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LUCIEN (LAZSLO) AIGNER

BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 14, 1901

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.,
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HUNGARY VIA FRANCE, 1939

AGE 37

SHIP: *WESTERNLAND*

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCES:

- **ERSEKUJBAR, BUDAPEST, PARIS**
- **THE US: NYC, 5 AVE. AND 56 ST.**

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: A comprehensive listing of Mr. Aigner's many accomplishments and information about his life can be found in the 1994 edition of WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA, published by Reed Publishing Company. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 9/8/1998.

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SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, October 29th, 1993. I'm in Great Barrington, in western Massachusetts, with Lucien Aigner. Mr. Aigner was born in Hungary, lived in Paris...

AIGNER: I was born in a town which, at that time, was Hungary but which became Czechoslovakia and it is Czechoslovakia now.

SIGRIST: I see. And, and you lived in, in France for a while before you came to this country...

AIGNER: I lived in Budapest. I, I lived in Ersekujbar, which was my birth place, for, until I was six. Then I went to Budapest and lived there until I was twenty, twenty one or twenty two. Then I spent a year in Berlin and, and, uh, and in '27 I came to Paris, where I stayed until '38, my departure for the United States.

SIGRIST: You left, you left in 1938, in December of 1938?

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: You arrived in America in January of 1939...

AIGNER: Correct.

SIGRIST: ...and you were thirty seven at that time.

AIGNER: Correct.

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SIGRIST: Okay. Can we begin, Mr. Aigner...

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...with you telling me your birth date on tape, please?

AIGNER: Well, I was born in, the 14th of September, 1901.

SIGRIST: And can you say the name of the town again, please?

AIGNER: Well, in Hungarian it's Ersekujbar.

SIGRIST: My goodness, can you spell that for us?

AIGNER: E-R-S-E-K-U-J-B-A-R.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in that country is it?

AIGNER: It is on the line between Vienna and Budapest. The rapid train stopped there for a minute or so. And the Siguine [ph] orchestra, uh, Gypsy orchestra, was playing the "Rackuzzi [ph] March" and that was, at that time, the only distinction, I know of, of Ersekujbar. In Czech it is called Nove Zamky and (he laughs) in German Neuheusel [ph].

SIGRIST: I see. And you said that part of Hungary later became Czechoslovakia.

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AIGNER: Correct.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what memories you have, if any, of that town.

AIGNER: Very little. It used to have a river on, cutting the, on the lower part of the town. It was a small town. I don't remember the population but I would say between eight and ten thousand population. it was, I don't know of any distinction except that my father used to be secretary of the local savings bank and also member of the board of education.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

AIGNER: Adolf.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about your father's background?

AIGNER: Well, he was the son of a country educator, a country teacher, was studying for, for, becoming a lawyer. At the age of twenty or less, he was in charge of a small, uh (correcting himself), of a big law office in town. But then, due to health problems, he interrupted his career and became an industrialist, which was his first occupation when we moved to Budapest. But law became, or remained his main interest in life and worked himself into a very special position being able to handle very complicated law cases which were open to non-lawyers. Election cases were one, so much so that when the speaker of the Hungarian parliament, the Lord Chamber[lain?], had his mandate attacked by opponents, he chose my father to defend his, his office even though my father was not a lawyer. And then in elections, or rather

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arbitration cases, he became a specialist. He was a great legal mind without having ever graduated. And that became a very interesting situation. Excuse me. I see a visitor whom I asked to come.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause the tape just for a moment. (break in tape) We're now resuming with Lucien Aigner. I also neglected to say that photographer Don Victor [ph] is also in the room and you may hear noise that he's making during the tape. Mr. Aigner, you were explaining about your dad to us.

AIGNER: Well, the interesting development was that when, I, I have a law degree. In Hungary, it is called a doctor's degree, in Europe and in Hungary. But it isn't a doctor's degree in an American sense. It is a Bachelor's degree. But when it came to graduation, I was more interested, on, I backtrack, I, I was more interested in journalism from the very beginning and it, I studied law because in Hungary it gives, it's something like Ph.D. It is a basic degree which gives you openings to many areas and many directions. And it allows you to call yourself "doctor." And, in journalism, that is a good recommendation, to sign your articles "by Dr. Lucien Aigner," which, by the way, we have to explain later, the "Lucien." It's not my original name. It's not a Hungarian name. Hungarian name, my Hungarian name is "Laszlo" or in diminutive "Lotzi" [ph]. But in my career abroad, it became very difficult to explain the word and it, it is not very familiar to people, so I used in France the French name "Lucien." And when I came, I officially became "Lucien."

SIGRIST: Laszlo is spelled L-A-Z-L-O?

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AIGNER: L-A-S-Z-L-O.

SIGRIST: L-A-S-Z-L-O.

AIGNER: It is, it is the name, or was the name of a Hungarian king who also was Polish king. And in Poland he was called Ladislaus [ph]. So, it's a complicated deal. I don't think your listeners are really interested.

SIGRIST: I would like to get back to your parents for a moment...

AIGNER: Well, just let me once, tell one fact about my father, though.

SIGRIST: Okay.

AIGNER: I was ill when I should have passed my exams and, so much so that I had a couch put in the (cram?) course where I was studying for exams. And I didn't have the time or the energy to write my thesis. So it was my father who wrote my thesis. So, in a way, he proved (they laugh) that he was a better lawyer than I, I would have ever been. And was a satisfaction to mother that at least he did that much.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what your father's personality was like?

AIGNER: Well, for one thing he had a birth defect. He had only one arm and that was the left arm. And therefore he had to write with the left hand, which became a very typical, very characteristic, uh, style. he was a quiet man, interested in the legal aspects of the world. And he was, he was known as an

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intellectual in a small town, as a leading intellectual. He was elected to the school board which was, by the way, a Jewish school board. He was a prominent member of the Jewish community in Ersekujbar. He was not religious and I was not brought up as a religious youngster. I changed my religion at the age of eighteen, with the Hitler era and anti-Semitism foreshadowed, but was not really a, a deeper conversion except many, many years later when, at the age of forty three, I became the elde religious. She came from a small town in, in Hungary which was Gyoemroe, twenty seven kilometers from Budapest.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

AIGNER: What?

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

AIGNER: G-Y-O-E-M-R-O-E. The, the, my grandmother became a widow very early. My grandfather was in the occupation forces of Bosnia, which is very much in the news now. And that was the time when the Hungarian, Austrian-Hungarian monarchy was trying to occupy Bosnia and was occupying Bosnia and, I think, did fairly, I don't want to go into politics for that.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

AIGNER: Carola Stern, S-T-E-R-N. She is buried in Great Barrington [Massachusetts].

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SIGRIST: And can you spell Carola, please, for me?

AIGNER: C-A-R-O-L-A.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you the same question about your mother as I asked about your father, what was her personality like?

AIGNER: Well, as an orphan, or half orphan, she was brought up in an institution as a, to study for, for the educational profession. And she graduated as a teacher and was found, really found, in this institution after graduation where my father, having had this handicap, felt that he had to go into places where they have "pearls," so to speak, without great pretensions. And so he married this "pearl," who became his wife for life and continued a wonderful marriage even though, with economic conditions and others, it was under great strain many times. You probably want to know how many we were in the family?

SIGRIST: Please.

AIGNER: I had an older sister, who died at the age of one, one and a half. So I became the eldest, oldest. Uh, I had a brother, Etienne, which is also the French equivalent of Istman [ph], who, which was his official Hungarian name which is, again, more the equivalent of Stephen. And then we had a late arrival who came when I was already thirteen, a sister who became a wonderful addition to the family. I really brought her up after my father's death, which was at her age of, I think, five or six. And we are still very, very wonderfully united and she is my great moral support in, in life and we are very close to each other.

SIGRIST: How did your father die?

AIGNER: Uh, I think through illness. I, I and my brother, who were working in Paris by that time, were called to his death bed and I could only see her in the coma, uh (correcting himself), him in the coma.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year that was?

AIGNER: Not really, but I would say, well, I would have to study his tombstone but I was, I think, twenty eight or twenty nine so it must have been in the early thirties or late twenties.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about your activities as a young man, in your teens. What were you interested in? What was going on at the time?

AIGNER: Well, I was going in Budapest to school, which was the Latin variety or the Latin, or not Latin really, the language, humanities, the humanistic variety. It compared to the realistic, which trained for careers in, in, in technical like engineering and, and other non-humanistic careers. I had eight years of Latin in my, gymnasium it was called, and it helped me enormously in my language studies. I mean, for a Hungarian I speak pretty American language, or English language, which is not always the case. If you have interviewed Hungarian immigrants, you probably discovered that their accent is atrocious. What helped me much, it was that at the age of twenty I studied a year in Berlin, where I was registered at the Friedrich Wilhelm University and really ally, two documentaries and was in Berlin studying the (German),

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which is the stage language, which is the, so, so to speak, the pure German. So much so that in some ways I was speaking a better German than some of my colleagues born, native born Germans, who had a regional accent.

SIGRIST: Now, your family is living in Budapest at this time, yes, when you're in...?

AIGNER: When I was in Berlin, yes.

SIGRIST: You were in Berlin one year or...?

AIGNER: One year.

SIGRIST: Just one year.

AIGNER: One year in Berlin and one month in Prague, where I was registered for medical studies. That was the year when Budapest had its, uh, university and schools unrest on as a foreshadowed era of the Hitler era.

SIGRIST: When you were a teenager, can you tell me what you recall about World War One?

AIGNER: What I would, when I was still a teenager, what I was...?

SIGRIST: Yes, what do you recall about World War One?

AIGNER: What I recall?

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SIGRIST: Yes.

AIGNER: Yes. First of all, I think a very important part of my life is the fact that I was too young for the First World War and too old for the Second World War, when by that time I was already in America and on my way to American citizenship. Uh, (he pauses) I'm trying to pick up the thread instead of rambling back and forth.

SIGRIST: World War One, we were talking about.

AIGNER: World War One. Well, I remember the fact that my uncle, my mother's brother, was serving in the Hungarian-Austrian Army and became an officer. At the end of the war he was, he was a painter, a very good artist and had some good, good work. I can show you one which I have which is showing you the quality of the man. At the end of the war, he was assigned to teach art in a military academy in the western part of Hungary and even though he was a first lieutenant, the equivalent of a first lieutenant, he was really not engaged in fighting anymore, partly because, also because his health started going down. And so he was retired from active duty and was becoming a teacher in a military academy.

SIGRIST: Did the war have any direct affect on you and your family? For instance, food shortages or anything along those lines.

AIGNER: Uh, not, yes, of course, to some extent. I mean, I don't recall it very vividly but, yes. I mean we, we had restrictions and food stamps and so on and so forth. But mostly during the Communistic, inter--, intermezzo, inter--, what is

it, uh, I remember, for instance, having been on a, on a trip in the, in the suburbs of Budapest to gather food from the peasants, peasants, or I mean the farmers, and having heard outside the city the bombardment of the Communistic headquarters through the, some warships, minor warships which came up on the Danube from the south and who became later their support of the regent which introduced white extremist regime. Admiral Horthy Miklos Horthy, was the admiral who bombarded the Red headquarters in Budapest at the Hungaria Hotel. Uh, the first Communist regime lasted only, I don't know how many days, I think eighty or so, and that's what was followed by a number of extreme regimes. By this time I was out of the country and living in Paris and only heard the echoes of what was going on, getting from a democratic regime more and more toward the extremist regimes. My father started his political as a "forty eighter," which was the tradition and the heritage of the Hungarian Revolution of '48. In politics, he was continuing that, that kind of parties and then later, when we lived in Budapest, he became a member of the Democratic Club of (Hungarian), the Leopold district of Budapest. His official career after the savings bank interlude, which was only until we moved to Budapest, where he founded and, and managed a screw factory with a technician who was an expert. And that factory burned, I think, in the 1910s. And it took him a long time to get the insurance money but thanks to his legal background he did finally get it. And that became the foundation of our later life.

SIGRIST: I see. (he clears his throat) Tell me little bit, you came, you went to Paris in '27, you said, 1927?

AIGNER: I think it was '27 when through a fluke of some circumstances I had an offer

for a job in Paris by an American photographer James E. Abbe, A-B-B-E. He was a contemporary of the Dish, (correcting himself), Gish sisters, Charlie Chaplin, Mack Sennett and so on and so forth. But he came to Europe and (he pauses) left his family in America and founded another family in Paris and became a tramp photographer. He went as far as Moscow to interview Stalin because he became quite prominent with European and American magazines. One of his most important markets was the London magazine which he was representing when he came to Budapest to report on Hungary.

I was at that time already working for the Hungarian newspaper group, Azest, A-Z-E-S-T, which was including three daily newspaper. And I was starting my news, news reporter career with them. So one day I was called down to the managing editor's office, or the editor-in-chief's office, and handed over to Abbe. And he was handed over to me and I had the assignment ambition to continue my career abroad because Hungary, especially after the First World War, became a small country. Most of its territories, it's nationalities, were taken away by the Trianon Treaty. And that created the successor states including Poland, which was not at the expense of Hungary but at the expense of Austria, and the Romanians and the Serbs whose not so glorious achievements we're witnessing now. I mean, they were carved out of Hungary's great, big country, sixty three million population. And Hungary became, after this carving, a truncated country of eight million. So...

END OF SIDE A, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: Were you excited about this offer from Paris, or apprehensive? How did you feel about moving to Paris?

AIGNER: Well, I didn't want to go to Paris. I wanted to go back to Berlin, but this providence which prevented me from going back to Berlin because, well, probably my career would have turned quite differently. And the reason I was glad that, to go to Paris because my brother, who became "the" Etienne Aigner, a designer and author, I mean designer of the famous Etienne Aigner handbags, belts and shoes. If you ask your feminine relatives, they will tell you who Etienne Aigner is because he became known world wide. But he was beginning his career in Paris at that time and it was a comfort to find that I was not alone with Abbe, which was all the better that Abbe turned out to be unmanageable, a southerner and rather bohemian, lazy guy who, who, he was sometimes very inspired and was taking fantastic pictures. And then, in written article, homespun style like Will Rogers, the, cowboy writer. And he had a pretty good name but couldn't finish the assignments and was a rather, I don't know how to describe his character but he went to Mexico, finished the, to cover the Mexican War and came back with nothing to show because he bought a new camera which he didn't know exactly how to handle. Later, the same thing happened to me because the Lieca, the thirty five millimeter camera, which became the, the trademark of my photographic

career, was at that time not familiar to us and we thought we are turning on the film and moving the film but the film wasn't moving because it slipped out of the clamp which should have moved it. So that much for Abbe. I, I broke up with him and started to make my own stand in journalism, both as a correspondent of the Avest group and the, the, one of the early pioneers of photojournalism.

SIGRIST: Was it Abbe who first fostered an interest in photography in you or had that been established already before you met Abbe?

AIGNER: Uh, no. I was not established as a photographer, except for the fact that I started taking my own pictures at the age of nine when my uncle gave me a present, a box camera. And I started taking photographs of my family. I have, strangely enough, I have two negatives which I took at the age of nine with that box camera. But I began to take illustrations with a small folding camera called Icka Attom [ph] and that, two and a quarter, three and a quarter size camera. And I used to illustrate my articles mainly because I realized that at that time I was a free lance and I got better pay when I delivered articles with a photograph than when there was no photograph. So that was the beginning and the first impulse for me to take photograph, not only to, not to mention the fact that I, I am one of those rare personalities whose mind and whose brain is oriented to be able to be a photographer as well as a writer.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what Paris was like at that time in the late '20s and early 30's, what the atmosphere of Paris was like.

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AIGNER: Nervous. Nervous because they were trying to stabilize Europe, defend the status quo and, uh, the Hungarians started the (?), which, which was a revenge atmosphere trying to get the lost territories back. And that, that was the characteristic of the ten years to follow. The Versailles and the Trianon Treaty and this revenge attitude and the efforts of Germany to get out of the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty led, of course, to Hitler and upon the second great eruption which put everything again in turmoil.

SIGRIST: Do you think that people in Paris at that time were feeling what was going on in Germany quite so much or were you more isolated in France from...?

AIGNER: No. As a matter of fact, we were taking the brunt of Germany's efforts. In Hungary, it was the successor states; Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, who were our enemies and who were our partners in, in conflict. But in Paris I was exposed to the, to the developments between Germany and France and I had a much more intense, intense reaction to that than I had to the, to the antagonism between Hungary and the successor states.

SIGRIST: Now, are you living with, with your brother Etienne at that time?

AIGNER: For a while, while we economically found it advantageous but he married first. (he pauses) Or in business life and in becoming known world wide as the creator of the Etienne Aigner bags, belts and shoe.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, when you were in Paris, your career beginning and, and some of the assignments perhaps that you went on.

AIGNER: Well, you are asking me big chunk.

SIGRIST: Yes.

AIGNER: (he laughs) You have to realize...

SIGRIST: Give me a little piece of the big chunk.

AIGNER: Well, I covered the Stresa Conference, which was an important conference where the British and the French were trying to, weaning Mussolini from the Hitler alliance. I covered Danzig, which was the hot spot where all the conflicts between Poland and Germany were concentrated and where I was nearly killed by trying to cover a controversial meeting between Poles and German Communists, no, the other way around, Polish Communists and German, German Nazis.

SIGRIST: Had you traveled to Danzig to cover that?

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your...

AIGNER: Well, I had to try to cross eight, no, not eight but several frontiers because there was the Polish corridor Poland does not have any outlet, or did not after its, its also being a victim of the Versailles Treaty, no outlet on the sea. So it, it, a corridor port control. Then, the first night,

trying to report and do my duty as a foreign correspondent, I got myself all the necessary permissions to photograph a controversial meeting as I mentioned before. And I was, but it became, degenerated into a free for all and I was nearly killed. I spent three days in hospital, in the local hospital which, on the other hand, gave a good opportunity to observe the situation from an inside point of view. I wrote two articles. My French sponsors congratulated me for not being killed but told me if I were a French native, I would get very rich compensation from the Danzig, from the Danzig government. But this way, I only got two articles accepted instead of one while I was covering, no, not while, a period. I was directly going to the Lozan [ph] Conference with a bandaged head and being presented by the French prime minister to the Polish foreign minister as the man who suffered toward Poland at the, and this happened at the conference where I was, which I was attending with the bandaged head as a foreign correspondent having received the assignment previous to my Danzig adventure.

SIGRIST: Being a journalist at that time could be a risky proposition, couldn't it?

AIGNER: Well, I decided not to risk my life any more even though it may bring glory and recognition. And I was more circumspect in situations where there was danger to limb.

SIGRIST: Sure, understandably so. Tell me how it was that you decided that you wanted to come to America.

AIGNER: Oh, I always wanted to come to America ever since I was a boy. I had a cousin whose story I heard about, who started at the basement and ended

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up at the top of the building as an elevator boy in a, in an industrial building as I see it now. So I wanted to emulate his career. And it, the Nazi situation was not the only, I don't say it had no part in my decision but was not the only reason I came to this country of great opportunities and, well, I don't want to go into politics. (a telephone rings in the background) I have to answer the telephone. I have to...

SIGRIST: We're going to pause the tape just for a moment. (break in tape)
We're now resuming again with Lucien Aigner. Mr Aigner, we were talking about why you wanted to come to America and you told us that, that you had always wanted to come, even as a child, and, of course, the political climate in Europe in the '30s was a reason also. Were there any other reasons why you wanted to come?

AIGNER: Well, America always had a glamorous sound to me. And, excuse me...

SIGRIST: We're going to pause for moment. (break in tape)
We're now resuming with Lucien Aigner. Yes, you said that America is glamorous.

AIGNER: Well, of course, the, I, I knew America through the American movies. And American movies were my (fare?) from an early childhood. We had a neighborhood movie near our home in Budapest and at the age of ten or twelve or fourteen I was given a nickel or a dime by my mother, when she had French lessons, and to be out of the way and still entertained and relatively safe. Uh, America always had an attraction to me and I always wanted to come to America.

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SIGRIST: And the time certainly seemed to be right.

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: At that time. Tell a little bit about the process of getting your papers and, and getting permission or whatever you needed to be allowed to go to America.

AIGNER: Well, after my first entry I remained in a very precarious position because I was traveling on a Hungarian passport and by that time Hungary was at war with the United States. But if that is the way of all enemy aliens are treated, I didn't mind being an enemy alien, except for the fact that I couldn't get a job, a paying job, that I had to limit myself to free lancing...

SIGRIST: Are we talking about in Paris?

AIGNER: What?

SIGRIST: Are we talking about in Paris right now? Are you still, we're still talking about Paris, getting, getting your papers together.

AIGNER: Oh, no, no. I am now already in the United States.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, go back to Paris for a minute...

AIGNER: Oh.

SIGRIST: ...and tell me about the process of getting ready to go, getting whatever papers you needed to go...

AIGNER: I had the papers. That's why I came as a visitor rather than an immigrant, because to be an immigrant would have lasted years of, of waiting. And it is not sure that I would have gotten the, uh, immigration visa. So I came on a visitor's visa, see, and remained in that precarious position for many years, no, not many years, for I think over two years at least until, uh, trying to help my family to come because Mrs. Frank--, Mrs. Sarah Delano Roosevelt was my fairy godmother, so to speak. And she helped me enormously with, with recommendations and so on. And one of my, on one of my trips in Washington at the, at the, uh, visa department director's office, where I was informed that my family, my sister and my brother-in-law and their child had just gotten the, the visa. And that was the last visa they were giving out. Because of the war situation and otherwise, visas were completely, I mean, giving out, giving visas were completely interrupted. But on the same visit, when I was asking his advice what to do to get the family to the United States, he said, "Mr. Aigner, why don't you straighten out your status?" Well, I was under the impression, or had been, that my straightening of the status would require my admitting that I came with the vague idea that maybe, maybe, maybe I can immigrate. But as, I don't know if you are aware of the fact that in those years you couldn't change your visitor's status to immigration status unless you went out of the country. And going out of the country meant that you may have to wait years and years before your immigration visa arrives. And it was the danger of perjury to ask for immigration visas from here because that would have been admitting that

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you didn't maintain your visitor's status, which you promise you will. But by that time it became so obvious that visitors, whether they were sincere or not, could not go back to Europe. I mean, at that time American authorities were not as, I don't want to be critical, but we have just read a few days ago that a group of, uh, what was it, Haiti immigrants or illegal immigrants were sent back by the Coast Guard, caught by a Coast Guard ship, to Haiti. Well, they were not sending back immigrants who came as visitors to Hitler's Germany in those years.

SIGRIST: So your family was brought over in the 40s, then. You brought your family over...

AIGNER: Uh, yes. I think it was '41 or '42. I don't remember...

SIGRIST: Right at the beginning of the war...

AIGNER: Uh, yes.

SIGRIST: ...for us.

AIGNER: I mean, in, in, in (a squeaky door can be heard in the background), in later years you couldn't because there was no safe way. For four years there was no safe way to go to Europe or to bring people from Europe. I mean, it was the war, it was the U-boat war. And there was no passenger service between the United States and Europe. So it couldn't have been too much into the war.

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SIGRIST: When you left in December of 1938, when you left from France, what did you take with you?

AIGNER: (he laughs) You mean (carriage?) Well, not any furniture. Not any real bulky possessions. Mostly clothing and cameras.

SIGRIST: And what port did you leave from?

AIGNER: Uh, Antwerpen, Belgian port.

SIGRIST: Now, was it, was it difficult to travel to Belgium at that time?

AIGNER: Not really, not really. That was in December, 1938. The trains might have been a little crowded but it was regular train service. It was less than a day's travel. And, and I had my transportation paid in Hungarian money, which was a great advantage and which was due to my being a Hungarian journalist. That Bernstein Line, which had representation in Budapest, was represented by a man who used to be the pioneer of Hungarian aviation and whom I knew because my first article, really important article, was an article about Hungarian aviation in the Azest. So I knew him and I got all the advantages what could be given to me spending Hungarian money which, at that time, was not internationally valued. So, as a Hungarian journalist, I was allowed to use my severance pay for the Hungarian newspaper for my passage. And that was the reason I was brought to Ellis Island, because, because I was given no real other advantages. It was, except that Hungarian money was accepted internationally for an international passage whereas as, as a matter of principal it was not exchangeable for, for foreign

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money.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship that you took?

AIGNER: Westernland. Now, let me finish this because it's very important. So I was given the only great advantage that, I was given the best cabin on the ship which was a one class ship. There was one cabin which had a shower. It was an old ship, a small ship, seven thousand tons, but still very comfortable....

SIGRIST: Were you traveling alone or did you have...?

AIGNER: No, no, I was traveling with my wife and my son.

SIGRIST: You were already married at this time.

AIGNER: Yes. And in the middle of the trip, the purser was trying to collect the extra money which I should have paid normally as a supplement for my cabin because it was a one class ship but there was this cabin which, which called for a, I don't know, thirty, thirty dollars extra supplement for the shower and for being the only real cabin on a one class ship. And the purser wrote me a letter asking for that money. And I had a rather pointed argument with him that if, in maritime, uh, no, traffic, any other proof is required than the officially established ship, uh, what is it, ticket? There we are on a (?) So he didn't ask for any more for the, because I had the Budapest office of the Bernstein Line established that I paid the transportation and so on and so forth. But the purser is a good busybody.

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He, he said that was, he, they didn't say that they gave it to me as a present. But they did establish officially the, the ticket and he wanted the thirty dollars and I didn't want to pay the thirty dollars. All I had was a thousand dollars and that I was ferociously protecting. So he was mad at me because he had to accept that I was right. So he called the immigration authorities' attention to me, that I was on the whole ship the only family not immigrant and therefore I must have very dark plans. Coming as a visitor with family, wife and child, and pretending to be a real visitor who (he coughs) who is planning to go back didn't make sense. And he was right, in a way. So he called the immigration authorities' attention on me. And when I was examined by the inspector, he said, "We can't deal with your case. You have to go to headquarters." And that's how I was sent to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: How long was the ship voyage from Antwerp to New York?

AIGNER: Ten days.

SIGRIST: And, and, do you remember any other details about the voyage?

AIGNER: It was very pleasant, much better passage than the passage I made on the Normandie, which was the flagship of the French fleet, a beautiful luxury ship, luxury boat, but too slick, too narrow and too fast for safe and comfortable passage. Whereas this little seven thousand ton Westernland was very comfortable. It took ten days instead of five but it was a very pleasant voyage.

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SIGRIST: And before we get too far ahead, what year did you marry in?

AIGNER: (he pauses) I don't remember.

SIGRIST: What was your wife's name?

AIGNER: Ann Lenard, L-E-N-A-R-D.

SIGRIST: And you said that you had a son, also, at this point.

AIGNER: Yeah, a one year old son.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

AIGNER: John Peter.

SIGRIST: How did your wife feel about going to America?

AIGNER: Well, ambivalent.

SIGRIST: Was she French?

AIGNER: She left, no, Hungarian. But Hungarian in a different way, from another half of Budapest than I was. I was from the left bank, which was bourgeoisie, and she was from the right bank, which was aristocracy, the gentry and so on.

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SIGRIST: You met her in Paris?

AIGNER: I met her in Paris.

SIGRIST: Mr. Aigner, we're going to pause just for a second. I need to put another tape in here.

AIGNER: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: And I would also say that if you want to find another cassette tape for your machine, too,...

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...this would be the time to do it. We're now going to pause. This is the end of Tape One with Lucien Aigner.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

AIGNER: ...to Ellis Island.

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SIGRIST: We're now beginning Tape Two with Lucien Aigner, who came to America in 1939, in January of '39, when he was thirty seven. This is Tape Two and it is October 29th, 1993. Mr. Aigner, you were just saying that the ship voyage was ten days. And then, when you arrived in New York Harbor, you were detained by the inspector.

AIGNER: No, I was, I was carried. As he put put, "You have to come to headquarters to explain your case." And that's what happened. They put me on a little tugboat and I had a glance of my, my belongings, some of which were packed in cardboard packages and were getting (he laughs) opened and damaged. And we were arriving at the time when the Ile de France had to be also inspected and that delayed us. And that made it necessary for us to stay overnight at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what you remember about that experience.

AIGNER: Well, it was not a cruel or, or any experience reminiscent of early immigrant days, when people came in steerage and when, when, when they were really not, unable to talk to their authorities because they didn't speak English. I mean I speak, spoke a fluent English and, and, and passed Ellis Island with flying colors. The only thing, of course, which you realize when you get there, that the windows are barred and you can't leave and you don't know what the outcome of the examination will be, whether they will be sent back or whether you will be allowed to enter. Uh, the big hall is rather friendly. There you move along, around. You can buy candy. You, you, you are treated as a, as a somewhat restricted but still free man or

free woman. The trouble begins when you have to move to your night quarters, which in this case of, I think, was relatively deluxe because we were a family and we were not sent into dormitories where, I understand, dozens or hundreds of people were kept for a night. And the most unpleasant part of it was the cockroaches. You must have heard about that, that the old Ellis Island was infected by cockroaches. And fortunately, I don't know why, those cockroaches didn't go into the bed. So we were, were kept under foot. But not a pleasant night companion. Also, for some reason or another, I think psychologically pressured, the one year old boy started crying and wouldn't stop. And so the matron came in and said, "Make that child stop." And I said (he laughs), "You make that child stop. I can't." Because the child, once it's crying, it, it won't stop just, I mean, the mother did everything in the book, lullabying and, and walking with him and everything but he wouldn't stop. So I got really angry and I said to the matron, "I didn't want to come here. You brought me here, you and your authorities. So probably my son doesn't like it either." (he laughs) But I think it ended on a peaceful note. She left us alone and we survived the night. And in the morning we were brought to the judge and there I had a very interesting experience. He spoke an atrocious Hungarian. And I said to myself, "If with such an English you can be a judge in this country, it must be a good country." And I went through the examination with flying colors. My agent arrived and gave me moral support. And, of course, I had all sorts of credentials with, with big newspapers like London Times and, and some French newspapers, so on and so forth. So in a very short the judge said, "Mr. Aigner, I let you entry."

SIGRIST: Did you understand why you were being held?

AIGNER: Yes.

SIGRIST: You did understand.

AIGNER: Sure. I wasn't surprised. I wasn't happy but I wasn't surprised. I was a suspicious character in a precarious situation. And, even though I kept my apartment in, in Paris, so I had a base to return to. The fact that my sister and brother-in-law, he arrived, they were not married yet but he arrived, arrived the same day from Czechoslovakia the day we left. So it gave my sister moral comfort and they took our apartment. They took over my business, which was a small press agency at that time to continue selling pictures in France. So everybody was relatively safe. And, except for the fact that the war was coming on and everybody knew that you are much safer in America than in Paris, uh, I still had a certain amount of intention to come back. Not enthusiastically, but if I had to, I had a place to go.

SIGRIST: Right. You didn't burn any bridges behind you.

AIGNER: That's right.

SIGRIST: Do you recall where they fed you at Ellis Island?

AIGNER: Did I what?

SIGRIST: Do you recall where they fed you at Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Yes, very nicely. It's cafeteria food, institutional food or whatever but compared to European, European fare, very, I mean, it was not a deluxe restaurant but it was very neat and very nice and very clean and, and, and satisfactory. But (he laughs), now, you can delete it if you want but what impressed me most was the toilets. After Paris, I don't know if you have been in Paris and you know how in restaurants the toilet is a hole. You crouch and, and in, uh, (in light?) I mean, uh (a light?) yourself. Compared to that, the American toilet system, those clean, painted partitions and the whole system is, in Paris, a deluxe accommodation. So that, for somebody coming from Europe and coming from primitive countries where you have outhouses and so on and so forth, it was a great experience.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything else along these lines, maybe in New York, that you had never seen before?

AIGNER: Yes. We were driving into New York through the West Side Highway. And, as you know, the West Side Highway and the water, waterfront is not a deluxe place. So it was disappointing. Fortunately, by that time, I have seen New York in my first trip during the second Roosevelt election when I was reporting on the election for, to French and European newspapers. This was not the only thing I knew of New York. And we were taken to a deluxe hotel, a small, very high class hotel at the corner of 56th and 5th Avenue, which had, in earlier times, served as a private hotel and host to the Roosevelt family. And thanks to a due bill arrangement, in those years hotels were not anxious to advertise. And to induce them to advertise, advertising agencies gave out, uh, due bill which were in return, I mean, their hotel (addresses?) and paid with due bills which entitled the recipient

to sell it, like my agent did, and give me fifty percent discount in the, in their hotel. So we were getting an apartment in a deluxe hotel on 5th Avenue for half price. It was still more than we could afford but, I think it was two hundred dollars per month, which in those years was quite a bit. But on the other hand, it was less than four hundred dollars. So, uh, the only catch was that once you were accepting this arrangement, you couldn't leave for three months. If you left before three months was over, you had to pay the, the difference between full price and the half price you had paid. So we were in the position, like many immigrants in early days when they were selling themselves as quote unquote slaves to mining companies and other companies which, which took hold of them, gave them the privilege of buying in the company store on credit and, and put them in a position where they couldn't free themselves, so they remained cheap labor on this arrangement. Well, we did not remain cheap labor but we were using up our very minimal funds on a relatively expensive hotel bill. Now, it was true that I intended to pass into American society at the top. I had no business trying it because I had no substantial funds but I was already a, a prominent European journalist. So I was trying to get into American society on that level. So I welcomed this arranged, which gave me a 5th Avenue, or near 5th Avenue, address, which gave me a deluxe hotel which was known as catering to the Roosevelts and so on and which would give me a foundation for a, a, a spot from which to start an American career high up. It didn't work. I mean, after my money was over I had to give up this dream and start at the bottom during the summer which was following to start knocking at doors in, in seashore resorts on Long Island trying to get into homes of rich, 7th Avenue people, clothing industry people, mostly Jewish people who didn't make life very pleasant for me even when they accepted my services

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and paid me, well, I don't want to go into those details. It's, it's...

SIGRIST: Were you offering yourself as a photographer for these people?

AIGNER: Yes, photographing children.

SIGRIST: Like a portrait photographer.

AIGNER: Yeah, yeah. I, I have those. (he laughs) One day, if you want to look at those...

SIGRIST: Did you feel that this was something, uh, you had different intentions, obviously, when you first got here. You hadn't intended on doing something like this.

AIGNER: No.

SIGRIST: Did you find this demeaning, to have to go and do, look for...

AIGNER: Well, demeaning is not the word. I felt, yes, in a way I felt humiliated. I didn't enjoy it. I didn't enjoy, have to, have to talk to a colored maid into letting me do it without the boss knowing about it and then hope, coming back with the proofs, that they will be good enough that the boss will buy some. I had no basic arrangement. I had, I was doing it "on spec," and on, on gambling. And where is the market was not as bad as it later became for this type of photography, it was, it was a very bitter experience.

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SIGRIST: Did your wife go to work when you first got to America?

AIGNER: Soon. She was fantastic in doing things which she didn't know how to do.
(he laughs)

SIGRIST: It's a nice talent to have.

AIGNER: What?

SIGRIST: It's a nice talent to have.

AIGNER: Yes. She was invited to be an M.C. [i.e. master of ceremonies] in a charity affair organized by Hungarian doctors. And she actually spoke English (he laughs) which she had, I mean, she didn't know English when she came but managed. it was fantastic. And then she got herself salesgirl jobs in, in good places. She, she had, she had a good background for fashion and she was, in Europe she was selling, I don't know exactly what clothing she did but she was traveling with her boss and they were selling coats and, and other clothing articles which were manufactured cheaply in Hungary and then sold out of Hungary for world, world market prices. But she did get a early job and she was actually earning more than I was earning, except that (he laughs) she practiced the principal "what is yours is mine" and as afar as what I have you have no business to be interesting in. (he laughs) She got sales jobs and so on and she bought her clothing. She bought the children's clothing and so on and so forth. But I don't know how to describe it. Did it help me? Didn't it help me? You see, our difficulties started from this period and ended in divorce, how many years later? Twelve years later.

SIGRIST: Tell me, the first few years in America, what was the hardest thing to get used to?

AIGNER: (he pauses) Not to be allowed to take a job. And the fact that I was past forty and my qualifications or my background qualified me for, for high level jobs. But my age disqualified me and my lack of specific experience disqualified me. You see, I made my living in Europe as a free lance and I had no corporate experience, except for three months when I became art director of a big, a big French newspaper. But that job didn't work out. I didn't fit into a, a corporate life in France. And so I went back to free lancing and remained a free lance all my life, whether I was opening a portrait studio or whether I was offering article or making article "on spec." It's still this free lance. It's still no, uh, my only non-freelance experience was with the Voice of America and that was because my wife insisted that I take it. The Hungarian department was directed by a friend. He knew me and he, he was, or had been a newspaperman in Hungary in a, in a small, not small, in a big, in a big part of the capitol town, or city. Big, big town. And, but I was a higher level newspaperman than he was. So he knew that I would be, I mean, I don't want to go into his problem, his illness and his lack in confidence and how it came all of a sudden that he, as a low man on the totem pole, became head of the Hungarian department. And so he came to me in the dark room in the basement and asked me to help him. And I was expecting to become the head of that department, instead of which I was asked to support him as his assistant which I did. But it ended in my divorce. You see, he became too much involved with my wife and so on and so forth. So after seven years of fighting, divorce, I had to accept it.

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She had to go to Reno [NV], and she did, to get herself a divorce because she wanted me to ask for it. And I didn't. I didn't want to get divorced. I wanted to live happily ever after. By that time we had two children, no, four children. And I thought, if we didn't have any business to get married when we did, we were so incompatible, but we had no business to go apart when we had four children and make them half orphans and a broken family and so on, so forth. But I had to accept it. We did divorce. And that's what brought me here in Great Barrington [MA] because I had friends here and I felt that I'm not going just in a strange environment but somewhere where I have supporting, are you familiar, support. Are you familiar with Gould Farm [ph]?

SIGRIST: No.

END OF INTERVIEW