

EI-315

HARRY GEM HOY LEW

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ARRIVAL IN THE U.S. BY PAN-AMERICAN AIRLINES FROM HONG KONG

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, May 17, 1993. I'm at 65 Mott Street in Manhattan with Harry Lew, who came from China, from Hong Kong, in 1951, December of '51, turned sixteen while he was detained at Ellis Island for two months, and was finally released in February of 1952. Good morning, Mr. Lew. Can we begin by you giving me your name, as it was in China?

LEW: My name is known as Gem Hoy Lew, G-E-M, H-O-Y, L-E-W. I came from China in December of 1951.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, sir?

LEW: My date of birth is December 6, 1935.

SIGRIST: Where were you born?

LEW: I was born in Canton, China.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about your family? What did your father do in China?

LEW: My father came to China when he was a youngster. He stayed for many years. And he always took a trip to China, and I was born there when he took a trip there. And some of my brothers and sister were born in this country, in New York City, and they always stayed there. I was, stayed in Hong Kong to learn Chinese, so that I make sure I had a Chinese good education before I would immigrate to the United States. Yes.

SIGRIST: Was your father born in the United States and then went to China?

LEW: Yes, I think so. I think he was born in California, and he went back to China, see, and got married. And some of my brothers were born in China, and some, they were born in this country.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about why your father was born in California. How did his family get to California?

LEW: That I don't know, see. That's a long history. And I think the great-grandfather used to work in the railroad many, many years ago, and was born there and went back to China. And the Chinese, they always want their kids to have a better Chinese culture, Chinese education. It's a cultural tradition. And some of my brothers and sister was born here, and they also sent back to China. And some of them came to the United States earlier than I do. They were back in the, in 193-, '39, '38, before the Second World War. Some of them stayed here, and I was left behind in China, and another older brother left behind in China, too. And after the war, in 1951, '52, we started to come back to this country.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

LEW: Uh, Kew Tai Lew.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

LEW: K-E-W, T-A-I, L-E-W. Kew Tai Lew.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what his personality was like?

LEW: Uh, he worked in a, he opened up a Chinese laundry, like old times, they opened the laundry. He's nice, hard-working gentleman, always tried to save money and raise us, and sent us to have a better education. And always encouraged us to work hard, and this is, United States is a land of opportunity, and all we could do is to work hard.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

LEW: My mom is Chen See, C-H-E-N, S-E-E.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name? Is there a maiden last name?

LEW: Chen. Chen, C-H-E-N.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same question. What was your mom's personality like?

LEW: Well, she was a very nice woman. She always tried to encourage us to work hard and tried to raise us to be gentlemen and courteous.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how your parents met? Do you know that?

LEW: Oh, that I don't know. You know, in China, in China, in those days, marriage is by, marriage is by proxy. You know what, parents designate the, a woman, and the father's side designate the son, and they get married. Not by knowing each other. It's just by proxy.

SIGRIST: The families sort of set it up.

LEW: Set it up. The families set it up. Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your parents meet in the United States, or did he come to China?

LEW: Oh, in China. He come to China. They met in China.

SIGRIST: And you said that you were born in Canton.

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: And are there any stories associated with your birth at all that you know of?

LEW: No, I don't. I mean, any particular things like that, see. But I remember that I was a kid, it was during the Second World War. I mean, we were attacked by the Japanese. We always hide in the mountain, and I can remember that. We don't have a good life when I was a kid. It was during the Japanese war.

SIGRIST: What were some of the hardships that you and your family had to endure at that time?

LEW: Oh, we don't have a good meal all the time, see, because Japanese always coming under attack, you always hiding in the mountain. All the time, see, we don't have a good education. Every time we start a new term of education, the Japanese come, see, and we had to run. That was the hardest thing that I ever remember as a youngster, always try to save our lives, try to hide from the Japanese. We were occupied by the Japanese.

SIGRIST: So this is like a nomadic life. You're going from place to place.

LEW: Yeah. From place to place.

SIGRIST: What kinds of places would you live in at that time?

LEW: Oh, it was a very hard living because we don't have a decent meal all the time for two or three years. Always hiding, always running away from the Japanese. That was the worst time, because our place was occupied by the Japanese, and they killed Chinese. You couldn't take all your belonging. It's the worst thing that happened. When I was a youngster, I can always remember just always hiding away, running away during the Second World War.

SIGRIST: So it's scary.

LEW: Scary.

SIGRIST: During the Second World War you were, what, six, seven years old.

LEW: Six, seven years old.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what kinds of food you would have eaten in a situation like that?

LEW: We ate rice. Not too much. You know, in the mountains you get what you ate, a lot of fruit, vegetables, but not too much meat, because you're running away. So you take whatever you can, and there's not enough food all the time, see.

SIGRIST: Was this, was there a large group of you in the mountains?

LEW: Yes, the whole village.

SIGRIST: I see.

LEW: The whole village, like, sixty to seventy people. Some of them did not run. They were killed, you know. The luckiest ones run away from the Japanese. A lot of them, old person, when we came back they were shot to death, see.

SIGRIST: And you witnessed this kind of thing.

LEW: Yeah, we witnessed that kind. In my mind, this is a horrified thing, always in my mind as a youngster, I remember this.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any good times during that period, during the war? I mean, what did you do for fun, if there was any fun.

LEW: There wasn't too much fun, really, because you were always scared, always running away. They're not really, not too much fun. But in Hong Kong we had more fun, after the war, see.

SIGRIST: Well, how long, how long did this period last where you guys were on the run all the time? Through the duration of the war?

LEW: During the duration of the war, about two or three years.

SIGRIST: Was your father with you at that time?

LEW: No, no. My father was in this country, in the United States. My mom and one of my brothers and I, they stayed behind, see.

SIGRIST: And did you have extended family in China? Was there like a grandmother or a grandfather, something like . . .

LEW: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

LEW: Nothing like that, no.

SIGRIST: So when the war ended, you moved to Hong Kong.

LEW: We moved to Hong Kong, and we had a better life there, too.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, let's talk a little bit about that. Where did you live in Hong Kong, first of all?

LEW: We lived in Kowloon.

SIGRIST: Can you describe, you know, the apartment or the house or whatever it was?

LEW: Well, it's, you know, at that time in Kowloon, Hong Kong, part of Hong Kong, we live in small apartment, and very, very small. One room, three people lived in there. So very tiny room. And my father sent money back then, so we were able to afford ourselves. And I attended school in Hong Kong, and a better education then. Anyway, I was a year or two years behind the regular

kids because I did not have my formal education when I was six or seven years old, because those were the days that we were hiding in the mountain. We have no education at all. So almost two years behind the normal kids in my education.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about that when you went into school and you were more behind?

LEW: Well, I feel frustrated, but I tell myself I had to try to work harder because I was always two years behind those kids. I'm two years older than them, in the same education, I was two years older than those guys. Since I'm older than them, I had to try to work harder. I mean, I cannot see them. I'm older now. I was stupid to those guys. So I always tried to work, I always trying to work harder. Even I, in this country, I was at least two or three years, I changed my language to a different language. I was two or three years behind those kids. I always had to work harder.

SIGRIST: So your whole life you've been . . .

LEW: Always behind, always behind, always behind. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Was your father's laundry in California or in New York?

LEW: In New York, in New York.

SIGRIST: So that when he went back to the States, he went back to New York as opposed to back to California.

LEW: Right. He went to New York.

SIGRIST: Did he have family here in New York? Why would he have gone back to New York as opposed to back to California?

LEW: I don't know. Maybe it's better opportunity over here, see. No, he had no family here. Now he has family because all the kids, you know. But other than that . . .

SIGRIST: But at that time, no. He was sending money back. What did you know about your father? I mean, he's gone a lot of the time.

LEW: Yeah. I don't know too much about him, actually. When I, I got back here in two or three years he passed away, so actually I don't, I never knew my father.

SIGRIST: You never knew him very well.

LEW: No, no. Never, never.

SIGRIST: When you were in Hong Kong, tell me a little bit about what the city was like after the war.

LEW: A lot of people come (?), you know. A lot of people in Hong Kong. And at that time I see a lot of chaotic situation in Hong Kong too, because a lot of people didn't have their jobs. And a lot of stealing, you're walking in the street, you have something in your hand, somebody will go there and took your stuff away. Very chaotic in the first few months, because it's transition

from a Japanese government to Hong Kong, uh, to British government. It took a few months, and very chaotic. People were stealing, very chaotic at that time.

SIGRIST: It's not quite the tourist place that it is now.

LEW: Not quite the same. Not like now, but in the beginning it was very chaotic because the Japanese occupation, and they were leaving, and there's no people to direct, there's no laws and rules for this several months. People were stealing from the homes and nobody could stop it control. I seen a lot of stealing over there by kids.

SIGRIST: What about any kind of physical violence?

LEW: A lot of violence. People were attacking each other. It was very scary.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a specific instance of that that sticks out in your mind as a kid?

LEW: I remember that, a lot of stealing, a lot of fighting. A lot of people minding their own business. After several months, I was afraid, very afraid.

SIGRIST: You spent most of your childhood frightened.

LEW: Frightened, frightened by these childhood, different scary things.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your mother is doing during this time. She doesn't have a job, does she?

LEW: Watching out for me and my brother. And got money from the States. She can't get a job there. She, as a woman, see, she can't. So she stayed with us for two or three years, then my mother came to this country. We were left behind because they didn't provide education so good in Chinese, so me and my brothers stayed behind to get a formal, a better Chinese education. So we stayed in boarding school for a few more years.

SIGRIST: Now, is that an English school?

LEW: No, no. Chinese, Chinese school.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about it when your mother left you?

LEW: Well, then we got no choice. We got used to that kind of life now, because we hiding in the mountains maybe separated from our mother, we try be independent, get our own selves, so we don't have too much problems, you know, taking care of ourselves.

SIGRIST: You're kind of used to it, you know.

LEW: You're used to that, see. You know, from the Japanese occupation you get used to that sort of type of thing. You know, like this, six, seven years old we tried to have a life ourselves. Otherwise, we couldn't survive.

SIGRIST: You were sort of like little adults.

LEW: We were. It's a survival, a matter of survival.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about the woman's place in Chinese culture? Women didn't go out and work.

LEW: A woman's place in the house, they take care of the house, all the housework. They raise the kids, cook, make clothes, that's all they do. I mean, it's not like this American society (a telephone rings in the background) that's females go to work, and that sort of thing. And in China is, the father is head of household, and they take care of everything, see.

SIGRIST: Although in this situation, of course, your father's gone, so your mother's the head . . .

LEW: Everything, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about school. You said you went to boarding school, and what was that like?

LEW: Well, that give me a lot of encouragement and hope in the boarding school because the teacher was very, very kind to me. She know all the struggle and the trouble I had been, and give me extra attention to guide me for a better education, so I was very, very grateful for that woman, the teacher that taught me, she taught me extra. Give me extra hour after school, give me extra help so I could try to be ahead. And I spent four or five years in a boarding school, four years, and that give me other good work in elementary, you know, in math, science, history. I'm very, grateful for that, see.

SIGRIST: Your parents, of course, your father, this was important for him, for you to have a good education.

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: Were your parents educated people?

LEW: No. They were not educated at all. And, of course, you know, in those days, they don't have money, no education. They had to work hard, so no education.

SIGRIST: Is your brother older or younger than you?

LEW: Older.

SIGRIST: So he's not really in, he's in the same school, but he's not in the classes with you.

LEW: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me about his experience in the boarding school. Was it a positive experience for him?

LEW: Yes. We all had very good experience.

SIGRIST: Were you inclined to learn easily, or did it come, was it harder for you?

LEW: No, as a matter of fact, when I come to this country they order basic science and math, I was easy to catch, to be, to catch on with all the

homework, all the education in this country because thanks to the teacher who give me all the encouragement in China. I was able to do that math and catch up right away. I don't have problems with the barrier of the language. Once I got, that broke through, then it come easily to me.

SIGRIST: Everything just fell right into place.

LEW: Fell right in place, yeah. Because all the math is all the same, the basic, the math, they all the same anyway.

SIGRIST: Numbers are numbers.

LEW: Right, numbers are numbers, because you had understanding. Once you get the language barrier broke through, then everything come easy to me. That's why I was able, even at age sixteen, I was able to spend only six months in eighth grade, and went on to high school and college. It's not, once I got the language problem all broke through, everything come natural to me.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in the boarding school?

LEW: Four years.

SIGRIST: Four years. And then did you graduate from that school?

LEW: No, no. I did not graduate because I had to come to this country.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, what did you know about America when you were growing up, as a kid?

LEW: Over in China?

SIGRIST: Yes. When you were in China, what did you know about . . .

LEW: I knew that I had to go to this country sooner or later, so. And . . .

SIGRIST: But did you have any ideas about what America was, or what was here?

LEW: Oh, of course. I called on my imagination that America is a free country and a lot of opportunity, and it's freedom. It's the most inspiring that you have the freedom, the freedom of choice, to do whatever you wish to do. And that's the most inspiring is freedom.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about how the process was that you got over here? Did your father send for you?

LEW: Well, my father sent for me. Now, it's a very, very special at that time, the immigration law. I had to be in this country before I was sixteen. So that's why I cannot wait.

SIGRIST: Why couldn't you come if you had turned sixteen?

LEW: Because that's the immigration law. Once I passed sixteen, I cannot come to this country. So I was here two, one day or two days before my sixteenth birthday. That was the way it is. It's all written in the immigration law. So I had to quit school, come to this country right away, before the age of sixteen.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving Hong Kong?

LEW: Well, I had no choice. I liked Hong Kong, but I, in another way, I have to be united with my parents. You see what I mean?

SIGRIST: Had your brother already come over here, or . . .

LEW: Yeah, they all come over here.

SIGRIST: So you were the last.

LEW: I know. Because my brother had to come before sixteen, too. He come here a couple of years before I do, so I had no other choice. I could not come because I wanted to stay in Hong Kong and finish my education as much as possible. Not really finish but, it would be another year before I could graduate, but I cannot wait for another year because I had to come before the age of sixteen.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you? What did you pack when you were coming?

LEW: Not too much, just the right clothes, souvenirs from school, that's all. I mean, what do I got, see, a little kid. There's nothing much. Empty handed, almost.

SIGRIST: So where did you leave from? You flew . . .

LEW: Flew, yes.

SIGRIST: . . . here. And you flew from Hong Kong to where?

LEW: We flew from, Jesus, we flew Europe. No, we stopped in Calcutta, London, Newfoundland and this country. So we only stopped by for a few hours, so I could take a look what Calcutta look like, and we passed all the Kuwait desert, all the desert from the mountain. I mean, I sit in the airline and see all the desert there, a nice view. I mean, a little kid, I passed through all the desert. And I look down here, and I see, we stop London for a few hours, and I see London, and we come to New York. (a cat is heard meowing in the background)

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a plane before?

LEW: No, the first time.

SIGRIST: So tell me what that was like.

LEW: Oh, exciting, I mean, fantastic. The airline, the airplane look down there and see all this country, all these buildings and all the rivers, and I'm very excited. The first time I took a trip, I mean, in the airline, see, the airplane, see. Very, very nice.

SIGRIST: Now, you said, when you were telling about where you were going, you said, "We." Are you traveling by yourself, or is there someone with you?

LEW: Yes, by myself. Just me.

SIGRIST: Are there any other people your age, or you're really by yourself.

LEW: I was really by myself. I was by myself, see.

SIGRIST: Well, that must have been quite an adventure, then.

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: I mean, going to all these places.

LEW: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Did, how long did the plane ride take, ultimately, before you landed?

LEW: Oh, it took about four days. You know, in 1950 it was not yet jet. It was all propeller airplanes. It took, the reason it took four days, we stopped in London for two days because the fog there, too much fog, and they cannot see. The airplane had to stop there for two days to clear the air, the weather get a little better.

SIGRIST: So where did you stay for those two days?

LEW: I stayed in a hotel.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of London, or seeing London?

LEW: Yes, very, very foggy. I mean, you can't see anything. I mean, people cross the street, you cannot see them. Very, very foggy. And I was able to go out and take a look, see. In London, when I stayed in London in a very old hotel. I see what a big bomb, you know, after the Second World War. It was a horrible sight, too.

SIGRIST: Yeah, the bombed out buildings . . .

LEW: A lot of, I walk a few blocks, all the buildings all bombed out. I remember that. Nowadays, no. This is right after the war, not too long, after the war, 1951 they still not fixed up the place there.

SIGRIST: Of course, you were used to being around English people, right?

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: Being in Hong Kong.

LEW: But I see, wow, London, all bombed out. All the big buildings. I walked several blocks, and around the place all bombed. Still not fixed.

SIGRIST: Was there any time during the flight that you were frightened?

LEW: No, I was never frightened because I think the Japanese war, occupation, I was never afraid. I was never frightened alone. I was young, by myself, I was able to take care of myself from the past experience of the Japanese occupation of China in my village, so I was never frightened at all.

SIGRIST: Right. You'd been through the most frightening things. (they laugh) All right. Tell me what happened when the plane lands. What airline was it?

LEW: Pan American.

SIGRIST: And what airport did you land in, in America?

LEW: Uh, Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy.

SIGRIST: And then what happened? How did you end up at Ellis Island?

LEW: You see, it's funny thing with this America, immigration law. I don't know why if, in Hong Kong, the consulate approves your passport or your ticket or whatever. You are approved to come to this country. Why do people have to stay in Ellis Island, I mean, after I landed in Kennedy Airport I met my father and my brothers and sisters, and the immigration office took us to Ellis Island. See? That's why I don't understand, I still don't understand why, why do I have, why do people from any other country once their passport is approved, approved this country, and after that I arrive in the airport and they took me to Ellis Island for the processing. I mean, that sounds ridiculous, is it not? Now they do away with this, I mean, thank you. At that time it was a very ridiculous rule or law that people approved from other port of departure arrive and they were sent for further processing. It doesn't make sense. Is it not?

SIGRIST: Who met you at Ellis, I mean, at the airport? Your father?

LEW: Yeah, my brothers and sisters. Almost all the whole family.

SIGRIST: What was it like to see them again?

LEW: Reunited, see. (a telephone rings) And a few minutes we had to say goodbye again. That's, accompanied by an immigration officer, and he drove me to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: How did you feel?

LEW: I feel really sad! I said, "What the hell's going on here?" I have no idea what happened to me. I thought when I saw them I'll be united, I'll go home with them, see. And I was frightened, too. I said, "What the hell's going on here?" They took me again and put me over there? I don't expect it. And when I was there, people told me this is the way it is. I was crying, I was sent with those people, and they explained to me that's the way it is. You have to wait for your time for the bureaucracy of this, you know. You've got to take time. It's not a couple of days. A couple of months!

SIGRIST: Two months.

LEW: Yeah!

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what happened at Ellis Island. Tell me, like, where you slept and all of that sort of thing.

LEW: In army barracks, bunk beds. One on top of each other. We have a room that had fifty guys, divided in smaller sections, one room, one room. And we had, in a small room, around fifty guys. And I know I met some of my friends, still friends right now. And I had a good time there because we had

nothing to do. In the morning we ate breakfast, then lunch, then dinner. After that, you're all free time. What do you do? You play chess and play ball, try to kill time, see? And, in fact, when I left Hong Kong I was less than a hundred pounds. When I get out of Ellis Island I weigh a hundred and fifteen. I gained fifteen pounds, more than fifteen pounds. We had nothing to do. They fed us and nothing to do.

SIGRIST: What kind, were you given foods you'd never seen before at Ellis?

LEW: Of course. I never, I had a hamburger and beans. I never had it before. I said, "What the hell's that?" We're having this funny looking thing. (he laughs) They had spaghetti. I never had it before. A hamburger, and they have meatloaf. I never had that before. I said, "Whoa!" But you're hungry, you had to eat. But I got used to it. I ate all kind of junk. In the mountains we ate all kind of junk. Enough, as long as it's edible, I eat, you fill up your stomach. But it's funny-looking things that I, I (?) eat American food like that, see.

SIGRIST: Where did they feed you?

LEW: There is a dining room from the living quarters all the way walk down. There's a dining room, dining hall there, very big. Very, very big there.

SIGRIST: And what was the procedure for eating there?

LEW: Well, everybody get a tray. It's like a cafeteria style. You go in there, you got this and that. You put on and eat. (a telephone rings) That's all. And you have bread. Big dining hall, dining hall. Very, very big.

SIGRIST: How many . . .

LEW: That is still there, right, the dining room?

SIGRIST: Yes. How many people were detained there, do you think, at that time?

LEW: Well, I know there are at least two hundred Chinese. The Italian and the French, I don't know how many there are, because we do not live in the same quarters. Every Sunday they give us a movie. Everybody go, most people go to just see a movie. And I see all these white people, you know. Female and separate living, you know, that get together in the theater. And I see that there are other, there's another deal over there, only on Sunday, that there's a movie, and we go to the movie house on Sunday.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where that was, where the movie theater was that they showed you?

LEW: Uh, I can't remember exactly. Someplace on top of the dining hall, or something like that. That's second floor.

SIGRIST: Of course, all of these movies are in English, so how did you feel sitting there?

LEW: Well, I see the action, that's all. I don't understand what they're talking about, but the action sometimes, you notice a little bit. But it's better than nothing to do, see. You see what I mean? You see some things

moving, and you get some idea what's going on, see, even though you don't understand what they're talking about, the action you see, like somebody murders somebody, you know, the guy's murdering somebody. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you pick up any English while you were at Ellis Island?

LEW: No, no, no. No, no, not too much. There were Chinese there. We all talked Chinese.

SIGRIST: Now, did they segregate people by nationality, or . . .

LEW: I think so. I don't know the other nationality, but I know all Chinese were with all Chinese, no other, nationality.

SIGRIST: And how many Chinese, you said?

LEW: About, I think at least two hundred.

SIGRIST: Two hundred.

LEW: At least two hundred.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: So that's a sizable chunk of people, Chinese people.

LEW: Yeah, yeah. In one, one section.

SIGRIST: Were they from different parts of China? Were there people . . .

LEW: Mostly from Hong Kong, mostly from Hong Kong. I think ninety percent, ninety-five percent from Hong Kong.

SIGRIST: Do you . . .

LEW: They talk same language I talk. Not from the north, because everybody I talk to, same, same dialect. I never seen anybody talk different dialects there, so mostly from Hong Kong . . .

SIGRIST: So in a way that must have made you feel . . .

LEW: At home, yeah. At home. And, as I said before, some of my best friends are the ones that I met in Ellis Island. We're still friends. I was going to call them tonight and see if they're interested. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Yes, we'd like to talk to them, too.

LEW: Right, right.

SIGRIST: Did they let you outside of the building at all?

LEW: What?

SIGRIST: Did they let you outside?

LEW: No, no. No outside.

SIGRIST: You could never go outside.

LEW: There's a corridor there. We never get outside. Always there is gates around here, you know, screen. We're never allowed outside. Always stayed in the same room. Go to the dining hall, they feed us, we go back to our living quarters or go outside, the corridor here. That's all. We always stay there, play chess, play cards. That's all the pastime we can have.

SIGRIST: It was pretty boring, probably.

LEW: Of course, of course. Boring, for two months.

SIGRIST: Of course, you're, you know, just a boy, really. I mean, you're sixteen.

LEW: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you ever mischievous? Did you ever . . .

LEW: There was no choice. And I got used to that kind of life. You know, Japanese war, it doesn't really matter. You see, I mean, I've seen worse. How could it be worse than you hide in the mountains, right?

SIGRIST: You mentioned on your oral history form that you had had food fights.

LEW: Oh, yeah. Sometimes I seen people do that. I mean, they don't have it, they took their meal. Argument always going on, just like people in the prison. They gather together, they talk something insulting, and they start fighting.

SIGRIST: I imagine there's a certain amount of tension, too.

LEW: Yes, yeah. I stay there, I seen people stay for six months. Those guys told me I was only two months, but I seen this guy's been there for four months already. When I left, that guy's still there. So more than six months. This is, maybe something wrong with their background or something. They were still detained after six months. And those guys really get tense and aggravated, see. I mean, you say something insulting, "Hey, how come you stay," insulting language and they start a fight. I mean, these guys are, like, old timers, see.

SIGRIST: They're probably much older than you, right?

LEW: I seen people stay more than six months over there. Something happened to them. I don't know what happened. Either they don't got people to process their paper or something. They were more than six months, some of them, see.

SIGRIST: Were you afraid of being sent back?

LEW: Of course. You know, they ask you different kinds of questions, questions like, uh, your sisters' children, their name, their birthdays. I mean, how can people remember that? I mean, you had brothers and sisters, right? And their kids? Can you imagine their kids, and their kids' birthdays?

I mean, sometimes you don't remember that thing! I mean, as a person, you can't remember this whole thing sometimes.

SIGRIST: Did they interrogate you on a regular basis?

LEW: Yeah! Interrogate.

SIGRIST: Where would you go for that?

LEW: You know, this is serious, my father would give me the name of all the kids, all their kids, all the birthdays. I don't remember that, see. And then I remember by memorization. Every single, uh, brothers, their kids, the birthdays, you have to remember that. So you write it down on a piece of paper and remember that. So when the immigration officer asks you that kind of question, try to tell them exactly what it is. You pick the wrong date, hey, you get sent back to China, see. I mean, it sounds ridiculous.

SIGRIST: What do you think they were looking for? What do you think that they . . .

LEW: Well, they were looking for whether or not you are the real father, or brother, uh, father and son relationship. Some of them, you know, are phony, falsified, see. That's what they're looking for. They, some of them, they tell you that you didn't say the correct answer. That's why some of them stay there six months or longer. They fought their case in the immigration office, maybe because the guy doesn't remember, see. It doesn't mean the guy's false. Maybe he's false, and maybe he's not, see. That's why they detained, more than six months.

SIGRIST: Do you think . . .

LEW: Because they might say the wrong, the wrong answer. Because immigration, uh, you got how many brothers, and what are their name, and pick out your number two brother and his two sons. What's their name, what's their birthday? You pick the wrong date, and you cannot process, you're left behind. You see?

SIGRIST: What about political affiliation? Do you think that they were looking for some sort of information about that? For instance, were you a Communist, or something along those lines?

LEW: Uh, no, I don't think so. It's more of whether or not you were a true father-and-son relationship. They asked questions about this thing. You say the wrong thing, and you might be falsified, but they are not so, you see. I think not so much of political aspect more than falsified, see.

SIGRIST: Were they harsh with you, or were they respectful of you?

LEW: Well, you mean the immigration office?

SIGRIST: The officers, yeah.

LEW: (?) I wouldn't say they were nice, but I wouldn't say they are, it's their duty for their job to do that, see. They are supposed to, according to the book, you had to answer questions. You had to give them right answer or wrong answer. You know what I mean? I wouldn't say harsh or nice or anything

because this is their duty. It is their job to ask questions, to process. You said right, the right thing or the wrong day.

SIGRIST: Now, did they have a special room where they would take you to ask you questions somewhere, or . . .

LEW: No, no. They have just an office, no special room, no. Not like a place to ask questions. Just like a room. And you have secretary, stenographer, all this, you know, ask questions.

SIGRIST: They had a Chinese interpreter?

LEW: Yes, a Chinese interpreter.

SIGRIST: Was it a man or a woman?

LEW: I don't remember whether man or woman, but a Chinese interpreter, yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of medical exams?

LEW: No, not at all.

SIGRIST: Nothing at all?

LEW: No. Could be the first time they give you a physical, physical checkup, see, just regular checkup.

SIGRIST: Nothing extensive.

LEW: Nothing extensive, no.

SIGRIST: Now, your family came to visit you while you were out there?

LEW: No.

SIGRIST: Not at all.

LEW: Not at all.

SIGRIST: Did you have any communication?

LEW: No communication. I don't think we were allowed any visitors at all, no. Always in . . .

SIGRIST: What about, I didn't ask you this when we were still in China, but what about religious life. (voices are heard off mike)

LEW: What is it?

SIGRIST: What religion were you in China?

LEW: I had no religion.

SIGRIST: No religion. So that was not a factor.

LEW: No.

SIGRIST: Okay.

LEW: No religion. I became a Catholic in this country. I come to this country and I went to Transfiguration School.

SIGRIST: That's a Catholic school.

LEW: Catholic school, right here on 41 Mott Street. I become a Catholic then, see.

SIGRIST: Do you remember them celebrating Christmas at Ellis Island at that, because you were there at Christmas time.

LEW: Yes. They celebrated Christmas.

SIGRIST: Do you remember at all how they did that?

LEW: They had a Christmas tree and a Christmas party. But other than that we don't know too much about it, see. Because I didn't know it was Christmas or, at all. We had no religion. They give us a Christmas dinner. You know what this, a dinner that was better than other dinners, you know, bigger meal, see. This I remember. They told me this is Christmas. They were singing Christmas songs. We don't, the first time I heard. (he laughs) You know, you order (?). I know there's a big party, a big day. I remember a big dinner, a big meal, better than ordinary dinners there.

SIGRIST: Better than the meatloaf.

LEW: Yeah. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: So basically the whole time is pretty boring. You had no communication with your family.

LEW: No.

SIGRIST: So this must have been very frustrating for you.

LEW: Well, not really, because I'd seen worse, but I got used to it. And, for other kids, they cry. They really get frustrated, see. From my own young experience, this is like nothing at all, see. I mean, you are safe, you stay with other people my age, a lot of friends. Not too bad, see.

SIGRIST: You're warm, you're well-fed.

LEW: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you do for clothes during that time? Did they give you clothes?

LEW: No. They don't give you, we wear our own clothes.

SIGRIST: But you didn't bring whole lot with you.

LEW: Yeah, not too much. But I think we had to wash our own laundry by hand.

SIGRIST: Where did you do that?

LEW: Well, they have a big toilet in all these washroom here, where they go. They give us a couple of soaps, and we just wash our own clothes. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. Were there women staff members as well as men staff members that you saw?

LEW: No, only men.

SIGRIST: Only men that you saw.

LEW: I guess they segregated the men in my section and the women on the other section or something. The only time I see woman is in the theaters.

SIGRIST: And you said you all slept in like a dormitory room of some sort.

LEW: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What time did you have to go to bed?

LEW: We had no set time. They, like seven, eight o'clock, nine o'clock. It's probably some, some people play cards very late, see. But usually it's up to you. You go to bed early, or you go to bed late. You see what I mean? I think by twelve o'clock they shut off the lights. Twelve o'clock is definitely nobody, you know, they shut off the light.

SIGRIST: What about, was there a specific time you had to be woken up in the morning?

LEW: Uh, usually like seven o'clock.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

LEW: I think the guards would come in here with, uh, "Hey, get up! Time for breakfast." You don't get up, you miss your meal, so you had to get up, see.

SIGRIST: Did they lock you in at night, do you think?

LEW: Yeah.

SIGRIST: They did, yeah.

LEW: They did.

SIGRIST: Well, let's get you off of Ellis Island. (they laugh) So you're there till February of '52.

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me about how you got off, finally.

LEW: Well, I was interrogated by the immigration officer and what I said was correct. They said, "Okay, you, you can go." So I, they informed my parents. They picked me up at the other end. So they said, "You're going to go by Sunday." So they called my parents, and they picked me up at the other end,

see. They had a ferry boat. Because you can't just walk away from Ellis Island, right? (he laughs) So, I go by ferry boat and they come at the other end and pick me up, and that's it, see. Then February, it was Chinese New Year, on Chinese New Year, when I, I think the day before Chinese New Year. And so I see the Chinese in New Year celebrating New York's Chinatown, just like in China. They had fireworks and dragon and all this. Very happy. And other than that I'm, I go to (?), a special school. You know what they, you know what, for people who there's a special class for people that, uh, a second language. You know, just to know English at all, so they teach you a special way of teaching you. So I studied here February to June, four months already. Later on I see some of my friends from the Ellis Island, they're enrolled in Transfiguration. So I asked them to enroll there. So, the nuns were very, very nice. They, after school they gave me special instruction in English, so they taught me, so I catch up in eighth grade. And then during, before I graduated eighth grade they encouraged me to take the high school exam. You know, you had to pass, you know, for Catholic high school, see. So I took all the exam, I was accepted in St. Francis Xavier High School, and they took me there. I was, like, sixteen. They accepted me because I was from China, they give me special admission because I was a few years higher than those kids in high school. The other kids were fourteen, I was sixteen. See what I mean? In high school I was two or three years older than those guys. You know how it is in St. Francis Xavier High School on 16th Street. After I graduated I went to Fordham University for pharmacy school. Then I graduated there with a degree in pharmacy.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing about learning English when you first were beginning to learn English? What was the hardest thing to grasp onto?

LEW: Well, first you learn all the ABC's, you know, all the spellings, what does it mean. What is, you know, and you say a few words, this and that. Once you master the spellings and usage, grammar, and try to figure out, see. I would use the dictionary, Chinese, English to the Chinese, Chinese to English, and I try to look up what does it mean. And after you learn a few months like that you remember all these, this meaning, use of grammar and it becomes quite easy to me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a story of your own experience where maybe you made a mistake speaking English? Something that sticks out in your mind?

LEW: Oh, of course, of course. I made a lot of mistakes. (he laughs) You mean something and say the wrong thing, see. But things happen, and time passes. You try to remember the mistake and correct it. And the nuns were so encouraging and tried to be so helpful to me, it was easy to catch up, see.

SIGRIST: Were there other Chinese kids at the School of the Transfiguration?

LEW: Oh, yes. Fifty percent are Chinese at that time.

SIGRIST: But the nuns weren't Chinese, were they?

LEW: The nuns are English.

SIGRIST: The nuns are.

LEW: All the nuns are English.

SIGRIST: Where did your parents live? What was their address?

LEW: On Mulberry Street, 60 Mulberry Street. About one block behind this.

SIGRIST: 16 Mulberry?

LEW: 60.

SIGRIST: 60.

LEW: 60, 6-0.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the apartment that they lived in?

LEW: This apartment is not too bad. I mean, it's a place, like all the American apartment it's one bedroom and one living room, one kitchen. It's a lot better than one in Hong Kong. Hong Kong we had a small room where three people live there. At least this is much bigger.

SIGRIST: And your father's laundry business is doing well?

LEW: Well, a little bit. We sold it after three years, and they passed away. My mother passed away after three years, so.

SIGRIST: So both your parents died soon after you got here.

LEW: I'm in a school. I'm working. I earned my own tuition. I pay it back. In fact, I was a waiter in the restaurant when I was attending high school. Every summer I work, I save the money from here and there, and going to college I worked. I worked my way through college.

SIGRIST: Was the waiting job your very first job as a waiter?

LEW: A waiter, yeah.

SIGRIST: That was your very first job.

LEW: First job.

SIGRIST: How did you get that job? Do you remember?

LEW: Well, my friends, I mean, they were waiter. A friend that I met in Ellis Island, and they introduced me to (?) that taught me to be a waiter. And then I, I went from one place to the other, and I make money at that. After school I worked, summertime I worked, on the weekends I worked. I save a little bit of money in here and there, see. Then I'm able to afford to go to college. At that time college was very cheap, five hundred dollars a semester. Now it costs a fortune. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Going back to those first couple of years that you were here, was there anything in New York that you had never seen before, something that was very, very strange to you here in New York that you had never experienced before?

LEW: Uh, (he pauses) New York.

SIGRIST: For instance, like the subway. Had you ever ridden on a subway? Was this a new thing for you?

LEW: Of course, of course. Well, I went to Empire State Building too, you know, the first few months I was here. It was exciting, because tallest building in the world at that time, and very nice to see it. A big, big tall building. I always heard about the Empire State Building. I never witnessed that, see. I went to the Statue of Liberty. You know, that was very nice, too.

SIGRIST: Of course, you had lived in a city. I mean, Hong Kong was a city.

LEW: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So New York is just sort of a bigger version of that.

LEW: Bigger, bigger it was, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your parents' life here in America. You said they both died soon after you got here.

LEW: Yeah, hmm.

SIGRIST: But tell me a little bit about your father's laundry business, and who his clientele were.

LEW: Well, he had a laundry in Queens, and I remember the first two years I used to help him out, too. And the clientele are mostly Jewish people, see. They bring a whole bunch of pretty clothes, some shirt, pants, underwear. Then separate and put them in different laundry bins, so laundry can be repacked. He doesn't wash on the premises. Send it to different, uh, wholesale, like a wholesaler. They clean it up, they send it back. You pack it for them. They charge you for that. The whole process like that, see? And you still have to iron the shirts. They're clean, but they don't iron them. You had to iron the shirts for them, see. And I used to learn how to iron this and pack it for them. It's a tedious job, and it's a hard working job.

SIGRIST: How old was your father at that time?

LEW: Oh, he was like around, over sixty, over sixty.

SIGRIST: So he's commuting to Queens, too.

LEW: Oh, yes. He commuted.

SIGRIST: So that's a long day for a man.

LEW: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes he stayed in the laundry. You know after they close he sleep there, see, sometimes. Not all the time but sometimes. I remember that sometimes he had to work long hours, like fifteen. They open like eight o'clock, stayed there until twelve o'clock sometimes. Then he closed the laundry, but he do all the cleaning, or the ironing after that, see.

SIGRIST: He was hard working like you're hard working.

LEW: Hard working, hard working, too.

SIGRIST: In our last few minutes, tell us about your career. You said you graduated from Fordham and then you went to pharmaceutical school.

LEW: Right.

SIGRIST: And tell us about how you had your own pharmacy, and all of that.

LEW: Well, after I graduated I spent two years in Indiana. I was trying to go to graduate school there, and tried to get a higher degree, see. But I realized I better come back here and open up a pharmacy, see. So I opened up on 60 B Mott Street for thirty years now. So business not too bad. I've been working long hours, hard work. I treat my customer really well. I dedicate myself to the service of this community, and people seem to like me. That's why I tend to business, and people like me. So after thirty years of hard working I had the opportunity to buy this newer building and location at 65, and here we are. Business still is very good. In fact, the reason I chose the new location, my three daughters, two of them study pharmacy, and they take after me. So I hope my children will tend to business, keep up tradition that I, one of those days when I'm gone, they will attend this, hopefully continue the service to this community, see.

SIGRIST: Now, do you deal only in western medicines, or do you deal in traditional Chinese . . .

LEW: Oh, we do some traditional.

SIGRIST: But what, exactly?

LEW: Well, we have Chinese patent medicine, patent medicine. They were well-known in China, people like aspirin, Alka-Seltzer, right, well-known in this country, and they are patent Chinese medicine, well-known in China. We sell these, the tiger-balm, (Chinese), liniments and that sort of thing, see. A lot of patent, very popular Chinese medicine.

SIGRIST: Do you have some customers that have been coming to you for thirty-five years?

LEW: Yeah, yeah. I have seen some of my customers of two generations. They were a kid, and they were like seven, eight years old, they come to me. Now they're married and they have kids. Two or three years, they come back, "I've been coming thirty years now." I see many of those, when they were little kid, I gave them the lollipop. Then they come in, (?). All right, then they grow up, then they get married, then they have children, and they get their medication for me. It's a very, very, how do you say that, feeling, then. You know, the contentment, joyful . . .

SIGRIST: Satisfying feeling.

LEW: Satisfying feeling, that they come back to me. I see those grown up, they come back, and I see them.

SIGRIST: As long as it doesn't make you feel old. (they laugh) What are your daughters' names?

LEW: Uh, number one daughter is Carol. My number two is Mary and number three is Karen, see. Three daughters.

SIGRIST: And whom did you marry?

LEW: I married K.C. Loo, K.C. Young, also a pharmacist.

SIGRIST: Really. And what year did you get married?

LEW: 1963, '63.

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good place for us to end.

LEW: Yes.

SIGRIST: I want to thank you very much for taking some time out and letting us talk about your, your information about Ellis Island is wonderful.

LEW: Thank you. Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: I wish you a lot of luck.

LEW: Okay, thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Harry Lew on May 17, 1993.
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