

EI-329

RALPH (ROLF) ATLAS

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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GERMANY VIA SPAIN, 1936

AGE 7

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 27, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Ralph Atlas. Mr. Atlas came from Germany via Spain in 1936 when he was seven years old. Good afternoon.

ATLAS: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Mr. Atlas, can we begin by you giving me the name you were born with in Germany?

ATLAS: Yes. At that time it was Rolf, R-O-L-F Atlas.

SIGRIST: Middle name at all?

ATLAS: No, no middle names. I don't think in Europe middle names

were too popular.

SIGRIST: And what was your date of birth?

ATLAS: February 28, 1929.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me where you were born in Germany?

ATLAS: In a town called Elberfeld, which is still there.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for us?

ATLAS: E-L-B-E-R-F-E-L-D.

SIGRIST: Can you describe . . .

ATLAS: It was Elberfeld, today it's Elberfeld/Wuttertall, W-U-T-T-E-R-T-A-L-L. And it's two towns merged in the '30s or '40s, I believe.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about that town, maybe what it looked like in those days?

ATLAS: Well, my recollections are vague, but there is one distinction for that particular town, Elberfeld, and that is that they have a monorail which, at that time, in the early '30s, was very unique and probably one of the few monorails that existed, and it's still running today, from what I understand. Somebody recently went to a meeting

in Germany and brought back a book which was about Elberfeld, and I see the monorail is still running. So I do remember that, and I remember, I think I have some recollections of starting school there, and at one point, whether it was some sort of a graduation from kindergarten or something, I was given a scroll filled with fruits and candies and nuts, and I have a picture of that. I think I actually recall that.

SIGRIST: That's a great German tradition, of course, the cones of candy.

ATLAS: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: Tell me, what did your family do in this town?

ATLAS: My father and mother owned a dairy store in Elberfeld, and I guess they had a pretty nice business going.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what a dairy store is?

ATLAS: I really don't recall, but I would think it would be a store that sold cheese and breads and milk and everyday essentials, that kind of a thing. And they did very well, and we were happy. I have one older sister at that time. She's passed away since then, but she was two years older than I was.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

ATLAS: Lois. It was actually then Lotte, L-O-T-T-E, changed to Lois when she came here. And then in 1935 things started to look quite bad. Salespeople that called on my parents' store started telling my parents that things didn't look good for Jewish people.

SIGRIST: And your family was Jewish.

ATLAS: My family was Jewish. And I guess my parents ignored it for a time, and some months went by. And then one day one of their favorite salespeople came in with the S.S. uniform, and he said he had joined that organization and he thought he'd come in to show them the uniform. And when my parents were talking to him he said to them that, "The truth of the matter is that the Jewish people in this country really have to go, and you know I like you, I call on you, you're a customer of mine, and I'm telling you, and I'm giving you some advice. If you are smart, you will pack up your things and consider leaving Germany." And I guess some more time passed after that, and my parents decided that, as they observed other signs that things were not going to look good for the Jews at that time, point in their life, decided that they'd better think

about leaving Germany. And so my father went on ahead.

Why he selected Barcelona, Spain, I don't know, but he went on ahead, and as my mother tells the story, then about a month or two later she took my sister and I almost in the middle of the night and left everything and got on a train, very apprehensively, and went to Barcelona.

SIGRIST: Let me ask some questions about your parents. First of all, what was your father's name?

ATLAS: Max.

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

ATLAS: My father, as many fathers in those days, was not that close to me, as I recall. I mean, we had a relationship. It was not a very close relationship. He was a very hard-working man. My growing up with my father here in this country, he first, when he first came he didn't have much money in his pocket. He got a job working for Armour here as an egg candler. Now, there are some people who don't particularly know what an egg candler is for Armour at that time.

SIGRIST: Explain it for us on tape.

ATLAS: In those days every egg was checked to see whether it was fresh, and the way you checked it is you took three or four eggs in your hand, you kind of twisted them around in your hand under a light bulb. And if you saw a dark spot, then you knew that that was a rotten egg and you pulled it out, and that was his job, was to examine these cases of eggs. And I believe he told me he made like eighteen dollars a week.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections or perhaps stories of interactions with your father in Germany? Does something stick out in your mind, an incident perhaps, an exchange?

ATLAS: I wish I could say that's true. I really can't. Not in Germany, not really.

SIGRIST: Your memory kind of kicks in later on.

ATLAS: It does, really.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like?

ATLAS: Some people say that I resemble my father. He was a good-looking man about my height, 5'11", 175 pounds. He was a very, he was a businessman. He was a great believer in working for yourself. He did not believe in working for other people. He had the store with my mother in

Germany, and when he came to this country, of necessity he had to get a job working for somebody else. And, as I said, he worked for Armour. But it wasn't long after that the he opened up a small little grocery store, and my mother worked in the store, I worked in the store.

SIGRIST: Not unlike what he had done in Germany.

ATLAS: Exactly, right.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, the dairy store in Germany, was this a continuation of a family business?

ATLAS: I believe so. I think my mother's parents had that business and then turned it over to my parents.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection of grandparents in Germany?

ATLAS: Not really.

SIGRIST: Nothing really.

ATLAS: Not really, no.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you what your mom's name was.

ATLAS: Uh, I'm thinking it's Betty, but I believe that her birth certificate probably said Bertha. But she is known as Betty Atlas in this country.

SIGRIST: What is her maiden name?

ATLAS: Mayerhoff.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

ATLAS: M-A-Y-E-R-H-O-F-F.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you some of the same sorts of questions about your mom. Can you describe her personality and temperament for me?

ATLAS: My mother was, I would have to say she was pretty much of an introvert, really didn't have many friends. She was a hard worker, along with my father, in the store. Cared for us very well. Very strict. Both my parents were very strict, I guess the European upbringing, which served my sister and I well, I'm sure, over the years. But she had a hard time making new friends, as opposed to my father, who was more of an extrovertish kind of an individual. Growing up in this country, my early years, when my father opened up the store. He found many activities to get involved with while my mother was more interested in staying home, and he joined card clubs from other German refugees. My mother had no interest in doing that sort of thing. So they were not, they were somewhat

opposite in personality.

SIGRIST: I see. Let me also ask you this question about your mother.

Is there an instance, a story, an anecdote, something that sticks out in your mind about your mom when you were growing up in Germany?

ATLAS: It's really tough. I wish I could say that I could remember. I really can't, no.

SIGRIST: Can you remember the house that you lived in in Germany?

ATLAS: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing?

ATLAS: No.

SIGRIST: How about, you mentioned school. What about religious life at all? Was there a synagogue nearby where you lived? Do you have any recollections?

ATLAS: There was. My parents were quite religious. My mother observed the Sabbath on Friday night lighting candles, that sort of thing. But other than that, no. Not in Germany.

SIGRIST: Not in Germany. Do you remember, let's take this from

the point of view of a small kid, do you remember maybe a holiday celebration or a special toy that you might have had, something that sticks out in your mind?

ATLAS: No, I'm afraid not.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's get you to Spain. Your dad went ahead to Barcelona.

ATLAS: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: And you're not sure why he opted for Barcelona.

ATLAS: No, I really don't know why. I guess it was easy to go to. I mean, they had to give a lot of thought to where to go, and I guess Spain looked like a place where there could be more safety than in some other countries.

SIGRIST: Do you recall, or do you recall your parents speaking about any other kind of anti-Semitic activity in this town before they got out?

ATLAS: Not really, no.

SIGRIST: Just the friend who had become an S.S. officer.

ATLAS: Right.

SIGRIST: Was your father's intention to eventually come to America?

ATLAS: This I really don't know. My father's sister and her husband, the aunt and uncle that I lived with for a year in this country, had left Germany approximately ten years prior to the time I came. So it could well have been that it was on his mind to eventually come to this country, but whether he had done it if the Hitler situation didn't arise, I really don't know.

SIGRIST: So really the frame of mind is really to just get out of Germany as opposed to actually going someplace.

ATLAS: Yes, yes, exactly.

SIGRIST: How long was your dad in Barcelona before you went to Barcelona?

ATLAS: I think a month or two.

SIGRIST: Oh, so it was a very short time.

ATLAS: A very short time.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to Barcelona when you moved? You went with your mom and your sister?

ATLAS: I went with my mother and sister. It was a late night, overnight, middle of the night kind of situation and again

difficult to say that I remember that particular trip to Barcelona. I do remember some things living in Barcelona.

I was six, seven at the time, six. The Spanish Revolution was going on in 1936, and I do recall that there was a lot of people running on rooftops, shooting at each other, and that was kind of scary. And my father there, for the year that I lived there with him, sold things, and I can't really say what category. I think he sold whatever he was able to buy, and had a market to sell I think it was, he dealt in some clothing, articles of clothing, shoes, whatever. He was always a great believer in buying something at one price and selling it at a higher price.

SIGRIST: A true merchant.

ATLAS: A true merchant, a true merchant, exactly.

SIGRIST: Was there a Jewish population in Barcelona at that time?

ATLAS: I'm sure there was. I can't really say. We had no other family there, so I don't recall that we gathered as a family with other people besides ourselves there in Barcelona.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you lived in Barcelona?

ATLAS: I don't. My older sister went back a couple of times and

identified the place where we lived and told me about it.

SIGRIST: What did she tell you? What did it look like, or what did she remember?

ATLAS: It was a very humble, small, little apartment. Obviously when we left Germany we left with very little, so we didn't have much money. So there wasn't much to it. I guess it was just adequate for four people.

SIGRIST: Did you pick up any Spanish while you were there?

ATLAS: Yes, I spoke Spanish very well. And then, as a matter of fact, a year later when I came to this country by myself within a couple of months I was able to pick up English pretty well, so I have to say that at the age of seven I spoke German, English and Spanish.

SIGRIST: An interesting combination. (they laugh)

ATLAS: An interesting combination, right. And today I really only speak English, although I do understand German and can speak a little German and a little Spanish. Not too much.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever speak about how they felt about being in Barcelona? Did they feel very much out of place there?

ATLAS: Yes, yes. I'm sure they did. It was a period of struggling to make a living, and it's easy to understand how when you're in your '40s, I guess, and you're uprooted from where you've lived all your life, and suddenly you go into an entire new country with a different language, and how traumatic that had to be for them.

SIGRIST: Not to mention just the environment at the time.

ATLAS: Yes. With what was going on in there, right. And so I think from the time that they lived in Barcelona it was probably their intention to eventually come to this country through my father's sister, who lived in Chicago.

SIGRIST: May I assume that when they lived in Germany you were a fairly comfortable family. You had, you had the store.

ATLAS: We were, we were.

SIGRIST: Going to Barcelona obviously things are much more hand-to-mouth. So I'm just wondering if this had an effect on your parents?

ATLAS: I'm sure it did. I'm sure it was a whole change of lifestyle. I guess having a business in German, a store like that, provided a very nice income.

SIGRIST: Did your parents talk about this kind of thing a lot, or did they tend not to talk about it?

ATLAS: No, not too much, not too much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, when you think about Barcelona, do you think about a specific event? Does something stick out in your mind, maybe it an entertainment that you went to, or . . .

ATLAS: The one activity that I do recall living in Barcelona was going to a bakery to buy bread. And I don't know why this sticks out in my mind. Maybe because I love bread so much today that I recall buying bread in Barcelona. But what was unique there was that if you went to buy bread, if it was like a pound or two pounds of bread, it wasn't of one type. What they would do is, and I recall this vividly, that they would take a piece of a bread, put on, on a scale. Put on two rolls, and then cut off another piece and put it on the scale, and take another roll, and you would end up with a conglomerate of breads and rolls, which composed the one pound or the two pounds, whatever you wanted, which was really, I thought that was quite interesting.

SIGRIST: Chunks of bread.

ATLAS: Chunks of all kinds of breads, right.

SIGRIST: Do you think you ate a lot of bread in Barcelona?

ATLAS: I probably did. I ate a lot of bread and chocolate, and I still do today, unfortunately. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember . . .

ATLAS: Bread and chocolate is a good combination, as a matter of fact.

SIGRIST: And very European.

ATLAS: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember foods that your mother cooked in Europe that were, perhaps in Germany or in Barcelona that stick out in your mind as being your favorites at the time?

ATLAS: My mother made the traditional German-type foods that I enjoyed, along with Jewish-type foods that I enjoyed. So, the usual, you know, the matzo balls and chicken soup and cabbages, things like that.

SIGRIST: Did you actively . . .

ATLAS: She baked. She was an excellent baker, and she used to bake all kinds of fancy cakes, which we loved.

SIGRIST: So she had a talent for . . .

ATLAS: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: Pastry chef.

ATLAS: Right. Her cakes were never attractive. They looked as if they were sloppily made, but they were absolutely delicious. (they laugh) It's true. We used to always, we used to always wonder why she didn't spend more time making them look better, but they were very good.

SIGRIST: When you were in Barcelona did you actively practice the Jewish religion?

ATLAS: Yes, I'm sure that we did. My father was a very religious man. I remember him being more religious than my mother. I do recall my mother saying that, you know, "Papa wants it that way, so that's the way we did it."

SIGRIST: You were in Barcelona a year, you said.

ATLAS: One year.

SIGRIST: Then what happened?

ATLAS: And my father was corresponding with his sister in Chicago trying to get the four of us to come to America.

SIGRIST: When had, when had his sister come to America?

ATLAS: About ten years earlier. They left sometime, quite a few years before that.

SIGRIST: Was she married . . .

ATLAS: With all of their valuables, which made a big difference.

So they also were people of comfort in Chicago. And so they, my father, I guess, assumed that they were financially able to bring us over to this country. But what happened is they were only able to get a visa for one individual in 1936. And so I guess my mother and father decided that of me and my sister that I should go because I was the youngest, I guess, the youngest was chosen because the future was greater, I guess, for the youngest.

So it was decided that I would go alone to America and live with my father's sister, my aunt, in Chicago.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you knew about America as a six-year-old boy?

ATLAS: I guess my parents kept talking that it was a much better place to live, you know, the land where you could do what you want to, you didn't have to be afraid of people putting you in jail for saying the wrong things, doing the wrong

things. So it was a very positive image.

SIGRIST: So this was something you liked.

ATLAS: Yes, oh, yes. Right.

SIGRIST: How did your sister feel about this choice?

ATLAS: I don't know. I really don't know. I never really discussed it with her. I guess she was probably in favor of it, too. It was always assumed that they would come shortly after I left.

SIGRIST: I see. Always the intention.

ATLAS: As it turned out it was exactly one year later that the three of them came. And, but my father, reluctantly, of course, took me to Marseille, France, the two of us, and made arrangements to put me on a German boat, and then my aunt would meet me in America. He wasn't too happy about putting me on a German boat, but I guess that's all he could afford at the time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the trip to Marseille with your dad?

ATLAS: Vaguely, vaguely. I guess we took a train there. But I do remember that at the, I guess, I'm not sure if it was the American consul office in Marseille where I was

standing with my father talking to the doorman there. It was raining out, and my father had tears in his eyes, telling the doorman that, tearfully, he was going to put me on this German boat to America and that his sister would meet me in New York. But being a German boat he was very apprehensive of what could happen, and who knows if he would ever see me again. The doorman was listening to the story, and all of a sudden a couple walked over to my father and said, "We'd like to introduce ourselves. Our name is Beimel. I'm Arthur and my wife is Miriam Beimel. And I overheard, I couldn't help but overhear your conversation to the doorman saying that you were putting your young son on this German boat and that your sister would meet him in America. We are completing a tour of Europe and we leave in a couple of days for America on the Normandy, and we're Jewish, we own a dry cleaning plant in Chicago, and we would love to take your son and watch over him until he gets to America and your sister meets him." And my father thought, "Gee, that's a wonderful thing for these people to do." So he sent a wire to his sister in Chicago and he said, "Do me a favor. Call up and find, try to get some sort of information on these people to see if in fact they do own a dry cleaning plant on the south side of Chicago, check out their name.

And my aunt in Chicago called up there, and they said, "I'm sorry, the Beimels aren't here, they're on a trip to Europe." "And what is this place?" "This is a cleaning plant." And so then she wired my father back and said, "Yes, it is true, what they told you." And my father then felt comfortable in leaving me in the hands of this couple.

And so I stayed with them on the Normandy until I got to this country.

SIGRIST: Do you remember . . .

ATLAS: Unfortunately, what happened when we arrived in America, I believe at that time you had to have somebody there to accept you, and my aunt in Chicago just assumed that the Beimels, who would get off the Normandie with me and come right on to Chicago. And so she wasn't here in New York when the Normandie arrived, and that's how I happened to spend my one evening at Ellis Island, waiting for my aunt to arrive from Chicago the next day.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about being given up to this strange couple?

ATLAS: Well, they seemed like very nice people.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about them?

ATLAS: They're absolutely wonderful people who never had children and throughout my later life kind of adopted me as their son. They came to our, to my wedding, my wife and I's wedding. So they, I remained very close to them, even though we lived on the north side of Chicago and they lived on the south side of Chicago, we still kept very close contact while they were both alive. And they were just wonderful people.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how long you had to stay in Marseille before you left?

ATLAS: Probably a day or two, because switching from the German ship to the Normandie, I guess it was worth it for my father to do that, so we stayed an extra couple of days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your dad?

ATLAS: Yes, but whether I really knew that I might never see him again, I'm not really sure about that part. But I do recall that he was crying and it was a very sad thing.

SIGRIST: But, again, they always had the intention that they were coming . . .

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Back.

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: And your father must have been, actually, somewhat relieved that you were going on this boat with these people.

ATLAS: Oh, yes. He was very happy about that, and that's why the Beimels really did a wonderful thing.

SIGRIST: Good example of, sort of, fate stepping in.

ATLAS: Yeah, it really is.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what a little boy thought of seeing the Normandie?

ATLAS: Well, it was overwhelming, of course. And you have to remember that the Beimels spoke English and I spoke German and Spanish, so we had a communication problem. But they already, I recall that even on the boat they were starting to teach me the English language. And I think the first word that I said was something about breakfast, I think. Mr. Bimel said, "Go over and tell Mrs. Bimel that it's time for breakfast. Say, 'Time for breakfast.'" And I do remember that those were my first English words.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the cabin that you stayed in? Can you describe any parts of it?

ATLAS: It wasn't as luxurious as our recent cruise that my wife and I took, I'm sure. It's, I really don't. But the Beimels were people of means, and I'm sure that it was a fairly nice cabin. But I really can't say that I recall it.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the boat? Do you remember being up on deck, for instance?

ATLAS: I have pictures at home of me being on deck with the Bimel family, and I don't know. In the last few years my wife and I have taken five or six cruises, or maybe coming off on the boat has made me enjoy that sort of thing, enjoy being on cruises.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if they had any kind of organized activities for the passengers?

ATLAS: No.

SIGRIST: For the children, perhaps?

ATLAS: No, I really don't, no.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating on the boat at all?

ATLAS: Uh, remember specifically where I ate and what I ate?
No, not really.

SIGRIST: But you know you must have eaten. (he laughs) Somewhere.

ATLAS: Even though I was a skinny, a little skinny kid.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

ATLAS: It's in August. End of the summer.

SIGRIST: It's in August. And how long did the trip take on the
Normandie.

ATLAS: I believe it was five to six days, yeah. I think they
all took that . . .

SIGRIST: Was it a smooth trip?

ATLAS: Yes. I don't remember being sick or anything.

SIGRIST: I see. All right. Well, so, do you remember arriving
in New York?

ATLAS: I think so. I mean, I was told so many stories about
arriving in New York that I do remember arriving in New
York. Although the truth of the matter is, now, I know
that I spent one night at Ellis Island here, and, but I
cannot in all honesty tell you that I remember sleeping

on a cot, in a corner, this and that. I really don't.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of you being taken away from the couple and brought to Ellis Island?

ATLAS: No. (he laughs) No, no. Not really.

SIGRIST: I see. But you know you did end up here.

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection . . .

ATLAS: They may have, in fact. I'm not sure about this, but they probably decided to stay on until my aunt arrived the next day. I can't see them leaving me without making sure that my aunt got here from Chicago.

SIGRIST: But they were not brought out to Ellis Island to stay with you.

ATLAS: No. I'm sure that they couldn't do that if they wanted to.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of Ellis Island, what it looked like or who was here at that time?

ATLAS: Again, Paul, when you see pictures of that era of Ellis Island, of that era, you say, "Yes, that's right, that

looks familiar." But it's so hard to pinpoint and say, "Ah, I do remember." I look at that exhibit that they have out there of the luggage, and I say, "Yeah, that's what the luggage was. It was straw, that kind of thing."

It's so hard to pinpoint that. I do remember a boy coming up to me offering me some chewing gum, and I had never had chewing gum before, and I thought that was unique, and he said, "Don't swallow," and, "You know, it's not candy." That was my first experience with chewing gum.

SIGRIST: Do you have any feelings about how you were feeling emotionally about being brought out here? Did you know what was happening?

ATLAS: I really think you have to say that I really didn't know what was happening. You know, I can't really say there was a very traumatic part of my life, although maybe a psychiatrist would say that was a very significant part of your life, and it affected your personality from that point on. But I really can't say that it was that traumatic. The one thing that I think is important is that I lived with my aunt and uncle for one full year until I saw my parents and my sister again, and I had a difficult time adjusting to my parents and my sister.

SIGRIST: Once they came here.

ATLAS: Once they came here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember . . .

ATLAS: And leaving my aunt and uncle was traumatic for me. I didn't want to do that. Interesting that at that age, when you spend a year with other members of the family, they kind of become the parents.

SIGRIST: Did your aunt come to Ellis Island to get you?

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you didn't know this woman, did you?

ATLAS: No, no.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you felt having to go with her?

ATLAS: (he laughs) Well, I guess there was somebody there to take me which was, no. I really can't.

SIGRIST: What was your aunt's name?

ATLAS: Regina.

SIGRIST: And this is your dad's sister, correct?

ATLAS: My dad's sister.

SIGRIST: So what is her married name?

ATLAS: Steiner was her last time, Regina Steiner.

SIGRIST: S-T-E-I-N-E-R.

ATLAS: S-T-E-I-N-E-R.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what she was like as a person?

ATLAS: She was, she was a very nice woman. She loved me dearly. They also had no children, so that, I lived with them for one full year, until my parents arrived. And thereafter she also became like another mother to me. Really, I guess I must have had three mothers, Mrs. Beimel and my aunt. And there may have been a little resentment on my mother's part because of that. My mother never cared that much for my Aunt Regina. And maybe resented the fact that she had some wealth and my parents had nothing when they came to this country. They lived in a very nice apartment near Lakeshore Drive in Chicago. He was an egg broker, my Uncle Benno, B-E-N-N-O. Uncle Benno was an egg broker, a wholesale egg broker, made a lot of money. And, but my mother never liked Regina. She thought Benno

was pretty nice.

SIGRIST: Had your aunt and uncle met in Europe and came here and married.

ATLAS: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Was your uncle German also?

ATLAS: Yes, very German.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. And they had come so much earlier.

ATLAS: Right.

SIGRIST: Was your aunt younger than your dad or older?

ATLAS: She was probably a year or two younger.

SIGRIST: I see. So they probably came to America fairly newly wed.

ATLAS: Yes, right, right.

SIGRIST: And set up a whole new life.

ATLAS: That's right, set up a new life. But were able to leave Germany with their belongings and valuables, and they had a very nice life. And helped, helped my family considerably from the time that we arrived in this country. They were always giving, which was really very nice.

SIGRIST: Do you know why they went to Chicago when they came?

ATLAS: I don't know. I really don't know. Why they didn't stay in New York like a lot of people did, I really don't know.

SIGRIST: Now, did you stay with your aunt . . .

ATLAS: There may have been some friends of theirs. I do recall now that they had some very close friends. It wasn't family. The Kamps, K-A-M-P, a couple, and they had a son close to my age, Michael Kamp. They, they were very close with that couple and, I guess, maybe because they went to Chicago, maybe they were in Chicago before they arrived there, and that's why they went to Chicago.

SIGRIST: I see.

ATLAS: That's interesting. I never even thought about that until now.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for a second and Kevin's going to flip the tape, and we're going to get you to Chicago.

ATLAS: (he laughs) Yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now resuming with Ralph Atlas. Mr. Atlas, did you stay in New York for any period of time before you went to Chicago with your aunt?

ATLAS: Just the one evening here.

SIGRIST: And how did you get to Chicago?

ATLAS: No, no, no. I'm wrong about that, Paul. I have to retract that. I think we did stay a night in New York, because I do recall that we stayed in a hotel, what was the name of the hotel? It later became a hotel for women on 56th Street. I can't think of it right now. But what I do remember about this hotel is that my aunt called down in the morning for breakfast to be sent up, and they had a little trap door in the bottom of the door. And rather than room service just, you know, knocking on the door they just flipped this trap door and put the tray into the room, almost like a thing for a pet to go in and out of. I do remember that.

SIGRIST: And that made an impression.

ATLAS: The Barbizon Plaza was the name of the hotel, the Barbizon Plaza.

SIGRIST: Was your uncle with you, too?

ATLAS: So we did stay one night in New York.

SIGRIST: Was your uncle there, too?

ATLAS: No, no.

SIGRIST: Just your aunt.

ATLAS: Just my aunt.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of your impressions of New York City? Did anything stick out in your mind as being unusual or you've never seen something before?

ATLAS: No, not really. I'm sure I was impressed with the whole hustle-bustle of the whole thing, you know, compared to overseas.

SIGRIST: How long did it take you to get to Chicago?

ATLAS: I guess we took a train at that time. Maybe a day or whatever.

SIGRIST: Was the couple traveling with you, or had they gone on?

ATLAS: They weren't with us. I don't recall them being with us, no.

SIGRIST: Do you recall saying goodbye to them or thanking them?

ATLAS: Yes, I'm sure. Yeah, obviously.

SIGRIST: And where did your aunt take you when you got to Chicago?
Where did she live?

ATLAS: She lived (he clears his throat) about a half a block off of Lakeshore Drive, which is probably one of the nicest parts of Chicago on the near north side. She lived on a street called Surf Street. A very nice apartment in an apartment building. And while it wasn't a very large apartment building, it may only have had like thirty or forty apartments, it had a little grocery store inside the lobby of the building, which was very unique. And I remember that a year or two later I worked, even when I was like eight or nine years old, delivering groceries for that store.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood?

ATLAS: It's a very nice neighborhood, and I love to go back there. I've gone back several times, walking around. It hasn't really changed too much, a very residential neighborhood.

SIGRIST: Was this a primarily Jewish neighborhood at that time?

ATLAS: I think so, probably. But not, not what you would consider

to be a wholely Jewish neighborhood.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the year that you spent without your parents here in America. Tell me about, for instance, going to school. Did your aunt enroll you in school?

ATLAS: I went to the local grammar school and, you know, learned English.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

ATLAS: I lost a year. I think just with the children, just through listening to them. You pick it up so quickly, I guess, at that age. And just going outside playing with the kids, you learn the language very easily.

SIGRIST: Did you ever experience any kind of prejudice because you were not American when you were going to school?

ATLAS: I don't remember any situation that set me back, you know, regarding that. No. I was one year older than the other kids in the class. I was like set back one year.

SIGRIST: What were the things that you liked most about this country when you were a kid?

ATLAS: Well, the thing that really sticks in my mind is that I always, and this probably came from my father, I always

did something to make money. I mean, even at the age of eight, a year after, I was able to speak the language.

I had all kinds of different jobs, you know, delivering groceries, working in a cleaning store. I always did something, and I enjoyed that. It was very nice. After school I would do those things. And my year with my aunt and uncle must have been a very pleasant year. I had the feeling that my aunt, I was closer to my aunt than I was to my uncle. My uncle was a very quiet sort of individual, and I can't even say that I had a great relationship with him. But my aunt was a very loving woman and cared for me. And that's why, as I mentioned before, when my parents finally arrived a year later, it was a difficult thing letting go and difficult accepting the fact that I wasn't going to live with my aunt any more and now I had to live with these people. And even though you might say it's only been one year, it was almost like again, starting up all over again with strangers, I was so attached to living with my aunt and uncle.

SIGRIST: Were you corresponding with your mother and father during that year, you personally? I assume your aunt probably was, but . . .

ATLAS: Yeah, I don't think so. I don't think personally that

I was.

SIGRIST: So they were sort of out of sight and out of mind.

ATLAS: Yes, exactly, exactly. I'm sure my aunt and uncle, you know, corresponded with them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother and father talking about later what was happening, or perhaps your sister, what was happening in their lives for the year that you were with your aunt and uncle in Chicago?

ATLAS: It was a difficult year, because those were trying times there in Spain with the Revolution. But my father survived. He made enough money for them to exist, and I guess they were very happy when the word came that the three of them could finally come over.

SIGRIST: So they were actually there for two years before they actually left, because they were a year with you . . .

ATLAS: They were there for two years, I was there for one year.

SIGRIST: And then the year after.

ATLAS: Right. And they came over on the Queen Mary.

SIGRIST: They came on the Queen Mary.

ATLAS: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Into New York Harbor.

ATLAS: Right.

SIGRIST: And then did your aunt go to meet them?

ATLAS: I don't recall. I really don't recall whether she had to. I guess she must have had to at that time, too. It's only a year later.

SIGRIST: When you were a kid, what did you do for fun in Chicago?

ATLAS: The same thing any other kid would do. Just play with the kids, read comic books. I loved comic books. I remember every night when I went to bed, living with my aunt and uncle, it was a big thing to have my little chocolate and my comic book in bed, reading.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own bedroom in that house?

ATLAS: Yeah, I think I did. I think I did, yes.

SIGRIST: Were there, was there something about your aunt that reminded you of your dad?

ATLAS: She did resemble my father. But, you know, more specific than that I can't really say.

SIGRIST: You said there might have been a little bit of resentment on your mother's side with your aunt. How did your aunt feel about giving you back to your mother and father?

ATLAS: Well, I'm sure that was very difficult for her, too. And that's what creates this thing between my mother and my aunt. And my aunt was, my aunt was a domineering woman. And, I mean, she was a loving woman, but she was a domineering, opinionated woman. And my mother was, too. So it was a definite clash there.

SIGRIST: I see.

ATLAS: And my mother always felt that because they had money and we struggled, and they had to help us, that she, that that was not a very good situation to be in. And she resented that, of course.

SIGRIST: Did your parents like America when they got here?

ATLAS: Yes, very much so.

SIGRIST: They did. What was the first job your dad got?

ATLAS: It was with Armour company as an egg candler. That was the first job. And I think he probably stayed there until he decided to open up this little grocery store.

Interestingly enough, it wasn't an ordinary grocery store.

It was a grocery store where he sold day-old breads and dented cans. My father learned quickly that there were places to go in Chicago where you could buy cases of foodstuffs that insurance companies would take over after they paid off on policies from things that were in train accidents, or just damaged goods from fires and things like that. It's insurance salvage, I guess it's called.

And he could buy those things rather cheap, and so he was able to sell those things cheaper. And my father's little grocery store attracted the people from all different neighborhoods because he had these cans of Campbell's soup which were like two cents a can less than what you would find at the A&P. And he had a big sign in his window that said, "For every dent you save a cent."

And he loved that business. He'd come, he'd pull up in front of the store. And I'd help. I worked in the store for a long time, my sister, too, along with my mother.

And he's come from the market. He used to be so proud and so happy about what he found. "Look at this." Ten cases of some ridiculous thing. I said, "Dad, nobody buys this." "Oh, but it's cheap. Look, I only paid two cents a can. If we get four cents of can we'll make a lot of money on this." "But," I said, "it's lima beans. People

don't buy a lot of this stuff." "Oh, we'll sell it."
But he just loved that sort of thing.

SIGRIST: I have this mental image of your dad sort of with the gears
always turning in his head.

ATLAS: Yes, always turning. And my father always felt that a
man, a man should make a living, you know, paying a nickel
for something and selling it for six cents. That was the
only way to make a living. When I graduated college, and
surprisingly enough about my father, he did not encourage
me for further education. Most children say, "Oh, my
parents just wanted me to get the best education possible."

The truth of the matter is, my father had this store for
years and years, and wanted me, after high school, to go
into the store and forget about college. But, since all
my friends were going to college, and my relationship was
not that wonderful with my father that I wanted to spend
all my time with him in the grocery store, I decided to
go on to college. But my father was a great believer in
earning a living, and that education wasn't all that
important. Strange, but that's the way he felt. I,
however, did go on to college and got a job with a large
corporation immediately after college, which my father
thought was ridiculous because they paid you a straight

salary, and he couldn't understand that anybody would work week after week getting the same amount of money. I remember it was fifty dollars a week that I made. And he said, "They give you fifty dollars a week, no matter whether you work hard or don't work hard that's the amount that you get? That's not business." He said, "Business is buying something for a nickel and selling it for six cents. And if you would come into my store we could expand the store and we would do a lot more business." And he was very disappointed that I chose not to take his route in going into the business with him.

SIGRIST: What about your mom? Did she get a job?

ATLAS: My mother worked in the store for many, many years, and then later decided to work for a department store, surprisingly. My father and mother didn't get along that well. It was not the greatest marriage. It may have been an arranged marriage over there in Europe. I think it was an arranged marriage, according to my mother. But anyway she got a job working for a department store in Chicago and really enjoyed that, Mandel Brothers.

SIGRIST: So your father had no great objection, then, to your mother going out and working.

ATLAS: No. But that was very late. I think it was, my father only had the store for a few years after that.

SIGRIST: I see.

ATLAS: But for the early years of having the store, my mother was always there. And the my father, I have to tell you. My father had a wonderful idea for his store. In addition to what he had with the dented cans and day-old rye bread. After the war, after World War II, he found that a lot of the German people over in Germany were looking for foodstuffs like powdered milk and powdered eggs and, for some reason, flints that you'd use in lighters. There was a great demand for that. So my father went to his insurance salvage places and bought these things in bulk quantities, and the four of us, my mother and my father and my sister and I would sit in the back of the store. We didn't live in the back of the store. We had a separate apartment. But we'd sit there and we'd make up these individual one-pound bags of powdered sugar and powdered milk and one hundred flints. We'd take a little spoon and take these bulk flints and make a, count out a hundred with a spoon and wrap them up in paper. And my father ran an ad in the German newspaper saying, "We have special packages for your friends and family back in Germany,

foodstuff packages." And he ran that ad in the German paper. And they ran on Saturday, and Sunday morning there was a line a block long of German Gentile customers, Gentile customers who were coming to buy this. And my father made a lot of money on that. And I don't know whether I should say this or not, but my father had the wonderful feeling that he killed more Germans than the American Army with that junk that he put in the powdered milk and the powdered sugar. He felt so good about that. He bought this terrible, old stuff and he packaged it up, and these people bought it and paid money for it and sent it over to their relatives in Germany. And he was so proud of that, he kept on saying that he got back at them. He got back at them by selling them this merchandise.

SIGRIST: That's a great story, boy. Your father's revenge.
(he laughs)

ATLAS: My father's revenge. Because a lot of these things he bought were not really fresh stuff. I mean, it was stuff that was laying around for a long time. I recall looking at some of this powdered milk, it had black things. And I said, "Papa, you can't sell this." "Put it in! Put the black dirt in there. It makes the weight, you know. We'll get the full weight that way." But, yes. My father

did fairly well with the store. We were never wealthy people, you know, but enough to make a living.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you this question. Because you were young when you came here and Americanized fairly easily, and I assume that perhaps your sister followed a similar route.

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Although she's a little bit older than you.

ATLAS: Right.

SIGRIST: Was it ever an embarrassment to you to have noticeably immigrant parents when you were growing up?

ATLAS: Probably. Probably, I have to say that it was probably normal. I was probably embarrassed at certain times. Because I made it a definite point to mix with other kids that were better off than I was. That was the course that I took, and it really helped me a lot. We lived in a fairly poor neighborhood, and so you had to go to a certain grammar school and a certain high school because of the neighborhood. But I socialized with other kids. There weren't that many Jewish kids in this particular area. We lived in a Gentile poor neighborhood. And so when I went to high school I had to go to that high school.

But most of the Jewish kids went to another high school, and so I socialized with those, too. I went out of my neighborhood to socialize with those kids.

SIGRIST: And these were kids from a . . .

ATLAS: And eventually met my wife, who was part of that other group. I thought she had money. It turns out she was the only poor girl there, and she thought I had money.
(he laughs) So . . .

SIGRIST: That's what you get.

ATLAS: That's what you get for trying to be shrewd about these things.

SIGRIST: But the other Jewish kids were, perhaps, a little socially more elevated than your parents, came from . . .

ATLAS: Oh, yes. These were kids that lived along Lakeshore Drive in Chicago and went to schools like, you know, Sullivan and Sen High School. And I went to Lakeview, which was kind of a blue collar kind of high school.

SIGRIST: When did you get married?

ATLAS: 1951.

SIGRIST: And your wife's name?

ATLAS: Marlene. M-A-R-L-E-N-E.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

ATLAS: Zenner. She went from a Z to an A. It's Z-E-N-N-E-R.

You see, in school she always sat in the back, and I always sat in the first row because I was, they used to seat you alphabetically in those days.

SIGRIST: And you said that the couple who had brought you over was at your wedding.

ATLAS: They were at my wedding, yes. And we look at those pictures, and it's very nice. They all passed away.

SIGRIST: Were they a young couple when they brought you over, or were they old?

ATLAS: They seemed very old. (he laughs) I'm sure they weren't that old but, you know, when you're seven everyone looks old.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have?

ATLAS: Three sons.

SIGRIST: Could you name them for us on tape?

ATLAS: Yes. Bradley is the oldest and Gordon is our middle son and Joel was our youngest son. And we're happy to say that two have PhDs and one's a lawyer, so that's very nice. We're very happy.

SIGRIST: Well, in our last couple of minutes I have a few final questions for you. One is after World War II did your parents ever want to return to Europe?

ATLAS: Oh, no. No, that was never talked about, never, not really. As a matter of fact, my mother never even took a trip back. My father went to Israel once or twice by himself because my mother didn't want to travel. My mother was kind of a homebody and to herself but, no. It was never understood that they would ever want to return there.

SIGRIST: Had they lost a lot of family in the Holocaust?

ATLAS: Yes, most of their family. Both their parents, yes. I often view my life as having had a second chance.

SIGRIST: So you're glad they shipped you off, a little boy all by himself on the Normandie. Have you ever been back to Europe?

ATLAS: Yes. I went back to Germany twice. Once I took a business

trip for my company. I was in charge of the military business for my company, and I went back to Germany and spent some time there. And then my wife and I took a trip through Europe, and Germany was part of that. We took a cruise up the Rhine and stopped at several places. And we were close to Elberfeld, but it would have been another hour or two and for some reason I really didn't have a great interest in going back. Because I didn't, I wouldn't be able to identify where I lived anyway.

SIGRIST: That was sort of going to be my next question. Did you have any kind of an emotional response to being there?

ATLAS: Yes, there's no question about that. And even though my Jewish friends say, "How could you even go back to Germany, you know, after what happened?" The interesting thing is that even though I have a tremendous resentment, I happen to enjoy the German language because I grew up with the German language. I grew up listening to it with my father and mother, you know, with some, a little Yiddish mixed in, but it was mostly German. So I get a tremendous kick, even today, in overhearing a German couple speaking, because I can pick up the words, and I can almost understand what they're saying. And so I wanted to include German as part of our trip to Europe for my wife and I, and I

had a lot of fun, because I'd go into stores and I would test myself to see if I could make myself understood. And I remember once going into a store to buy some candy, and I asked for something. And I asked it in such a way that I sound like I really can speak it very well, you know. And so they start babbling back to me, and then I'm lost. You know, it's embarrassing, because I can say something very nicely in German, you know, the way a German says it, but I really can't converse back and forth. So I did enjoy it, and we may go back again to Germany, but most of my Jewish friends would say that's, you know, "I would never go back to Germany, and I wouldn't." And yet they, you know, some of them have Mercedes. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: It's interesting that when you hear the German language, something, you enjoy hearing that.

ATLAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: It's some kind of distant memory sort of triggered.

ATLAS: I tell you, Paul, I hear words, I can hear a word today in German that I say, "My mother used to say that word when I was a little kid." I haven't heard that word in fifty years.

SIGRIST: Interesting, like this constant thread of your childhood somehow.

ATLAS: Right, exactly, exactly. Certain words that my mother and father used in their conversation, that I may have never seen in a German movie. And all of a sudden I happen to hear it and I say, "Oh, my God. I know what that means. I know exactly what that means." It's very interesting.

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Atlas, I want to thank you very much.

ATLAS: Thank you.

SIGRIST: For coming out here to Ellis Island and giving us a most interesting story to add to the collection.

ATLAS: I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: I appreciate it.

ATLAS: I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Ralph Atlas on Thursday, May 27, 1993.