

EI-21

PAUL H. LARIC

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YUGOSLAVIA VIA INDIA, 1940

AGE 14

PASSAGE ON THE "PRESIDENT POLK" PORT: BOMBAY

RESIDENCE IN OLD COUNTRY: MARIBOR

RESIDENCE IN US: NEW YORK CITY; NEW ENGLAND

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Wednesday, February sixth and we are here with Paul Laric, who came from Yugoslavia via Bombay in 1940 when he was fourteen. Mr. Laric, please state your full name and your date of birth.

LARIC: My name is Paul H. Laric. Date of birth is March 20, 1926.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

LARIC: I was born in Vienna although we lived in Yugoslavia at the time. But, uh, my parents thought that the hospital in Vienna was better than the hospital in the little town of Maribor, Slovenia, and that's...

SIGRIST: Could you spell that please?

LARIC: (he laughs) M-A-R-I-B-O-R.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: It's, uh, close to the Austrian border.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: But, uh, uh, this is quite, uh, uh, as accepted practice. Um, we also had a, a better, uh, better hospital facility in the town of Graz, Austria and, uh, that's where my brother was born.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your brother's name?

LARIC: His name is Ivan.

SIGRIST: Is he older?

LARIC: He is two years older, yes.

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

LARIC: My father's name was Vilko. V-I-L-K-O.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

LARIC: He was a textile manufacturer. In fact, he was one of

the founders of the textile industry in Yugoslavia. And he had both, uh, weaving and knitting mills in Maribor and then, uh, he continued in that career when we came to this country. He started again and had textile mills here.

SIGRIST: I see. So the, so the small town in Yugoslavia was basically an industrial town, where you came from.

LARIC: Yes, it was.

SIGRIST: Uh, was the textile industry the only industry in that town?

LARIC: It was one of the major industries. Um, there were some smaller woodworking industries and, um, uh, a bit of farming and, uh, uh, it, Maribor was a railroad intersection and so there was quite a bit of commerce going on.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: But as far as industries are concerned, textile was number one.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the town just a little bit? I'm just sort of curious.

LARIC: The town is, uh, in a valley on the river Drava, D-R-A-V-A, uh, under a mountain that, uh, this is actually the last in the Alpine chain. The name of the mountain is Pohore. Um, the, um, town at the time when we lived there had a population of about fifty thousand people. Now it's,

uh, three times that size and, um, the people were, of course, Slovenian but, uh, prior to World War I that area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, uh, German was a second language. So almost everyone knew German quite well but, uh, Slovenia tried to emphasize to, uh, keep its language going and therefore, um, all schools and all official functions were strictly in Slovenian.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, I, I'm just curious. Uh, who worked for your father? Were they, were they local people or were they brought in from somewhere else? Who worked in these mills?

LARIC: Well, my father actually had his apprenticeship in the textile industry in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia was quite, um, advanced in that area, much more, of course, than Yugoslavia and, uh, when he moved to Yugoslavia he thought this would be a good area to develop the industry because of the availability of a labor force. But he had to bring some experts with him from, uh, Czechoslovakia who would, uh, run certain parts of the, of the mills. So that it was a matter of establishing and training many of the employees and this is just what happened. And it became a flourishing industry.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, let's talk a little bit about your mother, too. What was her name?

LARIC: My mother's name was Margaretta.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. What was her maiden name?

LARIC: Her maiden name was Lauverova.

SIGRIST: And, um...

LARIC: She was also Czechoslovakian, she was Czechoslovakian. She was born in Czechoslovakia and, uh, came to Yugoslavia when after marrying my father and, and after he decided to, uh, move his business there.

SIGRIST: So they met while he was in Czechoslovakia.

LARIC: That's correct. Uh, in fact, he was in business with my mother's mother, my grandmother who was, uh, a, uh, an importer and exporter and merchant in textiles in Prague and in other towns in Czechoslovakia. She has, she was quite prominent in that business.

SIGRIST: Is this unusual for a woman to...

LARIC: Uh, at that time it certainly was unusual because women were primarily housewives.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: But she had both a housewife career and a business career and, uh, she met my father as a business associate and that's, um, how he met my mother.

SIGRIST: How did, how did she get involved in, in that business? Was this a family thing that she, that was just handed her, or...?

LARIC: Uh, she actually worked together with her husband but when he passed away she just continued the business.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: She knew a great deal about it and was very successful.

SIGRIST: What was she like as a person?

LARIC: My grandma? Was a wonderful person. I remember her as being particularly generous and indulgent and, uh, she absolutely, uh, adored her grandchildren, spoiled us rotten every time she came to visit. Uh, she was a marvelous cook and we always looked forward to her arrival, not just for the cooking but all the gifts she was always bringing.

SIGRIST: Did she make anything, did she cook anything you particularly liked?

LARIC: Yes. She was a specialist in a Czechoslovakian, uh, preparation that involved a goose liver. It's taking the liver of a goose and, uh, treating it in some way, chilling it, and I remember the liver itself being in the middle of a sea of fat, all this, of course, solid after it's been chilled.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: But being very tasty. It's, um, very similar to the French foie gras.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Was this, was this a holiday preparation or

something...?

LARIC: It was, yes. It was around Christmas and around Easter, uh, much in, uh, vogue, but, uh, since, uh, since she visited us at various other times of the year she would do this every time she came.

SIGRIST: I see. So she, she still lived in Czechoslovakia.

LARIC: Yes. And she, she died there also.

SIGRIST: I see. How far away, uh, from where you lived did she live?

LARIC: Uh, well, it was, um, in terms of miles I would have to guess somewhere in the area of three hundred to five hundred miles but it took an overnight train ride and, uh, at that time that was a major trip.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go to visit her as a child?

LARIC: Yes, um, when I was quite small I just remember being there. I remember as soon as my brother and I arrived in her house the very next thing we were given was a puppy dog for us to play with. And, uh...

SIGRIST: For yours to keep, too?

LARIC: For us to keep and then, uh, we brought him back to Yugoslavia after that, but, uh, that was one of her generousities.

SIGRIST: So your father got on very well with your mother's family.

LARIC: Yes.

SIGRIST: Um, were there other members of your mother's family?

LARIC: Yes, she had a sister and the sister had a daughter and, um...

SIGRIST: But they were in Czechoslovakia.

LARIC: And various cousins. They were in Czechoslovakia, yes.

SIGRIST: Um, what about your father's family?

LARIC: My father's family, uh, was, uh, originally from Stupava, Czechoslovakia and, um, my father, my grandfather who I never knew, he died before I was born, uh, was also a merchant. I don't know exactly what business he was in but he had, uh, eight or nine children and, uh, kept a very close rein on everyone's doings and instilled in each a sense for business because they all have followed him in his footsteps in that area.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, let's talk a little bit about the house that you lived in in Yugoslavia. Did you live in one place for a long time?

LARIC: Well, yes. When my father moved there and established his first factory, uh, on the factory grounds was also a residential house and we lived there a number of years and,

uh, I was quite small then but I do remember it because it also involved a garden and we had, uh, uh, various pets, uh, to play with, ponies, and I think a lamb. I still have photographs of that.

SIGRIST: Did you name all the animals?

LARIC: Yes, we did, but I don't remember their names. (he laughs) Uh, I do remember the dog's name that I got in Czechoslovakia. His name was "Bonzo." (he laughs) I don't know why I should remember that, that's ages ago. However, uh, after a number of years we moved to, uh, the center of town and actually occupied an apartment from then on in Maribor.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: That was, uh, one of the most modern buildings at the time and I think we had something like, uh, eight or nine rooms plus a kitchen and two bathrooms.

SIGRIST: How old were you at that time?

LARIC: Um, I was about six at that time.

SIGRIST: So it was, it was just Ma, Dad, you and your brother.

LARIC: And I was just starting school, um, I think, the year that we moved in.

SIGRIST: Um, you said it had eight or nine rooms. Did you have your own bedroom...

LARIC: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: In the house?

LARIC: Yes. Well actually my brother and I shared a bedroom but we had other rooms that remained empty. We also had, uh, a room for a cook and a room for a chambermaid, uh...

SIGRIST: These were live-in people?

LARIC: These were living, live-in help, yes.

SIGRIST: Uh, it sounds like you were very comfortable in this town.

LARIC: Yes, yes. My father was one of the most prominent individuals in town.

SIGRIST: Yes.

LARIC: And, um, financially very comfortable.

SIGRIST: Did he get involved in the political life of the town at all?

LARIC: Not specifically. Only in that he was, uh, from the beginning, drastically opposed to the Nazi movement in Germany and, uh, made it well known throughout the town what his position was. And, uh, that was really the reason for our leaving Yugoslavia when we did. He knew that, uh, with a German take-over he and his family and his property

would be the first victims if it, uh, came to pass.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, uh, the, the fact that, um, there were so many German speaking people in the town and, uh, many of those had family in Austria and Germany, there was a considerable contingent of, uh, German sympathizers, Nazi sympathizers.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, uh, we knew that this was a dangerous situation for us.

SIGRIST: Um, let's talk a little bit about, um, before we get off onto that track because I realize it's very important to, to your story, let's talk a little bit about religious life.

LARIC: Uh, huh.

SIGRIST: Um, what religion were you?

LARIC: Well my parents were, uh, my parents were of the Jewish religion originally but we became Catholics...

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: In the thirties. And, uh, but that, of course, uh, as far as the Nazis were concerned didn't, didn't matter (he laughs) because it was Jewish origin that they were concerned with.

SIGRIST: Do you know why your parents did that?

LARIC: Well, um, for no specific reason other than, um, uh, they were not particularly religious in following the Jewish religion. They did not observe many of the, uh, customs and, uh, observances. And, uh, since, uh, Yugoslavia was predominately Christian, that is either Roman Catholic or Serbian Orthodox, um, we wanted to conform pretty much to the, uh, rest of the population and, uh, rather than stand out we wanted to be part of it and therefore we changed our religion.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to church?

LARIC: Yes, indeed.

SIGRIST: Was there, was there a big church, uh, nearby?

LARIC: Well, uh, yes. We have two churches in Maribor and, um, church was, played a big part in everyone's life, particularly for children because, uh, religion was, uh, one of the required courses in school.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, uh, we had to, uh, uh, we had to go to church on Sundays and conform to all the various practices.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, talk about yourself as a child a little bit. Um, what were you like? Were, were you an athletic child? Were you an artistic child?

LARIC: Well, um, yes on both accounts. (he laughs) I enjoyed sports a great deal. Uh, Maribor is situated, as I mentioned, near a mountain and in the winter we would go skiing there and I began skiing at age four which was, uh, it was even then quite unusual.

SIGRIST: This is something your parents liked to do, too.

LARIC: Yes, my mother was, uh, the instigator there because she began to ski and we enjoyed it ever since and went on ski vacations, uh, for Christmas and, um, to Austria and also other parts of Yugoslavia. But, um, skiing was a very big part of our lives in the winter. In the summer we went to, uh, a little island in the middle of the Drava River which had swimming pools and, uh so swimming was a big past time, especially in the summer and, uh, the rest of the time we would go on hikes and we also had horses. My brother and I, um, became very fond of riding and, uh, so every spring and summer and fall we would be with our horses. We had a stable that was right in the middle of town and, um, many people in town knew us for, um, galloping through the streets and holding up traffic once in a while.

SIGRIST: This would have been after you moved to the apartment because you said you had ponies when you lived in the house.

LARIC: Yes, that's right, that's right.

SIGRIST: Um, were your parents musical at all, for instance?

LARIC: Well, my mother was. She had gone to the Conservatory, um, in Czechoslovakia but unfortunately didn't keep up with her piano, but she did ask me to, to take lessons, which I did in the beginning, um, uh, at the same time that I started school. I was not particularly fond of my, uh, teacher, who was an older gentleman who was very demanding. He required a great deal of, uh, uh, my, my exercise time and, um, I didn't always perform very well, as much as I enjoyed music. Many years later I picked up the clarinet and I still doodle around once in a while. But that's about as far as my musical education went except that my brother and I were very fond of, uh, jazz. American jazz.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And we collected records and, um...

SIGRIST: You had a phonograph?

LARIC: We had a phonograph and, uh, to this day I still have records. These are 78 rpm records...

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: That he and I had in Maribor, uh, in 1938 and 1939.

SIGRIST: Collector's items.

LARIC: Yes.

SIGRIST: Interesting that you chose to take those with you.

LARIC: Oh, we wouldn't part with them because we played them on, um, on our voyage, uh, here. We had a wound, a wind-up, uh, phonograph machine and we played them all the time.

SIGRIST: Well, let's, let's get you on your way to America. Um, refresh for me a little bit about the political climate at the time and, uh, your father's decision for...

LARIC: Well, um, as you know the war began, um, in September, 1939. At that time my brother and I were in England and, um...

SIGRIST: Why were you in England?

LARIC: We, uh, to learn English. My parents sent us to Switzerland to learn French and then to England to learn English. And, uh, uh, however, uh, just around September when we were, we were about to return to England from Yugoslavia after our summer vacation the war broke out and we didn't return, so we spent on more year in Yugoslavia. This was a touchy time because, um, my father expected, um, an invasion of Yugoslavia, uh, at any moment. And, in fact, we made various, uh, various trips out of Maribor, which is so close to the Austrian border, to Zagreb and to other other towns whenever he suspected something was happening at the frontier. Uh, finally, uh, the next summer, uh, 1940, we spent on the Adriatic at a resort and by this time our papers were in, uh, order and we had received visas. My brother and I had student visas. My parents had visitor's visas. And, um, uh, without even returning to Maribor we left, uh, from, our, uh, vacation

place, which was a little town called Sicren, which is still a resort, um, to Zagreb, picked up, um, uh, our, uh, personal belongings, uh, which we had with an uncle and aunt and cousin of mine who lived in Zagreb.

SIGRIST: Related to your mother or your father?

LARIC: Related to my father. Uh, my aunt was my father's sister.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: We said "good-bye" and, uh, took the train from Zagreb to Belgrade, from Belgrade to Bulgaria to Sophia, from Sophia to Istanbul. We stayed in Istanbul for about ten days awaiting, um, papers that would allow us to spend some time in Bombay because we knew that we would have to wait for a ship there.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a question. Your, your father had already sort of pre-planned this route or did this just sort of happen as you tried...?

LARIC: He had pre-planned it. By that time the war was already in the breath, um, uh, between, uh, uh, Germany and France. France was being occupied. The Italians occupied the southern part of France, so to go west, for instance to reach Spain or Portugal for where we might possibly have gotten passage to the States, would have been very difficult.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: So he decided on a longer but safer route and that was, um, uh, to go, um. through India and then take a ship. And the ship could have gone in any direction. It could have gone west to, uh, New York or east and ended up in California. We, we weren't particular. We took the first one that we got and, and ended up in New York.

SIGRIST: Did, um, do you remember, uh, your parents sitting you and your brother down and saying to you, you know, "We need to go. We're going to go to America?" Or was this all sort of understood in the family?

LARIC: This was, this was understood and my brother and I were absolutely delighted. We were very, uh, pro-American in many respects, not just, uh, listening to a lot of jazz records but, uh, we were also, uh, very, uh, uh, fond of American films, American books. We read, uh, Jack London a great deal and, uh, we had, uh, we were very, uh, very eager to come to this country.

SIGRIST: Had you studied American History, say, in school or...?

LARIC: Only, um, to a, to a minor extent. The schools in Europe, in particularly Yugoslavia, were much more preoccupied with, uh, European history, particularly the history of Yugoslavia, which was, uh, difficult enough, the country having been know first as the, uh, kingdom of, uh, Serbs, Croats, and Slavines and then, uh, being united as, as one country with, um, three, um, basic ethnic groups: the Slavines, the Croats and the Serbs and a few minor

groups such as the Montenegrans and the Macedonians. There was a great deal to be studied there.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: Uh, periods under the Ottoman, uh, occupation from the Turks and the occupation under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So we, we had to know this pretty well. America was a far-off land that we knew about only as, um, the great democracy in the world and, uh, a land that promised, um, uh, progress and freedom and all the good things that we read about and wanted to be part of.

SIGRIST: You and you brother had the opportunity of learning English. What about your parents?

LARIC: My parents studied English. Uh, they took private lessons from, uh, uh, professors in Maribor.

SIGRIST: In Yugoslavia.

LARIC: Yes. And their English was never particularly, uh, good. They, they spoke well but, um, they, uh, both had very heavy accents.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. (Laric laughs) All right, well let's, uh, let's, we're at Constantinople then and you were there for, for how long?

LARIC: For about ten days. Um, again, um, waiting for some papers.

SIGRIST: Were you staying in a hotel or with friends?

LARIC: We were staying at a hotel on the Black, uh, Sea, uh, in a, uh, place called Terrapia, which is a beautiful, uh, resort, Turkish resort place and, uh, we had a wonderful time. I remember going fishing in the Black Sea and, uh, um, water skiing and, uh, visiting Istanbul and the various places of interest, uh, Tokapi, the various, uh, mosques, the Ia Sophia.

SIGRIST: This was very exciting for two teenage boys.

LARIC: This, this was absolutely fabulous.

SIGRIST: Yup.

LARIC: Uh, both my brother and I kept diaries. Uh, just recently I rummaged through some papers and I found my brother's diary...

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, uh, reread our entire journ...the story of our journey. And he kept fairly good note and, uh, he, he was also quite talented and he sketched some of the sights that we had seen, such as the minarets in Istanbul and later on some of the sights in, in Bombay and South Africa.

SIGRIST: So did you go, uh, by train from, from Istanbul?

LARIC: By train, by train from Yugoslavia to Istanbul. Then, of course, across the Bosphorus by boat to, um, the, um,

train terminal, um, on the Asian side of Istanbul and from there by train to Baghdad, which was a very long journey. I think it took, uh, two days, two days, two days and two nights.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of this?

LARIC: Yes. Uh, very, uh, very clear memories of, uh, the longest confinement I had ever known up to that point. (he laughs) Uh, that being a, uh, train compartment which was, uh, not particularly well ventilated. This was, uh, September and the heat was everywhere. And, uh, what I remember particularly is looking out the windows as we went through Turkey and later on Iraq on our way to Baghdad, uh, the extreme poverty of people, uh, people living in, uh, lean-tos and, uh, just some, under some wooden planks made into a, a living area and maybe a goat, uh, as their only possessions.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: Um...

SIGRIST: Was this the first time, having come from a rather privileged background, was this really the first time that you were confronted with this kind of poverty?

LARIC: Yes. Absolutely. Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Um, were you in a private compartment or were you...?

LARIC: We were in a, uh, yes, I guess you would call it a first

class compartment which was upholstered and very stuffy and, um, but the ventilation was non-existent so we had to open the window and this being a coal fired, uh, locomotive, we received a lot of soot. (he laughs) It was a, a very uncomfortable trip. We had a dining car which was, uh, adequate I suppose in terms of the food that was being served, but that also was hot and, um, uh, uncomfortable. And we were sitting next to, uh, people that, uh, the likes of which I had never seen before up to that point. Some of them were Arabs, uh, others were, uh, Turks and they all looked very fierce to me.

SIGRIST: Um, while you and your brother, of course, are wide-eyed with, with, with all of this to take in and very excited, what about your parents? How do you think were feeling at this point?

LARIC: Well I think they felt a feeling of, uh, bewilderment, uh, going through, uh, unknown, uh, places and into a bigger unknown as far as the future was concerned. I'm sure they were wondering if they had done the right thing. Did they take a step that was, uh, really necessary and, uh, uh, one of our thoughts that we shared was, of course, our family and friends we had left behind and we were wondering what, uh, was going to happen to them. So, uh, knowing that we very likely would not see them again, certainly not, uh, very soon, it was a mixture of excitement, of excitement in terms of seeing new things but also sadness in, in leaving many things behind.

SIGRIST: Um, let's talk about Baghdad. How long did you stay there?

LARIC: Baghdad. I, uh, I think only two days. I remember arriving after this long, tedious and boring journey. All of a sudden we were surrounded by a mob of people who were trying to out shout one another, each one telling us that they represented the very best hotel in Baghdad.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And so they were grabbing our luggage and beginning to load it on their various, uh, taxis. And, uh, finally we, we decided to go with the, the one who was the most aggressive because he had already gotten half of our luggage and we ended up in a hotel that was not the best in the world. But, uh, so be it. We had no other choice.

SIGRIST: What was it like?

LARIC: The hotel was, again, very, very warm. Uh, Baghdad, I think the temperature at that time was something like 120 degrees in the shade and there really was not very much shade anywhere. (he laughs) Um, the hotel was, um, uh, ventilated primarily by fans. The hotel rooms were a, also had fans. Some of them were working, others were not. Uh, but we were so tired that we decided, uh, let's make the best of it. And I remember my brother and I shared a room and, uh, couldn't sleep because of the heat during the night so we had the idea of filling the bathtub with cold water and taking turns, uh, lying in it.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And then around five o'clock in the morning the sun came up and, uh, we walked out in the garden of the hotel and, uh, I remember some employees were lying, spending the night on the benches in that garden and, uh, flies were all over them. They, uh, were going in and out of their mouths and noses. (he laughs) It was a very vivid memory that I still keep to this day.

SIGRIST: Well, so you said that you were in Baghdad for about two days.

LARIC: Two days. The next day I think we all bought topees, tropical hats to keep, uh, try to keep cool under the hot sun and we also went to a doctor to get shots. I think it was for diphtheria and various other diseases that we would be likely to catch in the, uh, Orient.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: And, uh, then we took a train to Basra and spent, um, a couple of days there. Basra, at that time, was a, uh, as it is today, a port city that was involved in the oil industry in the area. But we stayed in a hotel that we were told was constructed by Germans and that was our first exposure to air conditioning. It was a wonderful change from what we had gone through the last few days.

SIGRIST: Is Basra a somewhat more affluent city than Baghdad?

LARIC: No, not really. The city was, uh, as poor as Baghdad but this hotel was on some elevated plateau overlooking the

city and, uh, had a swimming pool which was, uh, nice to have even though the water was very warm and the sun very hot, but the inside of the hotel was air conditioned and that was just wonderful.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: So, uh, I remember about a day or two there and, um, my brother and I went to a movie in Basra, which showed a Tarzan film. (they laugh) Another one of our heroes at the time, Johnny Weissmuller. And, um, the movie was sort of interesting in that in the film apparently some African natives were fighting some Arabs who were trying to capture natives for the slave trade. And when some of the Arabs were beaten by the, by the African natives the audience was not particularly pleased and started to heave things at the screen. (he laughs) But then the mana..., the theatre manager, um, gave a little speech in Arabic, which I didn't understand, and everything was must better. (end of cassette tape side one)

SIGRIST: O.K., um, so how long were you in Basra?

LARIC: Uh, two days and then we, we, uh, boarded a, uh, ship that, uh, that navigated from Basra to Bombay through the Persian Gulf. The name of the ship was the "Barpeta." It was a British ship and...

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

LARIC: B-A-R-P-E-T-A.

SIGRIST: What kind of boat was this? Was this a...?

LARIC: It was a, uh, cargo ship. And, uh, the major cargo that it carried were, uh, dates. Dates and I think other, uh, agricultural products.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, um, it had two classes for the passengers.

SIGRIST: Did it have a lot of passengers on it?

LARIC: It had maybe twenty passengers.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: Um, half were, uh, American and English. They were all involved in the oil business in Iran and in Iraq and in, uh, Arabia. The other half were Arabs. I don't know what nationality but they all looked the same and all dressed the same. And, um, one was a sheik who was traveling first class, Uh, his attendants, however, travelled second class and my brother and I were in second class so we got to know the attendants. Not to know them really, but, uh, we exchanged nods everytime we sat down for lunch or dinner.

SIGRIST: How long was the boat ride?

LARIC: The boat ride must be, must have been something like a week I would say.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it was a long time.

LARIC: Yeah. We stopped in many ports in the Persian Gulf and also in Karachi, um, once we left the Persian Gulf and we spent, uh, a morning in Karachi. We were able to go ashore in the ports and so we, we saw Bahrain and, uh, also a few ports on the Iranian side and, um, I remember the morning we spent in Karachi, uh, uh, which was already at that time was a fairly large city and, uh, but, uh, half of the traffic in the city were camels.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: People riding camels and, uh, or leading them. And, uh, it was very hot so we didn't spend too much time in town. We went back to the, to the ship, which then continued the trip down to, uh, Bombay.

SIGRIST: What kind of accommodations? Uh, describe your cabin.

LARIC: The cabin was fairly, uh, ordinary I would say. It was not large. It had, uh, um, tiers of bunks and, uh, again my brother and I shared, uh, the small cabin. My parents had a much, uh, larger state room which was quite comfortable and, uh, the, uh, the shipboard life was fairly ordinary. In the morning we would, um, get up quite early. Sometimes we would sleep on the deck outside just because it was a lot warmer, uh, uh, it was warmer in the cabin. It was cooler on the deck. And, uh, and, however we had to get up very early in the morning because they started to sweep the deck around, uh, five or six in the morning. And, um, then we spent the rest of the morning lounging in deck chairs and being served, uh, boullion. (he laughs)

There was even some skeet shooting I remember. But other than that it was not a very exciting voyage except at night we had to, uh, all lights were out because England, of course, was at war at that time and the possibility of some, uh, U-boats or whatever, was present so we had to conform to those regulations. The crew was very attentive. There were English, um, officers and pursers and, uh, I got to know the captain who, uh, had me up to his cabin at one point because he said he had a son who was my age who was in England, in fact, went to school very close to the school that I had gone to when I was in England, which was Brighton, Brighton College. And, uh, so he wanted to know a bit about us. I guess he wanted to know who we were, um, with Yugoslav passports going to India, which was sort of unusual.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Indeed. (Laric laughs) Well, let's get you to India.

LARIC: Um, India was another , uh, uh, revelation to us. We had never, uh, seen anything like that. Um, Bombay was a huge town, um, with low buildings, um, very crowded streets, crowded both with people and cows that were wandering at random. These were holy animals and therefore were admitted anywhere they wanted to, to go.

SIGRIST: When did you arrive in Bombay?

LARIC: We arrived in Bombay, I guess, um, about the mid..., about the middle of October I would say.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: And, uh, it was, uh, still very warm. The monsoon, um, season, uh, was about to arrive and, uh, we were fortunate in obtaining an apartment rather than a hotel.

SIGRIST: You were going to have to stay there for some time?

LARIC: Yes, waiting for a ship. Whatever ship would take us to the States, uh, first, whether, as I mentioned, to California or, or, uh, the East coast. And, uh, we made some friends, my brother and I, in Bombay. We had net some, uh, uh, Hindu, a Hindu couple on the ship and, uh, they said we have to get to meet their children and so we had, we really had a crowd of friends that we, uh, that we spent time with. Um, both bicycling and, uh, going to a, to a swimming installation which was really, really a set of pools both indoor and out. And we spent most of our time there.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: Uh, in the evening my parents and I would, uh, sometimes it was, if it wasn't too warm, would walk, uh, at, uh, the various parts of Bombay, visit Malabar Hill and, uh, visit various restaurants, especially if they were European. There were some fairly good French and Italian restaurants in Bombay.

SIGRIST: Was there a large European population in Bombay?

Uh, not that I could recall, no. The population was, uh, enormous and all were, uh, Hindu. Uh, the European

population could be seen primarily in some of the newer apartment buildings and, and some of the better hotels, such as the Taj Mahal, which was the best hotel in Bombay at the time. We spent quite a few evenings there. They had, uh, five o'clock tea including dancing and, um, they had their own swimming pool, too, if I remember correctly.

SIGRIST: I see. So how long did you have to wait?

LARIC: We were in Bombay I think close to a month.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: And, uh, I remember various visits to the American Express office in Bombay that my father had to visit and also, uh, several visits with the American Consulate in Bombay. Um, so that by the time the ship arrived we were, uh, ready to go. At that point we didn't know that our papers were not in order. For some reason or other the American Consulate, um, maybe, um, didn't realize that my brother's visa had almo..., was about to expire and that's what really brought us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So what was the name of the boat you finally got on?

LARIC: The boat was the "S.S. Polk," "President Polk," part of the president lines.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And it was previously called the "Dollar" lines, if I remember correctly.

SIGRIST: The "Dollar?"

LARIC: "Dollar"

SIGRIST: "Dollar?" Like money, dollar?

LARIC: Yes. And, uh, it's, uh, the trip was from Bombay to, uh, South Africa, to Cape Town where we stayed for a day and then to Trinidad and then to New York. And that trip was also long. It took from, uh, it took about a month.

SIGRIST: Wow.

LARIC: From the beginning of November to the beginning of December.

SIGRIST: What, um, what, what were the accommodations like? What were you...?

LARIC: Uh, the "President Polk" was a much larger ship than the "Barpeta" and, uh, it was very comfortable. It was primarily a passenger ship and, uh, it had all kinds of distractions including a juke box, which we had never seen before. There was dancing, there were, uh, games on deck such as deck tennis and cloits and, uh, shuffleboard. And, uh...

SIGRIST: Well, and you said you had brought your phonograph and your records.

LARIC: And we had, we had our records and, uh, we immediately

had a crowd around us because they all wanted to listen to the same music.

SIGRIST: Was it, were there mostly Americans on the boat or were there...?

LARIC: Uh, yes. There were mostly Americans. Uh, again, uh, many people from, uh, the, uh, uh, Persian Gulf region were in the oil business, either returning from a tour there or maybe just, uh, back from a visit with the family. And others were, however, also refugees like ourselves. We had, uh, a Turkish family on board, some people from Greece, some people from Poland, all of them escaping the war in Europe.

SIGRIST: Um, was it a smooth ride? Was it a rough ride?

LARIC: The ride was quite smooth except as we approached Cape Town. I remember, uh, huge waves and there were some people who had sea sickness but that was only temporary, maybe a few hours, and the rest of the ride was really very, very smooth. We had constant, uh, uh, notices as to what was happening in the world. Every morning, uh, a news sheet was posted on the bulletin board so we could read the events of the war and, uh, (he coughs) again, uh, we're reminded how fortunate we were to be on our way to America while, uh, leaving behind, uh, a very sad situation.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Um, well, you've been on so many boats and so many trains, you must have been very happy when your family finally made it to New York.

LARIC: Well, it was, it was overwhelming. Uh, I remember my brother woke me up very early and said, "You've got to come out and see this!" and he, uh, dragged me up topside. I was still in my bathrobe and in the distance he said, "Now take a look," and there was the Statue of Liberty and it was a, it was a beautiful sight. Uh, we had, of course, had seen pictures. You really have no concept of size and grandeur, so that was, that was just marvelous. Of course, beyond the Statue of Liberty was the, uh, Manhattan skyline and that was equally impressive, if not more so.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: We had seen that in various films in the past and, uh, to be there was a, was a, just a terrific experience.

SIGRIST: Now at this point you don't, you didn't realize that your brother's visa had expired.

LARIC: No, no we didn't. We thought this would be a formality and it could just be renewed because my visa was, uh, intact and, uh, we knew, we thought the authorities would take a look at this and say, "Well, uh, since everybody's papers are in order, uh, just the expiration of one visa is not going to be a, a major problem." It turned out to be quite the opposite.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh. Well let's, let's talk about that.

LARIC: Well, on arrival, as happy as we were to be, to be in New York and, and, uh, and a new life for all of us, um, we were disappointed almost immediately when the immigration

officers looked at our papers and realized that, uh, uh, my brother's visa had expired and that he would have to be taken to Ellis Island to await processing of a new application. The rest of us were permitted to, uh, to land in Manhattan if we wanted to but my brother was only sixteen years old at that time. We, we didn't want to leave him in Ellis Island by himself and so we joined him. And we spent, um, a little over three weeks on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay exactly?

LARIC: In, you mean in Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis.

LARIC: Um, well, we were, we spent our entire time in the, in the large hall. Uh, the day that we arrived we were, um, given a physical exam. We were told that my brother's papers would be processed and that we would be advised as to the outcome "in due time." We were given no time frame whatsoever as to when this would happen. So we, we had no idea how long we'd be detained. We entered the big hall and, um, found some place, uh, on a bench that also had a table and we set up our headquarters there for the next three weeks. (he laughs) We...

SIGRIST: Were there other people here?

LARIC: The place was filled.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LARIC: Uh, there were people in, in similar circumstances who had their papers looked at and processed. There were others who had been there for, uh, weeks and some for months. Some as much as a year. And, uh, there was a feeling of desperation because we had no idea when we would get out and neither did the other people. The other feeling was that this , being war time, um, and, um, the influx of immigrants, uh, at such a high level, it was understandable that the United States would be very careful in screening the people that it admitted. And so there was a great deal of suspicion as to who was being admitted and for that reason also there was a feeling of, uh, um, privacy that you wanted to observe and not mingle with too many of the other detainees because you had no idea who they were...

SIGRIST: Right.

LARIC: What their political persuasions were. Uh, there were rumors that, uh, half the people in the Great Hall were, uh, Axis, uh, spies or infiltrators so that we kept pretty much to ourselves, except my brother and I had met people our own age and, uh, we mingled quite a bit, playing various games such as Monopoly and, uh, exchanging, uh, pictures that, uh, we brought along showing then what Yugoslavia looked like. And they showed us what various parts of the globe looked like where they came from.

SIGRIST: What about the sleeping accommodations?

LARIC: That was, uh, highly regimented in that women had to

sleep in, uh, in, uh, their own dormitory and the men and boys in the other. I think it was the first time that my parents, uh, were separated.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: So it was, uh, it was pretty much of a prison atmosphere I would say. And a fairly gloomy atmosphere most of the time, even though we were left alone in terms of being able to receive visitors. But, uh, we knew only one family that lived in New York and they came to see us once in a while, so these were our visitors. Uh, most of the other people, uh, were just, uh, marking time...

SIGRIST: Yeah.

LARIC: And, uh, not knowing what would happen to them.

SIGRIST: And there really wasn't much to do.

LARIC: There really wasn't much to do. We were given, uh, permission to walk outside in the garden, courtyard really, um, I think twice a day if the weather was, uh, so inclined and, uh, even then we had to walk single file and for one reason or another we were not allowed to talk to one another, which was almost like a prison courtyard.

SIGRIST: Um, they fed you, obviously.

LARIC: They fed us quite well. We had not been used to many of the things that we received. I remember that most of the people being, uh, from Europe and other parts, uh, had

never seen Jello before and when Jello was served for dessert hardly anyone touched it, not so much because they didn't like the taste but because they didn't like the, the wobbly texture of Jello. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Never had seen anything like that before.

LARIC: That's right.

SIGRIST: Did they, where, where did they feed you?

LARIC: In, um, I guess it was a special dining area. I remember long tables in the room where you just, uh, sat down wherever you could as we marched in. But even that was under supervision. There were people standing around telling us when we had to, uh, be finished and, and leave. And...

SIGRIST: So you were fed all at the same time?

LARIC: All at the same time, yes.

SIGRIST: How many times a day?

LARIC: Three times a day. Breakfast quite early I think because revelry, uh, was probably around seven o'clock or so with breakfast following shortly thereafter. And then lunch I guess maybe at noon, uh, and dinner also quite early, maybe sometime between five and six.

SIGRIST: I see. You said when you first came here you underwent medical examinations. Were these just kind of

cursory examinations or...?

LARIC: They were quite cursory, um, because we all looked, uh, in fairly good health and therefore we didn't go through any, uh, extensive exams. Others who did not look, uh, quite that healthy, some maybe, uh, had, um, uh, some problems with their gait or with their limbs, they were checked much more thoroughly.

SIGRIST: I see. Uh, did you or your family ever have need for a doctor?

LARIC: No, no, we never did. We, uh, it was a fairly sheltered existence. We were not exposed to too many, uh, situations where we could catch a disease and I think the authorities within Ellis Island made sure that, uh, any outbreak of, uh, flu or some other contagious disease was quickly handled in that there was a hospital here and people were, uh, quickly transferred from the main hall, main concentration center to the Ellis Island hospital.

SIGRIST: Did they offer you any kind of entertainment here? Did they show movies or have concerts or anything?

LARIC: No. No entertainment whatsoever, unless we arranged it ourselves among the childre...the youngsters that were here. We played games, as I mentioned. But nothing that was organized. Um, I remember this being shortly before Christmas they brought in a Christmas tree that was already decorated so that it needn't give us the pleasure of doing it ourselves.

SIGRIST: Where did they put it up?

LARIC: Um, somewhere near the center of the hall and, um, it was an object of really, um, some criticism on many of our parts in that it, uh, for almost everyone there, it was not a very merry Christmas and, uh, it was almost ironic to have it there because the atmosphere just was not, uh, conducive to celebrating the holidays.

SIGRIST: Now was the hall a great big open space or were there partitions blocking it?

LARIC: The half was, uh, I would say three quarters of the hall was an open space with benches and tables where everybody set up headquarters and kept their bags and attache cases and other belongings, uh, and kept the same place everyday. The other portion was actually the, uh, visiting area and that was, uh just fenced off by a barrier and, uh, we were allowed to go beyond the barrier and sit with the visitors. But that's, that was the only partition within the big hall.

SIGRIST: Was there a designated visiting time when visitors could come out?

LARIC: I believe visitors could come every day in the afternoon. I think mid-afternoon from what I remember.

SIGRIST: Did, um, did a lot of the detainees have other people visiting them? You said that you had, had a couple from New York who came.

LARIC: Yes, we knew one family who came. In fact they were very helpful in, in expediting our departure from Ellis Island. They retained a lawyer for us and also a clergyman, a Catholic priest, who, um, was very helpful and I think he was able to go to the various offices that, uh, required, um, certification and other papers that were necessary, such as the Yugoslav Consulate in New York, uh, attesting to the fact that, uh, we had, uh, indeed been Yugoslavs and my father was a prominent industrialist, etc. Other people had guests also, family and, and friends who had, uh, immigrated to the States before. And, uh, that was really the only diversion that we had.

SIGRIST: The people that you knew in New York, how did you know them? How was...?

LARIC: Uh, this was the doctor who actually brought me to life. He was from Vienna.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

LARIC: His name was Achner and became quite prominent in New York. Uh, Bernard Achner.

SIGRIST: A-U...?

LARIC: A-C-H-N-E-R. And, um, he had a wife and daughter and I remember the frequent visits, uh, on their part and then we became close friends for many years thereafter.

SIGRIST: I see. Well let's get you off of Ellis Island. (they laugh) So how did all that happen?

LARIC: Well, uh, it happened completely by surprise. One day we were told that, uh, my brother's papers were, um, in order. The reapplication was accepted and he was...

SIGRIST: Who came and told you this?

LARIC: Um, I really don't remember specifically but, um, there were a number of Ellis Island, um, administrators and employees who circulated among the detainees from time to time telling them what was the status of their situation or what was being done and if there was any, any change. And I think it was one of these individuals that came and told my parents that finally the papers were in order, we could begin packing and, uh, be ready to leave. And, uh, this was just, uh, a day or two before Christmas and it was the biggest Christmas present we could have wanted.

SIGRIST: Yes. What was your parent's initial reaction?

LARIC: Well, they were absolutely elated because, uh, until that point we didn't know if we would be deported somewhere or whether we'd be...

SIGRIST: And that was, the great fear was that you were going to be sent back?

LARIC: Either sent back or, or that we would have to remain on Ellis Island as so many did for so many months. So this was a, a big change and everything brightened all of a sudden.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: I remember for days just before that looking through the huge windows from the Great Hall at, um, not just the New York skyline but also the Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty was, uh, facing the other way. She was showing us her back as if, uh, sending us a message.

SIGRIST: That's right.

LARIC: So, um, finally we were on the ferry back to New York and we could see the side and face of the Statue of Liberty and things brightened up. By the time we reached Manhattan our friends were at the dock.

SIGRIST: This was the doctor?

LARIC: Yes, the doctor and his wife. And, um, they took us to a hotel. I remember it was the Franconia on West 72nd Street. It's still there. And, um, we had, uh, a suite and, uh, two bedrooms, I believe, and a little kitchenette, which was something new in hotels as far as we were concerned. We had never seen a hotel where you could do your own cooking. But, uh, we were sure that this wasn't the only new thing that we would encounter. I remember the first night we had, uh, we went to Times Square and my father took us to a cafeteria and I'd never seen so much food, uh, the trays were just not big enough to hold everything. We had a marvelous dinner and after dinner we went to the Astor Theatre and saw "the Great Dictator" with Charlie Chaplin.

SIGRIST: How timely.

LARIC: That was, that was a, that was a marvelous introduction really because, uh, a film like that would not have been seen in Europe, especially at that time.

SIGRIST: Right.

LARIC: And, uh, seeing the spoof on, on Hitler made us aware that finally we were, uh, in the land of freedom.

SIGRIST: In our, in our last couple of minutes, uh, talk a little bit about how your parents adapted to America.

LARIC: Well, um, they, um, they began taking intensive English lessons and my father decreed that from now on we were not to speak any other language but English. And that was quite funny because their English was not as good as my brother's and mine.

SIGRIST: Uh, huh.

LARIC: And, uh, we often had to say things twice and say things in different ways in order to be understood but, uh, as soon as we tried, uh, saying something in another language that they would understand, because they understood both Yugoslav, uh, Czech, and, uh, German, they quickly shushed us down and said, "Only English!" So, uh, that was the, uh, the order²⁰of the day and that remained the order from then on.

SIGRIST: So that, so they were intent on becoming American.

LARIC: Absolutely.

SIGRIST: They really wanted to project being American.

LARIC: Absolutely. My father, um, quickly, uh, looked at various business opportunities. He was fortunate in that having had some money that he was able to get out of Yugoslavia before, even before the war, um, with the First National City Bank, uh, first in England and then also in New York and, uh, he was able to, uh, invest in a small textile enterprise in Connecticut and later also in Massachusetts and those became very active businesses, particularly once America got into the war because he was producing a number of materials needed by the armed forces.

SIGRIST: So he did very well...

LARIC: Did quite well, yes.

SIGRIST: By coming here. Just, we have two minutes left. Your mother's mother in Czechoslovakia...

LARIC: Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: Did, did you ever see her again or...?

LARIC: Never saw her again. Uh, we received word, I think sometime during the war, I think it was 1942 or 1943, that she had died after an operation.

SIGRIST: I see.

LARIC: My, uh, my aunt, my mother's, uh, sister and their daughter and her husband also perished in concentration camps and my uncle and aunt and cousin in Zagreb also perished in concentration camps.

SIGRIST: I see. Just quickly, have you ever been back to Yugoslavia?

LARIC: Yes, I was back in 1985 for the first time in some, uh, forty five years and then again just this last, uh, September. Uh, after my first trip I wrote a book about my visit called "Maribor Remembered" which was published in '87 and, uh, there are possibilities of it being made into a movie.

SIGRIST: Wow. Well, congratulations.

LARIC: Well, thank you.

SIGRIST: Well, and on that very happy note, um, I want to thank you very much for, for coming out to Ellis and, and relating to us certainly on of our most fascinating, uh, uh, trips to America, uh, experiences that we have in the whole collection.

LARIC: Um, I'm delighted. It's my great pleasure. It's been my first visit in some fifty years and, uh, I realize now that I should have come back, uh, sooner because, uh, there are so many memories attached.

SIGRIST: Well, thank you very much.

LARIC: My pleasure.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park
Service.