

NPS-141

GUSSIE SHAPIRO

BIRTH DATE: 1896

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 87

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RUSSIA, 1909

AGE 13

SHIP: LAPLAND

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES:

- **RUSSIA:**
- **US:NJ; NY,NY**

CLOUTIER: OK. It's 1983. And this is Dennis Cloutier with the Ellis Island Oral History Program [sic]. Today we're speaking with Gussie Shapiro, and she's going to tell us about her life. So, Gussie, when and where were you born?

SHAPIRO: I was born in Russia in 1896. Then I came to America in 19, uh, nine -- 1896, and then in 1909 I came to America. My Russian life -- of course - - I remember an awful lot of things about Russia, but I don't know if you want to know about it.

CLOUTIER: Let's hear it.

SHAPIRO: Yes. When I was in Russia, there was a revolution going on in Russia,

and they wanted to throw down the czar that time. And I was a little girl. And -- of course -- we didn't have a very wonderful life in Russia. Because if anybody ----- you're not allowed to say anything, and you're not allowed to do anything. Anybody that they --- any little button on him, he was already a somebody. You have to be afraid to talk to him. And when I came to America and I found out one little thing. You could say whatever you want; you could do whatever you want. You're allowed to go the first of July --- May the first --- which you call it a certain day for the Revolution with the red flags in the street. That was to me the most wonderful thing that I found in America. And -- of course -- I cannot tell all about my life. It'll take a book. [Both laugh] I don't want you to write a book about me, but I had a very wonderful life since I'm here. I have three sons, and --- of course --- three daughter-in-laws, and eight grandchildren, and nine great-grandchildren --- which they all very beautiful.

CLOUTIER: All right.

SHAPIRO: Not only in my eyes. And I'm very happy here. And -- of course -- if I should talk about my life, I don't want the man to write a book about me. But I was --- I'm going to start to tell you about the life here.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] Well, before we do that, Gussie, let's talk about your trip over here. Do you remember much about it?

SHAPIRO: Oh, certainly. Oh, you want to know about the beginning of the trip?

CLOUTIER: The very beginning.

SHAPIRO: Oh, the very beginning of the trip I was about ---- I'd say four -- sixteen years old. And I --- my sister sent a sh-- a ticket for me to come over here. And I had to go with somebody --- with a family that their daughter

was already in America --- and I went in her name. We had to go through customs. But, if I was going with a family and with a passport, we didn't have to make that trouble, too. We just went through customs like nothing. They didn't say nothing.

CLOUTIER: Now, you went with her name, you said. You didn't go under ---

SHAPIRO: With the family, I went with the girl's name. I --- I don't re--

CLOUTIER: [Interposed] You didn't go under your name.

SHAPIRO: No, because I had to be part of the family.

CLOUTIER: Ah.

SHAPIRO: Don't you understand?

CLOUTIER: You didn't have your papers, but you had ---

SHAPIRO: We didn't have any papers. I didn't have my birth certificate or anything. I really don't remember. Don't forget, seventy-two years ago, I can't remember everything. [Laughs] But then I remember that we came to *Antwerpen*, and we stayed there for a few days, and then we board on the ship named Lapland.

CLOUTIER: Lapland.

SHAPIRO: Yeah. Lapland.

CLOUTIER: Lapland.

SHAPIRO: My voice isn't --- my voice isn't so good like it used to be before. Now I

got all my teeth.

CLOUTIER: It sounds wonderful.

SHAPIRO: And when I came to America, I came to my sister's house. And I had it very, very good. And, -- of course --- a couple of years later I got married, and it started wonderful. I had a wonderful life. I still have my husband living after sixty-eight years married. He's in --- he's in a home next door to me. And we had a very, very wonderful life. We brought up very wonderful children. And the most of all, I liked the freedom.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] That's right. Okay, now, do you remember the port's name that you left from back in?

SHAPIRO: Antwerpen.

CLOUTIER: What's that?

SHAPIRO: Antwerpen. Antwerpen. That was the port's name.

CLOUTIER: That was the port's name.

SHAPIRO: Yes. And the ship was Lapland.

CLOUTIER: Did you travel in steerage?

SHAPIRO: No, no. I traveled with second class.

CLOUTIER: Second class.

SHAPIRO: I traveled the second class, but I cannot tell you very much about the trip because I was sick for all the time I went there.

CLOUTIER: Seasick.

SHAPIRO: And when I came, I came to Ellis Island. Ellis Island, right, it's Ellis Island. And -- of course -- it was a little too late for the people to come to collect their, uh, the relatives -- you know -- it was too late. So I was there, I slept over one night. And because I was just a little girl, they put me to sleep in a hammock --- instead of a bed.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] How about that!

SHAPIRO: And the next morning I had a very nice breakfast -- prunes, cooked prunes and cereal and milk -- white bread, which I didn't see in my own home. And it was a wonderful time, and they treated me very good. And then -- maybe --there was a lot of times -- when I talk about other times about Ellis Island. Later on, I came to visit --- it was a cousin of mine in Ellis Island. And this here bothers me all my years. Something happened there which I saw that I did not like. You know when we had to come in there, we had to show a card to be able to go out -- you know -- we were visitors. So one --- one girl got -- a -- s - somebody put the card away on the window, and a girl --- an immigrant --- came over, and she took it. I didn't know what to say at that time. Now, I would know what to say of it. I didn't know what happened to it. But she was smart enough to take that woman's card. And that bothers me all the years.

CLOUTIER: There was a leaving card, I guess. You had this card and you could leave the island.

SHAPIRO: Sure, otherwise you couldn't get out. She didn't get -- I don't know -- she probably got out. She got all American --- what she shows that she ---. And this was when I came over here, and I had a very, very wonderful life. And -- of course -- you can't plan your life forever. There came a

time when we had to go to a home, to a nursing home. And this is what happened to us now. A year ago -- of course -- I'm not going to tell you all the troubles. I'll only tell you good things. We went to that nursing home, and I'm here already a year. It's wonderful. I'm, every morning that I get up I pray to God, "Give me more life." Because there were certain days, believe me, when I lay down to sleep and I says, "God, I do not want to wake up the next morning." And then I came here, and I got a perfect new life. Place is wonderful. We have a lot --- a lot of entertainment, which you couldn't have it in your own home. You have a *doktor* --- a doctor right away if anything happens. I -- we have, if anything -- and when the family could come here, it's very wonderful. And I'm very, very happy over here.

CLOUTIER: Back on Ellis Island, did you have any problems at all or any, anything stolen or ---

SHAPIRO: No, no. Not --- only that I seen somebody stole the card. That's all. That's always on my mind. Nothing stolen, what little going --- what you're going to do. They stole those things when we on the train, but that's got nothing to do. You know --- they gave me --- I don't know why --- ooh -- see -- my tee-- why they send over pillows to America. So they sent over a pillow. Somebody stole it. This is not even necessary -- little things.

CLOUTIER: Did you hear any rumors before you came to the United States about things happening on Ellis Island?

SHAPIRO: No, no. We didn't even, --we didn't -- we only know --- you'll have to excuse me a minute -- a minute.

CLOUTIER: Oh, sure.

SHAPIRO: I've got to take a little w---- [Pause]

CLOUTIER: The question I was asking you, did you hear anything about people being sent back home

SHAPIRO: Oh, yes.

CLOUTIER: from Ellis Island? Were you afraid of this?

SHAPIRO: Yes, certainly, certainly. I wasn't -- I was too young enough to be afraid of that, you know. Because I didn't have any trouble anywhere I went. I was just born lucky. I didn't have any trouble. Not the -- th-m ---- customs where some people have a lot of trouble. Or some people was sent back because of their eyes. The main thing, the eyes. I went to a doctor before I went to America. I went to a place called S -- Bialystok -- which a lot of people know about it. And over there was a special doctor. And if he gave out a paper that my eyes are good, then I had it -- have no trouble at all. I was a young girl with a very healthy body, so nobody bothers.

And that's the way I came to America. And I knew about Ellis Island, because a lot of people that were sent back used to tell the troubles. And that's why they called it the island of tears. Because when somebody from a sam--- family is sent back, that's very, very bad for the other --- for the other people of the family. So this is the only thing you heard about Ellis Island. But I had no trouble nowheres. My brother-in-law came the next morning and took me to his house -- that means my sister's house. And I had the most lovely life over here. You will not believe it. All my life, I never got up a day to go to work.

CLOUTIER: Never?

SHAPIRO: Never.

CLOUTIER: What did you do here?

SHAPIRO: Well, I came to my sister, and she had a dressmaker shop, and I worked in her house. And I didn't work so hard, believe me. And then when I got married, my husband made a very beautiful living. And I did not have to go to work. And I never, I mean, I worked in the house. This is no work. When I worked for my sister that wasn't called work -- because I could have come work whenever I felt like. And then the first thing I did when I came here, I went to night school. Because all my education, I had before I came here. What is -- before I was --- because I was educated in Europe, it was very easy for me to take over the English language. And in fact, I still remember when I came in and we pledge allegiance to the flag. And it was everything so wonderful to me. Whatever I see and whatever I do, it's wonderful to me. And all the people say I've got one word, "By Gussie, everything is good." And it's good. That's what I could tell you. But I -- most of all, I'm very, very happy to be here.

CLOUTIER: I'm glad you're here, too. Did you meet your husband here?

SHAPIRO: No. And I didn't --- I mean, yes.

CLOUTIER: In this country.

SHAPIRO: Certainly, I was only fifteen years. Oh, it was -- that's a too long story, the day I met my husband. [Laughs]

CLOUTIER: Was he an immigrant also?

SHAPIRO: He came 1906. My husband was brought to me --- to my sister's store

just one day, and we fell in love --- and love at first sight. And then now we married sixty-eight years, and I'm not sorry.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] That's good. Well, I guess it's redundant to ask why you came to the United States.

SHAPIRO: Oh. Hmm. Everybody's wish in the whole country was to go to America. Because – not --- they didn't about the freedom. But they knew in America you could --- I don't know why ---- I was a little girl, what do I know? But America was the word of --- what you say --- magic word. And as soon as I got the ticket to go to America, I was very glad and very happy. I run to the [Not understood] the minute that my father was taking me over to go se-- to go to America. And he was crying and I was crying, and that's all.

CLOUTIER: Did you ever see them again?

SHAPIRO: No. My father, I didn't see again. I just saw all my sisters, yeah. Look, they came --- everybody came to America ---- and we had no complaints. And I certainly have no complaint, 'specially about this place. I'm so happy to be here.

CLOUTIER: As a newcomer to America, what kind of experiences did you have? The hardest thing you had to learn about the American ways?

SHAPIRO: Well, I didn't have anythi---. When I came to America ---when I came to New York --- I'll tell you was, was --- was, was funny to me that had the clothes hanging on the fire escapes. And in Europe if they have something, they don't call it a fire escape. They call it a patio. And you sit there for enjoyment. And over here I came and I see all the fire escapes hanging with clothes. I couldn't understand why. But later on I understood what they're doing downtown. Because I didn't live in New

York. I lived in New Jersey. And I had a wonderful life there. That's all I can say. I didn't know what's doin' by somebody else. About my children, maybe I could tell you a little bit. I'll tell you what -- I'll bring a cup of water.

CLOUTIER: OK. Sure.

SHAPIRO: I'm up -----

CLOUTIER: OK. OK.

SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, I can only tell you --- whoever's going to listen to it --- that I have very, very wonderful children. They're all professionals. Which I'm not saying it because it's mine to have ---- because we mi--- immigrants at the --- at the --- you're able to have my children all professionals. So are all my grandchildren. And -- of course -- I am such a proud great-grandma with nine great-grandchildren that I'm blowing over ----

CLOUTIER: [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: with pleasure sometimes. I'm going there for ----whenever I come there, I have a wonderful daughter-in-law. That whenever I come there, she not only invites all the family. She also invites all of friends. And all of friends are very happy to see when I get up and say my speech. That's really my thing to do.

CLOUTIER: Do you think this could have happened in the old land?

SHAPIRO: I don't think so. I don't --- well, over there I cannot -- you know -- I can't even talk about it. Because most of the family were killed by wars and by Hitler. So I want to forget about it altogether. I also want to forget about another thing, which people do not forget for a long time. I left my

apartment --- my home --- with all the beautiful things; put out of my mind. Because I'm here, and I have my husband in the next building. And we're both very, very happy here. That's all I could tell. I don't want to make a book.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] You made a great sacrifice to come to this country.

SHAPIRO: Sure, I left so --- my fa-- after all, my father and my sisters and brothers and everything else. Of course, at first it was a little hard. You know -- you go away from the family. And -- but I came to family. I came to my sister and my other sisters, and they were very happy around here. And -- and they were much, much older than me. And I was the little girl in the house. That's the way they treated me.

CLOUTIER: How long had they been here before you arrived?

SHAPIRO: Well, they had already children. I -- the [Not understood] -- could I remember all those little things? When they left there, I was three, four years old. So how could I remember? When I came here, they had all their children already here, and I had a very wonderful life.

CLOUTIER: Did you ever hear about the streets paved with gold in America before you came?

SHAPIRO: I suppose so. But that time it doesn't mean so much to me ----- you know what I mean? But I knew America is a golden, America is called a *goldene medina* (a golden province)

CLOUTIER: A golden what?

SHAPIRO: Land, a gold land. *Medina* means a [Not understood] in Jewish. That's what America is called all over. And I want to tell you something right

now. America is the golden pot where everybody wants to grab it. That's what Russia wants. I knew Russia. In Russia --- those wars -- they didn't care for nothing else. They didn't care for the people; they didn't care for anything else. They wanted a war, so they made a war. I lived through four wars already. But I was very lucky that all my three sons that went to the army; they all came, thank God, as --as ---as healthy as they left. Oh, this was the main thing in my life. And that the main thing in my life, I go every weekend to my grandchildren. And I have a granddaughter that's working in a school; and ev--- three times a week in the morning she gives me a call. They know already, "Oh, Gussie Shapiro, your granddaughter is on the phone." *Nu* (so) ---- who could ask for anything more?

CLOUTIER: When you were eating your meals on Ellis, did you pay for these?

SHAPIRO: No, no. Didn't pay. But I was -- you know -- I was very surprised because I didn't see white bread, and cooked prunes in the morning. Because we used to use it for dessert only.

CLOUTIER: Hmm, right.

SHAPIRO: So it was something new to me. But when I came here --- well, I came to family and I fitted right -- I always, that's one thing -- I fit right in wherever I come.

CLOUTIER: Adapted. [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: "Everything is good by Gussie," they say. I'm here. What do they expect? The people exp--- the people here expect they should make them all the good foods that they used to eat at home --- which it's impossible. But I want to tell you something else. Nobody got sick from the food yet. 'Cause they give them the right food to eat. But I'm very

happy.

CLOUTIER: I bet you were glad to get off the ship after that long journey.

SHAPIRO: Well, I wouldn't know because I was --- I was dazed a little. I was si-- sick, you know. I was seasick. So I really don't remember that. But I was glad to go, I suppose so. I was glad to get off.

CLOUTIER: You remember the Great Hall, right, when you came through? The Great Hall?

SHAPIRO: Yeah. You mean at Ellis Island?

CLOUTIER: At Ellis Island.

SHAPIRO: Oh, sure. We came into a very great, big place. To me it looked like a mountain. And it was very wonderful. After all, I was only a young girl there. And my mind wasn't just to look around whatever's goin' on there. And the only thing I'm just telling you. That I came here to freedom, and I appreciated it very much, and I didn't have anything bad to say.

CLOUTIER: Did they ask you a series of questions when you were there?

SHAPIRO: I really do not remember that much. I only remember I was sittin' in a chair and the doctor came over and examined my eyes. I suppose they asked me some questions. And they -- they asked me in Russian, I was able to answer them anyhow. But -- by golly -- you wanted to remember that, too.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: [Laughs] Too much.

CLOUTIER: When he checked your eyes, did he use the buttonhook to flip up the eyelids?

SHAPIRO: Oh, I couldn't remember that. They looked at my eyes and they said it's all right. That's all. You know that --- everybody's excited. When they come there they don't know what to – what they want. They don't know what they're looking for.

CLOUTIER: It's scary.

SHAPIRO: Everybody was nervous. Everybody's nervous. The older people maybe was more adapted, but I was looking around what's doing all around me. I didn't care for anything else. I didn't worry for getting a job or getting, oh, what will I do when I come here. Everything was prepared for me. In fact, all my life I had all wonderful people. Everybody was very wonderful to me. I don't know why, but nobody ever says any bad words to me or scold me or anything else. They're not afraid of me, but I don't know, there must be something else.

CLOUTIER: If you had it all over to do again, would you do anything different?

SHAPIRO: No. I would not do any---- oh, there's one thing I would do different. I would like --- if I would have to do all the things over again, after sixty-eight years ---- I'd marry a modern husband, that takes care of the baby two o'clock at night.

CLOUTIER: [Both laugh] Okay.

SHAPIRO: I'm telling the truth. [Airplane sound]

CLOUTIER: That's about all the questions I have, I guess.

VOICE: You're not ready ----

CLOUTIER: You're not ready? OK.

VOICE: No.

CLOUTIER: You should, you should.

SHAPIRO: Well, I want to tell you something else. You name a book, and I read it.

CLOUTIER: Okay.

SHAPIRO: Not love stories,

CLOUTIER: [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: but all travel stories. You ask me about places of places that was years and years ago, I could tell you about it. You know. The way people lived --- wit—with thousands of years ago, because I used to read all these books. And -- of course -- over here, I read. and I --- listen, after all -- all these years you do certain things. I had small children. *The Forverts* (The Forward) --- there was a *Forverts* when I came here. The first thing, there was a *Forverts* coming out, a Jewish paper. And I used t--- my s—my sister used to buy it for me. And all the girls --- the six girls that worked there -- used to put away the work, and I used to read to them the *Bintel Brief* (Batch of Letters, advice column). If anybody knows what's about it

.I used to read from the paper. There was a certain -- you know -- a story in the paper goin' every time. And I used to read it for them. I used to like reading a lot, and I used to like going out all the time. For

weekends, me and my husband ---- they were all rich people, because my husband is a worker and makes ladies' coats. But every time we had a --- we had something, with all the organizations --- we used to go out for a weekend. I know all the hotels in the mountains, all the hotels in Florida and all the hotels all over that you ask me about it. So we had a ve--- wonderful life. What could I tell you? What could I tell you is wonderful.

CLOUTIER: Now, this trade you had, did you pick it up here in America?

SHAPIRO: No, no. I knew already how to sew.

CLOUTIER: You knew how to sew.

SHAPIRO: I knew how to sew. And my sister --- my sister had that shop that the girls for sewing. Yes, I knew how to sew. I also made my own clothes. I make my own clothes. And that's all, I'm telling you. I was the little girl of the family. I had four sisters here, and I was the youngest of them. And they treated me like, like a little girl in the house.

CLOUTIER: Did you go to school here in America?

SHAPIRO: Night school.

CLOUTIER: Night school.

SHAPIRO: Just to night school in Jersey City. I don't remember. I remember the looks of the teacher. I remember when I got up the first time to say --- to sa--- sa---salute the Star Spang--- Spangled Banner. But I didn't go very long to school, because my husband came along. About a year later ---- it was about two years later when I was here, so I stopped school. [Not understood]

CLOUTIER: Had you gone to school back home?

SHAPIRO: Oh, sure. I went. Uh-huh. See, it's very important. I also went ---- we didn't have no free schools in Europe. You should know about it. But I went. First I learned Jewish, then I went to another place and I learned Russian. I learned Hebrew --- and I knew the three languages very good --- and arithmetic was my best subject. But now you do not need it, because you have a computer. So you don't need to know arithmetic. But I was good on everything. I have the same trouble over here a little bit. Because when I went to a certain school and I used to pick up my hand -- you know -- to answer, he says, "No, somebody else." And here when I come into the conversation room and I start to talk a lot, they says, "Oh, I'd let somebody talk a little bit, too." So I have the same problem over here. But I wish all my friends that have the problem that I have now. Of course, we should be well. But what could you expect after eighty-eight years?

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] That's right. What did your father do back home?

SHAPIRO: He was also a tailor. That's where I knew how to sew. I was born a dressmaker. So----

CLOUTIER: Did you have communica--- with him? Letters?

SHAPIRO: Oh, certainly. My father was a very, very educated man, and we used to communicate till he --- till --- that --- till Hitler came there. No, not Hitler -- -another war that was there that my father died. Oh, yes. My father was a very educated man, and my family was all very edu--- educated. And even now if one of the grandchildren are very good in school ---- because they are doctors and lawyers and everything else--- they say, "You take after Grandma."

CLOUTIER: [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: If anybody's nice looking, they say, "You take after Grandma." This, I don't know why.

CLOUTIER: [Laughs] Did your mother live at all?

SHAPIRO: No. This I don't ---- my – my ---- I didn't --- I was born --- my mother died when I was born.

CLOUTIER: So you never knew your mother.

SHAPIRO: But I had a stepmother, that she was better than any mother. Because she's the one that was --- wanted to see that I have all the education. And she was wonderful. I'll never -- of course -- it's already seventy years. I also will never forget my mother-in-law, which she was so wonderful that a mother couldn't be any better. She always looked to --- to the -- the good things for me and my husband. That's why we were so happy for sixty-eight, for sixty-eight years, 'cause he had a good mother-in-law. She was wonderful. All nice people.

CLOUTIER: When you first arrived on the shores of America, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

SHAPIRO: Yeah. Yes. We saw the Statue of Liberty. We knew all about the Statue of Liberty in Europe. And everybody, they called out, "Here's the Statue of Liberty." And it was a little – it was later in the day, so we saw it from far away. We all knew about the Statue of Liberty, and we knew that America is a *goldene land*.

CLOUTIER: A golden what?

SHAPIRO: A golden land.

CLOUTIER: Land, right.

SHAPIRO: Okay. This is my ---[Pause] Yes. Some people that when they left the country to go to America, they didn't have a passport, and they had to go through the customs. They, they went at night they shouldn't be seen, I really don't know why, but they used to say, "They're stealing the custom place."

CLOUTIER: Stealing?

SHAPIRO: Stealing the custom place. And I'll tell you, in Russian you --- there were some people who wouldn't understand what it is. They were stealing the place. They had to go by, that nobody should know them, should see them. And they had to also pay the guards that they should look around, they should look in back --- not --- you know --- not look to them. So that --- that was ---- that was the very, very thing that people were afraid of.

CLOUTIER: Now, these were Russian guards.

SHAPIRO: Russian, probably Russian guards on this side, and who knows what it was on the other side. Well, this wasn't American guards. No, it wasn't before you came to the ship. It was before you came, before you board the ship. When you was already on the ship was all right. But the co— but I didn't have to do it, because we had a passport. I was different name, but we had a passport for this [Not understood]

CLOUTIER: Makes it a lot easier.

SHAPIRO: Oh. [Laughs] I -- I wouldn't want any different. [Both laugh] But I heard -

- you know -- while I was there ---- I can't say it in Jewish ---- they stole the place. They had --- nobody should see them. How would you say it in English? They had to s --- they had to go. They stole it. They s--- nobody should see them when they go, when they go pass.

CLOUTIER: Yes, duck through.

SHAPIRO: Yes. As they went through, they shouldn't catch them. And if they caught them over there, they sent them right back -- to Russia.

CLOUTIER: Sure.

SHAPIRO: So everybody was only afraid of that. But I was lucky. I told you I'm lucky. Well, that's it. Anything else.

CLOUTIER: Well, I think that's about it, actually. Which ---do you ---

VOICE: Now tell me one.

SHAPIRO: One more thing. Do you prefer modern-day America, or America when you first arrived?

SHAPIRO: Well, I want to tell you. When we first arrived, everybody seemed to be very poor, but very happy. And today with all the modern things, all the beautiful things --- we don't have to do any arithmetic, we got somebody to count for us, and we got a washing machine to wash for us and do for us --- but no, we cannot be any happier because we are walking on broken glass wherever we go. If we go to the train, or we can't go down the street, and we can't stay alone in the house, so how could we be happy? Because we're afraid.

You know, if you're scared of your life, nothing could make you happy

already. If you go out someplace and you've got to come back at night; any pleasure that you had to being by the party, it takes hard just going home. If the children used to come to me, and then when they had to go home. And I waited for the telephone to call me if they're home already, they were already, the cars broken, or somebody got -- got him, or what - -- when everything was already in my mind. Till the telephone came, "Grandma, we're home already, don't worry."

CLOUTIER: So you think the quality of life is declining?

SHAPIRO: Declining? Absolutely. Of course! There is an awful lot of very rich people now. They live very, very rich. We didn't have it before in America. Before we just went to hotel for a vacation. Now what are we going to do in a hotel? Sit and eat? You go for a trip to Colo—to Germany, to Paris, to Rome. You tic to the – you talk to the young people now --- they know the whole world. And sometimes they don't know what's doing in their own home.

CLOUTIER: In their own backyard. [Laughs] Did you ever go back home at all, back to Europe?

SHAPIRO: No.

CLOUTIER: Never. You stayed here in America. And you stayed in the metro area?

SHAPIRO: I lived in New Jersey. And from New Jersey ---- I lived five years in New Jersey ----- and then I moved to, uh, oh, it's not Brooklyn. It's Brooklyn, but it's not called Brooklyn --- Williamsburg. Then I lived in Williamsburg for two – two years, and then I moved to Brownsville where my mother-in-law made us to buy a little house. Then we became right away owners of a house. And from there I got married, and I lived in East New York all my life.

CLOUTIER: It sounds like a pretty happy life.

SHAPIRO: Very. Very happy life. Well, look. Everything a person hasn't got. So now my husband is --- oh --- I don't want to talk about that. My husband is ---sits with an amputated foot, and we could not be together on the same place. This is the only worry about my life now. But we are lucky that thing--- va—va--- this also, because my husband is in the next building. And I go every day to visit him. And we had a beautiful banquet in this place, and my husband came here on the wheelchair, and we had a very wonderful time. And that makes me happy. I could at least see him all the time. He's not far away. But I would be much happier to be together with ----

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

CLOUTIER: These tapes are going to be used by the National Park Service for use by people visiting Ellis Island for them to listen to.

SHAPIRO: Sure. Why not?

CLOUTIER: Is there anything that you think these people would be interested, in years from now, to know about . . .

SHAPIRO: Years from now?

CLOUTIER: From now, coming to this Ellis Island, about the place, and about.

SHAPIRO: Oh. That's -- that's --- well, now I was very much surprised, because the place is all empty. And -- you know -- the only thing I saw there is a table, and some dishes that people were eating in. And I don't know how many years it was standing there. But certainly it doesn't feel -- you

know -- it feels a little empty when you come over to a place where it was hoo-ha -- you know -- a lot of people, a lot of doing, a lot of going. And now you come in, it's just walls.

CLOUTIER: Empty.

SHAPIRO: Empty walls. Like I say to some people, they say, "Oh, my home, I left my apartment." I says, "An apartment is just a ---just walls. When you are there and make it a home, then it's counted a home." But if you're not there, it's not counted a home. So what could I say about Ellis Island now? It's empty place, and it brings a lot of memories to a lot of people. Because this is a very, very big memory, --- a very thing to remember. Because you go from one place right away to a different place. You know -- it's such a big -- it's not that you move from one apartment to another one.

If you come from Russia and you come to America -- you know -- you're amazed with all -- first of all, you're amazed at the freedom. You're allowed to do everything. America's. And then we're amazed at all the things. Of course, of course I got very good things to say. I didn't suffer here. I didn't have any trouble with anybody. So I'm maybe a little bit different than somebody else. I didn't have any trouble. Whoever I met, whoever was in my life was the most wonderful people. And even, even this time, right now, I went into Mrs. Diehl [ph] which is the, uh, what is she here?

CLOUTIER: The superintendent?

SHAPIRO: The superintendent of the place. And I ask her, "How come that all the people here are so nice to me?" She says, "You got a certain touch." [Both laugh] I don't know what it is.

CLOUTIER: I do. The golden touch.

SHAPIRO: I suppose. The golden touch?

CLOUTIER: From the golden land.

SHAPIRO: Because every person, all the ---- all my husband's family, my family, that I can talk about it till today. Don't forget. Do you know when a baby is born here ---- when my great-grandchild is born, and it's still three weeks' old --- my granddaughter takes her right here to my husband to s--- he should see her. 'Cause my husband is a --- got an amputated leg and he's in a wheelchair. So they bring the baby, three weeks or four weeks old, for him to see it. And I could show you a pictures.

CLOUTIER: All right. [Break in tape] Okay. The question was did you have, know anyone who was sent back from America?

SHAPIRO: So, I told him I did not know anyone --- anybody, but everybody was feared they shouldn't be sent back. And I don't now what kind of reasons for they were sent back. Sometimes, sometimes kind of a sickness or sometimes --- well, I couldn't know everything else. You know. I was too young to think even about it. But there was a lot of people sent back.

CLOUTIER: Trachoma was a real ---

SHAPIRO: Trachoma, yeah. Most of the eyes, yeah. But we used to go to that doctor.

CLOUTIER: Our stories have it that they would take a buttonhook and . . .

SHAPIRO: I don't know.

CLOUTIER: . . . flip everybody's eyelids.

SHAPIRO: I'm asking you, could I remember a little thing like this? [Both laugh] The way they looked to my eyes? My eyes has been looking for all these years, because I had that eyes. Every doctor who's got all kind of different things to make them look in your eyes. And today I don't know. Today they just put on something and they see everything what's going on. Wonderful.

CLOUTIER: Now, you said you had a cousin that was staying at Ellis Island for a couple of weeks.

SHAPIRO: Yes.

CLOUTIER: And you came over visiting.

SHAPIRO: Yes. So I s—I told you, I came over to visiting, and this is what I – for what I saw. That's all.

CLOUTIER: You were glad each day to leave, I bet.

SHAPIRO: Oh!

CLOUTIER: You didn't want to stay. [Laughs]

SHAPIRO: Oh, I didn't just know what to say. I knew it was stealing. I knew somebody take somebody's card. And I knew the other --- I had to have my card to go out, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go out.

CLOUTIER: That's right. You couldn't lose it.

SHAPIRO: So it bothered me very much. And it remained in my mind all this time,

the way they was sneaky. She just came over, and there was – you know --already something wrong. That was in my mind, that's all. But my cousin was there -- there, and then everything was settled. I don't know. I don't remember exactly what was wrong, and then she also came to America and lived a very nice life.

CLOUTIER: When you got off the ferry from Ellis Island, we have stories of a lot of thieves and people waiting for the, uh . . .

SHAPIRO: Not when I came over. Oh, you only hear about thieves today. When I came over, we used to go home ----- I used to, I belonged to a lot of organizations --- and I used to come back one o'clock in the morning, and I was never afraid. It's only now that you hear about stealing and mugging, all the other things, in our beautiful modern land now. But you didn't hear about those things before. Nobody was afraid. I really don't remember how I got from the ferry to my -- to New York --- to downtown, to my sister's store. I'm just wondering. One night I was laying, and I think, "How did I get there?" Was it by bus? It wasn't by car, it wasn't by taxi. Must have been by train. Yeah, but thinking about it, how did I get?

CLOUTIER: I don't know. [Laughs] It was a long time ago.

SHAPIRO: Yeah. And then -- of course -- I went to the ferry --- as I told you --- I went to Jersey, to my sister, and from then on it was fine.

CLOUTIER: Well, Gussie Shapiro, I thank you very much, and I thank you for sharing your memoirs with us.

SHAPIRO: Thank you. Thank you for coming over.

CLOUTIER: All right.

SHAPIRO: I love to share it with somebody who understands what I'm talking about. Because over here they're very nice people, but they got one problem. They're very, very deaf.

CLOUTIER: What?

SHAPIRO: Deaf.

CLOUTIER: Oh, deaf, yes, yes.

SHAPIRO: Deaf. I told you I can't talk to. They're very deaf, and it's very hard to a person that they don't hear what you're talking about.

CLOUTIER: We hear you loud and clear.

SHAPIRO: Well, I suppose so. I suppose so. Thank you very much. Now, tell me, what is this, what is this going to do?

END OF TAPE