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ARNOLD LEFOR  
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.  
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NETHERLANDS, 1941  
AGE 14

SHIP: "THE MAGELLANES"  
PORT: AMSTERDAM  
RESIDENCES:  
? NETHERLANDS: AMSTERDAM  
? US: NEW YORK, NY

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, August 18, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Arnold Lefor. Mr. Lefor came from Holland in 1941 when he was fourteen years old. Anyway, welcome. Let's begin, Mr. Lefor, with you giving me your birth date.

LEFOR: April 22, 1926.

SIGRIST: And were you born in Holland?

LEFOR: I was born in Amsterdam, Holland.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about your birth?

LEFOR: No. Only that I had a small brother who died about two years before I was born. A year or two years before I was born, he died. He was one week old.

SIGRIST: Do you know how he died?

LEFOR: Yeah. He had some physical deformity they couldn't cope with at the time, you know.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your dad's name?

LEFOR: Uh, Karl, K-A-R-L.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living?

LEFOR: He was the -- he was the supervisor in a bank department.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's background and his family?

LEFOR: Okay. Now, my father, both my father and mother were born in Germany, Thuringia in English, Thüringen in German -- Germany, which used to be East Germany. They lived there. And my father was interned. I went -- in 1901 he always was proud to mention that he was still for one day under Queen Victoria. And he went to -- 1900 he went to England. And then when the First World War came along I, he was interned there as an enemy alien. He was, they put him for about five years on the Isle of Man. He was a prisoner of war there, and that affected him quite a bit, of course. You know, he was about in the thirties at the time. And I also know he lived in Paris for quite a while. .

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about being held as a prisoner of war and what that experience was like for him?

LEFOR: Yes. Not that much, but it was a terrible experience for him to be locked in for four to five years. And after that he could never take small spaces. That affected him all his life. There were, if you want, positive things where I remember he had two or three very quite close friends who were also prisoners of war, and those friendships survived. And it was also interesting to know, in the First World War they were very pro-German, pro-kaiser and all that, you know.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's parents? What do you know about his parents and their, like what they did for a living.

LEFOR: Yes. They lived in Barschfeld, Germany. He was a butcher. They had a butcher there, a butchery there. And they slaughtered animals, unfortunately, which I'm very much against. All right. And he -- oh, yes. I still remember he would always say, this would be in German (my mother always told me these stories) that, oh, he, his father, my grandfather, would say, "(Oh, Yetta, ist das die zuppe?)." That means, "Oh, Yetta, is that soup?" Or she would, she would say, "Oh, I'm going into the kitchen and get myself some more." That I still remember. She would always say that. And I, when I was five years old, about that age, I visited my grandmother who lived in Barschfeld, Thüringen, Germany.

And I still remember there was a small stream in front of the house. And I also, I also remember the 'john'. Boy, you look, there was no flushing. You look right down there, and she'd come with me, you know, ( he laughs ) to make sure I wouldn't fall in. We were on the second or third floor of the house. And the small stream, there were a lot of, there was a lot of glass in there. In fact, I don't know if this matters. My nephew, who's very into it, my nephew, Allen, who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, is a surgeon. He's very interested in family. And he and I are going to Holland. In fact, in March 1994, and from there he wants to go to Barschfeld, Germany. I'm far from sure whether I'll go.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Barschfeld for me?

LEFOR: Yeah. B-A-R, B for Baker, A-R-C-H-F-E-L-D. Barchfeld. It is near, the biggest cities are Eisenach. Eisenach, Germany is pretty much in that area, Thüringen.

SIGRIST: And can you spell that, too, please for us?

LEFOR: Pardon?

SIGRIST: Thuringen. Can you spell it?

LEFOR: Oh, sure. T-H-Ü, with an umlaut, that's two periods above it, R-I-N-G-E-N.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

LEFOR: What was what?

SIGRIST: Your mom's name, your mother.

LEFOR: My mother's name was Ilse, I-L-S-E.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

LEFOR: Her, Ilse Wolf, W-O-L-F.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same question about your mom. Tell me a little bit about her background.

LEFOR: Uh, yeah. Mother's background -- funny. I remember she would have liked to be a painter. In those days, ladies weren't supposed to be painters. It was Mother who had a lot of courage. My father was not, I think it was more like we were scared, you know. And Mother had much more courage, during the German inflation, she always told her mother get out of, you know, to get that money out of Germany. Which they never did -- they lost all their money during the German inflation. And mother wasn't that old. She was born in 1900. The inflation must have been in the 1920's, '25, maybe. So she must have been about twenty-five. And she always told her mother, my grandmother, to get the money out, and they never did. They ended up with very little, if not penniless.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

LEFOR: Yeah, very easy. Ironically, they were related. They were first cousins. And, which was apparently quite common in Germany. So that's why Mother, of course, knew her, it's crazy, because my Mother, from my father's side, is really my aunt. And from Mother's side he is, whatever, I don't know.

SIGRIST: ( he laughs ) Can you tell me how they ended up in Amsterdam?

LEFOR: Yes. My father came out of German - came out of German imprisonment, went back to visit his parents in Germany. And, if I recall, he had a sort of an emotional setback. He has had, he had two or three different, two breakdown, what you call nervous breakdowns. And I think he had one of them when he went back to his parents in Germany. He needed a year or two to recover, as I remember. And he stayed with his parents. And I don't know exactly, then he did work in Germany for a, oh, I don't know, some German, government maybe, banking, in the banking direction. I'm not sure it is. And then around the 1920's they asked him in Holland, would he like to come and start a banking firm. He said, "Yes." And he moved to Holland. And then he married my mother around the-- . Well, wait a minute, my brother, who was the oldest, was born 1920. Around 1922 they were married in Holland.

SIGRIST: So they actually did marry in Holland, then.

LEFOR: Yeah. My father never liked Germany. This was later, because they, interring him, where he lived they were quite anti-Semitic, and he never liked it basically, you know, that part of him-- . In a way, it's contradictory, because they're all pro-German and pro-Kaiser in World War One.

SIGRIST: What religion was your father?

LEFOR: Uh, Jewish.

SIGRIST: They were Jewish.

LEFOR: They were both Jewish, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit, then, about you growing up in Holland. Your early years, did you grow up in Amsterdam?

LEFOR: I grew up, yes. I was born in, my brother and I were born in Amsterdam, and we grew up there. My father was the vice-president of a bank by that time, and he was making a pretty good living. We grew up definitely better than the average working person. We had a car, which was, we had a General Electric refrigerator. We had General Electric electric clocks that I remember. We had a Chevrolet. It was a car. Our neighbor had a Studebaker. No, wait a minute. We had the, first we had a Studebaker, then we had a Chevrolet. Our neighbors had a La Salle. I still remember that. And, you go and try and find American-made cars in Europe now.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where you lived, your house, or your apartment?

LEFOR: Yes. We lived in the Prince Hendrik Laan, veertigvier.

SIGRIST: My goodness, can you spell that, please?

LEFOR: Yeah. That is Prince, in Dutch it would be spelled P-R-I-N-S, and in English it would be spelled P-R-I-N-C-E, Hendrik, H-E-N-D-R-I-K L-A-A-N, 44. That's where we lived. In fact, I will take my nephew who

has been there, Allen, who was there by himself but he is very anxious for me to go with him, because to make it short, his father, who was my brother, died in 1982, and I'm the closest to his father, the closest thing to his-- . He's been wanting to go there with me for some time.

SIGRIST: Now, was this a free-standing house, or was this an apartment?

LEFOR: No, it was, they are, all these houses there were attached, yes. But it was definitely in a better neighborhood. We had two maids in those days. I was brought up by a sort of a nanny. My brother was brought up by a sort of a nanny. We had, in the early days we had a chauffeur. We had two maids.

SIGRIST: What's your earliest memory? What's the earliest memory you have?

LEFOR: The earliest memory is that all I wanted to do is play with my toy, with my toys I think, even I had a little toy train, whatever. I didn't talk to anybody. They were definitely neurotic, I'll tell you that. You see -- . The best thing was the woman who brought us up who was German, Juffie, we called her. J-U double-F I-E. That's the typical Dutch name for nanny. And I also remember, because they all spoke German there. She was German. At five I had to be rushed, I had to rush to a Dutch-speaking kindergarten because I didn't speak any Dutch. And here I was born in Holland. In order to prepare myself, to be prepared, you might say, to go to school with the Dutch kids. It's amazing, the isolation you live in when you're a child.

LEFOR: Well, and you had German parents too, so . . .

SIGRIST: Yeah. I mean, yeah. But by that time I suppose that they spoke some Dutch. Of course, later they spoke it well, but they always had an accent, of which I was very ashamed later on when I grew up, especially as Hitler came along.

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. Can you tell me a little bit about how your parents perceived what was happening in Germany in the early '30s?

LEFOR: Well, yes. They, as Hitler came along I heard nothing but that. We -- about what was happening over there, we had twelve, I think we had about ten or twelve relatives living in Germany. And as the years progressed, the greater the danger became.

SIGRIST: Did your father go back, I mean, was he visiting his mother periodically while you were living in Holland?

LEFOR: My father's parents had died by that time. I have to tell you, there was quite an age difference between the two, about eighteen years.

SIGRIST: Between your mother and father?

LEFOR: My mother and father. I think it was about eighteen years.

SIGRIST: Oh, so your father was considerably older than she.

LEFOR: Oh, yeah. And there was quite an age difference, and, well, naturally she was his niece, basically, she was his niece. That sounds pretty ridiculous to me today.

SIGRIST: Tell me a pleasant memory you have, a pleasant childhood memory of growing up in Amsterdam.

LEFOR: Yeah, well, first of all, I grew up, yeah. I didn't want to talk to any--. Then later on I became a sort of a devil. I was quite wild. I would be in the streets and play with the kids, you know. We would, we would climb up the plants along the neighbors, you know, these, what do you call, these climbing plants.

SIGRIST: Vines of some sort?

LEFOR: Vines, right. You see, the first thing that comes to me in Dutch, it's crazy. I still remember a lot of things, I speak Dutch well. I have some friends here from Holland who practically speak no Dutch, but I do, I speak it quite well. Languages have always been one of my strengths.

SIGRIST: So you're climbing the vines.

LEFOR: I would climb vines and, of the neighbors' houses, and we were quite devilish. I would walk along the roof drains, and so did my brother, of the houses. And sometimes the neighbors called the police because we were in danger.

SIGRIST: And what was your brother's name?

LEFOR: My brother's name was, in Dutch, Maarten, M double-A R-T-E-N, Martin, in English. And as soon as he came to America, was pretty soon after, he changed it to Frank.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. ( he laughs )

LEFOR: Oh, yeah. Oh, he was American as could be. I didn't. I didn't like America at all at first.

SIGRIST: Did you get along with your brother when you were kids? Were you close, or were you not too close?

LEFOR: There were these -- you know, we did and we didn't. Oh, he, when we, all right, now you want to cover Holland first, I suppose. Yeah, and I was a devil, and in school I would, even I would throw sneezing powder in school, and the kids would all sneeze. The teacher would bring me home, and I had a moped, what do you call it, a scooter. And I would hang on behind the Dutch trolley cars. They had a, in [not understood] they had a mailbox in those times. If you were in a hurry, you threw your letter into the mailbox behind the trolley car. And they

emptied it out at the station, and it would be delivered faster. And I would hang on the slot in the mailbox, and the police caught me and would bring me home. When I threw the sneezing powder in class, the teacher brought me home.

SIGRIST: And who was the disciplinarian in your family, your father or your mother?

LEFOR: Uh, mother. Father wanted to know anything, and once the police brought me home, because we had pushed, we picked up used matches from the street and tried to push them into the bells, and they, to our great exhilaration they would keep ringing the bells. And the neighbors, when we knew they were out, they would keep ringing. And we threw the used matches into the mailbox. We never thought of this, but one day the police came to us, and they thought we had tried to push, set the house on fire because they found these used matches that we, gosh, I think about it today, it's incredible. Here we did walk on the grounds and all that, and we probably trampled some plants. It's incredible today, the things we did, you know. I mean . . .

SIGRIST: How would your mother punish you?

LEFOR: Oh, yeah. Now, when the police brought me home, the policeman came with me, and I was very scared. This was when they caught me with my mo-- what do you call it?

SIGRIST: The scooter.

LEFOR: Huh?

SIGRIST: The scooter?

LEFOR: The scooter, yeah. He took me home, he brought me home. And, "Oh," Mother said, "why don't you put him in jail for two days." You know. I didn't know they were joking. "And just let me know where he is." And I was really scared. I was in tears. ( he laughs )

SIGRIST: Now, did you have family in America? Was there any family members?

LEFOR: Yes. I had an uncle, Fred Greene was his name, G-R-E-E-N-E, I think. He changed his name, of course -- his name was originally Grunebaum, G-R-U-N-E-B-A-U-M, Fred. He worked as a, he had some office job at Bache and Company, B-A-C-H-E and Company, and he had an office job there.

SIGRIST: Is that your dad's brother or your mother's brother?

LEFOR: No. He was the, well, again, they're all related. But I like, he was the son of my father's sister.

SIGRIST: I see.

LEFOR: Selma.

SIGRIST: When you were growing up in Holland, what did you know about America?

LEFOR: Oh, what did I learn, yes. First thing comes to mind is, I used to be, some friend of my brother's had Pinkerton detective stories. They were format -- not as big as this, maybe seven by five inches, let's say. And I think they came out every month, and they're may be sixteen or eighteen pages. Yeah, I was an impressionable kid, maybe ten years old. And they were being printed in Dutch, too. And all these stories took place in New York, and they're all about crime, and how they, the guy would take, somebody would be taken up, eighty-four floors up, you know, to a highly luxurious noiseless elevator, highly luxurious surroundings, and the servant would come, "Here is Mr. So-and-So." And, oh, I don't remember what happened, you know, and everything was automatic, of course. The doors opened automatically. And what happened to the poor unfortunate, I don't remember. But I couldn't wait, I devoured these stories. They came out every month. And when we came to New York, I was so scared the first day I wouldn't go out, I wouldn't go out of our hotel. I just peeked out the door and quickly went in again because of these Pinkerton Detective Stories - that, I remember.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about why you chose, why your family chose to leave Holland when it did.

LEFOR: Well, we were nine months under the German occupations. And here, too, it was Mother who saw this whole thing coming. We had twelve relatives in Germany and you -- they, when Kristallnacht came, Crystal Night, some of the, we had one couple, a relative of ours, they had a six-month-old son, and they took the father and the mother in the middle of the night. The Gestapo came and took the - took the parents away, and the son, the six month old son was left alone in the apartment. And Mother, again, had to, she did all that, she had a lot of courage and she, she got a call in the middle of the night that the kid was alone.

They had some caretaker who found him all alone in the morning, and they, thanks to Mother they smuggled him out in a little basket. They gave him drugs so he wouldn't cry, smuggled him over the Dutch border, and he stayed with us. And these two parents were later, thanks to Mother, Mother did an awful lot -- freed. And they came to Holland. And the kid stayed with us for about a year or two, and they came to Holland and then went to England, saved their lives that way. Took the child, who thought we were his family. He was only two years old when he left us, and they went to England at the time. I still remember how bitterly he cried when he was taken away from us. He is also, I had unfortunately no contact with him. I know he's some kind of professor in a college, today. Klaus was his name, Klaus Grunewald.

SIGRIST: When things were beginning to happen in Germany, did you sort of feel safe in Holland or . . .

LEFOR: Did we what?

SIGRIST: Did you feel safe in Holland?

LEFOR: No. Mainly because of Mother, my father would say, oh, he was a sort of a, smooth businessman, "Leave me alone. Don't bother me so much." And he could see a sense of what Mother always said, especially after Krystallnacht. We had some very wealthy friends who lived about seventeen kilometers or miles behind, just from the Dutch border in Bocholt, B-O-C-H-O-L-T, Germany. They had a thirty room house, I still remember that, to where we were invited. They even had a private country place there. And after Kristall night, Mother went there, we didn't. She didn't have, she had a Dutch passport, so she could go there.

And they had ripped all the toilets out, those Nazis, they had chased the, how is the - yeah, the husband and the son out one exit of the house in the middle of the night in their pajamas, the mother and the daughter out the other exit, and somebody yelled, "Killed them." And somebody else said, "No, don't! He always had soup kitchens and where the people -- poor people could come." And they - they, with their bayonets they went through the paintings, they went with their bayonets through the seats. Those Nazis, they, everything was destroyed in that house. And when my mother came back and saw that she told my father, "Don't stay here. This will never stay seventeen kilometers from the Dutch border. Get out, get out!" And we had some paintings from -- that my father had bought in Holland, and Mother said, "Get everything out." We did send those paintings to relatives who had fled Germany after Kristallnacht. They had them here. And . . .

SIGRIST: Kristallnacht was 1938?

LEFOR: Crystal night was in 1938, November 1938.

SIGRIST: So your mother's really the instrumental one in getting you guys out of Holland?

LEFOR: Yes. And we have thank, I suspect thanks to her we had visas for Australia. We had, only wealthier people could get that. I think you needed ten thousand dollars to get to Australia, which was a lot of money in 1939. We had visas for Australia. We had them for Cuba, and Chile. Which, I can show you the Dutch passport. Their Cub-- Cuban visas arrived, ironically, just during the German invasion.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the German invasion of Holland?

LEFOR: ( he pauses ) Yeah. ( he is moved )

SIGRIST: Well, that's all right. We can go back to it. That's okay. Tell me a little bit about how you felt about leaving Holland. I mean, how conscious are you of what's going on . . .

LEFOR: No, no, now I can tell you. Funny, I seem - the older I get, the more upset I got. I never did formerly.

SIGRIST: That's okay. Take your time.

LEFOR: It's . . . ( he composes himself ) This German . . .  
( he is moved )

SIGRIST: The Germans invaded in 1939?

LEFOR: Okay, fine. The German invasion was May 10, 1940.

SIGRIST: 1940.

LEFOR: And I never forget it. You know, we had sold our house, thanks to Mother. To make it short, we had sold our house in this Prince Hendrik around '44. We had moved to a furnished, what they call flat there, an apartment, on the Beethoven Straat, which is Beethoven - and - - Beethoven Street. I think it was ma-- 96, or 94. And we were completely ready to leave Holland. And this was in 1939. The war between England and Germany had been declared, but not -- the Germans had not invaded our home. And we were ready to leave. Two weeks before, the Simon Bolivar ran on a mine, because the war had been declared in Germany and England, but not Holland. Simon Bolivar ran on a mine.

Two weeks before we were ready to leave we had the tickets for the ship, we had the furniture in storage, everything was ready. We had sold the house, and we, and my father could not go through with it. He saw us at night ly-- . He got a nervous breakdown. He saw us lying in the water, that our ship would hit a mine. We were supposed to go to England. And he couldn't go through with it, and Mother said, "Well, if you want to take that responsibility on you, there's nothing I can do." And we rented a duplex apartment on Stadium Rech 108. And, a nice duplex apartment. That's where we had the apartment, we got the furniture out of storage and moved in there.

And there it was, we lived there. We had a maid there, too. And we lived there, and that's when the war started. Even there, I would -- my father would check every night I was in bed upstairs, my typical young man's things. And I was pretty ingenious. You had to walk up the stairway to get up to my room. We had a duplex. And I had, one afternoon when my parents weren't home, I asked my friend to come up. And we installed electrical contacts with little, underneath the rugs, that led up the stairway. And by evening it was all finished. I had led a wire all the way from downstairs. And when my father walked up, a bell would ring in my room. And I - I was never re-- in bed when he came up. A bell would ring in my room, so I quickly went under the bed sheets, clothes and all, made believe I was asleep. He wanted to make sure, so the bell would ring. I was forewarned by that time. That was - that was me.

SIGRIST: Now, how long did you stay in the apartment, in the duplex apartment?

LEFOR: Well, now, we were in that duplex apartment when on May 10, 1940, the Germans invaded. I'll never forget it. I was asleep. It was maybe five in the morning, and I was sleeping. I crept further - I heard thunder, and I thought it was thundering, and I was scared of lightening and all that. I went under the bed, under the blankets. And suddenly

the maid came running in there. She said, in German, "Arnold, Ich glaub wir haben krieg." Which means (she was Austrian) it means, "Arnold, I think we're at war. There's war." And I sat up.

And we ran on the balcony. We had a balcony. And you could see all -- the whole place was, you know, when you have that anti-aircraft fire everything shakes. Your windows, everything. And I ran, of course, in the balcony you could see these black puffs from the anti-aircraft guns into the sky, and I was shivering with fright. ( he is moved ) And I still remember them. There was, some kid who lived across there, you could yell over to them on the balcony - it wasn't bad. He, and I still said, "Gee, the Germans the Mofe" (which is, the German for, like, you would say, "The Krauts have attacked us") And he was, it turned out his father was a Dutch Nazi who was killed later. Have attacked us And this went on for five days. We tried to flee from Holland to England.

SIGRIST: Okay. We need to pause just for a second so that Kevin can flip all the tapes. So we're going to take a minute and Kevin will flip, and then we'll keep going.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now continuing with Arnold Lefor. Mr. Lefor, you were just recounting for us the German invasion of Holland, and seeing the anti-aircraft fire and that sort of thing. Tell me what happened after the Germans came in.

LEFOR: All right. Now, after the Germans, I'll never forget the day of surrender, which was awful. That night there were about forty people in our living room. The smoke from the cigarettes, and we didn't know, most Dutch, if you were Jewish, didn't realize the terrible danger. We knew it from, we had had an uncle who was in Germany who had come, who had, after Kristall night had left. He showed us the marks of the whips, even then the Germans here, after three weeks he was let out of the concentration camp, thanks to my mother made these efforts. And how he showed us the whip on his head, and he was in World War One. He fought three -- four years for the Germans, in the war, right on the front, in France. And he said he'd rather go another four years through that than for three weeks in a concentration camp. It was awful. And he -- they stayed in Holland, and luckily they were able to go to what was then Palestine. And, so after the Germans came in, I'll never forget. We had, "Oh, get away from the windows!" We saw these . . . ( he is moved ) We saw the soldiers march in there, you know. And . . . ( he is moved )

SIGRIST: It's okay. Just take your time.

LEFOR: I'm okay.

SIGRIST: It's all right. It's understandable.

LEFOR: And then we saw . . . ( he is moved ) I get so upset. Okay. We saw these soldiers march in, and, "Get away from the windows."

At first things weren't bad. We lived opposite a butcher. You could see 'em -- how they took all the meat out of the butcher, the Germans. And how they - they behaved well, they were very polite. Everything was fine, generally. And, but the food, even then, got bad. The milk became blue because they kept adding water to it. There was no, I remember when we left Holland in December 1940 we hadn't had fruit for at least three or four months. And, but even if you were Jewish, you, the first anti-Semitic laws had just come out and came maybe, it couldn't be a public servant or something. By the time we left it was still - it was, things were not too bad. They were tol-- quite tolerable.

And my father was able to get out because he was a big shot, pretty much of a big shot in this bank, and this happened long before Hitler came, after had been a German bank. That's why he spoke, a person who was born in Germany. And with a name like ours, Lefor, the Germans didn't know that he was Jewish. And ironically, of all the people, the Germans came to him, around 1937, I would say, '38, whatever, asked him if he knew a, anybody. They needed a director, the Chairman of the Board for the Deutsche Bank. If he knew anybody who would be a, would make a good Chairman of the Board of the Deutsche Bank. Which is like coming here and saying, "Would you know a suitable person for the Bank of America?" And he thought himself, there was a man by the name of Adam, A-D-A-M, who was a Nazi, but he was not anti-Semitic. But he worked in my father's department and he thought he would be, not only would he get rid of him, but he would make a suitable director. And, sure enough, the Germans chose Adam to become a director of the Deutsche Bank. Now, after the German invasion, my father did everything to get out.

SIGRIST: By then your father realized, you know.

LEFOR: Oh, he knew it. Oh, sure. He seen, he had all these relatives in Germany who had been, several had been in concentration camps. As I told you, two of them, they left a little sixteen-month-old kid alone in the apartment, and the other was, how they hit him with whips. And we knew, we saw far more danger than they did. And I was a kid. I heard nothing after Hitler came but Germans, Germans, Germans. The Germans, Mother, "Get out," and all this. So, anyway, so he did, my father had had a nervous breakdown, by the way, as I told you, when he wanted to leave Holland you, before the Germans invaded. And, ironically, the moment the Germans invaded Holland, he had gone to a sanitarium, and he was back in Amsterdam the day before the Germans invaded. And the moment the Germans invaded, he recovered.

And I still remember him destroying anything. That's the way it goes. The anti-German, everything was ripped up and thrown in the Dutch canals. You should have seen those canals. I still remember he had a Dutch book, Duitsland set de klok terug, which means in Dutch, "Germany Sets The Clock Back." Everything was torn up and thrown in the canal, anything anti-German. So you can be sure after we invaded Germany, the Germans did the same thing. Everything anti-Allies was thrown out. So they, and the moment the Germans invaded, he recovered, completely recovered. And he completely fine, and we tried to flee during the German invasion to England. Every hundred yards there was a soldier standing with a gun ready. They stopped us.

And finally we, suddenly we had to turn into the ditches. An anti-aircraft gun started shooting. Near the Harbor the Germans were bombing. And we had to turn back, and they said, "Oh" and they -- we came back. And that's when Holland had surrendered. That was the worst. I'll never forget it. So then we, he did everything possible to get out. And what saved our lives, what happens here, is that we, he got out -- some people paid off the Gestapo. A lot of them were caught, because they set up the dummy organizations, and they were pay off these Gestapo guys. Not only that, that scum, they would -- you get it after they were paid off they would grab the money for themselves, probably, and people went right off, lost their lives because they went to a concentration camp. And I think he knew something about that.

So he legally applied and gave up, gave this Mr. Adam, who was then the President of the Deutsche Bank, gave him as a reference, and that saved our lives. Now, then we were, after eight months -- in May, Germany invaded Holland for six months, I think. And December 18, 1940 we left Holland, and we went by train from Amsterdam or whatever. It was pitch dark because everything was blacked out - to Berlin. A relative of mine still came with us. He could go as far as the border, and then he had to turn back, of course. We, also our name saved our life, Lefor. Nobody knew that we were of Jewish background, so we went to Berlin, stayed three days in a hotel there where Jews were forbidden. Jews were not allowed in there. Nobody knew.

The last night, the last two nights, I think, there were British air raids there. In Berlin we went to the shelter which, we were in a nice hotel there that was marked "For Jews Forbidden." And it's crazy at that time how you can change sides, you know. We kept our mouths shut down there, of course. We, my brother and I, we were too young to realize it, but my parents, the air raid was from about eight, eight PM to twelve midnight, and four AM to eight AM. I still remember that. We had to go down to the shelter. And, oh, they had a lot of anti-aircraft there. The whole city was shaking. And . . .

SIGRIST: It was a frightening time to have to go into Germany at this point, I should think.

LEFOR: We went into Berlin.

SIGRIST: And being Jewish and passing as being non-Jewish, I mean, this is frightening.

LEFOR: Yeah, yeah. Well, yeah. Well, of course, we were not too frightened because we had no - you know -- the Germans had there put a J, big J for Jew in the passport, for instance. Just was long before all that was done. Not long, but it was done before. We had nothing, and our name, Lefor, we were fine. And the, I would think even today that the average German didn't care so much. It really was done by the Gestapo and all that. The average Joe didn't care much. "You want a hotel? Here's a hotel." As long as the law, we don't want to know that much. Some of them, of course, were. A lot of them were, but not all.

SIGRIST: Where did you go from Berlin?

LEFOR: Uh, we were three days in Berlin. We still visited Jewish friends there who, three men who were already done with terrible, bad circumstances. They lived in small rooms, three men together. They would give them ration coupons but they, with a big J on them. That means they couldn't, they couldn't give them, only after six p.m. were they allowed in the stores, and there was nothing left. And so they would starve even then if it were not for non-Jewish friends of theirs. It shows you there were a lot of decent people in Germany, too.

And then after that we took a plane. My parents were very worried when these British air raids were there, because we were only allowed three days in Germany. And they were worried, which shows how you can change signs that a bomb might hit the air and our plane might not leave, that our lives might have been dependent, literally, on that. Luckily no bombs fell on the airport. It shows you how you can change sides. And in the shelter we kept our mouths shut. ( he laughs ) We hoped the British would bomb the hell out of them. And from there we took a plane, amazing for those days, Junkers 52.

We, my mother and I sat in that plane on one side, and my father and my brother sat on the other side. We had a table like this between us. We were lucky to get on it. Soldiers went first, luck there was space. And we flew from there to Stuttgart, and I'll never forget that we landed there. And I was scared stiff, because there was this typical German official yelling at my father, ( he imitates the official's stern voice ) "Do you have anything to declare?!" And we were very scared. And I had stamps, I was an avid stamp collector. And I had given an American friend of mine in Holland my whole stamp collection. It meant everything to me as a kid. Because most, ninety-nine percent of people didn't see them, and only thirteen, even I give myself credit. And I somehow felt if we didn't get out it wouldn't mean much anyway.

I gave him my whole stamp collection, an American friend of mine. His father was director of RKO Pictures in Amsterdam. And they left. They had American passports. They left many months afterwards. It was nothing for them. They got out, he took my collection with him, and he gave it back to me in New York. He was one of the few. And, so we landed in Stuttgart, and this, and I was scared, I thought this was the end of it -- officials yelling. And then we went back up, and we went to Spain. There we landed in Barcelona, and then we felt a little safer. It was filled with Germans, of course, and spies. It was just after the Civil War there.

They were so poor in Barcelona. The coin, they just had where, they didn't even have the metal to print coins there. Just, they were starting to issue 1870 coins. There were no bills yet, money bills, or anything. From Spain we stayed there three days in Barcelona. There was no room on the plane for all four of us, so my brother, my father flew from Barcelona to Madrid. Mother and I flew from Barcelona to Valencia to Madrid. There we met them briefly in the airport. And they flew, if I recall, from Madrid to Lisbon, and we flew from Madrid to

Lisbon. And we met again in Lisbon. And that was a crazy, strange, a very crazy situation there. You've got, there was a big war going on. Here were the German planes standing with their big swastikas next, these were all civilian planes, next to British Airways, standing next to each other, the Italians. It was crazy.

SIGRIST: It's like it's Portugal, it's neutral.

LEFOR: And the country was filled with spies. And, ironically, on this plane we, my brother, I think, had made friends with, we didn't even want it, with, or not friends. We would just talk, and it turned out this guy was the German military ambassador to, in Portugal, military attache in Portugal. Wouldn't you know it, they took down our names. We didn't want it, but we were scared. They took down our names, and I remember that my brother and I, one day they picked us up with the Mercedes Benz. God knows there was a swastika on there. And they drove us, they drove us to the westernmost point of Portugal. They showed us all that, you know. My brother and I kept our mouths shut, but we felt very uncomfortable. The less we had to do with that scum the better we were off. And there we found out that the American quota was wide open and, but we didn't, we were so afraid that Hitler might also invade Portugal, that we had the tickets to the ship, Magellanes. And so, after three weeks we left Portugal, took the chance, and went to Havana.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the ship?

LEFOR: Magellanes. M-A-G-E-L-L-A-N-E-S.

SIGRIST: Ah, what a story.

LEFOR: For example, Claude Frank, that famous pianist here, was on board that ship. I still remember. And he even dared, there was a piano there, he played then. He played even then, already, piano beautifully.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people in your type of circumstance who were on the ship going to Cuba?

LEFOR: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on the ship?

LEFOR: Well, first it was winter, December. Of course, it was warm in Portugal. After three days my brother was sick as a dog. We had a beautiful cabin. She had a ba-- bathroom. My parents had one cabin, my brother and I had another. And they, he was sick as a dog from the high waves. So was I. But my parents had to go upstairs in the cold air and that helped against seasickness, so I did. One day they couldn't - they couldn't find me, I was upstairs in the cold air so I wouldn't get sea--, it did help. It helps a great deal. And . . .

SIGRIST: How long was the voyage?

LEFOR: Thirteen days, if I recall. And, of course, it was boring, I guess. I don't remember, after three days [not understood] calmed down

and I don't remember too much of it. Yeah, they carried chickens on board that ship. Who knows, they probably killed them on board. I don't remember. And they, anyway, there were a lot of people, refugees. I remember my father's, my parents' later on, they told us they were scared stiff that a German submarine might come and say, "All people, all people -- all Jews get off." We didn't know in those days it was really Gestapo that did all that. And all Jews might get off. We were also somewhat afraid that some, we might be torpedoed. Not too much, because this was a neutral Spanish ship. And they had all their lights, bright lights on at night. Of course, made sure that they would be lit up. And we had really an uneventful voyage. I think some people saw some whales. I didn't. There was nothing really eventful, but we were very glad when we saw Havana. That was when we really . . . ( he is moved ) That was when we really felt safe.

SIGRIST: So it was thirteen days across.

LEFOR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Then how long did you stay in Havana before you went to New York?

LEFOR: Uh, five weeks.

SIGRIST: So you were there for a little while.

LEFOR: Yeah. We got the visa in Havana. Of course, we knew the quota. We found out there too, that the quota was wide open. The quota was wide open because practically nobody was able to travel in those days. And, you know, this country had a quota system, so many from all these countries. And because the quota was wide open, we could get out. We were very, very fortunate. My brother was almost of military age. He wouldn't have been able to get out of Holland. Even though they would never have drafted him later on, because he was Jewish. But we were very fortunate to get out.

SIGRIST: Now, did you take a ship to New York from Havana?

LEFOR: From Havana we took the Oriente, which was a pleasure ship, to, it was a cruise ship, to New York. And I still remember people dancing there. We had an indoor cabin. It was terribly hot. And we were in no mood to dance. ( he laughs ) Of course, I was a kid. You know, there were all these people having a lot of fun. And we landed in New York. Now . . .

SIGRIST: How long did that take, to go from Havana to New York?

LEFOR: If I recall, it took two or three days. I don't - yeah, I should clear that up.

SIGRIST: Now, was there someone expected to meet you in New York?

LEFOR: Yes. First, of course, we landed in Ellis Island. If I recall, I was just talking to my wife. I suppose we must have been taken

off by tender. I don't remember that. But I do remember that Great Hall in Ellis Island. I remember a lot of people and milling about there. And then all I remember, I would assume we must have been taken over by tender to New York Harbor properly after we got through here. If I remember, there were no hitches, and we just went right off.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything of what they did to you while you were here? Did you have to go to any kind of examination?

LEFOR: I believe they might have looked at our passports. I think it was just a formality, you know. I think everything was in order. You know, we had the immigration visa. And I don't remember any hitches. Of course, my parents took care of all the documents, they took care of all the luggage, whatever. I mean, all the paperwork, the formalities, and the luggage, and everything else. So I don't remember too much of it. I do remember them, as we got off somewhere there was Jules Roos. His name was J-U-L-E-S. His second name was R-O-O-S. He had fled from, fled. He had gone in 1939 from Amsterdam to Canada, Montreal. And, with his family. He had -- also saw it coming. And so he had fled furtively. And he was in Canada. He had come down from Montreal to New York. And there he was standing, to pick us up. We also had relatives here who lived in Washington Heights who were able to flee. One was the two people whose kid we had brought up for two years. They were here.

They picked us up from the Harbor. There were about, I would say, at least ten, eight, eight relatives, I would say (I would have to count them) were standing there at the dock saying hello to us. And then I remember Jules Roos and my parents -- I don't remember what my parents, I suppose they were taking care of the formalities, the luggage and everything else, but I do remember this Jules Roos of Montreal took my brother and myself, that was a great event, in the subway. He threw the nickel in. It cost five cents in those days, into the subway, and took us to the Standish Hall Hotel, which I believe was 45 West 81st Street. And he took us there, and as long as he was there I suppose I wasn't scared in spite of my Pinkerton Detective Stories. And took my brother and myself to the Standish Hall Hotel where we had a room. My parents had a room, my brother and I had a room. And took us there, and we stayed there for about three months. And then . . .

SIGRIST: You were in New York for a chunk of time, then. Three months you were in New York.

LEFOR: No. We stayed in that hotel for three . . .

SIGRIST: In the hotel for three months.

LEFOR: Standish Hall Hotel for three months. And then my parents went looking for an apartment in New York. And I think they mainly took this area, because my uncle Fred Green and his wife had lived in New York since the 1920's. And he, my uncle Fred Green and his wife lived on 86th Street. I believe 120 West 86th. And we then took an apartment at 137 Riverside Drive, which was 86th Street and Riverside Drive. Which was, for those days I only realized that, I didn't know it then, (it's only after, I'll come to that)), it was a better apartment. Randolph Hearst

had lived there twenty years before. He had the upper two floors on 137 Riverside Drive.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that you saw in New York that really took your attention, that you just thought were really interesting in those first couple of months.

LEFOR: Well, now, okay. I go to the Standish Hall Hotel. Again, I was this avid stamp collector. After three days, in spite of my Pinkerton Detective Stories, I finally dared to venture out. First I, even then I must have looked in the, I think I looked in the yellow pages. I knew very, I knew some English, very little. My father, in Havana, had sent me to an English school to learn English for the five weeks we were there, but I learned very little. I knew a few words. So the third day I took the subway, all alone, in spite of my fears and I, and naturally I took the wrong train.

And I landed on 125th Street in Harlem, the Eighth Avenue, I took, as I remember. And I had to ask, I was scared. But I took about, because I was alone and I didn't know English. I had to ask about eight people, I must have asked how to get back to 86th Street before somebody spoke a word --- a few words that I knew somehow used in combination. So finally I found my way back to 86th Street. And then I must have ventured out a few days later on Columbus Circle. There were stamp dealers there. And I also went there because my American friend Dick Westerby, who was -- whose father had been the Director of RKO Pictures, had my stamp collection, which I picked up from him. And I can't, right now I know the hotel, on 55th Street, it was. I picked up the stamp collection from him. Thankfully.

SIGRIST: That must have been great for you to have your stamps back.

LEFOR: That was a big, you don't know. That was a big thing for me. And then I built cardboard box and put all my envelopes and stamps in. I still have it today, of course. All my -- I put all my stamps in there, you know.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, in our last few minutes, tell me a little bit about how your parents adjusted to this country.

LEFOR: They adjusted - well, Mother adjusted poorly. My father always said, "Don't complain." They -- Mother was thankful to be here. She was very worried about her relatives. She said, "You'll see. You'll never see them again." They were all killed by the Germans, the ones that stayed at home. Every -- we lost twelve relatives. They all were -- all went to the gas chambers. And we, Mother adjusted very poorly. So did I. I didn't like America. First of all, I didn't, I never liked English, even in Holland. At first I didn't particularly like it here. We were much better off in Holland. We lived better there, to be perfectly honest, even though we lived on Riverside Drive here. We had a -- we had a car there, we didn't have one here. We had two maids there. We had a chau-- later -- not the chauffeur. We always had two maids, though.

SIGRIST: Did your father get a job right away?

LEFOR: Another thing, he was discriminated later against the job. After about a year or two they said, "We don't want any Jews." And mother used to say, "We have to come to America to hear all this." We never had these things in Holland, all this anti-Semitism. We didn't have the racism that you even have here today. And . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that your mother found hard to adjust to.

LEFOR: Uh, she said the people in New York are like the wall, like the bricks here, like stone, like bricks. She didn't like them. She didn't like that. There was no culture here. She didn't like the way that things were made. I saw it already in Holland when my American friend had this American bike. And I really was very favorably disposed to America. I didn't like his American-made bicycle in Holland, Dick's bicycle. It wasn't, there was something about it. I don't know. I can't tell you. Here she said the spaces were this big in the closets, the doors. That's all slop, slop. It wasn't made right, the car, it was all quick, quick, quick.

SIGRIST: Did she know English?

LEFOR: Yeah. She spoke some English. My father spoke it fluently, having been in England for many years. Mother spoke English quite well, better than I did in the beginning. We were sent to camp, which was wonderful. Then I started to adjust better to children's camp for two months. I met a Dutch friend of mine who also escaped from Holland and lived in Amsterdam. You'd rarely see the two of us. And, unfortunately, we spoke a lot of Dutch. But I did learn English, especially the second summer I spoke, then it became -- everything became easier slowly, and I adjusted. They sent us to public school, whereas we could have afforded to be sent to private school, which was not a wise choice, from a personal point of view.

SIGRIST: Was public school, was school hard for you in America?

LEFOR: No. But you didn't meet the type of people, I guess, a better class of people. You met the class of people, which I didn't realize then, really. That, well, you know, I mean, it would have been better off from that point of view to go to a private school. I would have met not only a better class of people -- I probably would have had better connections too, later, like I did in Holland. Look, I went to school with the son of the American consul. I mean, I never thought of it at that time, and some other people.

SIGRIST: You just, when you came to America you just had to adjust to a whole different type of life.

LEFOR: Oh, yes. Oh, I didn't like, yeah. Yes, I did. It was a big adjustment. And then, too, because of what happened in Holland I, it was a big shock for me, and I just wanted to, I just wanted to disappear, basically. The less they knew of me, about me, the better I was off. I

wouldn't write my name in the books in school, nothing. The less they knew about me. That was a big psychological shock, what happened there in Holland at that time. And my mother worrying about her relatives all the time in Holland. It was a terrible thing for anybody to realize that you -- they might be killed. When at the worst you didn't know that, then there -- mother had a feeling for that, you know. She always saw it coming.

SIGRIST: Well, you, in a way you owe your life to your mother. I mean, she really was the instigator to get you guys on there.

LEFOR: You are right, you are right. Although after -- once that war had started, I think my father wanted to get out. He would have gotten out. And we owed to him, his connections, that we were able to get out. I don't know what he would have done.

SIGRIST: Well, this is a good place for us to end. I want to thank you very much for coming out here and telling us, really, a very dramatic personal story. Thank you very much.

LEFOR: It was nice for me, too.

SIGRIST: ( he laughs ) This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Arnold Lefor on Wednesday, August 18, 1993 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Thank you very much, Mr. Lefor.

EI-384/LEFOR