EI-1006
DENISE GAQUER
BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 3, 1925
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 17, 1998
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

FRANCE, 1948
AGE: 23

SHIP: QUEEN ELIZABETH
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Okay. Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, June 17th, 1998 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Recording Studio using the portable DAT recording equipment. And I'm here with Mrs. Denise Andree LeRoy—

GAQUER: Gaquer.

SIGRIST: —Gaquer. And Mrs. Gaquer is the wife of John Gaquer, whom we have just interviewed. And Mrs. Gaquer also came from France. She came in 1948 when she was 23 years old and she's going to tell us her story.

GAQUER: [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Mrs. Gaquer, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

GAQUER: October 3rd, 1925.

SIGRIST: And where in France were you born?

GAQUER: In the [unclear] of Yonne—Y-O-N-N-E, which is south, slightly southeast of Paris. Only about 80 miles from Paris, I was born.

SIGRIST: And what are some of your early childhood memories of growing up?

GAQUER: When I was born, my parents lived with my grandparents, with my maternal grandparents on a big farm. But I don't remember any of it. We moved when I was three years old and at that age, you know, everything is very vague. I have no idea. I had a happy childhood. Then I had a brother two and a half years younger than me. And we were not rich. I suppose now we would probably be called poor but we never felt poor. We had a—a loving family. Everything was fine. And I was excellent in school. I hate to say that but that's true. I was very good in school and by the time I was 12 or 13 I knew I wanted to be a nurse. And I had to work after—when I was—before I was 14 in 1939 the war in—World War II had started in Europe and my father was called because he was a specialist in [unclear]. So from then on it was the war until I was 19 and until the nursing school. In between, I had a job in our hometown and I would spend my money on private courses. Unfortunately, I didn't choose English. [chuckles] Anyway, so I went to—to Paris to take exam. I became a registered nurse, two years of nursing school in [unclear] in Paris, and then became full-fledged registered nurse in [unclear], also in Paris, which is where I was when I met John.

SIGRIST: Let's back up. Before you get to meeting John—

GAQUER: [chuckles]

SIGRIST: —let's just get some family information.

GAQUER: Okay.

SIGRIST: Your father's name?

GAQUER: Andre Roger—Andre Roger LeRoy.

SIGRIST: That's L-E-R-O-Y.

GAQUER: Y.

SIGRIST: Your maiden name.

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What did he do for a living? You said he was an expert, a specialist in Morse code.

GAQUER: Yeah, that was in the war already.

SIGRIST: Right.

GAQUER: In ordinary life, he—he worked as a—a mailman and [unclear] time he works—I don't remember. I don't remember when I was there—

SIGRIST: Did he train horses?

GAQUER: Well, that was when he was young, even before he met my mother. I have no—he always loved horses. But I can remember a few occasions in our small town where there was a man who had a small farm and he would drink unbelievably, had never been—well, he was really an alcoholic. And he would go to the field with his horses—I mean, with the team pulling whatever. And in his drunkenness, he would—he would hurt them. You know, he would hit them and he would lose control. And the whole team would come, you know, foaming at the mouth so probably heading for the farm, which was in town. And the word gets around pretty fast. [voice breaking] I'm going to cry. And my father would actually walk towards them—these are, you know, crazy horses—towards them saying I don't know what. And eventually, they would stop. And my mother was crying at the time. "Oh, he's going to get killed. He's going to get killed." [chuckles] But he said, "What? If they come in town like that, you know, the damage or maybe hurting some people." So my mother [unclear]. He did love horses and he had a way with them.

SIGRIST: Did he have—did you keep animals when you were growing up? Did he have—

GAQUER: We always had, like, a few chickens, probably from—we didn't have a farm—from the—from the eggs. We had a—some chickens. And when the war came, for surviving, twice we raised a pig. We had a nice, big backyard, you know, or court in the back around, closed, simply for butchering in one of those days. And Mother had taken to raise rabbits. And she was really particularly [unclear] the purely white rabbits with the pink ears and the pink eyes. And that was strictly also for supplying something on the table. That's probably how we survived. Otherwise, we did not have a farm. When there was cats they were strictly outside animals. You didn't have a cat inside, you know. [unclear] little baby. You put a dish outside and that's it.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever keep his own horses?

GAQUER: No, never. No, never. Other than going to school, playing, you know, having an ordinary childhood.

SIGRIST: Can you describe yourself as a—as a little girl? What were you like?

GAQUER: I was small. I was small, a little blondie with sh—short, straight hair. Nothing much. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: What things did you like to do when you were a little girl?

GAQUER: Oh, we played dolls indefinitely. [unclear]

SIGRIST: Is there a doll that sticks out in your mind?

GAQUER: Oh, four of them. My whole family [unclear]. I remember them very well. And in France you had Thursday off. You went to school Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, not Thursday, and then Friday and Saturday. And on Thursday with my friends—I had a brother. I didn't play at all—with other girls we—we were at one of their houses in the yard and we played the dolls for the day.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

GAQUER: To the extent of grating some—what is that that's white? It's not clay.

SIGRIST: Chalk?

GAQUER: Chalk—something like that—to make milk with water for the dolls, you know, and dressed them and all that. And I had a very young grandmother and she had given me her doll, which was a big doll and had human hair, a head of hair made of human hair, which was like sewn to layers of fabric. See? To—like [unclear]. [chuckles] And her name was Jacqueline and the boy—gir—the boy doll was Jano [PH], which is John. And then my uncle [clears throat] [coughs] was—he spoke English and he was stationed at several colonies in Africa. And he would always bring me something and he had brought me a little black doll. It was absolutely exquisite, which was full—called Fatima. And then I had another little doll, Janet. And she was like a rag doll. She didn't measure to big Jacqueline but she was my favorite. And that—that was my real family. I loved to play doll and jump—we did simple things, jump rope, do the circle when you're skipping and singing. I had an ordinary childhood, nothing big.

SIGRIST: What didn't you enjoy doing as a child? What thing did you not like to do when you were a kid?

GAQUER: I liked—

SIGRIST: A household chore, perhaps or—

GAQUER: Well, we were expected to—to do a lot, believe me, after school. And I did it. You know, it's no—it was no problem. And the first thing of importance I learned to do was on Thursday morning I was to—I don't know where Mother went in the morning—and for lunch I was to have prepared a certain platter (I can see it here) of macaroni au gratin. My mother gave me the instruction. Once, twice, I was [unclear]. I was fast to learn. And I would prepare that and in layers with the grated Swiss cheese and lots of butter on the top and breadcrumbs and then you baked. Always came out fine. It was my first. But I didn't understand doing it. We didn't understand anything.

SIGRIST: What were some of the other foods that you ate?

GAQUER: [chuckles] Rabbits a lot.

SIGRIST: How would you prepare a rabbit?

GAQUER: I have no idea. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Well, how did you—I mean, how was it—not how—

GAQUER: Well, my mother did it special w—certain different ways. And during the war she was practically forced to kill them too young. They was not really a big meal for the four of us. So she would—when we were friendly with the butcher she would kind of stuff it with some bread filling with a little chopped meat to add to it. And then that would be roasted in the oven like you would roast anything else. But some of the time she would cut it like you do to a chicken and prepare the pieces in some delicious sauces. Especially one I liked was some kind of brown sauce, was very good. And we grew our own vegetables. We had two big gardens. We would have our potatoes, our peas and blah, blah, blah, including delicious fruits like [unclear] current, white current, red current, black current, [unclear] tomatoes, apple tree. We didn't lack for vegetables. In fact, it was a family chore after dinner because one of the vegetable garden was rented, the actual ground from a little widow that we paid rent for. And after dinner, we would all go, father and mother, myself and my mother, carrying water from the fountain to water the garden, like in the summer. And in the spring—father didn't cultivate the stuff but in the spring he would turn the ground over for mother. As

she said, “Oh, this—this bed has to be turned over,” and go with the fork and do that. So we never lacked for that kind of stuff.

SIGRIST: What kind of food would you have to buy? What kind—

GAQUER: The meat and the spices. You know, certain things like that, like, if you wanted, naturally, pasta, rice. You know, anything that you don’t grow, have to buy. And when it was Christmas, once a year they actually bought oranges, tangerines. That was the smell of Christmas. The rest of the year you have apples and pears and chilies or whatever was in season, strawberries. That was great. We—as I say, we were probably poor but I never felt poor. Felt good.

SIGRIST: What was your mother’s name?

GAQUER: Marie Louise Preau—P-R-E-A-U.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about your mother’s personality.

GAQUER: She was a lady and she was very soft heart, big and soft heart.

SIGRIST: When you say she was a lady, what do you mean by that?

GAQUER: She never did anything wrong. She wouldn’t dream of—she was a religious person. We were Catholic. And she had been raised by [clears throat] richer people; you know, parents who were well off. And her and her sister and—and in a finishing school by the nuns, you know. So naturally, she was not about to burp at the table, you can be sure. [chuckles] And we were to sit straight and, you know, only at that—to the wrist on the table and all kind of stuff like that. She had a good heart and she was a good mother. She was a good mother.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that she was responsible for in terms of the household?

GAQUER: Oh, a lot. Cooking, cleaning. Well, as soon as the children are ol—old enough, they help. But I never helped much in the cooking because, before I was 14, I was working. So when I came home I could set the table but, I mean, the cooking had been done. And in doing the work, she also worked. She would go to—what do you call that—doing the—the merchants, like, let’s say, the [unclear], the [unclear] and she would iron, because those were men and the shop in front and sell to the people. And the man goes selling in a—[clears throat] in the vicinity. You know, in the hamlets and so on. And those women have very little time for that kind of stuff. So Mother would go and iron, being paid by the hour. She was not proud. You know, it was okay.

SIGRIST: So she would do ironing for the—for the women shopkeepers.

GAQUER: Yes, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

GAQUER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: A [unclear] would be like a bakery?

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Okay. Tell me a—is there a story that you can tell me about? An experience that you shared with your mother? Something that the two of you did together when you were growing up?

GAQUER: No, I couldn't tell because we had many. Well, I'll tell you something though. It's not an experience, something we always did. M—my brother's name is Maurice. Maurice and I, coming out of school, we had our [unclear]. We had our [unclear]. Then we had to sit down, and being the oldest—and Maurice was not too keen about schoolwork—I'm to do my homework and supervise his homework. And all that is done and Mother is cooking dinner and so on. Now, all is done. We have set the table and we're waiting for Father to come home from work. And I think Maurice would play and my mother would say, "Let's not put the light on. It's so nice this time." And we wouldn't put the lights on until it was practically dark inside. And that's when we would talk. And they were really mellow. The chores are over, you know. And I—I always prized that. I prized that in a way, without realizing it until I was older, that this was a precious moment. And also, we had private moments where some of my girlfriends were not so fortunate. She would, as early as possible, explain all sort of things to me that were not usually spoken of. And she would tell me things and things that are ahead of me and so on.

SIGRIST: What—what kinds of—I mean, what sorts of things were not spoken of at that time?

GAQUER: Like sex, like being old enough to get your period but you don't know when it's going to come, about being aware that sometimes boys don't have the best of intentions. And you should be aware of those things, you know. And at—I know many of my girlfriend, their mother never spoke to them about that. It was good.

SIGRIST: Were there any other family members who lived nearby?

GAQUER: Well, I should tell you that when—when it was the invasion and France was invaded by the Germans, my husband—my husband—my father [chuckles] was nowhere around. We had no idea where he was. And we were made to leave our homes because we tried to escape ahead of the troops so we would be free. Well, unfortunately, they caught up with us and we—we walked and we walked back to the house and lived through the occupation, you know, in our house, not knowing where my father was. And that was some experience, believe me.

SIGRIST: Yeah, I'd actually like to hear about that. First of all, tell me—tell me the name of the town again.

GAQUER: Well, we lived—I didn't tell you that [unclear].

SIGRIST: You told me it was 80 miles from Paris.

GAQUER: Yes, Cer—Cerisiers.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

GAQUER: C-E-R-I-S-I-E-R-S.

SIGRIST: And this is—

GAQUER: Which would translate as "cherry trees." Literally, Cerisiers Yonne, which was the department, Y-O-N-N-E, in France.

SIGRIST: And this is 80 miles in which direction of Paris?

GAQUER: South, slightly southeast.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about your family's experience, the approaching of World War II and then, of course, the eventual invasion.

GAQUER: Well, as—at that time, I was not aware that we were going to have a war because that's the way it is. Thirteen years old, I mean, you're not occupied with it, especially—we had a radio. But the news was not my favorite subject on that machine. It just came that we received the papers for Father that he had to report and that was it. That was before the general mobilization and was what they called the [unclear]. And you went. And from then on, it's just Mother and the two of us, my brother and I. And we would do the best we could. Now, Father was stationed not too far. The city of Sens—S-E-N-S, which was only like, maybe, 15, 16 miles away. But naturally, it's over there.

SIGRIST: Was it the French Army that he had to report to?

GAQUER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. So it was the army?

GAQUER: Yes. And he was in a group of what they called the [unclear], which would be like the Explorers.

SIGRIST: Scouts?

GAQUER: Huh?

SIGRIST: Scouts.

GAQUER: The Scouts. And they rode very big motorcycles. And my father was not a very big man. And occasionally, he would just appear at the door because it's not all that far. And if somebody could cover up for him or something he would come because, you know, he would want to be with us. Naturally, it was a very short visit but it was good, especially for my mother, to be reassured everything is okay. There was nothing we could do. I remember sitting. Like, after supper, we would sit outside with other woman and other family and children. And somebody had a big radio. And I was outside. I don't know why. Maybe it was the season, I suppose. And here the voice of Hitler [unclear] about everything, like he [unclear] come apart, you know, blaring God knows what. And everybody being kind of—feel [unclear] that nothing good was going to happen. And it didn't. Nothing good happened.

SIGRIST: What was the first significant thing that happened that changed your everyday life?

GAQUER: Father going.

SIGRIST: Yes.

GAQUER: Then the invasion. What happened is I was working at the time. And although it was not a very large town, we immediately [unclear] up a [unclear], which is a—

SIGRIST: Welcome center.

GAQUER: —a welcome center where people would donate food or bring even their leftovers, bread, anything. And the people who had—who were evacuating their homes before us—let's say way northeast by Belgium and by Luxembourg and so on, they were passing through. Well, they

could always have something to eat and they could sleep, you know. And although I was working, every free hour I was donating my time to that place, along with many other people. That invasion was—the idea of all those people being on the road, you know, for days already before they get to us and keep on going, at that age, you know, what's happening? This is not a parade. And eventually, it was our turn. Never mind the welcome center; you go. So my mother had a problem because my father always told her, "Don't leave the house." But she did anyway. [voice breaking] There was brothers and sisters of my father with their spouses in the town and they were forming a large group who was leaving. And if we stayed, we would be kind of stranded. So [voice breaking]—

SIGRIST: It's okay. It's okay.

GAQUER: So we did on foot, having loaded a bicycle. Imagine what you can put onto bicycles and, naturally, pushing the bicycle [unclear]. And I remember my brother had a little wagon, like, [unclear] we had put stuff in. And eventually we abandoned it because it became too much for him. He was only 12 and not big for his age. So—so we left. But then—

SIGRIST: Where were you moving to? What was the—the—

GAQUER: The direction?

SIGRIST: —destination?

GAQUER: The direction was southwest and we didn't make it to the party that stayed, the Free France, because they were bombarding all the time, including a bridge that we would have gone over that we saw happening. [whispers] I can't—I can't go on. [voice breaking] One night, so [unclear] [clears throat] [unclear] and some of their families. So it was kind of a large group. There was maybe two dozen people. We were together.

SIGRIST: Did anyone have motor vehicles? Was every—where everyone—

GAQUER: No.

SIGRIST: —was on foot?

GAQUER: No. We wouldn't have gas for them anyway.

SIGRIST: Right.

GAQUER: There was no—that was when—when part of that family—they had a large farm [unclear] type of thing. That was loaded, even a mattress, and the two horses that pulled it. One night, maybe the third night [voice breaking]—I never think of that stuff. I can't say it.

SIGRIST: Do you want me to stop for a minute? I can do that.

GAQUER: Ah, one night we were sitting on the ground, which is what you can do. We had to stand. We stood in a bread line so we had bread. So we were eating bread and somebody had made a small fire. And it—the [clears throat]—the planes were very active. And the bridge went. It was a distance but we could see it well, especially with the flares and all. And it was fire. And my oldest uncle, the one from [unclear] said, "I don't know. That's—I don't want to be an alarmist but I don't know where we're going to go. It seems to be fire all around us, you know, on the horizon." And then the bridge went. And I learned later that some people we knew were part of it on the bridge. Anyway, from then on we—the men had a conference and realized that this was mission impossible and the best thing to do would be maybe to go back. And as we said that, the next morning the first batch of—I don't know what you call that—the four lines of the invasion caught up with us and passed us. And actually, I was told they were not Germans. They were probably Italians and God knows what. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Is that the first time you'd actually seen soldiers through this process?

GAQUER: Other than the French, yes. I—and, yeah, they would bombard the convoys of—

SIGRIST: Civilians?

GAQUER: —of civilians that we were. They would actually—[unclear] when the planes stopped and dropped, everybody left the road and went into the—the ravines on the side ditches and the bushes. Whatever you could do, it's okay. And when you come back you see if anybody's missing. And as the bomb come down, they always make the same terrible [voice breaking] whistling sound. You can ask John. For years and years, I couldn't hear that. It was sign of disaster, you know. Anyway, as the—as the [unclear] pushed [several words unclear], you know, they would go and try to talk to other people in the convoy. You know, it was a big procession. They said that we were going to be—what would you say—passed by these military units.

SIGRIST: Overtaken.

GAQUER: Overtaken. And we informed of a large farm, which was abandoned because everybody left their place. And that uncle had been in World War I. He was a—a wounded of World War I. And he saw in World War I the German soldier perform some atrocities. And he told us a few, which I will spare you, and rape [unclear]. And he [chuckles] decided that all the females—I'm one of them—including the grandmothers, were to be protected. So we go into the court or the yard of that farmhouse. And he locks us in what was probably the dirty room, you know, where the—the farmhouse woman would sell the milk and the cream, whatever. It was like one step down from the ground. And therefore, there was just—that I remember well—there was this much water on the floor for some reason. And he closes the door. And they all go. So like we don't exist, you know, so nobody's going to come and violate us. Well, that was not the most pleasant two hours of my life, believe me. And what happened is that those troops on the manhole were going pshhh and they were not interested in any of us. [chuckles] They left [unclear] and that night we slept on the—on the pile of hay and straw in a big hanger. And we thought we were smart. We went all the way to the top of the pile, you know, closer to the roof, not knowing you can't stay there. It—there's a certain type of emanation or fermentation and you feel it. You—you have to go lower so we did. And the morning came and we turned back and came back to our house, where in between some other immigrants from northern part of France had occupied our house, including a grandmother who had faithfully wetted every bed in the place. But I was—then they went elsewhere and we get our house back. It was miserable.

SIGRIST: Let's just take a couple of seconds here so that I can create a break—

GAQUER: But—

SIGRIST: [unclear] a minute.

GAQUER: That's enough on that subject. Oh, I never think of that stuff. That's in another life.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: That was—that was a—six seconds [chuckles] break. These are very significant experiences.

GAQUER: Miserable. Miserable, yes.

SIGRIST: Once you returned to your house and it had been occupied, how long did you remain there—did you stay—once you went back, did you stay in your house?

GAQUER: We stayed in our house [unclear] the way we were before, yes. And now we didn't know where my father was. There was no news from the Red Cross or the army or anything [unclear], because on their fast motorcycle they had escaped fast enough to be in what we call now the Free France, the part that was never invaded. And there was a line, which we call the line of demarcation, where you could not communicate. You—you could only write. We couldn't write to him. We didn't know where he was. But he knew where we were. You could only write a preprinted postcard, filling out a few blanks and that's it, and signing it. And he wrote several that we didn't get until after he was back. So that was a big help. And eventually, he came back.

SIGRIST: What year was the invasion of France?

GAQUER: '40, I think.

SIGRIST: Early on in the war.

GAQUER: Yes. I think it was '40, probably like late spring. I don't remember the dates. I don't know.

SIGRIST: And you remained then in that location till the end of the war?

GAQUER: Oh, yeah, and for a long time after.

SIGRIST: How—how was life different under the occupation in your town?

GAQUER: It was very different. The Germans had taken a few of the best houses for their [unclear]. And there was a curfew. We were not to have—not only to stay in, but we were not to have any sign of light showing from outside, which is a—a problem, believe me. And we lived like a—you know, like a limited life. And I remember I used to have my own room upstairs but my mother now [unclear] that I slept with her downstairs in her bed, which was facing the—the main street. And I remember being in bed at night, you know, just before you fall asleep. And on that sidewalk right, like two feet out of our windows, the patrol, you know, pum! You know, hitting pavement with the boots, a very reassuring sound. And my brother was made to sleep in the—in the kitchen on an opening. Got so we are all, you know, together, whatever happens. But other than that—

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you ate the rabbits and things during—

GAQUER: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: —this time period.

GAQUER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have food shortages and things?

GAQUER: Well, we still had the garden, you know. We still had vegetables and all that and food.

SIGRIST: You were allowed to keep [unclear]?

GAQUER: Oh, yes. In fact, I want to tell you the Germans never raped or—or—

SIGRIST: Molested?

GAQUER: —or molested—oh, that's not what—the other—

SIGRIST: Pillaged?

GAQUER: —or pillaged anybody's house. [clears throat] And they were very strict. The officer were extremely strict and tough with the army men. And the—the—the ones who occupied our town were the SS, which are the elite of the—of Hitler's army. They were beautiful young men, you know, disciplined, impeccable. And we had—[unclear] to do because you don't communicate, you know, language wise and because, also, we don't have any desire to do so. And they were tough and one little lady reported that a soldier had come in her garden and dug the potatoes. Do you know what they did to that man? He was whipped on the public place for stealing potatoes out in the garden. And another one, I don't know, was discipline like that. And they were giving motorcycle riding lessons and you could know all the young men would take that lesson because they are cut on the nose, because the officer stands in back of him swaying the motorcycle and giving him orders. And, you know, especially if you drive that thing, that's all you need is to have that thing down come down to cut your nose [unclear] a hel—a mark from the helmet. They—other than that, it was sweethearts. You can imagine. There is something I remember also which is not about that. Every night before their—their curfew they would march through the main street. And just at the end of the town they would stop and sing. And, you know, quite a number of young men singing full voice. We didn't know what they were singing about but it was at least a cheerful sound. But other than that, you know—

SIGRIST: When did you finally hear from your father?

GAQUER: [chuckles] I can't tell that [unclear].

SIGRIST: Was—was the—was the war still on—

GAQUER: Yes.

SIGRIST: —or had been?

GAQUER: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

SIGRIST: Was still on?

GAQUER: Yes. It was at the end of that same year. But those months seemed very long to us, had gone to the big town when—with a girlfriend to buy a hat. Mean, when you go to church you have to—I mean, [unclear] have to have a summer hat and a winter hat. And my mother gently told me, "You know, black is a very nice color, goes with everything." I know what she means. Anyway, I had bought myself a beautiful black hat and my girlfriend bought, I don't know what. And we're coming back. We traveled by bicycle. We're coming back home on our bicycle, like late afternoon. And at one point, a man on a bicycle passed us real fast and strong. And when he passed I said to Janine—I said, "He—he pedal just like my father." And that was it. I'm—I'm not thinking of him or where he is. And then we—we—in the next village we pass a—a gas station and that very man was stopped and talking to the man in the gas station. At that time, I said, [whispers] "Oh, my God. He looks like my—it is my father." [voice breaking] So we were united in front of that gas station. And he had stopped because he was getting close to our town and he was afraid. He wanted to hear that there had been no massacre. So we came home, the three of us on the bicycles. Oh, it was very emotional. And when we came by the house—my girlfriend went home—and Father said, "You know, Denise. You're big enough. You should understand. It's even worse for your mother to see me. Go in and tell her." [voice breaking] "You know, tell her that you met somebody." She wants [unclear]. She get it right away. And [voice breaking] [several words unclear]. There was something—then from then on, life was easier and Mother was more calm, you know. I know it—at least, she knew she was not a widow. And I had a black hat. So what?

SIGRIST: Was he allowed to stay for the duration of the war?

GAQUER: Oh, yeah. It was all over. You know, it—he was free of the military service. And then I worked and when I was 19 I went to Paris to school, which was what I always wanted.

SIGRIST: Was the war still on at that point?

GAQUER: Was the Liberation. And the [unclear]—

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the end of the war.

GAQUER: Well, the way we saw the Americans passing through the town in tanks like a—a parade or a convoy of tanks, and there was a lot of black men. And that was not so common. And they all [unclear] and throwing stuff like a bar of soap or everybody pouncing on that stuff, a bar of chocolate, a bar of soap, a container of crackers. You know, whatever. And the—the flags on their tanks and, oh, you know, like they're our friends. So that was—that was that. But it was the year of the Liberation. It doesn't mean we had food or anything. The conditions were the same, which was extremely miserable. And—

SIGRIST: Do you remember the Germans leaving the town?

GAQUER: No. I know they had but I don't remember. I don't remember it. And then I had—there was no transportation whatsoever. And I was so determined to get to Paris to pass my exams because to enter the school you have three days of exam. You know, you cannot just go and—and go home. And I had family in Paris and it was all right with one of my aunt to stay with her, and my uncle. But it's over there. So because of the war we were keeping a little girl, who was a second cousin of my father, because the family didn't want her in Paris. She would be better in the country. Anyway. Two days before I should leave her father came from Paris on his bicycle to visit his little girl, Claudine. It was like an act of God. Now, he has to bicycle back to Paris and I can go with him. My parents would allow me to go now. But otherwise, no, no, no. So I went to Paris on my bicycle [chuckles] with him and stayed at my aunt. In those days, was nothing to go 80 mile on a bicycle. We started early. We got there dinnertime, I suppose. And I—I did well on my exam. I went to school and I became a registered nurse, which, in a children hospital. This is all the thing I wanted to do.

SIGRIST: Tell me when you met Mr. Gaquer.

GAQUER: Well, in Paris I had also my aunt, which was my father's youngest sister. And she had a dry cleaning store. And it was not that far. You walk a lot in Paris. I had the early shift. I started at 6:30 and I was free at 3 o'clock. And when you are young, at 3 o'clock I used to take my uniform

home and freshen up myself, dress and go. And I walked—maybe twice a week, at least, I walked to my aunt's place and then turned back and come back. Didn't [unclear] a thing on the way. And eventually, she tells me that her nephew is coming from America. She married his uncle. My aunt married his uncle. We didn't know that. [unclear] he was coming from America and she sure helps that I will help him go out, you know, find his way. And in my young head I thought, 'You know, my dear aunt. I'm not going to tell you that but I know exactly what you can do with your American nephew.' You know. So that was it. And eventually, one day I came to the—to the store, to the dry cleaning store and there was this little label that I'd seen before on the door, which said, "I'll be right back." That means, "With a group, I'm having a [unclear] at the corner." Many times, I used to turn and go home. That day, I thought, 'Ah, I'll stop.' Sometime, I stop. I had one glass of wine. And I stop and there was quite a group. She [unclear] had some kind of group. Everybody's talking and so on. And I talked to John. I—I'd never seen him before. He said, "My name is John." "And I'm Denise." Fine. Eventually—and I assume he's French. And I'm smoking his Phillip Morris in between. Eventually, my aunt comes around to us and say, "Oh, Denise. You met John. I'm so happy. This is Morris' [PH] nephew I was talking about, you know, from America." "What?" I assume he was French. You know, he was another friend of a friend or something. So we met. Big deal. So she say, "You are not going back home. You are staying for dinner with us." I said, "I already ate." Doesn't matter. [unclear]. So I did. I was smoking a cigarette. That's it. It was no lightening or anything like that. That's it.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you made it to America.

GAQUER: Well, there was a few little things I had to do because I was already engaged to a childhood friend in my hometown. There was never anything official but it was going to happen. And I certainly didn't want to phone him or, when this thing became serious I have to work two weeks without a day off, so I can take three days off and go to my hometown and see this guy and tell him the good news. So I did and then we became closer and closer and eventually we get married. And immediately I get pregnant. And that same year they say that it was end of the—what do you call that? The war brides. On December 31st, no more war brides. Now, if you came here as an immigrant and if you came here as a war bride, was two totally different things because you're already married to a citizen of the States. So you're not on some quota. So that's how I came. And I was not anxious to come at that time. I would have liked to live in France with him, especially now that I'm pregnant and [clears throat] all my medical—I mean, I'm a nurse in a hospital and my medical bills are zero. And even if the child is born, there is a special nursery for the children of the nurses. And I would

have liked to stay. But everybody was after me. I have to come as a war bride. So we made it the 21st of December; we came here on the Queen Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: How did you think about America before you got here?

GAQUER: Well, I—I choose not to think because it was a big deal and what can you do?

SIGRIST: Did you have certain impressions as to what Americans were or—

GAQUER: No. No. Love is a strange thing. It does things to you. It obliterates some part of your brain. [chuckles] Is true. Anyway, my—

SIGRIST: So it was arranged that you would come on December 21st.

GAQUER: Yes, we left France of December 16th on the Queen Elizabeth and it took only five days, which were horrible. I was seasick or sick to my stomach in Paris on the firm ground. You put me on this big thing in December where the sea is not kind and I was sicker, if it's possible. So I saw mostly the inside—inside of the cabin. And in the inside of the cabin I saw mostly the inside of the chamber pot. And I want to tell you that the stewards are really kind and able but they don't know one word of French, none of them. Nobody on that ship speaks French to you. So anyway, it didn't take him long to realize that the guy takes off. She stays in, mostly laying down and feeling this chamber pot occasionally. And he was really kind. He would smile at me, would come in the cabin. And then he would bring a beautiful tray with little—fancy little cookies or fruits or, you know, things that—trying to tempt me to eat because I couldn't make the dining room. And John would come. He had been to the movie or wherever. He would look at that beautiful [unclear]. Hmm, hmm, hmm, pick a few things. The guy would come back and smile at me, "What a good girl!" [laughs] "She actually ate something." At least three times I tried the dining room and was not good. And I would—there you were not allowed to go on the deck because of the weather condition and the cold. But John would beg them, the guys by the deck and they would pull one chair out, leave it against the building where they have to stay. I had an old fur coat from his mother. And they put—put, like, three blankets over me and you could see this much of me. And in that coldness I would fall into a blessed sleep until somebody came from—"Oh, I have to go in." My face was actually covered with—with dry salt at that time. I have to go back in. I had a pile of special handkerchiefs about this thick for traveling inside the boat without being offensive to others. [laughs] That's the story. And then when we came, was in New York and the first thing we could disembark nine o'clock in the morning. First thing we see is his mother, his father, his sister

bundled up in the snow. It had snow. The snow was not very nice because it did snow that day. It was mostly black and mud. But they were there and John passes and then it's my turn, because we're getting off this very nice [unclear] and moustache man looked at me and one pull my papers and say, "Where are your chest x-rays?" John is next to me. He knows exactly what the man is saying. He say, "Well, my wife does not need a chest x-ray. We have all the papers that had been required of us. She's coming here as a war bride and chest x-rays are not part of the requirements." "They are. Go on over there." Okay. Over there lasted until two o'clock. They even had to give us lunch. I was in a room with other foreign nurse. We were not very well welcomed, including that Polish family which I already felt for.

SIGRIST: Can you explain the Polish family a little bit?

GAQUER: There was a mother and several children and they were dressed like country people, you know, and a scarf on their head and dressed, you know, not strange to me, more like the continental way, and looked kind of lost. And when it was 12 o'clock they came and gave us each a sandwich. That was really kind. John would come in—in and out and go back by the immigration desk [coughs] in the—in another home to see if this guy would disappear from the table. He didn't want to confront him, you know, to push his luck and turn him totally against us. So he was telling me, "Eventually, he's going to have to go for lunch." But he didn't take an early lunch, miserable man. [coughs] So maybe quarter to two or about two o'clock, John comes in, says, "Come. He's been replaced. You know, another guy is there." So we go like nothing was the matter. He looks at my papers. He smiles at me. He say, "I need your hand." "Which one?" "Either one." He takes my hand on the pad. So I take the other one too on the other hand. So, "Well, it was nice meeting you. Goodbye. Enjoy your life in America." That could have been done at nine a.m. That's where you—you blessed the Immigration people, you know. What—what excuse could he have? If he does not know his job, as what paper require, he shouldn't be there. If he knows it and I don't require it, why make waves?

SIGRIST: And all you did was end up giving fingerprints.

GAQUER: My fingerprints.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

GAQUER: And that was all. And then we want—in between his—his family is frozen. They're taking turn going for hot coffee or hot tea or hot chocolate and coming back. And you know, it's a long time from nine o'clock to two p.m. And then [chuckles] I'm still sick, you know. I'm still

pregnant. And we get out of New York and in those days you pass through—what's the name of that town?

SIGRIST: Secaucus.

GAQUER: Secaucus, who are known for raising pigs. And you could know it from the highway. It was very powerful evidence. Well, that doesn't go with my condition. "Father, stop the car." His father was driving. "Stop the car." John says, "Stop the car. When she says, it's now." Well, yes, now, maybe. By the time I opened the door, my first gift to him was a dirty door on his car. I'm sure the man blessed me totally. Ah, well.

SIGRIST: But when—how far along were you pregnant?

GAQUER: Halfway, about.

SIGRIST: About four months?

GAQUER: Four months, yes. And it was a strange thing because I was always very healthy. I was never sick in all that. And it was discovered because I—almost as soon as I was here I become not well and worse and worse. We had the Rh factor and pregnancy doesn't go well with that, and had three premature babies. And the first one was born at six and a half months by Cesarean section to save my skin. They didn't think he would—he would live. So it was a—a sad process. And we were advised that this one would not live. We shouldn't have another one. But we wound up with three sons anyway, premature but the—the one, the first one was born three pounds and lived in an incubator for a month. Oh, no. We even had an incubator at home after he was home. He is now nearing 300 pound, to my despair. Now, if—

SIGRIST: What is his name?

GAQUER: Alain.

SIGRIST: Alain.

GAQUER: A-L-A-I-N. Alain Gaquer. If somebody told me then that he would become overweight I wouldn't be out of my mind until he was like 12 years old, that to make him eat and keep the food was really a problem.

SIGRIST: What—what are the names of your other two sons?

GAQUER: D—Denis—D-E-N-I-S, after Denise. Lots of imagination. And the third one is Maurice, as in Maurice Chevalier. M-A-U-R-I-C-E.

SIGRIST: Now, where did you settle in New Jersey? You went through Secaucus to where?

GAQUER: To New Jersey. Nutley, New Jersey. N—

SIGRIST: To Nutley.

GAQUER: N-U-T-L-E-Y, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: Tell me, from your perspective, what were some of the things that were the most difficult to adapt to here in the United States?

GAQUER: Well, the thing—with any foreigner, the big obstacle is the language. In the—in the ship, on the Queen Elizabeth when I was around, occasionally the sound of the English would give me a headache. I never had headaches. It would give me a headache. It just a—and then when you come—to his parents, supposedly they were doing me a favor because I don't speak English, so I could speak French with them. At the same time, when I'm speaking French I'm not learning English. It's—you know, it's mixed feelings. And my mother-in-law volunteered to give me lessons. My mother-in-law, as John told you—I don't say that meanly—was a very stern and strict person. And what I remember good—well about those lesson is that, "I told you yesterday." And I would say to her, "Mother, if I remembered everything that has been told to me once I would be a living encyclopedia." Anyway, it ceased because I was not well.

SIGRIST: What were some of the first words that you learned?

GAQUER: Well, the—I learned pretty fast. You know, the politeness, the terms of, you know, hello, goodbye, thank you, that kind of stuff. But if—and then I learned to read and write very fast, spell fine. But to communicate, people do not speak like the world in the book. They say, "You—you shouldn't a went. I thought it was going to rain. You shouldn't a went." "What?" [chuckles] It's—it's a—it's a problem. But it came little by little, you know. And you realize that, because you do not speak, other people assume that you are pretty stupid. If you have no brain, why bother with you? Another thing is that some people enjoy making fun of you. And I [unclear] people for years, not meaning to, mind you, and some others are nice and all that but they cannot resist—very few people can resist the appeal of imitating you. And then you said, "[several words unclear.]" [chuckles] It's part of the deal. But when you pass that, you know, and you get over that [unclear], we live in a—it is such an enormous country where the natives have accents. A man from New England does not sound like the one from Alabama, and that's a fact. And the one from Brooklyn and the one from Jersey City, that's

another problem too. So why is it so terrible to have a foreign accent? It's just another accent, that's all. My big obstacle around the letter "R," the combination of "T-H," in the beginning, while I was trying to learn that sound, I said, "You mean you actually spit on people? That's disgusting!" [laughs] I had a problem with that. Anyway, that's it.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Well, one more question. Did you maintain communication once you came to the United States? Whom did you communicate with in France?

GAQUER: Everybody I knew. And to this day, there is a few houses where I—one time, we—I came by that house in the country to one girlfriend I had not seen in I don't know how many years. I couldn't tell you. I knock on the door. And immediately, she hugs me and she has not seen me or heard from me or anything. And it's like we—we left each other yesterday or last week, and all the family. All that, you know. And when the children were growing, John was in business with his father and, thank God, we could afford the trip. Three times, while they were growing, we went to France on a liner with the three children and stayed a little bit by his aunt and this and that and mostly at my parents. In between, my parents had moved to the South of France. It was different and very interesting and it was fun. It was great. But we always communicated. And to this day, if we go to France we make the rounds. We visit everybody still alive.

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good place for us to end. We're just about out of time. But thank you very much, especially the information about the invasion into France is—

GAQUER: Hmm.

SIGRIST: —significant and very important. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Denise Gaquer on Wednesday, June 17th, 1998 with Mr. Gaquer, whom we've just interviewed. He's with us here too. Thank you very much.

GAQUER: The weeping foreigner—

[END OF INTERVIEW]