**Levine**: Today is November 19th 1995. And I am here at the home of Sonja Sokolove who came from Russia in 1921 when she was 11 years old. Today Mrs. Sonja is 85 years of age and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and we will begin here. If you could say for the tape please your birthday and where you were born?

**Sonja**: I was born January 25th 1910 in a small town near the Polish border. The name of the town was Kletsk.

**Levine**: And did you remain living in Kletsk until you were 11 years old and left for United States?

**Sonja**: Yes.

**Levine**: Speaking about life in Kletsk, how about giving us your mother and father's name?

**Sonja**: Yes. My father's name was David Gabriner and my mother’s name was Francis.

**Levine**: Do you remember your mother's maiden name?

**Sonja**: My mother's maiden name was Ciok. C-I-O-K.

**Levine**: Okay and could you spell Gabriner for the tape?

**Sonja**: G-A-B-R-I-N-E-R

**Levine**: And did you have grandparents who were living near you in Kletsk?

**Sonja**: I had grandparents and at the time that we left Kletsk. They were living with us because they had lived there. My maternal grandfather was a blacksmith. They lived like in a village which was like one street.

And he was the blacksmith like for that village but the house and the blacksmith shop did not belong to him, it belonged to the people who owned the village or the head of the village.

And at that time, right after the Russian revolution, they were relieved of their duties there and they were sent out. They were expelled actually and my grandfather and his family came to kletsk and they lived with my mother.

[Phone ringing]

**Levine**: Ok we are pausing here, we are resuming here after telephone call. You were saying something about your grandfather coming to live with you. Do you remember visiting that little village?

**Sonja**: Yes I do.

**Levine**: What do you remember? Is there anything else you could say about that village?

**Sonja**: When I visited there I was very young but I remember the house it was very nice. It was sort of a farm house and my grandparents had a very large family. They had five daughters and the daughters were all very creative and they crotched and sewed and everything in the house reflected their touch.

They were great homemakers and cooks and they had a lovely little garden in the back with vegetables and flowers. I remember that and I remember there was one street, at one end was the village inn at the other end was the priest house.

My mother knew everybody in town including the children of the priest. The Russian priests are allowed to marry I think they are Russian orthodox and she even played with the children of the priest and had a crush on one of them. One of the men she told me.

**Levine**: Now was this typical of a small village in that area that it would have one street and probably what 20 families?

**Sonja**: Yes and they farmed the land. For the-well I don’t know what you would call them in Russian I think it’s called a Poretsk. Which I think he probably had a grant from the government so much land that I think he could till and he employed the peasants who lived there in the little village.

**Levine**: To till the land?

**Sonja**: To till the land.

**Levine**: And he himself worked as blacksmith?

**Sonja**: My grandfather worked as a blacksmith and all his sons, five sons were also blacksmiths. That’s the way it was, you were what your father was. My father was a shoemaker so was his father.

**Levine**: Now do you remember anything in particular about your grandfather or grandmother? Maternal grandfather or grandmother?

**Sonja**: I remember my grandfather reading the bible and I guess it was in the evening and he wanted to save kerosene because that was had to get or expensive and he would burn a very dry- I think you call it a spell. It’s a piece of wood.

And it would burn very slowly and he would hold that over the book and he would be reading his portion for the evening. My grandmother wore-she wore a kerchief all day on her head and on Saturday she wore a wig. Her hair was grey but the wig was brown. I remember that.

And she was short and stout and was not very grandmotherly. I don’t ever remember her being overly affectionate or kindly. Once in a while she would give us a cookie but other than that I don’t seem to remember having missed her when we left for some reason.

**Levine**: Do you remember the disposition of your grandfather?

**Sonja**: Never talked very much a very silent man. Long grey beard but I don’t think they were all that old because when we left we left them in our house.

What had happened to spur my father to immigrate at the time was that they had built a new home and had borrowed money from various people in town to free the expenses. I don’t think there was a bank. A formal bank I think you borrowed money from private people and you gave them IOUs or something like that.

**Levine**: So your father had built a new house?

**Sonja**: Yes, we never lived in it because we wouldn’t afford to we rented it out because we owed all these money. Then they decided he would go to America and work for a while, two years at most, and he’d send over all the money he had earned and she would pay off the bills of the house.

**Levine**: Was the plan that he would return at some point?

**Sonja**: And the plan was that he would return, definitely. But the year was 1913 when my father left and he left my mother with four children. The youngest of whom was in the cradle.

And a year later of course war broke out and from there on there was very little communication at times. Certainly no money coming through and all during the war, my mother did everything she could to make a living for herself and her four children and she did that by sewing and going out to the village and buying things like butter or eggs and selling them in the city. And that way she was able to sort of irk out a living. It was hard but she did it.

**Levine**: So she would go to a village not unlike the one your grandfather and [unclear 00:09:42] and bring it back to Kletsk?

**Sonja**: Yes they had a market day where all the villagers would come from around the area and bring their produce in and she would go there and set up a little stand and sell whatever it was she had to sell.

**Levine**: How about your grandparents on your father's side? Did you know them at all?

**Sonja**: No, they died before we were born. I was named after my paternal grandmother. I didn’t know her. I didn’t know either one of them. My father was 10years older than my mother and had been married before.

He was a widower. He had been married to my mother's cousin. And the house that they lived in, the little house in the back, of the big house this new house, was inherited by my father from his first wife estate.

**Levine**: Did you know anything about her? His first wife?

**Sonja**: Well I knew that my mother went to their wedding. My mother was 13 years old when my father and her cousin were married. Never thinking that eventually this would be her husband but she died-or his wife died in childbirth.

He had had four children with his first wife but none of them survived. I would ask him now and then what it was they died of but he didn’t seem to know. Say they all died of different things when they were infants.

**Levine**: Did the fact that your Father's first wife was your mother's cousin make it more likely that he would then marry her?

**Sonja**: Oh yes because when my grandfather would go into town for whatever reason he had to go into town he would stay overnight at my father's house because that was his niece. At that time.

And so when my father became a widower he still would go and stay over. And one night he said to my father you know, I think you should come out for the weekend and stay with us because you are too lonely and anyway I would like you to meet Francis my mother.

Who was at that time 18 years old and was the next in line to be married and her younger sisters were sort of behind her pushing because they wouldn’t get married until she got married that’s the way it went and so he went for the weekend.

And my mother was- I think she was a little taken aback. My mother always said that he looked so old and he had a beard and he said about her that she was very pale and very thin and her complexion was not all that great.

They sort of run each other down but he went out again for another weekend and he brought her a gift. It was a box of face powder and I remember the box because one of my younger aunts used that powder on her face that had swans on the cover and it was pink and blue some such thing.

And she when her father asked her if she liked him she said well she sort of like him but she wished that he would cut off his beard. Well he didn’t comply completely but he did trim it quite a bit. And six months later I guess-well not six months.

He had been a widower for six months when they got married. And she went into Kletsk to live with him and I remember her telling me and my sister I think that she would like it if we did not marry widowers because he was still in mourning for his first wife and she really had a rough time.

She would wake up at night and find him crying but in no time at all she was pregnant and he was ecstatic and very nervous because he had lost so many children. He really was anxious to have a family.

And when my oldest sister was born and she was a big healthy thriving baby, it kind of made up a lot for any other discrepancies. He adored her but she always tried to make us feel that she was hard to get.

And that he was the only one who was in love. But I did not believe her because she did tell me that he was very good looking. And he was. She was not considered to be a good looking girl but he was very handsome.

**Levine**: So what was your oldest sister's name?

**Sonja**: My oldest sister name was Rose.

**Levine**: And the other children in the order of their birth?

**Sonja**: Rose, Hye, Sonja, Abe and then of course when we came here, a year later Mathew was born, the celebration baby.

**Levine**: Were you closest to any particular?

**Sonja**: As children I was not close with my sister. I was close with my brother, my older brother. His name was Hye and I remember him taking me, a lot of times when he went like into the forest picking blueberries with his friends, he would take me along and take very good care of me because I was very timid child and he was the big brother to me and he always was the big brother to me.

**Levine**: What was life like in Kletsk?

**Sonja**: Well, life was a little bit of everything. When my grandparents came to live with us, they had three children left at home who were not as yet married. An aunt and two uncles and during the war, the two younger uncles were in the army.

One of them was taken prisoner in Germany and didn’t come home until after the war was over and we didn’t know where he was or whether he was alive but they survived.

Another uncle who was married and had a family, he had partitioned in the wall that he had built. So that he would be found and conscripted but eventually they found him and that was towards the end of the war and he wasn’t gone very long.

Schooling was not very good. I never had any formal-didn’t go to a formal school. My sister did and my brother I think. My brother went to Hebrew school and my sister went to a school that my mother had to pay.

But I was taught by my sister or a neighbor or-just a little bit. I learned to read and maybe do a little bit of addition but that’s about all I knew until I came here. When I was 11 years old.

**Levine**: What language did you speak at home?

**Sonja**: Well I would say my mother tongue is Yiddish but I spoke Russian and I read Russian. Shortly after we came here, I was very anxious to be an American girl and I would not speak anything but English. For years I did not say a word in any other language and I forgot all my Russian. I still remember a little bit of Yiddish because my parents spoke Yiddish.

**Levine**: In this country too?

**Sonja**: Yes, yes they did.

**Levine**: Do you remember any ceremonies while you were still in Russia?

**Sonja**: Yes I do. I remember when my aunt got married. I remember the match maker coming to the house and talking to my grandparents. And I loved my aunt. I thought she was the most beautiful creature in the world.

I used to sit and watch her get dressed to go out. Put on her powder and things. Wet her finger and do this to her eyebrows, so they will be-bite her lips and pinch her cheeks.

**Levine**: And do you remember what transpired when the matchmaker was there?

**Sonja**: Yes the match maker would come and describe this young man he had for her and my aunt would listen and by the description she would tell her yes she would like to meet him or no she wouldn’t like to meet him.

And when she finally met who she liked, my grandparents were not all that crazy about. He was a rapid communist. This was before the revolution, he was very active in the party in the revolution but anyway she married him.

**Levine**: So in other words your aunt’s parents weren’t involved in the initial matching?

**Sonja**: Yes, well they were there, all three were there. They would listen to what the match maker had to say and they were married and then the second one young man he got married. Yes I guess all three were married while we were still there.

**Levine**: Do you remember anything that had to do with dowries?

**Sonja**: Well the youngest one I remember married a girl who was called-everybody had a kind of-instead of people knowing your last name, they knew you by a description. Like Janet the shoemaker’s daughter or so and so the tailors son or the water carriers nephew and this young woman was known as the Dezjenicks Daughter.

Dezjenicks is a Russian expression meaning the childless couple daughter which means that she was adopted and her father was also blacksmith like my uncle and he eventually married her and went to live there.

And that was their home but the old people lived with them. But at their death they were going to own the blacksmith shop and the house. That was theirs so that was her dowry.

**Levine**: And how about the wedding itself do you remember any of those?

**Sonja**: The wedding, the ceremonies were usually done outdoors under the stars.

**Levine**: Oh so it was at night?

**Sonja**: I remember them being at night and then the reception was in the house and there was food and dancing and singing. Sometimes there was music at weddings but I always used to love to do the dancing. The dancing was great. I was very much interested in the goings on. Whatever was happening in the family was of great interest to me.

**Levine**: What other kinds of socializing did the family do at that time?

**Sonja**: Mostly the socializing was whatever the family could offer. There were holidays, holidays were always a time of meeting the family and eating together. The young people went for walks a lot.

They walked and they went to weddings where they danced but when they walked they usually walked-the girls walked together. The boys walked together but eventually they would meet some place and talk together. They would get together that way.

**Levine**: And were most of the holiday’s religious occasions?

**Sonja**: Yes, they were all religious occasions all of the Jewish holidays were religious occasions and a cause for celebration.

**Levine**: Were there many Jewish people in your city or what was the mix like?

**Sonja**: I think they were mostly a Jewish people. There was a street that was called [unclear 00:26:50]. I know there were non-Jewish too because there was a church and there was a mosque. So there must have been a Muslims but mostly it was a Jewish town.

**Levine**: Did you ever celebrate birthdays or name days or anything like that?

**Sonja**: Well, there was such a thing but, we did not celebrate them. I don’t know why I guess because maybe we didn’t have enough money to buy-