



African Immigrants Project

Interview transcription

Nebiat Tesfa

Interview date: February 4, 2001

Location of interview: Interviewee's home in Reading, PA

Country of origin: Eritrea

Ethnic group/language group: Tigrinya

Religion: Muslim

Profession: Electrical Engineer

Level of education: Bachelor's degree

Location of residence in Philadelphia: Reading, PA

Ms. Tesfa left Eritrea (then still part of Ethiopia) in 1990 and fled to Kenya. She eventually applied for refugee status and was resettled in the United States. She has a sister in Philadelphia who has lived in the States for 19 years. The sister also came as a refugee, in the first wave of Ethiopian/Eritrean refugees. Ms. Tefsa took English classes, and then began community college. She eventually transferred to Drexel University's Engineering program, where she received her Bachelor's degree.

Ms. Tefsa is now a U.S. citizen. She enjoys living in Reading, but returns often to Philadelphia in order to socialize with other Eritreans. She is an active member of the Eritrean Community and of its young adult group.

Interviewer: Leigh Swigart (LS)

Interviewee: Nebiat Tesfa (NT)

[START SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

LS: Could you please give me your name?

NT: Nebiat, my first name; Tesfa, my last name.

LS: And you are from what country?

NT: Eritrea.

LS: What's your ethnic group?

NT: Uhh, Tigrinya?

LS: Tigrinya? Okay.

NY: Yep.

LS: And your native language is?

NT: Is Tigrinya again.

LS: I'm not a specialist in the Horn of Africa. I lived in West Africa for six years. It took me a while to figure out that Tigrinya and Tigrean weren't the same thing. Are those related languages?

NT: Well, there are --- yes, certain, certain words the same, very close though.

LS: Can you understand?

NT: Ah, some words, yeah, kind of --- like, sometimes, you can use common sense, but not completely understand.

LS: So you wouldn't understand? I see.

NT: No, no. [NT laughs]

LS: What's the dominant language in Eritrea?

NT: I guess it's Tigrinya.

LS: Is the alphabet that that you use the same alphabet that is used for Amharic?

NT: Ah, yes. Letters. Yep.

LS: How long have you been in this area?

NT: In Reading area?

LS: Or how long have you been in the United States?

NT: Almost ten years.

LS: And how long in Pennsylvania?

NT: Same.

LS: Ten years, you came ---

NT: I came straight to Philly.

LS: Okay, and how long in the Reading area?

NT: About three years.

LS: Okay. We'll come back to that. So currently you are in Reading? Is this the outskirts of Reading? Is that what this is? It was hard to tell, because I felt like I sort of looped around the city. Is this the suburbs?

NT: Yeah, yeah, this is a suburb of Reading. It's like west, west, west of Reading.

LS: And who do you live with here?

NT: By myself.

LS: Do you have any relatives in this area?

NT: I have two brothers in Philly and a sister in New Jersey.

LS: That's nice.

NT: Yeah.

LS: And what is your current work?

NT: I am an engineer, electrical engineer.

LS: And your job is here?

NT: Yes, yes. Reading.

LS: Who do you work for?

NT: GP Energy. It's electric --- a utility company. GP Energy.

LS: Is it fun?

NT: Yes, yeah. I like what I do.

LS: Tell me a little bit about how ---Well, first let's start with Eritrea. You lived in Eritrea until you were, you said until you were in eighteen?

NT: Uh, uh, I have to think about that. [NT laughs]

LS: Okay.

NT: Yes, something like that.

LS: And what was your education in Eritrea like?

NT: Finished high school.

LS: And then what happened? How did you end up leaving Eritrea?

NT: Well, uh, you know the story, the war and all those things. I went to Addis and from there I went to Kenya, um --- can I stop here? [break in tape]

LS: And then what year is it you left Eritrea?

NT: 1990.

LS: And when you eventually came to the US, did you come as a refugee?

NT: Yes.

LS: And how did that work? Were you set up by an agency? Did you apply for this? Did you have a choice of where you went?

NT: Yeah, I went to Kenya and there I applied for refugee status and, um, that way I came here.

LS: And was the US the, the ---

NT: Yes.

LS: The only choice where ---

NT: Yes. Well, actually, there was a UN, and there were choices to go to actually Australia, Canada also, and US. And I happened to have a sister here.

LS: Your sister was already here?

NT: Yeah, she's been here for, like, a long time. Eighteen, nineteen years, maybe.

LS: So she came --- Did she come --- ?

NT: She came as a refugee, too.

LS: In the early eighties?

NT: Yep, yep, yep.

LS: So when the first wave was coming.

NT: Right.

LS: Was your sister already in New Jersey?

NT: She was in Philly.

LS: Okay. [pause] How did you feel when you found out that you could come to the United States? Was that a huge relief or were you also anxious?

NT: It was exciting, the fact that I have a sister here that I hadn't seen for a long time, and plus the situation we had back home, you know, was, was not easy, you know.

LS: Were you able to be in contact with people when you were in Kenya? Did your sister, did she know you were coming?

NT: Oh, yeah. Yes, yes, yes. She knew.

LS: But she didn't make a counter application to have you come over? Do people ever do that? NT: No.

LS: They know that they have --- I hear people sometimes say, like Liberians say, "I have a sister at a camp in Guinea and so I am working from this side to see if I can get my sister to come."

NT: Oh, yes, yes, yeah, but my case was different () because of the age, age, certain age.

LS: Yeah, they were talking about minors, actually.

NT: Yeah, this was like --- like, there were two cases in Kenya. I know that one of them was, like, you are, like, over age and there was a camp that you go to. You live there and the UN process your, you know, your process. Which in my case it was under --- like, it was a different status, which was like an under-age status and I lived with family there, actually, like relative families and then my sister did help.

LS: Do you still have family in Eritrea? Are your parents there?

NT: Oh yeah, my mom. I have three sisters and a brother.

LS: And they all made it through the ---

NT: Yes, they did. They survived. Yeah.

LS: So you have a big family?

NT: Yes. Yep, we are a big family.

LS: So your sister came first, you came, and what about the other two brothers? Then they followed you?

NT: No, my brother came before me, my older brother. And my younger brother came in 1995.

LS: So you came here and --- What year did you come here?

NT: I came in 1991. I lived in Philadelphia(?) for about a year, a year, before I came here.

LS: What were your impressions upon coming to Philadelphia. Had you heard about Philadelphia? Had your sister told you about it?

NT: Well, I haven't heard anything about Philadelphia, you know, but when back home we see movies and stuff like that about US and I had a little bit idea but not that much.

LS: What part of Philadelphia did you go to?

NT: West Philly.

LS: And how did that correspond of what you had thought of the US?

NT: Well, first --- [NT laughs]

LS: I have lived in West Philly, too.

NT: Yeah, yeah. Well, actually, I mean, the first time, when I got off the airplane and went home, my sister was living in Haverford, Haverford Street. In Overbrook area, it was a nice area.

LS: That's ().

NT: Yeah, that was a nice area and that's the America that I was, you know --- [NT laughs] yeah, that I had an impression of. And then the next day, I think it was like the day after or something, we went out. We went to the real West Philly. [NT laughs]

LS: Was that a surprise?

NT: It was a *huge* surprise. The area and I just like --- we were walking down the streets and I just couldn't believe it. I was, like, asking my sister, "Is this it still? Are we still in US?" [NT laughs] And my sister say, "Yeah, yeah."

LS: Was that because you were not expecting there would be poverty or ---

NT: Yeah. Well, the area, you know. You always, when you think of America, you think of all this nice, nice houses, you know, all the big buildings, nice landscapes and all those things. And I saw West Philly, all the dirt, the garbage outside and the style of the houses and all those --- it was just totally different that what I ever had, then what I had in my mind.

LS: What season did you arrive?

NT: Actually, it was a nice season, April.

LS: So that was ---

NT: It was spring, very nice, like where you can just go outside.

LS: So you did not have the shock of the weather?

NT: No, the weather was just perfect. It was similar to that we have back home. Very similar.

LS: So when you got here, what did you do? Did you need to take English?

NT: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. I mean, the only class, I mean, the --- back home, we take classes, English classes, in high school. Actually, most of the classes, or subjects are taught in English.

LS: Are they really in English?

NT: Yes, yes. All except the one language which was the Amharic. Everything else was taught in English. But we were doing it only in school. Outside that, we always used our language and it was not that easy.

LS: So your English wasn't that solid?

NT: No, no. I mean, I could understand people, but it was not that great so I had to take English classes.

LS: Where did you take them?

NT: First, right away, when I came I took this class --- I went to this, um, I think it was, um, some Jewish Employment ---

LS: Oh, JEVS. Jewish Employment and Vocational Service.

NT: Exactly. I took classes there for a couple of months or something. I went there before I start school in community college.

LS: So that's what you did? Then you started community college?

NT: And then I started community.

LS: Which one did you go to?

NT: Philly.

LS: ().

NT: Philadelphia, yeah, Spring Garden.

LS: How did you find that? That's a big school.

NT: Yeah, big school. It was, like, from the school that I went to, high school, it's much different, you know. And, umm ---

LS: How did the work compare? Just the classroom style and the teaching and what was expected of students?

NT: Umm, it, it --- it's totally different. It's different, you know. First of all, it's high school versus college, but it's different, you know. Community is, like, you don't have that many students in class, you have, like, a few, few, which was good. Yeah, for one thing ---

LS: What was your class size in Eritrea? Was it big?

NT: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LS: Like sixty?

NT: We had, yeah, at least from forty to fifty people in class. I think it was something like that. But here you had, like, maybe fifteen to twenty per class. You get a lot of attention from teachers here, which is good. So that was different and first classes that I took were, most of them were, like, English, different like the reading, writing, speaking. So it was kind of exciting to learn the language.

LS: Were there any other Eritreans or other Africans in your classes?

NT: Oh, yeah, there were, there were --- well, no, Eritreans, no. Africans, some other Africans --- I know there were other group like Orientals, Oriental people. I had a class, but I do not recall --- it's been awhile --- I don't recall any other African students, but I had some from South America, like Jamaica, but I didn't have any Eritrean in my class, in my English classes.

LS: How long did you go to the community college?

NT: Actually, three years I went. First year were more like English classes and then I start taking the college level classes. So I went there for three years.

LS: And after that what did you do?

NT: And then I transferred to Drexel University.

LS: So you could come in as a junior? Is that how ---

NT: Pre-junior. Drexel is a five-year college. You have to go like five years. It's, uh, the first year you go, like, the whole year. It's a quarter system, their system is different, and the first year you go, like, full year and then the second, like, you work six months and go to school six months. Co-opt. They have a co-opt program.

LS: Yes. I've heard about that.

NT: Yeah. So your second, third, and fourth year it's six months working and six months working and going to school six months. And then last year, your senior year, you go the whole year.

LS: And what did ---

NT: So I, when I transferred, I transferred as a pre-junior, which was like the third year at Drexel.

LS: And when you got out, you got a degree in ---

NT: In electrical engineering. [break in tape]

LS: And this whole time did you continue to live with your sister?

NT: Uh, yes, the first four years, yeah, I lived with my sister and my sister got married and moved to New Jersey, so I was living with my brother.

LS: The one who'd come over since? Or the one was already here?

NT: Before me, yes. Both of them, actually, but my older brother was the one who was taking care of us.

LS: Is she a lot older than you?

NT: My brother?

LS: Your sister?

NT: Yeah, yeah, she's the oldest one.

LS: So was it a little bit like you had recreated your ---

NT: Yes. She's more like my mother, you know, she is everything, like my mom and my sister and you know --- [NT laughs]

LS: That's important, huh?

NT: Yeah, yeah, I mean, she's one of the reasons I went to school straight, you know.

LS: Where does she live in New Jersey?

NT: She lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

LS: So that's not too far.

NT: Yeah, it's not.

LS: Are these her kids?

NT: Yes.

LS: I saw that picture ---

NT: Yep, yep, four years and one year.

LS: Is this a boy? Or are they two girls?

NT: No, a boy and a girl.

LS: Did your sister marry an Eritrean?

NT: Yes, her husband is Eritrean.

LS: Whom she met here?

NT: Yes.

LS: How does that work here? Is there a preference to marry within the community?

NT: Yeah, there is always, but it depends on the person, I guess, on the individuals. It's not --- I don't think there is a lot of pressure from the community to, so it's up to the individuals.

LS: What do you miss most about Eritrea?

NT: Back home, oh! [NT laughs] One thing is weather. The nice weather we have there is just ---it's very nice. And the family closeness that we had, even though we are close here, it's very hard to keep up with all the works, busy schedules and all those things. It's very difficult to keep that family togetherness. So that is one of the things. And I miss my family, of course, that the main --- I miss my mom.

LS: Have you been back?

NT: Yes, I went back last September, September before --

LS: For the first time?

NT: No, no. I went back home in 1995 also. My father came here to visit us and he passed away here, so we had to take his body back home in 1995. So I went back also in 1995.

LS: That must have been really difficult.

NT: Yep, yep, yeah.

LS: He died unexpectedly?

NT: Unexpectedly, yes. He was a healthy guy. His death was sudden.

LS: So you went back and did a traditional funeral?

NT: Yes. Yep, yep, yep. So, and then the second time was to visit my family, the year ago. More than a year ago.

LS: Has your mother ever been here?

NT: No, she hasn't.

LS: Would she like to?

NT: Yeah, she would. I have little sisters, young sisters, and she doesn't want to leave them behind.

LS: Oh, I see.

NT: So, that's one of the reason she doesn't want to come now, you know. But yeah.

LS: What do you like best about the United States?

NT: Ah, US. Ah, the opportunity. The fact that if you put your mind, you can do anything. Anything.

LS: Do you feel like what you have done here would have been difficult to do in Eritrea?

NT: Yeah, I think so. The fact that we don't have enough schools, higher education there. It would have -
-- I think it would have been, umm, but, uhh ---

LS: Do women go into things like engineering very often in Eritrea?

NT: Yeah, they do. The thing is that because of the war and stuff we have before, there weren't that much opportunity for not only women but everyone else, to continue going --- do their higher education and all those things. But now, hopefully, it's better, better than before. And, hopefully, it will continue. If it continues the way it is improving now I think everyone will get opportunity to.

LS: Is the unemployment rate still very high?

NT: Well, uh, I don't know. I'm not sure.

LS: When people get out of college, can they find jobs or something?

NT: Yes, yes, yes.

LS: They do find jobs?

NT: Yeah. I mean, if they graduate there is always job. The thing is not everyone can go to college. They don't have enough higher education schools, like universities, college.

LS: There's University of Asmara and then what else is there?

NT: And there are a couple of, like, I guess, technical schools. Otherwise that's what it is, that's all we have. And that's the only problem. It's not the job, you know.

LS: That sounds better than a lot of countries, because a lot of countries in Africa, there are enough people who go to college but there are not enough jobs for them.

NT: Right, yeah, yeah.

LS: They are just unemployed and that creates other kinds of problems.

NT: Yeah. I mean, considering the situation there right now and for the government to start from the scratch, it's been only independent for --- what? --- seven years, officially. And they start from scratch to build almost the whole country. And considering that, I think they are doing great.

LS: Do you find that Eritreans here are investing money back in Eritrea?

NT: Back in Eritrea? I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I cannot say anything about everybody else, but I can tell you about myself. I am still paying my loan. [NT laughs] My school loan! I don't have money to invest there.

LS: So you took out loans to go to school?

NT: Yes, yes. You know how expensive it is, Drexel.

LS: Oh, I know.

NT: So I haven't started investing yet.

LS: But it's good that people can get loans. It's a burden something afterwards, but it also allows people to go.

NT: Yeah, yeah, it's not complaint. I, I --- it's a good investment. School is a good investment, I think. And I will pay my loan off sometime and then after that, you know ---

LS: So with your degree from Drexel, you were able to get this job? You didn't have to go to get a Masters or do --- ?

NT: No, no, no. With the intern experience that I had, it's much easier to get a job.

LS: Where did you intern? In Philadelphia?

NT: In Philly, yep. The one year --- it was two years --- and the one year I had it, I went back to community college. I worked for the electronics laboratory. And the other one was for one architectural engineering company downtown in Philly..

LS: Yeah, I am sure that makes a big difference ()to look at what you've done.

NT: Yes. Yeah.

LS: Do you think that immigrating here has changed you? Are you a different kind of person than you would be if you had stayed in Eritrea?

NT: Um, I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I don't know, but I guess I am different now, but I am not sure why I am different. Maybe it's because I grew up, you know? Because I am a mature person now. But, yeah, I can tell you I am different. But I am not sure why. If it was being here or growing up. But you learn a lot of things. I learned a lot things being here.

LS: If you move back to Eritrea tomorrow, would it be hard for you to live there ---

NT: No.

LS: --- or would you be able to integrate?

NT: No, no. I wouldn't. I know there a lot of people who would have, like, hard time considering the convenience that they have here. They would have, but for me, I don't think I would have a hard time.

LS: How does your mother --- How does she view the fact that so many of her children are outside of Eritrea? Is this considered as an enormous hardship? Or is she sort of happy for that, that you have an opportunity?

NT: Well, she has --- yeah, some ways, yeah. She is thankful for the fact that we have this opportunity, but sometimes also she would like to be with us, you know. Together. And I guess, you know, she wouldn't mind if we go back there.

LS: What do you think you'll do in the future? Do you have an idea? Are you committed to staying here?

NT: I am not sure. I don't know, I don't know. I have no idea of what I am going to do but for now I am just going to work. [NT laughs]

LS: Are you a citizen?

NT: Yes, I am.

LS: Why did you decide to become a citizen?

NT: For some --- it has some opportunities.

LS: To be a citizen?

NT: To be a citizen, certain things you can do.

LS: Could you retain your --- Well, what happened, because when you left Eritrea was not independent?

NT: It was not.

LS: So you came with an Ethiopian Passport?

NT: Yes.

LS: And then now have you ---

NT: Well, yeah. I came --- well, actually I didn't have a passport when I left, but I was considered Ethiopian when I left, when I came here. And umm --- but --- and then afterward when we had to --- the referendum that we had to do in 1993 we chose --- I was part of it. So we had like a special ID that we

got from the Eritrean government. So I was () until I became a citizen, I was Eritrean who had a green card here.

LS: I see, I see. But when you became an American citizen, could you retain your Eritrean citizenship?

NT: I am not sure, I am not sure. I am not sure if I can have a dual citizenship. Hmm. That I just will have to find out.

LS: But going back to Eritrea doesn't pose --- you don't have any trouble getting a visa or anything? That's an automatic thing.

NT: No, not a problem. No.

LS: Where is your family? Are they in Asmara?

NT: In Asmara, yes, yes, yes.

LS: I'd like to visit the Horn of Africa sometime. I've never been to East Africa, only in West Africa.

NT: It's, it's exciting, you know.

LS: Are you satisfied with where you got in your education? Do you think that sometime later you might do anything else to specialize?

NT: Yeah, I like to go back to school. I have been saying that for three years since I graduated [NT laughs] but I like to continue my education on electrical engineering, actually, the technical things, you know.

LS: What would you be able to do that you can't do now with your degree?

NT: Just to expand my knowledge. I don't think --- I don't think --- I'm not sure if I would have better job just because I have my Masters or something, but just to satisfy myself. [NT laughs]

LS: Sometimes companies pay for you to do it.

NT: Yeah, that's true. So if I would like to go back, my company would pay.

LS: Oh, wow. Is there a place around here where you can do that?

NT: Oh, I want to go back to Drexel. I am more familiar with their curriculum and all the classes that I have to take and stuff. So I wanted to do that, but I am not sure.

LS: That's a long ---

NT: I know – commuting. Yeah, yeah.

LS: And how did you find your current job? Was it advertised and you applied?

NT: You know, when we graduate, right before we graduate, Drexel University posts your resume on the Internet. They have a web site where they put all --- everybody's resume so company access the web site and they can get information and then that's the way the company found me.

LS: Wow.

NT: Yeah.

LS: That's amazing. So you just finished --- so you finished in nineteen ---

NT: Ninety-seven.

LS: And you were employed immediately?

NT: No, no. Actually, I was on vacation for, like, awhile. I got my job, I went --- I traveled a lot, I went to California, and other places. Umm, so I took a break, you know. And I start working in November. So I was out of school for four months or something, I think. Yeah.

LS: And how did you feel about coming to Reading?

NT: Well, first it was a little bit hard, you know --- like living in Philly city, you know like a city person, there was kind of a little bit difficult because this is --- [NT laughs] it's different. It's a lot different. But now I am so used to it, it's nice actually. I like it.

LS: You don't feel isolated?

NT: No, no. It's, umm --- I guess when I was living in Philly, I spent most of my time in school doing studying and I was very busy. And I didn't see the difference between living in a city or suburb. () stuff. I was too busy, you know, doing stuff. But now I came here, I like to live in a quiet area. You know, quiet place.

LS: This is nice.

NT: Yes, yes. So I really loved it here. Whenever I like the crowd place, I can always drive to Philly. And I do. [NT laughs] I do.

LS: So do you still find that you socialize most with other Eritreans?

NT: Yeah, I do. Yeah. I also have a lot of friends from school from all over the place. Everywhere in the world, so yeah, I hang out with a lot of my schoolmates also.

LS: Are there any other Eritreans here?

NT: Here in Reading?

LS: Mmm-hmm.

NT: Not that I know of. Not that I know of. Maybe there are, but I don't know.

LS: Is there a black population in Reading?

NT: There are, but there are very minor. You don't see that many.

LS: So what do people take you for here? I bet you they think you're from India.

NT: Yeah, oh, yeah. I used to get that. When I came here ---

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

LS: They always thought that you are ---

NT: Yeah, they always thought that I am from India. So the first question they ask me was, "Are you from India?" And I was like, "No, I'm not."

LS: Does anyone from India ever think you're Indian?

NT: Yes, yes.

LS: Do they speak to you in Hindi or something?

NT: Well, because they have different language within India, they couldn't talk to me in Indian but they asked me, yeah, a few of them asked me if I was from in India. I was, like, "No, I'm not!" [NT laughs]

LS: When people ask where you are from and you say, "Eritrea," do they know where Eritrea is?

NT: A lot of people don't. A lot of people don't know Eritrea.

LS: And how do you explain it?

NT: Yeah, I try --- "It's a small country in East Africa, it used to be ---" Well, you have to explain to them. But ---

LS: Have most people heard of Ethiopia?

NT: Yes, a lot, everybody. It's like --- so the first thing you say is like, "Have you ever heard of Ethiopia?" "Oh, yeah." "We are in the north part of it."

LS: I was in a parking garage and I saw this man and I thought, "Wow, he looks like he's from Eritrea." And I said, "Where are you from?" He said, "Africa." And I said, "Well, yeah. Where?" He said, "East Africa." "Where?" "The Horn of Africa." I said, "Where?! What country?" He said, "Well, it's this little country called Eritrea." I said, "Okay, I know Eritrea." He said, "You do!?" [both laugh] He started with this vast continent ---

NT: Yeah.

LS: And kept chipping away.

NT: Right, right.

LS: I figured that he had been asked that so many times that he knew to sort of give ---

NT: Yeah, yeah, because you, you --- yeah, some people just don't care. They ask you where you're from, you tell them Africa, and they say, "Okay." That's it. So that's why --- actually a lot of times I do answer --- so you kind of get the idea if they are interested ---

LS: Interested in ---

NT: Yeah, what it is, then they will ask you anyway.

LS: Are people ever surprised when you say you are from Africa?

NT: Yes, a lot. Well, actually I had this experience --- yeah, a lot of times, but this one experience that I had was, umm, this girl --- she was a young girl. I think she was from Puerto Rican or something. When I was in community college, I used to tutor mathematics. So, she came, she assigned to me, and I was tutoring her and she asked me one day, "Where are you from?" And I told her from Africa. And she goes like, "Huh? Yeah? You don't look like from Africa." "Uh, I am, and what do African people look like?" And she explained to me, "You know, I thought all African people have this short hair, kinky hair, dark skin." And she was like so sorry about that but she said, "It's like, yeah, you know, I didn't expect you, you know." "Yeah, I am from Africa. Now you know." [NT laughs] So, yeah, you get a lot of those, a lot of that.

LS: Well, there definitely would be some people who would fit immediately --- they would look immediately like they were from Africa.

NT: Right, right.

LS: I was at this event yesterday for all Sudanese boys who came as refugees.

NT: Right.

LS: There are fifty or sixty of them.

NT: Right.

LS: And they are very young and they're very tall ---

NT: Right, right.

LS: And they're very black.

NT: Right, yes.

LS: () with big smiles. And they have been telling their host families that there were no black people in Philadelphia. And they said, "What do you mean? Philadelphia is majority black." They said, "No, they're brown."

NT: [NT laughs] Okay. Right, right, yeah, yeah. So, yeah, you get a lot of those --- but people are nowadays, you, know, are, you know, know more --- better.

LS: They are a little more sensitized ---

NT: Yes, that, plus I guess, you know, they know more about Africa than before. Because when my sister tells you story, it just cracks you up, you know. Some things ---

LS: She looks like you?

NT: Yeah, she looks like me and the experience she has is funny. And all those stories, she can write a book.

LS: But she thought it was funny; she wasn't offended.

NT: Yeah, you know, what can you say? You look at the TV and when they show African people, all they show is the dark skin and stuff. So you don't blame the people, you can't blame them, that's all they know. So you try to teach them.

LS: Not knowing.

NT: Exactly.

LS: It wasn't malicious.

NT: No, no, no. It's not.

LS: Do you have an idea how many Eritreans are in this area?

NT: That I don't know. I know there are a lot of them, many of them. I can tell you, I mean, people who participates in the community center we have there and stuff, are up to probably, I don't know, up to five hundred, maybe.

LS: Five hundred people?

NT: Maybe, I'm not sure. I guess, if you ask them --- the board people of the community, you might get the accurate answer. But there are a lot of them. A lot of them in the area, especially if you add New Jersey, Delaware area, there are so many of them, a lot of them.

LS: I think Eritreans and Ethiopians together are the second biggest group in this area. It's hard to estimate. After Nigerians. But I think Nigerians are the biggest group anywhere of Africans, 'cause there's ---

NT: There are a lot of them, too. () numbers.

LS: A lot, a whole lot. Where does your community tend to meet, the Eritreans? Are there particular places they tend to hang out or to see each other?

NT: Yeah, the community center, of course. Yeah, I guess actually that's where actually we meet. There are also a couple of restaurants. One restaurant, Eritrean restaurant.

LS: Which one is that?

NT: The Dahlak Restaurant.

LS: Oh, the Dahlak?

NT: Dahlak, it's in ---

LS: On Baltimore.

NT: Baltimore, yes. There is also a bar which is owned by Eritreans also.

LS: Oh, the Asmara Connection?

NT: The Asmara, yes. So they hang out there also, but it's mostly --- we meet at the community center we have.

LS: Before you had the community center, where did people see each other?

NT: Oh well, I mean, we had the community center for, like, awhile.

LS: I thought the building is new, just a few years.

NT: No. They bought it, but we rented it since 1994, or maybe '93. Something like that.

LS: I am on the list, on the listserv there. () I always see the messages about the renovations.

NT: Okay, right. Yeah, on the Philly group. Yeah, but before that, I don't know. I am not sure what they were doing. I came, like, new then, so I don't know ---

LS: When you came in, was your sister already kind of hooked in to all the Eritrean community? Did she introduce you to people?

NT: Yes, she had already been here more than eight years, I think. About eight years, when I came here. And yeah, yeah, she did.

LS: She was the pioneer.

NT: Yes, yes. So I didn't have any trouble doing, like, adapting the cultures, you know. It was much easier for me because I already have --- [NT laughs]

LS: Oh, it makes a big difference.

NT: Oh, yeah, it does. Because the experience she has --- when she tells me what kind of experience she had, it was not an easy thing. But it was easy for me. It was very easy.

LS: She must be a very strong person.

NT: Yes, very strong. Yes. She is a very strong person.

LS: Do you know John Kidane?

NT: Yes.

LS: He was telling me when he arrived back in '81 ---

NT: Yeah, yeah, they were probably close with my sister.

LS: He said they arrived and his wife was six months pregnant.

NT: Oh, God.

LS: Not only did they have to fit in, but they had to understand the system and have a baby with no family support.

NT: Right.

LS: It's kind of amazing to think what that must have been like.

NT: Right, yeah. Yeah.

LS: When your sister had her children, was she wishing that she was back in Eritrea with a lot of people to help her? [both laugh]

NT: Yeah, of course. Back home, like, uh, almost the whole family raises the kid. You have a kid, it's much easier. You know?

LS: Especially of you're a professional woman or something?

NT: Oh, right. Oh, yeah. It's much easier. Yeah, she was, but --- but she's happy. And the fact that she has healthy kids, that's the main thing.

LS: When my kids were very small, we lived in Senegal so we had people who lived in our house and helped us and it was, really, so much easier. I don't even know what it's like to be a mother with --- 'cause we were there for three years when they were one child was nine months to three and a half and the other one was two to five. The most intense years. So we were very fortunate. Do most Eritreans that you know maintain very close contact with their families back home?

NT: Yes.

LS: Do you think most people send money home?

NT: I think so.

LS: Do they use bank transfers or do they send through Western Union? How do they get money back home?

NT: I have no idea. I do not know how they do it, but I am sure they help family back home.

LS: Do you think that most Eritreans that you know feel comfortable here? Do they feel accepted? Do they feel like this is where they are going to live?

NT: I'm not sure if that's, if, you know, if they think what their future is, you know. But I know they're grateful, the fact that you have a job. The fact that you can work, because there are so many things here, and then especially when you come from that experience we had back home, it makes you stronger, you don't take things for granted. A lot of stuff, thing. So I am sure they are grateful that they can work.

LS: And some of their future may be decided by what happens in Eritrea in the next ---

NT: Exactly, yes.

LS: The peace is maintaining, right? Right now?

NT: Yeah, yeah, but you never know, you never know.

LS: That is not the first time that they've established that and then they've started up again, right?

NT: Yeah, I mean, with this peace we just like --- I don't know what is going to happen. Because a lot of people were going to go home before this two years, three years war.

LS: Oh, they already planned on that?

NT: Yeah, a lot of people planned. Yeah, a lot of people planned to, but --- now all those things and now I don't know what's going to happen. How this whole thing is going to end up? So I guess it's going to be based on that.

LS: So you are a member of the Eritrean Association? Are you also a member of the Youth --- what's it called? ---

NT: Yes, yes.

LS: The professional --- wait, what's its --- there is the very young one and there is --- ()

NT: Yeah (). The young adults, we call ourselves. Yes, yes, I am a part of that and I am also a member of the Community, Community itself.

LS: What is the young adult group like? What kind of activities do you have?

NT: Actually, we started up with, um, actually now to --- with all the war that we had in the last couple years, we started out to help what's going on back home, all the displaced people --- that's how we started and we are still working on that.

LS: In what form does your assistance take? Do you send money? Do you send clothes? How are you helping?

NT: Yeah, they try to help in fundraising, to help whatever is --- whether it's money or clothes or whatever.

LS: Is that the walkathon that you guys were ---

NT: Yeah, yeah, that too. Things like that.

LS: Okay. And you have a non-profit status so you can collect things like that?

NT: Yeah, we kind of --- we have also other organizations, as in DC area and other areas, so our youth group is not an official organization. So we kind of hook with them.

LS: So that you are under their auspices?

NT: Exactly.

LS: Do you also have social activities, the young adult group?

NT: Yeah, we try, we try. We just started very recently and we had one, umm --- I think it was Labor Day or something, we had a barbecue for all the Eritrean community and a lot of activities there, sports and stuff like that.

LS: And you do it at your center?

NT: Well, actually that time we went to Lansdale. There was this huge park, so we went out there. And also we have like a lot of times barbecue at the community center. You know how --- I'm not sure if you've been to the center ---

LS: It's across from ---

NT: Yeah, the park. So we use that park. Yeah, we play there like. A lot of, like, volleyball and stuff.

LS: Your community seems very cohesive. You seem to do a lot of things together.

NT: Yeah, we try to. We try to.

LS: And I think that --- because I study all these African communities --- the Eritreans are the only ones where there is a young group like that. In fact, its the only one that has a young adult group. But then the younger ones, the adolescents, there's a lot of community ().

NT: Right, right.

LS: And I went to --- they had a little get-together at the Asmara Connection ---

NT: Oh, okay.

LS: All those kids are so sweet.

NT: Yeah, yeah, yeah. People like Tomas, I'm sure you met Tomas, are the guys we should be thankful for doing all those things. He's ---

LS: Oh, he's so committed and ---

NT: Very.

LS: But he's also just such --- he's also just such a pleasant person.

NT: He is, yeah. And, um, so we try to --- to give the opportunity them of learn --- to keep their culture. You know, things, like, there aren't a lot of cultures that are, like, very rich culture. We had a very rich culture. That are certain things that you don't agree with --- I don't agree with our ---

LS: Like what?

NT: --- cultures and traditions.

NT: But, well, it's just --- [NT laughs] I can go on and on about that. But, um, like, you want to keep some things and you want to pass that to your kids and we want our young children to keep those things, like the family values that we have, things like that. The respect that we have for each other, the closeness that we have, we like to keep it. So things like that you try to teach them.

LS: What kind of experiences are your sister having with her kids? Is she ---

NT: They are very young, so ---

LS: But the four-year old, does she speak Tigrinya at all?

NT: She does, she understands it. She also speaks a little bit. We try to speak to her in Tigrinya at home so she can maintain the language. Now she started at preschool. It's a little bit hard for her to speak Tigrinya but ---

LS: Are there any other Eritreans in the Princeton area?

NT: No. Uhh, I think --- not in Princeton. I am not sure, I don't think. But there are a few miles away, there are some, some Eritreans, but their mom is very good at home. She is staying home.

LS: She's staying home with them ---

NT: Yeah.

LS: --- so she can really do that? That's good.

NT: Yes, she is staying home. So that helps a lot, too.

LS: That's in favour(?) of --- if they were in day care ---

NT: Mmm-hmm. Then, then that would be very, very difficult, but the four-year old now she speaks. She speaks and she can understand. Whenever you talk to her in Tigrinya, she understands everything.

LS: Does your sister's family come all the way down to Philadelphia for particular events?

NT: Yes, yes, when there are things like get-together, barbecue and stuff, she comes.

LS: Did they move up there for work? Did her husband get a job there?

NT: They used to live in Trenton. Actually, he works in Trenton but they didn't like the area they were living in so they moved to Princeton.

LS: It was a little rough?

NT: Yeah. But he works in Trenton and they live in Princeton. It's not that far from his work.

LS: Do you find that living in Reading that you have more contact with Americans than you might have if you had stayed in Philadelphia?

NT: I think so, I think so, because if I stayed there I would associate with --- more, associate more with Eritreans than with other group. And, um, yeah. But, uh, yeah, here, yeah, you kind of associate with different groups, ethnic groups. Which is good.

LS: Is this a good place to be a single person or is it kind of boring?

NT: [sighs] I don't know, I don't know. It depends, I guess, on the individuals. I don't mind. But it depends how people are, you know. Like I said, I like a quiet area, a quiet place. I don't mind to just sit here and read, and do things myself. But there are people who don't like, you know --- like more sociable, city-type of people. So I guess for those people, it would be very boring. But for me it's fine.

LS: Are there still a lot of Eritreans coming? Are people coming on the lottery? On the DV program at all?

NT: Um, the last --- I am not sure about now, but I know, yeah, the last, like, a few --- two, three years ago, maybe. Three, four years ago, a lot of people came on the DV, I think. But I am not sure about the last two couple of years.

LS: And do your association immediately know about these people and try to help them out?

NT: Well, somehow --- well, not all the association, but somehow they always meet Eritrean. So that Eritrean always try to help them or try to bring them to bring them to the community center so everybody else can ---

LS: I suppose a lot of people who come now are coming here because they already have family.

NT: Yes.

LS: It must be rare that people come and they don't know anybody here.

NT: Yeah, yeah. Because it's like --- leaving --- when you look at it from back home, to just go to United States by yourself, it's not an easy thing. So, you know, unless you have someone there. You can't even think about it, you know. I don't know, you know?

LS: When I lived in Senegal, people are very poor and very generous and very welcoming and they would say, "Oh, of course, it's fine if you come in our house, or you go to a village and you spend the night, because that's what Americans will do if we came there." And I thought ---

NT: Yeaahhhh, riiiiiiiiight. [both laugh]

LS: Exactly. “No, I don’t think so, but ---” I just wouldn’t want to say anything, but I was thinking, “You know what. You wouldn’t.”

NT: Right, right. I mean, it’s different, culture is different.

LS: Very different.

NT: It’s totally different. But I think almost everyone knows someone here, since we have a lot of people here.

LS: Are you a member of any other kind of group or association? Not necessarily Eritrean but professional or --- ?

NT: No, I am not.

LS: Are you active in a --- are you Christian?

NT: I am Christian.

LS: Are you active in any church?

NT: Ahh, no. [NT laughs] No, I’m not.

LS: But you never were, even in Philadelphia?

NT: No, but my sister is, though.

LS: What church?

NT: She goes to this Orthodox Church.

LS: Which one?

NT: It’s in Trenton.

LS: Is it a Greek Orthodox or Russian?

NT: It’s a Russian Orthodox Church.

LS: I am always curious, because I know there is an Ethiopian Orthodox Church ---

NT: Yeah. Right. I've heard about it.

LS: But Eritreans don't go. As far as I can tell, nobody goes.

NT: I don't think so.

LS: They tend to go to the Greek Orthodox Church.

NT: Yeah, yeah.

LS: Do you think that is motivated just by political feeling or is it because ---

NT: I think so. Yeah, I think so.

LS: Has the Eritrean community ever thought about getting its own church?

NT: Actually, they, um --- I'm not sure, I don't know. But now there, there is this girl also --- there is a priest there trying to organize, not the way the Orthodox church does it, but like a Bible study type of thing.

LS: Oh, I saw that on the listserv.

NT: Did you see that ---

LS: Yes.

NT: Exactly. So she is going to start that, which is good, you know.

LS: And so what do they do?

NT: I guess they will teach a Bible study. I'm not sure.

LS: But then the Bible --- because I don't know that much about the Orthodox thing --- the Bible is written in Ge'ez, is that right?

NT: There is a Tigrinya Bible.

LS: There is a Tigrinya Bible.

NT: Yep, so ---

LS: So then it's not an ancient language --- it's in the ---

NT: No, everybody can --- it's for everybody. Every Christian. So I guess they will do that.

LS: So it's not an Orthodox Bible?

NT: It's just a Bible.

LS: It's a Tigrinya translation of the Old and the New Testament.

NT: Exactly. Nothing ().

LS: Because some people are Orthodox and some people are just main line --- Protestant?

NT: Yeah, there are Catholics, there are all kind.

LS: Has there been a Tigrinya Bible for a long time? Is that something that ---

NT: As far as I know, yeah. [pause] I don't know how long it has been, but it's been ---

LS: Are you from an Orthodox ---

NT: I am Orthodox, yes, background. Orthodox.

LS: How long did it take you until you felt comfortable with your English, that you were not missing anything or having misunderstandings or other ---

NT: Well, yeah, once I start school --- I guess it took me probably like a year or so to get used to and then there, after a year, I could understanding, you know, I could understand almost everything.

LS: I was just thinking about the Eritreans that I meet. They always seem to have very good pronunciation. Like they are able to adopt a very American pronunciation.

NT: Is that really? I don't know.

LS: That's just an observation I made because some other groups they do not make that shift. I think, though, they've been in countries that are already English-speaking. Sometimes they keep that ---

NT: Right, right, right.

LS: That pronunciation because that's what they grew up with. Liberians are having a lot of problems because they speak Liberian English and they go to schools and people don't put them in ESL because they already speak English. And in fact their English is so different that nobody can understand them. It's a very big problem.

NT: It's different. Okay. Right.

LS: What kind of food do you eat? Do you cook American food? Do you cook Eritrean food?

NT: Uh, yes. Well, here I usually cook American food. I cook all kinds of food. I don't cook Eritrean food that much. Whenever I need Eritrean food, I go to my sister's. [NT laughs]

LS: Did you leave Eritrea before you had learned to cook? Were you so young that you didn't learn to cook?

NT: No, I did learn. I mean, back home is --- women back home are different than women here. So you learn the household stuff since you are very young everywhere in Eritrea. So yeah, yeah, I learned how to do things when I was --- before I came here.

LS: Where do people usually buy ingredients they need for Eritrean food?

NT: Here? Well, I guess --- well, there is a place, the Indian store at Walnut, 42nd and Walnut.

LS: So you can get all the stuff?

NT: A lot of the things, a lot of the spices and stuff. A lot of it, most of it, like, your family send it from home.

LS: Oh, really? What gets sent from home?

NT: Oh, things like the hot spice, like the hot pepper, the powder, and things like that usually come from home.

LS: Someone told me the other day that there is an American who grows tef now and then makes the flour?

NT: Yes, yes, yes. I think they grow it in Texas or in California. Somewhere. Yeah. So they sell it. That is the main ingredient to make injera back home. So before they used to import it from Ethiopia, but now they are growing it here.

LS: Somebody figured out that there was a big niche that had to be filled?

NT: Yes, yes, exactly. So now I think you can buy it at certain places. Not everywhere, but certain places.

LS: When you first came here, I know your sister helped oriented you, but did she help you find health clinics and all those kinds of things that you would need?

NT: Yes, everything. I am in good shape.

LS: You were lucky.

NT: Yes, I didn't have to do anything. So for me everything was, like, as not sudden. I learned things gradually because of my sister. So it was not that difficult. [NT laughs]

LS: You owe her a huge debt?

NT: Yes, I do. Yes, I do.

LS: What kind of music do you listen to?

NT: I listen all kinds of music. Of course, I listen to Tigrinya. I like jazz. I like some Caribbean also, Caribbean reggae type of music.

LS: Where do you buy Eritrean music?

NT: They usually sell it --- I usually buy it when I go to a festival, a huge festival that organize in DC area.

LS: ()

NT: Yeah. Places like that you find it.

LS: Are those festivals fun?

NT: Oh, yeah.

LS: What's it like?

NT: First of all, you see people from, like --- you haven't seen for, like, awhile, from high school, or family members ---

LS: And they ended up here ---

NT: Up here, somewhere, scattered in US. That's where you see them.

LS: That's amazing.

NT: Because everybody comes to the festival.

LS: Where do people stay? They just have hotels?

NT: Hotel, a lot of family. Well, actually when we go to DC area, we have cousins there that we always stay with. So a lot of them have families that they stay with, but a lot of them also stay in hotel. It's very fun. We always ---

LS: Sounds like a long party that people are ---

NT: Yes, yeah, yes. Like a three-day party. It's great, we enjoy it. I always enjoy it.

LS: I saw there was a web site and all that.

NT: Right, right. They try to do a lot of things like that, organizing. They have a soccer tournament every year, the festival, they also have, umm --- have you heard of the Dehai Internet?

LS: No.

NT: That's Eritrean Internet connection. It is called Dehai. So they organize every year a retreat somewhere, usually it's either somewhere in Pennsylvania, which is Pocono's area. Or sometimes they do it in ().

LS: Is this an information web site? Is it a list?

NT: Yes, yes. It's an information where you go there and get your news and everything. Just like ()Africa. Have you ever been to ()Africa?

[END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

[START OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

NT: --- classmates or your neighbour.

LS: You run into people?

NT: Yeah, you run into people, people like that, a lot.

LS: So do you think most Eritreans subscribe to that list? To that Internet listing?

NT: Yes, most of the people who can access an Internet have access to Dehai?

LS: What is it? Dehai?

NT: Dehai, D-a-h-a-i. [spells word using "a," but actual web site spells it "dehai"]

LS: What does that mean?

NT: Dehai is "youth."

LS: In Tigrinya?

NT: In Tigrinya, it means, yep.

LS: I want to ask you a little bit about how you find the racial dynamic in the United States.

NT: Umm, yeah, you hear things on the news and stuff like that. I am not sure if I ever have experienced myself. I cannot tell you anything from my own experience.

LS: You felt like you've experienced discrimination or some ---

NT: I have never, never --- maybe I am too naïve to see it, or I don't know, but I don't feel. The school I went to is more diverse. I have people from everywhere, both in community college and Drexel. Drexel I have people, like, international people from India and Europe and --- so you don't feel like a minor there. And then work, well, most of the people that I work with are actually white, more like white male type of job. It is ---

LS: That's true.

NT: It is, yeah. But I never felt discriminated or anything like that, actually. They treat me just as an engineer. So I hear it on the --- from people talking about, or on TV, or stuff like that, but I never experienced anything.

LS: Do you feel that Eritreans in general have good relations with African Americans?

NT: Oh, I don't know. Yeah, I guess --- I think so. *I do*. But I don't know, I cannot say about other people.

LS: Do African Americans ever relate to you in the sense that you are all from the same place and that you have a connection? Is that the basis for any conversations you have or what about people's curiosity or --- ?

NT: Umm, not really. I just like anybody else. In fact, you get more --- sometimes you get more, like, questions from other ethnic groups than African American groups about the detail of your --- where you come from and your culture and --- I don't know why. Or maybe it's because I mostly hang out with other ethnic groups than African American. That could be the reason.

LS: So other ethnic groups?

NT: Other like international or white people here, not black. That could be the reason that ---

LS: So your American friends tend to be more white than black?

NT: Yeah, yeah, the school I went to is --- especially Drexel --- is more white people than black. And also people from other countries, other countries, like Asia and Europe.

LS: You liked Drexel? It was fun?

NT: Yes, it was very fun because the group that we had we were about, I think, close to ten people and all of us were from different countries.

LS: Wow.

NT: I think they had a couple of people, maybe three people, who were from the same, which were Indians, but the rest of us --- I was from Eritrea, I had one from Nigeria, I had one from Romania, I had one guy who was from United States, white male.

LS: He was the minority?

NT: White male. [NT laughs] We had a couple of people from India, I had from Vietnam, and so it was a very nice group that we had. It was nice.

LS: Do you feel in general that you fit in here in America, that you are accepted and that people --- ?

NT: I think so. I would like --- I think so. I would say so.

LS: We are going to have an exhibit and there will be photographs, and there will be information, and we hope to have some videos, music, churches and all kinds of things. This whole project is to raise the awareness of African immigrants and their experiences for the Philadelphia public. Lots of school groups will go to this exhibit. Is there anything in particular that you would like to communicate to Americans about what it is like to be an African immigrant in this area?

NT: Ooh, let's see. [pause] Ah, I don't know. [pause] Yeah, I would like the Americans to know --- sometimes a lot of people are, not everyone, but a lot of people are --- can kind of stereotype you. So I would like those people to look at the details and try to learn more, more about the cultures and about the people, instead of just stereotyping.

LS: So they should know that there is a diversity of people ---

NT: Yes.

LS: Okay.

NT: That's the one thing I --- if you would ask anybody back home in Eritrea, or if I was in Eritrea, it would have been a different story. For me, I wouldn't know anything. I wouldn't know about any other cultures, or anything else except my country, my culture and all those things. So I see the Americans also

that way. So but by being here I learned a lot about different cultures, different people, and I would like *them* to have that kind of experience. They have opportunity here, because there are a lot of people from different country, where back home majority were, like, all Eritreans. You don't have that, you know, other people, other people from different countries there. But here there are a lot of opportunity. If you are interested, there are a lot of opportunity.

LS: Do you feel in anyway African? Is that an identity that means anything to you or do you ---

NT: I feel Eritrean.

LS: You feel Eritrean?

NT: Yes, I do.

LS: So if you see someone from Nigeria or --- did you feel any closer to that man in your group who was Nigerian than to somebody from India?

NT: Uh, no, not really. No. It's just, you know, different country, it's just the same thing, not really, no. I feel the same.

LS: I think sometime Americans assume that there is solidarity there that may not exist at all, because people don't know each other.

NT: Right, that's right.

LS: I was just talking to someone yesterday who is Oromo and he started the Oromo --- I think it is called the Oromo Community Association.

NT: In Philly?

LS: In Philly. And he said that the Oromos and the Eritreans actually have cooperated in a number of things and feel very sort of united against the Amharas.

NT: [NT laughs] That's politics.

LS: Exactly, it's politics. But then he was saying that there had been some cooperation.

NT: Yeah, you feel like more closeness to them, at this moment, because we felt close to the Tigris, too, at one time, at one moment.

LS: And not anymore?

NT: Uhh ---

LS: Because things have shifted.

NT: Oh, yeah. Big time. [sighs] But it's not an easy thing.

LS: No, I can imagine.

NT: Right.

LS: Okay, is there anything else you would like to say about --- ?

NT: I don't know. I think I said enough. [NT laughs]

[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2]