

EI-1005/JOHN GAQUER

EI-1005

JOHN GEORGE (JEAN GEORGES) GAQUER

BIRTH DATE: MARCH 24, 1924

INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 17, 1998

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:11

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
USING THE PORTABLE DAT RECORDER

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL SIGRIST, JR., 11/1998

FRANCE, 1929

AGE 5

PASSAGE ON THE *PARIS*

SIGRIST: ...Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today
is Wednesday, June 17th, 1998. I'm in the Ellis Island
recording studio using the portable DAT equipment. And
I'm here with Mr. John Gaquer. Mr. Gaquer came from France in
1929. They arrived in July. Mr. Gaquer was five years old,
a little more than five years old at that time, and was
detained at Ellis Island for about two weeks because they
thought he might have diphtheria. present also in the room is
his wife, Denise Gaquer, and because we are in the
recording studio there probably will not be any
extraneous noise. Mr. Gaquer, thank you very much for coming.
Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

GAQUER: Yes. I was born March 24th, 1924.

SIGRIST: And where in France were you born?

GAQUER: Paris, France, in, uh, do you want the precise location in Paris?

SIGRIST: Sure, if you can give it to me.

GAQUER: In Paris, in the (he pauses) fifth department (French), or ninth, ninth, pardon me, the ninth district of Paris on the, the Rue de Martiers near the Sacre Coeur.

SIGRIST: Okay, can you spell the street name?

GAQUER: Rue, R-U-E. Martiers, M-A-R-T-I-E-R-S.

SIGRIST: And...

GAQUER: Near the Sacre Coeur, which is the great white cathedral in Paris.

SIGRIST: And can you spell that, please?

GAQUER: Sacre Coeur, S-A-C-R-E, C-O-E-U-R.

SIGRIST: Thank you. What was your name when you were born,
your full name?

GAQUER: Jean (he pronounces it as in French), J-E-A-N.
Georges (he pronounces it as "George"), my middle name,
after my father. And it was changed to John when I obtained my
American citizenship papers. It was simply because I was
confused as a girl with the Jean name. (he pronounces it as
"jeen")

SIGRIST: And Georges is spelled the same way...

GAQUER: Yes, with an "S."

SIGRIST: Okay. G-E-O-R-G-E-S. Great. Do you know anything
about the day you were born? Did anyone ever tell you a story
about the day that you were born?

GAQUER: I was born in a midwife's apartment, or place of work,
on the second or third floor at number 18, Rue de Martiers.
I can't recall too much, other than what I've been told (he
laughs) but that's...

SIGRIST: Well, did your mother tell you, or your father or family member, tell you anything about that occasion or perhaps your mother's pregnancy?

GAQUER: It was, it was not too far from where we lived and I believed they just walked there and walked back, you know, or took a taxi. I think they took a taxi back. It was only a few blocks away from where we lived.

SIGRIST: I see. Were there other children in the family?

GAQUER: No, I was the first born.

SIGRIST: First born. Were there any other children born in France prior to you coming to the United States?

GAQUER: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your earliest memories are. Do you, do you remember anything first hand in France?

GAQUER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Okay, what, what sorts of things do you remember?

GAQUER: I remember we lived on the seventh floor of an apartment house. And my grandmother was the concierge of that apartment house, and there was a big yard involved with the apartment house. And there was a big plaza in front of the apartment house where I used to play with a scooter and a little pedal-type car. And I remember the goings and comings of various people that lived there. And we lived in a very active neighborhood. Across the street was a famous French nightclub called Bal Tambarin, B-A-L, T-A-M-B-A-R-I-N, where Josephine Baker performed. These things I was told because I didn't, at that time, of it because I was too young. And I remember a happy childhood and, uh, my relatives that we used to visit and they used to visit us occasionally. Other than that I can't, my grandmother had a radio, one of the first radio where there was a big circular antenna on top of the radio with only three dials. And it was quite a novelty at the time. I remember everybody used to come and listen because it was new and fairly novel at the time. My father worked. We lived there but he worked elsewhere. He was an instrument maker and he worked for a company called Colin, C-O-L-I-N. They were a famous instrument, surgical instrument makers of France and world renowned, and that was his trade. And that's, he came here as that in the United

States.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, we could go in all kinds of directions here...

GAQUER: Well, I don't know how much you want me to elaborate.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, we're going to, we're going to sort of cut all that apart and, and dissect each part.

GAQUER: Oh.

SIGRIST: Since you ended up talking about your dad, let's talk about him more in depth. What was his name?

GAQUER: His name was Georges Eugene Gaquer.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about his growing up, his children and family background?

GAQUER: He, he was a Parisian from way back. In fact, that whole family is Parisian from many, many decades. And he was the middle son of a three child family. His sister was older, Louise, and he had a younger brother, Maurice. And, as I

remember, he knew and spoke to people who had been the United States and they had (he clears his throat) enticed him to come because it was the land of opportunity and he took them up. Although he had a good job and so forth, he felt there was future in the United States and that's why he came in May of 1929, to seek and find out what the possibilities were. And he obtained a job, found an apartment, modestly furnished it and then sent for my mother and I a few months later. And we arrived in July.

SIGRIST: Did he ever speak of his own childhood and were there any stories that he used to tell about his growing up?

GAQUER: He went to work at twelve years old, which was the norm at that time. Kids went to school for the first six years and then they went, they apprenticed out. And he apprenticed for a locksmith in Paris. And from that he jumped into instrument making as an apprentice and so forth. And that was his, his trade, and, uh...

SIGRIST: What did his father do for a living?

GAQUER: His father was a, a roofer in France. They have sort of a combination that roofers had a, a, involved with a bar

where the woman, the wife tended the bar and they also sold charcoal and little bundles of faggots for starting, uh, faggots in a, means wood, not other connotations. And that more or less went together, at that time, as a trade. That was sort of a combination of wife/husband type of a business.

SIGRIST: Bar and firewood.

GAQUER: Coal and firewood and charcoal. But I don't know why the combination was such but that's, it was a common mix. And he was a roofer. He died young at thirty six and I believe he fell from a roof, landed on a sandpile but subsequently developed pneumonia and died of that. At that time pneumonia was very fatal. It's not like today, where it's not so fatal.

SIGRIST: What about his mother? Do you know anything about her, or do you remember his mother?

GAQUER: My grandmother, yes. My grandmother's name was Louise Roufiac, R-O-U-F-I-A-C. She was a nice lady, because I remember her quite well. And I saw her after the war. She came to visit, visit us in the United States in 1936 and she came on the Normandie when it was brand new. So I have good memories of her. And then I saw her also during World War Two

when I obtained permission to visit Paris during my stay as a
soldier in Corsica. I snuck up and saw her.

SIGRIST: What is something that sticks out in your mind about
your father's mother when you think about her?

GAQUER: She was stern but very kind. (he pauses) She was a
good cook. And she was a gracious, old lady.

SIGRIST: Uh huh. The grandmother who was the concierge, then,
was your mother's...

GAQUER: That was her.

SIGRIST: Oh, that...

GAQUER: That was her, yes.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

GAQUER: My, uh...

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about her work as the
concierge of the apartment building?

GAQUER: (he coughs) Well, the concierge usually is checking people in and out of the apartment house to control the personnel and receive packages, send up delivery men and so forth. So it was checking and, uh (he clears his throat), they sort of left the mail there and she controlled. It was a general, you know, check-in, check-out type of a situation. Like a receptionist, you might say.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you can tell me about something that you did with your grandmother as a small child, or an experience that you shared with her?

GAQUER: Well, when she was concierge she was pretty well tied there. She never left too, too much, as I recall. It was afterwards, when I saw her during the war, that she had a little house in the suburbs of Paris. We never went anywhere, per se, restaurants or of that nature, but we visited her and she'd make lunch or dinner, whichever was appropriate. I went there with my future wife to introduce her. These are memories... (he is moved)

SIGRIST: Take your time.

GAQUER: ...that are very meaningful. Other than that with my grandmother, she died in 1951 and my father went there. At that time planes had started so her flew to her, for her funeral. And that's the end of my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit more about your dad. Can you talk to me a little bit about his personality?

GAQUER: He was a stern father, good, but stern. A hard worker.

SIGRIST: When you say "good but stern," can you, can you tell me something that reflects that?

GAQUER: Well, we never lacked of anything, even though right after we arrived in July of '29, the following October was the, the crash of the stock market, which made it tough on everybody. However, he never lacked of work because he had a trade and, very often, he had two jobs to make ends meet. But as a youth, I don't remember, we often ate the same things but we never lacked of clothes or food. We always modest, you know, a clean cut home.

SIGRIST: When you were a small child, was there something that

you remember that he gave you?

GAQUER: (he pauses) What did I get? Well, I got a good work ethic (he laughs), politeness.

SIGRIST: That's important.

GAQUER: Honesty. No physical, uh, other than when he died I got his ring and watch and things of that nature. But I had gifts for Christmas and things, you know. We were a nice, rounded out family.

SIGRIST: Is there a toy that sticks out in your mind from prior to leaving for America that you had in France?

GAQUER: I had, uh, I had a scooter. Not in the common sense of scooter you think of. It was a, sort of a pedal-type thing where you pushed on the pedal and made the back wheel turn. Even though you stood up, you didn't sort of pedal it with your foot. You, you pumped this pedal in the back and also, I don't know who gave me that. Also, I had a little tubular car-type thing that you would pedal, like a, I don't even know if they exist today. (Mrs. Gaquer knocks on the table and whispers to Mr. Gaquer) Oh, I used to be very (he

clears his throat) involved with the toy soldiers at that time. They were very popular and my relatives would always give me a little set of six or eight. They came in a box of various soldiers. And that was, I guess, my main toy that I enjoyed very much. A fairly nice collection, but mostly all French-type soldiers because France had a lot of colonies and every colony had their own military group. So there were Zouaves and I forget what else soldiers but I know they were very fancy soldiers which today would be worth a fortune, I imagine.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to bring any of these to America?

GAQUER: Yes, I brought some. What happened to them, I don't know. They just disappeared.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mom. What was her name?

GAQUER: Her name was Leone, L-E-O-N-E, after my grandfather whose name was Leon, L-E-O-N. So this was a sort of a feminine way of calling her Leon. He, uh, her maiden name was Cassereau, C-A-S-S-E-R-E-A-U. Her father was a bread maker, a "boulangier" as it's called in France, and I remember him somewhat.

SIGRIST: What is it that you remember about her father?

GAQUER: He was short and heavy, bald, a kindly man. Her mother abandoned her when she was a, just a child so she never knew her mother. And she was brought up by her father.

SIGRIST: The mother abandoned the family?

GAQUER: Yes. And I knew my grandfather because he lived in the country, my mother and I, and stay overnight. And he lived in the suburbs of Paris. But they had a yard with chickens and so forth and I used to be amazed at that because being a city child I didn't, wasn't too involved with that. So I appreciated going with my grandfather picking eggs from the nest and so forth and feeding them with the grain. And we, to go there it was muddy so we would wear the wooden shoes, which are called the sabot, S-A-B-O-T.

SIGRIST: Did anything ever happen when you were wearing wooden shoes?

GAQUER: No. (he laughs) And they got dirty from the chicken dirt and the muddy area. And you leave them at the door and walk in the house and wear your slippers. That, that I

remember very vividly because it was different from the city breeding that I had.

SIGRIST: What, what was your mother's relationship like with her father?

GAQUER: Well, they didn't see each other too often because we lived in the city and he lived in a suburb which, at that time, was probably not too far but it was more of a, I think we had to take the train. So right away it became an expensive and time consuming thing. So we'd see him, like I say, we'd see him occasionally and spend the weekend there probably. And, and it was mostly always my mother. I never remember my father being there, so I don't know if he couldn't get away or whether they had a misunderstanding, but I really don't know why. But it was always my mother and I, that we went there.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality.

GAQUER: (he laughs) My mother was very strict, very stern, and very demanding.

SIGRIST: What did she demand of you as a small child? What

were, what were some of the things that she expected out of you?

GAQUER: Well, when we came to the United States, she continued to give me French lessons so I didn't lose my French even though I didn't even speak English yet. And we had a little blackboard type thing and I would write and spell and, you know, do, and then we wrote to France to my relatives. I always had to include a note from myself written in French. I guess it was normal but to me it was a tough task to do this. And her stepmother had been a schoolteacher and I guess she was very stern because her stepmother had been very stern in her youth. But she was, you might say, a tough lady. I mean, I loved her as a mother but very tough.

SIGRIST: What did she do for her own enjoyment? When she had a few minutes to do something for herself, what would she do?

GAQUER: Neither my father or my mother had hobbies, per se. They enjoyed entertaining. They would have friends in, you know, have them for dinner and such. They played cards with friends. Personally, she really didn't do anything. I mean, not that she was lazy by any means. She didn't have past times, like knitting or things of that nature. She sewed our clothes

to maintain them but other, nothing that I know of.

SIGRIST: Did your mother work in France outside of the home.

GAQUER: Yes, she worked as a secretary for a while and then she also worked, I think she met my father in the same company, Colin. She engraved on the thermometers the graduations, which was done by applying acid on the glass and with a template scratching the lines of the measurements and filling it with acid that would etch the glass and then removing the wax afterwards. And it left the engraving on the glass. And for a while, I think, they had taken on the franchise of a milk and butter distributorship where you had a little store where they brought the things to you and you sold it to people in the neighborhood. And that was a means of, she could do that during the day when my father was at work and he would come in the evening and help load and unload the crates of milk and what not. That was a passing thing because it didn't last long, I think. It was not a money maker, something of that nature. Other than those things I can't, like I say, she was a receptionist, a stenographer for a while at a doctor's office and various offices.

SIGRIST: Do you know years your parents were born?

GAQUER: One, my mother was born on August 14th, 1895. And my
father was born March (Mrs. Gaquer whispers to him) 27th,
1901.

SIGRIST: Was there a place that you remember, as a child prior
to coming to the United States, outside of the home that you
enjoyed going other than your grandfather's, somewhere in town,
a building or some location you remember going to as a child?

GAQUER: In those days, I don't think people, we had no car and
we didn't go anywhere. I only remember once or twice going to
a racetrack, which was local in the city limits, I believe.
Autueil, which is a famous racetrack.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

GAQUER: A-U-T-U-E-I-L, I believe. My mother was keen on
horses. She liked the appearance of horses and she did enjoy
going to the racetrack for the, not the gambling but the,
the whole appearance of the paddock and the horses and the race
itself.

SIGRIST: Well, that's something she certainly did for her own enjoyment.

GAQUER: So I remember as a child, yes, going there a couple of, usually, I think, you would do on Sundays because people worked, at that time they worked pretty much six days a week. And Sunday was the only day off.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else about your early life in France that sticks out in your minds that you would like to, to add to what we're talking about?

GAQUER: You've pretty much (he laughs) squeezed my brain out. Some of these things I haven't thought of or talked about for decades.

SIGRIST: That's our job. (he laughs)

GAQUER: And I, uh...(he pauses)

SIGRIST: What religion were you in France?

GAQUER: Well, my parents were not church going people. However, it's the norm that a child is baptized as part of

the routine. And I was baptized Catholic.

SIGRIST: And was there any way that you practiced the religion
at home that you remember?

GAQUER: No, no, none whatsoever.

SIGRIST: Prayers of any sort?

GAQUER: None whatsoever.

SIGRIST: Holiday celebrations?

GAQUER: We had Christmas and had various things, at a certain
time of the year for a holiday you make pancakes, which is
(Mrs. Gaquer whispers to Mr. Gaquer), what's, what's the date?
It's, (Mrs. Gaquer whispers again), it has to do with the
Epiphany, I believe. And another time we have, we make a
cake with a little, a little porcelain thing inside that, (Mrs.
Gaquer whispers) oh yeah, this is the Epiphany, a little
cake with a porcelain thing. And the person who gets the
piece of cake with the porcelain is named the king. Or
if it's a lady, that she's the queen of the, the evening, you
know, as a ceremony type thing. It's, it's a fun type thing.

And they're related to, to religious date. However, it was done because it was a habit, you might say. Everybody does it whether you're even Jewish or Protestant. It was a, a going thing that everybody there, which is not observed that way in this country, the United States.

SIGRIST: You were too young to go to school, certainly.

GAQUER: I went to a, like a, it's called, now it's like pre-school, you might say. And being my mother and father both worked, I went to school at two years, I believe, to this (French).

SIGRIST: Do you have any first hand recollections of that?

GAQUER: Well, I, I was pretty young.

SIGRIST: Sure.

GAQUER: I just remember I was dropped or picked up by my father or mother, whoever was the most convenient for their time schedule. And I was there and played with a bunch of other kids. Other than that, I have no recollection.

SIGRIST: Can you describe yourself, what you were like as a little kid? What was your personality like and what some of the things that you enjoyed doing?

GAQUER: I remember people always say I was cute but that has, personally, annoyed me. (they laugh) Not, well, in the apartment where we lived there was a lot of, it was an apartment house, a furnished apartment house. There was a lot of transient type people. And I remember, ladies especially, you know, bending down and giving me a few coins as a, you know, little gift. And tweaking my cheek and saying, "Oh, you're so cute," you know. But true or not, that, I remember that because there was a lot of, a lot of passage of people. So there was, because when I didn't play outside I would play in this lobby area of the apartment house. And people would go through. You had to more or less go through this lobby to get to the apartments, like a hotel, you might say, you know, same kind of situation. So, therefore, I was exposed to a lot of comings and goings of the apartment house.

SIGRIST: Does anyone stick out in your mind specifically?

GAQUER: No.

SIGRIST: Somebody who crossed your path?

GAQUER: No. I just remember these people were usually always very well dressed and I didn't know what it was then but I didn't know what it was then but I supposed because they were affluent, at least appearing, and they always had little things for me. They always had little things for me. They'd give me a little sachet of candies or chocolates, things like that. I, I was pretty well spoiled, I guess, by these people (he laughs) coming and going. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You mentioned your father went to America first.

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Why America? Why did he go there?

GAQUER: Like I said, he had some friends who were American born and had, uh, who were living in France. But they had been to America and they told him he would probably have a, a better future in America than staying in France. That was the full influence. And these people that talked to him also were in rapport with people in the States that were the

sponsors because at that time you needed a sponsor to come to the United States. You had the visa and so forth but you still had to have a letter from a sponsor that somebody would be responsible for you in case you were out of work or what not, that you would not become a charge of the state or the country so that people would answer for your well being or even paid your trip back to your country.

SIGRIST: And where were they living, these people in America?

GAQUER: Two of them both lived in this apartment house.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. They had been American born but...

GAQUER: Yes. One had, One had a business in Paris. He was an American, Mr. Myers, Arthur Myers.

SIGRIST: M-Y-E-R-S?

GAQUER: E-R-S, yes. And the other one was a, a gentleman that was a, I think he was born in France. His name was Maurice, M-A-U-R-I-C-E, Van Bever, V-A-N, B-E-V-E-R, who had spent a good deal of time in the United States in business and what not. And he had gone back to France more or less on a retired

basis. And with their exposure to the States, they're the ones that influenced my parents to come for more of a future in the States.

SIGRIST: When your father came, and he came in '29 also, correct?

GAQUER: Yes, May of 1929.

SIGRIST: Okay. Where did he go when he first came?

GAQUER: He, he came to Brooklyn. He met someone on, on the ship that was going to visit their aunt, or something of that nature, and they said that the person had a rooming house. So he took advantage of that and went and stayed in this rooming house in Brooklyn. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Do you know what the first job he got in America was?

GAQUER: Yes, he worked in his trade, instrument maker, for the American Cystoscope Company, which was in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: Cystoscope.

GAQUER: This is the, that's a term they used in those days.

Today, they, they called them a bronchoscope. It's the tube they, they put down your throat and, to look into your intestines and so forth. And that was, you know, surgical instrumentation. And that's where he worked. It was called the American Cystoscope Company.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when your father left to go to America?

GAQUER: No, no. It was no, no striking thing.

SIGRIST: Did you, as a small child, have any ideas about what America was?

GAQUER: None, no, none whatsoever. I didn't know what was going on. One day we, we took the train to Le Havre and took a boat and, you know, to me it was all new and sort of strange and different.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind between may and, when was it you came? July, you said?

GAQUER: July, yes.

SIGRIST: July. Does anything stick out in your mind about how your life was different when your father wasn't there, if anything?

GAQUER: Well, we were there, we stayed in the same apartment that, like I say, that was in my, my grandmother's apartment house. We had a little cubicle of an apartment on the seventh floor. And I remember it was an event when they would receive a letter from my father from the United States and, you know, everybody read it because it was, naturally, the news from, from the brother, son and so forth of the family. And I know we all read it and I listened to the letter being read to, to us, to me. It was my uncle and my aunt and my grandmother. But I didn't feel, I don't remember a feelings of a loss or an abandonment or anything of that nature. I just went on my merry way.

SIGRIST: I just want a moment of silence just for a second. We're at the thirty minute mark. (pause) Okay, great. That will help me when I make your cassette. I'll know where to flip it over.

GAQUER: Oh, I see.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember, or what you've been told,
of what you and your mom had to go through to get ready to
leave France, or what you know about that process.

GAQUER: I, I know, I remember nothing of the, of the
formalities involved in coming to the States. Like I say, one
day we were there, the next day we took a train and the next
day we were in Le Havre.

SIGRIST: Does anything more specific stick out in your mind
about that process; being on the train...

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...maybe seeing something you hadn't seen before, or
packing...?

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GAQUER: ...thing but I realized it was a big trip. (he laughs)
And we had to arrive the day before, so we left Paris and came

to Le Havre. And we stayed at le Havre overnight in a hotel because the train (correcting himself), the ship was the next day and I suppose it was too tight a schedule so we had to sleep overnight.

And we, we walked around in Le Havre. And I remember walking in front of a victrola record store and they were playing music through a loudspeaker. And they were playing at the time, "My Blue Heaven," which was very popular at the time. And on the other side was "Ramona," which was also a popular tune at the time. And my mother bought the record for a memento of our passage through Le Havre. But I believe I still have the record.

SIGRIST: I have a story to tell you about "Ramona" when we're done with this interview. (they laugh, he refers to the interview with Isabel Belarsky, EI-10. In it, Ms. Belarsky tells about her father, who was an opera singer, winning a contest by singing "Ramona" while they were on the ship.)

GAQUER: It was, naturally, it was all sung in French. It was a French version of "Ramona," which is much different than the English version. There's no Indians involved in the French "Ramona." (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier taking some of your toys. Do you know anything else specifically that your brought with her to America?

GAQUER: Well, I remember we had steamer trunks full of household possessions. I guess the basic household possessions that you would carry with you in those circumstances. We didn't have furniture or anything of that nature but I guess we had pots and pans and bedding and linens and things of that nature.

SIGRIST: Do you remember there being luggage as such?

GAQUER: Yes, two, two steamer trunks. In fact, we had one until not too long ago. It's a big trunk with wooden slats on it, and several large suitcases. And that was the extent of our personal belongings that we brought. There was nothing extensive other than that. And, for a while, we used to use the trunk as a sofa to sit on. We put a blanket on it and, as I said, our first apartment was very sparsely furnished so we had to, if we had anybody visiting us we would sit on the steamer trunk as a, as a sofa.

SIGRIST: They came in handy. What was the name of the ship

that you came on?

GAQUER: The S.S. Paris.

SIGRIST: You came on the Paris. And you said you had to arrive in Le Havre the day before. Do you remember what your impressions were, as a small child, at seeing the ship for the first time?

GAQUER: Well, actually, when you're at the dock and you look at the ship, it looks like a monster, you know, a big mountain in front of you there. All those things were very impressive to me because it was huge and big and different and, you know, I knew there was something of importance going on. I guess at five years old you don't quite grasp the finality of leaving your country and so forth. And I remember being quite amazed on board ship of seeing this expanse of water on all sides. You know, for a young child it was very impressive. I wasn't scare or, you know, baffled by it. It's just, to me it was, well (he laughs), I didn't know it existed.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about coming to America?

GAQUER: I remember the sadness and, you know, crying. Other than that, I can't say whether she was for or against it.

SIGRIST: Did she ever speak of it later on, about her feelings about leaving?

GAQUER: No, no. I think there might have been a little bit of, well, these are personal things. I don't know if I should go into that. She was older than my father and the family had not too much accepted her, per se. She was the daughter-in-law but I think there was a little friction there. I think that might have been one of the, one of the far flung reasons why my father, or they, wanted to leave. To start on their own and not be influenced by whatever. It's a very minute side line. It's a personal thing.

SIGRIST: How long was the ship voyage?

GAQUER: Oh, oh, the voyage? I think it must have been at least seven days, seven or eight days. It was a long voyage, as I remember.

SIGRIST: You mentioned, as a child, seeing the water on either side. What, what other things stick out in your mind about

that trip on the ship?

GAQUER: For a day or so I felt ill at ease. I suppose it was seasickness but at that time I didn't know. And I had a large, woolled scarf that I wrapped around me to feel warm and comfortable. But that was only a passing thing. It was only a little while. And then after I ran around the boat, you know, like I, I got used to it or was acclimated to it. And everybody was nice, uh...

SIGRIST: Were there certain things that you remember seeing specifically on the ship that made an impression?

GAQUER: No, no. I know we ate well. But we didn't come in steerage, I think. You know, we came in third class. At that time it was third class. But even third class was, you know, very, I guess there was below that, below third class. I can't say. But I, I know it was a nice, you know, eventful, happy vacation type time, you might say.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the ship coming in to New York Harbor and arriving here?

GAQUER: I really can't say because we must have arrived in the

night and the next morning we woke up and we were at the, at the dock. Something to that effect.

SIGRIST: And what happened then?

GAQUER: (he laughs) Oh, that was the beginning of the end.

One thing on the ship that, that used to startle me was when they blew the whistle with the, the whole thing would shake and vibrate. And you had this huge, you know, noise of the ship. And that sort of like maybe scared me while it was going on. But I guess when they entered the harbor or crossed other ships they would blow this, ooooooh, real loud that thing.

And that used to, it was pretty loud. About arriving, uh, we, do you want me to go into this now?

SIGRIST: Yes, please.

GAQUER: When we arrived, I think we saw my father through a barrier of some kind. We couldn't touch or talk to each other because we were quite a distance apart.

SIGRIST: Are you still on the ship at this point?

GAQUER: Either on the ship or on the dock. We were now in the

hands of the immigration people. And I remember it as being a very hustling type of an experience where they just shoved us from hither and yon to this place and that place and in front of this desk and that desk. And everything was in English, which to me was a lot of rumbling noise that I couldn't understand. And I was sort of, I guess, amazed and very startled by it all. And only my mother was the only person that I could relate to. And from then on it was all downhill. I don't know what was happening. We went through this, I don't remember coming from New York to Ellis Island but I remember arriving in this huge building that we just saw upstairs, this huge room full of, crowded with a large amount of people. And sort of aisles or desks or something where you were sort of herded through aisles. And there were desks and people are talking and asked you things, which we didn't know what was going on. At no time were we told, myself or my mother, what was happening. We were just hustled from one desk to the next, from one person to another and papers stamped and so forth. And finally, at one time, they separate me from my mother, and not knowing why, and, you know, I was crying and she was crying and not a single person ever told us what was happening. It was like the end of the world to me. And I wind up in a hospital ward because it was all white and, you know, a typical

hospital looking type of situation. And they took my clothes off and examined, well, they had examined me before. That's what started the whole thing. They looked at my throat and say that my throat was inflamed because I had my tonsils out in March and they thought I had diphtheria, or the beginnings of diphtheria which was at epidemic stage at that time in New York. And I guess to play it safe they sent me to the hospital in isolation, or to quarantine. But we didn't know anything of this. That was the big boo-boo, is that we were kept in the dark as to what was going on. So I went to the hospital and they dressed me in the smallest adult size pajamas because (he laughs) they had no children's sizes. And they rolled my sleeves up. And it had no belt. They tied me with a sash cord around my waist to hold my pants up, which I thought was pretty disgusting because I had always been neat and well, well groomed as a child. And finally I, they let me see my mother through double fencing where we couldn't touch, maybe I would say maybe four feet apart. And, uh, she said, "What's going on?" And she didn't know too much what was going on. She said, well, "Be patient and, you know, things will, will come out. And (he coughs) after days and days, of course, at that time a child doesn't keep track of time but it was forever to my way of thinking. The only good thing is that they would give

me ice cream. That's the only (he laughs) redeeming part of the whole situation, is that ice cream was, I think, at every meal or often enough that it pleased me. But ultimately one day I was dressed back in my clothes, brought out to a, a room of some kind and, with a friend that he had made in the States that spoke English and could, they could understand each other. And we went home, never knowing until much later what had had happened and why and wherefore. The diphtheria thing, we never knew at the time that why they were doing it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you ultimately found out about that?

GAQUER: Well, through our friend. His name, he was a Danish person. His name was Knud, K-N-U-D, Hansen, H-A-N-S-E-N. He worked with my father in the same company and he had been in the States a few years before so he, he knew, more or less, the routines and so forth of what was happening to immigrants when they came through and he, they befriended each other, my father and Knud. And I, I think he helped him, helped my father to find out what was happening, why we were detained and so forth. Because I suppose, at that time, my father didn't even know what happened or the reasons for it. If he was

told, he couldn't understand. He had taken lessons, English lessons in Paris before leaving, with the Berlitz School, so he was, he was not conversant but he could understand English to a degree to be, to help himself. But I suppose some of it was over his head and it was a big mystery to us what this two weeks of isolation happened between all of us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how often you were allowed to see your mother?

GAQUER: I, I don't know the sequence. I know it was a big event when I would see her but it, there was no touching or, you know, she was far away. She was always like beyond the, the two fences. Like there was a, a, you know, like a screen or fence between me and there was one between her and there was a space in between. We couldn't reach or touch or, that was it. It was very traumatic. And to this day it is very hurtful.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the staff?

GAQUER: No.

SIGRIST: There's not a doctor or a nurse who sticks out in your

mind for some reason?

GAQUER: No. I remember being examined several times by doctors, you know, looking and doing what they do, you know, tap your chest and look in your throat and take your pulse and things of that nature, routine things that doctors do. Nothing outstanding other than that. The nurses were dressed in white. I believe they had white veils, as opposed to the nurses we have today. But today we can't tell nurses because they're dressed like everybody. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the other people in the ward with you?

GAQUER: No.

SIGRIST: Were there other people in the ward?

GAQUER: I was in a ward, I would say, maybe with a dozen people and they were all adults. I was the only child. And there was nobody who sticks out, nobody that I remember at all. To me it was a big cloud. Everything was, was confused. Everything was, and this talking to me in a foreign language was always awesome to listen to all this. It was strange. It was

different. I, I was like in a different world, which I was. And I had a feeling of abandonment. Well, what, what stood out in my mind later is that in this Ellis Island, with all the foreign people that they have in the United States that probably worked for the Ellis Island personnel, that they couldn't have dug up somebody that could have translated the happening to my parents and to me. Of all the people, I mean, between the English and the Italians and the Germans and, you think they would have found (he laughs) one or two persons who spoke French, of all these people.

Yet nobody, nobody expressed any kind of explanation of what was going on. That's what I hold in my memory as being victimized at that time.

SIGRIST: Well, certainly from a five year old's point of view, you know, how frightening...

GAQUER: My parents were adults and they weren't told.

SIGRIST: Was your mother staying here on the island during that time?

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did she ever relay to you any information about her experience...

GAQUER: No, no. At no time were we told or explained why there was this separation and why we didn't see my father. But he never came on the island. I guess he was not permitted to come.

SIGRIST: But did your mother, later on, ever tell you anything that happened to her while she was here, like do you know any details about her experience?

GAQUER: Well, she was, I remember she was in a dormitory just waiting out time, sleeping with other, I don't know the size or what, but she said it was a dormitory type situation. That she just, day to day, patiently waiting to, for things to evolve.

SIGRIST: While you were in the hospital, did you ever receive a gift of some sort or did anyone give you anything while you were in the hospital, either your parents or staff members...?

GAQUER: No, no, nothing, nothing. There was no contact. The only thing I remember is having ice cream. Other than that it

was a routine, you know, eat and sleep and just wait and
there was no playing. It was a very long day as I remember.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed out of the ward for any reason that
you can remember?

GAQUER: No, no, I don't remember ever being stepped outside.

We were brought into a, uh, what I would equate to a prison
visiting room where you're separated from your, the visitor and
the prisoner, by these barriers and just you talk. It, it was
painful, very painful.

SIGRIST: And that was when you were bring released? You were
brought into that room?

GAQUER: No, no, I mean...

SIGRIST: Oh, no, when you saw your mom.

GAQUER: When we visited with each other.

SIGRIST: I see, I see. Did your mother, you didn't say that
your mother came when you were released. It was just your
father and this fellow...

GAQUER: Oh, no, we were all brought together.

SIGRIST: I see.

GAQUER: I guess my mother and father were together. They had gotten together. Maybe he came at that time because I was being released in order to take us home with this gentleman, Knud Hansen. And they, they brought me and they were all (he is moved) waiting for me.

SIGRIST: Before we move on to, to the next part of your life, is there anything else that sticks out in your mind about being here at Ellis Island?

GAQUER: I looked upon the people as very mean and, not that I was treating, was treated badly. I just felt that the people were mean by not telling me what was going on. I thought that was a very bad thing. That they were bad people in my mind. That they were a bunch of strangers. And they were, that nobody hurt me or anything but I felt bad that I was isolated and, and not explained what.

SIGRIST: And for a long period of time.

GAQUER: Yeah, ten days or two weeks. I, I don't know exactly what it was. It, for a child it is very long under those conditions. You know, if I had been wined (he laughs) and dined and all kinds of toy, time passes. But this was a very lingering, boring period because from day to day there's nothing to do, nothing to, no one to speak to, no one to chat with or anything to pass the time of day with. I was solo, you might say, like almost in isolation because I was alone....

SIGRIST: And, well, how can you communicate with anyone, you know? They're not communicating with you and you can't communicate with them.

GAQUER: That's what I mean. I felt like I was in, in isolation because even though there are people around me, you know, you are still alone.

SIGRIST: Well, where did your family take you? When you were finally released, where did you all go?

GAQUER: In the meantime, my father had obtained an apartment not too far from where he worked in the Bronx. Tompkins Avenue was the name of the street. And it was a four or five

floor apartment and we lived on the top floor. And, like I say, it was sparsely furnished, just enough to get by with. There was a kitchen, a living, living room and a bedroom and a bathroom. And I slept on a, Dad bought an iron folding cot that I slept on in the living room. And, and that was it. Then, I know, we obtained a radio, which was a big thing, a radio that stood on legs. An Eveready radio.

SIGRIST: What was the name of it?

GAQUER: Eveready.

SIGRIST: Oh, Eveready, uh huh.

GAQUER: It was a very popular brand. There was just a little dial in the middle of the whole thing that would turn buttons and you could see the numbers go by in the front of that small dial. And this was, we arrived in July. I guess now maybe this is mid-August or whatever. And come September I was enrolled in school in the first school in the local school in the Bronx, again not speaking English.

SIGRIST: Tell me what some of your impressions were of, of going into school and confronting American children.

GAQUER: Well, it was very strange, very traumatic because I couldn't make myself understood. They couldn't understand me and, and I was picked on quite a bit as being an oddball, you might say, because, although probably amongst them (he laughs) there was a lot of immigrants, also. But I remember being picked on. First of all, I was five so I was small. And fortunately we, I met another young boy that spoke French after a few days or whatever. And he came to me and he said, "I'm American born but my mother is French and I speak French." And from that, uh, my mother used to come and pick me up at school to walk me back home. And he said, "Well, my mother comes too, and I'll see that she meets your mother." So we formed a friendship with this lady and she had this son that I met in school. They had a younger daughter. And we became friends and visited one another. And he helped me quite a bit. At least he was like a protector, you might say. And then, you know, a year or two I got to speak English. And I remember when I started to understand English. I was called "greenhorn" and "foreigner" and everything you want to, can imagine.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the specifics of learning English? How, how did you go about learning English?

GAQUER: Very tough. The one, the thing that stands out in my mind is that the teacher read us a poem, "I shot an arrow into air. Where it fell, I knew not where," and we had to write the author which was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. (he laughs) Now that's a mouthful for a foreign kid to absorb and write. it was tough. That's, that's one thing that in school that stands out at that time. But I guess that I progressed slowly and, you know, learned English and then fell into the fold. And I was always the, the oddball because I was considered a foreigner. I guess I had a bit of an accent that hung on. And from there we moved to, to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: What about your mom? Did she try to learn English?

GAQUER: Oh, yes, yes. They, they were, they, my father went to school, I guess, in Berlitz. He went to night school to learn English. And through him my mother learned.

SIGRIST: This was still in Paris, though...?

GAQUER: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Berlitz was in...

GAQUER: He learned, yeah, Berlitz he learned but when he came to the States he went, he went to high school at night...

SIGRIST: I see.

GAQUER: ...to learn English and he took other, math and algebra and things of that nature, too, just to better himself.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job outside of the...

GAQUER: She worked at home. She was a, being she was tied down because of me, she, uh, she went into New York City. I used to go with her, which was a very tiring thing because we had to take subways and buses. it was a long trip, as I remember. She would go to lingerie shops and they would give her lingerie to fix fancy lace to. At that time, ladies would but lingerie and then they would pick a separate lace that they wanted bordered on the hems and so forth of their lingerie. And she would come home with suitcases full of these articles and sew it home. And for a while she also tied in with somebody that, that she made ties. They would give her the cut material and she would sew them into the form of a tie with the, that flannel lining that's inside the tie.

And you had to test them that when you held them up by one end they couldn't twist. They had to hang flat. That meant that they were flat, the stitching was, was not tight or loose. It was perfect. And that was, the testing method was holding the tie up.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. How was she paid for this work?

GAQUER: I, I don't know what, what the...

SIGRIST: Not how much, but I guess what I'm driving at is, is this piece work or was she paid hourly?

GAQUER: Yeah, it was piece work. I, I imagine when she delivered, she got paid and then she took another suitcase home. And they were big suitcases. I remember her lugging this thing through the subway and so forth. They were big, you know, big suitcases that we had used to come with to the States.

SIGRIST: Were you, as the child in the family, responsible for helping her do this?

GAQUER: I accompanied her, I suppose, only because they didn't

leave me alone. I mean, they don't want to leave me, you know,
I guess it was a (?) at the time. She went into New York,
talked with the people involved and came back. I went with
her. I suppose it was on, on a Saturday that we did this
because I went to school. Or we did it maybe after school.
Those details i don't remember. But I remember Mother, she
was lugging these big things (microphone disturbance) and
I would help to the extent of piling things up and so
forth around the house, you know, this stack of thing, this
stack of thing. Other than that, I was not involved. And
the paying, I presume the normal way would have been to pay
her when she delivered the finished goods.

SIGRIST: In your early life in America, were there things that
you had never seen before that you confronted for the first
time here, here in America?

GAQUER: Well, not really, because Paris is a big city and when
you get to New York, you know, there was cars and taxi cabs and
subways and, just like in Paris. It's not like we came out of
the country ere everything was new to you. To me there was,
nothing stood out.

SIGRIST: What do you think the hardest thing was for your

parents to get adjusted to here in the United States?

GAQUER: (he sighs) Well, I guess the habits and customs, you know, it's different. You're stepping into a new world. We lived out life pretty much the same as we had lived it in France. We, we kept the same habits and customs pretty much in the, in the order that you could. And we made friends quite rapidly, like we had this French lady that we met through school. This Knud Hansen was married and had a child that was a little older, I was a little, oh no, he had a boy who was a little younger than me. And we used to entertain each other, you know, visit their apartment. They'd come to our apartment. And Sundays was a stroll in the park type thing. And no big, one outstanding thing, when we lived in the Bronx just below our apartment house was the, a movie house. And they had just played Al Jolson's, uh, his first picture, what was it?

SIGRIST: "The Jazz Singer?"

GAQUER: "The Jazz Singer." And there was a big crowd outside all the time because it was the first talkie movie and in the summertime they would have the doors open and we could hear this movie and him singing from our fourth floor because we

were right above the open doors of the movie house. We heard this, "The Jazz Singer," you know, two or three performances a night right next door to us.

SIGRIST: That's a great story.

GAQUER: Uh, it wasn't offensive. It's just that, you know, it was new. Movies, you know, talking movies. (Mr. Sigrist laughs)

SIGRIST: Did your parents become citizens?

GAQUER: Oh, yes, yes. They applied as soon as they were able to. And my, I, being a minor I was named under my father, you might say "piggyback." I don't exactly know the terms then. It was what you call a "derivative citizenship." I was an American when he obtained his papers. I was a temporary American under his paper until I became eighteen years old. At eighteen, I happened to be in the service at the time, and they called me out because they, I was called to go to the federal courthouse in Fort Worth, Texas. I was stationed in Texas at the time. And at that time, you had a choice. You could say you wanted to remain French or become American. So at that time I, I chose to become an American

citizen and I obtained my own papers at that time. And that's the time when I changed my name from Jean to John.

SIGRIST: So you had been known as Jean...

GAQUER: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: ...throughout your whole childhood?

GAQUER: Yes. Jean (this time he pronounces it as "jeen" instead of the French pronunciation of Jean), which I was made fun of that, too, because it's a girl's name.

SIGRIST: Let, we have like a minute left and I want to know what you think is inherently French about you? (Mr. Gaquer laughs) What aspect of your personality would you say is inherently French?

GAQUER: I like good food. (he laughs) I like French music. Almost anything French I have a, a, flavor, I can't think of the name, a feeling for. I'm basically a French background person although I'm very American patriotically.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different

had you never come to the United States?

GAQUER: Well, I have no idea. How can you establish that? I would have grown up in France and gone through the war and all the deprivations they had then, I suppose. And maybe died in the war, I have no idea. How can you foresee that?

SIGRIST: How do you feel about your parents' decision to come to the United States?

GAQUER: Well, I, I never held it against them. I think, I had no choice. To me, I lived with them and they brought me where they were and I made my life, uh, along the way I had a sister. In 1931 I had a sister that was born. Her name was Josette, J-O-S-E-T-T-E. She's seven years younger than me, still living. And, uh, (he clears his throat) that's my feelings. I'm, I'm French in feelings but I'm American through and through.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, that's a good place for us to end. Mr. Gaquer, thank you very much for letting me ask you all these questions.

GAQUER: My pleasure.

EI-1005/JOHN GAQUER

SIGRIST: It gives you a better idea, I guess, of the kinds of
things that we do and why people come to listen to these
interviews. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with John Gaquer
on Wednesday, June 17th, 1998 here at Ellis Island. Thank you.