

EI-1449

RICHARD J. MEESS

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 14, 1920

INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 19, 2007

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:

RUNNING TIME: 62:12

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: JANET LEVINE

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: MELISSA PERLZWEIG

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Coast Guard stationed at Ellis Island in December 1941

LEVINE: Today is June the 19th, the year 2007 and I'm here in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with Richard Meess, who was a Coast Guard and was stationed at Ellis Island right at the time of Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. So he had a very unique, I think, experience there, and then was stationed thereafter on Hoffman Island, for about eight months. So that would have been 1942, because that came right after. Anyway, (clears throat) this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm delighted to get to talk to you, Mr. Meess. If you would start please by saying your birth date.

MEESS: I was born on June 14, 1920.

LEVINE: Ok, and where were you born?

MEESS: In Pittsburgh, P-A.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And did you have any, perhaps, family members who immigrated or-- and/or -- through Ellis Island?

MEESS: I don't think so. Most of my ancestors were from Germany and came to this country I think in the 1850s and '60s. But um, they didn't come through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Yeah well that would have been too early.

MEESS: They got off in New York and took the bus (both laugh). They didn't have buses then either.

LEVINE: Well where did, um, they went to Pittsburgh?

MEESS: Yeah. My grandfather came from – do you know where Karlsruhe is? In Germany?

LEVINE: Where is it?

MEESS: Karlsruhe, it's a city. It was a big industrial city. It was where he came from and he was a carpenter who came to Pittsburgh and started his own business.

LEVINE: Do you know why he came to Pittsburgh?

MEESS: I think he felt there was greater opportunities for him and, of course, in those -- back in the 1800s in Germany -- I guess they were monarchies, and each state was run by like a monarchy. And he probably didn't like it. His political outlook on things was more f—more liberal than we had there. And uh –

LEVINE: [interposed] Did you know this grandfather?

MEESS: Yes.

LEVINE: You knew him as a little boy?

MEESS: Yes, he lived across the street. We lived in the section in a place called Troy Hill. It was all German up there.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: You were either Catholic or you were Lutheran.

LEVINE: Ah.

MEESS: And um, my grandfather, at that time, lived across the street when I was born – that was my aunt Emma. (phone ringing in background) And we lived there. He died – well, while I knew him there and he's the only one of my grandparents that I – that I knew. I had other cousins and uncles who came from the family of my dad's family.

LEVINE: Well now what do you remember about this grandfather, as a person?

MEESS: Well he was very friendly. He – he wore a beard, and he was – he had retired. But when I was born he was a retired man living with my aunt and my uncle and um, he was a very friendly man and I – he used to had it – he had a solid gold watch with a big gold chain and he'd let me play – play with that and he left me that watch in his will. I have his watch now. And he died and I guess I wasn't quite six years old then, at the time he died.

LEVINE: I see. Was he buried Germanic? Did he retain his old country ways, would you say?

MEESS: Well—

LEVINE: I know you were young but –

MEESS: Yeah, at that time, I'm going to say -- they all spoke German on the streets and I recall on Saturday night on every street cor—on a street corner there'd be a German band would play music. And then there'd -- people would give them money. They would move – move a few blocks over and play some more music. I went through, I think, half of the first grade, and then we moved away from Troy Hill to a section which had more Scotch-Irish people than they had Germans. And I remember my dad, when we moved to Brookline, he said there was a Lutheran church and he went and we – him -- went to service there and he said they're the wrong Lutherans. There were, in Germany – some of the Lutherans were still [not understood] Catholic, even their dress and everything like that. But he was what they call the Angelical Lutherans—

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: And they were different.

LEVINE: Your family was Lutheran?

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MEESS: But then we -- when we moved to Brookline we became Presbyterians (both laugh). Which came – most of them came from Scotland and Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh. So when did you join the Coast Guard?

MEESS: Uh, well we had uh – we were – in other words World War II started in Europe—

LEVINE: Right.

MEESS: And we were out of it for quite a while. But I think when President Roosevelt – they put in a draft for -- military draft -- in 1939. And the -- the word was goodbye dear I'll be home in a year but it didn't happen.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: A year was up and some of my friends had gone -- they were drafted. They didn't get home. And finally I just, I just said to myself, we're gonna be in the war. We're gonna be in the war. And I said --

LEVINE: [interposed] But you were young.

MEESS: Yeah. Well I was -- I was twenty-one -- I was gonna be twenty-one that year. And because -- I had to sign up for the draft board and they said we'll call you. But when they called me I said goodbye. I joined the Coast Guard. I checked it out, I said I know I'm given -- I sign up for three years. And um, I said we -- I knew we were gonna be in the war, I felt that. So I went to boot camp in New Orleans. You know where New Orleans is?

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: That was a long train ride from Pittsburgh. (laughs)

LEVINE: And that was the furthest you'd been.

MEESS: I had never been to New Orleans before. It took two days to get there on train.

LEVINE: Huh.

MEESS: And we were there for two months, in what they call boot camp, where they train you as a recruit. And then we were transferred to New York where we reported to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well now why did -- one, why did you join the Coast Guard?

MEESS: I thought they were better than the other units.

LEVINE: Do you know why? What it was about it that appealed to you?

MEESS: Well I -- I -- I -- maybe the cruit-- recruiters were better than the other recruiters.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: And um, (clears throat) I checked them all. I went -- I went and talked to guys who were recruiting marines, recruiting navy guys, army guys. And I got to the Coast Guard and I said, I -- I like what -- I like what they're selling me.

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh.

MEESS: So um—

LEVINE: [interposed] And how did you -- do you know what it was that led you to conclude that we were going to war, before we did?

MEESS: Roosevelt was -- was very close friend of Churchill. He was the prime minister of Great Britain, and they were very friends -- great friends. And he, he gave them a lot of our navy ships. And they had some deals wh-- where we were helping England quite a bit, before the -- before we ever got into the war. Of course getting into the war was Pearl -- when Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. They had no idea at Ellis Island what -- what happened at Pearl Harbor. All they knew was that -- the report that air fields there and everything had been bombed and a lot of people were killed. And um--

LEVINE: So why don't we get back to that. You went to boot camp in New Orleans --

MEESS: Right.

LEVINE: And then you were sent to --

MEESS: New Orleans. From New Orleans we -- we c-- got on a train and came to New York City and we were put on the -- the boats to take us to Ellis Island -- reported in Ellis Island. And we were only there s-- about two days when it was Pearl Harbor. And uh, that's when things got more active. That's when they brought all these alien people that were around New York. They brought in the Germans, Italians, and the uh, Japanese, to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: What was your understanding of why some people were rounded up and brought there and others not? Why were the ones who were rounded up rounded up?

MEESS: I would guess that the F-B-I had uh, had knowledge of the ones were -- still supported their own countries. And um -- that's -- that's who they rounded up. The -- the G-- the Germans, under Hitler of course. And then the -- the

Italians, under Mussolini. And then the Japanese I guess them -- I don't know who -- well they had a -- an emperor of Japan, I believe.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But um, we had been, we had been uh, the -- helping c—uh, convoy some of their ships. The Coast Guard had some cutters who would take them out to um, the North Atlantic to cross over and g-- eventually go to Russia with - - with arms and stuff that they were giving to the -- the people of Hitler and those people we were fighting.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: And I reme-- remember the Coast Guard cutter -- one of the biggest Coast Guard cutters was torpedoed and sunk by a German -- German U-boat -- U-boat.

LEVINE: Of which there I think were many around the New Jersey shore and --

MEESS: [interposed] That's true.

LEVINE: Right? And New York shores.

MEESS: Pr-- especially as soon as we got in the war you -- that's -- yeah I can remember you could look and see smoke all the time on the horizon off shore. Another ship got torpedoed. And uh, see I wasn't at Ellis Island, I think I got there maybe two weeks when I got sent to Hoffman Island.

LEVINE: Well why don't you describe what Ellis Island looked like and who was there.

MEESS: Yeah I really didn't get much chance to look around. Now, as I say we – we came from boot camp and we had s-- a lot of things we had to -- they had to teach us yet. And we were assigned to rooms there but we didn't get any active duty till – till the Pearl Harbor thing and then they rounded up these uh, aliens from -- and brought them here and uh, kept them at Ellis Island. Not very long. I think maximum probably two days.

LEVINE: Oh really?

MEESS: And um, then they took them and I guess took them away to the concentration camps.

LEVINE: Well now where -- what dealings did you have with them, any? With these enemy aliens?

MEESS: Well uh, what we did -- they had – they had these big dormitory rooms which I think maybe had as many as three hundred people in – in the -- one big room. And there was double -- double decker bunk -- bunks in there. Yeah. And uh, we were assigned, they would call us over and told us what to do. They assigned us to -- to patrol these rooms -- go in those rooms, stay there, on three hour shifts. And um, you had -- they told you if you see one going into the ba-- the washroom -- the bathroom -- follow them in. They had some sui-- a couple suicides I believe, during that period. And uh, w-- we were – all we had – there was t—they would put two of us in at a time. All we had to do--

LEVINE: [superposed] With three hundred people?

MEESS: What?

LEVINE: With three hundred people?

MEESS: And w—we each had a – our wooden club. That was it. Now the next day the F-B-I guys came out. And before they went in to talk to these people they checked their firearms.

LEVINE: (laughs) Uh huh.

MEESS: And I remem—I can remember talking uh, to these F-B-I guys. The – the ones that impressed them the most were the Japanese. They says – they had already elected a man to be their mayor. They had a lot of requests about things that they wanted done. There were – were -- would be permitted to do. One of which was to go outside for do their calisthenics outside the building. And I said that these Japanese who know what – what to do, they're just well organized.

LEVINE: Uh huh, wow.

MEESS: But um, I can remember, in my – you'd be on three hours and you were off three hours and then you'd go back on for another three hours. And (clears throat) a lot of them, they'd stop you. They wanted to talk to you. And many of them, I think most of the ones I had were German. And a lot of them -- they had been in this country a while. But they all had some reason to be upset about being there – this one guy "Oh I, I know this -- all these big shots in Washington. When I get – or -- if I could get ahold of the phone," he says, "I'll be outta here." And I said I don't think so. (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh. Did you ever have to use your stick?

MEESS: No, no.

LEVINE: No. So you were like guarding them. Were they in the building -- not the main museum building that's the main museum building today with the Great Hall and the balcony. -- was it a building a little bit behind that one, do you know?

MEESS: Possibly, I just don't remember to-- how I pictured that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MEESS: And I, uh -- but I remember they brought them from, what is it, Battery or a -
- over in New York?

LEVINE: Battery Park.

MEESS: They brought -- brought them out on Coast Guard ships and they would -- they would get off then they would put them -- march them down to their rooms. I think it was only a couple days they took them all away from -- from Ellis Island

LEVINE: Huh.

MEESS: And then uh--

LEVINE: And what did they, do you remember what they did as far as processing any of them? What kinds of things happened to somebody who was picked up and brought to Ellis as an enemy alien?

MEESS: I think they all went to concentration camps.

LEVINE: But I mean while they were at Ellis did they get any kind of processing or--

MEESS: No.

LEVINE: Medical... anything?

MEESS: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MEESS: But apparently they -- these were people they knew something about. You know that there was, I think each of these c—um, nationalities had organizations here. The German Bund was very popular in New Jersey and New York areas and I remember that [not understood] can you call -- can I -- can you call Washington D.C. for me? And I said I can't call anybody. He says, "If I could get through to this guy down in Washington," he says, "he knows who I am and what I'm doin." He says, "I'll be outta here." So I says well I can't help ya, I can't help ya. But we were only -- they were only there by -- I'm gonna say two -- two days, maybe three at the most. Then -- then they took 'em off the island. Again, they brought out the Coast Guard boats. Hauled them back to New York and I guess shipped them to different places.

LEVINE: Now what was the, what was the overall feeling of the people that got rounded up? Were they angry, were they, were they uh, upset? What did they think was happening to them? Do you know?

MEESS: Not -- not that much. I mean, really we -- we were supposed to s-- keep to ourselves, ya know. And just keep an eye on them, keep to yourself. Any time somebody goes in the -- into the washrooms, follow them in.

LEVINE: Did you do that?

MEESS: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: Because they had had one – one or two suicides where they went to the end of the wood portion and cut their – cut their wrists or their throat or something like that. And they were -- they were apparently ones who were – been hooked up with one of the – one of the different organizations.

LEVINE: [superposed] Oh they knew they were in for trouble

MEESS: [superposed] Yeah. They were in for it – in for it.

LEVINE: Uh huh, yeah.

MEESS: But you know well, one of the things in this country too, was when the Japanese – that uh-- so many of them got interned and they -- they were second and third generation here. And a lot of them were unfairly put into boot—into these training – um--

LEVINE: Camps.

MEESS: Camps.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

MEESS: And my brother was in the army. He was at one of the big places in California where they had the concentration camps of Japanese.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But um—

LEVINE: So during your time at Ellis Island, what exactly -- you oversaw them but didn't you have some contact with the F-B-I? I thought I read that--

MEESS: They didn't talk -- talk directly to us, but they -- when they went in -- before they went in, the F-B-I guys, yes they went over what -- what they were gonna do. And they would go in and talk. Of course they all had requests. You know they all had to get (mumbling). But -- um, but -- they didn't stay very long. I think it might have been two to three days.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of them?

MEESS: I'd say several, oh at least several hundred of them in each r-- in each room.

LEVINE: Uh huh. And um, let's see. Did you -- well you weren't there that long. I was gonna say did any of them try to escape?

MEESS: I don't think so, no. Course it's a long way to swim from there. (laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Well New Jersey's the closest—

MEESS: [superposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: But I think that's difficult too. Um, let's see. Ok so then you said you, you -- is there anything else about Ellis Island that you can think of that comes to mind? [superposed]

MEESS: Not really because it wasn't that long after. This -- I -- uh -- we left Ellis Island for some of our duties around the ship yards. And guarding, we -- we

guarded the ships that were going to be unloaded. And -- but then they would haul us back to Ellis Island by boat. And the next day we would go to some other shipyard and -- and guard the ships there. But then um, I guess it was before the end of that month, we were -- uh, several others were transferred to Hoffman Island. And that was a maritime service training station there. The Coast Guard ran the maritime service training for men who would be -- who were [not understood] on these um, freight—big freighters, and things like that.

LEVINE: What kind of training?

MEESS: Seamen training. Some of them would be deck men, some would be -- learn how they were gonna have to do in the engine room. Things like that. I don't know, they -- they were probably there um -- each class was probably there, I think, something like six months.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: And uh, (clears throat) now the Coast Guard was in charge of the c—of the um -- training at M-- Hoffman Island. But they would uh -- [loud muffled noise in background] but the men come outta there -- they were -- and became Merchant Marine sailors. They were not part of the armed forces. And (clears throat) -- and I think I w-- they were out there from probably some late December and um -- let's see, I was still an apprentice seamen when we went there. And one of my buddies, he got put into the Coast Guard personnel office on Hoffman Island and he says -- to me he says, "Tomorrow you and I are gonna take a test." He says, "We're gonna take a test for yeoman third class."

LEVINE: Ah!

MEESS: And we weren't -- we hadn't -- usually you didn't get a promotion till you're there six months, but we got to be second class.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: Well then what they did, the Coast Guard left there in June—

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: The end of June, and turned it back to the maritime service [loud muffled noise]. And uh (clears throat) anybody who had not received an advancement in rating during the last three months would get another advance-- advancement. So in --in first period of time I should've had, I became yeoman second class, which is second class petty officer [loud noises in background].

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But um -- and from there, I was transferred to the Hotel Sutton in New York.

LEVINE: Wow.

MEESS: They were tr-- they had all kinds of training schools there. They -- they lived in the Hotel Sutton, on East 56th Street. And I used to march two hundred and twenty guys out every night -- they went to diesel school where they would learn how to repair and [not understood] engines. And I -- I would--

LEVINE: You marched them out?

MEESS: Yeah we marched them from down Third Avenue, down into the subway and then they would take on the -- the train and we would go over to Queens. And the school was right over there, in Queens. They'd go over at six o'clock -- at six o'clock they had their breakfast. Six in the evening they had their breakfast. And dinner was served over there about ten o'clock, at the school, at the -- at this garage school. And um, then after their classes were done they -- I think they were out till two in the morning -- we would march them back—

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: To the -- to the Sutton Hotel. And then we were free till the next night. That was pretty good duty.

LEVINE: Yeah. What was it like for a young man to leave Pittsburgh for the first time or to go any distance, go to New Orleans—

MEESS: [interposed] Yeah.

LEVINE: And then New York and -- and what was it like with being in the Coast Guard? I mean with so many different people from so many different places.

MEESS: Well I think we learned pretty quick what we had to do and I had to obey -- to obey the rules, take care of your clothing and everything. You couldn't uh -- y-- and you made friends. But uh, like when we went to um -- when I went from New York when I first got -- no, Baltimore -- when I first got sworn in, it -- it took almost two days to get to New Orleans. And then we went across the river there to [not understood] where they had a training station. And we were train—and we were in -- in boot camp for two months, and

some went to Puerto Rico, some went different places. And I – I came to New York, to Ellis Island, that's where we reported in.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: And – and at that time we weren't at war yet. But two -- about two or three days later, we were. Pearl Harbor, and of course everybody was "What's – what's going on? Where's Pearl Harbor?" It's in Hawaii. The Japanese brought us into the war.

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh.

MEESS: And – and what happened, I guess, when I was on my -- we left – I left -- when I left New York City I was in -- on a ship -- in a convoy we went from New York. We were gonna go through the Panama Canal. But we got caught in a hurricane that uh -- this convoy probably had, I think two hundred ships in it. And they were blown all over the – all over the Caribbean. And the ship I was on, we lost our engines. There was no way we – we – we should've s—saved it. And we got through it because uh, it was – it was about forty-eight hours in the middle of the hurr -- we went right through the middle of the hurricane. We just sat there and they towed us to Miami. And eventually then we got the ship repaired and went back to the – went out through the Panama Canal to um – to um, Long Beach, California, for some more repairs. And then we left from there and went to New Guinea.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness.

MEESS: It was a long ride to New Guinea. New Guinea and then – and eventually we worked from New Guinea up into the Philippine Islands.

LEVINE: Now, were you seeing combat then?

MEESS: Yes. Yeah, in – in -- we were in the Philippines just about the time MacArthur, I think -- well, no he hadn't c-- gotten out of there yet. But we -- we served some of the small island there with -- we had -- we had equipment on there for the Navy Air Force, which we had delivered to one of the Philippine Islands when we got there.

LEVINE: Tell me, were there casualties among the people you were with on your ship?

MEESS: No.

LEVINE: No.

MEESS: No.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: No, we uh (clears throat) and we -- so uh, while we were in -- we got towed into Miami -- and um, while we were there my enlistment was up. My three years were up.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: And I went to the district office and the guy said, "Well, you wanna sign up again for three more?" I said "I don't think so." He says, "We'll give you a bonus of two hundred and fifty dollars, plus a nickel a mile from Miami to Pittsburgh." And I said, "I don't know." He said, "Well how about signing up for two more years rather than three years? We'll give you a hundred and fifty dollar bonus." I said, "Alright." [laughs]

LEVINE: Wow!

MEESS: Well at that time, we -- it looked like the war was gonna last quite a while yet. What ended the war was when they -- when the Japanese um, were bombed. Then, ya know when our -- our -- our planes went in and -- and bombed Japan they gave up. That was the end of the war. But I still had another year to go on the in-- So I finished with -- I had five years, one month, and eleven days service in the for—in the Coast Guard.

LEVINE: I see. How do you think [loud muffled noises] how do you feel about your time in the Coast Guard now when you look back on it?

MEESS: I think it was uh, worthwhile. I still have a couple of friends I hear from. Of course we're all at the age now where every year we lose one or two more, ya know. I was just eighty-seven last week [laughs].

LEVINE: Wow, congratulations.

MEESS: And--

LEVINE: [interposed] You stayed in touch with a few of them, huh?

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh that's nice.

MEESS: We were on -- we were together for, oh about a year and a half on the same ship.

LEVINE: I was gonna say, a ship is a small place to be with--

MEESS: [superposed] It was a small ship, a very small ship. It was actually an Army ship with a Coast Guard crew. And we worked in the Philippines for the Navy. And--

LEVINE: Uh huh. Do you think the Coast Guard -- I think it's the Coast Guard, no -- I -- I get mixed up between the Merchant Marine and the Coast Guard. One of them lost a whole lot of people in World War II that isn't usually talked about [noises in background].

MEESS: [superposed] The Merchant Marines. I can tell you that's uh, the Merchant Marines had -- particularly in the North Atlantic and along the Atlantic coast, German submarines tore them up.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: Yeah. There was one -- one submarine was sunk by a Coast Guard ship. The Coast Guard -- a small Coast Guard ship torpedoed the uh--

LEVINE: [interposed] The German sub?

MEESS: The German sub. [not understood] And uh, the s-- when the submarine surfaced, the men escaped. They -- they jumped in, got out and they were captured, of course. And one of the Coast Guard guys got in and he shut off -- closed all of the valves that they had opened so the ship didn't sink. They captured the ship and towed it in somewhere around, off of North Carolina [not understood].

LEVINE: Why don't you mention about the Normandy, uh, that you saw, that you witnessed.

MEESS: Well it was um, of course I think it was about the largest sailing ship at one time and it was a – a -- for people who were – who, you know liked to spend a lot of money travelling. And uh, it happened to be in New York as the war started, and they took men from Ellis -- from Ellis Island. We went over and did -- did stayed duty on – stood duty on the Normandy – guard duty on there. And I think--

LEVINE: [interposed] What were you guarding against? Or for?

MEESS: They – they – they thought there were people that were spies for the other countries or were trained – if they got up the Norman – if they -- any of them would get on – on board the Normandy and put a bomb or something in, then that was it. But what happened was that somebody -- and I think there was a lot of welding and stuff they were doing on the ship, to convert it into a troop ship. And it caught fire. And then trying to put out the fire, they kept pouring water in and eventually it had so much water in it that it just rolled right over at the – at -- right at the pier, and they never got it up.

LEVINE: Did you see it?

MEESS: Not after it went turned over. We – we were – we were – we – we did duty on there for one – one day, I think.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But um, it was only about two days after that that this thing happened. Where they had the fire and they had -- put out the fire, turned it o—turned it over.

LEVINE: Were there people on it at that time?

MEESS: Oh workmen, yeah a lot of workmen on there. They were con—there was a lot of work had to be done. They had to make it from a passenger ship to a troop ship.

LEVINE: Did people die in that?

MEESS: No, I don't think so. But um, let's see, that was before when – that was before -- yeah before we went to Hoffman Island.

LEVINE: Yeah, and what was -- can you describe Hoffman Island?

MEESS: Well it was at that time -- was a maritime service training station. The Coast Guard was training these men to become Merchant Marine men either in the engine rooms or on deck, and uh--

LEVINE: So the Coast Guards trained the merchant marines?

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Because I know there was a radio operator training school on Hoffman Island.

MEESS: [superposed] Uh huh, uh huh. And I remem—I remember as um -- it's – it's very close to Staten Island. In fact, I think it – I -- when we had liberty ship it would take us from Hoffman Island over to South Beach, on Staten Island.

LEVINE: Oh. Did you ever go to Swinburne Island? Which is the little island right next to Hoffman.

MEESS: Further out, I think.

LEVINE: I think it was, because that was the ultimate um—

MEESS: [interposed] Light – lighthouse.

LEVINE: Quarantine station for Ellis Island.

MEESS: [superposed] Oh, ok.

LEVINE: In other words, if you got to Swinburne, you probably weren't getting off.

MEESS: (laughs) You're going back home.

LEVINE: No, they actually had um, they had a um, a crematorium.

MEESS: [superposed] Oh!

LEVINE: I mean these were for people with deadly, contagious diseases. But I don't know if it was used during the World War II time. That was earlier [not understood].

MEESS: Well we – we were -- I think our country was -- there were a lot of -- like these convoys with c—freighters and that, we were -- we were in that before the war started. And they were maybe hauling something in the – in the Northern [not understood] to Russia. And um, a lot of them would get sunk at sea. There was heavy loss in the Mer—in the Merchant Marines, their ships being torpedoed or -- or sunked.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But the Mer—men in the Merchant Marine made more money. They were well paid.

LEVINE: [superposed] Well that makes all the difference.

MEESS: I think most -- during the war, on every merchant marine ship they had a Navy gun crew. They [understood] they put on the big cannon on there, in case they got uh -- mostly planes would [not understood] come out and, particularly when they got closer to -- to Europe airplanes they would -- airplanes would come out. And I remember one night at Hoffman Island there was a young fella on there who was from Holland. He was a -- he'd been on a Dutch sailor and um, they had a little program that brought some of these guys out who had had bad experiences. He was on five ships that were torpedoed and sunk. He says on the last one, uh -- he was in his bed and the music was playing 'Why Don't We Do This More Often?' He said and just about then, "Boom!" (laughs) they got hit again. And he was at -- he came to Hoffman Island for they had a program that they broadcast there over the radio for people and uh, it was a -- it was a--

LEVINE: [interposed] Oh. About the war? About what was happening?

MEESS: It was -- it was -- well it was just to entertain the people who were being trained there. It gave them a chance to -- they had some music there. An orchestra played for them and things like that. It was a nice evening for them.

LEVINE: Hm.

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So um, so where did you go then, after Hoffman?

MEESS: Well we all went back to New York receiving station again and um (clears throat) I was -- I got to get to the Hotel Sutton -- was on East 56th Street and that's when these men were being trained and to be machinist mates on the ships. And um, they stay-- they -- their living quarters was in the Hotel Sutton, which was a sixteen story hotel and building in New York on East 56th Street. And there was all different schools where they were going out from there to their -- for their classes. And -- and I used to take two hundred and twenty guys -- there was two of us, in charge of them. We would march them down East 56th Street, down Third Avenue, down into the subway. We had these nickels to put in the subway. And take them over to Queens -- Long Island -- Long Island City I guess, across the river, and then the school was right there. And at two o'clock we brought 'em back.

LEVINE: Wow.

MEESS: That was -- that was good duty. But then um, I got transferred from there to another ship -- not another ship. I was -- I had to report to a -- a shipyard over in Brooklyn, where they were converting a -- a fishing trawler into a Coast Guard ship. And there was -- the only guy there was Commander Olsen. He was in -- in charge of the work that was being done at the shipyard, and I was on his -- I was his assistant. And I had to do all the paperwork for him. But uh (clears throat) yeah we -- I was there till they got the ship completed and commissioned it and took it off on -- on a cruise. We took it up to Massachusetts and put it into service up there. And then I came back to New York again and that's when I got on uh, on the FS-315, this convoy. And uh, we went through that hurricane.

LEVINE: This was the Panama Canal? No?

MEESS: The hurr-- we -- we were towed into Miami.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: The hurricane hit them about Fort Lauderdale. And a – there were a number of ships went down during the hurricane. I don't know why this -- we were a very small ship with twenty-one men in the crew--

LEVINE: Wow.

MEESS: And some of these were big, big freighters or big battle -- battle ships for the Navy ships. And one answered -- we sent out an S.O.S. because we were sinking. And uh, this one Navy destroyer answered the S.O.S. and they said, "Do you want us to take your crew – take -- try to take your crew up?" And the guy said you couldn't do it. They were running in seas, I think about eight, eleven foot high sea-- seas. So you couldn't – couldn't get anybody off. Well that was the last message [not understood] sent . They turned over. And out of I think about three hundred men in the crew, only a hundred survived. They all drowned. But we were fortunate. We -- we got towed into Miami. They sent out a tug and towed us in and got us ready to go to the Pacific.

LEVINE: So you have had the experience of being a man thinking your ship was going down.

MEESS: Yeah, oh yeah.

LEVINE: What was that like? To be on a ship and you think it's gonna sink?

MEESS: [superposed] Well, what are you gonna do?

LEVINE: Yeah, I guess.

MEESS: You wouldn't get – you wouldn't get very far. I remember, you know after we got towed into Miami, the man who was the captain on there, he called – called the crew all together and he says, "I just want you to know," he says, "it was no due to – it was no uh – umm – (long pause) expertise that I had that got us through this." He says, "If you weren't praying, you should have been, because that's what brought us through." And we all felt that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MEESS: Well anyway, enough sea stories.

LEVINE: That's -- that's lucky. That's what you call good luck, right?

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Ok so, so then, do you think that, if you had it all to do again, you would join the Coast Guard?

MEESS: I think so, uh huh. Actually, after I came back from the Pacific and I got in w—w-- came back on a – on a Navy ship too, we were still in -- we were still in the -- no we weren't in the war, the war was over. I had to come back though, on a ship that took us I think twenty-one days to get from the Philippine Islands to – to San Francisco. And then I went – I went home and I had fifty-five days leave to go home. And then they called me to come back and report to St. Louis. And I got on a river boat, the River Boytender[ph]. And I was on that for about six months. Worked -- we worked the Mississippi River from New—from um, St. Louis to Caro, Illinois (it's where the Ohio River comes into the Mississippi). (phone ringing) And then um, I was on the -- I was on there about three-- six months I guess on that boat. And I got orders to be transferred to Baltimore. They were just

completing a ship that was going on a trial -- out for a trial run out of Baltimore. And I only had about ten more days to serve.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: So I -- I had to go to over there though. I had to go there and report, and I went out on their shape gun and brought it back into Norfolk and they were leaving to go -- go to Iceland and I -- I got off. I went home, that was it. I was done.

LEVINE: Hm. Now why would they be going to Iceland after the war was over?

MEESS: They had w-- they used patrol ships. They patrol nav-- for navigation they - - I guess they c—they catch some of these big -- uh, things when the ice breaks off and starts to melt it could hit another ship.

LEVINE: Oh uh huh, uh huh.

MEESS: But um, yeah I used to see them come in -- come in over there on Staten Island, some of those who came in from uh, the duty in uh, in the winter time. And they were just a big sheet of ice. And it's fortunate we didn't get into that. But anyway, I decided after I got home and uh, I was now -- n-- now I'm twenty-seven years old, and I looked at the G.I. Bill and I said, "It looks pretty good. I don't know, I never had a chance to go to college, but I'll give it a shot." So I -- I started college at age twenty-seven and I met my wife there. (laughs)

LEVINE: Did you know what you wanted to study when you went in?

MEESS: Yeah I studied accounting and uh, you mean when I got into c--college, yeah?

LEVINE: College, yeah when you took the G.I. Bill.

MEESS: Yeah, yeah I – I majored in accounting and German.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: Language a-- I tried to learn French but it was impossible, that's terrible language to learn (laughs).

LEVINE: Dd the German come a lot easier?

MEESS: Oh I think so, yeah.

LEVINE: Well your grandfather probably spoke it, right?

MEESS: He did.

LEVINE: Had you been around German speaking family members at all?

MEESS: No, after he died I didn't hear much. However if you're still in Pittsburgh go to Troy Hill, there's still some up there speaking German but not many anymore. They intermarry in other -- other nationalities and then you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. So what's your wife's name?

MEESS: Helen. And her last name was Aull, A-U-L-L, which is German.

LEVINE: Ah, and so you, you met her --

MEESS: [interposed] As she was going to college.

LEVINE: When you first started?

MEESS: No, I – I met her, I think in my senior year at college. No, she was in her -- she graduated two years ahead of me, so – so I was only a – a sophomore.

LEVINE [interposed] Sophomore, and she was a senior.

MEESS: [interposed] Sophomore in college, and she had graduated.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: And she lived in Pittsburgh, but this was -- school was in West Virginia. Called Bethany College, in West Virginia. Very small school, but a good school. But um, so anyway, she -- after she graduated I dated her for that summer and by the next year we got married. My son was born about two weeks before I graduated – my fir-- our first child. And he's now about fifty-six years old.

LEVINE: So then did you get a job in accounting then, as you got out?

MEESS: Well I started out with t-- teaching and uh, I sort of had a minor in education. And I accepted -- accepted a job in Manassas, Virginia. Did you ever hear of Manassas, Virginia?

LEVINE: Yeah for some reason I think I have, but I have no idea why.

MEESS: During the Civil War that was what they called the Battle of Bull Run, was at -- was there. And at that time, I – I – I accepted the job and the pay was twenty two hundred dollars for the year. For a year, I had to teach five different subjects. And that meant five lesson plans every night. And most

of these kids were farmers. They had to ride the bus fifty miles to get to school, after they milked the cows. I -- I lasted one semester. And then my wife's brother dropped in one day and he w-- he was a partner in a dairy in Petersburg, Virginia, and he -- he says um, "I know y-- you know accounting," he says, "Would you be interested in working for me?" And I said, "Well what are you gonna pay me?" He said, "I'll give ya two quarts of milk and seventy dollars a week." Two m—two quarts of milk a day and seventy dollars a week -- or a month -- no a week, seventy dollars a week. Which wasn't bad, it was a big increase. (both laugh) Yeah.

LEVINE: So then you really started doing accounting.

MEESS: Yeah and then we -- we were down there about three years, he sold out to his partner and we all came back to Pittsburgh. And um, I had to get a job in Pittsburgh. And I had a job right -- not far from here, where we had a plant that manufactured envelopes. I -- I -- I -- I worked here for twenty-three years.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: Yeah, it was a good -- good opportunity and I was able to do well with it.

LEVINE: So, could you say something more about Pittsburgh as a, an immigrant city?

MEESS: Uh huh. I think there were periods -- of course we have -- a—any -- all the nationalities that are here now -- there's -- there's are a mixture, ya know, as there are in a lot of our cities . But um, for a while they -- they s-- they kept to themselves. Now if you go over to what they call the South Side -- its cross one of the rivers here in Pittsburgh -- there used to be, this block from here was the Polish, and the next was Slovakian, and there was an area,

there was all these different nationalities, and they – they kept the old world with them too. They had – they would get together and do these dances, and they had all the clothes that they wore in Europe you know, and they knew all the songs. They liked music. But what happened -- I guess some of them now are second and third generations people here and the kids don't go for that stuff. They've married somebody from another f-- nationality group and it's – it's just changed a lot. The city has changed a lot, in that way. But um, I always thought it was a pretty good city.

LEVINE: Well it was so-- such an industrial city, right?

MEESS: Yup.

LEVINE: And I guess that attracted immigrants—

MEESS: [interposed] It did.

LEVINE: To work in the -- in the steel --

MEESS: [interposed] Steel mills and uh--

LEVINE: [interposed] Coal mines, steel mills, right?

MEESS: Yeah, that's just the way it went.

LEVINE: And now that's gone, so what has replaced it?

MEESS: Ummm

LEVINE: I guess the information age, right?

MEESS: [superposed] Not – not – not – not much in manufacturing. Now Westinghouse Corporation was a big big m—uh, company here and employed a lot of people. I think it employed about forty thousand people. And – and just, in the last ten years, they have been divesting themselves of different operations here and I think theyre just about gone in Pittsburgh and as I said there's about forty thousand work – from uh, there (loud background noise)

LEVINE: Wow. And now, were you the person who said it's three hundred thousand now? (loud background noise)

MEESS: Pardon me?

LEVINE: Were you -- did you say it was three hundred thousand people now?

MEESS: Now, Pittsburgh, the city? Yeah, the city. Pit-- what we have around the city are a lot of what they call boroughs.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: Boroughs and townships. Now I don't live in the city. I live in what they call Penn Hills -- it's a township. And uh, we have our own government and our own tax s-- systems and things like that.

LEVINE: Oh, so you don't have Pittsburgh as an address?

MEESS: Yeah I do. It's a postal address, but um -- a lot of -- and a lot of the post offices are still called -- go by Pittsburgh and of course with a couple of numbers after it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

MEESS: But um, well--

LEVINE: Do you ever go to reunions with the Coast Guard?

MEESS: I would say up until about four or five – four years ago, I think. I'll tell you when – when it ended. I think it ended when -- around the year 2000. There was about -- the last time we met there were four of us left from our ship. And the – the one man lives in Toledo, Ohio and they have a nice ah – a nice place in the summer to go to with a cabin and had a – a nice lake there you can go fishing and all that. But four of us got together there and we'd spend about three days together.

LEVINE: Oh, how nice.

MEESS: And the one man came from Massachusetts and um, one from Indiana, and then there was myself and another guy from Ohio.

LEVINE: So that was a long time after you got out that you were still getting together.

MEESS: But um, that will only last another year or two I guess. Some of them I – I get afraid to call and ask for him because he may not be there anymore.

LEVINE: Yeah. You know I noticed you wrote on this questionnaire that after the eight months of training, you got done training at Hoffman Island, you returned to Ellis Island for two weeks in -- well the end of August to the mid-

September '42. Do you remember that time? Were the detainees still there? Or the enemy aliens?

MEESS: No.

LEVINE: No. What was happening at Ellis then -- do you know?

MEESS: I don't think I came back to Ellis Island then.

LEVINE: You thought you did. I don't know.

MEESS: Then -- then -- that would have had to have been before I went to Hoffman Island?

LEVINE: No, right after that. No, you went -- after you did Hoffman, you returned to Ellis for two weeks, this says. Early September '42. Await-- oh awaiting reassignment to duty.

MEESS: Ok that's when I went on the ship that I got on and I was on it for the next -- next two years. The FS-315 yeah, we got -- got caught in the hurricane.

LEVINE: Oh ok. But when you went back to Ellis, was anything going on there besides, there must have been other Coast Guards there, but --

MEESS: J-- just a receiving station. That was called the receiving station... They'd put you up there for temporary duty or something like that but --

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

MEESS: Yeah during the -- during the war the Coast Guard was pretty active on anti-submarine.

LEVINE: Yeah. So did the Coast Guard -- was part of the duties of the Coast Guard to attack the submarines?

MEESS: Oh yeah. The Coast Guard al-- during the war the Coast Guard is part of the Navy.

LEVINE: Oh.

MEESS: It was under the Navy. We wear the same uniforms, except that the Coast Guard has a little white shield on it -- on the sleeve.

LEVINE: Were you a boat person? Were you interested in --

MEESS: No, I was mostly -- when you're a yeoman, you're the one that does all the paperwork.

LEVINE: Ah.

MEESS: But I -- I did on the small ship I was on, we only had twenty-one enlisted men and four officers, and I always had turns on -- I go and say we -- we were under way I would have a four hour -- a four hour stint on watch where I would have to steer, help steer the ship or be on the lookout for. We would have two guys and one would be like up on the -- up on the top looking all around and (loud noises in background) see what's going on and uh-- one guy at the wheel. But I had to learn to do that. And I thought I did it well, too.

LEVINE: Yeah? Yeah good.

MEESS: But I still had the a—the additional work of any paper-- paperwork that had to be done. But once you're -- you're going out of -- out of the country here you don't do much paperwork. Yeah we were in the Philippines. We were directly under the Navy then. We were part of the Navy, we were signed and still being paid to be part of the Navy.

LEVINE: What would you say has given you a whole lot of satisfaction that you've done in your life?

MEESS: I think serving in the Coast Guard. And I had a good job after I got out of college, I had a good job. I mean I didn't make tons of money but--

LEVINE: [interposed] This is the, the place where you were for twenty three years? Is that what you meant?

MEESS: Yeah. And after I -- after I retired from -- from the company there I worked in part-time for a psychoanalytic center in Pittsburgh where they had all the psychiatrists work and try and make people sane again. But um—

LEVINE: You worked doing their books?

MEESS: Uh-huh. Yeah, I did that for I gonna say going on three years when they ran out of money. And I told them -- the boss, or the trader of their board, I said I think -- this was in June -- I said I think you better call a meeting and tell these people we c-- they're not gonna be able to go -- go -- go on with us. So he called the meeting and he said we can maybe make it till September, but you should start looking now for other arrangements. Find another job.

LEVINE: How big of an organization is that psychoanalytic society?

MEESS: It was um, mostly they – they were -- they'd cut people with heal— medical—or health prob—not medical problems. Problems that they thought they could help them overcome. But they – and they – if they – they didn't have money they – they served anyway. To train helped— helped--

LEVINE: [interposed] To train?

MEESS: Yeah, to get well, to get well. And a lot of these people, they donated money out of their own pay every -- to keep things going for a while. So I left there and then I worked part-time for the man who was treasurer of their board. He had his own business and I worked for him. He wor—he lives right near here and um, I think the last time I worked for him I – I would only go in like about three days a week, work maybe four hours a day or something like that. And then um, he lost his biggest client -- was U.S. Air.

LEVINE: What was his business?

MEESS: The airline, U.S. Air. And after when that happened I s—I said Sydney I don't think you need me anymore, you don't have enough work for me to do. And he agreed, but we're still friends. Yeah he lives near here.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well you've had a varied career life.

MEESS: Yeah. When I graduated from high school I was sixteen years old -- when I graduated from high school -- and it was right in the middle of the Depression. And I remember my dad told me I had to get a job and my first job I was sixteen years old and they needed messenger boys for this company and you delivered things around town by carrying them on your shoulder. And the pay was thirty cents an hour. And my dad – when he came home and he said “Your mother told me you found a job.” I said yes.

He said “How much money are you gonna make?” And I said “Thirty cents an hour.” And very quickly he said, “Well that’s twelve dollars a week.” He said, “On pay day you’ll give your mother four dollars. You’ll put four dollars in the bank and you can do what you want with the rest of it.” (laughs)
They took out twelve cents for social security.

LEVINE: Oh my gosh.

MEESS: But that’s, I don’t know, that was the Depression time.

LEVINE: And that’s when you were what, eighteen? Just out of high school?

MEESS: Sixteen.

LEVINE: Sixteen.

MEESS: I worked there till – and I -- I was promoted. I eventually got into their sales – I think -- sales department there. But that’s when the draft came along and I thought, well I better get into the service, and I joined the Coast Guard. Yeah, my teaching career was very brief.

LEVINE: Wow, what a lot of work right?

MEESS: I knew I didn’t have a whole lot about the s—about Ellis Island other than the time – that’s when we knew the war was on and uh, it took – it took five years to find that out.

LEVINE: Well you know the thing is, the one thing that everybody has in common, everybody I interview for Ellis Island has in common, is that they passed through Ellis Island. And so each one’s story is more like a little, what do you want to say, tip of the iceberg of their life story. And all of it together is

part of the history of this country. And so that's why I'm collecting it. So there doesn't have to be that much about Ellis Island. It's just, you know, the basis for the interview. Well gee that's great and we've talked about an hour now. So is there anything else that you can think of relative to Ellis Island or --

MEESS: I n-- not really, I guess of course as you know

LEVINE: [superposed] Your Coast Guard career?

MEESS: [superposed] I think it was -- it was before -- it had to be in the last eight years anyway -- Diane took Helen and I to New York with her and we spent -- that's when we made the trip to Ellis Island and they--

LEVINE: Ok great that's when you filled in the questionnaire.

MEESS: And um, I think we also went to um, Statue of Liberty of Island there or whatever that is. But we -- I always liked New York. It was exciting to be in New York. I -- well I can remember when I was stationed in Hoffman Island, my first time I was in that—I was in Times Square on New Years. That was an amazing thing (laughs). That was very exciting for me.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh huh, yeah, yeah. Well, ok.

MEESS: (loud background noise) I had a picture in -- here, this is -- this is Hoffman Island.

LEVINE: Oh, great.

MEESS: This looks like it's pretty -- that's the sea all around it there.

LEVINE: Wow. Huh, wow. Do you – how did – what -- oh you put it in this book, it didn't come in this book. I see.

MEESS: Right. No, I put it in the book. Yeah I – I started with this book in the um --

LEVINE: Oh so you've got a book of (coughs) – of photos and what, newspaper articles?

MEESS: This was – this was a guy was on our ship and that was a dog we had at the time. We always had a dog. There's the Hotel Sutton.

LEVINE: Oh yeah. You always had a dog on your ship?

MEESS: No, we had -- not this dog but another dog we got I think when we were at Miami. And he d-- the dog died after we were out in the Phil—out in the Philippines. Then we had a monkey.

LEVINE: Oh really?

MEESS: Yeah.

LEVINE: Where were you when you had the monkey, on a ship?

MEESS: [superposed] In the Philippines.

LEVINE: Oh uh huh, wow.

MEESS: And it was -- her name was Rosie.

LEVINE: Wow. Was she a Philippine monkey?

MEESS: Uh huh, not big. Just about that big. And I remember one day we were – there the -- our cook negotiated with one of the natives there and bought a whole stock of bananas. And we had them hanging on the back of the ship – and -- we call it a fan tail. And we were eating dinner one night and one guy looks out and he says, “Look out -- look at that window!” He says, “Rosie is eating – eatin’ all our bananas.” She was out there (noises imitating monkey) -- stuffed them in. Sh-- she knew it wasn’t going to last, you know (both laugh).

LEVINE: What was it like sharing small quarters with a small group of people for a long period of time in the middle of nowhere?

MEESS: Yeah. I think we essentially mostly got along pretty well. There were times with guys that didn’t get along and they would c—they would have fight and generally whoever l—whoever won the fight, they would shake hands and that was it.

LEVINE: Oh yeah? You mean a physical fistfight?

MEESS: Oh yeah. I remember even in high school that happened. After school you’d get out and fight it out and shake hands and with whoever – and it was over.

LEVINE: Huh, wow. Ok well we’re gonna close here. It’s been over an hour now and this is Janet Levine. I’ve been speaking with Richard Julius Meess who was in the Coast Guard at Ellis Island at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and then was on Hoffman Island. And we’re gonna try to make copies here of -- I’d like to make a copy of your discharge papers from the Coast Guard and I’d love to see if I can copy --

END OF INTERVIEW