

**EI-311**

**BERNARD THAL (LICHTENTHAL)**

**BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 3, 1910**

**INTERVIEW DATE: 5/14/1993**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1995**

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**POLAND, 1922**

**AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 12**

**SHIP: AQUITANIA**

**PORT: LIVERPOOL**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **POLAND: STANISLAV**
- **US: NY, NY**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, May 14, 1993. I am at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Bernard Thal. Mr. Thal came from Poland in 1922 when he was a lad of twelve. Mr. Thal, good morning.

THAL: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Let's begin by you giving me your birth date, please.

THAL: Yes. September 3, 1910.

SIGRIST: And what was the name that you were born with in Poland?

THAL: Bomverd [ph] Bernard Lichtenthal.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

THAL: L-I-C-H-T-E-N-T-H-A-L.

SIGRIST: I see. And then it got shortened here in America?

THAL: Oh sho—sho--- sure. I -- I was the only one who was living under 'em --- Lichtenthal. All my brothers changed. When I went into the family business, joined the business, I found it uncomfortable using my old name.

SIGRIST: So it was easier

THAL: So wal---

SIGRIST: to use

THAL: Saw the --- I knew one of the brothers. This way, they kept --- the people kept on say---, "What do you have two fathers?" [Laughs] And so on. So I changed my name.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in Poland were you born?

THAL: Whereabouts? Well, the city *Stanisławów*.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

THAL: S-T-A-N-I----- I - E-S-L-A-W.

SIGRIST: And where is that in Poland?

THAL: Near the Russian border.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were actually born in the city then.

THAL: In the city.

SIGRIST: Did your family live in Stanislav?

THAL: Quite a few years, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe the city for me a little bit, please?

THAL: Yes. Was nice-size city, probably a little over a hundred thousand people. We had a nice house there. As a matter of fact, is it the ---- almost the – almost like a castle. ‘Cause you --- I know during the war the people --- the neighbors in the neighborhood --- they used to congregate down the cellar where we had, like, different rooms. People used to occupy different rooms when the shelling and so on went on.

SIGRIST: During World War One.

THAL: World War One.

SIGRIST: Can you kind of walk through the house and just describe for me how it was laid out?

THAL: Yes. Originally we had ---- my father, that time was --- had a barbershop. We had a storefront, and the back of it was a – a --- a la-- nice large eat in kitchen --- to use. Then you, that was one building. Right in back was a main living quarters --- a la-- brick house with marble stairs leading upstairs. The --- below was the cellar that we'll have ---- you walked up the marble

stairs, you entered a s--- hallway and you got into a great big living room. On the right of it was my parents' bedroom. On the left was the kitchen, and a maid's room. And after my parents' room, was --- were the bedrooms.

SIGRIST: This is a rather spacious house.

THAL: At that time it's a very spacious.

SIGRIST: You were a comfortable family.

THAL: Yes.

SIGRIST: What did your father do for a living?

THAL: He was a barber.

SIGRIST: Can you describe his shop for me, what it looked like on the inside?

THAL: Yes. It was a nice, big store. He was also a bird breeder, canaries. So one side he had his chairs and cabinets with various perfumes and so on, and the rest of the house was all lined with birdcages. And he was breeding canaries, parakeets and so on.

SIGRIST: What did he breed 'em for?

THAL: He loved 'em, and buy 'em and sell 'em.

SIGRIST: Oh, he did sell 'em.

THAL: Oh, he sold a lot, yeah.

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SIGRIST: Who would buy canaries in Poland? Who would buy . . ?

THAL: A lot of people had 'em. For what I remember, most of my friends and their parents, they had 'em in cages in their living rooms.

SIGRIST: So it was a popular pet at that time.

THAL: Very popular.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

THAL: Isador.

SIGRIST: And can you describe what he looked like for me?

THAL: Well, yes. He was about my size. Well, a good-looking guy. In later years – well --he had a cut across his mouth where his teeth were missing. Where ---during the First World War we were raided by the Cossacks. And they were robbing, breaking cabinets, robbing us. They gathered --- ha!---- they used to have at that time --- when they entered there ---or the Cossacks and the Tartars, they used to get permission, --- twenty-four hour leave, to loot, to rape, do anything you wanted. That was their freedom. That was their pay. So they tried to bust open one of the doors. My father stepped forward. One of 'em threw a bayonet, lunged at him, cut him at the mouth, cut his mouth open and this --- had all the teeth knocked out. My mother had an eighteen-year-old [sic] baby, was holding him. She stepped forward to protect him, so another guy raised his rifle butt and swung at her, hit the baby in the head, and spattered the brains all over the room.

SIGRIST: Was this a common kind of occurrence? Did the Cossacks raid . . ?

THAL: Yes, they were very covas --- no, Cossacks and they had twenty-four hours to rape, pillage, burn --- anything they wanted. That was their pay.

SIGRIST: Did, was this simply done to Jewish people, or were they raiding everybody?

THAL: No, mostly Jews, Hebrews, they looked for. But they did, I remember they, bloodied Polish people and so on, wherever they felt like.

SIGRIST: What was the general relationship between the Jewish people in the town and the Christian people in the town?

THAL: Well, I had many Christian friends. As a matter, the house was across the street from the church. Many times, I attended it. We did not --- you see, my family did not live in the ghettos where all the Jews the --- not too many Jewish people. We were mixed crowd, Polish and Jewish. If you stepped out of that neighborhood, you had to look out. If they saw a Jew, they attacked 'em. So I was goin' to school. When I graduated public school, I started the gymnasium, which was a high school. There were about four ---- five hundred students, six Jews.

SIGRIST: So a small Jewish population.

THAL: Well, you had to be admitted through exams and so on, and we always had to walk together, and we never got back without somebody getting a black eye or a bleeding nose. We was always ----we always attacked.

SIGRIST: You always had to look behind you.

THAL: You always had to walk in the crowd around there, and be ready to fight.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any instance that yourself as a boy was harmed in some way?

THAL: No, I was not.

SIGRIST: You were lucky.

THAL: I was lucky. I --- all my friends, most of my friends -- there were, as I said, maybe fifty percent of 'em Jews and fifty percent Gentile. It made no difference to us. But the outside, the rabble-rousers, who kept on stirring. "You crucified Jesus." That was --- and I think most of it is --was by the priests who stirred 'em ---- used to stir 'em up.

SIGRIST: Let me get back to your parents for a little bit. What was your mom's name?

THAL: Anna.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

THAL: Engel. E-N-G-E-L.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about what your mother's personality was like as a person.

THAL: Yes. She was very nice. She had ta-- she was very, very pretty. She was the youngest of the children. Very, in a way, protective of us, and in a way we protected her. She wa---she wasn't too worldly, let's say.

SIGRIST: Kind of naive.

THAL: Kind of naive, raised *ous to be* --- up to be a housewife, and that's what she

did.

SIGRIST: Could she read and write?

THAL: No, she could not.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

THAL: Yes. My father was apprenticed was apprentice barber to some---- His father apprenticed him when he was six years old. And he indentured him, and he left town with his – [Not understood] owner, and they traveled around. He was a barber. That's how my father became a barber. At one time my Grandma – my mother's mother, who was a widow --- she met him, she saw him, got acquainted with him. She took a very strong go--- strong liking to him, invited to his house, introduced to my mother, and saw to it that they got married. [Laughs] Plain and simple.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year they were married?

THAL: Yes. 18, let's see. Let's see, no, it's nine, 1889.

SIGRIST: They were married in '89.

THAL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Did a barber, at that time, only cut hair, or did he have other duties?

THAL: Oh, no!

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that?

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THAL: He was a surgeon.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about some of the surgery that he might have performed.

THAL: He might, he extracted teeth, he applied leeches, he bled people. He applied those cups on the ----- if they were sick, they used to use those vacuum cups applied to suck out the bad blood. If you were bleeding or something, he cut an abscess or anything. He operated on that and cleaned it and so on.

SIGRIST: Kind of like the town doctor, in a way.

THAL: He was the—the neighborhood doctor.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how and why a person would be bled?

THAL: Many things. Yes. If he had fever, or didn't feel well, *ayn* ---the first thing they'd do, either apply the bloodsuckers to you, or they'll make ---- the doctor will make a small incision and let a little blood run out. Take out the impure blood. That's what they used to say.

SIGRIST: And that was the philosophy behind it, to take out the bad blood.

THAL: To take out the bad blood.

SIGRIST: Did you ever watch your father do any of this kind of stuff, or were the kids kind of removed from that?

THAL: No, the kids were removed from that. I know. He did it to me. He did it to my brothers when we were sick. But that --- I didn't see him do that to other people.

SIGRIST: But he did that kind of stuff to you.

THAL: Yeah. That's is --- how he was called to.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other kind of medicine that was used at that time for various illnesses, or folk remedies of some sort?

THAL: They used to make some paste out of leaves and so on, some flowers and so on, but I wouldn't be familiar with that.

SIGRIST: I see. But it's kind of primitive, isn't it?

THAL: It was very primitive, but effective, ostensibly.

SIGRIST: So because your father was in this position, he probably knew lots of people in the town, because they would be coming to him.

THAL: Yes, they'd be coming to him.

SIGRIST: Let me talk a little bit about school. You started mentioning school. How old were you when you started school?

THAL: Well, it was compulsory. At age of six you had to go to school. If not, they dragged you off. Education was compulsory.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of things would you have learned that early?

THAL: Reading, writing, arithmetic was the first year. And I also, yeah --- the mathematics, and so on --- whatever you learn here. As a matter of fact, in the latter years, in the last year ---- the public school there is only four years,

not eight years. Then you graduate, you take an exam, you go to what they call gymnasium, which is eight years, but that's a combination of high school and college.

SIGRIST: It's a whole different kind of system.

THAL: System. Because the first year I learned Latin. I learned Greek; I learned higher mathematics, practically everything. I never stopped learning that.

SIGRIST: When you were in grade school, when you were very young, did they teach other languages?

THAL: Yes.

SIGRIST: What languages did you speak?

THAL: We, funny part, we spoke many languages, 'cause when it was ---- first it was Austria, I was born in Austria, Austria Emp--- Austrian-Hungarian Empire, under the king there.

SIGRIST: That part of Poland.

THAL: Was Austria-Hungary.

SIGRIST: I see.

THAL: We spoke Austrian, German. When --- during the war --- when we were conquer, the city was taken by the Russians. You weren't allowed to have a German book or an----, or speak [Not understood]. You had to speak Russian, read Russian, do everything Russian. Then when the Poland, the Polish Revolution, they took everything away, everything had to be in

Polish. You had to read and write and speak only Polish. Then Ukrainians got in. It was, it became so that every year you were a different nationality. You spoke the --- so you had to speak a number languages.

SIGRIST: In a way, that was great, wasn't it? You learned lots of different languages.

THAL: We didn't appreciate it. [Both laugh]

SIGRIST: Since we brought up World War One, can you tell me some of your recollections of World War One?

THAL: Oh, yes. Let's see. It started, I remember, in 1914, when the war was declared, when the Arch Duke was assassinated in Sarajevo by a student revolutionary, a communist. It broke out, and then . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about it in your town, your own experience with the war, what you might have observed?

THAL: My father was drafted immediately, first thing ---- we, and taken away. We lived --- well, we --- luckily, he was promoted rapidly. He became an office rand in charge of all the supplies, the food supplies, for an entire front. So he saw to it that we didn't go hungry. As a matter of fact, my mother used to throw out --- away bags of sugar and flour. 'Cause she couldn't stock so much. She had a bag was enough. She'd give it to the neighbors, or throw it in the street and let have somebody take it.

SIGRIST: Were there bad food shortages at that time?

THAL: Oh, very. There's plenty of time that --- oh, that I remember we eating sawdust mixed with potatoes and horseflesh. That was our staple.

SIGRIST: Where was the food going? Why was there a food shortage? Where, who was taking it, I guess?

THAL: Who was taking? It was rotting. There was nobody to tend the fields. And whatever there was, the army confiscated it for the front. The soldiers needed it worse than you do. They were all being shipped. So the [Not understood] we had absolutely nothing to eat.

SIGRIST: But luckily your father kind of helped out there.

THAL: He helped out, yeah. Every once in a while --- as a train passed our city, Dad unload a couple of bags of sugar, a couple of bags of flour, rice and get a wagon, and he ordered it brought to the house. So we had enough to feed ourselves and some of the neighbors.

SIGRIST: Did soldiers ever come in to Stanislav?

THAL: Oh, yes. The – the bat-- battles were fought all over. As a matter of fact, our house was one, and next to us was my grandmother's house --- a similar house. There was one time where we were dispossessed. Austrian headquarters was formed in our house, was the Austria. And there was a big yard. A fence was --- barbed wire fence was through. I mean, next to the hou--, my Grandmother's house was taken by the Russian general. They lived together, practically. [Laughs] Same backyard. And we saw both of 'em. If they weren't fighting, they were fighting. When the whistle blew --- the curfew was over ---- they killed each other.

SIGRIST: As a small child, or, you know, a young boy at that time, was this a scary time for you? Was this an exciting time? Did you understand what was goin' on?

THAL: Yes. I sure understood. I wasn't scared, wasn't scared. We saw too many people being dead --- being killed. Too many people laying all over. There --- times we walked in the field, stripping 'em after a battle, stripping the bodies. The Russians, the great, big, fur hats, *kuchmas* [ph], and those bayonets and so on. We stepped over dead bodies to get to what we wanted to pick up. So [Not understood] we got so scared it didn't matter to us.

SIGRIST: Just kind of every day . . .

THAL: It's a every day occurrence.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing artillery exploding, or airplanes, or something along those lines?

THAL: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I was describing it to my kids not long ago. I think I saw what was the first aerial dogfight in the history. A Russian plane and a German plane --- about, it must have been a hundred, a hundred and fifty feet above us. Try and fi--- to see both planes are made out of wood, with linen frames, chairs strapped in for the pilot. And he sat in a chair, was tied with ropes and so on. [Laughs] The one plane trying to fly over the other, and throwing chains down to catch the other guy's prop and bring him down. Naturally, he missed it. So they pulled out their pistols and fired at each other. Not machine guns, but regular pistols. They fired at each other. They both missed. They saluted each other, and they want their way. [Laughs] That was the first dogfight that I ever saw.

SIGRIST: They did what they had to do, I guess. [Laughs]

THAL: That's all. They were friends. It didn't mean anything. They tried to bring the plane. It was a game.

SIGRIST: Was your father gone for the duration of the war, till 1918?

THAL: Uh, a little longer than that, yes. Yes, he went in 1914. He came home on his leave of absence 1915. Then he went away. Then we, he was in Hungary. We went, followed him. That's what happened. My brother was killed. My mother wa--- didn't want to be alone, so we all followed him. He was shipped to Hungary. He was stationed in Hungary.

SIGRIST: You all moved to Hungary.

THAL: We moved to Hungary. We lived that town. We lived practically in dugouts for about two years to be near him. And then we came back. He was --- he was ship to Constantinople, Turkey, and for ----from, ---he was there two years. From there he was sent to Palestine. He was there not a couple of months, and then the war ended, and she --- he came home.

SIGRIST: So when you left Hungary you went back to Stanislav?

THAL: We went to Stanislav.

SIGRIST: I see. He went all over the place.

THAL: All over, yeah.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. I bet he probably had wonderful stories about all these different places.

THAL: He probably would, yeah.

SIGRIST: So your father comes back. And why, who wanted to go to America?

THAL: No, no, we didn't want to. We lived there for a while. My father open it ---- that building was expropriated from us. We lived in that --- the whole house. It was all expropriated. When we left, years before. So we lived in a house on the other side of the street and in the city itself, took a house. And we lived there. But then one day ----we lived there quite a few years. We went through all the various revolutions and everything. But one day we got up and we heard the wailing across the street, noises coming out from the houses there. So we got up to find out what happened, and found out our neighbor, he was Ukrainian, Greek Orgodox --- Orthodox. His wife was Polish, Catholic. They had four children. He got up during the night. He slashed all their throats. He killed his wife and the four children, and during the pa--- partisan. So my mother said, "Enough. I had from 1915 to 1920, I'm not staying here any more." So we wrote our brother, who lived in New York. We wanted, she wanted to come here.

SIGRIST: She had a brother in New York.

THAL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When had he come to America?

THAL: Oh, he came here, he was a child yet ---- at the end of the last century ----eight---towards 1800.

SIGRIST: As a small child in Poland, what did you know about America?

THAL: Nothing. I --- America was Indians, cowboys and Indians. [Laughs] That's all I knew about it.

SIGRIST: What did your uncle do in America?

THAL: He had a dress sh---- dress shop ---- on the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: So he's communicating back and forth with your mom.

THAL: With my mom, yes, and so on. And then finally my mother wrote him and says, "Zitad [ph], we want to come over." So . . .

SIGRIST: What about your father? Did he want to come?

THAL: Oh, yes, definitely. They were both sick and tired of all that.

SIGRIST: Yeah, all that carnage.

THAL: And we kids were sick and tired of already always fighting, always --- nothing permanent, always changes. So we were --- when we heard that we goin' here, we were glad.

SIGRIST: Did your father have any relatives in America?

THAL: Yes. He had a couple of uncles.

SIGRIST: I see. But he wasn't necessarily corresponding with your mother.

THAL: No, he wasn't corresponding anything.

SIGRIST: [Interposed] Your ---

THAL: M mother ---

SIGRIST: mother was close to this uncle.

THAL: My mother had a sister and a brother here, and she was ---- she was the youngest. No, she was --- yeah, she was the youngest. And there were a girl ---- two girls, my mother and my uncle and my mother.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the process of getting ready to go. What do you remember about that?

THAL: I remember when we got ---- my uncle got us into s---- a letter that every --- he's ready on his end. Every----g has been done and what we should do. My fa--- we had to get a visa, exit visa, to permit us to leave. He got a visa here, too. The entry visas were all arranged and taken care of. The ship was taken care of, everything.

SIGRIST: Your uncle paid for all this.

THAL: Yes. So we ---- my father left for Warsaw, which was the capital, to get a visa. I know people ---- you figure it'll take 'em 'bout, with luck, two or three months waiting period. Because people ---- like I know that my wife and her father, they waited a year for a permit.

SIGRIST: But you got yours fairly quickly?

THAL: He --- when he arrived there, he put on his officer's uniform, took a briefcase. He walks ----- he saw thousands of people milling outside, inside. So he just made himself not knowing. He's an official --- walked in, the guard saluted him. My father asked him where you find the general office. They directed him. He came in. He took the papers. He said, "I want you to sign it." The guy didn't know a Goddamned thing. He was looking at my father, "Yes, sir." Signed the papers, my father pocketed, "Thank you," was saluted, and went home.

SIGRIST: This is . . .

THAL: [Interposed] Didn--- didn't even spend the night there.

SIGRIST: This isn't the first time your father's military career has come in handy.

THAL: [Superposed] It comes in handy for sure. Right. So we were ready.

SIGRIST: Great. We're goin' to pause just for a moment so that Kevin can flip over all the tapes, and then we'll pick up the story in a second.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now continuing the interview with Bernard Thal. So your father got your visas.

THAL: Yes.

SIGRIST: And he:

THAL: And then came home. Then we are ready.

SIGRIST: Do you remember packing, or what you took?

THAL: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you take?

THAL: We took ---- we --- just some clothes. My older brother and me took all our books. That's one thing we would not leave. Both of us, especially my

brother, we loved adventure books. That's the only thing we cared about. We took with us. And my fa---- came home. My father received a hundred dollars from my uncle--- for money, pay for the passage and everything. I remember goin' with him. He had to hire a horse and a wagon to bring that money back. In fact, filled up the entire back of the wagon. [Laughs]—that hundred dollars. And all over that was. One mark, then ten marks, a hundred marks, a thousand marks.

SIGRIST: That terrible inflation.

THAL: Oh, God, inflation. So he had a ---- we had a whole wagon full of money ---take us home. But we went . . .

SIGRIST: Was it sad for you, as a boy, leaving? Of course, you're twelve at this point.

THAL: No. I was excited. We were excited. What – like --we knew what was in front of us. L ----we were sad leaving our friends and so on, but so was exciting.

SIGRIST: You figure it had to be better than what you'd been through.

THAL: It couldn't be worse. And, fortunately, let's see, we left September the 10th.

SIGRIST: Where did you leave from?

THAL: From my city, we took a train to Danzig. There we boarded a small boat took us to Liverpool. At Liverpool we got aboard the Aquitania.

SIGRIST: What was it like seeing the Aquitania?

THAL: Oh, God, was floating palace --- with the four stacks, and the size of it. But,

unfortunately, we were down in the hold. [Laughs] In the very bottom of it. And like stacks --- like bales of hay. We had one small cabin --- my father, my mother, my five brothers. And all around, the --- you had a small cabin. And we were there all the time. We -- allow ---once a day we were permitted to go out for a half hour for breath of fresh air. Ship was over thousands of people. You couldn't leave them all. So once a day our turn came to let us up for a half hour ---- to get a fresh air, stretch our legs. Then we went down again.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick on the boat?

THAL: Yes, we all. We got very sick because we hit, halfway, a storm ---- a tremendous storm hit ---- where they call, "batter [sic] down the hatches." We were down in the hold. They battered the hatches down. And how I knowed, that our cabin was full of water up to the level of --- of the first bunk was under water, the bottom bunk. So we were just sittin' on the top bunk, swinging our feet. At that --- that time, I --- we heard that the captain was ready. He was goin' to --- . Yeah, we put on the li—the life belts. We had taken a --- up. And we came out, there were ropes stretched all around the deck. You had to hold on to the ropes to walk, not to fall off or be blown off. And we were told, the sailors told us whe--- if we -- they load the lifeboats, which is our station. We waited there. But he s—the Captain ordered on -- to the last minute --- he said, "I'll give the word when you are to do it." Luckily he waited out, and the storm abated.

SIGRIST: Of course, your father is probably a good traveler, having been around.

THAL: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How about your mom?

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THAL: Nah, she'd never been anywheres, too. She – that's the furthest she ever --- well, the Hungary, and then here.

SIGRIST: Had she ever been on a boat before?

THAL: Neither have I. None of us were.

SIGRIST: Do you remember on the Aquitania where they fed you?

THAL: Yes. Practically three times a day ---- herring, and piece of black bread, occasionally a potato. Never saw anything else.

SIGRIST: And was there a dining facility there?

THAL: Uh, no. We got our food in the cabin. We ate in the cabin.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it when you left Danzig?

THAL: Let's see. We left the house September the 10<sup>th</sup> -- I remember --- a week after my birthday. Took us two days to get to Danzig. That we boarded the same night. We boarded the boat and we were in Liverpool overnight. Next morning, we boarded the Aquitania.

SIGRIST: Then how long did the Aquitania take to get to New York?

THAL: About ten days.

SIGRIST: So it's kind of a, it's a long journey, you know, from the time you left to the time you got here.

THAL: From the time, no, it was very short -- took us about two weeks.

SIGRIST: Well . . .

THAL: That's the shortest that anybody I ever heard of made a tri—a trip like that, in such a short time.

SIGRIST: On, you know, two boats, and . . .

THAL: Yeah, a train and two boats.

SIGRIST: A train and two boats.

THAL: And then a tugboat from here to --- from Ellis Island, back to Manhattan.

SIGRIST: Do you remember arriving in New York Harbor?

THAL: Yeah. We got there during the night. We weren't let out till early in the morning. It was still dark, dawn. When we went out on deck ---- when, it was cloudy, dark. Then the clouds were breaking up, and we heard people shouting, "America, America," pointing their hand. Then we look --- I looked up, there was the Statue of Liberty. B--oh, they started ye--- everybody was so sick of it, everything. They were so happy; they almost danced at the sight of it. That was the first sight. And another sight I'll never forget is my first sight of a black man. I never saw one. I couldn't imagine. I was on deck, and I -- the --- from downstairs ----- from the ---- to a cabin class, a man --- take a look dressed in a yellow suit, one of those hats ----- flashing a smile, eating a banana. The first time I ever saw a black man, and the first time my life I ever saw a banana. He must have seen me staring at it. He took --- he had a couple of 'em --- he took one, peeled it, and gave it to me, and told me how to eat it. That was my first sight of both. I'll never forget that.

SIGRIST: Welcome to America. [Laughs]

THAL: It was welcome.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened. Since the boat dock?

THAL: The boat stopped mid-ocean. Then a --- it proceed a very slow pace into the Hudson bay --- I guess into the Hudson River. It docked somewhere. We were let off on the other side, it --- threw --- let us down into tugboats. We got right off --- not on land --- we weren't permitted; right on the outside -- the water side --- into tugboats. And they took us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Well, why don't you tell me what you remember about Ellis Island.

THAL: A gree--- we were marched up off the boat carrying our luggage, bags, whatever it was. I was crying. My -- I had ---- my older bro -- brother was crying all night long. 'Cause we were told we're not allowed to take the books with us.

SIGRIST: Had you gotten 'em on the boat?

THAL: We got 'em on the boat. But we weren't allowed; officials wouldn't allow them to be brought here. We had to leave them. My brother cried all night long over it. He didn't care, he's not gonna be parted from the books. When we got here he came in ---- it was great, big pipe railing. People starting filling it in, and we were waiting our next --- moving slowly, doctors examining. I don't know if they examined us all. They came to my brother. I saw the doctor take a look at it and put a chalk mark on it and said, "You -- you stop here." So my father, my parents knew what was happening. They started and they said, "No, his eyes be---" And my father said, "No, he

was crying all night." explained it, they wouldn't listen. So he got – he went down somewhere to the higher up's ---- went outside in the hall, some office. He got some doctor who listened to him. They came over and took my brother to one of the medical offices, examined him. He came back all smiles. The chalk mark was off, 'cause my mother was ready to go ---- all four of us go back."

SIGRIST: She was very upset about this.

THAL: She was upset, and she said ----she, "I'm not leaving my—my child alone." So she said, "We'll all go back." But he came back without a chalk mark and we moved on. And that was the first day of *Rosh Hoshanah*, Jewish holiday. We spent the -- that evening, my uncle hired a little tugboat --- came to Ellis Island, took us off. That night we spent in his house, and the next morning we went to the temple.

SIGRIST: And this is your mom's brother.

THAL: My mom's brother, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island crowded at that time, or was it . . .

THAL: Oh, was it! I don't think you could drop a pin on it. The noise --- all the tongues and the languages. Everybody was yelling, scared, frightened. They didn't know what to do, what 'waited them.

SIGRIST: Like your mom.

THAL: Like my mom, yes. But we were fortunate enough that our trip was, all told, was very short.

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SIGRIST: How long were you here at Ellis?

THAL: At Ellis, one day. We la-- landed in the morning. We left that night, late in the evening.

SIGRIST: Had it been a long time since your mother saw your uncle?

THAL: Since she saw my uncle? Probably about -- let's see, twenty-two year were --'bout twenty, twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it had been a long time before she had seen him.

THAL: Yeah, that's right. He was --- he was a youth. He want -- he was about fourteen, fifteen.

SIGRIST: So he was kind of a stranger to her, in a way.

THAL: In a way, he was.

SIGRIST: Tell me, you said he took you to his apartment.

THAL: Yes. We [Not understood] I remember, 101 Clinton Street, above the dress shop.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you did that first night when he brought you to the apartment.

THAL: The family was there. We sat and talk, and drank tea.

SIGRIST: You said his, the dress shop, was underneath.

THAL: There was a big dress store underneath, and he had an apartment above it. And then we split up. Now he had a small apartment --- he, his wife and a daughter. They ga—so they had one room, and the other rooms. So I stayed with my parents and my kid brother--- and various members of ---- her sister took some of them, and an uncle ---

SIGRIST: [Interposed] So these -----

THAL: took two.

SIGRIST: are kind of crowded quarters compared to what you're used to?

THAL: Oh, very, very crowded.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what it was like, the discoveries that you made in New York in those first few months? What was it like to be a small immigrant boy in New York at that time?

THAL: It was very dir—very ---as far as I was concerned, it was very nice. It wa---had disadvantages. It was crowded like anything. We lived in one of those tenement houses where six ----- first one was --- it was always 9th Street. I'm still living 9th Street in Brooklyn, but---. [Laughs] East 9th Street. We lived on the first floor. Tenement had six apartments in each floor. There were two bathrooms for each floor, for all of us. And most of the time they were out of order. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: So you were out of luck.

THAL: You --- you can imagine.

SIGRIST: How was the tenement apartment heated?

THAL: Uh, coal. That was coal.

SIGRIST: Was there a stove in the apartment, or was it central?

THAL: No, no. There was a stove, a black stove--- not a pot-bellied, but you cooked on top of it. You fed it wood and coal, and you make --- kept it hot. There's no bathroom. The bathroom --- we used to bathe in the kitchen. There was a --- not a bathroom, like a washroom ---- with the washers. That's what, the washtubs, you called 'em. That's what we used to bathe in.

SIGRIST: How did you light the apartment?

THAL: Uh, lit? Gas.

SIGRIST: You still had gas.

THAL: Oh, gas, you dropped a quarter into the meter, you got twenty-five cents worth. You had those gas mantles. They broke every Monday and Wednesday, [Laughs] and you lit 'em. Then, finally we moved to another apartment where we had our own bathroom. And we had electricity.

SIGRIST: What was the first job your father got?

THAL: As a barber.

SIGRIST: He got work as a barber here?

THAL: As a barber.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about starting a, what did he have to do to start a practice

in America as a barber?

THAL: Well, he didn't. He went to work for someone. He worked a few years, and then that man wanted to --- the owner --- wanted to retire. So my father bought the store.

SIGRIST: This is a long time afterwards.

THAL: Oh, yeah, a few years after.

SIGRIST: Did your father like America?

THAL: Oh, yes, he certainly did.

SIGRIST: Of course, I imagine the barber practice in America was somewhat different than it had been in Europe.

THAL: Not much. But ---at those times, wasn't much different. People still called him to put the cups down, to use the bloodsuckers, and so on. They still used --- if they had a boil or something, they u--- they asked his advice, what to do.

SIGRIST: So was his practice in a European neighborhood?

THAL: It was all immigrant neighborhood, the Lower East Side.

SIGRIST: A Jewish neighborhood.

THAL: Strictly Jewish, all immigrants.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe what the neighborhood looked like to me?

THAL: Yes. There were, the street where we lived in. Then the avenues were lined with pushcarts on both sides. Food, things, whatever, anything you wanted. To some, stores ---- most of the things you needed, you bought off the pushcarts. And there were no cars. A horse and wagons.

SIGRIST: Was it a crowded neighborhood?

THAL: Very, very crowded and dirty and noisy.

SIGRIST: Did your mom get a job when you came to America?

THAL: No, she never worked in her life.

SIGRIST: How did your mother adjust to America?

THAL: Well, my mother, since tha--- my younger brother was killed in her arms, she hadn't been well. She stayed out of most things. Just running the house and so on. That's all.

SIGRIST: So she pretty much just stayed at home.

THAL: She stayed at home, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did she find it difficult making friends, or anything like that?

THAL: Uh, she didn't have any friends. She didn't, she did not make any friends.

SIGRIST: That must have been hard for her.

THAL: It must have. We never stopped to think of it, but she had one or two

neighbors that lived next door to her, and that's all. She did not make any friends.

SIGRIST: Because, again, your father's in a situation where he knows lots of people.

THAL: He knew the whole world around him, yes. He knew what's goin' on. He was a go-getter. But my mother, no.

SIGRIST: Did they, did either of 'em learn to speak English?

THAL: My father did. My mother, broken English.

SIGRIST: How did you learn how to speak English?

THAL: Uh, when we were --- we got here, I had to go to school. I know --- I was in the *gymnasium* already, in high school. They put me into 3-A, public school, with little kids. And you were not, in those days it isn't like today, bilingual. You're not allowed to speak or read or anything--- anything but English. You're in America -- you study American, you be an American. And even the --- the kids couldn't ---- knew of --- some English, anything. If you tried to talk 'em out of it --- I did not know Yiddish. Only, in thus I spoke German. I spoke some French, I spoke a little Russian, mostly Polish. They used to call you, "Mocky, go back." If you said something it --- it ---- that wasn't --- not in English. So you were forced to speak. And we were all a very avaricious readers. Spent our life in the libraries reading or taking books. We started taking out English books, and we learned 'em.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the first English book you read cover-to-cover was?

THAL: Yes. Joseph Conard.

SIGRIST: Boy, you started with something easy. [Laughs]

THAL: He was our favorite. There's ---

SIGRIST: Wonderful writer.

THAL: We brought all his works, and Shake --- Shakespeare translated into Hebrew, all his works. These were our books. That's what --- that was our library.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a story or an anecdote of some sort of ---of when you were trying to learn English and making a mistake?

THAL: No.

SIGRIST: Something that sticks out in your mind?

THAL: No, there's not, because we all doin' the same thing. So it was accepted. You were corrected, that's all.

SIGRIST: How did your, I'm just sort of curious, how did your mother learn English? You said she spoke broken English.

THAL: Very, from us . . .

SIGRIST: From you?

THAL: From us.

SIGRIST: You said there were four brothers.

THAL: We were five brothers.

SIGRIST: Five. Could you name your other brothers for me? I didn't ask you that.

THAL: Yeah. I had Mac, oldest. Then I had one sister only, Ida, whom I didn't know until she was eighteen years old. And Julie, me, Jack and Bill.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the brother that had been killed?

THAL: Oh, Sigmund.

SIGRIST: Sigmund. And how come you didn't know Ida until she was so old?

THAL: Well, when she was a baby, my mother had another sister who eloped when she was about fourteen, fifteen --- to a -- to with a Romanian officer who was a nobleman. They went to the emperor's ba—ball. With emperor had a summer palace a block away from us. She went there with a friend, and she met that Yulan [ph] with the purple pants, crimson jacket and feathers and all. He approached her and asked her for a dance. They both fell in love. They eloped, and they went back to Romania and lived there. Unfortunately, she didn't have any children.

Then one day, she came and asked my mother, my sister was about a year or two old --- she want to take her for a vacation. She insisted. So my mother said, "Okay." She said, "I'll take her, I'll keep her maybe two weeks or so and bring her back." She took her, World War One breaks out, no communication between the two countries. So she stayed there until she was about seven years old. My mother was raising hell; she's the only daughter. And finally she came back. So my aunt started writing a letter. "The house is empty, the piano is silent, there's not a sound from it." And she sends her a photograph of her do—her doll. "Your doll is sitting there

and crying. Nobody taking her for a walk in the carriage," and so on.

My sister kept on getting those letters, so finally she told 'em, "Let me go back and get my doll, and I'll come back." Oh, no, that's the time-- that was before the war ---- she came back. Then she came back, the war broke out, and we didn't see her again until in this country when she was eighteen months [sic] old. By the--the aunt passed away. My uncle wa-- became the chief justice of the Romanian Supreme Court. He was busy and so on. She was a --- one lone girl in the house. So she decided she came, she joined her mother.

SIGRIST: She was eighteen years old.

THAL: She was eighteen years old.

SIGRIST: Boy, what a story that is. [Laughs]

THAL: When I first met her.

SIGRIST: What did your mother think about all this? I mean, she must have been very happy to have her back.

THAL: Oh, sure she was.

SIGRIST: but again, she was kind of a stranger in a way, too.

THAL: In a way. She didn't stay with us long. She lived a while. She wasn't used to all that. She took her own apartment.

SIGRIST: Did she get a job?

THAL: Oh, yes. She was teaching French and English in a school down on 18th Street, West Side.

SIGRIST: That's a very interesting story. Speaking of jobs, tell me your first job. What was the first job you had in America?

THAL: The first job I was twelve-and-a-half years old. I was offered a job as an errand boy in a dental laboratory delivering teeth, dentures. Picking up work from the dentist, impressions, and delivering finished work --- after school. I was given three dollars a week from. It started three o'clock and you generally worked till midnight. Saturday --- Friday night you worked through the night and Saturday the whole day for the three dollars. Gradually I learned a little, watch --. I had to make deliveries in between. You swept the floor. I liked the mechanical works. I fooled around, I practiced. People ordered my time when I wasn't working. I hung around there, and learned. Eventually, I became an assistant ----washing bowls, mixing plaster and so on. I worked myself up until I opened my own lab.  
[Laughs]

SIGRIST: A true American success story.

THAL: It was. I had my lab, ran it for about twenty-five years. Then I got a heart attack and the doctors forced me ---- made me, told me and my wife ---- if I'll --- if I go back to that, I won't last a year. So my wife wouldn't let me. So I went into ----- my whole family was, ran textile mills. I joined 'em. That's when I -- I changed my name to Thal. I was married under Lichtenthal. I liked it. My wife loved it. She refused to change it, so we lived. But when I went to work for brothers ---- when we met people ----- said, "My brother, Bernard Lichtenthal." They said, "What did you do, have different fathers, or what?" So it became embarrassing. So, I joined the family.

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SIGRIST: Well, Thal's easier to spell, I guess. [Laughs]

THAL: Yes, much easier, but Lichtenthal is more --- musical. It has a meaning. It's the town where Franz Schubert was born, the town of Lichtenthal. And the meaning goes, "Light in the valley." You're shedding light in the valley. So I --- I liked it, and I stuck to it. But when the whole family was known as Thal, I had to change it.

SIGRIST: In our remaining minute, I do want to ask you one final question, and that is ---- are you glad that your parents decided to come to this country?

THAL: I certainly am.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Poland?

THAL: I wouldn't be alive. It's as simple as that. How many -- I know --- when I investigated and checked with people, most of the Jews in my town were rounded up by Hitler and gassed anyway. Maybe one or two got away. So that's the answer.

SIGRIST: Mr. Thal, I want to thank you very much for coming all the way . . .

THAL: It's my pleasure.

SIGRIST: All the way from Brooklyn to do this interview with us.

THAL: You're welcome. It's the least I could do.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Bernard Thal on May 14, 1993.