

**EI-355**

**ANNA MARIE TONNESEN REIGSTAD JOHANSEN BJORLAND AND  
ASTRID KRISTOFA TONNESEN REFSLAND  
BIRTH DATES: JULY 21, 1917 AND JANUARY 17, 1919  
INTERVIEW DATE: 7/21/1993  
RUNNING TIME: 1:01:30  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1994  
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1994**

**NORWAY, 1925 AND 1935                      RESIDENCE: HIWY ARENDAL  
AGE 8 AND 6 (FIRST VOYAGE)              US RESIDENCE: BROOKLYN, NY  
PASSAGE ON "THE BERGENSFJORD"      PORT OF EMBARKATION: OSLO**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, July 21, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Anna Bjorland and Astrid Refsland. The ladies came from Norway in 1925. Astrid was six-and-a-half. Anna was eight, in fact, celebrated her eighth birthday on the boat, and it is our privilege to have Anna here because today is her 76th birthday. Anyway, ladies, welcome.

BOTH: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Let me begin, and I'll ask Astrid first, because she's younger, for your full name, complete name, and

your date of birth, please.

REFSLAND: My maiden name was Astrid Kristofa Tonnesen Refsland.

SIGRIST: And your date of birth?

REFSLAND: January 17, 1919.

SIGRIST: Now, can you spell all of that for us, please.

( he laughs ) Astrid we can do.

REFSLAND: A-S-T-R-I-D. Kristofa is K-R-I-S-T-O-F-A. Tonnesen,  
T-O-N-N-E-S-E-N. Refsland, R-E-F-S-L-A-N-D.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Anna, can you do the same for us, please?

BJORLAND: My name is Anna Marie Tonnesen Bjorland.

SIGRIST: Johansen? Your first maiden name?

BJORLAND: Well, my maiden name was Tonnesen . . .

SIGRIST: Right, but your first married name, too, is . . .

BJORLAND: Johansen.

SIGRIST: Yes. Can you spell Johansen and your present married  
name for us?

BJORLAND: Well, there was one in between, one more. I have one

first. First it's, well, Anna Marie, Anna Marie Tonnesen Reigstad Johansen, and Bjorland. It's embarrassing, but it happened to me.

SIGRIST: Spell the last three names for us, please.  
( he laughs ) The last three.

BJORLAND: The last three. Reigstad, R-E-I-G-S-T-A-D.  
Johansen, J-O-H-A-N-S-E-N. Bjorland, B-J-O-R-L-A-N-D.

SIGRIST: And your birth date?

BJORLAND: July 21, 1917.

SIGRIST: Thank you. That was a lot of spelling.  
( they laugh ) And since I'm talking to Anna, why don't we continue. Can you tell me what town you were born in, please?

BJORLAND: Arendal, Norway.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

BJORLAND: Yes. Well, it's actually an island first, Hisoy Arendal, Norway. It's H-I-S-O-Y A-R-E-N-D-A-L.

SIGRIST: And whereabouts in Norway is this?

BJORLAND: The southern part of Norway.

SIGRIST: The southern part. Astrid, as a young girl, what sticks out in your mind about this town where you grew up?

REFSLAND: Well, as a young girl, well, I really remember the island more, the island where I grew up, on the island. Of course, we had a ferry, and to get over to town, of course, at that time, when I grew up that's all I wanted to do was go on that ferry. So it really, it's a very, uh, historic town. It goes way back from the sailing time.

SIGRIST: What was it about the ferry that you enjoyed so much?

REFSLAND: I don't know. I just wanted to go back and forth on the ferry. I just felt grown up.

SIGRIST: What did the ferry look like? Do you remember?

REFSLAND: Oh, golly. Only passengers, no cars or anything, only passengers. And, of course, in the winter we could go down inside and sit, and in the summer we could stand on that little port on the back of it, get fresh air. So it just was, I don't know, something I enjoyed.

SIGRIST: Now, Anna, am I to understand then that on the island was not the town.

REFSLAND: Right.

SIGRIST: The town was actually on the mainland.

BJORLAND: The mainland, yeah. That was the mainland. That's what . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you grew up in for me, please?

BJORLAND: Well, it was actually a three-family house.

SIGRIST: ( referring to rustling sound ) It sounds, it makes potato chip noises on tape, so be careful.  
( he laughs )

BJORLAND: It does?

SIGRIST: Yeah, the kleenex.

BJORLAND: Okay. Well, actually was a three-story house. It had, like, on the top floor was like attic-type, slanted ceilings. The second was a bedroom, a living room, dining room and a kitchen. And on the first floor was two rooms and a bath. So that's . . .

SIGRIST: And what was the house made out of?

BJORLAND: Oh, that I really don't know. Brick, I would believe.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you know what the house was made of?

REFSLAND: Timber. Grandpa built that house.

BJORLAND: Yeah. Well, that I know, yeah.

REFSLAND: Timber.

BJORLAND: It was timber. I thought, to me, maybe part of it is probably brick, like on the bottom. And the stairs was a long, stairs that went all the way up the three-story house.

SIGRIST: Astrid, what do you remember about the house?

REFSLAND: Well, it was built on a rock, alongside of a rock. So that's why it was the three stories. But, of course, at the time, my grandmother, when she lived there, that first floor, as Anna said, that was really where they baked and washed clothes. They used to boil their clothes, so that was the first. And that, as she said, it was all cemented. And then

the second floor and the third. The third floor, we lived with my mother.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the process of the clothes being washed or the baking, or was that not going on when you lived there?

REFSLAND: No, it wasn't going on. But, I mean, I heard stories of it, and, of course, that's so in my mind. I can see it. Yeah, in my mind I can see all that.

SIGRIST: How was the house heated, Astrid?

REFSLAND: Coal stove, not coal, wood stoves. All three stories was wood stoves.

SIGRIST: Were these small parlor stoves of some sort?

REFSLAND: No, no. They had, it's a certain Norwegian stove, and they're kind of tall. And they have what they call, like you could put your coffee pot in to keep hot. You couldn't boil anything on it.

SIGRIST: Like a little niche of some sort.

REFSLAND: Yeah, exactly, a niche. So the first niche was bigger, and then they got smaller and smaller. That's how the house was heated.

SIGRIST: Anna, can you describe the bedroom that you slept in when you were a kid?

BJORLAND: Well, the first one, when we lived in the middle floor, that was just an ordinary bedroom, you know, that you would have any time, like this. But upstairs, that was the attic-type bedroom, and that was kind of, you know, a small space. But we had four of those bedrooms up there. But that was it. We never had anything fancy, but down comforters and pillows, and that was it.

SIGRIST: Is it cold in this part of Norway?

BJORLAND: Oh, yes, it's very cold, yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you remember about a big snow storm or a big blizzard, something that sticks out in your mind?

BJORLAND: Not that sticks out in my mind. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you remember a big storm at one point?

REFSLAND: Not from the time that, not from before I was six years old. But my brother told stories.  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Of when he was young, or . . .

REFSLAND: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember one of his stories?

REFSLAND: Do I ever! ( she laughs ) When I was born.

SIGRIST: Please, tell us.

REFSLAND: My brother had to row to town to get the midwife. And on his way back it was so cold that there was a thin layer of ice on the fjord. And when he, when the midwife got there he held me. The midwife just said, "Here, take her and go by the kitchen stove," and he held me first. That was, he was fourteen.

SIGRIST: What a great story.

REFSLAND: Oh, he told it many, many times. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Anna, what do you know about your birth?

BJORLAND: ( she sighs ) Well, it was, I understand a seven month baby, and I was told that I was so tiny they could have put me in a cigar box. And I was, I was just laying in cotton. They didn't have what they have here today, but they told me they had cotton all

around me. And everybody was afraid, they warned, everybody was afraid to pick me up because they were afraid my head was going to fall off. ( she laughs )

I was so little. And then about a year-and-a-half later, well, they baptized me first away, first. But then a year-and-a-half later my sister was born, so she was baptized, and then I was baptized the second time. And then I used to say, "Oh, there's the man who, when I saw the minister, "That's the one that put the water on my head." So I was baptized twice.

SIGRIST: Did they baptize you so quickly the first time because they thought you weren't going to live?

BJORLAND: That's right, yeah. That's why they did it. But I'm still here and, boy, when I was two years old I was a little blimp, I was so fat. So I'm still here at seventy-six.

SIGRIST: Anna, did your mother have a lot of children?

BJORLAND: Well, we, she had eleven, but only four of us lived on. Seven died.

SIGRIST: Can you name the four that lived?

BJORLAND: That lived? That's my sister Astrid, my sister

Margaret and my brother Tom.

SIGRIST: And yourself.

BJORLAND: And myself, yeah.

SIGRIST: Are you the oldest of those?

BJORLAND: No, my brother was the oldest, and then my sister Margaret, and then it's me, and she was the baby.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, being the older of the two, any of your brothers and sisters dying?

BJORLAND: No, I don't remember any of that.

SIGRIST: It all happened before.

BJORLAND: It all happened before. I think there was one in between me and you, I don't know.

REFSLAND: There was one younger than I.

BJORLAND: Oh, that one died.

SIGRIST: It wasn't something your mother ever talked about.

REFSLAND: No.

BJORLAND: She never, no. She was sick a lot, too, after we

came over here. That's the reason, when she passed away.

SIGRIST: She died soon after you got here?

BJORLAND: No, about, I would say, four years, I believe.

REFSLAND: Uh-huh. Yeah, four years.

BJORLAND: We stayed here a year after she died. She suffered very. She was in and out of the hospital all the time.

SIGRIST: Astrid, what was your mom's name?

REFSLAND: Kristiana.

SIGRIST: Was that with a K or a C?

REFSLAND: Yeah, K.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

REFSLAND: Holm, H-O-L-M.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's background, what you know about your mother's background.

REFSLAND: What I know is her father came, well, he was born in, well, Schleswig Holstein which was under Denmark at

that time.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

REFSLAND: Are you kidding?

SIGRIST: ( he laughs ) Could you say it slowly, then?

REFSLAND: Schleswig Holstein. It is, it's on the border of Denmark and Germany, so they sort of. And he came to, I just found out recently, he came to Alsund, Norway. A-L-S-U-N-D.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

REFSLAND: And then he, of course, in his, he came down to southern Norway and married, met my grandmother. And that he was a pilot, and he had fallen down on the ship, and he hurt his back. So he had, so they gave him the pilot house, and that house was built in 1600-and-something, and it's still there. My cousin lives there.

SIGRIST: Would that be the house that your mother grew up in?

REFSLAND: Yes. That would be where she grew up. My mother and, they're right on the border, and my mother was deathly afraid of water. She wouldn't, I don't think

she ever learned to swim. She was deathly afraid of water.

SIGRIST: Do you have any idea why that might be? Did she have a bad experience that she might have talked about, or . . .

REFSLAND: No, I don't think. It was just, that was also an island. See, that was a different island, and in order to get into town you had to go by water. And I guess, in all kinds of weather, you know, I guess she just got a fright. So outside of that, I mean, but this was where she grew up, with quite a few brothers and sisters.

SIGRIST: What did your mom look like, if you had to describe her in words?

REFSLAND: She was very pretty. I mean, she was very, now, to be a Norwegian, she was very dark. She had dark hair, velvety brown eyes, and she was a very pretty lady, very good-natured, a lot of fun.

SIGRIST: Anna, can you describe what your mom's personality was like as you remember it?

BJORLAND: She was a wonderful mother. ( she is moved ) I

loved her very much.

SIGRIST: And you said she was not well.

BJORLAND: Yeah. And she, I never forgot when she died. We all tried to take care of her, help her, and do all we could.

SIGRIST: And, Astrid, what did she die of?

REFSLAND: Really complications, heart attack. And really, she was, I wasn't home because I was with my aunt. I was the youngest, and so they sent me to be with the family. But Anna was there all the time.  
( she is moved )

SIGRIST: How old were you, Anna, when your mom died?

BJORLAND: About ten, I think.

SIGRIST: Do you know how she and your father met?

BJORLAND: No, I don't know that.

SIGRIST: Astrid?

REFSLAND: No, I don't know how they met, but they had mutual friends that we knew of, people who had been to their wedding and, well, especially one friend. We were

friends with the daughter. He also came to my mother's and my father's silver anniversary. How they met, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Anna, what was your dad's name?

BJORLAND: His name was Andreas, A-N-D-R-E-A-S.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you a similar question. Describe your dad's personality. What was he like as a person?

BJORLAND: He was very happy-go-lucky. He loved life. He loved the, he could sing and dance like nobody else.  
( she laughs ) He was a very, very good father. He was strict, but he wasn't, you know. But always happy. One of the best fathers, I would say, anybody could have.

SIGRIST: Would you say that your mother's personality contrasted that or was like that?

BJORLAND: My mother was a very happy person, too. When she was younger she was the same way. She had a lot of friends. She loved life. She loved people, and was just wonderful. They matched, I would say they matched very well as a couple.

SIGRIST: You said your dad was strict. When you were a little kid in Norway, is there a story that you remember of him punishing you the or you doing something wrong?

BJORLAND: Well, I tell you, I remember very well. See, we didn't see him too much in Norway. I don't remember too much. I know he was home a couple of times, but not too much. But when we came over here I remember him. I remember, as a matter of fact, the first time we came here, and we were playing, fooling around, you know how kids do. But, believe me, both of us, her and me, we got the worst whack in the behind that I don't think I ever forgot, and we had to sit on the chair each and sit there. We weren't allowed to move. And we never forgot it. And after that believe me, when we, every time we did something wrong we got a whack on the behind and it was sit there or that's it, and we sat. We didn't move for nothing. And that was the way he was, you know. But not a mean father or nothing, but he had to do something, I guess. They were normal, and we were kids.

SIGRIST: A little discipline.

BJORLAND: Do you remember that?

REFSLAND: I just remember they called us the Katzenjammer kids, because we were into all kinds of trouble.

BJORLAND: We were, we were. We were like twins.

REFSLAND: Really. We were into everything.

BJORLAND: We were unbelievable.

SIGRIST: You said your dad wasn't around a lot in Norway. What did he do for a living. I'll ask Astrid.

REFSLAND: He was a merchant seaman. He was a chief engineer. So he was out two years at a time.

BJORLAND: Yeah, he was away a lot.

REFSLAND: So we didn't see too much of Dad until we came here.

SIGRIST: And when did he come to America?

REFSLAND: Well, my older sister, when was she born? She's born in this country. See, so they were here, and then they went back to Norway.

SIGRIST: Your mother and father both were here.

REFSLAND: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting.

REFSLAND: Yes. Because my older sister is born here.

SIGRIST: So this was before you were born?

REFSLAND: Yeah, uh-huh.

BJORLAND: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about them coming to America, or anything they used to talk about being in America before you all were born?

BJORLAND: I never heard anything about that at all. You know.

REFSLAND: The only thing, I think when you're a merchant seaman and you only see your family every two years, I think that they figured, oh, my aunt was here, and my mother probably wanted to come over and see her sister.

SIGRIST: But you don't know what date or anything?

REFSLAND: Uh, no. Well, my brother was already, he was two years old. And then Margaret was born and, uh, when was she born? 1907.

SIGRIST: So it's prior to the First World War that they're here.

REFSLAND: Oh, yes.

BJORLAND: Yeah.

REFSLAND: So why, I understood, I heard the story. I don't know if Anna remembers, that he came home on the ship and the owner was practically a neighbor and he wouldn't let any of the people go ashore. And even the chief engineer, you know, the captain. And we stood, we could stand outside our house and wave to him, and I think that's when my mother and father said, "We're going back to America." So I think that was the turning point.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you both questions about just kind of growing up in Norway. Anna, let me start with you. As a little girl in Norway, what did you do for fun? What kind of games did you play?

BJORLAND: Well, one thing we played a lot of was ball. We used, we learned how to, how do they call that, three balls at a time?

SIGRIST: Juggling?

REFSLAND: Yes.

BJORLAND: Three balls, juggling. And over the shoulder, under, and all kinds of ways. Over the shoulder. We were very, really got very good at it. That was the most thing we did. And played hide-and-go-seek like other kids.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of other kids, or were you more or less isolated?

BJORLAND: No, no. We had, we were, how many were we? Five, six girls together.

REFSLAND: Uh-huh.

BJORLAND: And we were together since we were little, and we were together until we grew up, when we went over and went to America. And this is what we did.

SIGRIST: You played a lot of ball.

BJORLAND: That, and then the summer we'd drive out, go to the islands and go swimming, play other games like other kids, hide and seek.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a toy that you had in Norway?

BJORLAND: I didn't have too much toy, but I remember one Christmas we used to have regular candles on the tree. But I remember one Christmas there was a wooden doll hanging on the tree. It wasn't really big. But my grandfather had carved that out, and that was supposed to be my present, Christmas present. And I forgot, I can still see that little doll hanging there. That's about all I can remember, and toys, there wasn't that much. You know, there wasn't that much money around.

SIGRIST: You had to make your own fun.

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah. That's all we did. There was no, like, TV and radio and we never heard of that.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you remember a toy or something?

REFSLAND: Yes. ( Ms. BJORLAND coughs ) I had, I don't know, a porcelain thing. And I remember at the auction, when my mother had to auction off, you know, we were leaving, and the sheriff was, he had it in his hand for people to bid on it, and I know I cried out, I said, "No, no, no, that's mine!" And my mother had to stop him. ( she laughs ) But we had to, compared to today we had a wonderful, wonderful time.

BJORLAND: We did.

REFSLAND: I mean, friends and, we just made fun ourselves. We really did.

SIGRIST: You, Anna, you talked about there being a lot of kids. You probably went to school while you were in Norway. ( to Astrid ) I assume you probably were too young.

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah.

REFSLAND: Yeah, I didn't.

SIGRIST: But you went to school, didn't you?

BJORLAND: Well, I didn't start, see, because over there they started school at seven, when you were seven. But we were waiting, we had to wait for the passage when our time came, so that my mother couldn't start us in school because when we got this, it was like a waiting time. And when they said we could leave we had to just leave, so we, I never started school. I didn't start school until I came over here.

SIGRIST: When you were a little kid in Norway, what did you know about America?

BJORLAND: Not really too much when I was very little. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: When your mom said, you know, "We're going to go to America, and we're going to go be with your father," because he was here already, right? Did any of this mean anything to you? What were you thinking?

BJORLAND: Well, we were excited about coming to America, naturally, but we didn't know too much about it. But we wanted to come, we had a lot of family. We had my sister over here, and we had aunts and cousins, uncle, and we were excited about that, because we had always heard about how everything was so beautiful over there and everybody had everything, you know.

SIGRIST: Was your father writing back and forth to you?

REFSLAND: Oh, yeah.

BJORLAND: Yeah, that he did. He was good that way.

SIGRIST: Astrid, you mentioned at the auction.

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit more about this whole process.

REFSLAND: Well, my mother, of course, she was expecting, we were expecting to leave. And, of course, you know, in order to, you have all these things and you auction it off. And as I got older and came back I, my girlfriends, or my mother's girlfriend, and her daughter was my girlfriend, I saw a lot of our stuff in her home. So it was, it was just, we were leaving and we were happy, and I was going to see my sister again. The only thing my brother now, he could have been three years old when he left, left America to come back to Norway, and all he told me, he said, "There's a lot of stairs over there." ( she laughs )  
And that I got a kick out of.

SIGRIST: So that's his image of America.

REFSLAND: That's his image.

SIGRIST: A lot of stairs in America.

BOTH: A lot of stairs.

SIGRIST: Anna, what do you remember about the auction, because this could be kind of a traumatic thing, actually, to see all your stuff going up. Do you have any specific memories of it?

BJORLAND: Not really. I can't say I remember. I, the only thing I remember was all the, going through everything, packing. Everything, I felt something was wrong, because everything was going away, you know, taken out of the house. But what I really went through at the time, we had been vaccinated. And I think that's why I didn't follow it too much. I got very sick. I don't remember if you did but we both, I think, very sick from it.

REFSLAND: You were really sick.

BJORLAND: I remember they put me in this room and every day all these people were carrying stuff out, and I was so sick. My arm was like that. ( she gestures )

SIGRIST: All swollen.

BJORLAND: Terrible. And we were, and we had to, you know, get ready. And my poor mother, she must have, didn't guess what to do. So I guess that's what it is, that I don't remember so much of it because of that time.

SIGRIST: And the vaccination was part of the process of you getting ready to leave. You had to have, and you didn't.

REFSLAND: Three!

BJORLAND: Not one, but three. I still have those marks from that, and I had never been so sick.

SIGRIST: Do you suppose that's the first time you'd ever been vaccinated?

REFSLAND: Yeah.

BJORLAND: Yeah. That's because you had to travel over here, and you had to have that. You couldn't leave the country without that.

SIGRIST: Did anyone give you a party before you left?

BJORLAND: No, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to anyone before you left?

BJORLAND: I'm sure I did. As a matter, my girlfriend and her mother, they were very close, and I'm sure, you know, that we did say goodbye to all of them. But I can't remember especially from that time. I was, you know, too young, I guess.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you remember saying goodbye to anyone

specifically?

REFSLAND: Well, my grandfather.

BJORLAND: Yeah, that.

REFSLAND: And, as I said, the neighbor that we were very close to.

SIGRIST: When you said goodbye to your grandfather, was he living with you? No.

REFSLAND: Yeah. Well, we were living in his house.

SIGRIST: In his house.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about saying goodbye to your grandfather?

REFSLAND: Well, I remember my mother saying, "I'll never see this place again," so. ( she is moved ) Do you remember that? But no, he, he was sad to see us go. He wanted us to stay. But, and it was just, you know, hectic getting ready, leaving.

SIGRIST: And your mother is going with the intention of not coming back to Norway. I mean, when she said, "I'll never see this place again," her intention is that

we're going to America, we're going to make a new life.

REFSLAND: No, she wanted to, she wanted to come back.

SIGRIST: She did?

BJORLAND: Yeah, she did, she did.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a second and Kevin's going to flip the tape over for us, and then we'll get you on your way to America.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now resuming. Where did you have to travel to to get the boat?

REFSLAND: From Arendal we had to get to Oslo. That meant we took what they call, now they call it the Coastal Line. There was no caps. I mean, I don't think there was room ( she laughs ) from Arendal to Oslo. Because then we had a lot of relatives in Oslo. My mother's sister and her brother and I remember, you know, being in their home and all.

SIGRIST: Did you stay in Oslo for a period of time?

REFSLAND: No, not too long. And then, of course, we got on the Bergensfjord.

SIGRIST: Anna, what baggage did you take with you? What did you have for luggage when you left?

BJORLAND: Well, suitcases. That's about all. I remember that. What we really took, most likely, was just clothes, that I remember, anyway. I don't think maybe my mom had a lot of, probably things that she had for years, but I don't really remember much of that. But what really we took with us, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you take something that was your own personal thing as sort of a memento of . . .

BJORLAND: Not at that time, no. We were too young then. It was all so confusing, I believe, that we never thought of it, you know.

SIGRIST: So you were just in Oslo briefly.

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then, let me ask Astrid. You went to the, it was the Bergensfjord, right, the ship?

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you thought when you saw this boat?

REFSLAND: I don't remember that I even saw. I remember being on it, but I don't remember seeing that.

SIGRIST: Of course, you're no strangers to boats, are you, really?

REFSLAND: No.

SIGRIST: So this is not like the first time you've ever seen a great boat.

REFSLAND: Oh, no, no.

SIGRIST: So that may be why. It may not be the momentous an occasion.

REFSLAND: It wasn't momentous seeing the ship or anything, and I guess . . .

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on the boat, Astrid?

REFSLAND: I wasn't seasick. That's one thing. ( she laughs )  
And I was on my own a lot because my mother was seasick, Anna was seasick. So I had, and my brother, of course, was in a different part of the ship,

because him and another young fellow from our home town. So he would play the harmonica and I would sing, and people used to give me change. But I gave, in fact, my brother said later, he said I kept him and his buddy in cigarettes. And once in a while they'd throw me a bar of candy. ( she laughs ) So I remember always being on my own and just having a good time. ( she laughs ) That was it. So that's . . .

SIGRIST: You were their extra money on the ship.

REFSLAND: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Anna, what do you remember sticks out in your mind about the ship?

BJORLAND: Well, I remember it was big and it was scary. But I remember good times on there. Like I say, I had a birthday there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about having your birthday on the boat?

BJORLAND: Well, I'll never forget that big bowl of hard boiled eggs. ( she laughs ) My mother bought, to have, for the people to have an egg each for breakfast. It was

a, you never had eggs. They were very expensive, you know. So I guess that was the only thing she could do to make it like a party. That I remember. And then I remember my birthday, and I was, I remember Astrid and I were up on deck, and I had gotten a red apple, a big red apple. And two of us were singing.

Two of us stood up there and sang. Oh, we really had a real party. And then I remember we got ice cream, and that was something that we had never had.

So I, I thought it was kind of cold to eat it. So I went down the cabin and I took the ice cream and I put it up on some little shelf there, but there was sun coming in there. But my mother said, asked what I was doing. I said, "I can't, I got to make it warm. It's too cold. I can't eat it." Because I never had ice cream in my life before. She said, "You can't do that. It's going to melt, you know. You got to eat it cold." No, I couldn't do that. I had to have, till this day I like soft ice cream.

( she laughs ) I don't know. I had never thought it was good cold. And then I had a bad experience, too.

Somebody, I got my hand caught in a door. You know, that's part of it, and somebody locked the door on me, and I ended up with four sore fingers. Believe

me, I never heard the end of that. These people that did it, every time they saw me for years, "How's your hand? How's your hand?" They never got over it. They felt so bad, you know. That's what I would say I remember about the ship.

SIGRIST: Astrid, can you describe where you slept on the boat for me?

REFSLAND: Well, I was in, you know, what do you call them, cabins. And we each had our own, and, oh. I think, with my mother there, I think she was a great comfort. I mean, it didn't matter, as long as we knew she was there. That was it. We'd sleep any place as long as my mother was with us.

SIGRIST: Now, you said she was seasick. What do you remember about her being seasick?

REFSLAND: Well, she was in the cabin a lot, yeah. She really couldn't take, she couldn't take the sea. And what Anna said about the ice cream on her birthday, we put it in the porthole. ( she laughs )

BJORLAND: The porthole. I was trying to think.

REFSLAND: And I was the same. We couldn't eat that. It was

too cold. ( she laughs ) We really, I can imagine my poor mother. She must have had her hands full.

SIGRIST: And to be seasick on top of it all.

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: Now, Anna, were you seasick at all during the trip?

BJORLAND: Yeah, I was, yeah.

SIGRIST: At the beginning of it, or . . .

BJORLAND: More or less all the time.

SIGRIST: Was it a rough journey?

BJORLAND: As long as I was, about three weeks.

REFSLAND: It was longer than it is today.

BJORLAND: Yeah, it is. It took longer.

REFSLAND: It was quite a while.

BJORLAND: But I, as strong as I, when I started to get up on deck I felt better. So I guess they said that, I remember my father, when we came the second time, went home, he always kept us up on deck. That way you didn't get, don't get so seasick.

SIGRIST: Now, how's your arm doing during all of this? Did your arm finally sort of heal itself?

BJORLAND: It finally, it must have gone away because I, like I say, I was having fun and singing and I was happy. And so I guess it just went away.

SIGRIST: And it was your eighth birthday, correct, that you celebrated.

BJORLAND: Eighth, yeah. I'll never forget that one.  
( they laugh ) And I got a nickel here, and somebody gave us a nickel and a penny. Oh, God.

SIGRIST: Do you remember who else was traveling? Were there other Norwegians, or were they, you know, who else was on this boat? Were there kids?

BJORLAND: All Norwegians. It was a Norwegian boat. And there were people from, that we, well, not from our home town, but you got acquainted with a lot of people. Met, you know, different places. And when we came over here for years we met these, we were friends with these people. We never lost contact with them.  
I mean, they remember us when we were, well, they knew my mother, they were grownups. I remember we

met them after we came here.

SIGRIST: Not to mention the people that slammed your hand in the door.

BJORLAND: Them, they never forgot that. They were always asking me, as long as I can remember they asked about how my hand was. They never got over it. I didn't either.

SIGRIST: So you arrive in New York in July, and this is July of 1925. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty, either of you, from the ship the first time?

BJORLAND: I'm sure, we saw it, but I can't, I don't put it in my mind that I thought of it. I don't know.

SIGRIST: What about coming to because Ellis Island, because you did come to Ellis Island in 1925. Let me start with Astrid. What do you remember about that?

REFSLAND: Well, I just, I still wonder how did we get off the big ship and on to Ellis Island? And my experience was I saw my first black person. I had never seen a black person in my life. And he was a heavy-set man, and he was whistling. And I was trying to follow him. I was on one side of the fence, like, or a

gate, and I was trying to follow him and trying to whistle, imitate him. And my father, I remember we saw him and he was just laughing. He thought this was something. Well, I remember, it must be the Great Hall downstairs. Because we were sitting on one side and my father was sort of up on the pedestal with a lot of others welcoming their families. But it was no hardship or anything. It was just, it was just we were all very happy.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you remember, because your father's kind of a distant figure to you, do you remember your reaction when you first were introduced to your dad?

REFSLAND: Well, he had, well, yeah. Well, I remember ( she laughs ), I remember the first night in this country I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to be with my mother. That was it. And my father, he's distant. I didn't want him around. So I guess it took time, you know, until you learned. But, although Anna, I would say, I think was closer to my mother. I was more the tomboy, and she was the closer. So I don't know how she took the first.

SIGRIST: Anna, what do you remember about Ellis Island and

being here on the island?

BJORLAND: Well, first time, like Astrid said, first of all I saw this big colored person. I'd never seen one before. And he was the happiest person. He just laughed. He was laughing. And I cried. And my father, like she said, my father was standing there, and he was laughing his head off because I was screaming my head off. And I just never forgot that. It's always been on my mind, you know. That I remember seeing. My cousin standing on the side with a big banana, a big thing like this of bananas, ( she gestures ) something we never had in Norway, I remember, so they could, you know, and always, they're all smiling and happy and had all kinds of presents for us. We stayed there, I don't know. We must have eventually gone off shore. But all I remember I see that. My father and my cousins there.

SIGRIST: And it was your father and your cousin that came to meet you?

BJORLAND: Aunts, there was aunts, cousins, yeah.

SIGRIST: So it was, a small family group came to welcome you.

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah. Like my aunt, that was my mother's sister.  
She had several children.

SIGRIST: What was your aunt's name?

BJORLAND: Ahendrike. A-, I think, H-E-N-D-R-I-K-E. Ahendrike,  
Tante, that's aunt, tante, T-A-N-T-E Ahendrike.

SIGRIST: And what was her last name?

BJORLAND: Her name was . . .

REFSLAND: Andersen.

BJORLAND: Andersen. Wasn't he Swedish?

REFSLAND: No, he wasn't.

BJORLAND: A-N-D-E-R-S-E-N. And they always lived in the Bronx.  
I don't know if you ever heard of that.

SIGRIST: So they came, they came down to meet you.

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah. And all my cousins.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, what's your reaction to your father?  
I mean, he's probably just as distant as he is to  
Astrid.

BJORLAND: No, I, I remembered him. Well, I had seen him in

Norway, and he didn't seem strange at all. He was, he was just his happy-go-lucky self, and I was just happy to see him.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother greeting your father?

BJORLAND: No, I don't remember that. She was standing, just standing there with us, most likely. That's all.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing when you were at Ellis Island, when you got off the boat?

BJORLAND: That I can't.

SIGRIST: Not offhand.

BJORLAND: No, not that. Not when I was younger.

SIGRIST: When you were at Ellis Island, did you have to undergo any kind of medical exams?

BJORLAND: Not that I remember.

REFSLAND: No, nothing. I think we had all that done before we left Norway and, see, we, we just, it's not the pictures that they show. It was very, well, I think another thing is the Nordic people, I wonder if we weren't a little more accepted, you know? And that

they didn't hold us back for anything. And we, I think we always lived through that we, we have always sort of, well, Scandinavian, not just Norwegians, Scandinavians. And we were known to be very, uh, truthful. We didn't harm people. And I think that was one of the things. We were very, you know, accepted.

SIGRIST: Now, where did you go when you left Ellis Island? Where did they take you?

BJORLAND: We went to Brooklyn. We moved, went to, was it 52nd Street?

REFSLAND: 53rd.

BJORLAND: 53rd Street. And I remember that house, the first house.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that?

BJORLAND: Yeah. It was like an off, almost white stairs going way, way . . .

SIGRIST: As your brother had warned you.

BJORLAND: Going way up. And it was, we had first what looked like a basement underneath, but we had to walk these

stairs. And they called it a parlor floor in those days and, uh, like an apartment, that's all.

SIGRIST: How many rooms?

BJORLAND: Oh, I would say a couple of bedrooms, living room, kitchen. Just a regular American apartment, but with the old-fashioned, they called it the parlor floor. Where that came from I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in that apartment?

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah. There was electricity and heat.

SIGRIST: And your own bathroom?

BJORLAND: Yes. And they had radiators. You know, radiators that stood up, like they had years ago. Well, they still, maybe they still have them.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in this apartment?

BJORLAND: Well, we didn't stay there too long. I think it was furnished. And we went from there, I think, did we go from there to . . .

REFSLAND: 58th Street.

BJORLAND: 58th. Yeah, that's right. That was a different

apartment. That was something on the same order.  
You know, the usual, bathroom, kitchen, living room.

SIGRIST: What was your dad doing in America? How was he  
making his living?

BJORLAND: He was a dock builder.

SIGRIST: A dock builder. In Brooklyn?

BJORLAND: In Brooklyn, yeah, for many, many years. And that's  
how we made a living.

REFSLAND: Do you remember the house he built out on Long  
Island?

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah, that.

REFSLAND: He built a house out in Hempstead, Long Island, but  
my mother didn't want to live in the country. So,  
( she laughs ) we came back to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Astrid, what do you remember about maybe that first  
year or so in America, things that stuck out in your  
mind as being different?

REFSLAND: We saw, I heard my first radio the first day we  
landed. And we, we came to my mother's cousin's

house. And, of course, we started school in September. So that was a big experience.

SIGRIST: Where did you, you heard the radio at your mother's cousin's?

REFSLAND: Yeah. They were some, well, I guess you call them my second cousins. They had made a radio of some kind and, oh, you'd put the earphones on. They were all excited about hearing voices. So that was an experience.

BJORLAND: What about the player piano Tante Ahendrike had?

REFSLAND: Oh, yeah.

BJORLAND: My aunt, my mother's sister, she lived in the Bronx, we went there. And I never forgot that player piano. You know, you just, with your feet, play it like that. That really was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I could sit there all day. We used to drive her crazy with that.

REFSLAND: Well, the family, I would say, my mother and father especially, were very, if we had a family reunion which I think was every weekend, they would put on skits. We used to have a lot of fun with that, just

a family together. So we had very, very happy, I would say, a very happy childhood.

BJORLAND: And we were so many. We had this one, Carrie, she was a cousin. She lived up in Yonkers. And we used to go there. But I'll never forget the first Christmas.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the first Christmas. What religion were you? I never did ask.

BJORLAND: Lutheran.

SIGRIST: Lutheran.

BJORLAND: That was up in, up in Yonkers, at Carrie's house. What was her husband's name?

REFSLAND: Eddie.

BJORLAND: Eddie.

REFSLAND: He was Swedish.

BJORLAND: Oh, God, forget about it. He used to make his own beer, and he was never, he was like that.

( she gestures ) But he was good. He loved, they didn't have kids, so he loved us too much. But we

were the only kids in the whole family, so the gifts, you wouldn't believe. Oh, God. We got, I'll never forget these glass dolls we got. They were beautiful. They were unbelievable. And more dolls, and dolls' clothes. We got so much presents. I'd never seen anything like that, oh, in my life. It was unbelievable. Because none of them had kids, and we were the only two. Doll carriages, dishes, you know, little sets of dishes.

SIGRIST: Well, and as you had said, Christmas was a rather sparse celebration in Norway.

BJORLAND: Yeah. And then it was a special, because we had just come over, you know. We had never seen anything like this, never in our lives. Oh, that was beautiful. But I had a sad happening, and I forgot that either.

REFSLAND: Remember when we were small in Norway, being my father was chief engineer, my mother could go with him, sail. And she came home with all kinds of presents and everything. So, you know, we had such a good picture of my father. We didn't see him.

BJORLAND: What about when he sent her the crocodile?

SIGRIST: Your father sent your mother a crocodile?

REFSLAND: A stuffed one. ( she laughs )

BJORLAND: It was stuffed, but it was a real, had been. And that's how he was, he was full of the Devil.

SIGRIST: Do you remember this being in your house when you were growing up?

BJORLAND: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did she have it in the house?

BJORLAND: She had it standing up on the stand, but my brother, he used to love this, this crocodile. He would chase the cat with it. The cat would crawl on the wall. ( they laugh ) Remember? I never forgot it. He was terrible.

SIGRIST: Your brother had a little of the dickens in him.

BJORLAND: He did, he was. We were full of fun. Always was.

SIGRIST: Anna, you started saying that there was a sad happening.

BJORLAND: Oh, yeah. Now, that was because, it was about the glass dolls.

SIGRIST: Oh, yeah. What happened to the glass dolls?

BJORLAND: Where we were living in this apartment, and our father had this great big tool box, you know. And I was going to bed at night. And he shut the light. The lights were shut off. I didn't see where I was going, and I was carrying the doll to take it with me to bed and fell over the tool box and dropped my doll. I'd never been so heartbroken in all my life. I had never had a doll like that, and a glass doll, and it couldn't be fixed. That was sad. Oh, I'll never forget that one.

SIGRIST: We just have a few minutes left. Astrid, tell me about starting school.

REFSLAND: Oh, yes. That was an experience. But, you know, I just want to go back to, you asked if we had electric lights when we came. We had electricity in Norway. Starting to school. I still have it, that if I'd been someplace once I have certain places that I sort of had an eye on. Well, we went to school, and my mother said, "Now, you stay there until I come and get you." Well, we waited and waited, and all the children went home for their lunch, and we were

waiting. So I told Anna, I said, "I know if we go this one avenue, I know where we should turn down." There was a big synagogue on the corner, or community house. And sure enough the troops started on our way. We got home, and my older sister Margaret was there. "Well, where's Mama?" "Well, she didn't come." ( she laughs ) Well, it ended up that it was either Third Avenue or Fourth Avenue. So being that my mother missed us she took Fourth Avenue back, and my sister Margaret took Third Avenue. So I don't know if we got back to school that afternoon.

BJORLAND: I don't remember that either.

REFSLAND: But really, it was nice. That was in Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: School was no problem for you. You were young enough where you . . .

REFSLAND: Well, no. School was no problem because, but the only thing, taking those days and today, the teacher would say, "Have your parents speak English to you so that, you know, we could learn our language." But, of course, we did speak Norwegian home in the house. But then, of course, we learned English very fast.

SIGRIST: Well, especially, you know, you're at just the right age where you would pick it up quickly. Anna, tell me about how you learned English?

BJORLAND: In school.

SIGRIST: Well, how did you learn English? How did you go about learning it?

BJORLAND: Well, just by going to school and playing outside with other children that came little, it came little by little. I don't know, it just came to me. And from what I understand, my mother, I remember her saying that we had learned American in about a month. We knew how to speak. My mother never did. She couldn't understand. She was always fighting with these people, you know, to get them to understand. It was more Norwegian than American, you know. But we just picked it up, I guess.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the first word was that, when the light went on inside of you and you suddenly started to understand?

BJORLAND: No, I don't really remember, but we just automatically went into it.

SIGRIST: Astrid, do you remember anything like that?

REFSLAND: No, I just, I just remember that, in fact, it wasn't long after that my mother would say, "Speak English so I can understand you." ( she laughs ) I already started losing, you know, forgetting my Norwegian.

BJORLAND: It came about this very easily. We were lucky with that.

SIGRIST: You know, we've got like three minutes left, and I know you actually went back and forth several times. I just want to make sure we get this on tape. You arrived in July of '25, 1925. Then when did you go back to Norway?

REFSLAND: October 4, 1930.

BJORLAND: '30.

SIGRIST: Astrid, you think it was 1930.

BOTH: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: It was 1930. And your mother had died in the interim.

REFSLAND: Yes.

BJORLAND: Yes.

REFSLAND: '29.

SIGRIST: She died in 1929. So did Dad go with you back?

REFSLAND: Yes, oh, yes.

BJORLAND: He did.

SIGRIST: So it was you, Astrid, Anna . . .

REFSLAND: And my father.

SIGRIST: And your dad. Now, how long did you stay in Norway?

REFSLAND: Five years.

SIGRIST: Ah. Did you live in the same house when you went back?

BJORLAND: Same house. My grandfather . . .

REFSLAND: With my grandfather.

SIGRIST: Your grandfather's still living at this time.

BJORLAND: He was still living there, uh-huh. And then we went back to school over there. That was another little hard in the beginning.

SIGRIST: Well, yeah, you're confused at this point. You've got English . . .

BJORLAND: They, in Norway they have three more. They have "aw,", "ir" and "ah." They have three more in the alphabet, and that was very hard for us to learn. The language we still understood. We had spoken all the time at home, so that wasn't so bad.

SIGRIST: So when you were in Norway for those five years, did you want to go back to America?

BJORLAND: Well, we did, yes.

REFSLAND: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: But did you feel out of place in Norway by that time?

BJORLAND: No. We were happy there. We had our friends. All our friends we had when we were little we had when we came back. And they, you know. And we always, and we had nicknames that they tried to call us when we had when we were little, and we were so embarrassed then because we were so much older. We were called Alla and Deda, and we didn't want them to call us that, but they kept doing it, teasing us, you know.

SIGRIST: So you were there for five years.

BJORLAND: Five years.

SIGRIST: And then you returned.

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: And you returned on what ship?

BJORLAND: Stavangerfjord.

SIGRIST: Stavangerfjord. And then did you go back after, once, you returned in '35. Am I correct? And then you were here.

REFSLAND: Yes.

SIGRIST: You didn't go back.

REFSLAND: This was home.

BJORLAND: Yeah. Well, we . . .

REFSLAND: This was home.

BJORLAND: I was married a year and a month after I came here, so.

SIGRIST: In '35.

REFSLAND: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Well, boy, we're down to a minute now, so let me just ask you both individually one quick question. I'll start with Astrid. Are you happy that your parents made that decision, or do you wish you had grown up in Norway?

REFSLAND: No, I'm happy. We had very, very good lives. I'm very happy we were here.

SIGRIST: Anna, what do you think? Do you wish you had maybe lived in Norway, or are you glad that you came over here?

BJORLAND: I've always loved Norway, and if things had worked out a little better, I've been happy here. I mean, what I'm happy with is I have five wonderful children. They're my life. That's what I live for. And thirteen grandchildren, four great-grandchildren. And I got two more on the way, grandchildren. So I'm happy.

SIGRIST: So you've had a good life.

BJORLAND: Yes, I've had a good life.

SIGRIST: I want to thank you both. This has been a real treat for us.

BJORLAND: I hope we did all right.

SIGRIST: I think you did great. ( he laughs ) This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Anna Bjorland and Astrid Refsland, and this is Wednesday, July 21st, Anna's seventy-sixth birthday, and I'm signing off with the ladies here at the Ellis Island Recording Studio. This is Paul Sigrist.