**Janet:** Today is October 14th 1995. I’m here in the Ellis Island Studio and have the good fortune to be talking with a brother and sister. It’s Mr. George, originally Joseph Fin who became Fine at Ellis Island.

**George:** That’s right.

**Janet:** His sister Tillie, originally Toba Fine Kroop. We are here today, this is the second visit that you’ve made. Right? The first one was when you came from Latvia.

**George:** That’s right. That’s right.

**Janet:** You came from Latvia in 1922. Tillie was 13 years of age and George was 10 years of age at that time. I’m delighted and I look forward to anything you can remember about this whole experience of immigration. If we could start at the beginning. Tillie maybe you could say your birth date for the tape and where you were born.

**Tillie:** Okay. I was born in Rezekne. That’s 1909 December the 8th.

**Janet:** Okay, George?

**George:** I was born in the same town Rezekne on August 22nd 1912.

**Janet:** Can you spell Rezekne?

**George:** R-E-Z-E-K-N-E.

**Janet:** Now, were either of you ever told any story about your birth? Was there anything unusual or anything that your mother ever told you about the time you were born?

**Tillie:** I don't know, nothing really.

**George:** No, really not. My mother had a bakery shop and she was always too busy working for us to remember. Then even if we did discuss it, I wouldn’t remember.

**Janet:** You wouldn’t remember?

**George:** I wouldn’t remember.

**Tillie:** Our father passed away quite a long time. We don’t have much to tell you about him.

**Janet:** Was your father alive when you were living in Latvia?

**George:** Yes.

**Tillie:** Yes. That’s where he passed away there.

**George:** He passed away when I was about seven maybe eight.

**Tillie:** I don't know but we were younger children.

**George:** We were very young.

**Janet:** What was your father’s name?

**George:** Maurice.

**Tillie:** Maurice.

**Janet:** Do you remember when he died?

**Tillie:** No.

**George:** Yes. He died in about 1917, ’16 somewhere in there.

**Tillie:** I don't know.

**Janet:** Do you remember the incident? No?

**Tillie:** Yes.

**Janet:** Your mother, what was her name?

**Tillie:** Mary.

**Janet:** Mary?

**Tillie:** Yes.

**Janet:** Do you remember her maiden name?

**Tillie:** Miller.

**Janet:** Did you have other brothers and sisters in Latvia?

**George:** Yes.

**Tillie:** Yeah, we had two more brothers, right?

**George:** Three brothers.

**Janet:** Why don’t you say the names of the children?

**George:** The family had four males, four brothers. Myself …

**Janet:** And one sister?

**Tillie:** Three sisters.

**George:** No, three sisters. The boys were myself George. Then I had a brother Harry and Phillip who came to America with us. My brother …

**Tillie:** Isaac he was-

**George:** Isaac remained in Russia because he was not living at home with us. He was in the Russian Army at the time. He chose to stay in Moscow in that area. We were in Latria. We were living in Latvia then. See, we lived in Latvia, born in Latvia and that’s where we live. Our brother was in the Russian Army. At the time, he was stationed in Moscow. Also, there was an older sister who was with him.

**Tillie:** He was there.

**George:** They were the only two siblings who never migrated to this country.

**Janet:** I see. What was your sister’s name? The one who went to Moscow?

**Tillie:** Rya.

**George:** R-Y-A, Rya yes.

**Janet:** You had other sisters?

**Tillie:** Another sister Rose.

**Janet:** Rose?

**Tillie:** Yes.

**Janet:** Where did you two fit in the birth order?

**George:** I’m the youngest.

**Janet:** You’re the youngest?

**George:** She’s the next.

**Janet:** The next youngest, you’re the two youngest?

**Tillie:** We’re the two youngest, yes.

**George:** Everybody above us is gone.

**Tillie:** Yeah. We’re alive here to tell you.

**Janet:** When you think back to your life in Latvia and you remember your mother, what memories do you have?

**Tillie:** My mother was a hardworking woman. She used to bake. She used to sell the stuff she baked. She used to bake stuff like breads and all that stuff, hard working woman. My father, when he was alive, he was a carpenter.

**Janet:** Did he build houses?

**George:** No.

**Tillie:** No.

**Janet:** Fixing?

**Tillie:** Just fixing, yes.

**George:** He was a general carpenter.

**Janet:** Do you remember any times where you went places with your mother or father?

**Tillie:** No.

**George:** No. we didn’t travel too much. I think it was hard times.

**Janet:** Maybe to the market or just locally?

**George:** Not I much because I was the youngest. We had our older siblings [inaudible 00:06:13].

**Tillie:** A different way of living.

**George:** It’s real country. It’s country. It’s country in the, you didn’t live a house on top of each other. It was a house, the next house. The neighbor lived a block away or so.

**Janet:** What do you remember about, if you could describe as much as possible what it was like living in that small town?

**George:** It was hard. I remember during World War I, our town was beseeched. We were captured by the Germans. Tillie and I were at the time in a Hebrew school. Do you remember that day?

**Tillie:** No.

**George:** She doesn’t remember. I’m younger but she doesn’t remember.

**Tillie:** You have a better memory.

**George:** I remember that because not only was our town bombed but we lived near a bridge, not very far from a bridge over a river. They came around and told us to cover strips of paper across our windows, crisscross in the event of an air attack so the glass wouldn’t shutter. The bridge was mined. If the enemy got near the bridge, they were going to blow it up. We were living fairly close to that bridge. I remember that.

I also remember we were at the Hebrew school when the Germans attacked and captured our town. We couldn’t go home until way at the end of the day until we were going home. On our way home, this I remember, the big craters from the bombs that fell in the town.

**Janet:** Do you remember people? Do you remember like your Hebrew teacher or the other children?

**George:** The Hebrew teacher was an old man with a beard. He lived close to his house. We went to his house for lessons.

**Janet:** How many children?

**George:** I don't know how many he had there but not many. Then of course, another thing that I remember is the American YMCA had a branch there. They were living in a house in the head of our street. Do you remember that?

**Tillie:** No.

**George:** No. Anyway, I remember them. What impressed me about them is they used to play baseball with a hard ball. They used a glove to catch it. That was too strange to us because we used the rubber balls. We had many programs in our town. We were always saved by the embassy. The embassy would not permit anybody to get to our street when the program started.

I guess the Russians, what do you call them? We had a name for them, The Cossacks, when they were rioting, it’s not even a riot, it’s a program. It’s a riot. They would stand across the street and wouldn’t let them enter. They wouldn’t fight with them naturally. They were Americans.

**Janet:** This is the American Embassy?

**George:** Yes, not embassy, YMCA. We used to call it YMCA. I remember that vividly. We were spared but sometimes we had to leave our house during the programs.

**Janet:** What would you do?

**George:** Hide, run out behind the forest in the country somewhere. A program never lasted days, hours. It was a riot. Hit and miss and when the hall was clear we’d come back.

**Janet:** Do you remember any of that Tillie?

**Tillie:** No. I just remember they used to kill people. They used to hide them in the homes and all that but nothing else really. I don't remember.

**George:** There was another incident during World War I when the Germans occupied our town, the Russians were retreating. They passed our house. There was a group squatters, soldiers. They left about five gallon glass jug of vodka and told us not to touch it. A gentleman would come back and pick it up.

We had such a hard time keeping that downstairs in our cellar. The kids of course, my mother and brothers say, “Whatever you do, don’t go near that. If it breaks and they come here and find that it’s broken then they’ll [inaudible 00:11:21] the place literally.” I remember that. I don't remember what happened to the vodka. I don't think they ever came back for it. I don't remember. Of course these are things that pop up in my mind.

**Janet:** Yeah, wonderful. Was this a community of all Jewish people?

**George:** No, no, no. We didn’t have a ghetto.

**Tillie:** Mixed.

**George:** It was mixed. In fact, we had a lot of Jewish people there. We used to Easter, our Easter, we used to have a community Mato bake.

**Tillie:** Yes, that’s right. We used to go to big bakery and bake the Mato, all the Mato and bake this.

**Janet:** You remember that?

**Tillie:** That I remember, yes.

**Janet:** Tell whatever else you remember.

**Tillie:** I remember I used to help the baker and did nothing else really, I don't know if there’s anything else.

**George:** I remember more than she does I think because I remember the bakery.

**Tillie:** You know a lot more, you’re smarter.

**George:** I remember my two brothers working there. I don't remember you but maybe you did.

**Tillie:** I didn’t, no.

**George:** My job was … Are you familiar with Mato?

**Janet:** Yes.

**George:** The little holes, they rigged up a little around a wheel. What do we call it? There’s a name for it, that pointer turner thing.

**Janet:** I think I know what you mean. It turns and it has like spokes sticking out.

**George:** Exactly. A spoke wheel, a small one and they laid it up on a stick. My job was after the, whoever rolled out the dough for the Mato, I would come with the spoke to go make a hole.

**Tillie:** Yes. We had no machines to bake the Mato [inaudible 00:13:09].

**George:** No, not by hand. We used to bake enough for the whole Jewish community.

**Janet:** How did you feel? How did that feel like?

**George:** I don't know. I just thought I was helping. I was part of the crowd. I think that was a matter of being part of the crowd.

**Janet:** Now, were your mother and father present when this was happening?

**George:** No.

**Tillie:** My mother was.

**George:** Maybe mom was, I can’t make that out. I don’t remember my father too much. I only remember when he died.

**Tillie:** Part of that was we were younger.

**Janet:** Do you remember that?

**George:** Yeah, I remember yeah.

**Janet:** What do you remember about that?

**George:** Let me see. I remember that we used to sleep on the floor in the house. We had a basement but the basement has a cut door with a ring on it to flip the door up. We slept near there. I think my father wasn’t feeling well. He was a sick man. He got up during the night for one reason or another. Walking past us, he tripped.

**Tillie:** He fell.

**George:** And fell and hit his head.

**Tillie:** Yeah, that’s right.

**George:** He hit his skull. He must have messed up his scalp and maybe that’s why he died. He died I think about two or three days later.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**George:** I remember.

**Janet:** How was the funeral handled? Do you remember anything about that?

**George:** Now, that part I don't remember. Is that funny? I remember my mother’s funeral but then she died when I was 12 and a half, much older.

**Tillie:** I remember she died in this country.

**George:** Yeah, she died here.

**Janet:** Do you remember any other like rituals or ways of either religious observants or?

**George:** We observed.

**Tillie:** Yeah, we observed.

**Janet:** Anything different in Latvia than the way it’s done here?

**George:** Of course different because we used to cook our Shabbat meal on Friday before sundown. Then it would stay in the oven all night. The [inaudible 00:15:11] would stayed in the oven all night.

**Tillie:** That’s right. We didn’t cook on Shabbat.

**Janet:** What kinds of food do you recall from then?

**Tillie:** Lots of things.

**George:** Fillet pancakes was my favorite because fillet is my favorite.

**Tillie:** Fillet pancakes, we used to bake for Shabbat. We used to make that. We used to cook like, we used to have these hot ovens that they can cook and leave it overnight. We used to bake in there. Bake bread, mother was a baker. She used to bake, mother used to bake. In fact, she used to be a baker.

**George:** She had a shop.

**Tillie:** A shop to sell the baked goods. She used to sell this stuff.

**George:** Yes.

**Tillie:** That’s it.

**Janet:** Do you remember any other dishes that your mother made that you particularly liked?

**George:** She used to make pucha.

**Tillie:** My mother was a …

**George:** Do you know what that is?

**Janet:** How do you spell pucha?

**George:** I don't know how to [unclear 00:16:05] it.

**Tillie:** That’s like we make the baked sheet and other chilled stuff. You cook and then you chill that stuff. It’s like a Jell-O. That’s how.

**George:** It’s from cows.

**Tillie:** The cow’s feet.

**George:** They used to put the cow bone legs and slice them up and it would chill.

**Janet:** How was that?

**George:** She used to make good Gefilte fish.

**Tillie:** That’s right. We used to … It’s old-fashioned way. I’m not even going to [inaudible 00:16:35] carrot with sweet potatoes. Now, we have no sweet potatoes. We used to eat regular potatoes.

**George:** We used to go to …

**Tillie:** Put meat in there and that would be a meal. Gefilte fish, that was, we used to have a fresh fish and take the meat off and then chop it up. It’s a whole lot of different ways. Herring, a lot of herring.

**Janet:** Did you help your mother with cooking in the house?

**Tillie:** I used to help yes. I used to help cook, clean. I used to wash clothes. We used to go to a lake and wash clothes.

**George:** That’s right, to the river.

**Janet:** Do you remember washing? Wash day?

**Tillie:** Yes. We couldn’t wash clothes in the house. We’d go to the lake and wash the clothes. We used to have a heavy stick and used to bang on that.

**George:** Yeah to beat the clothes on a rock.

**Tillie:** Beat the clothes up. Wash it and then rinse it out. That’s how we used to dry it outside on the grass or something, yes.

**Janet:** Would it be a social occasion? In other words, would there be a lot of women there cleaning their clothes at the same time or not?

**Tillie:** No. No, everybody used to do different days, different days. No special day. They used to observe the Shabbat. That was a holy day.

**Janet:** Were you a particularly religious family would you say?

**Tillie:** We kept up the holy days yes.

**George:** No. We were orthodox. We were orthodox.

**Tillie:** Yes. We kept a religion.

**George:** We knew no other. We knew no other. Shabbat was Shabbat. No matter what the, now it’s what? Religious reformed.

**Tillie:** It’s different. Everybody who was …

**George:** Create a different religion here in America anyway.

**Janet:** Yeah, but there everybody who was Jewish was orthodox?

**George:** Right. Right, right. I knew of no others. No, maybe in years after we left. I’m sure it changed.

**Tillie:** All those things changed like everywhere.

**George:** I got to explain something about our house.

**Janet:** Could we take this because it’s going to pick that up?

**George:** Yeah. I thought about when we talk about cooking for the Shabbat. We used to have a big oven. In Europe, houses had ovens.

**Janet:** Describe the oven.

**George:** Ovens, we used to heat them with wood. The oven and all the cooking and baking was done in these ovens. Big oven [inaudible 00:19:15] in the house. Ours had the little space between the end of the oven and the wall where you can walk in and then there was shelf on top of the oven. We used to sleep there sometimes in the winter time when it was real cold because there was heat coming through. There’s two, three of us, we’d go up and sleep there. Do you remember that?

**Tillie:** That’s right. To keep warm, that’s right, yeah.

**Janet:** How big was it?

**George:** It was massive.

**Tillie:** Like a couch. You know the type.

**George:** You go into a bakery today who has an oven, it’s small but it’s very effective because they use electricity and technically or mechanically. This was a big hole.

**Janet:** What was the oven made out of?

**George:** Stone. It was built from stone.

**Tillie:** Brick, yes, and stone.

**George:** Bricks and stone. It’s the only thing you have keeping you, there was no steam heat. You had no furnace to put coal in there. We didn’t have coal furnaces.

**Janet:** Did you grow any food?

**Tillie:** No.

**Janet:** Or did you have any animals?

**Tillie:** No. No, we had no animals, no.

**George:** We didn’t grow food but we had access to vegetables, fruits. We could go to orchards.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**George:** People who had orchards had small gardens. Sometimes the farmers would pass our house, passing up by our house on a Saturday morning with their wagons loaded with bags of …

**Tillie:** Like what they call a peddler here.

**George:** [inaudible 00:21:00] of course we were mysterious. We’d run on the back of the little wagon and cut a hole in one of the bags and take out a few apples and potatoes and bring them home. That was it. It’s not that they chased us. We had, they were so fresh. There was no refrigeration so everything was fresh. You had to have everything fresh every day.

**Janet:** Do you remember any other things you did for fun?

**George:** Yes. Played stickball, yeah played a lot of stickball.

**Janet:** The same way they play it here?

**George:** Yeah. No, football, we call it football in Russia or soccer. When I came to America, it was better known as soccer. To us, that was football. We used to play typical boys games, girls games, mostly boys.

**Janet:** How about you Tillie? Do you remember what you played? Did you have girlfriends?

**Tillie:** Yeah, I had friends.

**Janet:** What would you do?

**Tillie:** Of course, went to school. We all went to school, every day we had school. We had a Hebrew school.

**Janet:** Did you only go to Hebrew school or did you also go to a public school?

**Tillie:** No. No, public school, learned the language.

**George:** That’s funny.

**Tillie:** Yes learned the language yes. Had a very nice, the Russian teachers, they teach Hebrew and English and the Russian language. The Hebrew school did Hebrew because I can still read and write Hebrew, Jewish. That, I didn’t forget.

**Janet:** What did you speak in the home?

**Tillie:** Jewish. Jewish.

**George:** Yiddish.

**Janet:** Yiddish?

**Tillie:** Yiddish, our language yes, our language yeah and Russian because we knew how to …

**Janet:** You had Russian and you had Hebrew?

**George:** Yeah.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**Janet:** You had Yiddish?

**George:** Yes.

**Tillie:** Yes, yes.

**Janet:** Then English?

**Tillie:** English, no English, no. No.

**Janet:** I mean when you came here?

**Tillie:** When we came here yes. Here, I got to do English language. The other Russian and Yiddish. These two languages as we used to go to Hebrew school.

**Janet:** When you think back of your life there in Latvia, do you have any memories that are the kinds of things that you think of when you think of that place?

**Tillie:** It’s much better here.

**George:** Everything that happened is a memory.

**Tillie:** It’s much better here.

**George:** Memories …

**Janet:** I mean are there any things that I guess persist in your own mind about that time?

**George:** Hardship.

**Janet:** Hardship? Do you remember it that way too Tillie?

**Tillie:** We used to go wash clothes. We used to go to the lake to wash clothes. They could beat the soap out of it then rinse it. Then we used to dry it like on the grass. Put it on the grass to dry it.

**George:** That I don’t remember.

**Tillie:** Hard to remember. It’s so hard to remember. It’s a long time. It’s a long time to remember all these things.

**Janet:** I know.

**Tillie:** We want to remember good things now.

**Janet:** Yeah, yeah. You remember going swimming?

**George:** Yeah.

**Janet:** Where did you go?

**George:** In the river.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**George:** We swam. You used to run down, take your pants off and go swim.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**George:** Never wore anything.

**Tillie:** No bathing suits, naked yeah.

**George:** We used to … I remember vaguely but from talking sometimes the guys would say let’s sneak and watch when the women were swimming or something. It wasn’t too much of that. I think it was more [inaudible 00:24:31] than anything else. We were active.

**Janet:** Do you remember why it was that your family decided to come to America?

**George:** Hardship.

**Tillie:** Hardship. My brother, our own, my brother and cousins and aunts in Providence, Rhode Island and they were on my mother’s side.

**Janet:** It is a brother and sister on your mother’s side.

**George:** No, no.

**Janet:** Or your brother and sister?

**Tillie:** No, ours.

**Janet:** Were already here?

**Tillie:** They were here already, yes. Then all our family, they all got together. That’s how we got to this country because they all got together and scrapped the money together and made enough money to send for the family. That’s how we got here.

**George:** After World War I, things got very hard for us, especially being Jews was difficult. When my sister came over here, I don't know what year she came here but I wasn’t. I was born after she came to United States, my older sister.

**Janet:** Is this Rose?

**George:** Rose, right. When that whole family came, some brothers and my father, my father was very stubborn, didn’t want to leave Russia.

**Janet:** Why didn’t he want to?

**George:** I don't know. He was a carpenter. He was doing well. My mother was running a bake shop and he says he doesn’t want go anywhere. This is the story I get. I don't remember. That’s why we were the only ones left. After World War I, it became very difficult for us with the programs. It was hard to leave. We were really paupers. The sister that was here and then there was my father’s two brothers and my mother’s two sisters.

**Tillie:** Sisters yes.

**George:** They were all here, all went, all left. We were the only ones who didn’t go because my father didn’t want to leave.

**Tillie:** They got together and they sent for us. That’s how we came to this country.

**George:** They sent us our air tickets. We came over in steerage. We didn’t come in luxury.

**Janet:** Now, who was traveling? Who was traveling with you?

**George:** Okay. My mother, two brothers Harry and Phillip. My sister Tillie and I.

**Janet:** Do you recall?

**George:** Tremendous.

**Janet:** To leave?

**George:** Tremendous.

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**George:** The anxiety, the excitement, neighbors fixed us baskets of food to take on the train.

**Tillie:** The clothes we packed which were pillows, blankets. We took those. We traveled with some blankets and pillows. They said the pillows and all that. It’s …

**Janet:** Do you remember anything else your mother packed?

**Tillie:** I know she packed some homemade jelly and right go on the boat the jar of jelly broke. My mother was a good cook. She was a good cook. That boat, you don’t know, you take it and then not realizing those are not the things you have to take but we took that. I tell you it’s a lot to talk about.

**Janet:** When you were leaving, do you remember the people gathered to see you off or how did that?

**Tillie:** No. No, not exactly. I don't remember that.

**George:** I don't remember that. I see it in movies where people are moving and the neighbors come in and say …

**Tillie:** No.

**George:** See, that’s news to me, new to me. I don't remember getting, you want to know if we had a big send off. We didn’t.

**Tillie:** That’s right.

**George:** I am sure that there were some people who envied us.

**Tillie:** That’s just it.

**George:** That we were getting out. See, we had a place to go and they remained.

**Janet:** Had many people from your little town come to America before you had?

**Tillie:** No, I don't know. I don't remember that.

**George:** That I don’t remember.

**Tillie:** No, not too many.

**George:** Anybody? I don’t.

**Janet:** Did you have any idea of what America would be like? I know you were children.

**George:** Garden of Eden.

**Tillie:** What?

**George:** That’s a fact. Garden of Eden, we’re coming to America.

**Tillie:** To America, yes.

**George:** Garden of Eden. I have no regrets.

**Tillie:** No, we’re happy. We were happy that we’re here.

**Janet:** You left, when you left, what did you take? What kind of transportation did you take and where did you go first before you got to the port?

**Tillie:** The family got, they were the ones that sponsored us to go there. We went to my sister’s house.

**George:** No, that’s coming here. Now, what she wants to know is …

**Tillie:** Going there?

**George:** We went by train from Riga.

**Janet:** How did you get?

**George:** No, from Rezekne we got by train to Riga.

**Janet:** Okay.

**George:** Then from Riga, we went by ship to the Port of Libau I think.

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**George:** Then we went to Hamburg. It was in Hamburg, Germany. I remember the Germans being very strict.

**Janet:** What incidents do you remember?

**George:** I remember that for the least fraction if you dropped a piece of paper or something, it was hell to pay. They were very strict about cameras. Of course I guess they didn’t like Jews anyway. We were there, we’re coming over. That was a short stop because what we were heading for was Liverpool. That was our fourth embarkation to come to America.

**Janet:** How did you get from Hamburg to Liverpool?

**George:** From Riga we went by a small boat to Hamburg.

**Tillie:** I think a small boat.

**George:** Yes, a little hazy to how we got there but I know that we took a small boat from the Port of Riga to go to Hamburg. In Hamburg, I don't know how we got from Hamburg to England. It had to be by ship. It had to be a ship of some kind.

**Janet:** Do you remember Liverpool?

**George:** Yes.

**Janet:** Did you stay there for any length of time?

**George:** In Liverpool, I think we stayed one or two nights maybe. It was nice. We had good food. It was clean. Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful.

**Janet:** You stayed in a hotel?

**George:** That I can’t remember where we stayed. Do you remember?

**Tillie:** I don't remember. You know more than I do.

**George:** I don't remember where we stayed. I do remember that it could have been a hotel, a big building of some kind. I remember of course I was very impressed by the good food.

**Tillie:** Even if we had to stay over, we didn’t all stay just the family alone. It was the rest of the crowd that traveled that way. They all stayed in the, everybody had to stay together.

**George:** Now, I don't know how big our party was at that time.

**Janet:** When you left Rezekne, did you travel with other people from the town?

**George:** No.

**Janet:** Just your family?

**Tillie:** Just the family. Just the family.

**George:** As you travel groups come.

**Tillie:** You get acquainted.

**George:** Provided you know that you’re traveling to the same place you get acquainted. I remember very little of that. The only thing I remember after that is a very hectic crossing of the ship. See, the boat we took was a small ship. It wasn’t big. We were supposed to be on a bigger boat but for some reason, we either missed it by a few days or it was late and we hit some bad storms.

**Janet:** Do you remember the voyage?

**George:** Yes, the voyage was very difficult because we were in steerage.

**Janet:** Describe steerage.

**George:** Steerage is what you show here in your films.

**Janet:** How was it in your experience?

**George:** Same thing. In fact and then we stopped some port and they were unloading. They were trying to unload or something. It looked to me like something to eat, nuts or raisins, I don't know.

**Tillie:** They set us with a lot of herring on the boat, a lot of herring.

**George:** Watching them load this and once the line of bag would break and the stuff would come down. One day I got a lot of strength to come together, put a little something at the end of it. The [inaudible 00:33:39] the guys might fill it up so I can bring it up. What they did is they pulled the rope away from me. I was so mad.

**Tillie:** I don't know. I don't remember.

**George:** The trip was very difficult. As I say, it was steerage. We slept like for a long time.

**Tillie:** It took us a long time to get here, a couple of weeks.

**George:** We were on the boat a long time. I remember at one point I think the storm was really bad. We were playing football on the deck and I almost fell off of on the side of the deck. Some guy grabbed me by my feet. See, I remember these. These are the things that I remember. We arrived in Ellis Island and that was it.

**Janet:** Do you remember when the boat came into the New York harbor?

**George:** Oh yes.

**Tillie:** Oh yes.

**Janet:** What was that like for you?

**Tillie:** It was happiness. It was really, everybody was happy, yes.

**Janet:** Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

**George:** Oh yes.

**Tillie:** Oh yes.

**George:** That was a big thrill.

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**George:** Big thrill. I remember we came my sister and brother who were instrumental in bringing us over, they lived in Coney Island and that’s where we came to stay. I remember when the ship came to the [inaudible 00:34:54] I could see the homes, the peace, and excitement.

**Janet:** What was your impression of Ellis Island?

**George:** Very bad, very bad.

**Tillie:** I don't remember seeing all these buildings. It was just like one room. We go in and out. That said, we were locked in. It was no freedom. There was just, everybody had to be together like, there was no freedom to get around.

**George:** It took us a long time to get off the island here for some reason.

**Janet:** Why was that?

**George:** I don't remember which one but one of us was sick, had a rash of some kind. I think maybe they found something on my scalp, I don't remember. I remember something about my head.

**Tillie:** Then they kept us back for about a few days.

**George:** No, no, they kept us back because they said that they don’t clear up, we’d have to go back.

**Tillie:** That’s how we got to the quarantine. You have to go.

**George:** Yeah. We stayed, I don't know how long. I know that my sister and brother-in-law were very upset because they were there. There they are waiting for us to come off the boat. It took a little while but obviously we made it.

**Janet:** Now, you had the rash so did you go to the hospital?

**Tillie:** No. No, just stayed longer. Just stayed longer.

**George:** For some reason they just kept us longer. We really for a while there we were worried about it.

**Janet:** They were watching the rash to see what it was going to do?

**George:** Yeah.

**Tillie:** That’s it. Yeah, that’s it yeah. Otherwise they didn’t put him in the hospital or anything, just kept us a little longer.

**George:** We first went to my sister’s house.

**Janet:** Before we leave Ellis Island, do you remember anything about the food, the accommodations? How you were treated by the staff?

**Tillie:** They gave us food. They gave us a lot of herring and bread and potatoes. That’s nothing fancy just something …

**George:** She needs to know what you …

**Tillie:** You don’t know because you were hungry you ate whatever they gave to you. We were happy with it. We didn’t expect …

**George:** We were on steerage. It was a bad experience. For some reason, I’m not going to say I remember it for sure but for some reason I think it carried over into the island here, when we got off the ship here. The way the crowds were, those are very busy years with aliens coming in. I remember that we weren’t mistreated. Maybe I was expecting to arrive, at 10 years old, it wasn’t like, I was like, “Now I’m in America. Things are supposed to be good in America.” See, that’s the thing. I guess it’s a child’s thing.

**Janet:** In other words, it felt like an extension of the ship experience?

**George:** Right exactly. Exactly, that’s why we equate it with that. It’s a mixed feeling. I tell you, I don’t regret it. I’m a proud American.

**Janet:** Now tell me what happened when your brother-in-law and sister actually came and met you.

**Tillie:** They took …

**Janet:** What was it like to see them again?

**Tillie:** I think …

**George:** I never saw them.

**Janet:** You didn’t remember them?

**George:** No.

**Janet:** Tillie, did you remember them?

**George:** My sister never saw me.

**Tillie:** My sister, I vaguely remember that not too much.

**George:** We didn’t our brother-in-law but my sister didn’t know me because I wasn’t born when she left.

**Tillie:** No, none of us knew her because she left, we were younger children. We just didn’t know her. That’s when we met when we came to America.

**Janet:** Do you remember your mother and her reaction to meeting her daughter?

**Tillie:** My mother, my mother she was thrilled. She only lived here two years and then she passed away. My mother was very happy to see the family.

**Janet:** What did you do? They met you and you came to Battery Park and then what?

**Tillie:** We went to my sister’s house.

**George:** We went on a train, on the subway.

**Tillie:** They took us, I don't know.

**George:** From the island.

**Tillie:** We went to the Coney Island, my sister lived there. We went to her house and we stayed with her.

**George:** It was a house full of food, wonderful food.

**Tillie:** You know?

**George:** I remember food. I must be a child.

**Tillie:** Went to my sister’s and we stayed with her for years and then after …

**George:** Yeah. We stayed a couple of years before we got our own place.

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**Janet:** Do you remember things that struck you when you first got here that you never saw before? Anything that stands out?

**George:** Everything we saw here we never saw before because don’t forget we were … Where were we? In a little town of Rezekne as it’s spelled. It’s in Latvia.

**Tillie:** In Latvia.

**George:** What did we have? Our first modern city we saw was Riga. No, Riga was the modern port then.

**Tillie:** That was the capital of Latvia.

**George:** Now, it’s a very modern city. That was the beginning of our living.

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**George:** Because in Latvia, we were existing.

**Janet:** Do you remember any new foods or any things in the apartment that …?

**Tillie:** We stayed with my sister. They used to feed us there. Of course, the things they gave us which we never ate before and a lot of the canned stuff I see tomato herring or something like that. It was something different.

**George:** Yeah.

**Tillie:** Then we stayed for a while. After that, we got an apartment. My mother and these single ladies, we got an apartment and lived close to my sister.

**Janet:** In Coney Island?

**Tillie:** In Coney Island yes. We had a couple of rooms and my mother lived close to the shore. She liked to go to shore every Saturday, she used to go. She only stayed two years.

**George:** We had yes.

**Tillie:** She couldn’t enjoy it.

**Janet:** Was your mother happy that she had come here?

**Tillie:** Yes. Yes. She was happy she was with the rest of the family. She was happy but her happiness didn’t last too long.

**Janet:** How about you? Did you start school anyway?

**Tillie:** Yes. I used to go to school. I went to school, yes.

**George:** First grade at 10 years old.

**Tillie:** Yeah I went to school. We used to sit with the bigger children and we were the little people. Of course it was different race.

**George:** We didn’t speak the language.

**Tillie:** We caught up. I think the teachers were very nice and we were really treated nice and finished school. Got older and of age to go to work. I went to work. I used to travel by train.

**Janet:** Where did you go?

**Tillie:** In New York. Downtown New York I used to go just over there. They had made dolls’ clothes, I used to sell dolls’ clothes and [inaudible 00:41:39]. Really, I worked there for years. I used to go by train. After that I …

**Janet:** Do you remember the name of the place where you were working?

**Tillie:** I don't remember, no. No, no, no.

**Janet:** Do you remember any experiences about learning English that come to your mind?

**George:** The best experience was the fact that when I went on to school, I had to speak English.

**Tillie:** That’s the only way we learned the English language.

**George:** The children did not speak my language. That’s why we learned fast. I did.

**Tillie:** He went to higher grades. I’d only finished after the eighth grade and then I was of age to go to, I worked. I worked in a factory where they made the ladies underwear. I remember on Broadway I used to work there. I had a good job. I worked on a machine, sewing machine, I used to sew underwear.

**Janet:** Was this before you sold dolls clothing or after?

**Tillie:** No, that was after, after that. That was probably just the beginning for me to learn how and I made a salary. I don't remember what I made. I didn’t make a lot but it was enough for me to get along. That’s that.

**Janet:** How about you George? You stayed in school how long?

**George:** I stayed in school.

**Tillie:** Yes, he went to school longer than all of us.

**George:** In our family, I was youngest, everybody took care of me. I went to high school, went to CCNY in New York. I went at night. Of course 1942 I went to the army. Put in four years, life was hard.

**Janet:** Where were you when you were in the army?

**George:** Fortunately, I was drafted. I was living in Buffalo, New York. I was working. I was with the National Shirt Shops. My first camp was at Aberdeen, Maryland. Our Ordnance Aberdeen Proving Grounds. There is where I met my wife. She’s from Baltimore.

**Janet:** What’s your wife’s name?

**George:** Ruth.

**Janet:** Her maiden name?

**George:** Her maiden name is Mazaroff, M-A-Z-A-R-O-F-F.

**Janet:** How did you meet?

**George:** How did I meet her? Okay, a very good story. I was a mess sergeant. I used to volunteer my mess hall to the Jewish boys on Friday night. We used to have Shabbat services on Friday night.

**Janet:** You donated the mess hall?

**George:** The use of the mess hall. I left it open and retained a crew there to take care of things. We used to have services. Do you know anything about the Jewish people?

**Janet:** Tell me about the services. That would be interesting.

**George:** Okay. The services, Jewish people on Friday night have after services called …

**Tillie:** Kiddush.

**George:** Kiddush, Oneg Shabbat. That means after services, you have a little wine, you have a little sweet things to eat. When I volunteered the use of, to keep my mass hall open on Friday nights for the Jewish boys services, my wife would come out from Baltimore with her aunt from the Jewish Welfare Board. They would bring out the Oneg Shabbat, the food for the boys after services.

They would set up a table in my mess hall. Then because the chapel is where we have services right next to the mess hall. They used to bring a lot of goodies. I used to prepare hot water for them to make tea or coffee whichever they want to make. I kept a few cake pieces to help me clean up. That’s when I met my wife.

**Janet:** Wonderful.

**George:** And I married her.

**Janet:** Wonderful. How about you Tillie? How did you meet your husband?

**Tillie:** I met him, we used to go to clubs. We used to have these clubs to go.

**George:** Singles club I guess huh?

**Tillie:** Singles club, we used to go to dances.

**Janet:** Were they ethnic clubs? In other words, were they people coming from Eastern Europe that would go there or were they?

**Tillie:** We used to meet the people but at that time, they don’t have it now. They used to call a landslide boat together.

**George:** Yeah. I went to the landslide as a Yiddish word meaning team fold. They would go where all the immigrants or Jewish people or Italian people or Irish people are.

**Tillie:** I used to go. I used to go with some friends. We used to go to the dance. We used to dance there. That’s how you went to meet some fellows there. Sometimes you meet someone decent, sometimes you just take a chance you go and that time was enough trouble for traveling along in those. We weren’t afraid to go on the train. We used to travel on the train. I met my husband later on and I got married.

**Janet:** What was your husband’s name?

**Tillie:** Jack.

**Janet:** Jack?

**Tillie:** Jack yes. We got married and my husband died 25 years already.

**George:** Already?

**Tillie:** It is 25 yeah.

**Janet:** Did you have children?

**Tillie:** I have three children.

**Janet:** Their names?

**Tillie:** Susan and Novan.

**George:** Two children.

**Tillie:** Two children, I have two. I have five grandchildren. I have a lovely family.

**Janet:** Wonderful.

**Tillie:** I thank God for that.

**Janet:** Yeah. How about you George? Do you have children?

**George:** Oh yes. I have two and I’m blessed with five grandchildren. Two children and five grandchildren. A son and a daughter.

**Janet:** Their names? Son and daughter.

**George:** My son’s name is Mark. My daughter’s name is Marietta. She’s here with us today. I have five lovely grandchildren.

**Janet:** Wonderful.

**George:** The oldest is 21 years old, the next one is 20. I’m getting old. I got to relay something to you about my sister in Moscow. I guess her going to Moscow is like youngsters here go, leave the country and go to the big city, leave the farm and go to the big cities. While in Moscow she met a young man.

**Tillie:** In the army.

**George:** No, no, not yet.

**Tillie:** No? Oh no.

**George:** She was keeping company with a young man who turned out to be a spy against Russia for a foreign government. He was sentenced to die. He was convicted to be executed. She was also convicted because she was his girlfriend. The execution squad, the firing squad who was going to carry out the sentence, a commander was a Jewish fellow. My sister was a beautiful girl.

**Janet:** She must have looked like you Tillie.

**Tillie:** No, she was beautiful.

**Janet:** Yeah.

**George:** Anyway, he saved her life and he married her.

**Janet:** That’s how you know the story?

**Tillie:** Yes. They had children.

**Janet:** Wow. That is really dramatic.

**Tillie:** It’s a whole lot when in the family, a lot. We had a lot. We had happiness and …

**George:** That’s it. She had …

**Tillie:** She has three children.

**George:** Four.

**Tillie:** Four children. Two boys.

**George:** Two girls.

**Tillie:** And two girls.

**George:** Yeah. I guess she’s been gone a long time too now.

**Janet:** She came to this country?

**George:** No.

**Tillie:** No, no, no. She’s not. She lived in Moscow.

**George:** She went over there twice to see her.

**Tillie:** I went to Moscow to visit her.

**George:** I went there once. Now, she’s gone but she’s got a daughter here and a son living on the West Coast, California. She had another son who died. She has another daughter who lives in Israel.

**Tillie:** Yeah, that’s right.

**Janet:** When you went back, did you go back to Rezekne?

**George:** No, Rezekne.

**Tillie:** No. No, that was …

**George:** I went back to Moscow to see my sister. I had no desire to go back to Latvia.

**Janet:** No?

**Tillie:** No, no.

**George:** No.

**Janet:** Why is that?

**Tillie:** That was for this, no.

**George:** It was a …

**Tillie:** We were glad to get out of there.

**George:** I had a bad memory of Latvia. Persecution, all I knew was persecution and hardship.

**Tillie:** Anytime you see here that there was a program, we used to go to see the [inaudible 00:51:17] that they killed them in the basement. We saw that. A lot of programmers used to go under.

**George:** A lot of people.

**Janet:** When you think about coming here as young people, do you think the fact that you immigrated from another place and started life again in this country, do you think that had an impact? In what way do you think that affected you in your personality and in the way you lived your life?

**George:** I’m living.

**Tillie:** It gave us an uplift.

**George:** It’s like a rebirth.

**Tillie:** That’s right. Something that we didn’t have and we have a little more here, of course.

**George:** It’s a rebirth I’m telling you. I still talk about the, I get into conversations or discussions and I say, “I’m proud to be American.”

**Tillie:** We worked hard. We worked hard here to make a living too. It was hard. It was not easy but we got by all right.

**Janet:** What makes you feel more satisfied about what you’ve done in your life?

**Tillie:** Together with the family, I made a big change that I’m here. That’s it. I have a nice family. Thank God for that.

**Janet:** How about you George, what makes you feel really satisfied about anything you’ve done in your life?

**George:** I must have done, it must be good because I’m 83 years old.

**Janet:** You look great.

**Tillie:** We’re two youngsters. He’s the youngest one.

**George:** We’re the only ones left.

**Tillie:** We’re the only ones.

**George:** Big family.

**Tillie:** We’re the only two. We were seven children.

**George:** Time goes by but here we are.

**Janet:** Do you think you retain any ways about you that come from the old country at this time?

**George:** I think maybe subconsciously. Subconsciously sometimes, some expressions we use, things like that. Other than that, I don’t regret leaving there at all.

**Tillie:** No, no.

**Janet:** What’s it like coming back to Ellis Island? Did you have any emotional reaction to coming here today or?

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**George:** Yes it is. How can I explain it? I didn’t think it would be so hard getting anywhere once we got here.

**Janet:** You didn’t think it would be?

**George:** It would be so hard getting my foot off of Ellis Island. I didn’t know ways of the world. I was young. I was 10 years old. I was a kid. I think we’re coming right here. We’re going to America. There’s movies about us, Coming to America. It’s not about that. I thought but then I didn’t realize all the regions the exams and tests and the tests to see if you should be let in. You show it on your movie here, to see because I don't know what percentage were sent back but I know some were sent back.

**Janet:** 2%.

**George:** Yeah 2%. You know what? The sun is too much to go back to that hell hole. See, the one part of the movie we saw today says the guy threatened to jump off the ship if they sent him back. It’s true. It’s very hard over there, in those years. It’s probably just as bad now I think. I don't think it’s any better. Look, I couldn’t be better. We had that massacre in World War II in Europe.

**Tillie:** We’re happy here. I’m happy here. We had bad times too here.

**Janet:** Do you remember the depression here?

**George:** Yes of course.

**Tillie:** Of course. We were here.

**Janet:** How was it?

**Tillie:** We made it. We did our best. We did our best.

**George:** It was hard, hard work.

**Janet:** Let’s see. Is there anything else that you can think of relevant to your immigrating to this country that maybe we haven’t covered?

**Tillie:** We’re very happy.

**George:** I’m sure that by the way I’m speaking that I’m happy to be here. I think this country did a great job of accepting us.

**Janet:** I think that’s a perfect place to end. I want to thank you both so much for a very, very interesting interview.

**Tillie:** Thank you.

**Janet:** I have been speaking with Tillie Kroop.

**Tillie:** Yes.

**Janet:** And George Fine. We forgot to tell George, just tell briefly how your name changed at Ellis Island?

**George:** Most people come to Ellis Island, change their name by dropping something off their name. With me, they added a letter to my name. It was spelled F-I-N, it came out spelling F-I-N-E.

**Tillie:** It’s pronounced Fin see and now it’s Fine.

**George:** I gained. I gained in every way coming to this country and also changing my name to the tune of one letter.

**Janet:** You gained an E?

**Tillie:** Yeah.

**Janet:** At Ellis.

**George:** That’s for excellent.

**Janet:** For Ellis Island.

**Tillie:** Yes, yeah.

**Janet:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**Tillie:** Thank you. Thank you. It was nice meeting you.

**George:** Thank you.

**Janet:** Very nice meeting you. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on October 14th 1995 and I’m signing off.