

EI-407

GRACIELLE CHRISTIANSEN NISSEN
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 7/2009

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AGE 11
PASSAGE ON "THE OSCAR II"
PORT OF EMBARCATION: COPENHAGEN

RESIDENCES: GETOFTE, GLOSTRUP
HARTFORD, CT

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, October 30, 1993. I'm in Glastonbury, Connecticut, with Gracielle Nissen. Mrs. Nissen came from Denmark in 1924 when she was eleven-and-a-half. Present also in the room is Mrs. Nissen's daughter, Jenny Elliot, and Mrs. Nissen's friend, Frie[ph] Lundgren, from Denmark. Anyway, thank you very much for letting me come out. Can we begin, Mrs. Nissen, by you giving me your birth date?

NISSEN: Yes. It's September 19, 1913.

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

NISSEN: I can, yes. I was born in Gentofte. That's spelled G, like in good, E-N-T-O-F-T-E. Gentofte. And that is just, it's connected with Copenhagen.

SIGRIST: Sort of like a suburb of . . .

NISSEN: A suburb, like the taxes goes into Copenhagen, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what this town looked like when you were growing up? Did you live there as a girl?

NISSEN: No, I did not. I lived in Glostrup. We moved there when I was a, I must have been about four years old.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of the first place?

NISSEN: No, none at all.

SIGRIST: Well, then why don't we talk about the second place, because I'm sure you do have memories of that.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name of that town, please?

NISSEN: Glostrup is G-L-O-S-T-R-U-P. And that is two, about three, uh, Danish miles from, uh, Copenhagen.

SIGRIST: So these two towns are not far from each other.

NISSEN: No, no, no, no, no. No.

SIGRIST: Why did your family move?

NISSEN: From Glostrup to the United States?

SIGRIST: No, the first move.

NISSEN: Oh, well, they, I think, as far as I understand, when I was born I was the first child, and then they had a child thereafter, they had three within three years. And, uh, each time my father moved from one town to another, no real reason. But Glostrup is the town where we lived and where I went to school, and when we came to the United States, that is where we lived, also, in that town.

SIGRIST: Tell me about that town, and what it looked like when you were growing up.

NISSEN: I, uh, tell you the truth, I loved the place. A lot

of houses had straw roof on them, and, uh, the, one school. And we all walked to school, regardless how many miles. It had nothing to do with it. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe the center of town for me?

NISSEN: Yeah. The center of town at that time, at that time, was a town that had a little store that sell butter and cheese, and another store that only sold, you know, meat. We had, at that time we also had a store that we started calling Brugsen, spelled B-R-U-G-S-E-N. That was a store where the working man thought that if they got a little bit together maybe they could start their own store and be a little bit more reasonable and have stock in it, because they didn't have much in those days. But, uh, and it still exists, and, uh, it's a very large, large store today. Uh, when we had snow, which we had quite often, uh, it was with a horse and sled that would come by from the other town. And we kids would jump on the back of the sled and get part of a ride to school. (she laughs) Um . . .

SIGRIST: Was there a, was there a place in town that as a child you particularly liked to go?

NISSEN: Uh, not really. You see, we went to school, uh, five-and-a-half days a week, half a day on Saturday also. And we had a lot of schoolwork. So there was a place where we, uh, had entertainment, and, uh, when it came to, not Halloween, because we don't have Halloween over there, but we have a thing called cat ni tun[ph].

That means the cat is in the barrel, full of nuts, and all the kids all dressed in costume, and you stand in line, and you take the big stick they give you and hit the barrel, and then the nuts are falling down and so forth and so on. Uh, that place is, the building itself is not standing up because it got burned down when the Germans took over, but it has been rebuilt, and it's a beautiful place for every little gathering that you, one hundred or two hundred people.

SIGRIST: This was like a hall of some sort.

NISSEN: A hall, yeah. And that's where we had our Christmas parties, also.

SIGRIST: Oh, can you describe a Christmas party.

NISSEN: Oh, they were out of this world, to my knowledge, because we didn't have much. So the hall was very large, and it had a curve like this here, a divider,

and they put the piano in between the divider. And before we did that, of course, there was the Christmas tree, which was a beautiful, beautiful tree. And that same day as we were having the party in the evening, the womens would get together in the hall and make roses out of crepe paper, which was all white and red, and was decorated over the whole tree, with little tiny, Danish flags that, we did not have electric lights in those days, but we did have candle lights, and nothing ever happened, and it was beautiful lit up. And, of course, we never saw the tree until the big doors were opened up, and then all us kids, in those days, you know, you had big families. So, like I said, we walked in, and underneath the tree was the, uh, the two helpers for Santa Claus, which we called Jule Nisse.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

NISSEN: That's J-U-L-E, Capital N-I-S-S-E. And they would sit down underneath the tree with their wooden shoes. They had gray pants on, but the top of the thing was a red jacket, like covered up. And then they had little hats that sat on their head, which was big enough so you could fold it over with a knob on the side. And,

uh, then it was time to sing the Christmas carols. And let me tell you, we could all sing. (she laughs) And what happened, they came around, and they got off the trees, and then they also held our hand, and we sang around the Christmas tree. And, uh, after that, why, then we, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Would this be on Christmas day or Christmas Eve, or a few days before?

NISSEN: That would always fall on either Saturday night or Sunday, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So that everyone could come.

NISSEN: Oh, yes, because in those days you didn't have cars like you have today, you know? But, uh, it, it was something you never forgot. Then you would get, stand in line after you'd been singing a lot, a lot of Christmas carols. It's not like, over here they don't do much of that, but there Christmas carols are really well-appreciated. And the very last one we had to sing, and every kid screamed, because they knew now came the goodies, was (Danish). That was really something. And we sang all the verses. I don't know if there's ten or twelve, but there's a lot of them.

And then we stood in line, and there we had a brown bag, and in there was one apple, one orange, and then some, some nuts. Then we stood in line, and we got into another room, and there they had hot chocolate with whipped cream on the top and beautiful, beautiful cookies that was on the top, with whipped cream in between the cookie, always whipped cream in Denmark. And then there was frosting on the top, and then some other few cookies. And then after that was all done and the grown-ups, they also had their Christmas at the same time, but in the big hall that was connected with the little hall. And they had, of course, Danish pastries and whatever. I presume, I don't know, but I presume they had a little bit where they could bend the elbow. I imagine so, I don't know. But after that was all over, then the tables were clear, and then it was time to play music. And we had the same orchestra, of course, as they had in the big one, and we did a lot, a lot of folk dancing, which we had learned as time went by. And there's no Christmas present, but we didn't need Christmas presents. We were happy over the whole thing, you know?

SIGRIST: Was that customary for children growing up in Denmark

to learn the folk dances?

NISSEN: Well, they have a lot, they do have, my parents never did send us to it, but most of the kids had gone to those dancing schools where they taught these kids that was eight, ten, twelve years, all dressed up for it. And, of course, my mother and dad, they used to dance a lot at home in the little kitchen. And, of course, they taught us all the dancing, too. So it was a lot of fun, a lot of fun.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

NISSEN: August Christiansen. August, that's the same as August, A-U-G-U-S-T, and the last name was Christiansen, was C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N-S-E-N, the same as John Christiansen.

SIGRIST: The gentleman that I interviewed.

NISSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: So that's your maiden name, then?

NISSEN: Yeah, that's my maiden name, yeah.

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

NISSEN: Uh, my father was a, for trade he was a cabinet maker, though he would like to have been something else, but this is what, in those days the parents told what they were going to be.

SIGRIST: What do you think he would have liked to have been?

NISSEN: Well, he, uh, kind of had a little friend that run the grocery store that had a daughter, so that's probably what he would have liked to have done. (she laughs)
But nevertheless, his mother was always there to pull him in the collar. But, uh, they all, in those days they all went to school for seven years. That, after they came to this country, some of the people, they took a test and they found out that that was the same as two-and-a-half years of high school. Now, you've got to remember, that is way, way back in 1924, so that's many years ago. Uh, my father came from a very large family. My grandmother had eighteen children, but four of them passed away, but then she had fourteen children, so each one helped each other. And my grandmother worked for the Queen of Denmark, taking care of all the silver, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandmother?

NISSEN: I sure do.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about your grandmother? What was her name?

NISSEN: That I cannot tell you. I can remember my grandfather's name was, uh, Ole. That's O-L-E. And, uh, in those days, way, way back years ago, what was your first name, the next generation, that would be their last name, and it kept on alternating. So, in other words, his name must have been Christian Olsen, or something like that, and then my father came along, and all those children, their name was Christiansen, as I said before. But, uh, my grandmother, see, she came to visit us once in Denmark where we lived, because they had to take the train, they were a little slower than they are today. And I remember how she came into the kitchen. And in those days they wore elastic around their panties, and she put her hands up and she said, "Don't say anything to Grandpa, but this is for the children." She had bought some red, red hard candy. (she laughs) So those are the things that stands in my mind very, very much.

SIGRIST: What did your grandmother look like?

NISSEN: She was a very attractive woman. She actually came from Sweden. She was going to be sold as a Swedish slave. Many people don't realize that in those days they did sell their children. They would have some land and want to be a farmer, and they had to borrow money, and they could only borrow from the rich, and that was the way that they did it. But my grandmother was whipped in the back, but they had to be nude, standing on a big, big block of wood or something, to see who was the highest bidder. And she did have a slash across her back from the belt. But somebody somehow pulled her out and got her into Denmark. But we never knew who did it or what, because I presume that person would have gotten in a lot of trouble. But that's the way the law was in those days. The farmer could buy them. But, of course, they came from a poor family. And, as I said, my father came from a very large family.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you know about your grandmother's work dealing with the silver.

NISSEN: She, uh, they had a special pantry at the royal family, and all the silver that came in, at the table,

then used and everything, that came into her pantry. And she had to wash all that stuff, and then she had to polish all the silver, including the trays and whatever that there was. And I do want to say that while she worked for the royal family for three years, she also had carried a child, and it's the first one that was ever kind to her. The queen said to her, because she says, "I'll just . . ." She put the baby in the apron and was going to send it home and let the kids take care of it. She said, "No, you don't do that, Mrs. Christiansen. You stay home for three days and take care of your little one." And that's the first one that had ever been that way. And, of course, that, we kids never will forget either. Our King Christian X, which was the son of that queen at that time, my father used to play with him quite a bit. He's dead now, but played, because as a child he would deliver three or four o'clock in the morning, he would deliver hot rolls, bread, special to this royal family, in through the woods, and make people think that he was a big, tall man, which he was only a little kid, maybe six or eight years old. HE, uh, would have a cigarette lit, and raise his hand way up high, so they thought that was from there. (she

laughs) So that's what I can tell you about that.
(Mr. Sigrist laughs) But, uh, when my father came back in, in 1924 to bring us to the United States, he was called in to the king and queen, and they gave him a special medal for the outstanding work that he had done in Denmark alone, because he did try to organize things so nobody would go hungry. And when confirmation, which is very important over there, at the age of fourteen, a lot of people did not have the money to dress their children, like the girls in white and the boy in dark blue shirts, suit, they would, and when they woke up in the morning there would be shoes and stockings and all the clothes for that person that was going to be confirmed. And he, they did a lot of that work. And, of course, he was called and got a special medal for that.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

NISSEN: Well, uh, I think, and my own children can remember that, they said he was a very stern looking man. He wasn't a man that smiled too much. That he didn't. He read a lot, not just plain books, deep, deep books. He, uh, as I said, to me he was a very good father. Because my, in those days, even so that you might

could have used a few extra crowns, in those days you didn't send your wife to work. The man saw to it that he supported his family.

SIGRIST: And you said he was a cabinet maker.

NISSEN: And he was a cabinet maker.

SIGRIST: Do you have anything in the house that he had made?

NISSEN: Yes, but we always had to sell it. It was only there for display, and then it had to be sold. He had his own shop, plus a store just to display stuff. That was, the doors was locked, of course, because you don't buy furniture every day over there, and then the furniture in the dining room was all different, uh, kind. And I remember the one kind that he made had a big, big table, and in the middle of the table, underneath the table, was a little piece of furniture. And as you bended down and opened up the door, that's where you kept your cigars and cigarettes, because in those days when there came anybody to visit you, to finish off the thing after you had your little drink or whatever, had coffee and so forth, you would pass the cigarette or cigars around. That was the end of that.

SIGRIST: So did your father ever make you something?

NISSEN: Uh, yes. Uh, my daughter has a piece of furniture here that is, see, he, when he came to this country he made antique reproductions.

SIGRIST: So he continued doing his cabinetry when he came here.

NISSEN: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Yeah. He has, there also is a footstool here that they claimed that's the only second one in the United States that he somehow got the blueprint. (she laughs) But, uh, he was a very, very smart cabinet maker. But, uh, like I said, time do changes now.

SIGRIST: When you think back to your father when you were a child, was there a, is there a story or an incident that happened between you and your father that sticks out in your mind?

NISSEN: Yes, there is. (she laughs) Uh, since we were never told outside that the stork came through the window, that's how he brought the children into the world. Uh, I remember my, and that's, this happened in this country, that there was something that, I can't remember what it was, but evidently there was

something that I hadn't quite obeyed, and, uh, all I said, and I never said anything like that before, but I'll never forget it till the day I die, and when I get up there to see my father, I'll apologize, but he said something, and all I said to my father, "Well, I didn't ask to come to this world." And you know where I landed. (she laughs) So that's about it.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother. What was her name?

NISSEN: Uh, her name was Louise Marie Von Hyndonke.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please? Just the last name.

NISSEN: Well, the last name is actually V-O-N, then H-Y-N-D-O-N-K-E. You see, my mother was not Danish. My mother came from Belgium and was educated part of her life in Paris. She spoke five languages fluently and could read and write.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about her family background.

NISSEN: See, her family background I don't know, because in those days you didn't have money to travel from one corner to another. Uh, all I, all I know, that my father learned the carpentry and became a carpenter. And then in Hamburg, Germany he was well-known in the

whole world to be one of the best cities in the world that knew about furniture and make furniture, so he went there for a year to go a little bit further. Meanwhile, he had met his brother, which was much older than him, and big, and he said, "How are you doing, August?" And he said, "Well, I'm doing pretty good." And he says, "How are you doing?" "Oh, I'm doing fine. You know, I'm married to so-and-so." Because the mail didn't go around too fast in those days. And, uh, "You can just tell your sister, tell your wife, tell your, tell your wife," this is what he told his brother, "Tell your wife that I'm coming over to pick up her sister as my wife." And he did. He went over to Belgium and picked up my mother, and they got married in Denmark in a big town hall in Copenhagen.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year they were married?

NISSEN: No.

SIGRIST: Uh, so your mother was educated.

NISSEN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

NISSEN: Oh, she was full of, she was full of fun. But I can tell you one thing, that when she said something or you had to do something, that's what, that's what they meant.

SIGRIST: Do you remember an incident where you disobeyed her or she got mad at you or punished you somehow?

NISSEN: Well, we got punished. If, we were four children, and if one of us did something wrong, we all four got punished at the same time. She was very hard that way, and that meant we had to go to bed regardless whether the sun was shining or not.

SIGRIST: That was the way she punished you, was to go . . .

NISSEN: Yeah. And being in a big apartment house, in those days it was a big apartment house, and hearing a lot of children playing outside, that was hard for us. But I do remember one good deed that my father came, he had his shop right across the street, and came home, he says, "What are you children in bed?" Well, because, I don't know. Somebody did something wrong, but I can't remember what. "Well, I never heard of such a thing," said my father. "You just get out of bed and get dressed and you go out and play like all

the rest of the children." And, of course, that day my father was an angel. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I just want to say for the sake of the tape there's a blower or a heater somewhere. It's all right. You don't have to turn it off. I just want to comment on it on the tape, so people know what that is. Can you describe the house that you lived in in Denmark for me, kind of just walk me through it?

NISSEN: Yeah. It was an apartment house. People in those days lived also in the cellar, and then there's three floors, and there was eight people in each apartment. For that matter, (?) comes from one of them. And we had a front door which had a big glass window and, uh, a big entrance. In the entrance they used, in those days, they had big barrels with fresh fish that was salted down, and with potatoes and some carrots and beets also, and they put sand in between so, the salt, for the fish, of course, was sand in between, so it wouldn't get rotten, so we would have something to eat most of the winter. Then you entered there, our kitchen was a long kitchen, but it had a big, big, black, built-in stove, where you put in the stuff to burn, and that had an oven where my mother even baked

beautiful bread without temperature control. And they had a little space in this here black stove where you put water in. That was where we got our warm water, even to take a bath. So that gives you an idea, it took a while. But there was four, four units on top of that big, black stove, that you could put pots and pans on, you know? And, uh, it, uh, it was a black sink, and we had to pump the water, and then it had cabinet, and then there was a little table, and there was benches that we sat on, and there was just room for us four kids to sit on that bench. We sat real close together. And that's about it. And we had a bedroom, and I don't understand it to this day, but my father made the bedroom furniture there, beautiful. They were painted white with gold edging. And there was a double bed in there, and then there was my bed, which was an iron bed that you pulled out two sides, so as you got bigger you still could use the same bed. And, uh, then the boys, they had a bed that they used, it was like a bench during the day and you pulled it out, so they called a solider's bed there, and room for them there, and my sister had a bed like that, too. Then there was the dining room that we used as a living room also. And that's, in those days

we didn't have inside bathrooms so, or toilets, or, you know where you had to go for that. So, but . . .

SIGRIST: You said this was in an apartment building?

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What floor were you on?

NISSEN: We were, we called it stool, but over here it's called first floor. Yeah, we were on the first floor.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in this apartment?

NISSEN: Oh, yes, yeah. Oh, yeah. And people were very good. Say, now the flu epidemic is coming, and the Spanish flu. We lived over there at that time, and people were dying like flies. And I remember that we all got sick. We just flopped on the floor. And our neighbor next door, she made a big, big pot of soup in one of those big, big black pots, you know, with the white enamel inside, and she would knock on the wall to let us know now the soup is by the door. And, uh, everybody helped everybody, because it was really, really, real bad.

SIGRIST: That was a serious epidemic.

NISSEN: Oh, very, very.

SIGRIST: Did you get the Spanish flu?

NISSEN: Well, we didn't get the Spanish flu, but we got some kind of flu, because she just flopped on the floor. And it happened so fast that my mother didn't even know what the heck was going on.

SIGRIST: Um, speaking of soup, can you tell me a little bit about what people ate in Denmark at that time? What was your average dinner?

NISSEN: Well, uh, they had soup, uh, of course. That was with carrots, and all clear broth, you know. You kept on cooking it with roast beef, you know? But, uh, they, uh, they ate also, many of the places, they had, on Saturday, for dinner, they had Danish pancakes, and I don't know if you ever have had them, but they're big, very thin. And I remember Mother had a big frying pan, and she could lift it up and go up there and turn it over just like nothing. I don't know how the heck she did it, but that's what she did. And then we had, we called fruit soup, and that was made out of, well, whatever you had left of apples and raisins, and if there was a pear in the house in the summertime,

whatever. We have very good apples over there, and I think why they're so good, because the season isn't as fast as it is here. It takes a longer time for it to get, you know, red, or whatever they're supposed to be, in the color.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your mother baking bread. Can you describe that process for me, please?

NISSEN: Yes. She had a, she had a big, big bowl, and, uh, it had fallen once, but she put it together with wires, and then she had the flour and the whole thing, and after once she had it all mixed then she started to knead it with her hands, and then she put it in the pan. And sometimes we got raisins in it. And, like I said, the way Mother tested it to make sure the bread was baked was by bending her hand, taking it out from the oven, and then bending it with her third finger with the, kneel down, and she could hear by the sound that the bread was done.

SIGRIST: Was your mother a good cook?

NISSEN: Oh, excellent.

SIGRIST: Was there something that she made that was your

absolute favorite dish?

NISSEN: No, but I can tell you what, the grandchildren's favorite dish, and that was apricot. We call it (Danish). And that she made quite often for desert, and that had the real macaroons all cut up inside, full of whipped cream in it. And it had to have pure vanilla stick. We split the vanilla stick over. It was still, you could get them, and then open it up, and that is all full of very, very fine grains, like sugar, and that goes into it, and that's what gives that the flavor.

SIGRIST: Was that a, was that a holiday thing that she would make?

NISSEN: Well, see, could be a holiday, but we had it more often than that holiday. We had (Danish), too, and that's made out of lemon. Lemon and gelatin and sugar and egg that is beaten up, and then it goes together like a big pudding, in a beautiful crystal glass bowl. Then it's all full of whipped cream, and then take away with red cherries.

SIGRIST: It sounds delicious. What about . . .

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: What about meat at all? Did you eat a lot of meat in Denmark, or not?

NISSEN: Well, for every piece of potato, we were taught, in our own family, for every piece of potato we had we could have one piece of meat. In other words, for each mouthful. So, uh, they made, what, that dish, and they still do it over here, that's called fraggadella[ph]. That is kind of reasonable. That's hamburg ground up, and then they put eggs and flour and salt and pepper, something like a meatball over here, but it has a little bit of a different texture. It tastes, and they're very, very light. That is one of the things that they had a lot. At Christmas time, they'd have always, most of them have big, big roast pork, and then they have a goose, or whatever you call it, also at Christmas, two meats.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, um, what you did for fun, what kind of entertainment did the family have in Denmark?

NISSEN: Well, of course, my mother and father belonged to a club they called 64, playing cards. And they took

turns going to each other's home. I don't know whether it was once a week or once every other week, but, anyway, whoever lost had to put in twenty-five cents in this here pan, and after they had played the whole season, then they have money enough in that pot that they went out and we all had a picnic in one of the big parks over there, not too far from Tivoli.

SIGRIST: What about, um, uh, the things at home? Were there games that the children played that you remember playing as a child?

NISSEN: Uh, not too much, because we had a lot of schoolwork. But, uh, Mother, since Mother, we were over there two years without my father, my mother taught us, she loved cards, so she taught us every card game that she knew all the way through, and then we really enjoyed that very much.

SIGRIST: With her card partner over in America, she had to teach the kids how to play. (they laugh)

NISSEN: That's right.

SIGRIST: You mentioned there were four children.

NISSEN: Yeah over there.

SIGRIST: Can you name your brothers and sisters for me, please?

NISSEN: Yeah. My sister next to me is Doris, and then there's Francois, he's passed away. And then there's Lucien, and he's also passed away.

SIGRIST: How do you fall into the children? Are you the youngest, or the oldest?

NISSEN: I'm the oldest.

SIGRIST: You're the oldest.

NISSEN: Yeah. Lucien was the youngest at that time. Then we came to the United States. But then I got a little sister named Patricia. Now, that is her name. But Lorraine, Sharmaine, Patricia. Every kid in the neighborhood came knocking on the door to tell my mother what that baby should be called. (she laughs) So that's why it's all mixed.

SIGRIST: Were you closest to one of your brothers and sisters?

NISSEN: Yeah, I think I was closest to my oldest brother. Of course, he wasn't as old as I was, but he was number three.

SIGRIST: Is there a story, before you came to America, in Denmark, is there something, a story that you remember about something you did with your brother, or . . .

NISSEN: No, not, not really, because, as I said, we, we didn't get home until three thirty, four thirty, and then our mother had work for us all to do. No matter who, which family. Every child had to do some work at home.

SIGRIST: Was there a chore to do?

NISSEN: The dishes.

SIGRIST: How would you do dishes?

NISSEN: Well, we had a pan to put them in, but we first had to heat the water, you know? And the kitchen wasn't very mild, like it is today. And we tried to rinse them off the best we could, and then just wipe them off, and that was it. Uh, of course, they had fancy dishes for special holidays, but those we didn't use every day. They very much, they liked this holiday business. It means a lot to them. But, uh, and, uh, Christmas means a lot over there. You see, we have Christmas, Little Christmas Eve, and the next day is

Christmas Eve, and the next day is Christmas. Then we have First Christmas Day and Second Christmas Day. So it's quite different.

SIGRIST: It's just a long, extended . . .

NISSEN: Oh, my. And, of course, it was very normal that when you went to school, of course, the girls all learned how to knit and sew, and they were busy making things for Christmas presents.

SIGRIST: So you did that also when you first . . .

NISSEN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. I can still remember the, how many loops I had to put on my knitting needle for making a pair of gloves. Fifty-eight. (she laughs) So those were the things you were, well, their training is not the same today. That's why I say that's the way it was in those days. Today they're, they're just like the kids are over here.

SIGRIST: So young women who were in school at that time not only learned reading and writing, but they also learned handicrafts.

NISSEN: Yeah, and, oh, yes, they learned everything.

SIGRIST: What subject did you like the least?

NISSEN: Well, I'll tell you, you wouldn't believe, but it was drawing, and that was because my teacher was laughing of me. You see, they put something in the middle of the floor, and then we would all sit all around, and then we would have a, a pencil in our hand, and we had to stretch our arm, then see how much that was, how wide that was, how wide. And then we had to do a freehand drawing. There were no rulers on the paper. And, of course, you had to close one eye, and I didn't know how to close that one eye. And the teacher got mad at me, and he said, "You've got to close, learn to close your one eye." I said "I don't know how. It won't close unless I've got to push it together with my fingers." And, well, anyway, I got shook up a little bit, because in those days, you know, you were allowed to get a little whipping. So, uh, he said, "But someday you'll learn how, I can tell you that." And, you know, that stuck in my mind all my life, because I didn't realize you wink with one eye. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a funny story. Um, tell me what religion you were.

NISSEN: In Denmark at that time it was all Lutheran.

SIGRIST: You were Lutherans.

NISSEN: Yeah. In those days it is. Now it is everything, because we have a lot of, a lot of foreign people living in Denmark.

SIGRIST: Were you a religious family?

NISSEN: No, because, you see, the people in Denmark, they don't go to church, really. We have nice churches, but in our school it's the law that you've got to learn your (?). From first to third grade you learned a little bible all by heart. And as each one stands up the next one, they've got to know exactly what they have to talk about. And I will never forget, I had to talk about what you people call Good Friday. We call it Long Friday. And I cried and cried and cried all the way through, but I also knew that if I didn't say the story I couldn't get into fourth grade, and that's the way it was. And in fourth grade we had to learn the catechism from one corner to another corner, and, by heart and everything. And then when we got in fifth grade through seventh grade, we learned the big

bible.

SIGRIST: So church and school are very much intertwined.

NISSEN: Oh, yeah, but it's not like that any more.

SIGRIST: No, but at that time.

NISSEN: At that time it was, yes.

SIGRIST: Was there some way that you practiced your religion at home?

NISSEN: Uh, no, just to have respect for our parents, I would say, more or less. I mean, we, I never heard my parents swear, and, of course, we didn't swear either. And, well, we went very much after the tenth commandment, and there it tells you the whole story, and if we all did that today we wouldn't have a war.

SIGRIST: Now, you said your father went to America two years before you all went.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did your father go?

NISSEN: Well, at that time things was getting slack over in Denmark, over in Europe, just like, it happened here,

too, but it didn't look that bad at that time. So he had a sister that lived in New York and said, "Why don't you come over here?" So he said, "Well, where I get the money?" So she sent him the money for the ticket, and he, he lived in their house with them, and had two jobs. He got a job right away the first day, because there wasn't a thing he couldn't tell you about with work, not a thing. So . . .

SIGRIST: And he got work as a carpenter, doing carpentry, uh, cabinetry.

NISSEN: Cabinetry. Oh, yeah. Yeah. And . . .

SIGRIST: What was his sister doing in America, do you know?

NISSEN: Well, uh, she was a young, pretty blonde-haired girl, full of H-E-L-L. And, uh, she thought, you see, the Danes, in those days, they did more traveling than any other nationality. You cannot compare it to (?) and people upstairs, right? They really liked to travel all the way, and a lot of people came to the United States, but there was always a waiting list, so many of them went to Canada, because there there was no waiting list. So my father went through there, here, and, uh, the next day they came to the United States.

He went over to get his first citizenship papers, right the next day. And then, then he looked for a job, and he started to work, and that was it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father writing to the family telling you about what was going on in America, or what America was like?

NISSEN: I, I tell you, through my mother, my mother never read the letters out loud. But, uh, she was also (?) and what not. And my father did send quite a few packages over there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what, the kinds of things he was sending to you?

NISSEN: Yes. Uh, one thing that really stood out in our mind was we girls, I don't know how the boys shoes were, but they were black patent leather on the bottom, and then gray on the top, with all little buttons, all the way on the side. That was a big deal, you know? We were, really people looked at us when we walked down the street. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You had on your American shoes.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your father, when he came before you came, did he like America? Did he ever talk about that later? Did he like . . .

NISSEN: Yes, he did like America. His wish was, before he died, that he would see the United States. But he died at the age of sixty-one and, of course, he never did. But, uh, he was over in San Francisco, lived there, too, besides New York and Hartford, Connecticut.

SIGRIST: How old was your father when he came to this country?

NISSEN: That I don't know. That I don't know.

SIGRIST: A reasonably young man probably.

NISSEN: Yeah, yeah, he probably was.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what life was like when your father was gone. How are you supporting yourself?

NISSEN: Well, my father sent money home to support us.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever go out and get a job?

NISSEN: Oh, no, no. Oh, that would never, never, never work.

No, no. You just didn't do those things. And, uh, of course, in those days, they made their own clothes, you know. Everything. My mother made everything for us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were in Denmark a certain outfit that sticks out in your mind that maybe your mother made you?

NISSEN: Yes. I can remember several outfits, but one outfit was at Christmas time we were dressed in white, pleated skirt with white top and blue like a sailor, and she made blue beautiful velvet coats. I'm telling you, with the patent leather shoes, we were really dressed. And then my grandmother had a golden anniversary in Copenhagen. We were the only children that was there, and I guess my aunt and uncle were kind of, I'll have you bring the children, because my husband can't come. And he also paid for it, and that always, we each had to pay for our own dinner, you know? At that time I remember mother made some beautiful pink, crepe de Chine dress with blue embroidery in between that held some of the material together. You know, it was gorgeous, I tell you. And let me tell you, we'd be all set like this. We'd fold

our hands, never said a word, never pushed each other, we were all dressed up, the boys and girls. And we knew just exactly what, what to do and what not to do.

SIGRIST: Of course, and you're in this room full of older people.

NISSEN: My mother only had to look at us. I remember we were invited to our neighbor next door at one time to have eel soup. That you make out of very small, tiny eels, and cut up, and then milk and butter and salt and pepper. And, of course, it tasted so good, but they would say, "Well, don't you want some more?" All we had to look at our mother and then we knew whether we should say, "Yes, thank you," or, "No, thank you."
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: And tell me about what you knew about America. Your father's over here already.

NISSEN: Nothing. I, all I heard about it that they have had, they had a hurricane, and I cried, and I did not want to come over here. I did not want to come over here.
And I'll tell you the honest truth, now I've been over here so many years, and it's just the last two years I'll say stay in the United States. Before that

I used to cry for Denmark, because things were a little bit more equal all the way around and, uh, people were different. But, uh, now they're getting kind of on the selfish side, each one for themselves, don't give a care about this and that. So then I tell everybody, "Stay in the United States." But that took many years.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother going through the process of getting your papers and all of that, getting ready to go? What do you remember about that?

NISSEN: Yeah. That was pretty rough, because on account my mother was born in Belgium, they called her a Belgian, but she was a Danish citizen. But Denmark says, Denmark says she was Belgian, and Belgium says, "No, she's Danish." So three or four times we were going to come over here, and there was only so many people that came in at that time. And each time we were all ready to go and had sold all our stuff and were ready, just living, so people could pick it up, you know, and they would get a phone call and say that sorry, you won't be able to go this time either. At the tail end after two years my father saved up money and came to Denmark, and then we could come over.

SIGRIST: Ah, so your father came back to get you.

NISSEN: Yes, to get you. I don't now who made that law. That must have been a lot of politicking there, because that's neither here nor there. My mother, she became all for Denmark, and many, many people did, because she liked Denmark.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about, did she want to leave and go to America, or was she just doing it because your father had done it?

NISSEN: Well, I really don't know deep inside, because we did have a lot of friends over there. But it, wherever there was an opportunity in this world, whether United States or Africa, my mother always followed where my dad would go, and that's the way it's always been. And my father was the same way. He says that a man, when he brings in children in the world, he's got to support them, and that's it.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what you packed when you, when you left?

NISSEN: Yes. We packed, everything was hand-crocheted edging on our slips, and our embroidery with our initials

that Mother put in. And, uh, we had flannel nightgown, and we had shoes and a few sweaters, and about the same like everybody else would have. The only trouble was we landed up in Nova Scotia first, and it said, well, there was snow, and it was icy cold. Oh, was it cold. And everybody was freezing. So mother took out, instead of having what she thought we were going to wear, was all wool clothes, and when we got to New York here it was so warm you have no idea. We sat on the corner on the sidewalk with our suitcases there waiting for my aunt to come and pick us up, and my father.

SIGRIST: Did you take any household objects?

NISSEN: Yes. My mother took all her cooking pans with, you won't believe this here, because my father said, "Don't you think that we have things over in the United States?" "But I just want to be sure." All her clothespins. (she laughs) That's funny, but that is the truth. And then we took all our bedding with, because we had featherbeds in those days, you know. We didn't have heat always in the bedrooms, so that was all featherbeds. And she had all her linen with her, and pots and pans and those things.

SIGRIST: Did you make the featherbeds? Did your mother make the featherbeds, or did you purchase them?

NISSEN: That I have no idea, because they were dead before I remembered that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Um, where did you leave from? Did you leave from Copenhagen?

NISSEN: Yeah. We left from Copenhagen.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

NISSEN: The name of the ship was Oscar II.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about the ship?

NISSEN: Well, it took us thirteen days to come over here, for the simple reason we hit a fog. They couldn't either see the moon or the stars, or nothing. And so for three days we stood still in the Atlantic Ocean, and there they were howling, howling continuously, because there was a ship nearby, and the one couldn't see the other one. And we had to stay down underneath for three days, because the water kept on coming up over the boat. And they claim that that ship had sunk once before, but they got it pulled out. So there were, I

don't know what the thing is today, but you're not allowed to whistle on a boat, because that means bad luck as far as the captain is concerned, and that I remember.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you slept on the boat?

NISSEN: Yes. Uh, there was, uh, there was other hanging up in the air, and I sat, I laid up there where the big holes so you could see the ocean. And the waves were so big, you wouldn't believe it. I think a lot of the kids today it would be scary. The waves were so high, and then if, like a big, big, big hole down below, and black, and all of a sudden going whoosh, you know? It really was rocking. And I, it took us thirteen days, and when we first came on the ship I said, "Oh, this is what I'm going to be when I grow up. I'm going to be a sailor." Because we went out on Good Friday, and very smooth, and the sun was shining. But it wasn't many hours before I started, and thirteen days I was like that. I was so skinny that when we came to Ellis Island my father was afraid they wouldn't let me in, that's how much weight I lost. I couldn't keep no food down.

SIGRIST: So you were throwing up a lot.

NISSEN: Continuously, night and day.

SIGRIST: What about the other members of your family?

NISSEN: They were, they were pretty good. They weren't as bad as I was, and my, they have a drink over there that they call akavit. And they say that if you take a shot of that akavit that you will not, and Mother got one and Dad got one, and they didn't either.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about the ship? Do you remember the dining room on the ship?

NISSEN: Yes, I do. There were long, long tables, and there is under it, and after that there was a little edge so the dishes couldn't just flip right over. But the boat was rocking so many times that there was times that there was maybe only three, three eating, out of hundreds and hundreds of people, because the rest was sick, you know? But my father, by God, he was a skinny man, he didn't weigh a hundred pounds, but he was tall. But that didn't, he had no problems at all. So you can imagine after being on the ship for a few hours, I was not going to be a sailor. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember there being any kind of, for instance, safety drills on the boat?

NISSEN: No. I really don't remember, in those days, that we had anything like that. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: What about some kind of organized entertainment on the boat?

NISSEN: Yes, there was that. There was dancing, and there was entertainment in the, when they had special dinners and stuff like that. And the food was, of course, excellent.

SIGRIST: Was your whole family in one cabin, or was your father and brother someplace else?

NISSEN: You know, when you asked me about that, you know, I, I think we were all in one big cabin. I'm quite sure we were.

SIGRIST: So, let's see. You left on Good Friday.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So it's got to be either March or April, or some time

in the spring.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: It takes thirteen days to get across the ocean.

NISSEN: At that time. Most people it only took ten or nine, but that's how bad the weather was.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

NISSEN: Yes, that we do. We passed it during the day, and there's the Statue of Liberty. Of course, it didn't mean much to me at the time, like today, you know more about it. I looked at that beautiful statue. But, you see what happened, I don't remember if it happened just before we got there or as we just passed it, but there was a Japanese freighter right next to us and that sank right in front of us. They couldn't save it. That's how rough the water was. So that wasn't so good.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw New York City for the first time?

NISSEN: (she laughs) I was so tired I don't think I thought much of anything. Everybody was just bustling from

one corner to another, and just kept right on going, you know? Because we were sitting on the sidewalk and everything, but, like I said it's, we lived with our aunt for one, one day, I think.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about, um, Ellis Island, getting to Ellis Island, and what happened to you.

NISSEN: Well, we got to Ellis Island because the ships were waiting to come in because it was full, and, of course, I had no knowledge of why . . . (voice off mike) So what, what happened, I, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did the boat dock first?

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Then you were . . .

NISSEN: Then we all got flocked off like a bunch of cattle, like you see on the TV today when they sell the cows, a whole bunch of farmers, well, that's exactly how we were. And, of course, uh, I didn't look around much, but we were so crowded that our arms had to be together. And, uh, the women had to be stripped way down to the waist. And, of course, we had never seen my mother stripped. You know, that was sort of a

shock to us. It was not clean, by no means, quite dirty. And I understand, though, I cannot swear on the bible because I don't know anybody who went through it, but there were some from some of the countries that they had to send upstairs to take a bath. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What kind of examinations did they give you?

NISSEN: Uh, they looked in the eyes and the ears and the throat, and then your lungs, you know, stuff like that. And, uh, they were all like bees, you know, you see bees, and they're making honey? But that, that's how close together we all were, really. And my father was kind of worried about me because I was so pale. Maybe they wouldn't let me in because they, they were very particular who came into the country in those days, and it wasn't because I had any illness, but I was pale and thin, but they put us right through, and then that was it.

SIGRIST: Do you think that this was a humiliating experience for her mother, for your mother to have to . . .

NISSEN: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Deal with herself in front of the children?

NISSEN: Yeah, I do think so. I do think so. It, uh, it, uh, they talk about Ellis Island today, all I can think of was we were just like a bunch of cattles, the whole thing. It, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it looked like on the inside?

NISSEN: No, I don't, because it was big, big, oh, it was a big, big, big hall, enormous big. I couldn't tell you if it was one hall or two halls, because we had to follow each other because you would get lost. That's how many people. Because it was full of ships coming in from all the different countries, all full of these people that came in, except the ones who didn't have to go were the ones who traveled first class. They didn't have to go. But anything that was tourist, you know, had to go into it.

SIGRIST: How long do you think you were there?

NISSEN: I have no idea. I have no idea. I was glad to get out of there.

SIGRIST: But you were in and out within a day?

NISSEN: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, yeah, oh, yes, of course, yes.
Because, you see, the ships were waiting to come in.
They all had to come in there in those days.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything at Ellis Island that you had
never seen before?

NISSEN: No, just about my mother, that's all. I really, I was
too scared, I really was.

SIGRIST: Well, now, where did, of course, your father's with
you. Where did he take you when you were done being
processed?

NISSEN: He was with us.

SIGRIST: Right. Where did you go when you were finished being
processed?

NISSEN: Then we had to follow through and go up to that ship
after the whole thing's gone through. Now, I don't
know if they stamped any papers, because that I cannot
remember. I remember there's thousands of people
there, and they all speak different languages. I
mean, very confusing.

SIGRIST: Just kind of chaos.

NISSEN: It was a chaos. There was no doubt about it. I mean, well, that was their system in those days. And we know of somebody that wanted to come over, we know of several that want to come over here and thought the opportunity would be better if they got a family and they could support them better, but if they had some little thing wrong with them, they had a little lip, they couldn't come over here.

SIGRIST: So when you were finished being processed at Ellis Island, and you left Ellis Island, and got back on the ferry boat, went back to New York, where did you go?

NISSEN: Well, it, uh, it, uh, what the heck, I don't know where we landed, but we landed with all the other ships right in New York.

SIGRIST: Right. And where was your father going to take you?

NISSEN: Well, he was going to take us to my aunt that lives in New York, but the worst thing happened. We had, I'll tell you something that just dawned on me now. They had those trains that's up on the top, you know, that goes? And father said, "Now, make sure you all stick together, and don't be too polite. You just go right in." And so we followed, it's true, but to be honest

with you, we got, one got on the other. So, but we did, I don't know how my mother knew where we were supposed to get off, what street, but we got off, and then we were glad to see my father, too. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Now, um, do you remember where in New York your aunt, where her apartment was?

NISSEN: She lived, in those days, it's not a beautiful section today, but in those days it was, it was 84th Street West, and we, my sister and I, we had, when she lived there for a while, we also had been in the park and played with our twenty-nine cents tennis racket in those days, you know? So she had a rooming, a boarding house there.

SIGRIST: She ran a boarding house?

NISSEN: Yeah, room and boarding house.

SIGRIST: For just Danish people, or . . .

NISSEN: No, any nationality. It had nothing to do with that at all. She wasn't that Danish. (she laughs) None of us are, really, you know? Everybody's equal when it comes down to that.

SIGRIST: All right. We're going to pause for a minute, and I'm going to pop another tape in, and we'll get you to your life in America.

NISSEN: Okay.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now beginning Tape Two with Gracielle Nissen, who came from Denmark in 1924 when she was eleven-and-a-half. It is October 30, 1993, and we're in Glastonbury, Connecticut. This is Paul Sigrist. Mrs. Nissen, you got yourself to your aunt's house in New York.

NISSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you what, what you thought of America in those first, say, that first year, what struck you as being very different from how things had been in Denmark.

NISSEN: Well, I did not like the schools.

SIGRIST: Tell me why you didn't like the schools.

NISSEN: Well, because the kids did not know how to lift their feet off the sidewalk. They sort of scraped a little bit. And then they'd chew gum. And, uh . . . (she laughs) That's the thing that stands out in my mind mostly. Uh, I, the school, I didn't know at the time that I needed glasses. And evidently I had, I should have had glasses for many years but didn't know it, and I sat in the back room. So I had to memorize everything what she wrote on the blackboard. I couldn't see it. Uh, I, uh, will say this much. You see, I had a piano in the old country, and so, uh, when we came to this country, of course, we didn't have a piano. So one of the things that stood in my mind, we had a table. And, uh, and made, a keyboard out of clothes pins, and had some cans in front that held my music, and then I would sing and push down the fingers as I was singing, but it didn't take very long before my father got me a piano. I don't think we were over here more than three or four months. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: He knew how important that was to you.

NISSEN: Yes, because I was not very happy, and we were, I didn't like the, well, I just didn't like the whole

setup. And still I had two brothers and a sister, and they just loved it, but I could not. Every Saturday my father worked half a day, and we would meet my father, and he would take us out for dinner, and we would get a nickel for candy, and, uh, and my father thought that would surely cheer me up. But I said I don't eat no candies, you know? But, anyway, I got O'Henry. That was my favorite chocolate candy in those days. But, uh, I wasn't, I wasn't too, too happy over here, but eventually, you know, I suppose you got used to it. And my father and mother, they moved a lot. Every year we moved to another section, which meant another school. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So that made it particularly hard.

NISSEN: Well, you never made any, know anybody really.
So . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about learning English, and how . . .

NISSEN: Oh, that was, we didn't learn, we didn't know a word of English when we came to this country, and we lived in a neighborhood where in back they were quarreling, and the first word we learned how to say, you won't believe it, was "shut up." That was the first, and

that was real bad to my mother and father. So we, we didn't say that but once. But, uh, we learned the English language, but I never was very good in composition. I didn't care whether it was yesterday or the day before, so whether it was past tense or not, that didn't matter to me. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember being made fun of because you were an immigrant?

NISSEN: Oh, yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a specific instance?

NISSEN: Many instance from the same kid. Uh, the second school we went to was A.E. Burr school, and as we were walking down Weathersfield Avenue, there were some bushes there, and this kid would be behind the bush, and so soon, I couldn't see him, so soon that I came by he would jump out of the bush and he'd beat me unmercifully in the back, and then spit on me all over. And one day I came late to, late to school, and Miss Magward[ph], that was my teacher at that time, she says, "What happened, Gracielle?" And I told her. Let me tell you, that kid never did it again. She took this boy and put him in with all the girls,

because in those days the girls had their own yard to play in, and put a big, beautiful satin ribbon all around his head with a bow on it, and he had to walk with me in the hand up and down. And let me tell you, he never did it again. But, you see, it happened so many times, and this time evidently she could see that something was terrible, because I didn't want to tell anybody anything, you know? So he never did that again.

SIGRIST: That's a wonderful story.

NISSEN: Yeah. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Um, when did you, how long did you stay in New York?

NISSEN: Oh, we only stayed there maybe a day or two, that's all.

SIGRIST: Oh, and then you came up to where?

NISSEN: Then my father got a rent on Retreat Avenue. And then he . . .

SIGRIST: In what town?

NISSEN: In Hartford.

SIGRIST: Oh, in Hartford. You came up from New York to Hartford.

NISSEN: Yeah, because that's where my father worked, in Hartford. And so, so because dad got double beds for, three double beds, because we were two boys and two girls, and then my father and mother, and then we had one bureau, and a table and four chairs, and that all had to be on payments in those days. So, like I said, it was a really hard struggle for my dad. He was such a good man.

SIGRIST: And, again, your mother didn't work.

NISSEN: Oh, no, no. Oh, no. That would mean the door. No.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother's adjustment to this country?

NISSEN: Oh, she, my mother loved the United States. (she laughs) You see, since she had been educated a lot in Paris, and here and there, in those days that was the gay Paris, you know? And she was a dressmaker. She, uh, she just loved it there. And my father liked it too, but my father took my mother out a lot when they were, when he was over there. And, of course,

there they had fish and chips all night long, so they had a lot of that going on. But, uh, things is, we, it was only me that didn't like it over here.

SIGRIST: Tell me how your mother learned English, if she learned English.

NISSEN: You'd better believe she did. I told you, she spoke five languages. Every piece of paper that she picked up, even if there was a piece on the sidewalk, she picked it up, took it home, and would read. And I remember my mother went to a night school. She only went there twice, I think, or three times. And that was on Lawrence Street. There was a school down there, in Hartford, an evening class. And she came home, and she said to my father, "You won't believe, August, the big word I can spell. It's this big!" You know, she would go with her finger, and my father said, "You don't need to tell me." And I think the word was either "beautiful," I think it was "beautiful" or "wonderful." I think it was "beautiful," and she knew how to spell that. And from that, oh, my mother, she, she loved to, languages, really loved languages.

SIGRIST: Did your father speak passable English?

NISSEN: Oh, yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it, um, important to him that you children become Americanized?

NISSEN: Oh, yes, very much. That's why he did so much for Saturday. Why he went, I mean, in those days there's not very many that could take out four children and their wife for dinner, and then take them to a movie and give them five cents for a chocolate bar or something, not very many. I mean, my father was really very, very good.

SIGRIST: And he did that so that you would be out in American society?

NISSEN: Society, yeah, he did that, always.

SIGRIST: Were there ways that you changed the way you look to become more American?

NISSEN: Uh, I wouldn't, I really don't think so. Mother sewed all our clothes, and I remember they weren't too fashionable. Some yards of material, and my mother sewed the dress, and we, see, my sister and I, we were

always dressed like twins, and my two brothers were dressed like twins. But I, uh, no, because our clothes over there was very much the same as here. There wasn't that much difference.

SIGRIST: What about hairstyles, because in the 1920's . . .

NISSEN: Yeah, that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Women were into cutting their hair.

NISSEN: We had our hair braided. And then we had what we call hamburger, and that was braided around the ears, and then big braid things that held it together, one on each side. And that is where we were different than other children.

SIGRIST: Sure, that's a very European look.

NISSEN: Yeah. And that was the way that it was. So it made it kind of rough on us two girls that way, but we never thought anything about it. My mother did the best, and she never thought, of course, we would never think of having hair flying out all over the place, never.

SIGRIST: So you were never allowed to bob your hair short as

many were wearing at that time.

NISSEN: No. No, no. The first time that I had my hair cut I was, uh, I must have been about, uh, fifteen-and-a-half or sixteen. I had a job down in Trenton Beach with some friends. They had a rooming boarding house, so I had to help peel potatoes and stuff, you know? And, uh, when it was time to go home, they had a daughter that was older than me but very modern, and they had older children. And, see, believe it or not, my mother know that I bet that she only cut off about an inch of my hair. And when I walked into that house, she says, "Who cut your hair, and why did you cut your hair?" And I didn't cut it to irritate anybody. It was just my girlfriend there, she thought I looked nicer, because I had, I saved my money. I got five dollars a week, you know, for helping them, and that, she kept the money, and then she went down to Pratt Street and bought a beautiful yellow sleeveless dress with a little embroidery on it and a brown velvet, a jacket, and that's the way I walked in, and my hair was cut a little bit, and that was just . . . (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Your mother's very observant.

NISSEN: Oh, you'd better believe she was.

SIGRIST: Did, you said that you moved around a lot.

NISSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Even in Hartford.

NISSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Even in Hartford.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the first place that you lived.

NISSEN: Yeah. The first place was 66 Retreat Avenue up on third floor, top floor. And it was hot! Oh, dear, was it hot. And that's right across from the hospital. And, uh, the very first experience we had, we were going to have a bath, and they had the big tank where they had the gas, and what happened, it evidently had that green corroded stuff on it, and mother lit the thing, and what happened, all four of us got sick and flopped on the floor like dead flies. She hurried up and put us on the bed, but she opened

up the window. Now, we had only been here a short time, maybe four or five days. We couldn't speak the language. But she knew the direction where my father was working, and she runned from 66 Retreat Avenue way down to Asylum Street to one of the old buildings that was there at that time and called my father home. And, of course, they got, my father knew right away what had happened, so we got milk, which would make us bring it out. But if she hadn't opened the windows, we would have been dead.

SIGRIST: What a, what a frightening thing for your mother to have happen so soon after you arrived.

NISSEN: Yeah, very much. So, of course, she couldn't ask police for anything, she couldn't ask anything, so she just kept on running.

SIGRIST: Now, how long did you live in that first apartment?

NISSEN: We didn't live there very long. I was about three or four months. And then we moved to 78 Retreat Avenue, because they said we would have a garden there. And, of course, mother paper hanged, and father paper hanged and painted up the place, but we stayed there a very, very short time. We, there was a lot of

cockroaches, and we were not used to that kind of stuff. We'd spray and spray, and we sprayed our place, they would just run upstairs, but soon that odor was gone, then they came from downstairs and came down again, you know, because it was a two-family house. And then from there we moved to Botwell Street, which was a two-family house. I lived there for maybe a year or so.

SIGRIST: So you really are moving very quickly.

NISSEN: Oh, yeah. And already then my father had bought me a grand piano.

SIGRIST: Which had to be moved.

NISSEN: Which had to be moved, open up the window casing and everything and down like this, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you take lessons, piano lessons, once you got to this country, also?

NISSEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your piano teacher?

NISSEN: Well, the first one I wouldn't recommend, but, uh, then I had, and he's dead now, he's Gydell[ph]. And,

uh, everything, what she taught me was wrong, and there's no doubt about that, because she was busy saying, "Now you play that Gracielle," and then she was out doing baking, greasy fingers on the paper. So I didn't learn much there. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What was your favorite music to play at that time?

NISSEN: Well, I don't know. I used to memorize all of them, but I can't memorize any of them. The thirteen Chopin waltzes, all of them. And, uh, my father loved music, my mother, too. So this was, I did every night, I played at least three hours, and my father didn't care whether it was the scale of C, or if it was, get at that piano. And I remember I was playing Maiden's Prayer, and I was a little slow on one of them, and this was the first piano, and I had to pull up the key, you know, to get the sound, and that took a few, about a split second, and my father said, "That was all right, but you were too late with so and so." I said, "But Dad, I couldn't help it. I had to pull up the key." Let me tell you, the next time, it wasn't but a week or two afterwards, there was a brand new piano. He found a music store down on Asylum Street, and he asked if there was some way that he could pay

him, and then he could refinish it. Of course, they took a lot of pianos in and out. It was during the depression, things was hard. So he refinished that, and that helped to pay off the piano. But, but after five years afterwards, or more than that, I got married, and the piano wasn't paid for yet. That's how expensive.

SIGRIST: A long time.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever go back to Denmark to visit?

NISSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What was, when was their first visit back?

NISSEN: Their first visit going back, it was 1958.

SIGRIST: So they had been here for a good chunk of time before then.

NISSEN: Oh, yeah. They were going back to see, I can't tell you what, and my mother don't know either, but the government had sent my father to Sweden. What that was about, I don't know. So naturally Mother went there with Dad, and then from there they went over to

Denmark. But when they got to Denmark they were kind of disappointed that they came over here, because they found out that all their friends were doing just as good, if not better, than what their friends were doing here. So that's the way life goes. So 1958 was their first time.

SIGRIST: When was the first time you went back to Denmark?

NISSEN: Uh, that was 1958, wasn't it, Danny, something like that? 1958, 1960 or something, '58, I think.

SIGRIST: Did you go back with your parents?

NISSEN: No. At that time I was married, and, uh, I went over there.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you thought when you went over there. Of course, you missed it so desperately for so long.

NISSEN: Well, I did, and I really loved it over there. And, and, uh, I think everybody would like their own country, where they're going to school and had their friends and everything. But the world in itself has changed so much that it actually, it hurts inside, it really hurts. And they, what happened there, they had taken in so many outsiders, and they give them rent

free now, and they give them furniture, they feed them, they do everything, and the people that have been living there for generations, they don't get the same treatment, and this is what hurts.

SIGRIST: How often do you go back to Denmark now?

NISSEN: I've been going back the last, uh, six, eight years, I've been going back every year. So . . .

SIGRIST: Was there ever a time in your life here in this country that you've regretted being brought to this country?

NISSEN: Well, I did that very much at the beginning, and that's because the school system was different, the kids were different, and, well, I had all my friends over there. And when you have a friend over there and you need something, they're behind you, they're in back of you, helping you all the way through. You don't, you don't find that. You probably do now, but at that time when I came over, you didn't find anything in that line.

SIGRIST: Well, and it was even especially hard because you kept moving, as you say, so it was very hard to make

friends.

NISSEN: And you couldn't speak the language either, remember?

You couldn't speak the language, so it made it rough.

SIGRIST: Was there a large Danish population in Hartford?

NISSEN: Uh, not, uh, yes, there was some, but not too, most of the people that came over from Denmark in the days when I came over here, they were farmers, so they would go to work for a farmer. And, of course, that means you'd get room and board there, too. So, uh, there was one year, I remember clearly that there was a whole bunch of Danish fellows that came over here. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Did your parents belong to a Danish society, or . . .

NISSEN: No, no.

SIGRIST: But did such a thing exist at that time?

NISSEN: Oh, yes. On May 12, I forgot the date, the, uh, Danish people bought a big hall that's on White Street today, they've sold it since. And now I remember, boy, that place was packed. First for in the afternoon Danish pastry, and then dinner and then

dance and everything else. And in those days I will say that they all had a good time. We had no TV, we had no nothing, but they had a good time with very little what they had. Many times I played the piano in the orchestra, and many time they wanted to dance some more, so they passed the hat around, put in a little dime, and so then we played another hour or two, and sometimes we, sometimes we didn't get finished until three o'clock in the morning, but they enjoyed themselves, and many of them had to walk many miles home in snow and everything.

SIGRIST: Well, it was an important social outlet, too.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: This is how people met each other.

NISSEN: Well, that's, well, there was a lot of them that had come more or less from the same town. I remember these fellows more or less did. But, uh, they got together, and they enjoyed themself, and they all loved the United States because, well, they could make both ends meet, right, and they had a place where you got something to eat and a clean bed. What else do you want? Some money in your pocket.

SIGRIST: Make your life complete.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I'd like to get on tape maybe you speaking a little Danish, because you do still speak some Danish.

NISSEN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: But I'd like to see if you remember something that you learned as a child in Danish, like maybe a nursery rhyme or a little poem or something.

NISSEN: Oh, gee.

SIGRIST: That you might remember?

NISSEN: I have never, never been good at that, can you believe it? Not even in this country. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer, perhaps, that you know in Danish?

NISSEN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: The Lord's prayer?

NISSEN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you do that for us?

NISSEN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. (Mrs. Nissen prays in Danish) Thank you.
(Mrs. Nissen laughs) Another thing I was just
thinking of, you spoke of so many Christmas carols.

NISSEN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there a Christmas carol you could just sing for us,
a short one, in Danish?

NISSEN: If I had the words, but, uh . . .

SIGRIST: One that you remember?

NISSEN: Well, one, I can't, that's over here, and that's over
nationwide, that's Glae[ph] Yule[ph], Silent Night.
(she sings a couple of words in Danish) No, I can't
remember it in Danish. I can't remember any of them.

SIGRIST: Oh well.

NISSEN: And since I'm not in my own home. My home is in
Madison, you know? So therefore I cannot pick out the
music to sing. (voices garbled) (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And also, just for the sake of the tape, I just want
to get down your husband's name.

NISSEN: I'm not, this is just a friend.

SIGRIST: No, I realize that, but the man that you married.

NISSEN: Yeah, Lawrence Nissen.

SIGRIST: And what year did you marry?

NISSEN: Uh, 1933, March.

SIGRIST: Can you name your children, please?

NISSEN: My children's name, the first one is Mary Esther, the second one is Jenny Elaine, the third one is, uh, Christian Fonickson[ph].

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about your husband's background. Was he Danish also?

NISSEN: Yes. He was part Danish and he was part German, but he come from a borderline when they changed, one day is Denmark, the next time was Germany, you know. You do the next best day. In the schools it's the same, half and half all the way around.

SIGRIST: So he had been born in Europe also?

NISSEN: So he was born in Europe.

SIGRIST: He was born in Europe?

NISSEN: The town, when he was born, I don't know whether it was Germany then or not, because I think it has changed over four times.

SIGRIST: Do you know when he came to the United States?

NISSEN: Yes. He came in the United States I believe in 19, maybe 1926, somewhere around there, '25, '26, came a lot of Danish fellows over here.

SIGRIST: Was he older than you?

NISSEN: Yes, ten years almost, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I, I'm just wondering if, as you look back on your life now, having come from Denmark, and if you wanted to bestow some kind of advice to people listening to this tape maybe a hundred years from now, what kind of advice would you give them about your own life and . . .

NISSEN: Well, first of all, I think an education is very important, because that's something that they can't take away from you, even so that you might now use it right away. Uh, I do, I do believe that, I don't

believe in charge account. I know most people do, but that's something you've got to pay for, and you never know what tomorrow's going to bring.

SIGRIST: Look at all the furniture your family bought on time, on credit.

NISSEN: Yeah, that was those days, yeah. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What about a secret to living a long and satisfying life?

NISSEN: Well, of course, uh, I don't think I have any long life or secret life, because right now I don't. I'm not in the best of health. So, uh, and many times very, very depressed, which makes it hard because I have never been depressed in my whole life, because there is so much to see, the trees and the grass and the leaves, but somehow you get pains and you get a little bit frightened that this is your last. But, uh, I, uh, think that one of the most important thing is that you have a good family, and that I surely do. I have, my daughter and her husband has been extremely good to me, and I have, uh, friends that are also good to me, and that's why I sure would never go back to Denmark to live, never.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Nissen, I want to thank you very much for letting me come out and, um, ask you all these questions about your life. And this has been a fine interview. You have a good memory, especially for detail, which is really good. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Gracielle Nissen in Glastonbury, Connecticut, on October 30, 1993. Thank you.

NISSEN: You're welcome.