

**EI-11**

**BIRGITTA HEDMAN FICHTER**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**SWEDEN, 1924**

**AGE: 6**

**PORT: GOTEBORG**

**SHIP: *DROTTNINGHOLM***

**RESIDENCES:**

- **SWEDEN: SANDVIKEN**
- **THE US: VERMONT AND CLIFTON, NJ**

**SIGRIST:** Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. We're here with Birgitta Fichter, who came from Sweden in 1924 when she was six years old. Could you please state your full name and your date of birth.

**FICHTER:** Uh, my full name is Ingeborg Birgitta Fichter and I was born April 7, 1917.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

FICHTER: I was born in Sandviken, Sweden.

SIGRIST: Is that a big town? Small town?

FICHTER: Uh, it's a big city now. When I was born there it was a very small town, probably a village.

SIGRIST: I see...

FICHTER: At that point.

SIGRIST: And, um, what were your parents' names?

FICHTER: My father's name was Wilhelm Reynard Hedman and my mother's name was Elin Maria Hedman. Her maiden name was Berkman.

SIGRIST: I see. Were they from that town or were they from...?

FICHTER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What did your father do?

FICHTER: My father was a carpenter, a carpenter and a builder in Sweden.

SIGRIST: I see. What? Houses? Furniture? What sort of things did he do?

FICHTER: Uh, yes. Construction. Construction carpenter, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. And Mom? What did Mother do? Was she, was she at home or...?

FICHTER: Yeah. Um, my mother was home. She did work (audio level lowered) in steel which now is world known and they have plants all over the world. The parent company and the start of Sandviken Steel is in Sandviken. That's where it gets its name. And my mother worked for Sandviken Steel while my father was, you know, doing his type of work.

SIGRIST: What, what did she do?

FICHTER: Uh, I think she was a packer. Uh, they make saws and, uh, I think she worked in an area where she wrapped saws and packed saws.

SIGRIST: I see. Were there brothers and sisters?

FICHTER: No.

SIGRIST: You were an only child.

FICHTER: No, I'm an only child.

SIGRIST: Um, all right. Let's talk a little bit about where you lived when you were a child. Did you live in a house or an apartment?

FICHTER: Well, I can remember a couple of places, uh, that we lived in. First of all we lived right next door to the park. It was called Fulcet Park, which is Ful, people's park. We lived first in a small building up on the second floor and I think we had about two rooms there. Then we moved into a bigger

house, uh, had four apartments in it and we occupied one of the apartments there. But that was also next to, next to the park.

SIGRIST: I see. Then you didn't move far then...

FICHTER: No, we didn't.

SIGRIST: Uh, let's talk about the second place you lived. Is that the place you lived before you came here?

FICHTER: That's, yes, right.

SIGRIST: Could you describe the house, the apartment a little bit? You said it had four rooms.

FICHTER: Uh, it had a big kitchen which, you know, at that time you ate in the kitchen. And then it had, uh, I think it had a bedroom and a living room and that was it. But at, at that time the apartments were small and sometimes a whole family lived in two rooms. And they had open-up couches, um, you know, like in the living room you had an open-up couch and it became a sleeping room.

SIGRIST: I see. Uh, did, um, was, was your mother a good cook? Did she ever cook?

FICHTER: Oh, excellent, excellent cook.

SIGRIST: What did she cook that you liked?

FICHTER: Everything she cooked. Well, of course, then she, she Always cooked Swedish-type food, you know, but she was an excellent cook and an excellent baker. As a matter of fact, um, after we came over here she worked for a family, you know. We came in 1924 and in 1929 we had the big stock market crash. In the 1930's were the Depression years. My father died in 1930 so it was just my mother and I, for a family as a housekeeper. And she was an excellent cook.

SIGRIST: She was a good cook.

FICHTER: Oh, she was, yes.

SIGRIST: When you were a little kid in Sweden, did you help her cook at all or was that pretty much her domain?

FICHTER: I guess I was too young, uh, to do anything then. But whatever I know how to cook today I learned from my mother.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: She was also an excellent seamstress, my mother. My mother was a tailor as a matter of fact.

SIGRIST: So she made clothes for you.

FICHTER: She made my clothes. She made clothes for other people and...

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a child one specific, one specific dress or something that was made for you?

FICHTER: I remember what, after we came here, before my father died, one Easter she made me a dress and she made me a navy blue coat with a cape lined in red.

SIGRIST: Wow.

FICHTER: And I had a navy blue straw hat and I was all dressed up for Easter. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: All ready for the parade.

FICHTER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Um, let's, let's talk a little bit about life, your parents life, Um back in Sweden. Were they around relatives or, or their parents? Were they near the area, you, or...?

FICHTER: Well, my father's parents were there, uh, that, we all lived in the same area.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: My mother, uh, brother and sister, uh, all lived in the same area. My father's sisters had emigrated. They were already in America...

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: Before we came here. And he had one brother that had emigrated. He

also had an older brother that emigrated to Australia, uh, before we came over here.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: Uh, my mother's family were still in Sandviken and, uh, most of them still are. Uh, you know, but, uh, my aunts and uncles and cousins, now all my aunts are gone, but, uh, and my uncles, but I still have cousins over there, so I still have very good connections with, with my homeland.

SIGRIST: So, so when you were a child, uh, for instance, let's talk about family gatherings. Um, uh, did your family come visit you often or did you go visit your family often? I guess what, what I'm driving at is, was, was this all a close family, the grandparents and...

FICHTER: Oh, yes. Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You spent a lot of time together.

FICHTER: My mother's mother died, however, when she was very young so, as a matter of fact she died before I was born, but my grandfather, my mother's father, I can remember him, uh, when I was...

SIGRIST: What was he like?

FICHTER: I can remember, he would, him coming to the house. I can remember sitting in his lap. Uh, I have a picture of him. That's how I know what he looks like. I don't think that I would remember him, you know, outside of

that. But my father's father I do remember. And my, uh, my father's mother. She was a very tiny woman. And my grandfather was a very big man and used to do the same thing. He would come to see me. He would walk to where we lived and he would come to see me and if I was playing he would come and talk to me. And he would give me a coin and he would turn around and go back home and he wouldn't even go in the house sometimes. (Paul laughs) He just came to see me. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, now this brings me to a point, you know, being an only child, with whom did you play?

FICHTER: Uh, there were lots of kids around, uh , lived in, in the little community that we were in. Yeah. I had a lot of playmates.

SIGRIST: Let's see, you were probably too young for school, right?

FICHTER: I didn't, no, I hadn't started school yet.

SIGRIST: Hadn't started school.

FICHTER: At that time, uh, children didn't start school until they were seven years old.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: And I was six when I came over here.

SIGRIST: Um, were your parents religious?

FICHTER: Oh, yes. Uh...

SIGRIST: And what would that be?

FICHTER: In, in, in Sweden you were born a Lutheran.

SIGRIST: I see. I was thinking that you were probably Lutherans.

FICHTER: (she laughs) Yeah. That's the state church. There is no separation in Sweden. Um, the, um, the church is, is subsidized by the state and everything.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: But it is a Lutheran denomination, you know, and, of course, when you, when you are born there you are, you know. You get married in the church, you automatically are baptized in the church and your records are kept in the church.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: Every, uh, the church kept the records of everybody. If you wanted to find out, trace your family or anything, that's...

SIGRIST: It's all done through the church.

FICHTER: Yeah. That's, that's the place to go. Go to the church in the city or town, you know, where you came from.

SIGRIST: Do you remember holidays or anything like that?

FICHTER: Oh, Christmas, of course.

SIGRIST: Oh, we talked about this a little bit.

FICHTER: Yes. Christmas, oh, Christmas was a lot of fun. It was, we always had a fresh cut tree, you know, the farmers would go out and bring it and we had candles and ornaments and cookies, a lot of baking and food, uh, for Christmas. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Was a, the main meal on Christmas Day or...?

FICHTER: Christmas Eve, Christmas Eve is, is the big celebration. That's when, when, uh, it's not Santa Claus, it's a, it's a "Tompte," which is like Santa Claus, comes with the presents and somebody would always, you know, come dressed up with the presents on Christmas Eve.

SIGRIST: Is this a holiday you celebrated with your relatives?

FICHTER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Or were you just the family?

FICHTER: Relatives and friends.

SIGRIST: So did they come to your house or did you go to other people's houses?

FICHTER: Yeah. Well, it, we would take turns. We would take turns and we would

dance around the Christmas tree. We had Christmas tree songs that we sang as kids and we danced around it. It was geared very much to the children.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FICHTER: Uh, Christmas. And then, um, Christmas morning, uh, every body went to church.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FICHTER: Four o'clock, about. I think it was around four o'clock. It was, it was in the morning. Yeah. And everybody went to church and, of course, there was always a lot of snow, you know. And then, when you come back to church we, it would be around six o'clock in the morning and it was still dark...

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: You light all the candles in the house. You don't have any lights on. Uh, the house is completely lit with candles.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: Uh, and then you have, you eat and have breakfast and you know...

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in the house or did you have gaslight? Do you remember?

FICHTER: (she pauses) Oh, I think we had electricity. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, um, so it sounds, it sounds all very, sort of light hearted and festive.

FICHTER: Oh, it was. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: And, um, Easter? Was that a big celebration, too?

FICHTER: Oh, yes. Easter is also a big celebration there. Advent is, also a very, very big important, uh, holiday...

SIGRIST: Which we are about to get into.

FICHTER: Yes. Sunday.

SIGRIST: Um, did you do Advent candles and that kind of thing?

FICHTER: Everything.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: And, and everybody went to church. They, since the church in Sweden is a state church, people don't go to church every Sunday as we, as we do here. We're affiliated with the church here. We do every Sunday. This is the norm here. Uh, they don't do that there. But any holiday, any church holiday or, you know, religious holiday everybody went to church. The whole family would go, would go to church. And Advent is one of those holidays. Pentecost is one of those holidays.

SIGRIST: Epiphany, too?

FICHTER: Yeah, Epiphany. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Wow. Uh, O.K., let's, uh, let's talk a little bit about, um, we'll get back to Ma and Dad and, uh, the decision, maybe, to come to America. Who decided? What, why did...?

FICHTER: That was my father.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: Yeah. He, he, he wanted to come over here. He had his sisters here, as I said, he had, um, he had four sisters that had emigrated and were here. And the one brother. The one brother died shortly after he came here, so, uh, the sisters were living when we came.

SIGRIST: And how did he die?

FICHTER: Excuse me?

SIGRIST: How did the brother die?

FICHTER: I really don't know. I don't remember how he died. But they, the sisters all settled in New England.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: Vermont and Massachusetts.

SIGRIST: Did they come over unmarried or were they married before they came here?

FICHTER: Um, I know one was married because, uh, she married an American Indian.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

FICHTER: Yes, and...

SIGRIST: How did the family feel about that?

FICHTER: Well, he was such a nice guy. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: He was, he was extremely handsome.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: And he was. He was just such a wonderful person and they had two daughters.

SIGRIST: What was their names?

FICHTER: Uh, Adams.

SIGRIST: That was their last name.

FICHTER: Is that an old American name! (they laugh) Yeah. And my father's sister's name was Otilia. His name was Carl.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: And the, the, uh, daughters were, um, Ruth and Edith. And then the sister in Massachusetts, I don't remember her, uh, too well. The, um, the other sister in Vermont. Her name was Agnes. I was closer with, with them, um. They were married, I think, in Sweden.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. And then came over.

FICHTER: And then came over here. His name was Lindy, uh, Kall. K-A-L-L. And her name was Agnes. And they had two boys and two girls. They had Lindy Junior and Ernest, Ruth and Anna. And when father died in 1930, he died in March. That summer, when I got out of school, uh, I spent the summer in Vermont with my Aunt Agnes and their family.

SIGRIST: I see. Did they have a farm or something up there?

FICHTER: No, they didn't. They had a very nice typical brick New England home.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: But Otilia and the Adams family, they had a farm in Vermont. But, I was closer with, with my Aunt Agnes and her family then because I spent the summer with them that year.

SIGRIST: Now were the sisters in constant contact with your father? Did they write

back and forth and that sort of thing?

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah. They wrote. And I think that the, the, inspiration came from that fact, that they were here already and, and, he was the only one that was still in Sweden and he wanted to, to come to America and like everyone else he, he felt that the the opportunities here were much better.

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

FICHTER: Well, I don't know exactly how she felt. We had to give up everything. She gave up more family because it was her family that was there in Sandviken.

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: She didn't have any family over here.

SIGRIST: There were just your father's sisters.

FICHTER: Yeah. But still, when my father died, my mother and I went back in 1931.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: I had started school here, of course, and, we went back in 1931 and my one uncle, and as a matter of fact her whole family tried to talk her into staying in Sweden then. They said, "What are you going to do back there? It's just the two of you. You've got your whole family home here." So we were there about three or four months.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: But the summer went by and, and, um, my mother said, "No." She said, "She started school in America and," she said, "I think she should finish school in America." She said, "Then we'll see what we do."

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: So we came back and, of course, uh, once you come back and you get into, into the daily routine of living...

SIGRIST: Well, and you both had Americanized by then anyway.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So had your mother, probably, by that point.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, well, O.K., so, um, so, do you remember, do you remember, 'course you were so young really, but do you remember getting ready to go? Do you remember any of that process at all?

FICHTER: Uh, I remember my mother having an auction and selling everything we owned. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Really. Really.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did all the family come to buy things?

FICHTER: Everybody, people came and, and she had an auctioneer and sold everything and after she came over, uh, realized what she had done. She had sold all her beautiful hand crocheted linens and, and hand monogrammed linens and, and came over here and had to start buying Turkish towels. (they laughs)

SIGRIST: Did, um, as a small child, what did, what did coming to America mean to you? Did it mean anything to you?

FICHTER: I don't know. I guess I didn't think about it too much. I knew I was going to move away from there and I didn't like the idea of leaving my cousins and my, family and everything but I guess as, as a child I, too, felt that, well, my mother and father are going so I'm going too and just accepted the fact that, you know, we were coming over here.

SIGRIST: Such is your fate.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, well, um, now do you remember, did, did anyone give you a "good-bye" party or anything like that? Of course, with this rather dramatic auction, I, you know, what a way to leave.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I don't know, remember anything specific but, uh, I know the family was very close and, uh, you know, they took very good

care of us.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FICHTER: Until we got on the train and left.

SIGRIST: O.K. Where, where did, uh, where did you go to? Where, where, when when you go to the train? Where, what port?

FICHTER: Uh, to, to, uh, Gotenborg.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: Uh, the ship left from Gotenborg.

SIGRIST: Was that a long ride from where you...

FICHTER: Oh, yeah. That's quite a long ride. We, we're on the east coast, quite far north. And Gotenborg is on the west coast, almost down the southern tip.

SIGRIST: So that's a long train ride.

FICHTER: Yeah. That's a long train ride.

SIGRIST: Was this the first train ride you'd ever been on?

FICHTER: Probably.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Do you remember any of this experience?

FICHTER: (she laughs) No, I don't remember any of that. The, the, I don't remember even getting on the ship or anything but I remember being on the ship. And I remember sleeping and the tight quarters and so many people.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, or you might have record of it, what the name of the ship was?

FICHTER: Yeah. It was called "Drottningholm," was the name of it.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: Swedish line had, had, uh, three names on their ship: "Drottningholm," "Stockholm," and "Kungsholm." And when they replaced the ships they were replaced with "Kungsholm I," "Kungsholm II," so on and so forth.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: They kept those three, three names. We came, came on the old, old "Drottningholm." Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you, were you in third class? Second class? How did you travel over, do you remember? Were you in steerage?

FICHTER: It, I think it was called "Tourist." "Tourist" class, which is the lowest class.

SIGRIST: Yes. Did you have a cabin, do you remember? Or were you with other people?

FICHTER: Yeah, we have, yeah, yeah. But I mean cubicles. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Did you get sick or did Mom and Dad get sick?

FICHTER: No, I didn't. I, I didn't. I don't remember my mother getting sick either for that matter. But there were an awful lot of sick people because, um, before we reached New York we hit a storm that everybody thought that we were just not going to reach New York.

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: Eh, we were on only a few days away and we hit this terrible, terrible Atlantic storm and, uh, they locked us, locked all the doors with, the, the waves were washing over the decks and the boat was bouncing around...

SIGRIST: What season did you, did you leave?

FICHTER: February.

SIGRIST: You left in, oh sure, the winter storms.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah. Winter storm. And it was very, very bad.

SIGRIST: And how long did it take, do you, do you know off hand or...?

FICHTER: The whole trip?

SIGRIST: Yeah, the whole trip.

FICHTER: I think it took around two weeks, something like that.

SIGRIST: Two weeks. Uh, huh. Do you remember playing with any kids on the boat? Were there any kids on the boat?

FICHTER: I don't re...I don't remember any kids on the boat coming over.

SIGRIST: Um, I meant to ask before we got on the boat (they laugh), when you, when you were packing, do you remember taking something that was yours? Do you remember taking a doll or something like that or do you remember what your parents might have taken with them? Or did they travel with virtually nothing?

FICHTER: I, I would say that would be about it.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: With, with whatever clothes we had because, as I say, my mother auctioned off the house goods, cookware, linens, everything, and, and, so I guess we came with whatever clothes we owned and that was about it. We were coming to, coming to America. We were going to be rich.

SIGRIST: Did, did your parents attempt to learn English before they came?

FICHTER: There, there were no places to go and learn like there is today. Today, of course, the kids start in like the lower grades to learn but they also have adult classes. My, my friends and my, my family have all gone to school. They didn't learn it when they were going to school.

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: They've learned as adults that have gone to take English lessons. No, there was no place to go and learn English then. We came over here and, and I remember my mother particularly. She would read the paper. She didn't know what she was reading but she was reading words. And she just tried to absorb everything that she could as far as learning the language.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

FICHTER: But there were an awful lot of people from Sandviken that settled in Clifton, New Jersey, when we finally moved there and, uh...

SIGRIST: When you left, did any people from town go with you?

FICHTER: No. Not on that trip.

SIGRIST: Not on that trip.

FICHTER: No, no. But there were a lot that were here and there were a lot more that came after us, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. So it was easy enough to sort of hook up with a, a community of, of Swedish people.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah. There, there was definitely a, a community in Clifton, New Jersey, uh, they used to call it "Little Sandviken" there was so many people from there.

SIGRIST: Isn't that interesting.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all on the boat or anything like that?

FICHTER: No, no.

SIGRIST: Um, O.K. So you're in New York then, you, you all lived the terrible storm, you all survived...(she laughs)

FICHTER: We all survived.

SIGRIST: And, um...

FICHTER: I remember seeing land.

SIGRIST: Yes, O.K.

FICHTER: When, when, uh, the storm was over and we were allowed to go up on, on deck again, uh, and I guess it was only maybe a couple of days after that storm that the cry went out, "There's land!" (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And everyone was very happy.

FICHTER: Oh. And I can remember looking and it looked like a, just a pencil on the horizon. Dark line on the horizon, you know, and you just watch it getting

bigger and bigger as you get closer.

SIGRIST: Your parents must have been very happy...

FICHTER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: By that time. Um all right, let's talk about Ellis Island a little bit then. Um, you, you came to Ellis, did you come over here by ferry? Did, had the boat docked and then they ferried you over?

FICHTER: You know, that part I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: Now they say that, my impression was that we got off right at Ellis Island but they, they tell me that the boats couldn't come up, you know...

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: Whatever boat that was and what door we came in and everything, into the Baggage Room.

SIGRIST: Right. And as, and as a little kid, just a little six year old kid, what were your impressions of this place?

FICHTER: Oh, there was nothing but people and I was short and little and everybody else was twice as big as I was. (she laughs) And I was just, you were just, as a kid, you were just squashed in with all these people. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Was it, was it scary? Was it exciting?

FICHTER: Well, scary enough that I guess I hung on to my mother and my mother hung on to me that we wouldn't lose each other in all that hubbub of people and suitcases. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember or do you remember your parents talking about it later any of the processing? Uh, you know, standing in line or anything?

FICHTER: Well, it was, yeah, you know, they explained it to a lot of people who wanted to know what happened and everything since we didn't get off Ellis Island and, and get off the same day. We had, my mother and I had to stay overnight on Ellis.

SIGRIST: Your father didn't stay?

FICHTER: He, my father emigrated in November of 1923.

SIGRIST: Oh, so he came before. Oh, I didn't realize that.

FICHTER: Yeah. He came, uh, five, six months before us.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: So he was supposed to meet us here and he had gone to Vermont to where his one sister lived and, and he had gotten a job up there.

SIGRIST: Doing what?

FICHTER: I don't know. I don't know. He wasn't there, um, I know he didn't like it.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FICHTER: And he was supposed to come down here and get us but I don't know what the mix up was that he wasn't here the day that we landed. And friends of my parents lived in New York and they came. They were going to, uh, take us to their apartment until he could get there. However, they wouldn't release us.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: So we had to stay overnight and, uh, my fathers came the following day.

SIGRIST: Um, O.K. Well, let's talk a little bit about staying overnight. What was that like? That must have been pretty scary, too.

FICHTER: That, I remember something from that. That wasn't too pleasant.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: We had, we just stayed very, very close together and these friends of my parents, when they realized that they couldn't take us home with them, they went out and they bought fruit and some things to eat for us and brought it back to us here.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

FICHTER: Oh, yes, sure, uh, her name was Maia and his name was Carl Bergstrom.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: And, they brought us a big bag of things to eat and after they left my mother put the bag down on a bench in, in the Great Hall where we were and, and it just disappeared. Some, somebody took it when we weren't looking, uh, so we didn't have anything, any of these goodies. But that night we sat at a big long table in a, in a dining hall somewhere and we, long tables and benches, and they passed, they passed a bowl of hard boiled eggs down the table.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

FICHTER: Yeah, they passed a bowl of these, these hard boiled eggs down the table. We were each supposed to take one and then they passed a long loaf of bread that had been sliced into pieces and we were supposed to take a piece of bread and pass it along to the next person. The eggs were not edible so we had a dry piece of bread. That was it that night. Uh, then, later on, we were put into a dormitory, double bunk beds.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the room at all?

FICHTER: Well...

SIGRIST: Was it a big room? A small room?

FICHTER: It was, it wasn't a great big room, but it had these double bunk beds, I don't know, they weren't even, didn't seem to be even placed in order. They were kind of helter skelter in there. And we were supposed to sleep, uh, go to bed and go to sleep and my mother and I slept in, one bed, in the lower bunk and my mo...'cause all my mother had with her was her pocketbook and whatever money she had was in there. So we slept together and she had the pocketbook between us and her arms wrapped around me and we didn't move all night long. But there was a woman walking around that I, I so vividly remember. She was, (she laughs) she was a big woman and she had a black dress and she had black hair pulled back and she walked around all night long looking at everybody and looking all over and, and it was like, uh, I know she was real but it was almost like a vision moving around in the room. But it was scary.

SIGRIST: Yeah, I bet.

FICHTER: That, that I remember and I didn't like and...

SIGRIST: Did she, she never said anything to anybody?

FICHTER: Didn't say anything to anybody, just walked around and looked and looked.

SIGRIST: Were there others who even spoke Swedish?

FICHTER: No.

SIGRIST: So you were very isolated.

FICHTER: We were, we, yeah. What other Swedish people came through Ellis Island, a lot of them probably got off Ellis Island when we landed. They probably had, uh, you know, people here to meet them.

SIGRIST: Right.

FICHTER: Whereas we had to wait because my father wasn't here. So there may not have been a whole lot of Swedish people that, uh, that stayed overnight. Then the next day my father came.

SIGRIST: Before we, before we leave Ellis, um, talk a little bit about your mother's shoes because they are such an important part of the museum here.

FICHTER: Oh yes, yes. My mother had, uh, had high top shoes on. Like I say, we came with whatever clothes we had because we thought we were going to get all dolled up when we got here, but...

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing? When you got off the boat?

FICHTER: No, I don't, no. I don't remember what I had. I don't remember what my mother wore either. The only thing is that we kept her shoes and we just, just couldn't part with them for some reason or other.

SIGRIST: Was it your mother who kept them? I mean, they were sentimental to your

mother.

FICHTER: Oh, yes. She landed in America in those shoes and somehow or the other she felt that, that she was going to hang on to them. They are brown high top shoes that had been soled and resoled and stitched and mended, uh, in Sweden to hold them together 'til she could get to America. (they laugh) We just kept them. And then, well 'course as I grew up and everything, I said, "Don't ever throw them away."

SIGRIST: They became a symbol, really, of your parents...

FICHTER: And then when my mother passed away, of course, you know, I had the shoes and, uh, until I read this article in the paper about the National Park Service looking for people that had, uh, come through Ellis Island or had mementos or whatever so I wrote a letter...

SIGRIST: And here they are.

FICHTER: And here they are, yeah.

SIGRIST: O.K. So your father came and got you. That must have been a great relief.

FICHTER: (she sighs) I can, I can see my father coming through that door and, and, and I, I darn near tumbled down the stairs, I guess, to get to him and my mother behind me, you know, and we were so glad to see him. So, uh, we got off Ellis Island and we went back up to Vermont. It was, I guess, the plan was that we were going to settle in New England.

SIGRIST: How, how did you get there? Do you remember? Did you take a train?

FICHTER: Train. Train. I don't remember but I know it was a train. My father took the train down so I'm sure we took a train back up there again. But, as I said, my father didn't like the job. It was, my father was an outdoor man. And he, he had a confining job and he didn't like it. My mother's uncle was here and he heard about the job and, you know, got in touch with my father. So he came down to New Jersey and the job was with the United States Animal Quarantine Services in Clifton, New Jersey. So my father went to work there as, as grounds keeper.

SIGRIST: That's an interesting job.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he like that? Was that...?

FICHTER: He loved it.

SIGRIST: He liked animals, probably.

FICHTER: He loved animals. Yeah. And he loved being outdoors. I've been up there recently. The city of Clifton has purchased art of that property. The city, uh, Clifton City Hall is on that property now. But some of the barns are still there and they were the most beautiful barns I've ever seen. They're made from brick. The, the architecture is so beautiful.

SIGRIST: You'll have to ask Brian (referring to the recording engineer) because he is from Clifton.

FICHTER: And, uh, I went up there a couple of years ago. I took a lot of pictures of the barns. When my father worked there we lived right down the street and my mother...

SIGRIST: Did you buy a house or did you rent?

FICHTER: No, my father, my father got a job with a, with a church in Clifton as a superintendent to take care of the property and the church and everything and they had a big house next to the church...

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: That had three stories, three floors.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what church it was?

FICHTER: It was the Athenia Reformed Church in Clifton.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: And this big, they called it the "church house" next door, the first and second floor were all Sunday school rooms and on the third floor was an apartment. And we, we lived there. We had free rent there so my father, he was ambitious, he had the job with the quarantine and he had the superintendent job with the church, got paid and we had free rent.

SIGRIST: Well, that was a good deal for you.

FICHTER: Yeah, it was. It was a good start for us.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go visit him at work?

FICHTER: Yes, I did. When I got out of school in the afternoon, my mother was also working and she was going out doing housework at, you know, to help out...

SIGRIST: Did she work for one specific family or did she sort of...

FICHTER: No, she worked for several different people, yeah.

SIGRIST: Several different people.

FICHTER: But I would go up and visit my father at the Quarantine and at one particular time he was planting trees around the perimeter of the property. The property goes, it goes up Clifton Avenue, goes around the bend onto another street. It's quite a long stretch and he planted trees there and I used to sit there on the grass and talk to him and watch him while he planted the trees and they were little saplings at that time. Now they're full grown trees. Those trees are all still there and beautiful.

SIGRIST: They must be big now, probably.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about how you and your parents Americanized. Um, how did you learn English, for instance?

FICHTER: Well, they simply put me in the first grade in school. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Sink or swim? (he laughs)

FICHTER: I, I turned seven after, you know, after we got here. I was seven years old and, and here children were starting at the age of five in kindergarten, so at age seven they put me in the first grade, which was kind of dumb, I think, because I didn't know the language and, I didn't know "yes" and "no." That's how bad it was. I just sat there and everytime the teacher even looked at me I would start to cry because I was afraid she was going to say something and I didn't know what, what she was saying. But there was one little girl that I'll never forget and when it was recess time I didn't know why everybody got up and went out of the classroom. But this one little girl came and put her arm around my shoulder, didn't say anything, she just took me outside, stayed with me during recess, and when recess was over she brought me back to my seat in school. And then, that girl, I'll never forget her. But, uh, it was very hard not knowing the language and getting started in school. But when you're young you, you pick it up, I think, a lot easier, especially when, when you're with kids and I had, uh, a couple of my mother's cousins the uncle that had gotten my father the job, his daughters, they, they could speak Swedish and everything so, uh, it, it went.

SIGRIST: How about your parents? You said that your mother at least learned to read words even though she didn't really know what she was reading.

FICHTER: Oh, she taught herself.

SIGRIST: They didn't, did they take night classes or anything?

FICHTER: No, no. My mother taught herself. My father taught himself.

SIGRIST: Because your father certainly would have to know a little bit of English, probably...

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: In either, in both of these jobs.

FICHTER: But I, I think, too, that people were, the minister in the church, people were very kind. Uh, at the quarantine there, the doctor there who was, who was a veterinarian, of course, and the people, the superintendent of the, of the whole thing was there, they were all very helpful and they helped my father. And taught him a lot, you know. But he learned English, my mother learned English and, uh...

SIGRIST: Did you continue a very important religious life after you got here?

FICHTER: We belonged to the Lutheran Church in Clifton at the time. Not, well, as I said before, in Sweden you didn't go every Sunday. You went holidays. And I think we kind of continued in that way.

SIGRIST: And your father's uncle, uh, I'm sorry, it was your mother's uncle who was in Clifton.

FICHTER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So there was some family around.

FICHTER: Yeah. But since, since my father was superintendent of the Athenia Reform Church, I went to Sunday school there.

SIGRIST: That's right. (they laugh)

FICHTER: So I got away from Lutheranism for a while, but, uh, I had Sunday School anyway.

SIGRIST: Did your mother continue cooking in a traditionally Swedish manner or did she try, you know, to Americanize her cooking?

FICHTER: My mother could cook anything.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: But I, I think because she cooked a lot in the Swedish manner because that's what we were used to.

SIGRIST: Yes.

FICHTER: But it was very plain. It was good. Yeah. My, my mother could make a meal out of almost nothing.

SIGRIST: Yes. It's an art.

FICHTER: Yes. And my father died in 1930 and we had the Depression years after that, uh, when things were very, very bad and I wasn't finished in school yet. And my mother worked for a family then but she worked for one

family and she cooked and took care of the house and everything for them.

SIGRIST: What did your father die of?

FICHTER: Had lung cancer.

SIGRIST: I see. And what happened, were you able to retain the apartment at the church after that happened?

FICHTER: No, no. My mother and I, uh, had to move out then because then they had got another family to come in.

SIGRIST: Right, right.

FICHTER: Another Swedish family that, uh, took over. So we moved in with my mother's uncle for a very short period of time until we could find, you know, an apartment. But we moved an awful lot during those years. It was...

SIGRIST: Were those very tough years?

FICHTER: Oh, they were bad years.

SIGRIST: Did you do any work to, to help? I realize you were in school also but, um...

FICHTER: Yeah. Well, as soon as I was out of high school, I went to work. I think my first job was typing tax bills for the city of Clifton, (they laugh), which

was a temporary job at best and I earned the fabulous sum of fourteen dollars a week.

Sigrist: But, but at that time that was welcomed, I'm sure.

FICHTER: That was good. Yes, yes. So, and then, you know, from there, when that was finished then I, had to look for another job and I did.

SIGRIST: What did, in those, in those years in the early thirties when things were, were a little tougher, what did you and your mother do for entertainment at all? Did you, did you go to the movies at all or, um, did your mother read a lot or did you read?

FICHTER: Well, there wasn't a whole lot of money to go to movies, spend money. I think, I think mostly our, social life was with our, our friends, family, friends...

SIGRIST: Was there a Swedish organization or something?

FICHTER: Oh yes, yes. My mother and father both belonged to it and as a matter of fact I have now joined it myself.

SIGRIST: What was the name of it?

FICHTER: That's the Vasa Order of America. It's V-A-S-A.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: It's a Scandinavian-American organization that started in this country in

1905.

SIGRIST: I see. Very early on.

Fichter: But it started in Sweden in the 1800's. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. And what sorts of things did they, did they offer their membership? Did they sponsor dances or, you know...?

FICHTER: Oh, yeah. They had a social and, uh, as a matter of fact now they have a, bought a park up in, Bird Lake that we go to and, and it's, uh, has a lot of social fun things. But it's a very serious organization, you know, it's, it's a fraternal organization and we're, we're, we're in it to help one another and to help anyone who needs help. We have scholarships for member's children and, uh...

SIGRIST: And you said your father was a member of this because...

FICHTER: My mother and father were members before he died. I think my mother eventually drifted out of it. Too busy trying to make a living for us.

SIGRIST: Well, let's, let's talk about a little bit later on in life. How long did she continue to work?

FICHTER: My mother worked all the rest of her life.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: She worked, she worked until she was about, she was in her sixties.

SIGRIST: Doing domestic work like she was doing before?

FICHTER: Well she, she did, during the war years she did work but unfortunately my mother lost her eyesight when she was in her sixties and she, I had married and, of course, I was living, you know, separately from her but then when she lost her eyesight I made her come and live with me. And she lived with me until she died.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: So, uh, it was an unfortunate thing that it happened.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you did in your early adult life. For instance, tell me about your husband and when you were married and that sort of thing.

FICHTER: Uh, well, let's see. I got married in 1938. Um...

SIGRIST: Did your husband fight in the war?

FICHTER: No, he did not. My husband had been born with a birthmark, on his shoulder and he was hit there. He, he did, he worked in the shipyard doing was work but he was hit in the shoulder by someone that was walking with a plank and hit him and the, uh, he was rushed to the hospital and he was, actually, what happened the arteries and the veins were ruptured and he was bleeding profusely and they had to, they had to tie all the arteries and the veins to stop the flow of blood. But he, it affected his heart, the shock affected his heart so he came out of that with a serious

heart condition. And, yeah, he was only forty one years old when he died.  
He, he only lived ten years after that.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

FICHTER: His name was Leslie.

SIGRIST: I see. And, um, I know you have a son.

FICHTER: Yes. Gary.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Is he your only child?

FICHTER: Uh, Gary is my only child. Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. This line of only children.

FICHTER: Yeah. (they laugh) Well...

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me a little bit about, about, um, you know, your life more recently. What are you doing now...?

FICHTER: Well, now I'm retired. (she laughs) But I worked, I worked in law offices. I worked in business offices and, and about 19...1965 I got my real estate license. And then I got my broker's license and from that point I worked in real estate, first up in Bergen County and then in Monmouth County, where I now live in New Jersey. So I've worked in Monmouth County for about the last twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: I see.

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And tell us a little bit about how you became so involved with Ellis Island and...

FICHTER: Well I, I read the article in one of the newspapers that the National Park Service is looking for people who had come through Ellis Island and who had parents and grandparents...

SIGRIST: This was a couple years ago?

FICHTER: That was in 19..., late 1987. And they wanted to know people who may have had artifacts or clothing or something that would be of interest to put into a museum and I remembered my mother's shoes that we had been carrying all those years, so I wrote a letter. And I, I guess I went overboard with the letter. I told them how we got here and how that I had the shoes and what, you know, how sentimental I was about them and I described the shoes, it was about two weeks after that I got a phone call from the Metaform Company and, they asked me if I would bring the shoes and whatever documents I had into New York, which I did. I was very happy to do. And, uh...(the air system turns on and can be heard)

SIGRIST: (he laughs) I've never heard that before. And , so you did...

FICHTER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And, uh, you ended up on CBS.

FICHTER: Yes, I did. I got a call asking if I would, you know, be interviewed on CBS for the Charles Kuralt's Sunday Morning Show, which I was very happy to do. The whole thing has been a lot of fun for me.

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's exciting.

FICHTER: I've enjoyed. It's been very exciting, very exciting.

SIGRIST: From Ellis Island...from a little girl coming through Ellis Island to, to an Ellis Island celebrity. (they laugh)

FICHTER: Well, it was a little worrisome when the first day I came out here because that was my second trip to Ellis Island since I was six years old.

SIGRIST: So it was very emotional?

FICHTER: It was very emotional and I thought, "Oh, I'm going to make a fool of myself when I get out there, I know it. (they laugh) I'm going to cry all over," but everybody was so so nice and they just sort of helped me through the whole thing, you know, and we looked around. It was, it was an emotional day, though, there's no question of that.

SIGRIST: Well, it must be, you know, it was the beginning off your whole life, really, more or less.

FICHTER: Yes, yes. I walked down the stairs that I, that I say I almost tumbled down the day that my father came to get us and, and I stood there and I could just see him coming through that, that sort of alley way, you know.

SIGRIST: Wow.

FICHTER: Yeah, that was, that was very emotional. But I've been back several times now and it's still emotional. It, it brings back so many memories and it brings back my life to me, you know.

SIGRIST: Would your parents be happy that the building was restored like this?

FICHTER: Oh, they would be ecstatic.

SIGRIST: Your mother would be. She'd be so happy to know her shoes were here where everyone can see them.

FICHTER: We, we, you know, you know, I had said to my son I had those shoes and I worried about them. What was going to happen to the shoes? He says, "Well," he said, "You know I never, I never worried too much about it," he said, "I couldn't put my finger on it but I always knew something was going to happen with those shoes." And he said, "Here it is."

SIGRIST: Yeah.

FICHTER: And he said, "What greater place." And he said, "What an honor," he said, "for Nana to have her shoes in the museum at Ellis Island." Yeah, you know, we, we always say that how we wish she could have been here, you know, to see it.

SIGRIST: She is, sort of. At least part of her is here.

FICHTER: She is. (she laughs) Yeah. Well, everybody tells me don't worry. She knows they're here. (Paul laughs) So I, I hope so.

SIGRIST: Well, uh, I'm, uh I think they're just a wonderful thing to have. How many people would have saved something like that?

FICHTER: I know, I know. And, I'm just, and my father's birth certificate is on display and a picture of me when I was four years old is on display, so I', well represent...

SIGRIST: They're going to erect a statue of you out front.

FICHTER: I'm well represented in the museum. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, on that happy note I think we're going to end the interview and I want to thank you very much for coming out here...

FICHTER: Oh, I want to thank you.

SIGRIST: And for doing this, and I hope you, you know, come out as often as you want. It's YOUR museum!

FICHTER: Oh, we'll be here. We're planning a family get-together in the spring because my one granddaughter had not seen it yet and my grandson hasn't seen it yet, so we're, we feel that coming out as a family is going to be a better day for all of us.

SIGRIST: Yes, I think so.

FICHTER: I think we'll all appreciate it a lot more. Yeah. And we'll all appreciate everything a little bit more, you know, sharing it. So.

SIGRIST: Well, on behalf of the National Park Service, this is Paul Sigrist signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW