

EI-1234

NAME: GUNTER GRABER

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 8, 1941

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 23, 2002

RUNNING TIME: 1:03:20

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PhD

RECORDING ENGINEER:

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: ALECIA BARBOUR

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: INTERNED AT ELLIS ISLAND IN 1943

LEVINE: [Tape lapse] --- 23rd, the year 2002. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Gunter Graber who, with his family, was interned at Ellis Island. That was January 16, 1943, when the family was here for four days.

GRABER: Yeah. It's correct.

LEVINE: Then they were sent to a camp called Seagoville in Texas, where they spent about one year. In June 1944, they were sent to Crystal City -- to the camp in Crystal City, Texas. And there they could live in a bungalow as a family again. They stayed there till January 1945 and then were put on a train to Jersey City and passed through Ellis Island again, briefly. On January 6 they departed on the Gripsholm for Germany. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Okay, if we could start please by your saying your birth date and where you were born.

GRABER: I was born June 8, 1941 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in General Hospital. I can even recall the name of the---the doctor---

LEVINE: The doctor?

GRABER: Dr. Crabtree was his name [Laughs].

LEVINE: [Laughs] Okay. And why don't you say your mother's name and maiden name and your father's name.

GRABER: My mother was born Emilie (ph) Rehm, that's R-E-H-M, uh, in Gansbach (ph), that's a very small town in the Black Forest near Baden-Baden, and she immigrated to the United States in 1937. My father's name is Theodore Graber and he was born in a small town near Stuttgart, Germany called Winnenden and he came to the United States in 1935.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did your mother and father know each in Germany?

GRABER: They did not know each other previously. They met here in New Jersey at one of the German club functions. At that time there was a proliferation of ah, singing societies and clubs to go wandering and, you know, you name it and they had a club. And they met at one of the parties there and obviously fell in love and that was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh [Laughs].

GRABER: They got married in 1939.

LEVINE: Okay. Did your mother or your father ever talk about the circumstances under which they came to this country? Why they decided to come, um --- their emigration?

GRABER: Yeah. I---I mean, both---both felt very strongly with --- when Hitler came to power in Germany in the '30s, that they did not like the direction this was

headed. And um, of course my father at that time, he had an older brother who was living in the United States already. He immigrated in 1924 and he encouraged him, you know, "Why don't you come over to the United States and make yourself a life here." My father was a toolmaker by trade so from a work standpoint there was no problems finding – finding work here. My mother actually came over --- she was more adventurous ---- she came over as an au-pair girl initially. And -- you know --- she just wanted to see something differently.

LEVINE: So she came by herself?

GRABER: She came by herself. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your father, did he come by himself too?

GRABER: He came by himself also.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did your father than go to your uncle to stay with him?

GRABER: He lived with---he lived with him a very, very short time, you know, a few months. Ah, just to get the feel and---and -- and kind of get comfortable. I mean, obviously everything was completely new. You talking different language, uh, which he had to learn and everything. And then, you know, he found a, like a – a ---a room in---in a private home.

LEVINE: Like a, he was a boarder?

GRABER: Boarder, Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

GRABER: Yeah. And then, of course, when, you know, he met my mother and they got married and they rented an apartment.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And---and where, did they settle in Elizabeth? Is that where . . .

GRABER: No. They---they actually---they actually--- they actually lived on Jefferson Avenue in Elizabeth on---on Elmora Avenue first. And then my father ah, found ah, work in Bayonne for the International Nickel Company in their laboratories though, so they moved---they moved to Bayonne. And then my mother--- you know, she -- she was pregnant at that time. They had the---the first son, my brother Werner who was born in December 1939 and uh, so they lived there, and then I was born in June 1941. And, you know, we lived there as a family uh, until --- what happened is the owner of the home where my parents rented an apartment, he was Polish. And he -- when, of course, when at the outbreak of the war when uh, when Germany invaded Poland and defeated them -- he became very angry with---with the Germans who were living in his house. And he made life unbearable. And --

LEVINE: What did he do? Did your Mother and Father talk about that?

GRABER: Well you know, they---they never really got into any kind of details. They just, "well, he raised the rent," and you know, he always complained about excessive noise when the babies were crying. I mean, babies cry, what are you going to do? You can't muffle them, you know. And, finally, you know -- he once more raised the rent, like after three months, and my father then decided that was it and he moved out. But, unbeknownst to us, this nice gentleman had also contacted the local FBI and made accusations towards my father, that he harbored contraband in the apartment, that he was --- he had a short wave radio and every night he would be communicating with boats and submarines off the New Jersey

shore, which was a blatant lie. My---my father never had [Laughs] ---had a short wave radio.

And then when we moved to Jefferson Avenue in Elizabeth after this episode, that's when we started being investigated by the FBI. And it started very innocently. There was a car sitting across the street for several days and my mother kept wondering, you know, "Who are these two guys sitting there?" You know, they're neatly dressed and everything. And they ate sandwiches and drank coffee but they would never throw anything out of the window. It was always put back in the bag and she--- she watched all of this. Until one night, there was a knock on the door at ten o'clock and these two gents introduced themselves as FBI agents and they just walked into the house and took over. And, you know, searched the whole house and then they wanted to take my father with them to be, you know, interrogated in Elizabeth at the local FBI headquarters.

LEVINE: And did they take him?

GRABER: Well, then my mother asked them, "Well is he going to come back?" And they said, "Well, we're not sure." She says, "Well, then you're going to take me and the kids as well, 'cause he's not going to go by himself and if he don't---if you cannot guarantee me that you're going to bring him back then you're going to have all of us." So what they decided for that night, while they're there they suggested to her to get a babysitter, you know. My mother said, "I don't know anybody here we just moved here and, you know, I can't just leave the children alone." Because -- like I said --- I was --- in 1941, I was barely over a year old. Plus she was pregnant with the third boy at that time. Then uh, so they said, "Okay, we'll come back." And they came back a couple of days later and then they took my father down to Elizabeth to the---to the headquarters there and you know, interviewed him about---about all the accusations.

LEVINE: Oh, that's how you know what---what he was being accused of, uh-huh.

GRABER: Right. I mean, they asked you know, "Where's the short wave radio?" And then, what had happened then in the meantime, they came back again and searched the whole apartment. I mean they took everything apart. Everything. I mean --- there was nothing left in that apartment which was not touched. They didn't find anything. They didn't even find a picture of Hitler, 'cause there wasn't anything to find, you know.

LEVINE: So then did they, after they interrogated your father did they let him go home?

GRABER: Well, they brought him back again. Because they realized I mean, there was still a little bit of civility then. Okay, they realized that you know, my -- what's my mother---my mother going to do by herself with you know, a very, very pregnant and with two -- two small boys. So they brought him back. But then in ah, in January 16th, again --- I have even the name, FBI Inspector Stern and two Elizabeth city cops. They came and knocked on the door and simply said, "OK, pack whatever you can carry, you're coming with us." "Well, where we going?" "Well, we'll show you when we get there." So my---by that time, the third boy, Teddy, he was born and he was born two months premature. He was crippled and he had an open spine, I believe they call it *Spina Bifida*, and uh, then, here again Dr. Crabtree, he told us he will never work ---- walk in his life. So he essentially was a handicapped child. And he was in the hospital 'cause you know, he was sick with the open spine in the back. You know, my mother couldn't take care of him. So you know, when they came and says, "Pack everything you can carry, you're coming with us." You know my mother asked, "Well what about our other son?" "Where is he?" "Well, he's in the hospital." "Well, don't worry. We'll pick him up." So they

picked him up and they brought him to Ellis Island as well. Except there was no medical facility on Ellis Island at that time and then they realized that that was going a little bit too far. So they took him back to Elizabeth General Hospital again, where---where they had picked him up and um ---

LEVINE: The rest of the family stayed here

GRABER: and we – we – we were here. My father was in the Great Room where they only had --- they only had men. Men were all in the Great Room. And then um, mothers and children they were in the smaller rooms. I believe it was off the balcony. There were smaller rooms there---there were several women, like three women, with their children together in one room. And but, you know, everybody was kept separated. There was very little, even, very little communication during the day, you know.

LEVINE: Oh really, like you---you didn't see your father even?

GRABER: Well, you know, there were guards all over the place and---and---and they tried, they tried very hard to keep the people apart because they didn't, you know, they didn't want any kind of mingling or anything.

LEVINE: Were, was it crowded?

GRABER: Oh yeah. I mean, how about jammed. Not overcrowded. Jammed.

LEVINE: Jammed. Um-hmmm.

GRABER: I mean --- it was like wall-to-wall people.

LEVINE: And were they, uh, were they Italian and Japanese as well as German?

GRABER: Uh, lot of the Italians, Germans, some other European Nationals but no Japanese, not here on the East Coast. There were a few Japanese on the East Coast, but a lot of Italians and Germans, primarily. And uh---

LEVINE: Um-hmmm. And they were kept together?

GRABER: They -- they were all in one room, essentially. Yeah. I mean --- you couldn't really keep the nationalities separated. And basically it really didn't matter-- they were all in the same broom or boat -- or whatever you want to call it, yeah.

LEVINE: So, um, in other words your mother and father didn't really know what was going to happen next.

GRABER: No. There was, you know, the irony of the whole thing --- all the interviews and the, well, the time spent at the FBI, at the interrogations --- we were not allowed, or my parents were not allowed any kind of representatives. No lawyers. Uh, we were not allowed any kind of character witnesses like my---my uncle's brother who had been living in the United States since 1924 uh, all the relatives we had. We had, my brother had a sister in the Bronx, living in the Bronx at that time and you know, she was a citizen already. She wasn't allowed to come and act like -- as a character witness or help or anything like that. We were completely, totally isolated. We had no contact with anyone.

LEVINE: So there were no visitors?

GRABER: Local priest, doctors, nothing. Nothing. And, that's --- that's what I don't understand. How you can basically just simply say, "Okay you have absolutely no rights. There's no civil rights for you. There are no laws

pertaining to you. We will do with you whatever we please to.” And that’s the part which today I’m --- I have a very serious problem with, you know.

LEVINE: So then what happened to you after you were here for four days?

GRABER: We were here for four days. I remember it was ironic. A – a --the Catholic Bishop from New York, or the Cardinal from New York, he had planned to come here and visit. And that was, that was because of the Italian community. OK. They – they -- there was a lot of complaints about the living conditions. I mean ---- Ellis Island, from what I saw just now when you brought me through here, was very, very nice. Back then, it was wet, there was a lot of rats running around freely. The living conditions were atrocious. Bathrooms were, u—u—unless the people them—themselves tried to clean a little bit, there was no maintenance in that respect. So some of the pari—parishioners had complained and the Cardinal of New York City had planned on visiting.

And a day before uh, we were taken out of there ----because another thing that the people complained about --- we were actually the first children which were, you know, which accompanied the parents which came over here onto Ellis Island. Until that time it was only adults, okay. We were the first kids and that really caused an uproar because you know, now they’re even bringing kids already. And as Cardinal, he wanted to see the conditions for himself and just a couple of hours before he was supposed to land with the ferry uh, or the boat, uh, they had taken us off and they had created a makeshift pier in Jersey City where we were set on shore again. And from there they took us, the FBI took us to Jersey City Train Station where we sat and waited. But separated, you know, we were surrounded by police personnel and kept separate from everybody else. And you know, everybody’s looking at---you know, here’s a husband and a wife and three small children --- they had picked up Teddy in the

meantime and brought him to us. Three small kids and they're surrounded by---by ah, um policemen. What did they do, you know, to deserve such a nice treatment. So from then we were put on the train and then, you know, taken down to Texas and to Seagoville, the first camp we stayed in.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was the train ah, were there other people on the train who were also going to the camp?

GRABER: No. We – we were not aware of that because again, we were in a compartment and we were guarded. We had no contact. The food was brought to us. We were not allowed contact with anybody else. So we--- we weren't, we didn't know whether there was anybody else. I mean, when we landed in Jersey City, we were by ourselves.

LEVINE: And did---did your mother and father know at some point where you were going?

GRABER: Nope. Just, we had absolutely no idea. We were not told where we were going and you know, my father kept asking, "Where are you sending us? Where are you taking us?" And it was all just, "Shut up. We'll tell you when we get there." Essentially that was the treatment and [Deep breath] I don't understand why. And again, there was no accusations, there was no court, there was uh you know, there was no jury, there was no judge, no nothing.

LEVINE: Did--- now, do you know, did your mother and father ever tell you I mean, had they been in contact with other family members during---during the course of the war uh, family members in Germany?

GRABER: We, well, my parents were allowed to write and we were allowed to---to write. I think it was one letter a week and, but everything was heavily censored and the letters we received back in return ---- I mean they were all opened up and they were read through and---and some of the, some of the sentences and some of the words were just blacked out. Even---even, never mind the letters going out but also letters coming in. You know, let's say if---if uh, because we had absolutely no knowledge of how the war was going you know, and you know, 'cause there was no communication, there was no radios, we weren't allowed to have anything. So my father had no idea what was going in Europe and then you know, when his sisters and brothers or mother or father would write something, anything pertaining to the war was completely uh, blacked out.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do---do you have any sense of uh, you know, your mother and father's sympathies? I mean, with the family in Germany and being here in America and---

GRABER: Well I mean, not knowing what was going on --- I mean, there was ah, there was a lot of concern. Because ---- you know, just simply receiving letters where you really were not able to get a feel for what the conditions are in Germany. We only found---- we only found out when we landed, finally, in February 1945, when we landed in Germany we found out how bad it really was. And we found out that --- you know --- Germany essentially was defeated. We had no idea before.

LEVINE: Hmm. So did that remain true, that there was no outside uh, like in Crystal City for example, could your mother and father listen to the radio?

GRABER: No. I mean we---we had no radio. I mean we had---we had a radio where you could essentially listen to---to just local broadcasts which were strictly geared. Um, any---any kind of broadcast --- well, no, the broadcasts

where the American Army was uh, was um, winning, you know winning battles and stuff like that --- they always were broadcast.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

GRABER: But not the other way around I mean, there was nothing positive pertaining to the Germans. Okay, it was only essentially that, you know that this battle was won and---and then the invasion, when the invasion came and that they successfully invaded in Normandy---

LEVINE: Normandy.

GRABER: Yeah. But other than that you know, we---we were not allowed you know, any kind of newspapers or so, from the outside there was nothing. We--- we were not allowed to have anything. And then --- you know --- my mother spent a lot of time because she was so sick all the time.

LEVINE: Was she ill as a result of having given birth---

GRABER: Yeah.

LEVINE: --- to Teddy? Uh-huh.

GRABER: Yeah. She had s---some serious after, you know, effect problems. And uh---

LEVINE: And what about Teddy during this---during this time?

GRABER: Well he was basically in a crib all his life as I remember. You know, he wasn't able to participate in anything, I mean. We were able, you know, to take him for a --- you know, most of the time, you know, he was in the

hospital down there as well because of the *spina bifida*, you know. He--- he, by the way he uh, in 1948 he died --- in Germany. And ah, he finally you know, there were no medications he came down with---with pneumonia and um, then he died. And I think, I think it actually was the best for him because. . .

LEVINE: Hmmm.

GRABER: You know, he was crippled, so. And [Sighs] sadly to say you know, my parents never recovered from that. You know, especially when you think that you know, you come to a country and you want to create a new life for yourself and then all of a sudden you find yourself --- I mean, you know, we were not the only ones you know. Totally -- totally they were about eleven thousand um, Germans interned and they suffered a very similar fates to our fate. And um, by and large they all still you know, some of the people I've been in contact with, they all feel the same. It's --it's -- how can something like that happen you know, why was it allowed to happen? First of all the question is what did we do? What kind of crime did we commit? And then of course, you know, my two brothers and I, we were citizens you know. How can you treat your own citizens like that?

LEVINE: I'm---I'm, I'm curious as to why they decided then, did they decide to take the children as well ---- so as not to break up the families? Or, to take the child---I mean, it's hard to know which is worse you know. . .

GRABER: Well I mean-- ultimately I mean --I know, I know there was a situation where my parents were told, "Well, you're going, OK? But if you have a place for your kids, I mean they are citizens, I mean, they don't have to go with you."

LEVINE: Oh.

GRABER: But you know, what kind of---what kind of question is that?

LEVINE: Yeah. Right. Yeah. Okay, so you were on the train to um, Seagoville---

GRABER: Seagoville

LEVINE: ---and you had a compartment so you really didn't know uh, what was going on around you on the train even.

GRANER: No idea.

LEVINE: And then you got there, that must've taken awhile?

GRABER: I think it was three days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what greeted you in Seagoville? What was that like?

GRABER: Sand. Lot of sand. Uh, it was a camp uh. I don't remember now. I know in Crystal City, after we came to Crystal City there were barbed wire, and there was a wire fence around it. 'Cause I remember I used to crawl---I used to crawl under the fence because the camp director, Mr. O'Rourke (ph) um, he had a beautiful uh, grapefruit and orange grove. And we would help ourselves to some of his fruits by crawling underneath the fence. But I don't remember in---in Seagoville, what the make-up was there. I think, it could've been, I uh, -- Let's see if --- I have something in my notes here. It could've been a -- a -- a -- female, a former female prison? I think that's what it was. It was a prison for females where we essentially lived in---in the cells. That's why I---you know, when we went to -- came to Crystal City we had bungalows which were more---more friendly towards family life. Living in a cell with small children wasn't really

a good environment for a family. That's what it was and Seagoville it was a ---- yeah, a former female jail complex. That's what --- that's where we lived in.

LEVINE: So. Your whole family was in one cell?

GRABER: No, two---twos--- two rooms, basically, two rooms.

LEVINE: Two rooms. Uh-huh. So um, do---do you remember Seagoville?

GRABER: Faintly. I remember more about Crystal City than Seagoville.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: Because there again --you know -- my mother was able, she had a small kitchen; she was able to cook meals. My father worked. They had like the---the power---the power complex which created -- Seagoville was pretty much self-sufficient. Uh, the inmates took care of all ---Crystal City was self-sufficient. They took care of the power aspect, the power room, boilers, hot water, electricity, and stuff like that.

LEVINE: Hmm. And do you remember um, were you---do you remember like food and how you were treated

GRABER: Yeah. [Interposed] I mean

LEVINE: when you were interned at Seagoville [not understood]?

GRABER: Yeah. You see, the---the treatment actually wasn't bad. I mean, being a family we had certain advantages because we got real milk and we had a refrigerator where I remember there was an ice delivery. I don't know how

often it happened but they would drop -- again inmates or internees would drive the truck and they'd deliver the block of ice like---

LEVINE: This is Crystal City now? Uh-huh.

GRABER: That's Crystal City -- like, you know, you --you --- you see in some of the old pictures -- you know --- come from the ice house and places like that. And then my---my---my father would take it and put it inside the refrigerator so we had a refrigerator and we got---we got food. I mean, it was sufficient for a family. I mean it wasn't that---that we were going hungry or so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what about your father? Was he able to work in Crystal City?

GRABER: He worked --- again, he worked there. They had --- they had like a repair shop and to maintain the equipment which was needed to run the plant at the---the camp. The power plant, you know, like I said it created uh, hot water and steam for when it got cold. Just, Texas at night -- you know -- does get cold in the desert.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: Uh -- of course--- we had scorpions and other things to -- you know -- contend with. And I remember one time I was in the shower and the shower was just an opening basically with water coming out of the ceiling and the drain was an open drain and---and a scorpion had gotten in and w actually was sitting on my shoulder before I noticed. And when I screamed -- you know --- my father came running and he knocked it off before any damage was done [Laughs].

LEVINE: Now were there---

GRABER: Those things I remember, you know?

LEVINE: Yeah. You would as a child. Do---do you um, was it crowded there? In Crystal City?

GRABER: Yeah. You had on one side of the compound you had about oh, about two dozen Japanese. And on the other side were roughly twelve hundred Germans. I remember they had, they used to have sporting events --- the Japanese against the Germans, like soccer matches. The Japanese were good in the martial arts. They always had judo and jiu-jitsu exhibitions and stuff like that. One of the German uh, one of the German men --- he was a civil engineer --- he was responsible for creating uh ---actually he designed and was responsible for the construction of a pool, which was a huge ----. It actually was just like a big hole in the ground which they filled with water but --- you know --- it was an area where people can have some sort of relaxation. And -- you know --- us kids -- you know --- we'd love to be in the water plus it was hot during the day.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: So, but it was a self-sufficient place and the men worked. I---I even remember my --- 'cause my mother was a musician, she played the violin. They had a little camp orchestra where they would put on -- you know --- concerts every now and then for --- you know --- for the whole camp.

LEVINE: Did they have um, I have a friend who was interned, a Japanese friend, and they had like a boy scouts and everything in the camp. Did you, do you remember anything like that?

GRABER: No. I remember school. They had schools. I mean the---the Japanese had their own school and the Germans had their school where --- I mean among---among the people there was always the---the odd teacher or so and---and they would---they would teach the kids--- you know --- basic -- you know --- basic school stuff.

LEVINE: I see. So then---so then it was always internal.

GRABER: Yes.

LEVINE: In other words, there weren't teachers coming in or anything like that.

GRABER: No. No. It was all done internally. Like I said, there was no outside--- there was no outside stuff. The only thing I remember --- and that, I only know that because my father had told us that one day --- we, the boys, we needed shoes.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

GRABER: And uh, my father uh, with the two---the two older boys, I mean Teddy would never walk so he didn't need shoes but my older brother Werner and I again uh, by car with---with two of the FBI agents, they drove us up to San Antonio where my father could buy some shoes. And they, by and large, those guys were nice. I mean, they had family themselves and they---they felt bad for us, okay? Because they knew---they knew that, you know, there's no---

LEVINE: They knew that there wasn't a real basis for the---

GRABER: There's---there's no crime committed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: They knew there were no criminals there. They knew that th---those were just "Joe Average" people who --.

LEVINE: Did you have a sense that, I mean did anybody have a sense that some of the people there maybe deserved to be there?

GRABER: No.

LEVINE: Was there any sense of that?

GRABER: No. No. Ah, well [Sighs]---

LEVINE: Just for ---

GRABER: [superposed] Like---

LEVINE: the security?

GRABER: likely, well. No. Basically there was --- there was ---nobody there---there was nobody there who actually had any kind of criminal um, problem, or committed a crime, or was being investigated for anything criminally. I---I think the only --- maybe the only acts you can hold them responsible for is all of these people belonged to German organizations. Okay? Now there was at that time----- there was a big camp in ----- I'm not sure, I think it was in New York State someplace; and I don't remember the name of the camp uh, Camp *Freiheit*, which means freedom or something like that where they had a lot of Hitler oriented uh, things.

I mean guys would walk around with the brown shirts and the---the whole regalia and---and make believe that --- that ---you know ---- they – they were home. And um, they were mostly men. You know some of the men had---had um gone there. And I remember my uncle telling me that he had gone there once on a Sunday just to find out, just to see what was going on. Now, ironically, right after that he was being interrogated because the FBI guys, they took down the license plates as---as these guys came in with their cars, you know? They took down the license plate and then they hauled 'em in, you know.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

GRABER: Says, "What were you doing up in that camp?" And for him it was curiosity, nothing else, because he never experienced Hitler. 'Cause he had been here already. My father went with him once and um, but he had experienced Hitler, so ---

LEVINE: Do you think your father -- do you think that was a basis?

GRABER: No.

LEVINE: And the landlord? That ---

GRABER: The landlord was the primary thing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: Because he, he just --- he just made up -- you know -- I mean, whatever misery he could cause, he was probably very happy to do so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: I mean, what he ultimately caused, I don't think he ever realized.

LEVINE: So what---then what were the circumstances under which your family finally left Crystal City?

GRABER: There were, even living in Crystal City my father almost weekly was being interrogated uh, specific to the war. Like, questions were asked, would you join the U.S. army and fight? And my father said, "I would not join the US Army to fight against my brothers and sisters in Germany. However, if the United States ever would get invaded by a foreign nation, even if it is Germany, I would fight against them." And um, that was basically all he said, you know.

But I know for a fact that there is a large number of Germans were actually ah, ---were actually ---- taken into the army and then they fought in the Asia-Pacific regions, like they fought against the Japanese. Just like a lot of Japanese-Americans, who were in internment camps uh, they joined the army. But then they fought in Europe, so---. But ultimately what, I think what---what it finally was, is that you know, when you---when you make somebody's life miserable long enough, um, there's going to be a reaction. And, they continuously, they---they---the FBI continuously offered like exchange programs, "You wanna go back to Germany? Do you wanna go back to Japan?" and all these kind of things. And my father finally, he said, he says, "Well, I'd rather go back to Germany than live here in a jail and being deprived of my freedom." So that was the catalyst that then, in January of 1945 uh, that was one of them ---- I think there was the second of the last journey of the uh, of the Gripsholm back to Germany. I think after ours they made one more, I think in March. And

uh, we were then, again brought back to Ellis Island. And then from there we were put on the Gripsholm, and. . .

LEVINE: Were there a lot of people at Ellis Island that time?

GRABER: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: And they were all being ---

GRABER: [interposed] They were all being---

LEVINE: sent back?

GRABER: sent back, yeah.

LEVINE: So in other words, people were asked, men were asked if they'd join the army

GRABER: Right.

LEVINE: to fight? And if they'd go, if they would want to go back.

GRABER: Yeah. And you know, ironically, like I said, my father at that time and --- you know ----- he -- again -- he reluctantly over the years he kind of told us these things. He was---he was so mad of being treated like that, you know. Again, he says, "Tell me what I committed, what crime I committed and why am I, I'm serving this type of a sentence and then --- you know -- then I'll understand." But there was no crime, like I said there was no jury there was no judge, there was nothing. It was just simply, "You are a non-entity." You don't exist anymore. And he finally was angry enough to say, "Well, then I'm going to go back to Germany." And you know, I---I

remember asking him once, I asked him, this was---this was only a few years ago before he died, I asked him, I said, "Would you --- would you have gone back had you known what you were getting back to?" He never answered me. He---he didn't answer me. . .

LEVINE: How about your mother? Do you know if she wanted to go, I mean, how did she feel about going?

GRABER: Well, you see---you see Janet um, family life back then, especially Europeans and I---I know the Italians are the same way as the Germans, the man is the provider ok? He works, he brings home the money. The woman takes care of the house and the children and essentially the woman goes along with what the man says. And, I mean I don't know whether there was any kind of discussions, "Do you want to go back?" or whatever, or whether the decision was made solely by my dad, I don't know and uh. . .

LEVINE: Did your mother --- was your mother ill now at this point in time?

GRABER: She always had problems. She had---she had problems with her thyroid glands. They were then removed and uh, and she was never really right after that. I mean, I think, you know, when you don't have thyroid glands anymore your immune system really suffers. So the --- you know --- like the slight---the slightest cold somebody has or so and --- you know --- with her it came down three times as hard. Uh, so. . .

LEVINE: But just before you talk about Germany, um, is there anything about Ellis Island going the other way that you---that you remember?

GRABER: I just remember as a child, I remember the water, of course. And then, the big hall.

LEVINE: Was the Statue of Liberty something that people were aware of?

GRABER: I wasn't---

LEVINE: While they were being interned?

GARBER: aware. I wasn't aware of it --you know. I mean --- I was too small to even understand the significance.

LEVINE: Yes.

GRABER: And the proximity of---of the Statue of Liberty, and what it really means. Again, irony of ironies, you know? You have the Statue of Liberty within stone's throw of Ellis Island where, at that time, Ellis Island was called the Island of Tears.

LEVINE: It's also been called the Prison Years.

GRABER: Um-hmmm.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRABER: Yeah. Very apt.

LEVINE: Yeah. So then Germany. As a little boy, do you remember your first impressions of Germany?

GRABER: Oh God, yes I do. I remember no food. I remember absolutely, total destruction. Uh, we -- when we landed we---we lived with my grandfathers ---- my---my mother's father, my---my---my grandfather,

grandparents of my mother's side. And at that time, I recall, and I have written that in my story, actually my story starts out like that, that uh, it was in April of '45. My father and my grandfather, he had---he had um, a little bit of land where he would have a garden and he would grow vegetables. He had fruit trees and stuff like that. He also loved bees. He was a beekeeper and uh, you know my father was helping him to prepare the ah, the---the beds, the vegetable beds for planting and stuff like that where, there was an aircraft raid. Because there was a um, there was a Mercedes-Benz factory very close by and the Allies were after that. And uh, we couldn't make it to the aircraft shel---uh, to the bomb shelter anymore so we actually crawled under --- there---there was like a garden shed which was a little bit raised off the ground --- so we crawled under there for protection.

Uh, a few nights later there was another raid, the---the air raid siren went off. But it wasn't an air raid this time it was actually a tank attack by---by the French. And we were down in my grandparent's cellar, which was one of these huge cellars deep down underneath um, underneath the house. And the house suffered a direct hit, got wiped out completely and we---we were lucky we made it out of there with our lives. And again, we lost everything you know. So we made it to the---to the bomb shelter there and we spent several nights there and then my father said that he's gonna go back to Winnenden near Stuttgart there, to see if he can find housing there and work. And uh, he and my older brother Werner who at that time was five, yeah he ---he would've---that December he would've been six, they walked. And it's probably, oh I'd probably roughly guesstimate probably a hundred and twenty kilometers. And they walked. And while they were walking along, and they hitchhiked and they walked and stuff like that, they got stopped by a French uh, patrol, and they wanted to know where he's going, where he's coming from. And he showed him his American identification papers you know. He said -- you know --- he'd just

got here from America and um, and he was ---you know -- trying to go home to---to his parents. The only thing what saved him from being grabbed and thrown into the French Foreign Legion was---

LEVINE: Werner?

GRABER: Werner, my brother, the son. OK. And--and again, all ironies of all ironies, the French Commander saw the uh, the uh---the American ID card, he actually spat on it and you know, he essentially said, "The Americans are useless." I don't think much about the French, by the way. Ah, but you know, you – you – you hear these---these little stories and uh, and you often wonder you know, how---how can all these things happen, you know? Anyway, they made it, they finally made it back to Winnenden and um, and then subsequently, myself, Teddy and my mother, we joined them. And my father started working there at his father's business. He had a tool-making business where he made measuring instruments like micrometers and calibers and stuff like that.

And uh, so he started working with his dad. And -- but a short time later, his father, my grandfather who was---had gone into a neighboring town to find fresh milk from---from a farmer friend for us kids --- on his way home, it was just getting dusk, he was run over by an American uh, uh, truck. They just ran him over. As a matter of fact he was walking like, you know when---when you say you should always walk facing the oncoming traffic? Well these guys came from behind and they saw him walking there and you, then – you know -- after that you could see the tire marks, how this truck actually swerved over to---to hit him purposely, and killed him. So again, he was, my father was on his own and then you know he took the business and he kind of reconstructed it and he worked---he worked in that business basically until he retired a few years back.

LEVINE: And what---what town was that?

GRABER: Winnenden. It's uh, about twenty kilometers ah, uh, what is it, sort of northwest of Stuttgart.

LEVINE: And, your father stayed there then?

GRABER: Yeah. We stayed there.

LEVINE: You stayed.

GRABER: And we started school there. My brother and I we started school there and uh [Laughs], we were known. And it was ironic when---when my --- . you know at that time --- you know --- it was getting close to uh---. I mean the war was --- the V.E. Day was what in June? '45? Something like that. Well, I guess the war basically was over. But there was this tremendous, tremendous influx of Germans which then later became East Germany, which were fleeing the on-rushing Russian army. And uh, there were a lot of refugees coming out of Czechoslovakia and uh, Hungary, and all these places. So that the town was overrun with refugees.

And when my father went to the town hall like all the other refugees to uh - - you know -- to ask for help, you know social help and housing and stuff like that. When they---they looked at him and they sa-- you know, they looked at his papers and they asked him, "Where are you coming from?" They---they could not believe. Here is--- here is a family who came from America as a---as refugees and they told him flat out "There are no refugees from the United States." And he never got any help.

That made him just about every bit as bitter, being treated like that from his own people, as he was bitter being treated by the Americans. So it's,

basically you know, he was on his own. My---my---my brother Werner and I, we were known as Ami's, which is --- which is a---an abbreviation for Americans. It's just A-M-I. We were the two Ami's and that---that was our nicknames. We didn't have names, the other kids they just called us Ami's. That's how we grew up in --- you know -- in school and we grew up in town.

LEVINE: Was it---was it a derogatory, uh,

GRABER: No.

LEVINE: handle? Or was it just. . .

GARBER: It wasn't really---it wasn't really um, I mean all---all the Germans, especially in the southern and southwestern part of Germany, Americans -- soldiers and everything, they were not known as anything---they were known only as Ami's. Those were the Ami's.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: It was just, it wasn't really derogatory or anything like that. Um, like I said, it was more of an abbreviation for Americans, uh, rather than anything else.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: But us being you know, from the United States and you know, we were citizens then. I mean --- I wasn't a German or anything like that.

LEVINE: And did you know German when you went to Germany?

GRABER: You know it's funny. We only knew German.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRABER: When---when I---when I returned to the United States in 1959 I actually had to learn English. 'Cause you know, my parents only spoke German with us and---and then -- then of course in Seagoville and Crystal City that's all people spoke. Nobody spoke English.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRABER: They all spoke it – spoke German.

LEVINE: So. So um, your father really must've been disillusioned.

GRABER: Very much so. Very much so. And I, I recall for the longest time he uh, he said, "I'll never go back there." And---and he---he I mean, he came and you know, of course when my older brother Werner returned and---and I came back and-- you know --- I got married and -- you know --- had children and stuff like that you know, my parents came to visit us. They came to visit Werner. And then we had, I have another brother, Hans, he lives down in Miami now, but he was born in Germany ten years, he's ten years younger than I am. Well he came to U---to the United States as well. So they would come and visit us, but they only came to visit they never wanted to stay here anymore.

LEVINE: What prompted you to---to come here?

GRABER: Well um, when I turned eighteen I had to make a choice.

LEVINE: Oh because you were a U.S. citizen.

GRABER: Yeah. And the choice was do you want to continue? Do you want to be a citizen, a U.S citizen? Or do you want to become a German. And at that time I was just finishing schooling and I was finishing my --- an apprenticeship as a toolmaker. And my uncle --- I had mentioned, he had started---he had started in the meantime his own tool making business here in the United States. And he said, "Well, when you finish you can come---if you want to come over --- you know --- I'll help you." He says, "I always need good tool makers." That basically was the catalyst, you know

LEVINE: Did you um, how, what was your father's ah, response to your decision?

GRABER: They, I---I could see it, I---I could, on both of them um, my mother more so. Um, they---they didn't like it but they understood. They -- you know --- they said, "We may not agree of losing you but we understand that --- you know --- you want to look for different opportunities and look for a life. And, after all, you are American; so might as well be an American."

LEVINE: And your brother? Warner? Did he ---- the same?

GRABER: Same thing. Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. So how do you think, after all you've been through and your family's been through, how do you think about um, you know, your German side and your American side. How do you reconcile that?

LEVINE: I always enjoy to go to Germany to visit. I still have -- as matter of fact, last year we had---we had a big class reunion and um, and I have gone to several before that and---and it's great and I always get welcomed with open arms. As a matter of fact one of---one of our friends from school and a personal friend of mine --- we---we grew up together in the same

neighborhood ---- he actually had immigrated to South Africa and made a life there and started his own business. And he and his wife, they always come to the reunions and it's great to see people you don't normally see and I really love it. I enjoy it. It's the greatest thing. However, after a week, that's it. I---I need to go again.

You know – ironically, ironically uh --- in spite of all its shortcomings, this is probably still the best country anybody want to live in. And uh, I say that--- I say that without hesitation. It's a great country to live in. I---I love to be here. And I love to live here because the --- people don't realize the unbelievable individual freedom we enjoy here. Nobody bothers you. I mean --- you can do whatever you want to do. Um, and even in Germany which is a very liberal country which has modeled its constitution and everything very much to the American uh, uh, example; but still there are so many regulations and so many rules and so many this. You can't walk on the grass and you can't, you know, can't get off the beaten path you know. It's still amazing to see the freedom we have in this country and the freedom we enjoy.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm. How about the September 11th in---incident. Do you uh, do you have any ah, response to it and also to the profiling of um, Arab-Americans?

GRABER: The---the---the most---the most scary thing I experienced once more is the basic ignorance---ignorance of the American people. And the basic ignorance of our lawmakers. And the basic ignorance of the police. That's scary.

LEVINE: How are you, what do you think, what do you think, what are you thinking in particular of---of their ignorance.

GRABER: What I'm---what I'm thinking particularly is, number one---number one it should have never happened, okay. It should have never happened. How can you---how can you run a country and allow people to come and go virtually as they please without---without any kind---any kind of handle on it? Any kind of control? Any kind of knowledge of their whereabouts. You know I'm---I said earlier --you know --- the individual freedom we have here ---- give you an example. Living in Germany, let's say I want to---I want to---I get married, okay? I'm going to---the town I have been living in, my wife and I want to move to a different town. It's only five kilometers from there, okay? Nevertheless, first of all you have to go this town hall and you register. And you're saying that --- you have to tell them and you have to register there to become uh, uh a resident of this town on this and this day. And you register with the police. You give them your address. And when you leave the other town where you had lived until that time, then same thing. You have to go to town hall and you tell them you are leaving. So they know that you're not there anymore. This is control, ok?

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

GRABER: Here --- I mean, I've moved several times here in the United States, you pack up and you go. And if you don't want to you don't even tell your neighbors that you're gone, okay? One morning they look out the door [Laughs], the house is empty. This---this is what I mean. This is the uniqueness of this country but also this is what caused the September 11th things. And this is---this is what causes some other problems. But what I found more frightening than anything else when---when I was reading and then on the television I saw ---and so on, -- some of the stories would be--be---ah---how----the Muslims, the Arabs living in this country, who were born here, they were treated just like we were treated back in 1945 --- in

1943 and stuff like that. And that shows me we have not learned a thing in the last fifty years. And that's scary.

LEVINE: Um-hmmm.

GRABER: That's frightening. And I'm saying as --- as a nation we have not learned anything. And even more to the point when---when I, I don't talk about this very often uh, I've had some occasion where ---- I travel a lot in my job. You know, I fly all over the United States and there are periodic there --- and I happen to sit next to a gentleman and -- you know, "Hello, how are you?"

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GRABER: And you strike up a conversation and then ---- obviously my---my accent is noticeable so --, "Where are you from?" "Oh," you know, "How long have you been here?" and blah blah. And one thing leads to the other and de--- depending on the interest level and depending on the intellig---level ---- intelligence level of the individuals, I have told a couple of people this story and they looked at me incredulous. They said, "I can't believe this, I've never heard this." That's why the ignorance is---is frightening and what's even more frightening is that---that---that nobody is willing to---to uh, to publicize these things.

What happened, how---how people got treated how they like I said, you know, the Bill of Rights? Constitution? My own Civil Liberties? Meaningless! Might as not---might as well live in the jungle someplace and have jungle law. That's exactly what it is. And there was an inkling of that again when I---when this happened with September 11th. Where all of a sudden these people became a target. Now, is it because --- again, number one, ignorance as far as I'm concerned is probably the number

one---the number one issue here. People don't understand what's going on. When---when you hear stories, I was telling that to my son and his girl-friend on the way over here, is the other day, and I read that in the *USA Today*, that --- I think it was in Los Angeles or it was somewhere in the West Coast where---where one of the local TV stations just wanted to prove a point. They went out one morning they went out on the street, on a busy main street and they had a picture of Dick Cheney. Big, big picture of Dick Cheney, ok? And they were just stopping people indiscriminately, "Do you recognize this person?" Take a guess, out of a hundred people, how many recognized our Vice President.

LEVINE: Half?

GRABER: Zero.

LEVINE: Oh, my word.

GRABER: Zero.

LEVINE: Okay. Well we're gonna have to stop here. We're at the end of the tape but I want to thank you for a really wonderful interview. I'm very happy to add this to our collection here at Ellis Island.

GRABER: 'm ---I'm very happy that I had the opportunity to tell my story. Like I said, that's something I don't talk very much about and if it helps to educate people I think that maybe I was successful.

LEVINE: Okay.

GRABER: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: You're very welcome. Okay. I'm signing off here. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I've been speaking with Gunter Graber ah, on March the 23rd, the year 2002.