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HERMANN WILHELM GUSTAV MEIER
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SIGRIST: (sound of clock ticking) Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, January 21st, 1992. I am here in Schenectady, Rotterdam actually, with Hermann Meier, who came from what was then Czechoslovakia, later became Austria, to America in 1923 when he was nine years old. Good morning, Mr. Meier.

MEIER: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Can you please start off by giving me your full name. Include a middle name, if you have one, please.

MEIER: My full name is Hermann Wilhelm Gustav Meier.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, sir?

MEIER: January 18th, 1914.

SIGRIST: Where were you born?

MEIER: I was born in Braunau Bemen which is in Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please, for us?

MEIER: Which one? Braunau.

SIGRIST: Both of them, please.

MEIER: B-R-A-U-N-A-U. And then Czechoslovakia is C-H-O . . . Now, I'm not quite sure.

SIGRIST: That's okay, actually. Czechoslovakia we can look up.

MEIER: Okay.

SIGRIST: Explain a little bit why Czechoslovakia, when you were born, Austria later.

MEIER: Well, it was during the time of 1914, the first World War. And, of course, after every war the victors get the spoils, and the country, Czechoslovakia was broken up into Austria-Hungary, which later was absorbed by you might say Germany.

Because as I look at the maps now, Braunau is in Germany. But at that time it was like I said it was.

SIGRIST: Czechoslovakia. Um, tell me a little bit about this town.

MEIER: (he sighs) Well, we lived, where I was born was Braunau Bemen, and this is where my father's folks were, and my father's father was a butcher by trade. He had his own meat-cutting place, his own baloney kitchen in Braunau. And my father's trade was a tailor. Also he learned the art of butchering, so later on when his eyes failed he resorted to butchering, and that's what he remained doing until his demise.

SIGRIST: Uh, is this the town that you lived in until you left?

MEIER: No. No. From Braunau we decided, or my father decided, to move out of Braunau to a smaller town called Johannesburg. And this is Johannesburg, not Africa, this is Johannesburg, Austria then, which was only about three miles from the German border at that time. And this is where we lived, because he decided to be a tailor. And he was a very good tailor, if I may say so. In fact, his vocation saved him during the war, because he was drafted and he spent four years in the army. Three of which he spent in Siberia, and then when he came home, I remember that day. I was only four years old, but I remember it because he brought home a couple of oranges and a bunch of grapes, which we had never seen before. It's a small town of about three hundred

and sixty-five people, or sixty-six, whatever. And we lived in my aunt's house, but in the center of the village of Johannesburg, and when he decided to come to America (clock chimes in the background) to visit his sisters and brothers, he said he would buy us a house, so he did. Because he intended to come back from America and then set up a tailor shop and work there. But that never happened, because my uncle Willie, William, who was here since 1915, told him that, "Why don't you stay? I'll help you set up a little market like mine," only smaller, which he did, and that was located on Hewlett Street. Did you pass on that street today? And, since then it's been torn down and it's no longer there. But anyway, when he decided to stay in this country after two years, he only intended to stay one year, but then he sent money for our passage to America. That was my mother, my sister, my brother and myself. And I was the youngest. And, uh (he clears his throat), so then my mother had to sell the house and whatever monetary money she got from that she was not able to keep, because that country did not allow any money to be taken out of the country, just enough what we had to have for the passage. So that was lost.

SIGRIST: Can we pause just for a moment? (break in tape) This is Paul Sigrist. We are now returning to the interview. Before we get ahead of ourselves, I want to talk a little bit about Johannesburg. How old were you when you moved there?

MEIER: (he sighs) Well, I started school there, so I think I was, um, we started

school at six, and I started in the first grade. And we had what they call here a country school where the various classes were in one room, and they were designated by the number of rows or children they had in that town. And being in the early grades, I was in the front of the class with the others. And the higher grades, which went to sixth grade, was in the rear, and that was the school.

SIGRIST: What did, was it just a single building?

MEIER: It was a single building that had a small yard with some equipment there, like pole climbing, swings and such as that, but we had a lot of fun with that teacher, who was a man. They never tolerated women teachers in Europe, only men. And he taught us how to fly a kite, make our own kite, study bees, how they make honey. And we took walks, and we took excursions to different places in the countryside. Like I remember one place we went what they called Konigburg.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

MEIER: That's K-O-N-I-G-B-U-R-G. And we walked part of the way until we got to a railroad station. Then we took a train. This was an old castle next to a river, and where they had, it's an old medieval castle, in fact, where they had dungeons in the cellars, and where they kept people captives, and then we went, he took us in groups of twelve up to the highest part, the tower, because it was so old when we got to the top

you could feel it sway. And there were about forty in our class, all told, and we took turns going up and seeing the whole place. It was beautiful.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what his name was?

MEIER: No, I don't. No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Since we're just talking about buildings, can you describe the house that you lived in?

MEIER: Yes. The house was off the main road. In fact, there was only one road in this town. And you could get to it by a little path, downhill, because it was about twenty, twenty-five feet below the height of the road. But yet it was very nice. It was a long house, and the entrance to the house was in the center of the house. And as you go into the left, there was a big hallway as you enter, and to the left were our living quarters, which consisted of one large room. That gave us our living room, our bedroom, our kitchen and dining area all in one. Then across the hall from that, which was used at one time for sort of an inn, and we used it for a warehouse, was another large room, empty, of course. And in the back (he clears his throat) there was our usual sanitary facilities and another bedroom where my brother and I slept. It was very cold in the wintertime.

SIGRIST: How was the house heated?

MEIER: The house was heated, that house only in the kitchen stove. The old-type stove that had a reservoir for hot water, and we used mostly wood because coal was very expensive and we couldn't afford it anyway. And in the back, because it was on a slope, you'd go down about twelve steps to our woodshed where my brother and I kept rabbits and we also had a dog, a very nice dog.

SIGRIST: What kind of a dog?

MEIER: It was, well, it was sort of an Airedale dog. And, uh, he would chase chickens and jump and run like crazy. Very good. We always enjoyed that. But the rabbit that my brother kept and I kept, we had about, oh, maybe fifty rabbits, a lot of hutches piled high. Every now and then we would let them out and eat fresh grass on the back lawn. And in the back of this house and shed we had our own garden, which was part of the lot for the house. Oh, the house also had, which my wife would love to see. We never went back. We hope to someday maybe. Had a thatched roof, which was very nice.

SIGRIST: What was the house made out of?

MEIER: The house was all wood, like logs, but square, square, not rounded.

SIGRIST: Was it painted?

MEIER: Uh, well, it was weatherbeaten outside and whitewashed inside. That was the only decorated side that I saw. And the chimney was in the center of the house off the hallway. It was built in such a way so that it could be cleaned by going, entering it through a closet. And, in fact, that closet one time burst into flames, and we had to get out. But every house it seemed had a barrel of water handy for such a purpose. And we were, my mother and a neighbor extinguished that flame in no time, so we were saved. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Let's talk about the garden. Who tended the garden?

MEIER: Well, the garden, when I say a garden, we had some flowers, and mostly it was, like they call here, a sand garden for the children. But in the garden there was a huge rock which was never moved, and this is where I had my first serious accident.

SIGRIST: Tell us about it.

MEIER: Uh, we were building sand houses, my brother and sister, and I wanted to see how they were doing. So instead of walking around the rock, I climbed over it, and I stumbled and fell, and I got a terrific cut right here on my calf. (he gestures) And, of course, in that town, we had no doctors, so my mother did the best she could to

bandage it up and treat it, but it became festered. So then my aunt said, "Well, not to worry." This is all in German, of course. "I will go in the forest and get some herbs and cook them and put them on." Like a poultice, you know. Which she did, and that sort of helped, and it healed. But it left . . .

SIGRIST: Do you know what sort of herbs those were?

MEIER: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what grew in the forest?

MEIER: No, no. I wasn't concerned what they were at that tender age. But we all had our, everyone had their home remedies, and it did help. But it left a huge scar because they didn't realize that they had such thing a suturing a cut. So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being a kid in that house? For instance, perhaps a religious celebration of some sort. How did you celebrate, were you Christian, were you Jewish?

MEIER: No. We were not Jewish. We were Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic. Did you celebrate Christmas . . . ?

MEIER: And our church, we walked to church every Sunday. And it was right on

the top of this hill of this town. And my grandfather, who was my mother's, well, adopted parents sort of. She was an adopted child, but he was caretaker for that church, and it was his job to open the church and get some sort of heat in there by a wood stove. And from our house, I think it was about two-and-a-half miles to get to the church, but everyone in that village walked to the church. No one had any cars. We saw a car maybe about twice a year if we were lucky. That was a rare occasion because no one owned automobiles in that little town. In fact, very few owned them in Braunau, the bigger city, which was about six miles away. And this was where we followed our religion. And later on, I think when I was about seven, and I was confirmed, we had to go to the big city, and we were confirmed in a big Catholic church. And one of my uncles was my godfather at that time. And for a gift, in celebration of that, he presented me with a cap pistol and three rolls of caps, which was out of this world. (they laugh) So, and . . .

SIGRIST: Was religion, was Catholicism an integral part of your life, or did you just kind of go on Sunday and that was that?

MEIER: Well, that part of it, we had to learn our catechism, and because everyone knew their catechisms, being Catholic, and sometimes you were given a test. And they were very strict, if you didn't know your answers, and you had to make sure you knew them the next time, the next Sunday before the main mass and everything because they

would question you on that.

SIGRIST: Did priests ever visit the house?

MEIER: No, no. Never did.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about your mother. What was her name?

MEIER: My mother's name was Fanny.

SIGRIST: I see. And she had family in this area, yes?

MEIER: Well, she had two aunts who lived in their neighborhood, but they were old maids, you might say. And one of them I remember distinctly because we used to go berrying in the woods when the season was on, and she was bitten by a snake, a very poisonous snake. And she was brought back to her house, and she was very, well, she was in a coma, actually, because the poison of the snake had gotten into her system. And someone suggested feed her, or make her drink a lot of alcohol, which today is the worst thing you can do, because the alcohol seems to make it flow easier. But anyway, for some reason or other, she came around or got better, and she survived that snake bite.

SIGRIST: Did the aunts live together?

MEIER: Yes, they lived together.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about being a little kid and visiting your aunts.

MEIER: Well, we visited my mother's aunts because this was sort of a duplex house where they lived, and their neighbors, there was a man who was a tinsmith, he and his wife. And we used to get a terrific laugh out of them because every day you would see one or the other go to one of the beer gardens and get their ration of beer for their dinner. They'd have the old tin pail, held about maybe a quart-and-a-half, and he or she would get the beer every day. (bell chimes in the background) And we all would all call, "Ah, there goes the tinsmith. There goes the tinsmith's wife getting their beer." (they laugh) Every day. So that's about it for neighbors. But in the wintertime, we had a lot of fun in the wintertime because the way our house was situated, we used to take our skis, which were homemade, put them on, and slide (telephone rings) down the hill. And at the bottom of the hill there was a pond, frozen in the wintertime. And, of course, we had our skates around our neck, carrying them. Then we'd take the skis off and go skating. And other times, weekends, sometimes the German soldiers came across the border, and they loved winter sports. And we were in proud ownership of a nice big bobsled. Which they said, "Well, you give us a ride, and ride with us, and we'll go right down this hill." Which is the main road for about two miles, right down the road.

And a soldier would sit on the sleigh, about five, with about two or three kids squeezed in between them, and we'd go like crazy down. We could see the sparks behind us from the steel runners when they hit a little pebble or a rock. And we'd get down to the bottom, then we'd drag it back up again, and keep going that way until we got tired of it.

SIGRIST: Did people in town have sleighs for transportation in the winter?

MEIER: (Mrs. Meier can be heard in the background talking on the telephone.) Yes, they had sleighs, uh-huh. Some of them had horse-drawn sleighs, and most of the time everyone walked to wherever they wanted to go, because there weren't too many places to go. They had one grocery store, and that's about it. And if you wanted . . .

SIGRIST: Good. Describe the town a little more for me. So there's one grocery store. Were all the houses sort of all together?

MEIER: Well, the houses were stretched on either side of the highway, the school being in the center. And that town boasted three beer gardens.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) For a small town.

MEIER: And it's not like a tavern here. It's more like a bar with a huge dance hall with chairs and tables and nice hardwood floor for the dancers. And they'd have, well, a mechanical organ, which played songs for them, because they couldn't really afford an

orchestra, so they had that kind of music for them. And every weekend they would be filled to capacity because of the German soldiers. They would go across the border and, to our town, and enjoy themselves.

SIGRIST: Now, did you live in the town, or on the outskirts of the town?

MEIER: We lived right in the town, yep.

SIGRIST: Because a couple of times you talked about the forest, you talked about sledding. It seems like outdoor activities were very important?

MEIER: Yes. Outdoor activities were very important.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you do outdoors?

MEIER: Well, like I said, we had, the outdoor activities in the summer time were mostly walking, oh, birding. We did a lot of birding. And, uh, not in the sense of looking for birds to watch them, but to catch them. We had traps for them by (he clears his throat) which we would set by springs in the woods where the birds would drink, take a drink every now and then. And once in a while we were to catch one, and put them in a cage, and after a while they would sing. Every house that I knew, all my friends, they had a bird or two, and they would sing very well. And those that we didn't realize would sing we would let free. We only wanted the songbirds. And, well, after a while that was

banned because they were putting too many birds in cages, but because they were for nothing, you know, if you wanted to take the, make the effort to catch them, fine, you could keep them, but they banned that after a while.

SIGRIST: I see. As a child growing up in this environment, was it fun? Did you have fun, or was this actually a hard-working kind of an environment?

MEIER: Well, it was fun, and it was work because it was up to the children to pick berries in the woods, pick mushrooms, and gather firewood. That was our main job was gathering firewood. And we'd go in the forest and pick up any dead limbs, branches and put them in a big, huge bunch and carry them home on our backs. Now, the government there allowed anyone to cut down a dead tree, keep the forest clean. I mean, the forests there were like, well, a manicured garden here. Beautiful. There was no brush sitting around, no bushes.

SIGRIST: Because of this.

MEIER: Because of that. And there were no pine cones, because we would pick those up for the fire. And everything was very nice. Once in a while there would be an open spot and there would be deer grass. That's where the deer, actually, would feed. We saw a lot of those, but you weren't allowed to hunt them because the only way you could hunt them, you had to belong to a huntsman's club, which brings me to another

story. My father, while he was in Europe, he was invited to a dinner, a hunter's club dinner.

SIGRIST: Was he a member of this club?

MEIER: He was not a member. His brothers were. And so they had the dinner, and after the dinner, when they asked him how he liked it, very enjoyable. Then in the corner of one of their rooms, there was a gentleman who was making a strange noise. "Meow, meow, meow." And he wanted to know what that was. Well, they said, "Hugo," that was my father's name, "how did you enjoy? What you thought was rabbit was cat." And that made him sick. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: I don't blame him.

MEIER: (he laughs) But all-in-all we had a lot of fun.

SIGRIST: Let me get back to your parents. We started talking about your mother. I'd like you to sort of describe for me what her temperament was like. First of all, describe what she looked like, start that way.

MEIER: Gee, I wish I had a picture of her.

SIGRIST: How would you describe her in words? What . . .

MEIER: Well, she was shorter than I am. I'm five-ten. She was about five-five, I would say. And she was a very good-looking woman. Of course, in later years she became a little heavier, but she still looked good. But she was a very hardworking girl, and she was an excellent cook.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about that. Tell me, what was your favorite thing that she made.

MEIER: My favorite thing . . .

SIGRIST: As a kid in Europe.

MEIER: Yeah, well, she used to make what, of course, meat was hard to get. If we got, for the whole family, maybe a pound-and-a-half of meat a month, you were lucky.

SIGRIST: Why was that? Because of the war?

MEIER: Well, because of the war, because of the shortage of meat, and because of the small town. The only meat available would be chicken or goat meat. And once in a while one of the local farmers would slaughter a pig, and then we had pork, fresh pork. We had sausage and there wasn't a bit of the pork or the pig wasted. Everything was used. We'd have pickled pigs feet. (he laughs) Or fresh ham, or sausage. And

as children we would watch them slaughter the pig by virtue of a nice long knife. They would stab it, draw the blood, catch it, from which they made bloodwurst. And, as I said, nothing was wasted. The bladder was emptied, cleaned, dried, and then we children used that for a football. (he laughs) So that was that.

SIGRIST: Was there a butcher shop in town, or did the farmer who slaughtered the pig, did he go door to door, just selling? Did you trade . . .

MEIER: They did it right on the premises of the respective farmer.

SIGRIST: So this was your pig that they would be doing.

MEIER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see.

MEIER: And they have a trough into which they laid two chains, put the pig into it, and then rolled the pig back and forth to remove all the bristles, in hot water. And then when it was nice and clean, then they would cut it up.

SIGRIST: I see.

MEIER: Eviscerate it, and cut it up in sections.

SIGRIST: So tell me some of the great things your mother cooked.

MEIER: Well, our menu at home wasn't that great because of the meat shortage, but she applied most of her knowledge of cooking and everything when we came to America. But while we were in Europe she made mostly soups and when we had, some of our dinners were sort of from a big bowl, buttermilk and potatoes. We ate a lot of potatoes. (he laughs) And buttermilk, which was a local product. We had a lot of milk, butter, however much you wanted. No problem there. But meat was, that was the sad thing. No meat.

SIGRIST: Did your mother work at all outside the home?

MEIER: She took in sewing. Not very much, because while my father was there he provided the family with whatever we needed. And then when he left for America, he would send us money occasionally which she used very carefully, because it was at a minimum. And, of course, she did her sewing. Well, the whole family, so we sort of self-sustained. We had firewood from the forest, and we had berries and mushrooms, and we dried fruit, apples, and we picked cherries which she canned. And we didn't need a grocery store to speak of, except for the sugar and flour and some of the staple stuff. But the rest of the things we obtained ourselves.

SIGRIST: It sounds to me like you led a sort of no-nonsense, no-frills childhood.

MEIER: No frills is right.

SIGRIST: And there wasn't a lot of suffering either. I mean, you had what you needed.

MEIER: No suffering. I mean, we didn't know any differently, so we didn't mind.

SIGRIST: Right. Let's talk about your dad now. His name was Hugo, you said.

MEIER: Hugo. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And can you describe in words to me what he looked like.

MEIER: Well, he was a good-looking man. If, he was quite tall, a little taller than I am. About my height, I think he was. But his hair never turned grey in later years until maybe the last year of his life. And, as I said before, he was a tailor and a good one, and he would make suits for men. His customers were mainly in the city of Braunau because this, Johannesburg they had rough clothing, you know, farmer's clothing, as you say here. But every suit he made he made very meticulously, and it fit when he got through. And it wore well. Always good quality stuff.

SIGRIST: So he was a perfectionist.

MEIER: He was a perfectionist, yes.

SIGRIST: What was his temperament like? Was he a quiet man? Was he a gregarious man?

MEIER: Well, he's the type of man that wanted to be the boss. And if he said jump, you'd better jump, or else. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: You sound like you're speaking of this out of experience. (they laugh)

MEIER: He was a good father, but very strict, very strict. Like you said, no-nonsense.

SIGRIST: Explain how he was strict in the house. For instance, what were you allowed to do and not allowed to do as a child.

MEIER: Well, now there you have me, because being born in 1914 and he left in 1921, I didn't see much of him.

SIGRIST: That's true.

MEIER: And then he spent four years in the army, so that took a lot of it out of that period.

SIGRIST: So really your mother is the dominant figure in the house.

MEIER: My mother was the dominant figure in the family.

SIGRIST: Um, well, which leads me to this point. Let's talk a little bit about your father going to America first. Explain for me again why he went and what he did when he got there.

MEIER: Well, he and his brothers and sisters corresponded.

SIGRIST: And the brothers and sisters were already here.

MEIER: Were here, some of them. Because his father married twice, and there were ten children in the family. But anyway, the oldest one, William Meier, (clock chimes) he went to America in 1915 on his own. And eventually he would send for one of the other siblings, and then (he clears his throat) he contacted my father, "Why don't you come over for a visit?" I think he sent him the money and everything. So he did. He says, "I'll go over for a year and visit my sisters and brothers, and then come back."

SIGRIST: What year was that?

MEIER: In 1921.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father leaving for America?

MEIER: Yes, yes. Yes, I do remember that. It was sort of a sad day, and yet we were proud that he was able to go that far away.

SIGRIST: What did America mean to a little kid in this tiny village?

MEIER: Well, the way my uncles described it, "America is a beautiful place. You should see the streets. They virtually sparkle." Which they did, you know. They had the mica and everything in their crushed stone. Of course, enticed my father to go and visit. And, of course, we wanted to also see it sometime, maybe. But that wasn't to be until two years afterward. After a year, he failed to come back, and then he explained why in the letters to my mother, and then he stayed two years, and then he sent for us. He sent my mother the money and said, "Sell the house, pack everything what you want, what you can get out, what they will allow you to take out, and come to America."

SIGRIST: So he was writing pretty consistently back and forth.

MEIER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Now, he came here to Schenectady.

MEIER: He came here to Schenectady. And his first attempt at work here was with a tailor, but because my, his brother was a butcher, he had his own market. My

brother said, his brother said, "Why don't you try that, Hugo? We'll find a little store and start your own meat market." Which he did. So he eventually had his own meat market. But he would never expand, like it's customary to do here, to a larger store. All he wanted was a small meat market, and that's what he had, a small one. Where my mother worked, when he had that market, in fact, I think she spent more time in that market than he did. He would always say, "Well, I have to go to the beef house." They had two beef houses in Schenectady, Swift's and Wilson Company, gone now. But, uh, and then he had to visit my brother and go on a chicken farm and get some chickens.

SIGRIST: So Mom was left . . .

MEIER: Mom was left in charge. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: All right. So he's writing to you back and forth, and then did he send money for your passage?

MEIER: Yes. He sent . . .

SIGRIST: There's you and your brother . . .

MEIER: And my sister.

SIGRIST: And your sister and your mother.

MEIER: And my mother. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Um, do you remember how you felt about going to America? What did a nine-year-old, what was it like . . .

MEIER: Well, we were exuberant because now we could see those streets in America. They're supposed to be, everything is beautiful in America. So, uh, we were very happy when we got that news and my mother said, "Well, we're going to go to America now. I have to sell the house, and pack a few things," and whatever. And she had a huge box made. I think it was about four by six by four, in which she packed our clothing, but mainly our featherbeds, because they were very important to my mother. She wanted things that were nice. And she forwarded that. And clothing, we had small suitcases. And from there we went to Braunau on a train . . .

SIGRIST: Was it sad leaving your friends in town, your schoolmates?

MEIER: Well, I'll tell you. We had quite a party when we left. Before we left we invited our friends, our neighbors, and, of course, my grandmother and grandfather there on my mother's side. And we were allowed to have some strong drink. (he laughs) For a celebration. And I think that's the first time I ever got sick on alcohol.

SIGRIST: Was it beer from the beer garden, or . . .

MEIER: Well, it was a little stronger than beer. What they'd call a schnapps over there. But, of course, it didn't take much to make me feel that way. My sister was the same way, my brother the same way, and we went to bed very early. I think that was the plan. (he laughs) To get us to go to bed early.

SIGRIST: Did anyone give you a present to take to America or . . .

MEIER: No.

SIGRIST: Anything like that.

MEIER: No. It was, the best they could do was give us a party like that. And, of course, very pleasant farewells, but no gifts.

SIGRIST: Was it sad for your mother to leave her family?

MEIER: Yes. Because she realized that she would never see her mother and father again. That is, her, the adoptive mother and father.

SIGRIST: Were they elderly at that time?

MEIER: Yes, they were elderly.

SIGRIST: So she has kind of mixed feelings about all of this, then?

MEIER: Yes, she did. But the European trait is you have to go or you're determined to go where your husband goes. So if he was going to stay in America, that's where she wanted to go, with the family. So that's where we went. And from Braunau, by train we went to Prague.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time you'd ever been on a train?

MEIER: That's the first, no. We were on a train before, because we went on these excursions. And from Braunau we went to Prague. And there we had an examination, and we were vaccinated again. And I received four more vaccinations. I had eight in all. And my mother thought, she was very clever. She took up a moist handkerchief and tried to rub it off. (he laughs) But it took anyway, and I had a terrific arm. But after a while it went down, but . . .

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a processing area at Prague?

MEIER: Yeah. It's similar to, it's similar to, uh, Ellis Island. Those that left had to be first examined and inoculated, and then you were allowed to go.

SIGRIST: Of course, Prague is a big city.

MEIER: Yes, it is.

SIGRIST: Now, you had been in Braunau before, which was a larger town than where you were.

MEIER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But had you ever been in a city quite as large as Prague?

MEIER: No. No, we never had been in places as large than that. The reason, and then we, we were supposed to stay in Prague until the ship was to sail from Bremerhaven. But the word got to us from the officials that it would be late leaving, so they were, all the people were put up in barrack-like buildings, and one of the officials said, "Now, Mrs. Meier," in German, of course, "You don't want to stay here. We'll send you on to Bremen, and put you up in a hotel."

SIGRIST: Why do you suppose that happened?

MEIER: She appeared to be, not like a peasant. More of a, well, as we say, middle-class people. A little more refined. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And would you say that most of the people that you were with in these barracks were more of a peasant class.

MEIER: Of the peasant class, yes. But in that case we were very fortunate. We

were sent to Bremen and put up in a hotel.

SIGRIST: How did you get from Prague to Bremen?

MEIER: By train again.

SIGRIST: By train again. You're taking a lot of trains.

MEIER: Yes. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: From up and over . . .

MEIER: The hotel was very nice because, well, the food was touch-and-go, again. The same condition in Bremen, in the hotel. We didn't get butter, we got margarine, and that was a change for us. We didn't get rye bread, we got black bread. But all-in-all we survived. We ate, we had a lot of jellies and jams as children, you know, we liked that.

SIGRIST: That's all that berry picking you were doing in the woods.

MEIER: Well, this was in Bremen now, you know. But there we took walks all around the town, and we watched vendors with their fish, selling fish. And we didn't have any money to buy anything. But we passed one toy shop where I saw a steam engine and when we got back to the hotel I said to my mother, "I would like to have that

steam engine. That would be my day." Well, it so happened that she got a letter from my father, and there was a, of course, an American stamp on it. So right away we took the American stamp off, because my brother and I were avid stamp collectors. And when she read the letter, my mother read the letter, it stated that "I hope you can use the twenty dollars I'm sending." Which wasn't there. It had been taken. So she went to the postal authorities and reported it, but because we had removed the stamp there was not proof enough that it was sent that way. So she lost the twenty dollars. But anyway, she said, well, coming back to your steam engine, she bought it for me. And the salesman there says, well, the steam engine was four million mark. Well, she said, "I don't have that much money, but I got some American money, like a dollar." "Oh, I'll take that. It will be just fine." So she got the steam engine for a dollar.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, you know, inflation in Europe at this time . . .

MEIER: You know how bad inflation was? Bread, for instance, we ten thousand mark for a loaf of bread. And sanitary papers was very expensive. You might better use a kronen denomination of currency because it was that useless. It was just paper. It wasn't good for anything. And when we got word that the boat was ready to sail, and my mother was to settle the bill, of course she couldn't do that. It was phenomenal. (he laughs) So she went to the steamship company and stated her case. And they said, "Not to worry, Mrs. Meier. We put you in here, we will take care of the bill." So

from there they put us on the boat.

SIGRIST: Well, that's good.

MEIER: So we got that paid. And on the boat, the Bremen, we were shown a cabin, a small cabin. I don't think it was any larger, well, maybe about ten-by-ten. With two bunks, upper and lower, on either side, one for the girls and one for the boys, and that's all we had, just one bunk.

SIGRIST: Was there a sink or anything in the room, or . . .

MEIER: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

MEIER: No. We had a common washroom at the end of the aisle. And we had a main dining room for our deck, which was terrific. The food was phenomenal. Ah! All the food you wanted to eat. This is where we were introduced to ice cream.

SIGRIST: What was that like, never having seen ice cream before.

MEIER: We never had seen ice cream, but the dishes they brought the ice cream in, it was sort of a sculptured dish, beautiful. But the minute, of course, we were on board, and it was already waving. My sister and I got sick.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

MEIER: My sister and I got sick. Not too bad. The first day was fine, but after we left the port, we were sick for the rest of the trip. Eight days out of nine. It took nine days to go across the ocean. My brother was sick the first day, and the rest of the time he was well. Just the opposite. So whenever we saw food, we didn't want any.

SIGRIST: What about your mother?

MEIER: My mother was slightly ill, but not bad. But we ate a lot of oranges on board. That seemed to help.

SIGRIST: And you had seen oranges, because didn't you say your father had brought you some early on when you were living, I don't know if you had moved to Johannesburg by then?

MEIER: Well, yeah. We, he brought, when he came back from Russia that time, he brought the grapes, just a little bag of them, and two or three oranges.

SIGRIST: So the orange wasn't a revelation to you.

MEIER: No. That was, we, the acid of the oranges seemed to counteract the

seasickness, and it was able to stay in our stomachs fine, fine.

SIGRIST: At least your mother didn't have too much trouble trying to keep track of all these little kids, because you were very young. Your sister was sick.

MEIER: No. We minded her pretty well because we realized that she, being alone with three children, smaller children, you know, it was quite a job. Nine, eleven and thirteen. (he sighs) But on the way over we had to stop mid-ocean. It was very foggy and, in fact, we were given lifejackets (a clock chimes) and told to go to our cabins and stay there unless you were told otherwise, because they anticipated possibly a wreck, you know, by another steamship. But that didn't happen. We were lucky there, too. And then when we entered the New York Harbor we were getting over the seasickness, but we really weren't interested in anything except seeing America. In fact, it was still foggy, and I don't recall seeing the Statue of Liberty, and we got to Ellis Island where we were put into this large room with, there were booths all around. And there we were separated. The women, the females on one side and the men on the other. So after a while we got together again, and luckily everyone passed.

SIGRIST: What happened when you were separated?

MEIER: Well, we were sort of, it was an anxious moment for my brother and myself, and my sister and mother, because not being able to speak English, and they

couldn't speak our language, German, we were sort of up in the air. But we were guided around pretty well, and then brought together again.

SIGRIST: What kind, did you have to undergo examinations at Ellis?

MEIER: Well, we had a, they checked us for our lungs, like tapping and whatever they do. And they checked our eyes, they checked our throats, they checked our body, because we were stripped down. And, uh, we were fortunate there, again. We were in pretty good health, and we passed fine.

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island a scary experience for a little nine-year-old boy?

MEIER: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. Because, right away, when they separated us, that's the first thing that was bad. Then when we were put into booths where various doctors examined you for some diseases or some other diseases, and we felt like livestock. (he laughs) But, because we didn't come over first class. We could never afford that, my father. I think it was, well, you might call it steerage, actually, because we only had one cabin on board ship, with bunks.

SIGRIST: What do you think your mother is thinking about during the Ellis Island experience? Was she expecting this?

MEIER: Well, she was very apprehensive and she wasn't a traveller. It was a new

experience for her. And you could tell by her eye that she was really worried to realize whether we'd get to Schenectady and join our father or what and when.

SIGRIST: Now, whom was she expecting to come and meet you?

MEIER: Well, word got to my father and his brother that the ship was supposed to come into port at a certain day, and it did not. So they were down there, I think two days, and it didn't show up, so they went back home. And when it did show up, there was no one there waiting for us. But finally after Ellis Island, we were put on land, solid land. And I remember my sister, she was getting kind of edgy. So to console her, my mother bought her a jar of hard candy and spent her last dime.

SIGRIST: When you were still at Ellis Island.

MEIER: No, on . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, on land.

MEIER: Port of New York. And at Ellis Island because we were immigrants and didn't speak the language, we were tagged with a card here. (he gestures to his chest) "Schenectady, Schenectady, Schenectady, and so forth." So when we docked in New York we were just walking around on the wharfs and someone directed us to a train and from there we went to New York, from New York we went to Schenectady.

SIGRIST: This must have all been very difficult for your mother to do this, not knowing . . .

MEIER: Well, she just was happy that people would direct us. And because of that I think they'd give you tags so you would be advised where to go, what to do, shoved around like, again, sheep, cattle, whatever.

SIGRIST: So they didn't detain you at Ellis, just because somebody wasn't there to pick you up. They didn't, you didn't stay overnight at Ellis Island or anything like that.

MEIER: No, we left the same day.

SIGRIST: They released you.

MEIER: But then when they dumped us, so to speak, at the dock, what do you do then with no one waiting for you? But then, of course, some official realized that, and they put us on a train heading for Schenectady. Now, I don't know who paid for the tickets, because my mom was broke.

SIGRIST: Or how you even got to the Grand Central, or Penn Station?

MEIER: Yeah, right. It was quite an experience for my mother.

SIGRIST: When your father didn't show up at Ellis Island, did your mother think something had happened? Did she try to contact him in Schenectady?

MEIER: No. No, she never even tried to because by mail it would take a few days, and having no money she couldn't telephone. She wouldn't even know how to use a phone, what the number was, or anything. So for that reason, she was lucky to have us on a train heading for Schenectady.

SIGRIST: So you guys were on your own.

MEIER: Yes. And then when we got here to Schenectady, to the depot here, again there was no one there waiting for us. So we got off the train anyway, in the depot, and we started walking up that short street, Wall Street, onto State Street. We were on State Street then. So she decided to walk up on a sidewalk up through the city. And when we got to the courthouse, remember the courthouses on Albany Street? There's a fort down there, that park. My mother, there we were walking along, and my mother heard a voice, "Fanny!" It was my Uncle William. He was just coming from the beef houses in his Ford truck. So he stopped, took us on board, and we went to his house. Again, we were lucky. (he laughs) Otherwise we'd be stranded, probably still walking around in Schenectady.

SIGRIST: What a coincidence. What season is this?

MEIER: October.

SIGRIST: Now, are you carrying luggage with you?

MEIER: Yeah. I was in short pants yet.

SIGRIST: It's cold up here in October.

MEIER: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Boy, you have to give your mother a lot of credit.

MEIER: Oh, I tell you.

SIGRIST: She really just rolled up her sleeves and did what she had to do.

MEIER: A real pioneer.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Well, let's talk about, let's talk about the first night. Where did you stay your first night here?

MEIER: The first night we stayed at my uncle's house.

SIGRIST: Is that where your father was living?

MEIER: Yes, temporarily. My Aunt Julia and Uncle Willie, they put us up that night. They got cots and stuff, and there were four of us, and she put us up for a couple of days, because she said, well, "Hugo will find you a flat, and we'll move you into that." Which they did. And that was the first experience living in a house like that.

SIGRIST: What was the address, do you remember?

MEIER: I don't remember the address, but it was on Hodgson Street.

SIGRIST: Hoc?

MEIER: Hodgson. It's H-O-D-G-S-O-N. It's, uh, it was a dirt, it wasn't even paved. They had sidewalks, but not a paved road.

SIGRIST: Can you describe this apartment, this flat, where you lived?

MEIER: Well, this is a house my uncle owned. He had tenants downstairs, and he lived upstairs. It was a two-family house, with a two-car garage in the back, and a lot of little houses all around, two houses, I mean, two-family houses. And it was primarily Italian settlement, but that's where he lived until he built another house for himself on Lakeview Avenue, also in Mount Pleasant.

SIGRIST: What was it like seeing your father?

MEIER: (he laughs) Well, of course, he was happy to see us, but he was happier to see my mother.

SIGRIST: He's a man who you really don't even know that well.

MEIER: That's right. That's right. We don't really know him that well.

SIGRIST: So what was your reaction to him?

MEIER: They weren't, my father was never too affectionate towards his family, except my mother, you know. So he sort of just tolerated us and said for us to mind, behave ourselves, which we did. Because you were in a stranger's house, even though it was my uncle who had, at that time, two children.

SIGRIST: This is a house full of people.

MEIER: This is a house full of people. You have to do your best to get along.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay with your uncle?

MEIER: I think about three days. And then my uncle and my mother, they went flat hunting, and they finally found a place near school, Hamilton School on Pleasant Street, where we moved, a downstairs flat. And they obtained furniture from here and there in

second hand stores and whatever, and we finally set up house. It was real rustic. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Describe that flat for me. How long did you live there?

MEIER: We didn't live there long. Probably about, I think it was less than a year, because it was infested.

SIGRIST: Infested with . . .?

MEIER: Cockroaches.

SIGRIST: Ooh, uh-huh.

MEIER: And that's something my mother would never tolerate. Anything. Mice, cockroaches, whatever. And then she found a place on Main Street which was nice, another two-family house. And eventually she decided we have to buy a house. So we, she bought a house on Lincoln Avenue.

SIGRIST: What year is this?

MEIER: (he sighs) What year? Well, let's see. I was already going to, I was in the fifth grade, so it must have been around '27, '28, 1928. We had a nice house. I think she paid too much for it because, you know, being a foreigner they took advantage

of you, got top price.

SIGRIST: But your father is making some money now.

MEIER: Well, he's making money in his business, but he was too liberal. He allowed people to run a tab. In fact, when he closed the store, he had about seven thousand dollars outstanding, which he never got. And because of that, and because of the fact that he always said to his wife, my mother, "We own this house now," or "this house is ours, so we don't have to pay rent." So he never put any money aside for a mortgage. He figured the rent people are paying for that, the taxes and the mortgage and everything. And eventually we lost it. You just couldn't talk to him. My mother tried talking to him, but it didn't help.

SIGRIST: And she was actually very good at managing money.

MEIER: She's the one that managed the family and the store, eventually. But we still, we had to close it up, or my dad had to close it up and work for someone else after a while.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother plunked down in the middle of upstate New York (Mr. Meier laughs) from Europe. Tell me about how she adjusted to America.

MEIER: Well, she adjusted real well. In fact, she enjoyed going downtown, and

she'd walk or take a trolley at that time, a trolley being only seven cents. But most of the time she'd walk downtown, go through various stores. She'd want to get herself familiar with all the stores where you could buy certain things or whatnot. And she'd buy things on time, which was the American way, I guess. And pretty soon we had a nice house, a nice house furnished very nicely, our own house, at that time.

SIGRIST: Was she ever acutely aware that she was an immigrant in maybe a non-immigrant kind of society?

MEIER: Well, my, her sister-in-laws and brother-in-laws, sort of being the last one to come here to America, they looked down on her, because we were, we were the poorest of the whole force. And, of course, that didn't make her very happy. Because my uncles all had cars, they had their own house. But they were well-established. They had been here quite a while. But not so with Hugo Meier. He was the type that would never, he didn't take a risk. He would never take a risk (a clock chimes). He wanted a sure thing always. I think that's why he never really made it in the meat market business because you have to expand and serve the public what they want. Groceries, plus meat, plus vegetables, whatever, and he never tried to do that. His brothers did, they expanded.

SIGRIST: Did your father, at the meat market, have primarily an immigrant clientele?

MEIER: No, no. They were American citizens, Americans, born here. Some were, some immigrants, I think. But most of the people were American-born, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he Americanize? Did he, how shall I say, did he change his type of clothing and learn English and try to become as American as possible, or did he retain his European . . .

MEIER: Well, as far as the English language, while we were living at home, while we children were at school, we said to our parents, "We are in America now. We will speak no German. English only." And that's how they learned, even my father. Because, well, he had learned some English. You have to, to be in a business. So, but my mother, they all retained her German accent. My sister did, my brother did. They told me I was the only one, being the youngest, that lost my accent.

SIGRIST: Tell me about being, you know, a nine, ten, eleven-year-old German-Austrian boy here in Schenectady. What was it like? Did people pick on you?

MEIER: Yes, they did. Yes, they did, particularly in the schoolyard. You were a greenhorn, you know. In fact, I had a couple of fisticuffs, fights, while at Hamilton school. It was sort of a rough neighborhood. I lost the first one, but I didn't lose the second one, because I didn't want to, how can you hurt someone with bare fists, you

know. You shouldn't do those things. So I think I was kind of easygoing. I got beaten up myself, but not the second time. I got, I was the victor the second time.

SIGRIST: You were ready for them.

MEIER: Yes, I was ready. I was getting Americanized by that time. (he laughs) And as far as school is concerned, we had to start in kindergarten.

SIGRIST: Oh, and of course you're much older than that.

MEIER: Nine years old I was in kindergarten.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about that?

MEIER: Well, not too bad because I couldn't speak English anyway, so I couldn't keep up with the other classes, but my teacher that I had in kindergarten, her name was Mrs. Meyers, German, and she spoke German. So she would give me the translation of any word in English and vice-versa, which was very good for us. I was the last to graduate further up. My brother was older, and he went first, then my sister. But we, in twelve years, in eleven years, or ten years, whatever it was, we graduated high school.

SIGRIST: Did they put all three of you into kindergarten?

MEIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: So that would have been even harder . . .

MEIER: But I was the last to leave kindergarten.

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay there more than one year, or . . .

MEIER: Well, they didn't detain us that long because we picked up the language rather rapidly because of our teacher, Mrs. Meyers. She helped us a great deal. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: She probably had lived through a similar circumstance.

MEIER: Well, she may have. I don't know. But . . .

SIGRIST: Were there other immigrant kids in the class, perhaps of other nationalities?

MEIER: Not that I know of.

SIGRIST: I'm just trying to sort of get a sense of what Schenectady was like in the '20s. I mean, were there pockets of immigrant neighborhoods?

MEIER: Well, yes. There were Polish sections, Italian sections, whose parents of the children were immigrants. But of course the kids were all American-born, and they

frowned on us. (he laughs) But we survived.

SIGRIST: What memories do you have of being a kid in Schenectady, growing up? Any good stories that come to mind, or did you ever go and see an interesting sight in Schenectady, or . . .

MEIER: Well, it was wonderful when my father finally bought a car.

SIGRIST: What kind did he buy?

MEIER: It was a Model T, an open one, with the isinglass curtains. Oh, we thought that was great.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

MEIER: Oh, about, I would say twelve, thirteen. And once in a while my uncles would tease him to go on a picnic to various places around this area. Mostly we went to Ballston Lake.

SIGRIST: Why? Was that a sort of . . .

MEIER: Near. It was only eleven miles away. And they used to have an amusement park there on one end. Do you recall that, or ever heard of it? And this is where we used to go for a picnic, and I remember one trip we made to Ballston Lake.

We only had seven or eight flat tires. (he laughs) Imagine that. For eleven miles we had seven flat tires. The tires were terrible then, especially on this Model T.

SIGRIST: Well, the roads were no better.

MEIER: The roads were terrible. But anyway, we survived. In fact, at one time, the last one we had, we had a tin can. My father had a tin can, which he cut and used for sort of an inner lining in the tire, and then the tube, and then he pumped it up by hand, to make the trip home. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So much for your fun afternoon out.

MEIER: But . . .

SIGRIST: Did your mother retain her European ways of cooking, or did she try to, again, Americanize?

MEIER: Luckily she retained all the cooking, the European cooking, what she learned. You know, in Europe when you are a certain age, you are what they call farmed out to a different country to learn another language and there you will learn sewing, needlework, baking, cooking, whatever necessary for to be a housewife for, I think it was for two years. And then you go back home. They transfer, or interchange, children that way. And she was a wonderful cook.

SIGRIST: And this had happened to her? She had been farmed out?

MEIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: When she came to America, of course, you were talking about shortage and that sort of thing in Europe. I assume that everything she wanted was here.

MEIER: Everything, everything. Not only that, but in the meat line, my father being a butcher, she had access to whatever she wanted. Of course, my father would say, "Not that. That's too good. I can get good money for that." And she said, "Hugo, it's here, I'm going to take it for my table." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: As a little kid growing up in Europe in a rather rural situation, what was it like to come and live in a city?

MEIER: (he sighs) Well, you were, your amusement was changed, because whatever you did it required pennies, nickels. You had to have some money, which we never needed in Europe, for whatever we wanted to do. That was a different culture entirely.

SIGRIST: What was there to do here for you?

MEIER: Well, the main thing was, is go to a movie, see a movie, which was on

Crane Street, incidentally. There were two movie houses on Crane Street. And once we got accustomed to the American way, I know we'd, on a Sunday afternoon we were given some money to go to the movies. We'd go to one movie, and when that picture had ended, we'd run like blazes to the other movie house and go in there. We'd see two movies every Sunday afternoon, when we weren't going on a picnic or something.

SIGRIST: Did your parents partake in this also, or was it mostly just the kids?

MEIER: Just the children, yeah. And in the summertime we'd go swimming up to Central Park, or Ballston Lake, once in a while Saratoga. And that beach is closed now. All the nice things around here are closed, gone.

SIGRIST: You and your brother raised rabbits and had animals in Europe. Did you ever have animals when you were here?

MEIER: Yes. Once we lived on another street, up Woodlawn, and it was a very nice house, a two-story house, one-family, with sort of a shed in the center of the backyard. It had a barn-like garage, two-stall. And in this shed he kept, he had eighty pigeons. He had some very nice pigeons. But the kind, the species I liked were the tumblers. Did you ever see pigeons tumble?

SIGRIST: No, describe.

MEIER: They would fly very high, directly above your property, and then just nosedive and tumble all the way down. And then before they hit the ground they would glide off and fly again.

SIGRIST: Now, did he sell these pigeons?

MEIER: No. He just raised them, traded them, or gave them away. He started with a few, and they laid eggs and they hatched them and they had more pigeons. We had, he had about eighty pigeons.

SIGRIST: So your brother was a real animal lover.

MEIER: He loved animals, yes.

SIGRIST: Well, we're nearing the conclusion of the interview, and one of my last questions to you is how did the Depression affect your family? Did the Depression have a profound affect on your family?

MEIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that, please.

MEIER: It was difficult to find work, very difficult. After I graduated, I went to . . .

SIGRIST: You would have graduated high school just after the crash, right? In '33.

MEIER: Yeah, after the crash, but it continued quite a while.

SIGRIST: Right, right.

MEIER: Quite a while. In fact, uh, I graduated in January of 1933.

SIGRIST: Just the height of the Depression.

MEIER: That was the height of the Depression really, and you couldn't find work. So I went to a continuation school where I took up typing and typesetting, you know, in case I got a job in the newspaper somewhere or whatever. And I was there for one semester, and then it was getting kind of short on money all around. So that's when they started the CC's, the Three C's, remember that, the Civilian Conservation Corps, which Roosevelt put into effect? So I joined that, and I was sent to Warrensburg. I wanted to go out to Idaho, see part of the country, but I was sent to Warrensburg. And they gave you a dollar a day, your food, your lodging and all that, of which twenty-five was sent home because it was hard times, and you were allowed to keep five. But if you were industrious and whatever you could promote yourself. So I finally got into the infirmary, the hospital part of the Warrensburg place, but I didn't like that too well, because there were two people in there in charge of the infirmary. And the fellow I was

with, he got the, he got the grade higher than I did, giving him more money. But then I heard of an opening in the office, so I applied for that. And because I had taken typing in this continuation school, they said, "We'll give you a chance." So I got that. I was office clerk, company clerk. Typing, I had charge of the payroll, any new members coming in.

SIGRIST: This is great. I mean, you're very privileged to have this.

MEIER: That's right. That's better than going out in the woods chopping wood, you know, dead trees up in Pack Forest in Warrensburg.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have to give your parents some of this money for their sustenance?

MEIER: Oh, yes. Twenty-five every month was sent to them, and the rest I could keep.

SIGRIST: Is your father's store still going at this point? How did the Depression affect his . . .

MEIER: Yes, it was still going, but it was beginning to go downhill. But while I was in there, although I had at that time eleven dollars for myself, where could you spend it? (he laughs) I didn't, I smoked, but I didn't smoke much. But I would, I was a money-

lender. Some of the boys were spenders. They wanted more money. So I would loan them a dollar or two. And they say, "Well, I'll give your a dollar-and-a-half at the end of the month." "Okay." So I made money that way. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Well, you had to be enterprising.

MEIER: I was. I was enterprising, all right. Of course, if you wanted to go to town, they'd take you to town in a group on weekends for, in the army trucks. There we'd go rollerskating.

SIGRIST: Where? In Warrensburg?

MEIER: Glens Falls.

SIGRIST: Glens Falls.

MEIER: Yes. And one time we were in Glens Falls and we met a couple of girls. (a clock chimes) And so we went out with them, everything on the up-and-up, fine. But we missed the bus going back to camp. So we had to walk from Glens Falls to Warrensburg.

SIGRIST: That's a long way.

MEIER: That's a long way. (he laughs) And halfway there it started to rain, (he

laughs) We got back to camp soaking wet, soaking wet, just like a drowned rat. But it was fun.

SIGRIST: Well, you know, as I said before, you were very lucky in such bad economic times to fall into something like this.

MEIER: Yes, yes. And then, while being company clerk, which paid thirty-six dollars a month, there was an opening in the supply room, clothing. So I applied for that and I got it. And when you get that you have your own quarters, you have access to extra socks, extra shirt, and you were in charge of all the clothing for the camp. And then I was paid forty-five dollars a month.

SIGRIST: (they laugh) Wow. Now, how much, now you're sending money back to your parents here in Schenectady.

MEIER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Your brother and your sister, if they're working, are they helping to support the family also?

MEIER: Well, (he sighs). My brother was, but not so much my sister. But of that forty-five, twenty-five still went home, and the rest I could keep. I was rich. Twenty dollars a month.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, of course, that meant something then.

MEIER: But then I was, I had enough money to come home weekends with a fellow who had a car, who would hide it in the woods. And I had to give him about three dollars to go back to Schenectady and back to camp again. But that wasn't too bad.

SIGRIST: Everyone's making money however they can.

MEIER: Everyone's making, you know, all looking out for himself.

SIGRIST: I have two final questions for you. One is, I want to ask again about your parents. Did your parents feel that coming to America was the right thing for them to do, or did they, or your father or mother, wish that they had stayed in Europe?

MEIER: It was the right thing. Even we children said that's the best thing my father ever did.

SIGRIST: Did he feel that?

MEIER: He felt that too, because he was his own boss here. He was able to give his family the basic things, necessary food, whatever. Which in Europe would have been very difficult, even after the post-years, the post-war years. It was horrible. So . . .

SIGRIST: And so your mother felt this also?

MEIER: Yes.

SIGRIST: It was definitely the right decision to do.

MEIER: But my mother, she worked very hard here raising us kids. Hopefully trying to satisfy the bank, keep the store intact. (he laughs) It was tough.

SIGRIST: Her life was complicated.

MEIER: Her life was complicated, but she liked it. She didn't mind at all. She worked very, very hard.

SIGRIST: Are you glad that you came?

MEIER: Oh, yes, yes, I am.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Europe?

MEIER: Well, I would probably be pushing daisies by this time because my father, knowing what my father had to do, he was drafted or conscripted into the army, spending all that time in Russia, in Siberia. The average person there didn't have much

of a future, not much of a future at all, which is better here, much better.

SIGRIST: You had a good life.

MEIER: I think so. I have a house, I have a camp, we've got two cars, I have a beautiful wife, three nice children, three boys, and they all have terrific jobs. Two of them are college graduates. The third one didn't want to go. But I have one in computers, one in atomic energy and one in chemicals. So, the oldest one lives nearby, but the others are in Rochester. So in that case I was very fortunate.

SIGRIST: America has been good to you.

MEIER: It is. It has been very good to me.

SIGRIST: Good.

MEIER: But you have to go after it to get it.

SIGRIST: Sure. Well, Mr. Meier, I want to thank you very much for allowing me to come into your home and pick your brain.

MEIER: (he laughs) Well, I hope I've been able to help you of some sort.

SIGRIST: You've been splendid. We've been talking for an hour-and-a-half.

MEIER: It was very nice. Would you care to stay for lunch?

SIGRIST: Oh, no, I can't. I have to do another interview right after this.

MEIER: But you have to eat.

SIGRIST: I'll pick something up on my way. Uh, thank you very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

MEIER: Thank you.