

**DP-3**

**ELSA SCHNEIDENBACH MATCHEN**

**BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 21, 1909**  
**INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 23, 1989**  
**RUNNING TIME: 30:00**  
**INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS**  
**RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN**  
**INTERVIEW LOCATION: SCHAUMBURG, ILLINOIS**  
**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989**  
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**GERMANY, 1910**

**AGE 1**

**SHIP: PRETORIA**

**PORT: HAMBURG**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **GERMANY: TAUCHA, NEAR LEIPZIG**
- **USA:**

**PHILLIPS:** This is Andrew Phillips. I'm with Elsa Schneidenbach, S-C-H-N-E-I-D-E-N-B-A-C-H. Her married name is Matchen, M-A-T-C-H-E-N. Today is the

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23rd of March 1989. This is Andrew Phillips. It's 9:30 and the interview number is 377 [DP-3]. The country of origin is Germany.

MATCHEN: That's correct.

PHILLIPS: That's correct. All right. Um, let's start, shall I call you Mrs. Matchen, or...

MATCHEN: Why don't you call me Elsa?

PHILLIPS: Okay, Elsa. Elsa, let's just start, perhaps, with your telling us what year you were born in and where.

MATCHEN: I was born in Taucha, T-A-U-C-H-A bei Leipzig. That's L-E-I-P-Z-I-G, in Germany. I was born on September 21, 1909.

PHILLIPS: What date did you immigrate to the United States?

MATCHEN: Well, that's hard to tell, excepting that my parents tell me that when I was just a year old, that would have been September 1910, we were aboard ship headed for America, and that I, in turn, then learned how to walk aboard ship.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me what your parents told you about why they left Germany?

MATCHEN: Yes. My father had served his two year military trek in the army, and he just seemed to feel that war was very imminent. And so they sold all of their belongings and they headed for this country.

PHILLIPS: What did your father do in Germany?

MATCHEN: My father was a, they called them tanners, T-I-N-N-E-R, which working with tin and so on and so forth. Here it would be more or less like a, what it would be, I don't know. He was a tinner. He served his apprenticeship there and worked along those lines all of his life.

PHILLIPS: And did your mother work?

MATCHEN: No. My mother was, took care of me.

PHILLIPS: How many were in your family?

MATCHEN: Ultimately there were just two children. I have a sister who is twelve years younger than I.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me a little bit about what your parents described or talked about regarding their life in Germany before they came to the United States?

MATCHEN: Well, they were married when they were both in their twenties, and they had, there was poverty there. My father came from Schneebirge [sic: Schneeberg] *im* [in] Erzgebirge [a mountain range in the southern of East Germany] and there was a great deal of poverty there. He'd tell us about being from a large family and having come home from school, actually going out and searching for wood to be used. And his father was a mailman and then there were a number of children in that family and it was just a case of existing, you might say. My mother, too, came from a

large family, and she had to go out and work after she left school. Both of them had, they did not have the university type of education, they just had the, I don't know whether they call it grammar school or just what.

PHILLIPS: What, I mean, did they talk about how difficult it was and specific examples, stories about that?

MATCHEN: How difficult it was? They did, and yet basically they were people who were the kind who could fit into a situation. Uncomplaining, you might say. They went along with whatever the situation was. Which was not prosperous, at that time. But evidently they had worked and had accumulated money, had set up a household there and, as I understand, came to this country with approximately five hundred dollars, which was after, after transportation and everything.

PHILLIPS: Did they tell you why they decided to immigrate?

MATCHEN: Yes. As I mentioned, my father had been in the service. They have a two year military service there. And when he completed that, he said, I feel that we should go to America. By that time my father had two brothers here, in Indianapolis. So that was, that was the connection here. In other words, we were not coming here cold.

PHILLIPS: And so, because of his fear of impending war, he came to the United States.

MATCHEN: Uh-huh, yes.

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PHILLIPS: Did he talk about feelings about leaving family and friends behind?

MATCHEN: No. Evidently they just both decided this was in their best interest and so they left. That was how come.

PHILLIPS: What happened when they arrived in the United States? Did they talk specifically, let's start with their actual experience of arrival, seeing the Statue of Liberty and arriving at Ellis Island. did they ever talk to you about that?

MATCHEN: Yes, they did. My father would take me, walk me around the ship. My mother was very seasick. Anyway, he tells about seeing the Statue and what a thrill it was, and how all of the people reacted there. They all seemed to feel this is a new country, we're starting over and all of that. And he also mentioned that when we arrived there, we were so very fortunate because we were, three of us, were healthy. Now, he said, what was tragic about it was that some families came over and they had, they probably had a rash or had something wrong with them and in some cases they were deported. Not deported, but they would not be permitted to enter. And that seemed to bother him because we were aboard ship. Everybody was in the same boat. You were looking forward to being in this country, and then some of them were not permitted to land.

PHILLIPS: And that worried him.

MATCHEN: Well, it did. He was a very sensitive type person. He was a wonderful person.

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PHILLIPS: What happened after you went through the facility at Ellis Island. Of course, you were very young.

MATCHEN: I was very, I did not know. But my father said we were not troubled in as much as he was a very methodical man, so all of, everything was in line. All of his papers were in line, et cetera, et cetera. And then he, one thing he did tell, after getting off the ship, he said someone handed him a tomato. Now he, this must be the typical kind of joke they play on people who come over, he said he took this tomato, thinking it was an apple, and how he bit into it and when all, you know how tomatoes are, he said, and the people laughed, and he said it was very embarrassing, that this was one of the things that they did, evidently. You know, just, I don't know.

PHILLIPS: It was a joke.

MATCHEN: A joke. Good. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: And then, and then you moved to where?

MATCHEN: We moved to Indianapolis, Indiana. And there my folks rented a little three room house, and I remember it cost eight dollars a month. It was three rooms, bedroom, living room and a kitchen, and it was very lovely. They were very, they were the kind of people that took such an interest in, they beautified it by putting flowers around it and that kind of thing, so it was real homey. It really was. Papa immediately, uh, I think it was two weeks after he came over here, he immediately started school because he wanted to learn the language and he wanted to become a citizen of the United States. He was a very, that was dedication. And I don't have the

exact date when he became a citizen, but I remember he worked at it very hard and he worked for Fisher Body, which was an automobile outfit at the time. And my dear mother, evidently to supplement income, would, she worked at a dry goods store, too, in a cleaning capacity, but she took me along because I don't think they had nurseries (she laughs) at that time. And that was an experience that was very, very interesting. We'd come home and the lady across the way would come over and say, "Mrs. Schneidenbach, I am just out of money," and my dear mother, who had worked so hard for a dollar and a half would give this lady part of it. I'll never forget that because that was, to me, was sadness. This was taking advantage, of course, of an immigrant. After that my mother was very interested in making, in clothing, making clothing. So she took me to high school with her, they permitted me to go to high school with her, and there she learned how to sew beautifully.

PHILLIPS: And what did she do when she learned ho to sew? Did she go...

MATCHEN: She didn't use it. She made all of my clothes. She made my coats, she made her coats. She was a beautiful seamstress. And in the meantime, Papa was working toward becoming a citizen of the United States. And he, when he did, I remember it was an important day. And also, he would always say to me, "And you have become a citizen by an Act of Congress." And so that's always been in my mind. The other thing is these people were very aware, they were very patriotic. My folks never returned to Europe because it was their, this was now their country. And they certainly played a great part in being fine citizens and patriots. I remember the Fourth of July we would, we would go to a picnic and you'd march with the flag. This kind of thing. He made me aware of all of the holidays, like

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Decoration Day. I knew what Decoration Day was about, I knew the Fourth of July. All these days that I know I didn't teach my children as well (she laughs) as he taught me, but it was just something that was important to them, to be here.

PHILLIPS: Do you have any idea why he was so moved, or felt these days and holidays were so important?

MATCHEN: My thought was that he felt very liberated here, and that this was a part of that whole, the whole thing. He was very, very patriotic. He was also sort of a perpetuum, he had wanted to be a schoolteacher and he just kept on reading all the time, learning. The history was very important to him. He was, my father was a gentle man. He was a real gentleman.

PHILLIPS: Did he say, specifically, why he felt liberated?

MATCHEN: Because of the way things were going in Europe. Evidently they were from one war to the other and all of the men, naturally, they were drafted for their tour of duty there, and he just felt that, well, he was a student of history and I think he thought there was going to be a repetition, which there was, ultimately, of course, we know. Uh huh.

PHILLIPS: And what happened when the war came, indirectly, to the United States? First the First World War and then the Second World War.

MATCHEN: The First World War, the First World War my parents still had that little accent, not little accent, they had an accent. And I remember this, that if I went to the store with Mama and she would revert to the German, which

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was natural, I was so afraid that we, who were called Huns, now this is a long time ago, were called Huns, could be deported. It was real strange. And it was a time of, what shall I say, there were fears there and when the war was over I remember that it must, there must have been a great deal of poverty there, so my parents would send packages over there to help their relatives. That was, those were the things I remembered. That was Indianapolis. Then when I...

PHILLIPS: I was going to ask you, perhaps, to talk a little bit more about those uncomfortable feelings you had about that sense of that racial epithet which was imposed on your family. Did you talk about that at home? Could you describe that a little bit more for us?

MATCHEN: Yes. I can describe it. Mama knitted beautifully, and we would have young people, young girls, whose fiancés or husbands were in the war, would come over, and mama would help them knit. So I would hear much at that time about the hardships of the war on everyone, not only on my parents. That most of, you know, these younger people who just did not know if their loved ones would come back and that. And there was a great deal at that time. Now, the very fact that mama was of German origin made no difference to our close friends. That did not enter into it, but I remember being very careful that we did not talk in the native language. It's so different today, that you did not talk in that language.

PHILLIPS: When the Second World War came, did you feel similar feelings?

MATCHEN: No. It was all different by that time. Naturally, there was an interim. My parents, again, there, at that time, were grateful. I remember them saying,

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look, here's another war, which we would have been directly involved in. And many of them, both my father and mother came from large families in Europe. It was amazing how many of the men never came back. And so I remember war was always something that he was grateful for that he did not, that he was here. There was always a sense of gratitude.

PHILLIPS: What, specifically, were the hardships that you suffered during those times, perhaps the First World War? Do you recall? You were very young then, of course.

MATCHEN: I was very young. I did not, evidently whatever, you mean...

PHILLIPS: Well, you talked about hardships suffered by the people during that period, and I was wondering, of course, they had, their relatives were fighting overseas and that kind of thing, it was a different hardship to what the Europeans suffered, when the war was actually on their own territory.

MATCHEN: That's right. That's right. And over here I remember we, you know when they, I'm trying to think what the word is when you do not, you cannot buy everything that you want. What is that word?

PHILLIPS: Rationing, perhaps?

MATCHEN; Rationing. I can remember that. And the folks took that very beautifully. They felt, in turn, that by rationing we were helping our soldiers over there. There was always that feeling that this is, this is all right. We were going to go through this, this too shall pass. Which it, of course, did.

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PHILLIPS: That was during the First War.

MATCHEN: Uh huh. And the Second War, the Second War, of course, my parents, by that time I was married and yet I remember distinctly how they would always try to, they would collect clothes, they would collect things to send over there. And I, I swear, every month there were many packages. And I always marveled because it was expensive to send things over. But they just felt that they were so fortunate, by comparison, to what the people were undergoing there, that that was their attitude.

PHILLIPS: What was their feeling when, in fact, they were sending clothes to what were ostensibly, in American nationalistic terms, the enemy?

MATCHEN: Well, I would not say that during the war you could send, you could not send anything over during the war, so it was after the war as a relief type of thing. It was not in any way, I see what you're saying, but of course their connection with sending things over was relatives who had less than they did, and they felt they wanted to help.

PHILLIPS: I suppose that question is couched, in the sense that it was a slightly philosophic question, in that was there a, like that feeling, on one hand, here are my relatives in Germany and now I'm in the United States. In a sense I'm now being forced to fight and bomb my relatives. This must have been a very difficult feeling.

MATCHEN: That was a very difficult feeling.

PHILLIPS: Did they talk about that?

MATCHEN: I, I would say, guardedly, because I think always when you're an immigrant, you sort of feel that perhaps you shouldn't voice your innermost feelings, because you are now here, this is really your country. So you had mixed emotions. I would think that. Of course, I did not, because I was a year old, you know. And I just, I never had an interest in going back. My folks never went back, and I could not understand this, when so many people would go back, they never went back. They said they, the poverty that they had experienced there, it was just, why leave this country when it was so wonderful. It was really, they were, boy they were patriotic. (she laughs) They really were. I've, and I respected that so much. I really have. And they were grateful for everything. They never drove a car. They never, and in later years, we took care of Papa and Mama. Papa lived to be ninety-eight.

PHILLIPS: Can I ask you, did you marry into a German family, too?

MATCHEN: No. My husband's folks, they were several generations, they were here. And his background, I believe, is, now let me just think, was it Austrian and, um, oh, that little town, um, little country. Not Lichtenstein, but another, Luxembourg. No, no. My husband and I were...

PHILLIPS: I guess I was just wondering whether there was an inclination for you to marry into, into the roots.

MATCHEN: No. Not at all. There was not that at all. In fact, the other thing that I noticed in my parents, they never participated in these German-American-Vereins [organization], which were organizations. My folks never went in

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for that. Their background, their association was church more than, church and, uh, we did not have many relatives here. So it was that, and people that we met.

PHILLIPS: I see. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about?

MATCHEN: For instance? (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: Well, are there any particular stories about your parents that they might have, let me, let me ask you two questions. The first one is, did they ever talk, I know you have to go...

MATCHEN: That's all right. That's all right.

PHILLIPS: Did they ever talk about things that, perhaps, they missed about their original home, about their native country and life?

MATCHEN; What they missed about their country. Um, my father lived in, in Schneebirge im Erzgebirge, which was right next to what was Czechoslovakia.

PHILLIPS: I wonder if you could spell that for us. Is it possible?

MATCHEN: Shall I? You mean Schneebirge. That's S-C-H-N-E-E-B-I-R-G-E. That's Schneebirge. And then im, I-M-, E-R-Z-G-E-B-I-R-G-E. And that, evidently, was beautiful. They lived at the top of a mountain.

PHILLIPS: And you said that was near where?

MATCHEN; That was near Czechoslovakia. In fact, papa said, in the range of mountains they were at, he could look over into Czechoslovakia. And they were located on the top of this mountain with a huge church up there. So he, he always describes that as being very beautiful. Then he said, "When we came home from school and there was no food there, it wasn't, the beauty of it could not, in any way, take care of that. We had to go out and more or less fend for our food." And so there was much there, that he grew up before his time. His mother also passed away, so he was responsible for two younger brothers at twelve years of age. That made him serious. (she laughs)

PHILLIPS: That made him a serious... (?) sort of a man.

MATCHEN: Always a serious, very. There was, I would say, ultimately, he was a workaholic. He worked, he finally bought a home and it was, that home that my parents worked on and beautified, that was their castle, their dream. They didn't need much to make them happy because they sort of had, it must have been an inner glow or something.

PHILLIPS: I think you've explained, to some extent, unless you'd like to explain more, what particularly, perhaps any one or two things that he loved so much about the United States, and then, conversely, anything that he did not like about the experience, anything he was sorry about.

MATCHEN; I would not say that he was unhappy about anything. Whatever job he held, he did what he had to do because it was a means of income. He always seemed grateful for it. I'll never forget, during the Depression he

would pound the pavement and really try to find. He did all kinds of things. But he never grumbled. but he never wanted to go on whatever they went on, relief. And we never did. Of course, by that time I was working and I was able to supplement the income.

PHILLIPS: What were you doing?

MATCHEN: Well, I had a secretarial position and I worked in an office.

PHILLIPS: Why didn't he want to go on relief?

MATCHEN: Ahh, oh, that wasn't part of the game. You do not, you work, and you take care of yourself. It's a shame because, but probably it also strengthened, I think experiences strengthened us, don't you think so?

PHILLIPS: Are there any other anecdotes you'd like to share with us? Anything you'd like to have on the record about your parents, about yourself, about your immigration experience?

MATCHEN: Offhand I cannot say that I'm, I've always been grateful for having parents (she laughs) that were so patriotic and so dedicated. I was very lucky. I know I was.

PHILLIPS: All right. Well, that finishes our interview with Elsa Schneidenbach [sic], interview number 377 [DP-3]. The time now is 10:00, and that's the end of the interview.

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END OF THE INTERVIEW