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MARY GOLBERT SIEGEL
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RUSSIA, 1911
AGE 15
PASSAGE ON "THE KURSK"

NASH: Today is November 28, 1973, and I am visiting with Mary Golbert Siegel, who is an attorney practicing in Manhattan, but who came to this country many years ago in 1911 at the age of fifteen. She was born in Glusk Minsk Gobernia Russia, and she is going to tell us the story of her experiences coming to this country. Mrs. Siegel, I'd like to know a little bit about the town where you grew up.

SIEGEL: Well, I grew up, as you stated, in Glusk Minsk, in a small town in Russia. Its population was about five thousand. It had mostly Jewish population with some locals on the side and the villagers would come on market days, usually Sundays, to trade. My mother had a little store there where she was selling flour and grains and such like things and her busy day was Sunday.

My father helped her with that store ever since they were married, but I remember that my mother used to rush away to the store early in the morning and my father would dress and go to synagogue where he stayed until about eleven o'clock studying and praying and then at eleven o'clock or so he would come home and my mother had a maid who was one of three sisters who successive worked in our family and raised her children, and as each sister married the younger one would come to help. And the maid would prepare hot pancakes for my father with butter, which I remember melting and smelling so good, and he used to relish his breakfast and then he would go to the store and my mother would come home and see that the children were properly attended to. She would grab a bite very fast and in no more than an hour return to the store where she was really the whole works, my father not being too experienced or too interested. In 1904 my father, who had been a reservist in the Russian Army, either received notice or knew that it was imminent that he would be called up to participate in the Russia-Japanese War.

NASH: How did he become a reservist?

SIEGEL: Well, he had been serving in the Russian Army prior to his marriage. He served there, I believe those years it was six years, and that is a rather interesting story I think because up until the time he was called up for service, he who was a widow's son who had another son, was called up to be examined as to his age. You see, in those days in Russia registering

your children was not compulsory and I believe that the Jewish population probably practiced not registering their sons, but the government overcame that by calling them up on what they call, literally translated would mean, external appearance, and so they would call up boys who looked as though they might be seventeen or sixteen or eighteen and they would judge whether they were old enough to pass as eighteen and they would just draft them into the Army. And when a widow had two sons and one was married, the other one would be called up as a matter of course. And my father who was a brother of a married brother, was called up although he was studying for the Rabbinate, and ordinarily he might have been given an exemption. After he got through serving and he came home he was twenty-four and the Rabbis would not permit him to become a Rabbi because he was, well, he was not pure anymore in the sense that he must have been compelled to eat non-kosher food and probably work on Saturdays, certainly perform his military duties, and so they refused to give him a smikhe. That is the license to practice, to continue his studies and obtain the Rabbinate certificate. So, he did the next best thing I assume (she laughs) because he married and he didn't do badly because my mother was a hard-working, earnest, devoted woman, a really extraordinarily devoted wife and mother, very capable,

and they were very happy together. And we as children were happy too because we understood the limitations of our possibilities, but we had our dreams and as for myself I can say I always dreamed that in some way or other I would continue my studies no matter what. This town where we lived had only one school for Jewish children. I don't mean a Hebrew school because all the boys went to Hebrew schools, including my brothers from the age of four, but for people who wanted to study Russian and wanted to study modern things, there was only one school which officially was like one class, to judge what one class means, you must remember that a Russian high school graduate went through what is called eight classes, which means eight years, but in order to enter the first year of high school in Russia, those days, you had to (she clears her throat) have an equivalent of at least three or four years of education. You had to be able to read fluently and know arithmetic, and be rather bright if you were Jewish. I mean even to apply, doesn't necessarily mean you were accepted no matter how bright you were because it was a quota. So that one school they called a one years school which meant that if you were graduated from that school and were lucky and had everything going for you, you would be able to officially apply for first year of high school, gymnasium in Russia. The

teachers in those schools were usually husband and wife, Jewish. They were given the status of teachers which made them sort of the Jewish aristocracy in that little town. And the particular teachers who were teaching that school, they usually live there for years until their children grew up and they wanted more education for their children, then tried to get transferred to a school where there were more opportunities for their children, also within the pale of settlement because I know my teachers eventually were transferred to Vilna where there were higher schools and their children, tewo children, continue their studies. Anyway, these teachers were, I can say they devoted their life to educating the few Jewish children whom they could take in. There was just room for nine to twelve for the boys where the men teacher was teaching. There was room for probably for thirty or forty. One great big room where everybody. After twelve to four the wife would teach the girls. There were so many applicants and so little room that you first had to take an examination to see if you were qualified. After you took the examination, you had to draw lots because the examination would probably qualify two or three hundred Jewish children and there was room for only thirty or forty.

NASH: Was this school paid for by the state?

SIEGEL: This was paid for by the state, yes. It was a state, but the only school there was, and not every small town had it. We were just lucky and we were lucky, we, the Jewish children, were lucky in having those teachers. I'll never forget the teacher who worked on us and when she saw possibilities in children, she didn't stop at the curriculum that you go that far. The syllabus meant nothing to her. She taught them as much as they could take in. When I got through, I was lucky, I passed the examination, I also drew the right lot so that I was able to get in there. I went to that school I believe from the age of nine until the age of twelve, and when I was graduated my teacher, oh, I knew, everybody knew that I was fully capable of entering what would be called here a junior high school. In Russia it was called progymnasia. In other words more like before you enter the higher school, pre-high school, pre-higher high school. And in Bobruysk, which was a town about forty-six miles from Glusk, there were two progymnasias and one full gymnasia. The full gymnasia was out of the question for me. I couldn't make the quota. But the progymnasia we started trying, and it took about two years until I finally made it. And, of course, irrespective of the

fact that I could have entered a higher class, I was glad to take what I did and I entered the third class of the progymnasia which means that I had two more in the progymnasia, which was a four-year school. And so at age about fourteen I was graduated from there. And then there I was. I had no place to go, nothing to do, no prospects. And my mother became quite desperate about me and the children. My sister couldn't even make the lower school. She wasn't lucky enough to draw the right number. And the two boys were much too young for that, but there was just no prospect for them.

NASH: What were the hopes for girls at that time living in Russia? What did you think you would do with your education?

SIEGEL: Well, the girls of families whose parents were business people, whose father was a scholar like my father was, couldn't think in terms of anything but waiting to get married, (she laughs) I would think. As far as I am concerned, I never thought of marriage. I just dreamed of how I will eventually go on. You see, I used to read everything that was at all available. There was no regular library. But there were friends who had books or families who had books whose children didn't care to read, and you always borrowed. I think I started reading as soon as I was able to read and I read constantly and indiscriminately because I had no choice. It wasn't a case of where you said, well children this age should

read such and thus and so. And so, of course, by reason of my reading I may have had a little perverted view of the world but I did have a more worldly view and concept of the world and living in a small town and then in Bobruysk for two years would ordinarily have qualified me for. And so by that time my father had already been away about six years and we began seriously thinking of, my mother, that is, began seriously thinking of probably coming to this country, joining my father. And, of course, they figured out that if we left say at a certain age, during a certain period, I would be fifteen, my sister was a year and half younger, would be thirteen and a half, so that we would be able to work. You could get working papers those years at age of fourteen. And the boys would be able to go to school and I would go to night school. I knew that there were night schools here and there was never any question but that was exactly what I would do.

NASH: When your father wrote to your mother, did he describe the United States?

SIEGEL: Well, he described it with longing for his family, hope for them and, of course, great pain over the fact that he couldn't make a go of it. He was working as a presser in a men's clothing factory and the pay was very poor and the work was not steady and whenever he, he lived very poorly, and whenever he had a penney he would send it to my mother, but there were not many pennies. I think that both mother and he had to borrow

and whatever they realized on their possessions and he was finally able to get us steerage tickets. And my mother began getting ready to come to this country, and knowing Russia the very first thing she did as we were getting ready was to send my sister and me, who were the older, alone to Bobruysk because I knew the town, and to have our eyes checked to make sure we didn't have trachoma. We knew we didn't, but you know, they checked on that.

NASH: Who told her about that? How did she know about that?

SIEGEL: We heard from people and, you see, I used to read so much, and I had some concept. I didn't come altogether unprepared, although I was quite unprepared in many ways. And so while my sister and I were in Bobruysk for three or four days getting our eyes examined, my mother began going through all the papers and everything and she destroyed whatever she didn't know about. My mother could not read Russian. She was bright, she was clever, she was not educated. She knew Yiddish, of course, could read and write. And so she destroyed all the writings that I had had and it so happened that I used to (she laughs) write poetry. I knew Russian to an extent where I could speak to an educated Russian boy or girl of my, who were

usually not Jewish because the Jewish children just didn't have that opportunity. I would speak Russian with them when I knew that they could understand me, and if uneducated Russians would stand by and listen to us, they couldn't understand it. Because I knew that language so well. To this day I speak Russian, although I mean I tried not to. I tried not to ruin my accent and so forth or not to make it any worse. And so I used to write and I had what I thought was beautiful poetry because I remember some of it and I thought it was very good for a young child. And my mother destroyed everything in sight.

NASH: Why did she do that?

SIEGEL: She was afraid that we might be searched and they may find because that you see that was in 1911. It was following the Russian Revolution when they had the Duma and where everybody was being searched.

NASH: What is the Duma?

SIEGEL: The Duma was, well, there was a Russian revolution in 1905 and the czar granted a certain degree of freedom and what they

called the Duma which was sort of house of representatives in St. Petersburg. That is what he was called. Leningrad was called St. Petersburg. Well, the Duma was supposed to be followed by some sort of a constitution. Not really, but a sort of declaration of right. It never happened and the Duma was dismissed and the persecution of liberal and thinkers and revolutionaries and what they called nihilists, all sorts of party affiliates became even worse and so, of course, my mother was just afraid that they may find something in the writing that may disclose something that we would be sent, not only would we, we would be sent right back and I may even perhaps be jailed because by that time fifteen and it wasn't unknown that fifteen year olds were jailed.

NASH: Do you have any idea of how long your family was in Russia? I mean your ancestors.

SIEGEL: Well, I know I remember my grandmother. I have her picture here, I can show it to you. And she said that they had come from Spain. That was her recollection of it, that they came from Spain by way of Holland, so that I imagine the family might have been there seven, eight hundred years or six hundred, I don't know, I am not going through there, about, yes, about

six hundred years, I would think, whatever it was. But it wasn't a question where we didn't belong. Nobody questioned the fact that that's where we were, but they kept passing new laws and new regulations. Oh, I mean it would take too long to tell you what happened to some members of the family who lived in villages and owned land and managed estates for the landlords of the large estates, and then they were suddenly told they were no longer allowed to live there and they had to get uprooted and try to find a place to live. Well, where could they go? To the little towns where there were already so many Jews and where they had not prospered. They lived on each other. Each time a daughter, let us say of a storekeeper, would marry, she was, if her father was a storekeeper, if he was learned, he was more or less in the upper class, they did have a hierarchy in those small towns, you know, and their daughters wouldn't marry working people because to marry a shoemaker or a tailor or a carpenter was a disgrace, it was a comedown. And so they would try to find somebody either from the same town or from some adjoining town who was a member of a family, similarly situated, but was male, and so he had been studying and he would marry this girl. Of course, the girl would have to provide a livelihood so they would open a store for the daughter in the same business where

the parents had been and so they really lived on each other. Eventually there was terrific competition.

NASH: (?)

SIEGEL: (?) in the family now. Now, I remember my grandmother, who was a widow, had a son with whom she lived, a daughter-in-law who hated her guts, but my grandmother was by comparison rich. A son was supposed to be having the first priority on his parent's estate and so this only son who would eventually say kaddish, you know, the prayers for the dead, for her, was the apple of her eye and she took everything that her daughter-in-law had to dish out in order to be near her son and so that he could inherit her business, which was a rather prosperous business. And the daughter, my mother, who went into a similar business on a smaller scale, would compete with her own mother because what would happen, the Sunday was market day, and my grandmother, who was older and who had been in this business long, knew a lot of the peasants and she would come to market and pull their horses and wagons to her son. My mother, who also had to earn a living, had four young children to support, would also had known some of those peasants and there would be competition and I remember that my mother

used to feel very bitter about it. I don't know how my grandmother used to feel. She probably felt righteous because it was no more than right that her son, being a son, was entitled to everything. But that was not an exceptional case. That was more or less typical of what would happen.

NASH: Why did your mother feel bitter?

SIEGEL: Because she would lose the business. My grandmother would take the business to her son and she would fight her own daughter right there and then. Not, I don't mean fight in a way that was disgraceful, but she would use her powers of persuasion on the peasant that he had more of an opportunity there, there was a greater selection, and so forth. And my mother, who knew that it was true, nevertheless felt that she would have been able to satisfy that man's needs at the time and that there was no cause for doing it, but anyway, that's what happened.

NASH: Young women who were of higher status, when they married someone, did they generally marry people who were scholars rather than storekeepers?

SIEGEL: Well, marrying scholars conferred a greater status upon you. Now, in my mother's family this is what happened. An older sister married a man who was from a small village nearby, but who had some sort of a going business. Now when she married him she married wealth, financially, because she didn't have to work. He had brought the business along and he simply reopened a store in the same town where we lived, but he had his following more or less so that they had a lot more money. They were able to do a great deal more for their children than my parents did, but the status of my uncle, this man who my aunt married, was in so far as respect or deference is concerned, nowhere near my father who was poor but who was able to go to synagogue every day and teach a following, discuss with them. My father had a tremendous Hebrew library. He would spend money on that. But there was no money for many more important things. So that we finally had to come here and eventually we went to Liepaja in Russia, which is a port. It was further Northwest and I think it is now Lithuania or Latvia. And, of course, there were either quarantined or I don't know what the reason was that they kept us for three weeks, but it was the American HIAS who took over once we got there. And, oh yes, I had read and I knew certain things we had, certain rights, and even though we had steerage tickets,

we were entitled to a room, being a family. And so this lady who met us who was a representative of HIAS and maybe employed by them, told us that she would take us to a place where we would spend the three weeks or so that we had to stay before we were able to board the ship, and I said to her, "We're having a room to ourselves, aren't we?" And she said, "Oh, yes." And when we came back we had exactly two beds in a room that had twelve beds, with other families, but there was nothing I could do.

NASH: How many were you?

SIEGEL: We were my mother and four children. I was the oldest, and being the oldest, of course, and also being the most knowledgeable, I thought, and my mother thought so too, and naturally I was, limited as it was. I sort of took charge. And then, of course, they were supposed to provide food for us and there was a place where you could boil water that was the extent of the cooking during that period. But they didn't provide enough food and we had very little money and my mother had to go out and count pennies and buy food and she thought everything was so expensive. Probably it was. Perhaps they were taking advantage of the immigrants. We didn't know

anything or anybody and the representative of HIAS, I think, would show up periodically and we would complain and she would say it would be taken care of and it never did. But those three weeks finally passed too. We learned to sleep three to a bed and so forth. And finally we got to the ship. The name of the ship was Kursk. It was the Russian-American Line they had in those days. And, of course, it was steerage. Now I knew steerage, but I didn't know what steerage actually meant in terms of practical living. What they did was this. The minute we got on the ship some officials or sailors were standing by. A mother with children would be shifted one way. If she had children who looked a little older, they would be shifted another way. Well, I was fifteen. I looked older, so we were immediately separated and my mother went there and I didn't mind being separated. I knew where she was going. And so I went to this place where they had just childless, unmarried girls, and just girls, not men. They had them separated. And so when we came that must have been early and so I was able to select a bunk. It was two tiers. I was able to select the upper tier. I felt that it was more comfortable. And I left my stuff there and I went looking for my mother and found her there and, of course, she was crying. She said, "I can't leave you alone. You are much too young. How can

I leave you?" And so I pacified her. I said, "You just stay here and settle with the boys." Actually, they had sort of upper, they were lucky, they also got upper, but there were about three bunks. She and my sister in one, the two boys and another, and she saved one for me in the hope that I would still be able to. Well, I went back to my steerage compartment and I there found two husky Lithuanian peasant women, young, right next to each other, and they told me, I said, "But that's my bunk. Here is my stuff." She said, "Here's your stuff." She threw it at me and said, "We have this room and what will you do about it?" or something to that effect. I don't know what she said. All I know is that I felt I couldn't fight with them and I didn't know enough to go to complain and frankly it wasn't so much that I didn't know, I knew from my life's experiences that complaining means nothing because I was only Jewish and I didn't count, especially amongst strangers.

NASH: Were they speaking Russian?

SIEGEL: Oh, yes. They all spoke Russian. And so did I. It was practically the only language I knew at the time. Well, I took my bundle and I came back to my mother who was in seventh heaven. She immediately squeezed me in with the family and that's where we stayed.

NASH: What were your mattresses made out of?

SIEGEL: Well, I don't remember what the mattresses, you must remember that in our state of affluence in Russia we didn't know much about mattresses. (she coughs) My mother and father had a pehrehneh, which means a featherbed, which was more or less an heirloom. You know, as each daughter married they would maybe add some more feathers to the thing or make her a new one, but the children slept on straw filled sacks and so that part, perhaps it was even better than what I had at home. But it made absolutely no impression up on me. This is the first time I even was led to think about that. And so far as the comfort of laying or sitting was concerned, I was alright. It was just we had to squeeze in. There was very little room. The bunks were terribly narrow and you had to squeeze in.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

NASH: I imagine the ceilings must have been very low.

SIEGEL: Steerage. Oh, yes you had to go down about two floors.

NASH: I said the ceilings must have been low.

SIEGEL: And also it was two tiers, you see, so that of necessity, if you were on the upper tier you really were practically, the ceiling was on top of you. Well, (she clears her throat) the ship started and the second day out my mother promptly got very sick, seasick, but all she was worried about is the children, especially the two younger boys. And my sister, she felt I would look after her, but two younger children, what could she do with them. And I don't know how she used to, so that sick as she was, she used to worry about them. I think that they used to serve one meal a day in the common dining room and she couldn't go down, and she wouldn't have wanted to eat anyway because it wasn't kosher. So she brought along some tea and some bread. She must have been told by people who heard from their children who went through that experience. You know, they had letters. And the immigrants sort of knew that they had to bring tea and bread. And so she had that and some dry cheese and she used to get hot water from the sailors once or twice a day and she would make tea and eat that bread and cheese and feed that to the boys because she was afraid to let them go alone to the dining room. My

sister and I couldn't take them because the dining room is just for girls.

NASH: Was the dining room only for the people in steerage?

SIEGEL: Yes. It was a great big dining room with long tables and benches. No cloths, of course, but I remember they used to serve, of course, there was always bread, lots of bread and tea, but I remember the meals must have been very unsatisfactory and monotonous because I remember to this day that every now and then they would serve a cereal of some kind. It was white like wheatina or cream of wheat, and we thought they used to serve a certain kind of jam. Not milk, but just a little jam to sweeten it. And I remember that I used to enjoy it so much after the bread and tea that I always felt that I would have loved to have another portion, but nobody ever offered it and there was never enough on the table to just help yourself because they used to put out great big basins and you helped yourself, but by the time the first round was served, that was that, there was no more left because you must remember, here we were no longer in a little Jewish community, we had competition from all kinds of immigrants from Russia, Lithuanians, Latvians, Russian peasants and so forth who ate much more and needed much more (she laughs), they were accustomed and were more aggressive. So that I remember was I was standing at the rail and I was just watching the waves because if you were well enough, there was a deck where you could go out, and I saw them bring out a barrels, something like a garbage barrel

that we have here, filled with that farina or whatever, that cereal, and they dumped it into the sea and I thought to myself, here there are so many people who would want more of it, but instead of serving it to us, they dumped it out.

NASH: Maybe they had a good reason.

SIEGEL: Well, no, it looked perfectly good. They just wanted to get through. They didn't want to be bothered. Well, my sister also became sick so that I was all alone on deck and I was having a very good time. I met some boys and girls who knew Russian well, spoke the language. I enjoyed it and after a while I became very friendly with one kid, a young fellow who must have been about seventeen or eighteen. He was a sailor, but he was working on the ship, but when he would have time off he too had dreams. He was writing poetry. He would read it to me and we were very, at least I was a very innocent child. I mean I knew there was such a thing as love and so forth. As a matter of fact, when I left Russia I had a boyfriend. We were very devoted, but was not physical relationship of any kind, not even kisses. And so, this was, I found the trip very interesting. I enjoyed it, but I always felt sorry for my poor mother who suffered so. Well, finally, the ship took exactly three weeks to bring us from Liepaja to here. And

on May 11th we arrived. When we arrived, I think May 11, 1911 was still Castle Garden. I don't think it was Ellis Island, but I am not sure. It is strange that I shouldn't remember, but I think it was Castle Garden because that is what I remember being mentioned all the time. And by that time my father, who was terribly anxious to meet us, could not see us that day because by the time the steerage passengers were cleared it was after three and HIAS didn't work or anybody. So HIAS took us to a great big room there, all the Jewish immigrants, and I think they gave us a meal which by comparison was luxurious because the strange things that you remember, I remember they had carrots on the table (she laughs) in addition to many things other things. And, of course, we went to bed. We had individual cots and we couldn't sleep. We waited for next morning and our father and sure enough next morning at eight o'clock.

NASH: Do you remember going up any staircases?

SIEGEL: Oh, yes.

NASH: You were probably at Ellis Island because Castle Garden was closed at that time.

SIEGEL: Well, if you say it was closed, then it was closed. But I probably am repeating what I heard other people say, my family say. Of course, they were accustomed to Castle Garden going way back, when immigration started. So that we came and went to the place where you could see people who waited for you and I remember we were examined by a doctor to see our eyes and we were passed. And there we saw behind a fence, a wire fence, we saw our father's face squeezing against the fence. Of course, we hadn't seen him in seven and a half years and we were all very young so my mother and I were the only ones who recognized him. And eventually we were joined by him.

NASH: Did you take a boat?

SIEGEL: No. This what I want to tell you. We did not take a boat as far as I remember or maybe we, well, I just don't remember, but I do remember one, I don't think we took a boat. That was Castle Garden then, wasn't it? I don't think we took a boat, but I remember that once we were joined, the family was reunited, my father walked with us a few blocks to the Madison Street bus, it's Duane Street bus, and of course, when we waited for the bus to come and that was the first stop so we got on

and the bus started. It was horse-drawn in those days. The horses started jogging and then the bus driver stopped and more people came on and I remember I felt resentful as though they were interfering with our privacy. I didn't know that a bus meant taking passengers generally. I thought it was sort of a private conveyance because that's all I knew about from my books. I didn't know about buses and public conveyances. In Russia, those years, they had no public conveyance. They had droshky, they had various other things, and that I knew about from books, not personal experience. But then I sort of realized that it's a public conveyance and my father had taken an apartment on Montgomery Street which was on the Lower East Side, of course, on the fifth floor walk up naturally, where another family from our hometown had an apartment on the sixth floor. And he made arrangements with them that when he brought his family, that woman would have tea and bread and butter for us, which he paid for in advance. And so he took us to our apartment one floor below where we dropped off everything and it was furnished. He arranged that. It was all furnished by him. He bought furniture and he told us that we were going upstairs to so and so whom my mother knew but I didn't know them, and she prepared tea and hot bread and butter and it was very delicious and very good and she

asked us if we would like some more. Now, the reason I refused and my mother did too, but my reasons were that I knew from reading because in Russia all you had was wood stoves and coal stoves that you had to use spirit lamps in order to get tea boiling in big cities, and so I thought she used spirit lamps and those were expensive so I didn't want her to make more tea for us. I didn't know my father was paying for it and for the same reason I didn't want any more bread and butter. Well, finally we came down and she didn't disillusion me, this woman. Maybe she didn't even know the reason for my refusal, and I was hungry because all we had that morning was a breakfast the Hias had prepared for us and I don't think any of us ate. We were anxious to get out. So finally we came down to our own apartment and I had been dreaming. I knew we weren't going to live a life of luxury and that I would have to work and that I would go to school at night, but I had been dreaming of a certain amount of comfort and the four rooms that my father had prepared didn't look too bad but there were certain things that were lacking and he explained to us right off and mother concurred, that one of the rooms would be rented eventually to help us pay the rent. And he said, yes he already had somebody if that's what she wants.

NASH: How many rooms did you have?

SIEGEL: Four rooms, and it was like a railroad flat. You know, you enter the kitchen and on your left was the dining room, living room, whatever you want to call it, and on the right were two small bedrooms. You had to pass one to get into the other. And they had tiny windows that looked into a court, and very narrow, they called it skylight, those days. It was a very narrow courtyard, and the kitchen also looked in the same courtyard and it was so close to the building next door that my mother and the lady who occupied the apartment in the other building were able to hand things over (they laugh) to each other when they borrowed things. It was very narrow thing.

NASH: How did that compare to the place you had been living in Glusk?

SIEGEL: Well, at home, as I said, we didn't live in luxury, but we had a, let' see, two bedrooms, we had a five-room house and it had a Shanne, you know, like an entrance thing, entrance room where in the winter and part of that was divided for sort of a storage room. There were conveniences and, of course, we had a stall for our cow in the rear, you know, further on the lot from the house and we had our own cow and we never

felt deprived. I mean we'd have meat maybe once a week and I remember mother would take that little meat that she would buy and she would shred it so it would appear like a lot, and the children or she would help them. But we had lots of butter, lots of cheese, lots of milk, and Fridays mother would bake all kinds of buttery cakes, you know, like coffee cakes (she laughs) but with lots of butter and it was so delicious they never lasted the week. We would eat it, Friday we would eat half of it. And sour cream and, of course, potatoes and all kinds of vegetables, and in the spring when our cow would calf, we would raise it for about six weeks and then mother would have it killed, have it slaughtered and we had that meat for us, so that we never really felt deprived and we always had warm clothes. Of course, you don't get luxurious things, but things that last and they're passed from one to the other. Well, we came here, as I said, and there was a contrast and I sensed it immediately because the second day I began to speak about going to work because I saw that we'd need money. I heard my father tell how much he was earning and it was very little. Something like seven dollars a week when he worked a full week, and even I knew that it was shockingly little. So, the third day I was here this same lady who had daughters of her own had one daughter who was working in a factory and

she said she would be able to get a job for me if I wanted to come in to work, so the third day we were here, I remember we arrived on a Tuesday and, no, the second day, Thursday, because Saturday I wasn't going to work, and I went with her early in the morning, probably about seven because we had to walk (she clears her throat) from where we were on the Lower East Side to I think it was Green Street or Mercer Street, if you are familiar with the neighborhood. It was more like the West Side...

END SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIEGEL: ...this was before eight and she introduced me to the foreman who was a young fellow and, of course, I was so trusting I didn't think he was rough. He looked like a stranger, and he sat me down to a very simple task which was joining seams on the children's dresses, the skirt seams, and it was simple work. It was just the matter of once you mastered the art of pushing the treadle on the electrified machine, as much as you could carry. And I thought I worked very hard and my back ached and my shoulders

ached toward lunch time and he was not satisfied. He said to me, "Griena, you don't work fast enough." He spoke Yiddish which I understood but couldn't talk back.

NASH: Was he Yiddish?

SIEGEL: He was Jewish. It was a Jewish place. They were closed on Saturdays, otherwise my father would not have permitted me to go to work there. And at the end of the day he told me the same thing. He said, "You don't produce enough," he said, "But I will do you a favor. I'll pay you two dollars a week." And so I started working on that two dollars a week. I worked there for about a month and all the time he kept complaining that I wasn't fast enough. Finally, I realized that I can perhaps get a job somewhere else and do better. But the first two dollars I got, my first pay, I was sure that he was wrong, that I could never earn that much money, so I grabbed a hold of the two dollars and as I walked back home I held on tight to it and kept looking back to see if they weren't running after me to get that money back. Well, after I worked there for a couple of weeks, I began to think there were only two things that I could do. I had to try to find another job, but I couldn't quit this one because we needed the two dollars

every week, and at the same time I felt here it was, we arrived on May 11th here, by that time it was already June and I still didn't start going to school. So those days they used to have summer night school in the public school. Not only in the winter, but in the summer, and there was a school on Hester Street, no Essex Street and East Broadway. It's now Seward High School, I think, that opened June 11th for night school work, and I immediately registered there and started going to school. And it was sometimes hard after a hard days work because especially during the very hot days I used to get terrible headaches, but I never skipped school. And in the meantime I began looking for another job and I think I got a job with a similar firm, similar type of work, where I was getting, oh, I think four dollars a week. So that was an improvement. Four dollars helped the family a lot because you remember those days, you don't remember, but I will tell you. Those days milk was five cents a quart and bread was seven cents a pound and mother always used to get the old bread so that she was able to get even more for the seven cents. She always used to go shopping to Monroe Street which those days was a haven for old discarded (she laughs) vegetables and old bread and everything else, and you could get it cheaper.

NASH: At that time did you feel any sense of relief of having left Russia?

SIEGEL: No. I felt a great sense of having left a life of the mind and soul for a life of perhaps greater physical comfort, but with such pain, such deprivation in that it was nothing but an animal life. You worked, you got up in the morning and you went to work and you were exhausted at night and the people that you got to know were the people that you would never have talked to because I told you in Russia there was that hierarchy. You never talked to at home and if you were younger your mother was careful to see that you didn't associate with them because she wanted you to grow up among your own kind. And I remember talking to a young girl after work. That young girl came from my hometown and in Russia I was somebody. I was a very educated person even though I was only fifteen and I was recognized as being intellectually superior to many. Now this girl who was about my age wanted to study Russian before she had left for the United States. She had left about two years before me. And so I used to teach her Russian. She was my pupil.

NASH: In Russia?

SIEGEL: In Russia. Although I was only thirteen, but it was nothing unusual. I mean I was teaching children, some of them, when I was eleven. And so, of course, she was just my pupil and I knew her in that way. When I came to this country she had already been here two years. She spoke English, whatever the quality of the English was, and I was just a greenhorn, and she made me feel it and I think she even said it. And I remember coming up and telling my father, "You know Papa," and my father was a marvelous person, understanding, sympathetic, I said, "You know, I will never immigrate again. I will never leave this country because I don't want any children that I may ever have to go through the experience that I am going through now. I want them to feel that they were born in the land where they grow up and where hopefully they'll be happy." Of course, those years no one questioned but in America you'll be happy, forever and ever and ever. That was one of the experiences. Of course, mornings I would get up early in the morning and I would be tired because I always felt I had a little homework to do and, of course, I had school, and my father (she clears her throat) who was generally laid off or maybe sometimes if he worked only part of the day so that he would be up. He would sit in with me for breakfast and mother, of course, would be up to prepare everything for the children to go to school

and so forth, and he didn't go to work and I who was, by that time he probably realized how very sheltered I was raised and what my ambitions and dreams were, which he understood and sympathized with and also dreamed with me, and so he would sit and cry. I would try to shove some food down because, of course, I was not hungry, but I knew I had two eat, and he would cry and after a while I would cry. And it was a sad life, but once I started school there was a little glimmer of light in the end. But in September (she clears her throat) the summer school closed and I realized that this was enough to give me little knowledge of the English language but that it wasn't getting me anywheres and I knew that I wanted to get an American high school equivalency diploma. I didn't know it in those terms, but I had met people who were going to private schools and so forth and somebody told me about the Erin Preparatory School. At that time it was located next door to the Forward Building, right next door in an old three-story walk-up, and Mr. Erin who was called Dr. Erin, he may have been a Ph.D., I don't know, was conducting a school where courses were being given so that people who were capable, incidentally, were being given both day and night, evenings, people who were capable were able to take an examination which was a high school equivalent examination, the same examination

that high school boys and girls were getting, but it was given under Board of regents supervision. They would give the examination and they would have proctors watching the pupils who were taking it, and if you passed it you were able to accumulate enough credits in the various required subjects to be able to enter college. And so I registered with Erin Preparatory School. It was quite inexpensive by present day standards, but for us it was a sacrifice because we had to give up literally bread and milk money to pay the tuition.

NASH: This is not a religious school?

SIEGEL: No, no.

NASH: It was not in any way Jewish connected?

SIEGEL: No. Well, there were mostly Jewish and I think (she laughs) he was Jewish, but it wasn't religious, it was just for high school courses. But mother said, "Oh, no," she said. "Money is no object. That is not going to stop you." She said, "We will be able to find something," she said, "if I have to become the janitress, I'll become a janitress." That's one thing, of course, we all knew that we didn't want our mother to be.

But anyway, she made it her business to have the monthly tuition ready for me and I started that school and I remember the first course I took was Foreign English because I had to learn English in order to be able to take the other subjects. All teachers were private, you know, some of them were regular high school teachers who were doing additional work at night, and I had to be there at six and I would stay there until ten. So the first course I took was Foreign English. I started in September. And Algebra and Chemistry. Well, both of those subjects I knew from Russia, but I had to take it because otherwise it wasn't recognized as a credit towards college entrance. So I took those three subjects and I did so well in English, (she laughs) I remember, that the teacher read my composition in class and he asked me how long I had been in this country. Well, this was September or October, and we had arrived in May and I told him and he couldn't believe it. He said, "How large do you think your vocabulary is?" I said, "Maybe a hundred words." I didn't think it was even (she laughs) that much. And yet I was able with those few words to manipulate them because I was accustomed to it. I had been writing in Russian and to make quite a praise-worthy little composition.

NASH: Do you remember what your composition was about?

SIEGEL: I think it was my impression of the United States, and as relates to my experiences from the home that I came from. And it must be that the impact of the superior attitudes that my former pupils or those whom I had barely known in Russia had towards me that hurt me so terribly because I remember writing that in Russia there was no snobbery among the Jews, but there was a certain accepted and recognized caste difference. And I remember that I asked him how to pronounce that word. I knew the word because it is the same in Russian and it means the same thing, but I didn't know how to pronounce it, so that word must have been included in my composition. Well, anyway, that January was the next Regents Examination to be given, so I took my examination in chemistry and algebra. In Foreign English they don't give you credit for. And after a while I began hearing from other people that they had gotten their results, they passed, failed, and so forth, and so I told my mother to watch for the mail, that I was expecting these results of mine, and so she told the super to watch and, of course, the minute the super heard that he thought it was something important so that that mail never arrived. He probably opened it and just destroyed it. Maybe he thought it would be something else. Well, I consulted Mr. Erin and he told me to write and tell them that I had not gotten it and so they sent me two credit cards. They were marked "duplicates." And there was an H after each subject. It means that I passed with honors, both algebra. And, of course, that gave me a tremendous lift. So when we began registering for the next semester, not equivalent of

semester, next term I had the courage to take English, which was the equivalent of four years of high school English, but you were allowed to take three years, and again the fourth year you could take or not. So I took three years of high school English which everyone seemed to have had a lot of trouble in passing and I passed it. In June I took that examination and in due course I was notified that I passed it, and so they put a bulletin on the board in Erin School that here I was exactly one year in this country and I passed three years of high school English. And it was very heartening. Well, I continued taking all the courses that I needed for high school, which included two years of French, foreign language, two years of German, two foreign languages, another foreign language. And then I had to take biology, a few sciences to make up the equivalent of a high school, a full four-year high school course, and I never failed. I passed every one of those subjects so that by June of 1913, no, 1914, I was ready to enter college.

NASH: How old were you?

SIEGEL: At that time I was seventeen. And I applied at NYU Law School. Those years you didn't need pre-law or pre-medicine or pre-anything. You graduated from high school, you were ready to enter those courses. And my preference would have been to study medicine, but medicine they were not giving night courses and I couldn't afford to give up my work because the family needed the money. So I registered at NYU Law School and I was graduated in 1917.

NASH: And when did you take the Bar? Did they have Bar examinations?

SIEGEL: Oh, yes indeed. I had to take the Bar examination, but I was not twenty-one. You had to be twenty-one to take the Bar examinations, so I couldn't take the Bar examination until the fall of 1917.

NASH: You must have been one of the youngest lawyers around. (she laughs)

SIEGEL: Yes, I passed the Bar examination, but I was not a lawyer yet. You had to work, those years you didn't have to go to pre-law, but you had to work a year for a lawyer before you were certified, before you were sworn in as an attorney.

NASH: Were there many other women who were involved?

SIEGEL: Two more. In my class there were two more women. Of course, they were both American born. They were Jewish girls, but they were both American born, and they were secretaries in law offices, as a matter of fact. And so what I omitted to tell you, that when I finally entered Erin's Preparatory School, I met my husband. (she laughs) That is, I met the

young boy who would eventually become my husband. He was about a year and a half older than I was. He was following the same routine. He had arrived the December before me. I arrived in May, he arrived in December. And my mother loved him because she was afraid that if I don't marry quickly, I'll be an old maid. And so she thought there was just no one like him. Well, he was a very nice, clean cut young boy. Family was about the same as us, also nice family, nice background in the sense that they were in business when they were in Russia, and family business went back generations and so forth. And so when I entered law school, his mother insisted that he buy me a ring and, of course, he did on installment, and he was able to pay it out finally. And the year I entered law school he entered the School of Commerce at NYU. And that time neither the Law School nor the School of Commerce were quite as large as they are now. Now each one has its own tremendous building, but those years they had on Washington Square, the official address was 32 Waverly Place, corner of Washington Square, and they had the eighth floor was the School of Commerce, the ninth floor I think were offices, and the tenth floor (she laughs) was the Law School. And so during intermission, he too went evenings, he would come up to see me. And so when I was graduated, which was on May 30th, I remember, on May

31st we were married. Actually, we had been married before, but not really married, just officially married because he was a citizen and I was not, and not being a citizen I couldn't get my diploma, I couldn't graduate from law school. So that in March of 1917 we were married in court so that I officially became a citizen, being married to a citizen. And so I was able to graduate, but I mean it wasn't makeshift because we had been engaged for years and our plan had been to get married.

NASH: Was it difficult to arrange a court wedding?

SIEGEL: Not at all. You went to the clerk like it is now. You get a license and they ask you whether you are going to be married home. They do the same thing today.

NASH: I thought that maybe that was done by the Immigration officials or something.

SIEGEL: Oh, no. It had nothing whatever to do with Immigration. It was City Hall, a municipal building. And we came, we were a couple of innocents. We came without witnesses and so the clerk realized that we were a couple of nice (she chuckles) youngsters and we were both on the way of being professional,

so he called in a couple of clerks in the office with him and they acted as our (she laughs) witnesses. So we became citizens. Well anyway, neither we nor either of our families considered us being married. I remember my husband would see me home from school about ten thirty from NYU. We would both walk home. He lived a few blocks away from me on the Lower East Side. And ten o'clock my mother would say, "Time for bed." And he would go home and that was that. But anyway, on May 31st we were married, Jewish ceremony that mother arranged with a Rabbi, and turn around the Chupa seven times and everything and she was happy. Now she felt we were really married. And by that time we were in World War I, which we entered I think sometime in May after Wilson had promised that if re-elected he was the man that kept us out of war, and we promptly were engaged in war and , of course, was subject to call, so that it was a question of whether we should even get an apartment, but his mother with tears streaming down her face, "Please, please, have a home," and so forth and so on. So there were no apartments to be had so we got a room in place in Seagate, Coney Island, and it was nice. We enjoyed it. There were lots of young couples. And then he was called up and he was rejected on physical grounds, 4-F those years also, I think. I don't know whether the Second World War had

the same classifications. And then the fun started. It was summer and I decided I would take the summer off. I had to wait until I was permitted to take the Bar, so I decided I would just hold out and not go to work for the summer, and I had such a good time because it was the first time since we had arrived in this country that I was able to get up and not have to run to work, have an evening and not have to go to school. It was just wonderful. And I suppose I better skip a lot because you want me to go on with what happened. Well, eventually the war was over. My husband passed his CPA examination, he acquired a couple of clients.

END SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

NASH: Well, maybe we could just go back a little bit. I imagine this was a very important time for you when you were able to enjoy your life. Maybe your feeling about America started changing.

SIEGEL: Very important. Oh, yes, it had changed quite rapidly after I started going to school. As long as I had hope of improving my lot and improving the lot of the family. There was no

question that I thought that this was the most wonderful land and I was so happy. I longed for the kind of life I had led as a child, but one longs for childhood irrespective of whether one immigrates or not. The memories of childhood is something you long for, you miss, but once I started going to Erin School and I knew that I had an aim to achieve a certain thing and I had every reason to believe I would achieve it, my whole attitude changed. I no longer had to associate with anyone I didn't want to. For one thing, I didn't have any time to associate with anyone except work and school and school and work. And so, as I said, now he started working for his CPA and eventually he passed his CPA examination and his mother began begging me to have a child. "Why don't you have a child?" Well, by that time I had taken the Bar examination and I had passed it. I was working, I had to put in a year in a law office before, I told you, before I was able to practice law, so I started working in a law office and I was perfectly happy as I was, but when I would see the tears streaming down her face, "Why don't you have a child?" Of course, she was afraid her son would be called up and she would have nothing left from him. I don't know what her reasons were, but I imagine that that was a part of the reason. And then I suppose I myself started to think would be nice to have a child and so forth

and so I became pregnant and eventually I had my very wonderful daughter who is now a professor of English at the University of Florida. But after she was about two years old, I decided she can do without me and I was sworn in as an attorney and I began practicing law and my husband and I have done pretty well for ourselves. We never expected too much, but we were very earnest about the work we were doing. Our clients probably appreciated it. And so we were able to get to a comfortable stage in life. We have gone through a lot. My husband had been ill quite a lot. As a matter of fact, he's always been ailing. He still is, but he is still working and so am I. And we have two wonderful children. My son is with his father. He's a CPA too. He's married to a wonderful girl who's a Ph.D. in French, and he has three wonderful children. Two of the boys are already in college. One is at MIT, the older one. The younger one at Michigan State. My daughter, as I said, she unfortunately lost her very wonderful husband, who died of leukemia six years ago, eight years ago. But she has this one child who is married to a very, very wonderful Rhodes scholar, brilliant boy, who is connected with the Administration of the University of Wisconsin, and my granddaughter was graduated from Smith and she has a Ford Fellowship to study for her doctorate in American History.

Very brilliant, very outstanding. So that you see I think that this country has done an awful lot for us, but I do think that we have done a lot for this country too. We have given it credit, we have given it all we had, and we had a lot to give by way of intellect, by way of devotion, by way of appreciation, by way of love. Now my granddaughter is in illustration. Was a 1970 graduate of Smith. You know 1970 was the year of those wild kids at college. It was anti-war and anti-everything else, all of which was perfectly justified, but my granddaughter, I thank God and all the powers that be, had never become a member of the SDS who said, "Destroy everything first and then begin to build." I knew because I did not believe that that was the path and many times when I felt that she was getting in with her school friends to be a little extreme and carried away by emotions, I had to be very careful how I spoke to her. I realized that I was speaking to a person who was not only acting, but thinking. But I told her and I hoped that she listened to me, that it had some impact up on her, anyway, no matter how small, that I was raised in a different country, under different circumstances, and I know how very wonderful this land of ours is and what a great future it has if only its citizens understand it, that within the democratic process you can build anew, you can create a better

life for people everywhere, not alone here, and it is still my belief that we do not need violence, we do not need guns, we do not need bombs. All we need is understanding, develop mentality, controlled emotions, and ability to reason and to think and I think we will all realize that we are fortunate people to be living here, that we are fortunate in that now that we are going through this terrible, terrible period of Watergate, of unscrupulous people in high places, of unprincipled grabbers of power, of wealth, of unprincipled people who take advantage of the powers which they have in that they deprive others of things which rightly belong to them, the great majority of the people. We still have our process of voting people out of office which is one of the few things still left to us and I think that if we are able to educate the populous, the masses, as to the prospects of a free society, acting not so much emotionally but thinking about what they do and what they can do, what they owe to themselves and what they owe to the people of their country and the people of the world, that we can create a wonderful life for ourselves here and an example to be followed by the rest of the world. I believe that my granddaughter was influenced by what she felt to be my true belief as regards this country. At least I hope she was. I do know this, that

she is very level-headed, a brilliant student, that she is interested in the politics of the state where she now lives, Wisconsin, that she had helped the governor of the state in his campaign and he is a Democrat, and so I think that not only my granddaughter, but even the wild and somewhat unruly younger generation of her college era will be the leavening of a brighter future, a hopeful future, and a soul-satisfying future for all of us.

NASH: Thank you very much.

SIEGEL: Thank you.