

EI-3

WALTER PAUL LOEBENBERG

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AGE 15

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RESIDENCES:

- **GERMANY: WECHTERSACH, NEAR FRANKFURT AM MAIN**
- **USA: SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS; CALIFORNIA;
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA**

SIGRIST: – To tell us about his immigration experience. He arrived at Ellis on May 31, 1939, came from Germany via Cuba and was, remained on Ellis for four months. So Mr. Loebenberg, could you please state your full name and where and when you were born.

LOEBENBERG: My name is Walter Paul Loebenberg. I was born in a small town in Germany called Wechtersbach on May 22, 1924. We lived there until I was about eight and then moved to Frankfurt am Main in Germany.

SIGRIST: Could you talk a little bit about what your parents did. What did your father do for a living?

LOEBENBERG: My father was in the paint manufacturing business. He produced paints that was used for decorating homes and such but at that particular time, paint was produced in a powder form and the painter mixed his own turpentine into the paint; so that they produced was barrels of paint that were sold to painters and sold all throughout the southern part of Germany.

SIGRIST: Did you come from a large family?

LOEBENBERG: Not too large, I only have a sister in our family. My mother had six brothers and two sisters. My father had only one brother and one sister.

SIGRIST: I see. Is your sister younger or older than you?

LOEBENBERG: Pardon me? My sister is older than I am.

SIGRIST: She is older. Can you describe your parents? What were they like as people?

LOEBENBERG: My parents were great people. My father, we were pretty well off. We lived in a small town in a very nice home until the beginning of Hitler's times that we had to move. My father was one of the early on prisoners of the Nazi Germany. He was, in 1933, because of his friends in the small town like we were, everybody knew each other and he told something to the policeman that he didn't like and my father went to jail for about six weeks.

SIGRIST: This was in Frankfurt?

LOEBENBERG: That was in, no, in Wechtersbach.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

LOEBENBERG: And after that occurred, that's when we moved to Frankfurt to get out of the small town.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

LOEBENBERG: Uh, but those were local friends in a small community and that's how Germany was changing at that particular time.

SIGRIST: Could you talk at all about your religious affiliations at that time.

LOEBENBERG: Well, I was Jewish and we started to feel the pressure from Hitler's organization. When I went to school in the small town just before we left, for about six to eight weeks, I was unable to go to and from school by myself. If I did I was gotten beat up. Children was constantly fighting and it was just a total combat between what then was the little Hitler Youth, people had just started on the Jews.

SIGRIST: So you were an in-person witness to a lot of a anti-Semitic behavior.

LOEBENBERG: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk more about family life here, for instance food. What sort of things, did your mother do the cooking? Did you have a housekeeper?

LOEBENBERG: We had housekeepers but my mother did the cooking, especially after we moved from this small town. We had no more housekeepers because housekeepers refused to work in Jewish homes, they weren't allowed to by law, but I believe it was –

SIGRIST: So your housekeepers were not Jewish themselves.

LOEBENBERG: No. And so my mother did all the cooking and all the work from then on.

SIGRIST: What sort of food do you remember that you –

LOEBENBERG: Well, we basically ate German-type of foods, normal food. We are not the ethnic food type of Jewish life that a lot of people associate with was not customary in Germany. That was more the eastern part of Europe that used that type of food, so ate the normal German-type food.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you talk about who decided that you would come to America?

LOEBENBERG: Well, it wasn't a decision of coming to America as much as the decision was to leave Germany. The problem we had was we had no where to go that we knew anyone was able to help us. We finally located a woman in Chicago and we persuaded her after some time to allow my sister to come ahead of us.

SIGRIST: Was she a friend of the family?

LOEBENBERG: She was a distant cousin.

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: But she had brought over some people early on in the 20s and who didn't turn out that good. So she was very hesitant to allow other people to come because at that time you had to have a guarantee that you would not fall to the state's welfare system.

SIGRIST: And when you say that they did not turn out very well, what happened, were they –

LOEBENBERG: Well, they was not reliable and things of that type.

SIGRIST: A great disappointment to her.

LOEBENBERG: Disappointment and so she was very hesitant. So we had no place to go. You have to visualize in Germany at that time or in Europe at that time the world was very large and America was very far away. When you talk about South America or China or Hong Kong, that was the end of the world. And the people just didn't associate the distance that today is nothing with an airplane it's a few hours. It would, it took weeks by boat and there was nothing known about the people that lived in those islands and, you know, the information was very sketchy so people didn't want to go to places that they didn't know anything about and they hesitated to leave. At the time the equator was like being a death sentenced, nobody would live in the equator zone. Today we live in Florida, we're subtropical, it's a great life. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Right. So when you wanted to leave Germany, who finally made the decision? Did your father make the decision?

LOEBENBERG: My father made the decision to leave and we finally got a visa to go to Cuba.

SIGRIST: Was this a difficult process, getting a visa?

LOEBENBERG: Yes. It was a very difficult process but the reason we went to Cuba was that we had, the United States had a quota system of only so many people were allowed to immigrate a year from each country and that quota was filled for years, so in order to wait out the quota time, we were gonna live in Cuba for that time. And we made the decision to go to Cuba. We booked passage on a boat called the "Saint Louis", which is a very famous story in the German immigration history. The boat was not allowed to land in Havana, the people all went back to Europe. A third went to England, a third to France, and a third to Belgium. The ones that went to Belgium and France all died or most of them died including an uncle of my wife's was on that boat.

SIGRIST: Why did they die?

LOEBENBERG: Because when they went back to France and Belgium, eventually Hitler invaded and they got caught in the web of that. The people that went to England survived.

SIGRIST: When you were going to meet the Saint Louis, what port did you leave from?

LOEBENBERG: They left from Hamburg, but we had, my sister had acquired a three day layover permit in New York, so we threw the tickets away on the Saint Louis and went on an American ship from Hamburg to New York, stayed three days in New York and then went to Havana.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you remember how much your initial passage cost, for instance?

LOEBENBERG: No, no. German parents didn't tell their children that much. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: That was a, we were sheltered.

SIGRIST: And how did you get to Hamburg? Did you –

LOEBENBERG: By train.

SIGRIST: You went by train.

LOEBENBERG: Yes. And we arrived in Havana at the time when the Saint Louis was laying in harbor and when we arrived there we were not allowed to leave the ship. The ship was a luxury liner that went from New York to Havana, one day in Havana and back to New York on the cruise ship. And we had only passage to go one way. When we stayed in harbor all day, when the people started to come back on the ship at night. My mother was very excited, my father was excited and pretty soon they asked what the problem was and we told them and there were a lot of influential people on that boat. It was a first class boat only and was a real luxury travel type situation. And the boat person came to us and said, "Well, we don't know what to do. You don't have tickets to go back

to New York. We can't take you for nothing," and we had no money. We were only allowed to come out of Germany with six dollars a piece, so we had eighteen dollars between the three of us, and –

SIGRIST: Did you have cabins?

LOEBENBERG: We had cabins going down but nothing coming back. But nobody got on as far as we know in Havana to go back. So some of the people on the boat got together and paid for our passage to go back to New York. And naturally when we came to New York we had no visas and we ended up in Ellis Island. We stayed here and looked for a place to immigrate to.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how they, do you remember when the captain or whoever came and told you were going to have to go to Ellis Island?

LOEBENBERG: The captain didn't know. This was only after we got off the boat in New York.

SIGRIST: I see, once you –

LOEBENBERG: Through the Immigration Office that took us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: I see. And how did they bring you to Ellis Island from there? Were you the only people from that boat?

LOEBENBERG: We were the only people from that boat that went to Ellis Island, yes. So we were here and we looked all these times to find a place to immigrate to and when we finally found or got a permit to go to England, then we were, made plans to leave and go back to England. We, the war broke out, which then destroyed our way of getting to England because they

only had boats and so on and so forth, so we were stuck again. We had visits from legislators like Senator Wagner from New York.

SIGRIST: Are you talking about when you were here?

LOEBENBERG: In Ellis Island, right, who helped, tried to help us to get off the island but was unable to get releases from Congress to let us off. We then got visas to go to London, which I just mentioned that the war broke out and we were unable to go. We had to pay on Ellis Island as far as I can remember, two dollars a day for food in order for us to stay here or if we didn't pay they were going to send us back to Germany, which was prior to the war breaking out. So somehow or another I don't know where the money came from but we paid some money to Ellis Island. So when the war broke out we got a special Act of Congress which allowed us to leave Ellis Island with the stipulation that we were not allowed to, my parents were not allowed to work and we were not allowed to go on welfare. Immigration at that time was very strict and they didn't want anybody on welfare. The people on the boat, and I don't remember how many, guaranteed our effort not to go on welfare.

SIGRIST: These were the same people –

LOEBENBERG: Same people that paid our passage.

SIGRIST: Who were these people?

LOEBENBERG: Strangers, total strangers.

SIGRIST: People you had met on the boat.

LOEBENBERG: Just didn't, we didn't even meet them on the boat because first of all we didn't speak English and second –

SIGRIST: Were these mostly English speaking people?

LOEBENBERG: These was all Americans.

SIGRIST: I see, these were all just...

LOEBENBERG: Many people spoke German and we could communicate the hard way like you can when you traveled to a foreign country. But they became extremely helpful, they guaranteed the, to the government that we wouldn't go on welfare and they let us off Ellis Island. We traveled from there to Chicago.

SIGRIST: Let's, before we leave Ellis, let's talk about, since we're here at Ellis, let's talk a little bit about Ellis.

LOEBENBERG: Okay.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you stayed? For instance, did you and your father stay one place or did they whole family stay together or how?

LOEBENBERG: No, the family, we stayed together during the day, but at night there were dormitories and my father and I were in one dormitory and my mother was in another dormitory. There were only about twenty-four or twenty-five people on the Island at that time.

SIGRIST: You mean staying over night.

LOEBENBERG: Staying on Ellis Island for one reason or another. And there was really nobody my age on Ellis Island. I probably was the youngest one here, so I had nobody to really play with.

SIGRIST: So what did you do?

LOEBENBERG: Well, I was the best belt and key chain maker (they laugh) that was around at the time. That's what we did, we just made belts and key chains and so on.

SIGRIST: Did the authorities at Ellis Island supply the materials?

LOEBENBERG: No, no, no, no. There was nothing like that, I don't know where it came from, probably my sister brought it when she came to visit. And basically we lived in one cube of the main room with benches. The rest was empty and had a same size setup by the door where visitors would come and you could talk to them. And you were allowed outside twice a day just like a regular jail is.

SIGRIST: And where did they, where outside, where did they?

LOEBENBERG: They had a door you walked out and they let you walk around outside in the morning and the afternoon and that was the only time you were allowed to go outside. We ate in a large mess hall.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you ate? Did you like the food or –

LOEBENBERG: You know, when your fourteen years old or fifteen years old you eat anything.

SIGRIST: Were your parents very much upset having to stay there.

LOEBENBERG: Absolutely, but you know, as upset as they were under the condition that we lived, it was a lot better than staying in Germany.

SIGRIST: Yes.

LOEBENBERG: And so we rationalized while we're there, sooner or later something has to happen that we can get off Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: And how long were you there for?

LOEBENBERG: I was there over four months. Just a few days over four months.

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: I think I got off October 2nd. We got on May 31st, I think I got off October 2nd.

SIGRIST: And did people come and visit you? Did you have this--

LOEBENBERG: My sister came to visit us, she kind of moved to New York for a while and some of the people on the boat came --

SIGRIST: Yes.

LOEBENBERG: To visit us on a fairly regular basis. The people on the boat were unbelievable both with moral support and financial support and that is a great credit that strangers will take care of people like this.

SIGRIST: How about the officials here. Were you treated well? Were you just sort of taking orders?

LOEBENBERG: That was no problem. They had a guard at the door, you couldn't get out and that the guards went wherever you went. But the treatment was normal and no problems and they didn't push anybody around and people lived by whatever rules they had and there was no problems.

SIGRIST: Was there any entertainment for you here?

LOEBENBERG: There was not entertainment. (they laugh) There was no television, no one had a radio, papers nobody could read, so there was really very little for you to do. They had a library here, I think, they had books in it and they had some German books in the library, they had –

SIGRIST: Medical volumes (laughs) or something.

LOEBENBERG; They had that you could look at and read but other than that there was really nothing. The only person that came on Ellis Island while I was here was the leader of the Nazi Party of the United States. The head of the Bundesrat or whatever they had in the United States was being deported from the United States to Germany.

SIGRIST: Really.

LOEBENBERG: And they brought him to Ellis Island for about three days before they got them on the ship to ship him back to Ellis Island. They had a daughter about my age. That was the only young person who I can remember being on the island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what his name was?

LOEBENBERG: No, I can't. I've been trying to think of that but I cannot remember.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. While you were detained here did you or your parents try to start learning English?

LOEBENBERG: Yes, because –

SIGRIST: There was nothing else to do.

LOEBENBERG: There was nothing else to do so we tried to learn English. It was very difficult and I think for my parents it was very hard because under the stress conditions that we were here, learning English was really not a primary concern.

SIGRIST: No.

LOEBENBERG: So I don't know how much English they learned. I learned English when I got off I went to see movies all day long.

SIGRIST: Yes, and that's what you did.

LOEBENBERG: I learned English, it took a very little time.

SIGRIST: Alright, well, let's talk about getting off of Ellis Island in detail. You now, you said it was a congressional act that you got off.

LOEBENBERG: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Could you talk a little bit about that?

LOEBENBERG: Well, some, I would presume it was Senator Wagner because he was very helpful.

SIGRIST: And you said he visited you or you had contact with him?

LOEBENBERG: No, he visited us.

SIGRIST: He visited you.

LOEBENBERG: One of the people on the boat was a personal friend and he got him involved to come and visit us and talk to us telling us what he' trying to do to get us off the island, so on and so forth. So apparently he probably started the ball rolling and got us off the island. I really, it was an Act of Congress and that's all I really know.

SIGRIST: Your parents must have been thrilled when all this happened.

LOEBENBERG: Oh yes, yes.

SIGRIST: So then what happened, where did you go?

LOEBENBERG: We went to Chicago where my sister lived and the custom –

SIGRIST: You said she had come to New York.

LOEBENBERG: Yes, but we went back to Chicago when that happened. We lived in Chicago. I went to school.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where in Chicago you lived? Your first address?

LOEBENBERG: We lived on the South Side. Yes, I remember my first address.

SIGRIST: Would you tell us.

LOEBENBERG: It was 5421 Kimbark Avenue, I believe. You got me here. I don't remember that too well. We moved from there to an address that I remember better, which was 5306 Woodlawn Avenue.

SIGRIST: Did your sister live with you when you went over?

LOEBENBERG: No, she lived with my, which we called "aunt" all the time.

SIGRIST: And this was the distant cousin who was already in Chicago.

LOEBENBERG: Right, right. I went to school and did odd jobs after school trying to make a little bit of money because we had no money.

SIGRIST: And your parents couldn't work and that was part of the stipulation.

LOEBENBERG: Couldn't work, so I had little odd jobs after school and so on and so forth.

SIGRIST: So, how did your family survive? Just on your odd jobs?

LOEBENBERG: Through my sister and –

SIGRIST: I see, your sister was working.

LOEBENBERG: She was working and my aunt.

SIGRIST: What was she doing?

LOEBENBERG: She worked in a watch company that produced watches and they were sold and she became the manager there and she made a living but she had no expenses.

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: So it was very easy. After I was out of school, after I became eighteen I registered for the draft. Was drafted into the U. S. Army and after I was in there two or three weeks I was asked to be a, if I would like to be a citizen, which I was very happy to do and I became a citizen in the Army. After I was a citizen, my parents could apply to enter the U. S. legally, even though we were at war and they had to travel to Toronto, Canada, to the American Consul and go through the immigration process and then came back to the U. S. under legal visa.

SIGRIST: Had they learned English by now?

LOEBENBERG: Enough to communicate. Yes, yes, they had enough to communicate.

SIGRIST: Did they go to school?

LOEBENBERG: They went to school, they learned a little bit and they spoke English pretty well.

SIGRIST: And I assume your sister spoke the language very well.

LOEBENBERG: Yes, she speaks very well, sure.

SIGRIST: So you all helped each other?

LOEBENBERG: Right.

SIGRIST: So you, did you go back overseas, did you see –

LOEBENBERG: I went back over to Europe. I never got into Germany. I stopped in Belgium and I was in the Service for three years and was –

SIGRIST: Until the war ended?

LOEBENBERG: Until the war, no, the war in Europe was over but the war in the Pacific was not over. And then I came home from my tour. Did a lot of things.

SIGRIST: Again we'll get back to your parents for a second. Life obviously must be very different for them here than it was Germany.

LOEBENBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did they adapt to that? Was this actually, they were glad to be out of Germany, I assume, but in a way did they feel they were being unproductive? They couldn't work, that must have been frustrating.

LOEBENBERG: Very frustrating and it was very hard for them to accept. I mean my mother never worked as such and my father couldn't work and it was very frustrating because of no money. When there is no money, frustration sets in.

SIGRIST: Did he have a hobby? I mean something that he could occupy his time with?

LOEBENBERG: No, no, basically there wasn't that much to do. I mean, when you are poor you do whatever you can.

SIGRIST: Well especially when you said you come from a rather well off situation in Germany.

LOEBENBERG: Right, so you just keep busy trying .

SIGRIST: Did they go to the movies like you went to the movies?

LOEBENBERG: We didn't have the money.

SIGRIST: You didn't have the money. So how did you get the money to go to the movies? From your odd –

LOEBENBERG: Five cents was the cost of the movies and you stayed there all day. (they laugh) I saw the film three or four times in a day and I went there when it opened and stayed until dinner time.

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: It was a five cents.

SIGRIST: Who was some of your favorite actors?

LOEBENBERG: Oh, I can't tell you, I can't tell you even today if they actors.

SIGRIST: You don't remember any of them.

LOEBENBERG: My memory on actors is very poor.

SIGRIST: Alright, why don't you try to us, just sort of fill us in what happened after you got out of the military. What branch were you in, I'm sorry?

LOEBENBERG: The Army.

SIGRIST: The Army. Why don't you just kind of fill us in what happened after that, bring us up to date.

LOEBENBERG: Well, as I said, I came out of the service. I went into the restaurant business.

SIGRIST: In Chicago.

LOEBENBERG: In Chicago. And had that for a number of years and sold the restaurant. I went into the vending business in Chicago. Sold that after a number of years and we moved to California. I worked in California selling household plastics like shower curtains and garment bags and things of that type and stayed there.

SIGRIST: So, were your parents still in Chicago?

LOEBENBERG: No, no, my parents went, my father passed away and my mother was living with my sister in California.

SIGRIST: And when did he pass away?

LOEBENBERG: Oh, about twenty years ago, twenty-one years ago and so I worked out there and came to Florida after we lived out there for about ten years, to work with my brother-in-law who was in the hospital business and we decided to develop and build hospitals in the southern part of the United States. I was there a very short time when he passed away. I took over most of the business and ended up with seven hospitals in the southeastern part of the United States, some health care facilities like Home Health Care Service, professional buildings and so on and so

forth, which I sold about six years ago and became very successful with that and I've been doing other things but basically I'm semi-retired.

SIGRIST: I see.

LOEBENBERG: At that level I'm involved in the boat business. We owned four marinas with my attorney and a friend and we owned some adult congregate living facilities. But I don't do anything like I – Right. All in Florida.

SIGRIST: I see. And your present home –

LOEBENBERG: Is in Florida, in St. Petersburg, Florida.

SIGRIST: In St. Petersburg, right. I see. Well, I think that pretty much wraps it up. Is there anything you want to say for posterity? (he laughs)

LOEBENBERG: No, I just say that to redo the Ellis Island for me was a very –

SIGRIST: That's right, we've got four minutes, why don't you talk a little bit about your participation.

LOEBENBERG: Very exciting because Ellis Island basically saved my life.

SIGRIST: Yes.

LOEBENBERG: If it hadn't been for Ellis Island I would have gone back to Germany somehow and probably would have been killed. I went through the Kristallnacht in Germany in 1938, which was a horrible experience and so basically Ellis Island I attribute to saving my parents life and my life. Even so, we were here, it was not comfortable but it's better to be uncomfortable alive than face death.

SIGRIST: Yes. When did you get involved in the Ellis Island restoration and what is your involvement in this?

LOEBENBERG: My involvement is that I got involved in '83 when I sent first check and as it developed I finally sent them a large check and I'm on the Ellis Island Committee for the opening event that we're having here. And I hope that some of the people that I invited will be here. I have not heard from them and basically that's my involvement in the Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: I see. And as we walked around a little bit earlier, are you pleased with what you've seen.

LOEBENBERG: Ah yes, things are. Yes, its going to be a really a beautiful affair--when you're here looking at it you'll know. It was basically reduced in size when I was here because of the few people that were here, but all the benches and everything else were still around and available and that's –

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

LOEBENBERG: Okay. Thank you.

SIGRIST: Let me sign off. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service, on Wednesday, September 5th and this is the end of the interview with Walter Loebenberg.

END OF THE INTERVIEW