

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EI-1344

LOTHAR EISERLOH

BIRTHDATE: DECEMBER 3, 1935

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 27, 2004

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 69

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: STEVEN MICKLOVIC

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GERMANY, 1947

AGE: 12

~~SHIP: THE GRIPSHOLM~~

~~PORT: SOMEWHERE IN GERMANY~~

~~RESIDENCES:~~

**REPATRIATED TO GERMANY FROM ELLIS ISLAND ABOARD
THE GRIPSOLM**

LEVINE: Today is September 27th, the year 2004. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oeral hHistory sStudio with Lothar Eiserloh who came – ~~well-Well~~, he and his family in 1945, January of 1945, were brought to Ellis Island and from Ellis Island aboard the Gripsholm were sent to Germany. In exchange for some American citizens who were then exchanged and came back to the United States at that time. Lothar was nine years old at the time that ~~--that~~ he passed through Ellis Island going to Germany. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and Kevin Daley is the recording engineer.

Okay, if we could start at the beginning, why don't you give your birth date for the tape.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: My birth date is December 3, 1935.

LEVINE: And where were you born?

EISERLOH: I was born in Stroungsville, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio.

LEVINE: Ok, aAnd what was your father's name?

EISERLOH: His name was Matthais [ph] Eiserloh.

LEVINE: And your mother?

EISERLOH: And my mother's name was Johanna Vietor Eiserloh.

LEVINE: And how do you spell Vietor?

EISERLOH: V-I-E-T-O-R.

LEVINE: Ok, aAnd were they – were they married when they came to this country?

EISERLOH: They were not. My father preceded my mother in 1923. She arrived in early 1924 and they were married in West Virginia in my - where my – my aunt, his sister, and husband lived at that time.

LEVINE: Uh huh, aNow where in Germany was your father living before he immigrated to the United States?

EISERLOH: Well my father was born in Plaidt, P-L-A-I-D-T, Germany, in the Rhineland. bBut after World War One, he moved to Idstein, I-D-S-

EI-1344/EISERLOH

T-E-I-N, Germany, which is in the Frankfurt area of Germany, to attend engineering and architecture school in that city. He rented a room from a family by the name of Vietor, V-I-E-T-O-R. And he fell in love with one of their daughters. And after he graduated from college, he came to the United States and his ~~brother~~^{brother} followed him about six months later and they were married.

LEVINE: Do you know why your father immigrated to the United States when he did?

EISERLOH: Well he had told me as a boy that he wanted to get away from the constant wars that occurred in Europe. He was of the opinion that those wars would continue for evermore and he wanted to have an opportunity to make a new life for himself and his family ~~and in~~^{and in} what he perceived to be a land of opportunity and peace.

LEVINE: And – so you – your mother – was - did she grow up – did she live in the same place ^{up} until the time that she left Germany?

EISERLOH: She did. ~~s~~^sShe grew up in the town of Idstein along with six siblings and her father was the town cabinet maker. ~~a~~^aAnd she studied to become a seamstress and midwife. ~~B~~^Bboth of which she completed prior to her immigration to the U.S.

LEVINE: Uh huh. That's like an apprenticeship? Is that what that's like - did she ever talk about that?

EISERLOH: Yes, she apprenticed to a doctor and learned the role of midwifery. And in terms of the seamstress, she went to seamstress school to learn all the techniques of becoming a seamstress. She could – she was a very adept and accomplished seamstress.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: She was still sewing things for people, putting things together, wedding dresses and so forth into her eighties.

LEVINE: Wow. And had she already begun working in---in either of those fields in Germany before she actually came here?

EISERLOH: I don't believe so. I think she was working on-to completing complete those trainings and then her plan was to join my father in the N~~r~~ew wWorld.

LEVINE: So your father came here a year ahead of her, essentially –

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: And did he get a job as an engineer?

EISERLOH: I believe he had a series of different jobs. Initially, he - his sister, his older sister had married an American soldier after World War One, who lived in West Virginia, so that was their earliest destination. And I think he worked for a coal mining company in some capacity. He somewhat – shortly there-after he moved to the Cleveland area where another sister lived, -Wwho had also married and come to the U.S., and they settled down there. And my father had various jobs in technical fields. He was an accomplished architect and an engineer.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: I don't have a history of his employment experience at hand but it was in that field, yes.

LEVINE: So he was able – he was able to practice what he had been schooled in, in this country.---

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: Is that accurate?

EISERLOH: Yes, yes he was. At one – at one point he worked for. I think it was the Erie and Pennsylvania Railroad. He was the designer and project administrator, I believe, for what at that time was one of the largest drawbridges, built for the railway---

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: ---and so forth. So he was working in his field.

LEVINE: Ok, and then you mentioned you had two sisters.

EISERLOH: That's correct.

LEVINE: Are you the oldest? Where do you---

EISERLOH: No.

LEVINE: ---fall in the line of siblings?

EISERLOH: I'm ~~the~~ second in order. We are all five years apart. My eldest sibling in Ingrid. Then my next – I'm next – and then ~~my~~ the third

EI-1344/EISERLOH

sibling in Ensolah. She's five years younger. And then the fourth sibling is Gunter. And he was ten years younger than I.

LEVINE: Uh_huh. How about – so when you were in Cleveland those first nine years, did you have – you had aunts and uncles and I guess cousins maybe –

EISERLOH: Yes, that's correct.

LEVINE: No grandparents?

EISERLOH: No, no.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: The grandparents all remained in Germany, on both sides.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And of those first nine years – well first of all, was the family religious?

EISERLOH: No, I would say not – not religious.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: Again my father felt that that was often the cause of many of the wars in the history of Europe and he just was very strong about remaining away from the causes of war. He was - he himself was a soldier in World War One--Hhad been severely wounded, and he just didn't want anything more to do with wars.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Mm hmm. How old a man was your father when he came to this country, do you know?

EISERLOH: He would have been – lets see – about twenty-eight.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Mm hmm.

EISERLOH: He went to school after serving in World War One and so he was a bit older---

LEVINE: Older than, uh huh

EISERLOH: [superimposed] ---than normal because of, he went to – as many American GI's did, went to college after the service was over.

LEVINE: Right. And your mother, roughly when she came here? Her age?

EISERLOH: She was twenty-two.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Ok, e Ok so those nine years in Cleveland, were you living in a German community in Cleveland?

EISERLOH: I would say Cleveland and greater Cleveland has a large concentration of German immigrants and long time residents, but we lived in a suburban area that-which was mostly farm land. And my father was able, at a time after my sister – my oldest sister's birth – to acquire a piece of land upon which he then proceeded to build a home for us. So we were out in a -- a very, a – rural area to say.

LEVINE: Say the name again, the suburb.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Stroungs ville.

LEVINE: Stroungs ville. Uh huh. So your – you say your father, he built it himself?

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh because –

EISERLOH: He designed and built it himself. He would come home on weekends and ~~he was a~~—he was one of the first practitioners using what's – what's now called hollow-core brick type construction and – so he would build as much as he could on the weekends. Some friends would come over and my mother would prepare dinner. She raised chickens to supplement our income, and ducks, ~~—Aa~~ and sold eggs and so on. And we had about five acres I'd say, or four acres – so we were able to raise some vegetables and so forth. So she'd ~~go from~~go door to door and sell things like that.

LEVINE: Wow.

EISERLOH: And then on the weekend she'd make a large dinner and relatives and friends would come over and help lay the bricks and so forth.

LEVINE: Wow - do you – how do you remember those times of the building of the house?

EISERLOH: Well for me it was a very joyful time. A very – I did miss my father. He wasn't home on the weekends, I mean during the weekdays

EI-1344/EISERLOH

because he was working with the railroad and they would send him to job sites wherever things needed to be done. But it was a very nice time. I remember, my father would come home on the weekend and he would take me hunting and we'd go hunting rabbits. And that would be added to our rabbit stew or something, so those were nice times.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And was your father political at all in those early days that you remember?

EISERLOH: I don't recall that he was. Of course, World War Two started when I was about five. I recall that he would - we would go, some---some weekends to - in - somewhere in Cleveland there was a, a large park. And the German community would congregate there on weekends and they'd have - play German music and sell sausages and various kinds of - there were stands that would sell various kinds of foods, and so forth and they'd dance the polka and whatever and so forth. I remember those times, -Bbut in terms of political I would say, he was not. Again, he felt that he wanted to stay away from whatever caused d - ended up being warfare.

LEVINE: Mmm hmmm.

EISERLOH: And he just -was very, very strongly committed to that.

LEVINE: Mmm hmmm.

EISERLOH: So he just -, he wanted to build a house, raise his family and so forth.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Yeah. Can you think of any attitudes or values that your mother or your father tried to instill in you and your sisters? I mean, were there any, either ways that came from Germany, from the old country that they sort of carried with them and tried to perpetuate in their own children?

EISERLOH: Well I would – I would say that the standard golden rules that they would advise of: Honesty, forthrightness, keeping your word, going to school, supporting your community. You know, if there were drives for some charitable cause or so, my mother would provide eggs or a couple of chickens to – that sort of thing. So the standard values, I would say of that time of life.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Were they – did, do you feel that they wanted for their children – to – for them to remember and to live out their German heritage? Or it, – was it that they wanted to become American? Or they – how did the balance fall that way??

EISERLOH: They wanted to become American. They didn't teach us German. I never spoke German. None of us learned German. We didn't attend German language classes. They wanted us to become American. —t They wanted to be American and they wanted us to become American.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Did they become citizens?

EISERLOH: They didn't.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: And I've done some research on this and the best I could come to – my mother and father, as you may be aware, the rules for becoming a citizen were much more stringent in those days. You had to apply – you had to fill out a written application signifying that you were intending to become a ~~cit~~ a citizen five – five years from the date of first application. But there were many subsidiary rules. You could not – you had to re-apply each year. You had to re-affirm that application each year. If you missed the date, you had to start over. You had to – if you changed your address – you had to maintain an address. That is the address you put down for five years. My – my father was moved from various jobs so they, for the first ten years or so of their existence they were constantly moving, they had to re-apply again and the process started over. In other words, the time that you already done was canceled – you started over. Then they – they also on one occasion, my father's parents were elderly and became ill. So they went back to Germany to visit ~~his~~ the ~~the~~ parents because he thought it would be the last time he saw them. And that was a very propitious time, 1929. They went there and when they came back that canceled all the previous applications and they had to start ~~all~~ over again. They had to re-file. So, A and then, you know, pretty soon it was World War One – I mean World War Two. So they never ~~---~~ they never completed the application program – process, although they had applied two or three times to become citizens.

LEVINE: Yea, Yeah. Ok, so was – when you went to school growing up, were there other immigrant children, German or any other ethnic group, that were in your classes that you? Were you mixing with a number of different kinds of nationalities?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: I'm sure we did. I mean I don't have any recollection specifically of associating with a person of this or that nationality. I just went to the elementary school. I went to kindergarten or whatever they called it, pre-school. And we walked to school. We walked through the forest in the morning, you know, it was just a small community.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: I walked with my sister and we just went to school. Pledge allegiance to the flag every morning as it was customary in those days, when the school day started and so on, then we came home.

LEVINE: Yeah. So could you just say a thumbnail sketch of – the temperament of your mother and father? What was-were their temperaments, personality wise? Was one of them the strict one or – as far as in relation to you?

EISERLOH: Well I think my mother was probably the most – the strictest in a sense and also the most devoted to her children. Not in any sense of – in – in a good sense. She had a very strong mothering instinct. She was left by herself out in the forest, because it was a forested area. Farming and forested and fruit tree area, so it was pretty rural. And she was left there by herself while my father was working elsewhere on the railroad during the week. So she had to be very strong and very self reliant. I remember she – she had took us – had us help her with the-her work. We'd collected the eggs in the morning, we candled them. We helped her when she had to chop the heads off the chickens and prepare them - put them in the hot water and defeather them and prepare them for delivery for-to customers and so on. She learned to drive. She was very self – self reliant and so she was the one who primarily forced family

EI-1344/EISERLOH

values and rules. Of course my father did too but he just came home on the weekends and very often. My father was – ~~well~~ ~~have~~ mean I have kind memories for both of my parents. They were, they were always very good to us children and always placed us first -- in terms of clothing and food or whatever. Those – that - that was the, those were the -depression years. And, so, I would say that they were very good parents.

LEVINE: Do you know – could you say what their expectations were, for you?

EISERLOH: Their expectations were that we would go to college. That we would become college educated and learn some profession. My mother hoped I would become an engineer also. And she likewise hoped the other siblings would do the similar progression through schooling.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: And my father did also. Again he – he was—he said I should be keep an open mind and see what my interests were. He didn't necessarily want me to follow his footsteps, he wanted - but he wanted me to become educated.

LEVINE: Ok. Ok, so could you talk about – your father was arrested, what was the circumstances of that?

EISERLOH: Well, all I can say is that I came home one day from school and my sister and my mother was crying and very distraught. And she informed us that two men came to the door and identified themselves as the FBI and took my father away. She didn't know

EI-1344/EISERLOH

why and what the reason -- they gave no reason -- they just arrested him. And she was very distraught and she asked -- she always would take me along on - on times ~~that-where~~ she would drive - and so she asked me to come along to find out where ~~she~~ was. And the most I remember is that we went somewhere to downtown Cleveland, I guess -- I think to the sheriff's department office or the police department, or something, to find out where he was.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And what did you find?

EISERLOH: Well, at some point we found him somewhere, I don't remember that exact details. And I remember that I was not permitted to see him. She was given a few minutes to talk with him, then we left. And I'm still trying to discover what ~~---~~what the circumstances were.

LEVINE: Did your mother tell you anything about what -- what was going on?

EISERLOH: Well she didn't really know.

LEVINE: No.

EISERLOH: There weren't -- there weren't any charges ~~sd~~ made or any ~~---~~any specific allegations or anything, they were just taken off ~~---~~was; just taken off. And we didn't have money to hire an attorney to make inquiries or even if there was such a thing possible. She would write letters, she wrote letters to all the people she knew, ~~---~~ in terms of the authorities, she wanted to gain information. I don't think she was much -- very successful except to discover where he was. He was transported I think somewhere ~~ferom~~ from Cleveland to Cincinnati to some camp -- I think camp -- I don't remember the exact

EI-1344/EISERLOH

progression. Two or three internment centers and then ultimately into Crystal City. I am still now trying to obtain documents from the government to determine what – what - rational there was for arresting my father.

LEVINE: Um hmmm. Did you father – was your father in communication with your mother during these – this progressive shipping from camp to camp?

EISERLOH: I think there was some letters written back and forth. I haven't ever seen them and they no longer exist, if there were. We – we – when we were exchanged to Germany, all our possessions were lost there again, so there is very little left, document wise. Photo wise and document wise there was – so much moving about that we lost the house in Strongsville. My mother couldn't make the payments. She was not employed, she had some earnings from the chicken and egg business but not enough to make the mortgage payments. We moved into the – my aunt's basement for a while and that begun -- became progressively untenable. The financial burden was too great on my aunt and uncle and that's how we ended up – she contacted the social welfare services and ultimately they made arrangements for us to be sent to Crystal City camp.

LEVINE: I see. So it was really because – without your father it became impossible for your mother to support the family and that's why you went to Crystal City, do you think?

EISERLOH: That's probably the overriding reason how my mother and the three siblings – the three children ended up in Crystal City. Because we just – I have some documents indicating that there was-were

EI-1344/EISERLOH

correspondences back and forth between social welfare agencies. And they were sort of at their wit's ends, the social welfare agencies, because the monies that they could provide ~~was-were~~ not sufficient to house and feed a family of four.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: -aAnd there were no relatives that were able to do so.

LEVINE: So in other words, let's just say that your mother had been able to ~~have~~— had money and could take care of her children and herself, then there's a good chance ~~that~~ you wouldn't have never gone to Crystal City, do you think-?

EISERLOH: Yes, that's quite---quite probably so, yes.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Uh huh. So it was your father – did it ever surface as to why he was ~~ever~~ arrested?

EISERLOH: Well, as far as I can say at this point, there were dossiers being collected by the FBI and the - police agencies prior to the beginning of World War Two - on enemy aliens. My parents were not citizens so they were classified as aliens, obviously. And then when the war broke out, they were classified as enemy aliens. So all enemy aliens were – there ~~was-were~~ dossiers kept on them. There never were any specific charges that I've been able to obtain. I did obtain a file under the – the Freedom of Information Act from the FBI, which was a series, I think, ~~of~~ five or six pages ~~were-in which~~ everything was blacked out by a felt – black felt tip pen except “a”, “as”, “is”, “the”. Everything else was blacked out so that was not helpful. My sister obtained a file – oh, about a year and a half ago

EI-1344/EISERLOH

from the – I guess it's the Department of Justice files – which contained allegations by various people of suspicious activities. So I think they just compiled a dossier and they found it more expedient to place people in custody that ~~was-were~~ suspect and ~~then~~ they never followed through with any kind of procedure to allow one to – to demonstrate one's lack of cause – sufficient cause. ~~You-They weren't--you~~ were not allowed to have an attorney. You were not allowed to have a hearing. They had perfunctory fifteen minute hearings where you could make a statement and they had a board of three or four people and then they ~~would'd~~ make a decision and you were kept in custody.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: So – and to try to go back a moment, you indicated --- my mother did request entry into the Crystal City interment center, through the social welfare agencies because she said -that was her only choice. And at least the family would be together. But the files indicate ~~that~~ there ~~were~~as things such as the FBI went to – my father was building the house and ~~they-they --~~ a neighbor reported that my ~~father-father ---~~ they had had a dispute, a boundary dispute on the property. So she reported to the FBI that my father was a Nazi and that he was ~~---that he was~~ building a Nazi bunker, an underground Nazi bunker on his property. And so the FBI came out and investigated and what they found out was that my father was building a home and the home was over a natural stream bed and so he had bored a hole down in the center of the house, in the basement, which was going to be interior welld. Because there wasn't plumbing, it was a rural area.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH And he had – so – so he had a large cap to this well. And the neighbor had apparently snuck on the property when no one was there and determined that that was the secret entrance to a Nazi bunker. And the FBI came out and investigated and said, “no it’s just a well.” But things like that – so there was, they went to the – the local lumberyard, the building supply yard and they asked the fellows there, they said, “can you report anything about Mr. Eiserloh”. And he said, “well, he sure, he buys a lot of concrete”. And my father was an engineer and he built houses out of concrete blocks [laughs]. So, we made the blocks ourselves. You couldn’t go to the Home Depot in those days and buy them. You made a form and we poured it - we put pebbles and cement and so that was one of the things I helped with on the weekends. So that was-- they took that for me -- buys a lot of concrete. So things like that. It was a collection of maybe twenty or thirty such things. And then he goes to the – ~~the the~~ -he went to the German embas – the German consulate in Cleveland. They took photos of people going to and from the German consulate and he was seen on two occasions – to enter to the consulate. There were no allegations of what he did there or what he was -said saying. So there’s no record --- if he did anything illegal or anti-American or whatever. Just things like that, it was a collection of that stuff.

LEVINE: Wow.

EISERLOH: So they felt better to keep somebody like that in custody.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Ok, we’re gonna pause here and turn the tape, and then we’ll continue.

EISERLOH: Ok.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

LEVINE: Ok, are there any other allegations that you are aware of that were brought against your father that might have contributed to his being interned.

EISERLOH: I'm not aware of any at this point. He and there's— I — I have not been able to obtain any documents that indicate that he performed any specific acts. I'm ~~I'm~~—I have one kind of action that might have led to this. This park that the Germans would congregate in each - on weekends and play music and so on, you would have to buy an annual membership to that. Just like now today, you become a museum member, you buy a membership or whatever. And so they would pay their three or four dollar membership fee. And apparently that park — well was the ownership of that park was the *Deutsche Bund*. And the *Deutsche Bund* was a subsidiary of the Nazi party or something.

LEVINE: I see.

EISERLOH: So by virtue of the fact that you were a member of the -, that you had paid a membership fee to this - this park, an annual membership fee, ~~so they can could~~ say well, that you were a— you were a card carrying member of the Nazi party or something like that. But that would be so tenuous. I mean, ¶ there were no actions my father took — took to support, that I'm was aware of. ~~To~~ That-- attend membership meetings, to go to rallies or to — do anything like that. There waswere no such documents found in our

EI-1344/EISERLOH

house. No- no- no propaganda leaflets or anything. ~~s~~So no, I was not aware of any - any overt actions or activities my father was engaged in to support and or participate in the Nazi activities that took place.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were you aware of ~~the a~~ kind of anti-German sentiment that was afloat during the war? Or did, I mean, did it effect you personally, or you mother or father in some way, that you know about?

EISERLOH: Yes. ~~t~~IThere were a number of incidents. My – my – at our school, we were called Nazis. People knew we were German and – and the children would on occasion ~~would~~ call us a Nazi or something like that. But that – I always – my mother said, well that’s what children do. They use taunts to say bad things about other kids or something. ~~SO Sp~~ that was one aspect of it. It turns out that the FBI interrogated or interviewed some of my sister’s fellow students and asked them if they knew that she had committed any - any bad activities or something. And a couple of kids said, oh yes, she’s a Nazi. So that’s in the FBI interviews that I-was’ve been able to obtain copies of. So there was that kind of sentiment floating around in the community.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember –

EISERLOH: Because the children must have been taught this by their parents.

LEVINE: Right, right. So in other words, you had left your house before you left for Crystal City because you were living in the basement of your aunt’s house.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: How long were you there, roughly, do you know?

EISERLOH: Well we left our house primarily because of – of the – the lack of sufficient money to pay for the maintenance and upkeep and mortgage of the house. But also, my mother had endured an incident where ~~their~~ there was an attempted rape of her at nighttime. Someone came to the door, broke in the door and tried to rape her. She did have – I don't remember – it was a knife or something by the bedside at night or a big club and she, she fought this person off. And apparently injured him some-what and that person left. But after that she no longer felt secure there because she was out – again, it was a rural forested area and she just felt ~~that~~ we had to leave.

LEVINE: Yeah. Was that connected with anti-German sentiment, do you think?

EISERLOH: It – it – it may have been but I wouldn't be able to attest to that. I – my ~~oldest~~ older sister remembers something relative to that. Some words were exchanged or something.

LEVINE: Oh.

EISERLOH: But she's the one that came to the aid of my mother – woke up. But I don't specifically have – but it certainly ~~it~~ was known that there was no man in the home and ---

LEVINE: Right.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: ~~---and~~ that he had been – as these rumors go around the community – that he had been arrested by the FBI.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Yeah. How ~~---was~~ your role as the only male in the family and with your father gone. ~~Did~~ certain, what, -tasks or certain kinds of –

EISERLOH: Well, I--- certainly had to mature a lot faster. I was – after all I was – at that time I was five going on six, so my mother relied a lot on me to do tasks that normally five and six year olds don't do. Carrying things, doing things in the garden, helping with the animal care and so forth. And certainly my sister also did – my older sister. But – it was nothing that I had felt – I mean I did wa--- willingly want to do that . I wanted to be participant and helpful. And then we moved to my aunt's basement and ----

LEVINE: And how long, about, did you stay there.

EISERLOH: About, well let's see, it would have been 1942 to – probably about a year and a half.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: -And---

LEVINE: And then do you remember leaving your aunt's?

EISERLOH: I do, yes. We. . .

LEVINE: And what was that like? Going by train, was it?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: They put us on a train and they put us under guard and pulled the shades down on the windows and things like that. We, I guess we weren't supposed to see where – any part of the country side or whatever. And...

LEVINE: And was there others being taken into Crystal City too? When you were---

EISERLOH: I think there were. I think people were gathered up at various stops. So that there were --- ultimately the train --- when it arrived --- I think the train arrived in San Antonio and were-we were then put on a bus , but I can't be absolutely certain of that. It may have gone all the way to Crystal City. But – there were other people , but I don't know how many.

LEVINE: Yeah. Could-Well, can you remember how you felt as a little boy, you know leaving the Cleveland area and going to Crystal City?

EISERLOH: Well , as a boy I think I – I – I was full of anticipation because I was going to reunite with my father. And that made me happy so I was willing to endure whatever we were endured. I didn't – I didn't focus on things like pulled window shades , or whatever. It was kind of curious why, but no one had an answer. But I was more focused on reuniting with my father.

LEVINE: Yeah, And what was that reunion like?

EISERLOH: Well , it certainly was a very happy occasion.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: It was---Wwhen we first arrived, I remember being awe-struck in the sense of that-when you first come to the fencethis camp its now got ten foot high wire around it. Guard towers and barbed wire at the top and – and gun placements on-at the guard towers. And I remember one – that made a very serious impression on me because I couldn't understand what my father could have done to be in a place like that. And I was a little – hesitant or –or reluctant to enter that location because of that. But ultimately we obviously did.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you – did you have doubts about your father, —you know why was he arrested, I mean did . . .?

EISERLOH: No.

LEVINE: Did anybody—I mean, did you think perhaps he had done something wrong?

EISERLOH: I don't recall of any doubts about my father.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

EISERLOH: I mean I don't – I never had any – of course, you know, I was---I was fairly young so it would have been easy for my father to conceal things if he had been so inclined. But I never saw any – sort of meetings where strange people arrive and cars come and go or anything like that. Nothing like that ever happened. That never happened-so I never had any cause to say, “who was that daddy?” or – or “who was that man or woman?” or whatever. That never occurred so it never – it never occurred to me that my father had done anything that was related to where we were living. And – and

EI-1344/EISERLOH

in terms of when he was away, he was at the workplace. So it never occurred to me that he could be doing something away at the first work place that that would be bad.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh huh.

EISERLOH: And so those thoughts never entered my mind. I just couldn't understand why he was there.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what was it like for you in Crystal City?

EISERLOH: Well, I was a child, again, it was – it was a fairly benign and pleasant time. We were treated very well.

LEVINE: Did you live as a family?

EISERLOH: We left – we lived as a family. The quarters were very cramped. They were generally one or two rooms. Some had a kitchen, some did not. They were like – they were originally that camp was a – a farm workers barracks area. And so the---there were minimally, some where larger, some were smaller and so on. It was only until enough men were in the camp and then they were used as laborers to build structures and so on. So we had a place to sleep, a place to – I think originally we ate in dormitory – cafeteria type thing – I mean in cafeteria type accommodations and I think at a later point we lived in a – the dwelling that we lived in was a duplex kind of thing and I think we had a small kitchen. And I'm not sure if whether my mother cooked meals there or whether we always continued eating in the cafeteria. Maybe we had a choice. There was plenty of food, we weren't deprived. We had clothing. No one abused us. The men in the camp built a large swimming pool-pool-

EI-1344/EISERLOH

--for everyone to use. So it wasn't a place of ~~depression~~
~~oppression~~ or – mistreatment.

LEVINE: Did you go to school there?

EISERLOH: Yes we did. I have vague memories of that. I have vague memories of going to school. We went back – they had a reunion in Crystal City a couple of years ago and, of course, all the buildings are ~~raised-razed~~ and there are a couple of schools. The community of Crystal City ~~have-has~~ built their own elementary and high schools on the property. But I couldn't recall – because there were --- there were -- regular American schools and there were also schools for if you - specific to nationality, because this camp contained Japanese and Germans and I think a few Italians. And so you could go to a school of that persuasion. So there was a German school and a Japanese school. And I don't recollect that I went to the German school. And I couldn't find myself in the photos ~~that~~ some of the people brought along. So, I must have gone to the regular American school. And I didn't learn to speak German there so I'm reasonably sure about that, ~~yeah-~~

LEVINE: How about mixing with the Japanese internees? Did you have contact with them?

EISERLOH: Initially there was a strict separation. The Japanese were in ~~some~~
~~point~~one part of the camp and the Germans were in another. At some point ~~t~~here was some mixing because I remember a specific incident – we had, apparently a Japanese neighbor in our duplex and ~~t~~he reason I remember ~~that was that~~is I made friends with him. And I actually, ~~I~~ asked him about – he was making these funny looking wooden ~~cl-~~walking things and I asked him what they

EI-1344/EISERLOH

were. They were shower clogs, Japanese shower – in Japanese culture you make these little wooden shower clogs. And he was making them and he invited me over to learn how to make them. So I would go over to him - his dwelling and – and he'd help me make these shower clogs. So I do remember we had at some – and we would trade foods. We would get an allocation of rations which included rice and potatoes and things. And the Germans liked the potatoes and the Japanese liked the rice so we would switch – do that kind of trading and so forth. But initially there was a strict separation and that was – I'm discovering now, had to do with – ~~that the~~ Japanese in the Crystal City camp came – were among a group of people that were abducted from Latin American countries. Primarily Peruvian Japanese. And I guess the government didn't want us to know about that. Because there were, Aas you probably know, about twenty-five hundred Japanese Latin Americans_s abducted from those various countries in Latin America.

LEVINE: I see, so they kept you separate but at some point ---

EISERLOH: Yeah. There was some mixing because I think there was – depending on how many of a particular group was coming in, they had to have quarters and so forth.

LEVINE: I see, I see. So when you think back about your time at Crystal City, how do you think about it now...in retrospect?

EISERLOH: Well I think it was a pleasant time for myself. We were together_s. W~~w~~e had meals together. We could go -- my father could throw a ball to me_s and things like that.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: You saw him more often.

EISERLOH: I saw more of him. He – he had the time then to do fatherly things with me which, he didn't before the camp. So for me personally, it was a time of joy. Except when I looked at those guard towers. That always gave me a sharp twinge because why am I, you know, –I haven't done anything and there's people with weapons in those guard towers and – and barbed wire up there and I, you know. And we couldn't – we were instructed not to come within –I think it was-- five or ten feet from of the fence.

LEVINE: Yeah. You often hear thate among the Germans who was-were interned that there was some Nazi activity going on in – here at Ellis Island, and I guess at some of in the camps. Did you ever see that?

EISERLOH: I personally didn't see any of it. I – I don't – I mean, I've read of it. I didn't see any of – I'm sure there were – I didn't know what they did. I mean, I didn't see any of it. There may have been propaganda meetings or something like that. Again, I didn't see any documents in our home. There was nothing I would say to my mom or dad, “what was that?”, or “what is that?”. I don't remember seeing anything like that. My father was always focused on – when I saw him he was ever-always focused on his trade. I mean his, he helped--- They made this huge round swimming pool over a water hole and he was one of the - instrumental people who made that. He helped built-build buildings for the other arriving people and so on. So when-what I saw him do – when I saw him, he was doing those kinds of things. I didn't see him – and I probably wouldn't have seen him, I mean if he was inside of a building somewhere,

EI-1344/EISERLOH

meeting or talking with someone I wouldn't have seen him. But I didn't personally witness any such meetings.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well now what were the circumstances that led to your family coming to Ellis Island to be exchanged with people coming ~~to~~from Germany?

EISERLOH: Again, I'm trying to find get the documents related to that. [~~enough~~clear throat] As best as I know now ~~—some—~~ somehow there was some information put- put to my parents that they could be returned to their homeland. And I know that my mother and father ~~has~~had some strenuous talks about doing such an activity. My mother didn't – did not want to go back at all. She said, whatever is the case, whatever happens, she'd rather remain in the U.S. and renew their lives-life when —when things came to a conclusion. My father was very upset with the fact that he couldn't get any information. There was no way he could -- in other words, he had an indeterminate sentence. There was – no one said thatwell, you're gonna be here five years. You've done this or that ; or whatever. He had no way of availing himself of legal help. It was just a vacuum for him. And I believe he was leaning towards ~~s~~ going back to his homeland. At least getting out of jail that way was the way he expressed it. And so I believe they had some kind of input as to whether they would go back or not. Because I remember my mother and he had some very serious disputes about that. So – my guess is at this point is that you had to agree to being repatriated and that he probably signed the documents or agreed to be repatriated. That's what I think k occurred.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Uh huh. Now when you came from Crystal City to Ellis Island ~~even~~ route to Germany, the war was still going on. So essentially, your father was going back to Germany during the war.

EISERLOH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

EISERLOH: I think my father was – if I reflect on it – I think my father was politically very naïve and very – he came from a small farming village in Germany. And here was this guy ~~that who~~ had ~~the a~~ chance to go – he was bright, he was accomplished, he was an inventor. He invented an automatic transmission that General Motors used in their cars in 1935 or whatever, whatever. Not in their cars, they did some other industrial uses and things like that. So, he focused – he loved engineering, he loved ~~con---~~ building. So he did – he never reflected much about what was going on in the world. He didn't – he didn't read the political opinion pages and newspapers ~~and or~~ whatever else. He just wanted to be an engineer. So I think when – when he had this opportunity, as he viewed it, to get out of jail, that's what he wanted to do. Focus on getting my family out of jail and ~~getting make~~ a life. He had no idea – about conditions in Europe and what was going on. I remember my- my- my- ~~y~~ "You're crazy. You're going to a place that - where there's a war. Where people are fighting – bombing. Why do you want to do this?" ~~y~~ "You know. But he was focused on wanting to get out of jail. So that was the – that was the psychology going there. Was it wise? ~~no~~ ~~No.~~ – Was it – was it – would a man take his family into a war zone? ~~no~~ ~~No.~~ He thought, my – my - I ~~had~~ have a little – my grandparents – his parents had died and left a piece of land back in ~~the his~~ village and he could go back to ~~this the~~

EI-1344/EISERLOH

village and do some farming and feed his family. He had no idea about the destruction or whatever. He didn't . . . Look, T there was no TV. We weren't allowed to have radio. He had no idea what the conditions were. He had I in his mind, it was to that you go back and take care of his-your family. And it was – it was a total shock to him when we actually then went into Germany. Because Aa that time, when the exchange took place, we had to fend our own way to – as it turned out that we ended up in my mother's village, outside of Frankfurt. And there was round the clock bombing going on and so forth. Se-And we went from this camp to bombing raids and running to bombing shelters and no food. The Germans had – they resented us coming there. We didn't want to be there [laughs]. It was a mess.

LEVINE: Wow, dD Do you remember leaving Crystal City and coming to Ellis Island?

EISERLOH: Yes I do.

LEVINE: Again, train? Is that –

EISERLOH: Train and I remember at some point they transferred us to a bus. And we were taken someplace and then – we must have been on a boat then. From there by – they took us to someplace – to a dock. I remember being frightened of the tall buildings and the wind was blowing very strong that time. And I, somehow – as a child, I was afraid those buildings were going to be blown over. And I remembered that for a long – I think I had nightmares about that for a while. And so then we got on a boat and then we got on the Gripsholm.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: And do remember anything about the time that you spent at Ellis Island, prior to getting on the Gripsholm?

EISERLOH: I don't₂ I don't. I – I – I seem to have shut much that out of my mind. I mean, I remember~~---~~ I remember ~~the~~ train, ~~the~~ bus through New York somewhere, the sky--- high-rises and then going to a dock and being put on a --- some kind of a ferry boat or something. And then being in ~~short~~ of a dormitory-dormitory or something for some days.

LEVINE: Oh, ~~s~~So you would have been there were here probably for a few days?

EISERLOH: Yes. Because~~because~~ they were loading the Gripsholm and we had to stay – they were bringing people in. I don't know how long that time was or anything, and then we were sailing.

LEVINE: Was it a pretty full ship? Do you remember?

EISERLOH: Oh yeah_h, it was pretty full. I think there was about twelve hundred people – twelve hundred Germans on that ship. ~~er-s~~ Something like that.

LEVINE: And they were all going back?

EISERLOH: Yeah_h. There was-were about three hundred and fifty children, something like that. And-And about, the rest were adults. And all the children were U.S. citizens. So they – [laughs] they were being shipped back to a foreign country in exchange for whoever the government got out.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Uh huh. So as a – just from a little--- from a child's eyes – when you reached Germany, what was it like for you?

EISERLOH: Well, first of all I was in terror already-- Because Ww when we sailed across the ocean, it was winter time. And the Atlantic Ocean is not a friendly place in wintertime. I remember being bounced around a lot. My mother almost died. She had given birth in New Orleans and she had hemorrhaged and so they put her on the ship and she was in ---in the ship's infirmary the entire trip.

LEVINE: Now how was it that she came to ----

EISERLOH: My youngest brother was born on the train coming into New York – being transferred-transported to New York. He was born in New Orleans. The train stopped momentarily and he was born there and then they brought her own. So she had lost – apparently a substantial amount of blood. So she was weakened so they put her in the infirmary, wherever – here on Ellis Island and then on the ship. So I was very much concerned about her dying and then we had a big red cross painted on the ship. We were going across the Atlantic and I knew there was a war and then I could see the submarine periscopes going by. And I was in total terror that we would-we were going to be torpedoed and I couldn't swim. I wasn't, I said I can't, you know – it the in this Atlantic [laughs]. So I was – I remember being in very much terror. And then we got to Switzerland. It was a, -and they had a very – apparently 1945 was a very strong winter. We didn't have much clothes. We had some things. They let us take a large trunk for each member of the family. And we had. my mother had saved money and we were able to buy some clothes andbut at the last moment they said no, there would be nothing shipped. So we had to leave it in the

EI-1344/EISERLOH

warehouse, in this town, Bregenz. We never saw those again. My understanding now is the French army came in and looted the warehouses. So we just made ~~it~~ our way across with what we could carry. We had a new baby and my – we were walking along the train tracks and things like that. So, no it wasn't a very – it wasn't a very happy time.

LEVINE: ~~So~~ And I guess your mother, who really didn't want to go back to begin with and then giving birth ~~on-en~~ route must have just been –

EISERLOH: Yeah, she was very angry and very upset. She was in a bad state of mind. And we were constantly bombed. We were strafed. We were on a train. Finally we got on a train from Frankfurt to my mother's village about twenty miles away, and we were strafed by Americans plans as we were planes coming out of the tunnel. So it [laughs] – it was just a total horrible movie for my mother.

LEVINE: Yeah. And how about your sisters?

EISERLOH: Well, I guess they were as frightened as I was. You don't go from a secure feeling and – for children, warfare is always very frightening. You have no power, you have no access, you have nothing. You just want to survive. You eat what ecere you can find. You drink whatever you can drink to get some fluid in your system and ~~to~~ go on to another day. So that was a very upsetting time for the whole family. We – we lost everything that we had. Which is standard refugee story I guess.

LEVINE: How – how did your mother come to save some money, you mentioned? In other words, was there an opportunity to make money in Crystal City?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: They gave an allowance to people, somehow. I'm not quite sure how that transpired. But there was an allowance and relatives could send you some moneysmonies. We probably left some possessions behind with my aunt in the cellar and my mother told her to sell those things. Because we had no -- any money we had at the time of my father's arrest, they froze the bank account. So we had no-- we could not access that money. Even if there -- even if there had been a savings account, we would not have been able to use that to pay the mortgage on the house because they froze everything, e everything.

LEVINE: And did you ever get that money?

EISERLOH: No.

LEVINE: Ok, we're going to pause here and change tapes --

EISERLOH: Uh huh.

LEVINE: -- and then we'll --

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2

LEVINE: Ok, we were talking -- we're starting tape two here. I'm speaking with Lothar Eiserloh, and w We were talking about, you know, going back -- the terror of -- that you experienced in going back to Germany. Talk about what you were saying off tape. About the

EI-1344/EISERLOH

survival – aspect of being plunged into a situation that you had no idea even existed.

EISERLOH: Yes. Well the obvious – to me the first inkling that things were not going to be as nice as they have been was my experience in crossing the Atlantic; the cold, the fear of being torpedoed. Mother in the hospital with – apparently -on the verge of dying. And then arriving in the harbor of Marseilles and everything is blown up. Buildings piled up and rubble. And then being taken by train into Switzerland where it was mountainous and icy cold that winter, with no clothes. So that all was a fore – forerunning – foreboding of things to come. We were then transported across the Swiss/German border and told to get on with it – go where we were going. There was – we had no German money, we had no – I don't know how it was arranged, but I recall walking along railroad tracks in cold of winter with no clothing. Our whatever - assets that were brought along in trunks that we were allowed to take with us ~~was~~ were confiscated and stored in a warehouse. And we were told that sometime in the future we would have them back. So we wore what we had on our backs, in clothing, carrying a little baby that was at that time, probably six weeks old. And we took turns carrying this baby and trying to keep the baby warm in some way. No food – scrounging food wherever we could. Eating raw potatoes out of the field and things like that. It was just a - a sudden transformation into a survival mode that as a child – having lived in the – in America, the country of plenty – being transformed suddenly into that situation was terrible for the children. I'm sure. ~~and~~ And was very --- put my parents in total confusion because they didn't know how to deal with it. So all you could do was go one foot at a time. Go towards ~~s~~ my mother's hometown, which was the closest one to where we were – we needed to go. So – shelter

EI-1344/EISERLOH

– shelter and shelter from the cold, food, shelter from attacks by American bombing. All of these things were constant needs. And – so, by luck, by good fortune, we survived and got to my mother's hometown. We were not received well by the Germans. They called us names –

LEVINE: What did they call you?

EISERLOH: Well, they called us whatever they called American – American troops or whatever because of the – we were the ...

LEVINE: Enemy?

EISERLOH: ...personification of what they were experiencing in the bombing raids and all that sort of thing. Although we had obviously not much to do with that. We had no money so we became a burden – an instant burden on my grandparents who were elderly at that time. There was no food being distributed. Not very much food being distributed in Germany at that time because the roads were destroyed, the bridges were destroyed, the farmers would not bring their food into the cities or the towns because money was worthless. So unless you had something to trade, for what the farmers wanted, you didn't get any food – unless you were related to a farmer. So that s---that's was the situation that we were in.

LEVINE: How long did it take you roughly to get to your mother's parents?

EISERLOH: My remembrance is something like probably three to four weeks.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness. And where did you sleep? While you were...?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Wherever we could find a place to lay down. We were in – at one point we were in Frankfurt and Frankfurt was enduring twenty-four hours bombing at that time and we were in a bomb shelter. Somewhere down, way deep in the ground. And nobody left that bomb shelter because if you left, you lost your place. I mean it was jammed as tightly as it could be. And to experience that, it was nobody – the toilet facilities were completely out of order so that the stench in that hole in the ground was beyond bearing. ~~But~~ And you didn't leave because if you left you wouldn't get your space back into the shelter. So it was – as close to hell as you can imagine and still be alive. So at some point the bombings stopped for some period of time and there was this one train that was going westward on to which we could get. And as we drew near to my mother's hometown which was about twenty miles west of Frankfurt. We came out of a tunnel and my father started hurling us under the benches and my mother was yelling at him, "what are you doing, have you gone crazy." And he of course perceived that we were being strafed by American fighter planes and he wanted to get us under the wood benches, for protection from the bullets, which of course was –

LEVINE: Not that much protection.

EISERLOH: Not that much protection. They got the train stopped and we all were ~~all~~-able to get off the train and flee into the woods until - until the action stopped. But again, it was another one of those experiences that were life or death and luckily we survived and we got to my ~~—~~ my mother's hometown from there. The war was mercifully over for that part of the ~~—~~ of Germany a short while later, maybe four to six weeks. In the meantime my father was beaten up by the SS and arrested. He was charged ~~for~~-with being

EI-1344/EISERLOH

a spy for the advancing American army and he was taken away and we didn't hear from him or know where he was or anything -- until after the war -- was over. So my poor father [laughs] was jailed by his country of origin and his country of immigration for no reasons that he was aware of and was pretty well -- beaten up [laughs] by the SS -- burst into my father's -- my grandfather's shop, pinned him up against the wall and started beating him up. Five of them all at one time and I remember I jumped up on the workbench and was grabbing -- and I grabbed a hammer to help my father and one of the men just grabbed me and threw me across the -- I remember flying across the room and smacking into the-a wall. For a long time I felt very guilty about not being able to help my father -- but anyway. So again we were without a father, without money, without food, it would have been -- . Luckily my grandfather had a small garden out on the outskirts of town and I would go with him and dig up beets and carrots and things like that and we were able to survive. Then the war was over. My mother luckily was able to - to contact an American commander of the -- whatever military detachment was in the town -- and prevail upon him to look for my father or find him or something. Because, she said "look, he's the father of four American citizens here." Aand they did find him somewhere, I don't know where he-it was. In other words, the Germans hadn't killed him yet but they -- they were apparently preparing to do so ---- again, luck.

LEVINE: What about your grandparents? I mean you had met them for the first time and they were elderly and in a war zone -- what were they like under those conditions? How do you remember them in relation to you?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Well, they- they gave us shelter and sustenance and love and they didn't make any distinction between where we were, where we came from or what we did. They willingly endured the burden of sheltering us and so forth. Some of the towns folk said bad things to them and so forth but again we were human beings. So it wasn't the question of – whether we had assumed a new nationality which was contrary to theirs. In other words, the politics of the situation did not enter the relationship with our grandparents. So that was – that was the one pleasant factor there that was involved.

LEVINE: Yeah. And I'm guess your mother must have been happy to be with her parents-...-

EISERLOH: Yes, she was.

LEVINE: ...having endured so much. So what was your father – what was the reunion like with your father after they released him?

EISERLOH: Well it was certainly joyous and joyful again. We still had a father and he was alive and he just had to heal from some of his injuries. But there still remained the - the question of shelter and food. Which ultimately we – we ended up living in some former abandoned army camp – some barracks – part of a barracks and that's where we lived until my older sister and I was-were repatriated to the US by the US government.

LEVINE: Uh huh. So, from the time the war was over and the family was living in refugee – was it a refugee camp where these barracks were?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: I think it was – it was a some kind of green barracks that housed. I think, an army detachment that was assigned to that particular – it was a village – it was a town I guess. And it was abandoned, so obviously the soldiers went home or ~~was-were~~ captured or whatever and so it was shelter so we ended up living there.

LEVINE: And were there a lot of families living there?

EISERLOH: Well, eventually the units were filled up by refugees – because there was plenty of those and yes, it became sort of a camp.

LEVINE: And why was it that you and your sister went – came back here?

EISERLOH: Well, my mother had contacted the American occupation authorities and did whatever was – filling out papers and requests and so forth and the authorities granted – they indicated that the children could come back to the US but the parents could not. So my - my parents, they said – well the two younger ones were out of the question. The one was only a year old or so and my youngest sister was about six or somewhere in that range. But that she – my mother said she would allow us to go back, did we want to go back? and And we thought said, “well, we think we should do that.”~~that we should do that.~~ Maybe we could then be helpful in getting them back. So that’s what happened. We were - we were then taken by the authorities and put in a refugee camp or what do you call them – a displaced persons camp. We stayed there about six weeks or so and ~~were --~~ got all kinds of health checks and that sort of thing and – then we – my – the same aunt who – with whom we had lived after my father had been arrested agreed to become our sponsor and we came back to the US. And they had, in the

EI-1344/EISERLOH

meantime, moved from Cleveland to Los Angeles, California after the war –

LEVINE: Your aunt that you went to?

EISERLOH: Yes. So we they – we came there to live with them.

LEVINE: I see. So you must have had a lot of mixed emotions, leaving your parents and coming here, to an aunt that hadn't been all that – good in arrangement before you left, right?

EISERLOH: Well, no, she had always been nice to us. She was my father's oldest sister. It was not a question that we were – ~~that~~ we were kicked out of her house, it was that they were poor. And they – they – they had this small home and the only space in the home was in the basement. She had a son and she was -- in order to survive they were taken-taking –

LEVINE: Boarders?

EISERLOH: Board – ah children – what do you call them?

LEVINE: Oh, orphans?

EISERLOH: Orphans from the social welfare system so they had a two bedroom house, so-and there was people everywhere [laughs] so they only remaining space was the basement. It wasn't like she didn't want us – it was just and they were just – it was the depression Depression and they didn't have any extra money to – to support four more people. And so – no she was always very kind to us, both my aunt and my uncle.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: So what year was it that you actually came back?

EISERLOH: We came back in 1947, about July 1947 I believe.

LEVINE: And did you, do you remember what ship you came back on?

EISERLOH: Yes, SS Ernie Pyle. It was a troop ship. USS Ernie Pyle, yeah.

LEVINE: Say it again, Ernie?

EISERLOH: Ernie, E-R-N-I-E, Pyle, P-Y-L-E. He was a renowned World War Two war reporter, I mean combat reporter and he was killed in World War Two.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. And where did you come into – where did you sail into?

EISERLOH: Must have been here.

LEVINE: Do you think?

EISERLOH: Yeah, I mean it was here, it was New York. Now that's a - that's interesting, I haven't been able to look that up yet. We may have come back through Ellis Island, I don't know where.

LEVINE: You might have, yeah.

EISERLOH: Yeah, have to do some research.

LEVINE: So you came here and do you remember Ellis Island at all at that point?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: I remember the Statue of Liberty [laughs]

LEVINE: Well its warm, its close [laughs].

EISERLOH: I remember that because I remember being as trite as it sounds – I remember - it certainly was a welcoming sign and ~~+~~ a very happy sign. But I remember we were on the ship and we stayed somewhere and I don't know where the somewhere was when -- when we came off the ship. And then at some point they put us on a train and we went by train across the country. So I'll have to do some research.

LEVINE: Yeah, sSo you and your sister and – and you were about twelve I guess – somewhere around there.

EISERLOH: At that time I was eleven because I'm born in December so I wasn't quite twelve – yea, eleven and a half.

LEVINE: Yeah, eleven. So you went to your aunt's and your ~~s~~ sister was still in school too?

EISERLOH: Yes, she was in high school and I was in junior high school and we stayed with my aunt and uncle. My sister reached her – I think eighteenth birthday and she became – she got married shortly thereafter and I remained staying with my aunt and uncle until I finished high school.

LEVINE: And how was that for you, living with your aunt and uncle?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Well, it was a reasonably nice situation. They had bought a home in sunny southern California which had about twenty million fewer people at the time so it was a very congenial place. And money was still tight [laughs] so I started a job during junior high school and helped my aunt and uncle. I was very grateful that they had taken us in and –

LEVINE: And what was your first job that you started when you were still --?

EISERLOH: I was selling newspapers in the – standing on a double white line in a trafficked road - at an intersection.

LEVINE: And what would you do? Would you go someplace and get your papers and did you – how did it work?

EISERLOH: The company would – I think it was the Los Angeles Times would drop off a stack of newspapers for me and I'd work until I sold them all. And I'd sit – I'd stand in the middle of the double white line and I'd sell to either side. And I think it was a nickel a paper and I got to keep two cents or something like that. Ten cents a paper and I got to keep two cents.

LEVINE: So did you do that in the morning before you went to school or was it the evening?

EISERLOH: It was the afternoon. After I got out of school.

LEVINE: After school. Uh huh.

EISERLOH: Yeah, that's right, it was the Valley Times. It wasn't the – it was the Valley Times. It was the San Fernando Valley newspaper.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Yeah. I always find newspaper boys interesting because that's often the first job that a boy has and I guess it's a good experience usually, I mean in the sense –

EISERLOH: Well, it was one I could do. I didn't own a bicycle so I couldn't have a newspaper route. They said that I could stand on the corner and I don't know how I was able to do that because I was never admonished by the police or anything. After all I was standing in the middle of a two, three lane road [laughs] selling papers and I never got hit by a car or anything and that's what I did. And then I got a job subsequently in a grocery store. As a, an all around stock boy and things like that and so forth.

LEVINE: And then did you give the money to your aunt?

EISERLOH: Yeah, my aunt and uncle. So –

LEVINE: Lets see, so now were you in communication with your mother and father then?

EISERLOH: Yes, we would write from time to time. And my mother would – my mother did most of the writing, in fact, just about all of the writing. And she would inform us that she would still be applying to repatriate and it was constantly denied and so they just kept trying. We didn't see them again for about, let's see, '47-'56, so about nine years. And at that – by that time I had endured some other experiences and ~~it~~ was in the Air Force, in pilot training school. And I don't know the veracity of what occurred but it was so simultaneous that I reasonably certain that it had something to do with it. I had to have a top secret clearance to become a pilot

EI-1344/EISERLOH

because we deal with – dealt with nuclear weapons and things. So they denied my top secret clearance and so I said that's fine, just send me back home – home ~~was~~ being ~~where~~ -- my aunt and uncle was. Because my intention was to obtain the benefits of the GI Bill so I could go to college. And they said, oh, just a minute and they held me back and they – whatever occurred – I got a letter from my mother saying that they had been granted immigration status. So it was ~~coincidence~~ coincident with my obtaining a top secret clearance that my parents were granted immigration status. So they came back through Ellis Island. I guess [laughs].

LEVINE: Really? So in other words, do you think that because they were being denied repatriation, you were being denied, but then somehow both things could happen? If one happened, the other could [laughs] – Do you make any type of link?

EISERLOH: I – I think there was a connection there -- because I – I just – on – on the conjunction of things that occurred, there were some other things that were happening that I can't substantiate so I'll just let that go. But the timing was so complete – I mean at the last – the prior communication with my mother, she was beginning to loose hope that she'd ever she see us in the near future and so on. That Then I'm denied this top secret clearance and I'm held back out of ~~the~~ class and whatever government agencies do, I didn't ---- and then all of a sudden I get this joyous thing that they had been giving given immigration status.

LEVINE: And you were given top clearance.

EISERLOH: Yes. Uh huh, and eh – so – I had saved some money when I was in training and they needed passage so I sent that to them and they

EI-1344/EISERLOH

were able to pay for their passage and we were reunited in Los Angeles, California.

LEVINE: So they probably came into New York –

EISERLOH: They did come into New York.

LEVINE: -- Ellis Island and then – and what year was this?

EISERLOH: This would have been – let me see – it would have just been around July 1956. Because I was just graduating from that training class and they did give me a leave for three days and I was allowed to go up to Cleveland and meet my parents. They came in through New York and then went up to Cleveland. Another sister was living there, my father's. And my mother had a brother and a sister living there.

LEVINE: So that's where they settled when they came back?

EISERLOH: No, they actually just stopped off there to –

LEVINE: Oh, to say hello ---

EISERLOH: To say hello and sort of regenerate – begin regenerating and they came out to California and actually lived with my older sister and her husband for a while.

LEVINE: Now – how - how had the war changed them or aeffected them?
Could you say anything about how they were having –

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: Well I would say my – my sis – my mother was still as resilient as ever. ~~and s~~She never lost hope about anything. She was always – always went on to the next thing. Did the best she could. Looked for ways to better her status, her situation or whatever. So she was still very, very resilient. My father was, I would say ~~he~~ was just about a broken man. He was pretty – pretty despondent, I would say, at that time. Not despondent about returning but despondent about being able to – resume a family situation. After all, they had nothing. He was – now he was sixty. He had no career. His career - people were not hiring sixty year old men. He couldn't find a job. He found a job at one point where he was a blueprint reader. I remember him telling me, he said these – they give me the blueprints that these young college graduates are producing and they don't know what they're doing. Everything is incorrect and they want me to – they have me correct it. I can draw these – I can design these things, but they won't give me a job as a designer because of my age. And – he was very embittered by that and he died shortly thereafter. He had a stroke or yeah, - I think he went to the grocery market and had a stroke. So I would say ~~that~~ the experience for my mother, while it was not a happy experience, she always endured and was resilient. My father became greatly embittered. Because the ~~juxtapositions-juxtapositions~~ of things were so much. He didn't know why he got arrested here. He didn't know why he got arrested there. There was so many hirings -- he was hired by the US army to build ~~there-their~~ barracks for them in Germany [laughs] So he said, if I'm this spy, ~~or~~ I'm this unwanted one, why are they hiring me to build their dwellings ~~for them~~ and things like that. Nothing made sense to him and he couldn't figure it out. He just – he got arrested here, he got arrested there and they took ten years ~~of~~ his life from him at the height of his – so called career. So it – it virtually – it basically destroyed him.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Yeah, ~~h~~ How about the ramifications for you? I mean, part of it as a child was just an adventure as you said earlier –

EISERLOH: Right, right.

LEVINE: -- but how about just overall?

EISERLOH: Well it had a bunch of ramifications for me ~~-but~~ I think I had more of my mother's spirit than I did of my father's spirit. Because a lot of things occurred to me as I was trying to become an adult and so forth. I was denied residency at the University – residency status because my parents were alive and in a foreign country. And I pointed out to the – I was attending UCLA at the time – and I just pointed out that I had gone to junior high school and high school in the United States and my uncle and aunt were my legal guardians appointed so by the federal court. And they said, we can – we can – we're allowed to make our own rules by the state of California and we decided you're a non-resident [laughs]. So they wanted -- I couldn't – I could barely afford the fees that were in existence then. The book costs and things like that and now they wanted me to pay non-~~residence~~ resident fees. So things like that – there weren't ramifications all along that occurred, but again, I have my mother's spirit and I just went on to the next thing, you know. ~~So I said,~~ "well how can I become a resident?" Well [they said], "you could-can wait until-'til you're twenty-two." In those days you had to be twenty-one to become a – to become ~~an~~ adult. And then a year later and I was seventeen at the time. What's the other option – go into the military. Ok, ~~##-I'll~~ go into the military, just-things like that [laughing]. And as it turned out I had fun flying. I mean ~~it~~ it was a joyful kind of thing for a male I guess.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Ok, ~~so~~-we're going to pause here and turn the tape and then well conclude on the other side.

EISERLOH: Yeah.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 2

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 2

LEVINE: Ok, you were mentioning as sort of an anecdote that happened in Germany about the American soldiers being in the town. Why don't you just say that for the tape, it's an interesting story?

EISERLOH: Well, by chance, the area in which my family was living was occupied by American soldiers. ~~a~~And when the – the group – the regiment of soldiers that were going to occupy our town moved into the town. I ran down to where they were setting up with some friends to watch them and they yelled something at us. To get out of there or to go away or something and I yelled back in English, who are you talking about or something of that do agnation – something of that type and the entire group that ~~was-were~~ standing out there turned around and looked at me because I said this in perfect English. And – which they weren't expecting. I then was adopted by that regiment and was introduced to ~~everyone~~ everybody around and by pure chance the chef of that particular regiment – the head cook had gone to, I guess it would have been grammar school with my older sister in Strungsville, Ohio. ~~And s~~So by virtue of that friendship and prior contact we were able to obtain foodstuffs from the US army. Enough that – for survival for our

EI-1344/EISERLOH

family and also to use as trade with German farmers to get some foods like coffee and butter and things like that. We were able to – foodstuffs that were not available in – in the destroyed German economy. So it was another quirk of fate that was constant between my family and our life as Americans. Even though some bad things occurred, likewise some good things occurred.

LEVINE: Yeah. And I guess that was your first encounter with the American military –

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: -- so it was a good one –

EISERLOH: Yes.

LEVINE: Well actually the first was sort of being bombed by them, right?

EISERLOH: Yes, well that was – that had all kinds of ramifications too because the strafing was being done by American fighter planes and I witnessed the Germans shoot down four of the eight fighter planes. And I was – I remember standing there saying, “The people --” I’m an American and the Americans are trying to kill me, by strafing, obviously not me specifically. And the Germans, who I know nothing about, are defending me and now these pilots are bailing out and being made prisoner and they’re Americans, something like I am, in a way.” Because I felt no kinship to Germans or Germany at that time because I had never been there and my parents had never-not stressed that. So there were all these ironies that occurred in my life. I also was sort-of-further taken in as sort of a mascot by this regiment and I was used – they made a little uniform

EI-1344/EISERLOH

for me and I went – traveled about ~~in a~~ it was a tank division: --
~~And and~~ they took me around, taught me how to drive a tank at age eleven. And I became the unofficial interpreter for different things they had to do. So it was, again, part of an adventure story which was a little bit bizarre but ultimately ~~it~~ worked to the benefit of our family in terms of survival.

LEVINE: Yeah. Ok, so then you went into the military and you became a pilot?

EISERLOH: Yeah, a fighter pilot.

LEVINE: A pilot. And – how long did you stay in?

EISERLOH: I was total -- Well my total military service was about ~~for~~ six years.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And then did you leave to go to the university, is that what you did?

EISERLOH: Yes, I was – again there's these quirks of existence. I went into a program which I don't think any longer is used. During World War Two, whenever there were shortages of particular categories of soldiers and things they had what they called cadet programs. So in this case for pilot training you normally would have had to graduate from ROTC or military academy but they had a shortage of pilots and they recruited as cadets. However, once you graduated, if you're not a college graduate then if they have a time period when they have an overage then the first people that are removed are those people who are cadet people. So I asked for a release because they made it clear that I wouldn't be promoted. Even though my performance was outstanding and so I wanted to

EI-1344/EISERLOH

go back and get my college degree. And I applied for some – some scholarships and things and then I was told I wasn't eligible for these scholarships and I said "why is that?" And they said, "your class is graduated." And they had some ~~archaic-arcane~~ rule that when you went to university, this is California universities now, ~~you~~ you had to matriculate within a certain given time in which you are graduating – your high school graduating class matriculated. If you're – if you don't do that then you lost all sort of privileges such as eligibility for scholarships [laughing] and things like that. So there were all these kinds of things that kept impacting my life along with my parents' life from this whole procedure.

LEVINE: So I guess you had in mind that you were going to get a college degree. How did you go about it?

EISERLOH: I just kept going to work and dropping ~~in~~ and out and going to work again until I could save enough money and go to class and get the units and then the degree.
[Both laughing]

LEVINE: So what did you – what was your field? What did you do after –?

EISERLOH: Well I didn't graduate in the field I wanted to graduate and that was in engineering and science. [Clears throat] In the meantime, during all this goings forth I got married and a couple of kids came along ~~and so~~ now it was more and more difficult to save up enough money to spend – to focus on school work with the intensity ~~say~~ required for say, a science curriculum. So I ultimately got my degree in international relations. I thought I would go into the diplomatic core. And that didn't occur either but I did manage to finish college and do some graduate work.

EI-1344/EISERLOH

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh.

EISERLOH: I'm the only one in the family that did so – it was – I guess I have my mother's spirit.

LEVINE: Yeah, well it seems – you've used the word luck a lot during the interview. It seems like. I mean even though incredible what – negative things affected your family, you seem to have – been lucky a lot.

EISERLOH: Yeah, I use that word because there is no way – there's no way you can – one can make a rational explanation of why in all these proceedings – I didn't sustain a -- an injury leading to my death. There were many - many occasions where I was close to it but I survived all these. So I had – I use the word luck to say it. It was just by chance, there is no explanation for it. On one occasion I had an aircraft accident and the plane tumbled around, and around, and around, and upside down and I had twelve hundred gallons of fuel and oh, I don't know, six hundred rounds of ammunition and rockets and everything and the plane didn't catch fire and I was trapped inside the plane. So [laughs] things like that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

EISERLOH: There was a number of such occurrences and I just – I lived through them.

LEVINE: When you were a fighter pilot did you see action?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: No, I was in – I was in active duty between the Korean War and the Vietnam War and – so I did not. There was some other --- [laughs] there were some other things going on.

LEVINE: Ok. Let's see, how about ~~your~~the German – your German side and your American side, how do you think about that?

EISERLOH: [Pause] That's interesting – personally I never considereded myself anything but American. American attitudes, American belief systems, American whatever. I just – I just – I lived in Germany for two years of my life. I wasn't raised in the home to focus on the German-ness. I was aware my parents were German. I was aware of their origin. I was aware that I had some relatives there. I lived there for two years but its almost as though I'm just visiting a place and I have some contact with it or some attachment to it but there's – there hasn't been any emotional or mental attachment. So – so that's the best answer I can give there. I just don't – I can't describe it any other way. I don't feel any affinity for the country of Germany at all other than that it's a place that I visited and I think the imprint on me as a young boy was an American imprint. And it doesn't – I don't have any affinity toward – toward there – except maybe some things – pride in my father's education and his abilities and so forth but that's about all.

LEVINE: Why don't you say something about the court case that a number of people who – whose family-families were involved in the whole internment and – what is, if you could just say for the tape, what it's about and why you particularly are interested in being a part of that whole move?

EI-1344/EISERLOH

EISERLOH: The eh -- Ok, well I'm involved in the movement to get recognition by the US government that German-Americans were interned during World War Two because I feel there was an unjust process involved and that many, if not all of those Germans ~~who were that~~ interned, lost a substantial portion of their livelihood, of their possessions, of their ~~of their~~ life for this unjust internment and it should be recognized as such. Coincident with any such behavior by a government toward people who are resident in the country and trying to make a life in that country in a legal way. So, to this point of the three major ethnic groups in the US that were interned, the Japanese, ~~The-the~~ Italians, and the Germans – only the German internments have not been recognized by – by Congress. And I feel that we should be so recognized and – so that the injustice of that internment can be brought to the attention of the population at whole and that it won't occur again in this manner. I think the process which occurred was unjust and we should not as a country – condone such a process again.

LEVINE: Um hmmm. Did you ever talk to your father about how he had – how he came to think about all the things that had happened in his life? The arrests and the beatings and all – I mean did he ever talk about that in his old --- well before he died he really didn't reach old age.

EISERLOH: Yeah. No, unfortunately after he returned to this country I was on active duty in the air force and I was away from where they were living. And then, in times ~~that-when~~ I was in the same area, he was busy trying to make a living and was pretty much exhausted. So, we never did talk about that at that time. They arrived when he was sixty and he died at sixty-five which is a good amount of time but really it was very, very meager relative to what was going on in both

EI-1344/EISERLOH

of our lives and we never did get a chance to discuss that. He was – he was – I do know that he was angry about it all. Angry mostly in the fact that he felt that he was-was very innocent of any wrong doing and that he had paid for it with, you know – I think at one point he had said something to the effect that he never got so much as a traffic ticket and he still was incarcerated for five years of his life. And – I know he was angry and upset about it but again, he was more preoccupied in trying to make a life.

LEVINE: How about your older sister? Were there any ramifications that you know of for the ordeal for her?

EISERLOH: Well I think, I a sense that it did have strong effects – stronger effects on her in the fact that when she – when we were in Germany for the time period the schools were closed mostly, and then we were in the repatriation -- refugee camp and then coming here. So in a sense it really terminated her education. She never got back on track again in terms of high school or even going to college. So it did have a strong effect that way. She wasn't able to obtain a level of education that I think she was capable of and thus did affect her life.

LEVINE: Yeah. Ok, is there anything else you can think of relevant to, I mean [pause] -- how close do you think this group is coming to getting some kind of recognition of what the government did to the interned Germans during World War Two, at this point?

EISERLOH: I think with the – the current administration it's not a priority at all and so I think any effort would-will have to be continually pursued because the current administration has other priorities that are

EI-1344/EISERLOH

~~taken-taking~~ up its political efforts and its expenditures of time and money and whatever.

LEVINE: Yeah.

EISERLOH: So it's going to be an ongoing effort and it will have to be intensified. Basically we are requesting recognition. We are not requesting remuneration or anything else. We just want recognition that there were a number of Germans that were interned, most of them unjustly, and that the government has failed to acknowledge that. ~~They've --~~ One of the things that used to disturb me when I was in college was go to the history books and go to the indexes and there was never anything – there was always something in there about Japanese interment. ~~And~~ I knew I had been interned and I could never find anywhere in the books anything about German internment. And still today there are very, very few books that mention it at all, ~~especially and certainly none of the texts in~~ college. If you talk to a college professor they'll tell you, no, it didn't happen, point blank. I've heard that -- no it didn't happen, in another place. So my concern is that we need to acknowledge things that did happen so they don't happen again.

LEVINE: ~~Uh huh.~~ Ok, ~~sewell~~ that might be the place to end. I want to thank you very much for a most interesting interview and I've been speaking with Lothar Eiserloh, who was born in this country and he and his family were repatriated or exchanged in 1945 and he returned to this country in 1947. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW