Only the sailors were Russian, but most of the people were, seems to me, Lithuanian. Maybe in the first class they had different nationalities, but I was not able to see them in first class.

APPLEBOME: What were your impressions when you first got to New York Harbor?

REPSHIS: Oh, uh, as I said before, we, uh, rode on the water fourteen days, then stopped in Halifax. Some of them get off and, to see the Halifax, but I was afraid to go, I may get lost, you know, or something, so, I didn't, I didn't go. And my

girlfriend didn't go, you know. So then we rode for a while and, of course, came to New York. In New York I was disappointed. When the boat stopped, you know, we were staying about every day until we get off the boat, so I was seeing nothing else but black chimneys, brick buildings, dirty, and the smell and I said, "Oh, my gosh, this is . . ." I didn't tell anybody, you know, what I was thinking, but I said, "That's not United States." You know. Then, after a while, they said, "We have to get off." I was so disappointed. I said, "In this dirty city we have to get off?" So then, of course, we walked so many blocks over the . . .

APPLEBOME: But first, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

REPSHIS: No, I didn't see the Statue of Liberty. I didn't, seems to me I, maybe it was there in some other side where the boat where I stood, I just see the buildings, you know, nothing else but buildings there.

APPLEBOME: And when you landed on Ellis Island, what happened there?

REPSHIS: Well, then, when we came down in Ellis Island, you

know, then, of course, there was a, uh, pretty nice place, counters where I bought, showed me how to buy the, my dinner, so they gave me, for fifty cents, box about twelve inches long and three inches wide, and there was a big piece of apple pie, I never ate in my life apple pie. Oh, I thought was delicious, you know. And then, was some sandwiches of ham, you know, and I ate that because I was hungry, really. So, um, but we didn't stay there very long.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember the examinations they gave you, or any questions?

REPSHIS: Well, they, they call us in different rooms, you know. They usually, always somebody would call me up because, so, uh, and this time, they, uh, they examined my eyes. My eyes was okay, and then, uh, then, they, uh, oh, I had to give that money, you know. And I had that money hidden under my skirt, you know, in the petticoat pocket because, petticoats, so pinned very hard, so I had to, I felt so ashamed because I had to lift my skirt and get that money out, you know, and give to him. Well, I had to do, you know. So then, um, he gave me, um, from fifty (?), only twenty-five dollars. And, of

course, I spent dollar, fifty cents, not whole dollar, for the sandwich, you know. And the rest of them I kept for myself. That was, uh, forty and fifty cents.

APPLEBOME: Were you worried about being sent back to Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Worry, what?

APPLEBOME: Were you worried that they wouldn't accept you, that they might send you back?

REPSHIS: Oh, no. I didn't worry. I was sure I'm gonna stay. I worried, you know, about my eyes, you know. But after my eyes was examined, everything, I thought to myself this way. I said, "If they gonna not accept me, and my eyes will be bad, I'm not gonna go back to Lithuania, I'm gonna jump in the ocean." That's why I was thinking that everything was okay. I was accepted, you know. And then, um, from, um, all that examination went through, after I ate my sandwich . . .

APPLEBOME: Did they ask you any questions?

REPSHIS: No. Ask, over there they didn't ask me any questions.

APPLEBOME: What did some of the other people look like who were at Ellis Island at the same time as you?

REPSHIS: Oh, they, they were different, all kind of men and women, you know, and some of them, uh, had no, uh, not much in their suitcases, like cheese, so they were trying to buy the cheese from me, so I sold to make more money, so I sold my cheese, that I'm supposed to bring to my relatives, so I sold my cheese and, um, then, uh, after, uh . . .

APPLEBOME: What language did you speak to the people that you sold the cheese to?

REPSHIS: Oh, they, they were all Lithuanians. Some of the sailors that I sold on the boat, you know, some of the cheese, they were Russians, you know. Then, of course, they had interpreters, you know, Lithuanians talked for me, you know, so, and, um, let's see, what else?

APPLEBOME: Did anybody meet you at Ellis Island?

REPSHIS: Nobody. That, because my, like I said before, my father's agency was paid to put me where my cousin lived. So, uh, from, uh, Ellis Island, from New

York, they put, uh, somebody always was with me, you know, different person, but anyhow I had ticket all the time in my hand, so they, uh, I showed the ticket and they motioned to follow them. So, um, they took me to boat, small boat, and that boat came to New London and then from New London I had to get off and take a train to Norwich, Connecticut. But always somebody showed me, the boat, once I got off on the wrong train going in to wrong direction. Then when they saw the ticket the train stopped and took me back to the other train that was going to Norwich, Connecticut.

APPLEBOME: What were your impressions of New York City?

REPSHIS: I told you, New York City, I had very bad experience.

APPLEBOME: Oh, from the boat. And it didn't look any better

REPSHIS: Oh, no, because, um, then I didn't see any more New York, just the edges. And I think it's happened that the boat stopped somewhere because that, full boat, you know. People used to think that we were on the poorest Russian boat, only three chimneys. The ones that had four chimneys they say it's much

better boat. And I came on the poorest boat. So I think even the boat, and stopped, at the Statue of Liberty, somewhere in the corner, either. That's why I figure out.

APPLEBOME: Can you tell me anything else about what Ellis Island looked like when you were there?

REPSHIS: No, I can't tell you about anything. I didn't pay much attention, you know, because they were trying to take us so fast, you know. And then, of course, when I came to Norwich, Connecticut, by train, I get off the train, all my friends disappeared from Ellis Island, some of them went to Chicago, some of them went another city. Of course, I was going to Norwich, Connecticut. Nobody was waiting for me. And I was standing all alone in the train, when I went, I was looking, nobody was waiting for me. So I saw the policeman. And the policeman slowly was walking towards me because I think he knew I was from Europe. I looked foreign there with these big shoes, you know, and . . .

APPLEBOME: You still had your bag with you, right?

REPSHIS: And my, and my, and my basket, you know, and then,

um, then he looked at me and he said something, I didn't understand, but I show him my, uh, address, then he motioned me, follow me, then I follow him. We walked, and on the corner, we stopped and he put me on the trolley car and told something to the conductor, you know, where I supposed to get off. So while I was riding some Russian man was sitting beside me and in Russian asked me these questions. Then suddenly I remembered that my mother told me not to speak any stranger when I come to United States. I forgot about that because I thought to myself, "Gee, I had nobody." So I was telling him, then suddenly I stopped. Then he, he was kept asking me, "Why didn't you talk with anyone?" "I want to talk with you." Then later on, uh, the conductor . . .

APPLEBOME: How had the policeman known where to send you? Did you give him an address?

REPSHIS: I had address in my hand all the time. Then conductor stopped and took my suitcase and put it on the sidewalk and took me by the arm on the sidewalk and left. Then I looked around, I didn't see any numbers, because the house was behind the other

house, that shed where my cousin lived. So, uh, then I was walking back and forth, back and forth, see, on the farm, we don't have any numbers on the house. We know houses. I couldn't find it, so the people was looking at me passing by, early in the morning, looking at me. One man looked like

Russian. And he looked at me, and I looked at him.

He passed. i turned back. I saw him looking at me and I was looked at him. Then he came back and he asked me. I knew a little bit Russian, so, um, he asked me where I was going. I said, "Here's the address." You know. I don't know where that house is. So he said, "Stay on this sidewalk. I will go in and find out." He went in the yard and he came back and he said, "Your cousin lived here, but three months ago he moved away and she doesn't know where he moved away. Because my cousin had the money already to send me ticket to come to United States, but he never received the letter from me and he never was ready to send the money to me. Then, I don't know if you care for it or not, another story goes on.

APPLEBOME: What happened? How did you finally find your

cousin?

REPSHIS: Well, then, this man, this Russian man, said, "Let's walk. Walk with me, and maybe we're gonna meet some Lithuanians." So we walked and walked and he stopped many people and asked them if they speak Lithuanian. Finally one man said, yes, he was Lithuanian. Tall man, about six feet, you know. So, um, then this Russian man said, "Now you go with him and he will help you to find your cousin." So this man said, "Of course." He asked me questions, and I described my cousin. So he took me and we walked all across foreigners, Polish and Lithuanians, used to work in those paper factories in Norwich, Connecticut. So he thought maybe my cousin would be there. So we walked there and he went about five houses, not doors, you know, we thought, where the Polish people lived and we asked if they know a man by the name John Kerlanis. So in the fifth house the woman, Polish woman, says, "Yes, I know where he works, but I don't know where he lives." So, um, this man said to me, "Now you sit over here in this woman's house. She gonna in the factory and bring your father." [sic] And he left

me. Then I was scared because I thought to myself, "Is she Polish?" And, uh, Polish people in Europe don't call Polish. We call Lanke. So, I thought to myself that she was Cossack, because the Cossacks used to come in the villages on the horses and they used to beat people, you know, something like that, we used to go under the beds, you know, hiding. And so I said, "My, she's a Cossack. Now I'm gonna get beat." And I was scared. But finally she brought my cousin. And I thought to myself, "When my cousin sees me he's just gonna grab and hug me." When he saw me in the house he just said, "How did you come?" Then I started crying. I never cry, because I was afraid to cry, so that my eyes wouldn't get red and everything, and this time I said, "Now I can cry as much as I want." Then he took me, put me on the bus and he himself took again, back, through the whole city, where he lived, in the Polish. Then my life began. Another story.

APPLEBOME: And what was it like? How did your life compare to what you expected?

REPSHIS: Well, uh, in this house, where he lived, you know, there was a Polish woman, and at that time I spoke a

little bit Russian, but I couldn't speak Polish, you know. So, uh, my cousin was working nights and he just took off so he said, "Now this woman will take care of you." He went back to work. Then, of course, I gave all the money I had to her, she said, "All right. We gonna go to the store. We buy the clothes. We buy the shoes and, uh, tonight we gonna have party for me, you know." So I listen in, I don't understand where she show me, I understood what she means. So we went to the store and, um, she bought me dress, she bought me brassiere. I never, I had never saw the woman's pants. We never wear pants in my country in those days, so she bought the pants, you know. And the funny part was, uh, when she was buying shoes for me the shoemaker, the shoe man, you know, the, weighed my shoes, that was weighing three pounds. She said, "My gosh, how did you wear those shoes?" But she bought nice shoes. She spent all my money, just one dollar left. And then we came home and, to make story short, in the evening, big crowd came up, all the men, most of them young boys, of course Lithuanians, they want to see foreigners coming to United States. They had wine and beer and bananas and all kinds of

food, you know. And she dressed me up, brassiere, you know, my breasts was just beginning to grow, I used to tie up so tightly so, I was ashamed, you know, but she threw my brassieres away and she said, "No, in United States, the style that you have a breast." And my brassiere were lace, nice lace. Oh, I was so ashamed. Then, in the evening . . .

APPLEBOME: What did she do with your old clothes from Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Throw away, you know. Everything . . .

APPLEBOME: Even that nice skirt you said you had brought that was special?

REPSHIS: Even that, I didn't want, I told her to throw it away. She throw everything away. And, uh, in the evening, they put the, uh, rocking chair, you know, in the corner and, oh, they were drinking, of course, I wouldn't drink, you know, but, uh, what, they wanna do trick on me, banana. I never saw banana, and i never saw the banana on a boat. So they gave me banana and everybody eating and they were watching me what I'm gonna do with the banana. But I didn't eat, I was waiting if somebody else

started. I saw them peeling, and I peeled it. They didn't catch me. And they gave me the ice cream. And, of course, I was eating ice cream, but then I didn't know that i could eat the, you know, inside the ice cream, how you call. Then I finish up that I can't reach anymore, then I dipped in the bottom, you know, then they had a lot of fun, laugh, you know. And then another thing they had a lot of fun to laugh, they put me in the rocking chair, I never sat in a rocking chair all my life, and when I sit they try to swing me I screamed. So all evening they were drinking and I was standing in the corner, I wouldn't sit in that chair, and they wouldn't give me another chair, you know. So about twelve o'clock, I think never three o'clock, they were so drunk that some of them were on the floor laying, on the chair, on the beds, you know, and the policemen began to knock the door and then the policeman said to the lady, "Now, listen, the other people cannot sleep. You're making too much noise." So then, of course, some of them went home and some of them stayed all day and I went in the corner somewhere and slept until next day.

APPLEBOME: Were they trying to fix you up with the men, do you think?

REPSHIS: Oh, yes, there was, oh, my cousin, my cousin himself want to get marry me. Well, I, I just used to, afraid to make sore at me because, you know, he's my relative. And then, I hear another man and another man wants to get married, he bought me ring, you know. So I wore (?) and I said, "No." I wouldn't marry that man either. And I was so stupid that I took the ring and throw out on the street. I said to myself now how stupid I was that time. Go, you know, gold ring with a nice, you know, diamond or something. But, uh, to get rid of them, I didn't know what to do, so I begged my cousin to go to Orange, Massachusetts. His sister lived there. And I said to myself, "I'm gonna tell everything to his sister because here I had nobody, no Lithuanians, all the Polish, and I couldn't have a friends, girls, Polish, but the only, one thing my cousin did, that he get the man, Polish man, but he knew Lithuanian, but he took me to the silk mill, the factory, to get a job, you know. That was right away when I came in, in about three days. So, um, I

went there and my cousin said, "If you like, you could learn there and stay there and work for a while, but if you don't like, you don't have to. So, um, I, uh, went there and I saw, my gosh, people were standing, sitting, laughing, joking, doing nothing, just watching machines. I said to myself I'm gonna stay here months, even. I was not thinking about the money, who gonna support me, but I must learn. So when I came back from that factory I said to my cousin, if you were to help me, I give you money back, but I want to learn there, to work in that silk mill. So I did learn, it took me four weeks to learn on those machines, you know. And I worked there, and I liked it very much. I had a hard time because silk, at the beginning when you go in the bag and put your hands on the silk, catches, and I had those, what do you call?

APPLEBOME: Callouses?

REPSHIS: Callouses. And my callouses begin to peel, because I had to wash everyday and powder hands, not to dirty the silk. Because the silk they wouldn't wash, you know, like they wash.

APPLEBOME: So are you glad that you came to the United States?
Were you happy then?

REPSHIS: I was very, that time I was very happy.

APPLEBOME: Did you, um, write to your parents at home in
Lithuania?

REPSHIS: Oh, that, I don't, yes, a few letters I wrote. That
was in July. I came, see, in July 1913, and the war
began in, uh, 1914, next year. So, uh, I was, uh, I
was, uh, I had enough money made to send my father
for the ticket, and then the war started for seven
years I didn't get anything from my parents.

APPLEBOME: So after the war you were able to speak to them?
Hear from them?

REPSHIS: To my parents?

APPLEBOME: Yes.

REPSHIS: Uh, after the war I didn't know if they were alive.
But my same, uh, same cousin, you know, that, uh,
he, uh, when I left Norwich, Connecticut, you know,
and came to live in Norwich, then the second year,
1914, 1915 I was in Lawrence (?). So, um, I, my

cousin was going to, uh, Lithuania after the war. And, uh, on the boat, the boat came from, uh, Germany, Europa, and that's the first time after war, the first boat to come to New York, you know, from Germany. So my cousin was going on that boat. So I gave him about two hundred dollars. I said, "If you find my parents alive, give this money to them." So he went there and, uh, and then, of course he came back and he told me that my parents were alive, except my mother was injured very badly because she lost her eyes when the bombs were going, exploded. They lived underground, and she came up to get the water and the bomb exploded and injured her eyes. But then she was, he told me, she was sick. So, uh, I, uh, I think she was about three, two years, something in bed, you know. So I wrote a letter, I said, "Mother, I'm coming to see you, to take care of you." And she said, she wrote to me, she said, "If you come and stay forever over here and be with us, come. But if you're gonna just come and see me and go back, you better send that money to me instead of giving the money to company." Then, of course, I sent her more money, but I didn't go to see her. I went to see Lithuania in 1961.

APPLEBOME: Okay, but, so by this time, after the war, had you married?

REPSHIS: When I married? Then, of course, uh, I didn't want to marry for a long time because I want to go school. I was thinking. When I lived in Norwich, Connecticut, I, working there at the silk mills, I didn't know how to get to school. And I can't talk for those, I was just learning Polish. I had tough time over there with those Polish men, but I escaped from everything, you know. So, uh, then, uh, when, uh, after one year I came to Lawrence, lived with my cousin, then I get rid of my cousin who wanted marry me, because I told his sister and his sister gave him good lecture, you know. So, um, then I was in Lawrence I learn how to get the job in the wooling mill, because I learned how to weave already.

APPLEBOME: And did you learn English in school there?

REPSHIS: And, I tried to go in the English, in the evening school, in, uh, in Lawrence. But we were about two boys and four girls, we were living in one house, and the parents of the two children. So, um, we would play cards after come from work or something.

Nobody was go to school but myself. They wouldn't let me go. And I was like a stupid, I said, "Oh, the hell with this language. I'll stay home, I'll stay with him." I didn't want to go. Then, I was thinking, someday I have to go to school. So, um, then, of course, there was a strike, but you didn't care about those things. In, uh, 1919, uh, I went to New York and then, of course, I met there intelligent people, you know, because I always went after, uh, educated people. There was not many, you know, intelligent people, Lithuanians, in Lawrence, small town. But in New York they were editors, you know, doctors, lawyers, so I met them and one of them, um, fall in love with me, who knew seven languages, and he was editor, he studied doctor. (she laughs) He was a priest in Europe, oh, he was very educated, so I was happy he liked me. So then he wanted to get married, to make the story short, I said I want to go to school. So he said, "I let you go to school, but I don't trust you that after school you're gonna marry me, so marry me now." And I said, "How I'm gonna get you, marry you?" Because in school, I thought that there is no married people in school. So I said, uh, to him,

uh, "Because I won't have friends." I said, "In school, and I be lonesome." And so he said, "Okay. Let's marry secretly." So we went to Catskill Mountains, and he knew some minister, and he's a minister, and he's right, and I think, a janitor was our witness, and we get married, nobody knew for years and, even in Brooklyn, New York, that we were married. Once in a while we used to live in some (?) school, house. But in order to get to school, I tried to go to evening school, but I belonged to so many Lithuanian organizations that I didn't want to leave. So my husband said, "If you're gonna do that you'll never learn anything." So, uh, I said, he says, "You better go to school. I promised to, to let you." So in about third month he said, "Now you go to school." We went to Springfield, Massachusetts, we find American International College that take foreigners with no English at all. So, um, we made, we made arrangements and filled applications, of course, he helped me because he knew the language English very good and everything. So, in 1923, in 1922 I marry him, no, before, just before marriage, in 1922, I married in 1923, I came to American International College, I went to, I

start from, uh, ABC, inter--, you know, public school, I had to have diploma public school. It took me two years to graduate from public school, four years to graduate from academy. There is the diploma, academy and, um, there is a social, social work papers, I took extra subjects. When I graduated I got academy and social work diplomas. Two diplomas, you know.

APPLEBOME: Thank you very much. That really was a very nice interview.

REPSHIS: Yeah. That's, I think that's the most important things, you know.

APPLEBOME: Thank you.

REPSHIS: Otherwise, you know.

APPLEBOME: Thank you. This is the end of side two of tape two [sic] of the interview with Mrs. Elizabeth Repshis. This is the end of the interview.