

EI-421

OLGA ABRAHAMSEN SWANSON

BIRTH DATE: December 18, 1901

INTERVIEW DATE: December 14, 1993

RUNNING TIME: 1:24:10

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1996

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 8/2009

NORWAY, 1926

AGE 24

PASSAGE ON "THE STAVANGERFJORD"

PORT OF EMBARCATION: OSLO

RESIDENCES: LILLESAND; BROOKLYN, NY

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Swanson is the mother of Ellis Island Oral History Project volunteer Roy Swanson. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/1/1996.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's December 14, 1993, and I'm here today at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Olga Swanson. Mrs. Swanson came from Norway in 1926.

SWANSON: '24.

LEVINE: In 1926, when you were . . .

SWANSON: Twenty-four.

LEVINE: Twenty-four years old.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Right. Now . . .

SWANSON: No, in 1926, but twenty-four years old.

LEVINE: Yes. Right. Now, you did not come through Ellis Island, but we want to talk about the fact that you didn't.

SWANSON: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Which will be interesting. Okay. Why don't we start by your saying your birth date, and where you were born.

SWANSON: Yeah. I was born in Norway, and in 12/18th, 1901. 12/18/1901, yeah. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: And what was the name of the town?

SWANSON: Lillesand.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

SWANSON: Yeah. L-I-L-L-S-A-N-D.

LEVINE: And did you live in Lillesand up until the time that you came to the United States? Were you always in Lillesand until you came here?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeha. I was working there.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, tell me about Lillesand. Describe it. Tell me what it looked like.

SWANSON: Oh, yeah. It's just a beautiful little town. It's a small town. Now it's quite big there, but, uh, they, the people, so many tourists from Oslo that came there, and they called it paradise. Paradise, yeah. (she laughs) You know, a small island outside the harbor, and we used to go there and picnic and, uh, and fishing and catching crabs and lobster. (she laughs) And it was just wonderful. They would have, the breeze from the ocean there, and it's, there was one thing I missed when I came over here. That was the trips out to the island, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Lillesand is not on an island, but it's close

to the islands.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: It's nearby.

SWANSON: Yeah. It was, uh, close to the island, you mean?

LEVINE: Yes.

SWANSON: Yeah, it was only about maybe a half an hour ride on a motorboat, or so, yeah.

LEVINE: Did most people have boats?

SWANSON: Most everybody had boats, yeah. They, at that time there was very few that had cars. But at that time they had boats, of course. The more well-to-do people had cars, too. Yeah.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

SWANSON: Christian.

LEVINE: And his last name?

SWANSON: Abramson.

LEVINE: So Abramson . . .

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was your maiden name?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And your mother, what was her name?

SWANSON: Christina.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

SWANSON: Yeah, that was Asbjursen.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

SWANSON: A-S-B-J-U-R-S-E-N. Asbjursen, yeah.

LEVINE: And, uh, did you have grandparents living nearby?

SWANSON: Well, I remember my grandmother.

LEVINE: What do you remember about her?

SWANSON: Yeah, what?

LEVINE: What do you remember about your grandmother?

SWANSON: Well, she was old. She was ninety-seven when she died. Of course, I, uh, knew her, you know, long before that. But, uh, she was hard of hearing. (she laughs) I remember that.

LEVINE: And do you remember going to visit her?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah, yeah, every summer. When we had seven weeks' vacation, and my uncle had a farm there, and, uh, I was there for the whole seven weeks. It was so wonderful.

LEVINE: What would you do?

SWANSON: We were there with the salmon coming there.

LEVINE: What was your grandmother's name?

SWANSON: Yeah. You know, that it's (?), I don't, I can't really remember who that was. But her maiden name was, I never heard it. In fact, they always said grandmother. So I . . .

LEVINE: You never called her by her name.

SWANSON: I don't think I ever heard it. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So the salmon would come up the river?

SWANSON: Huh?

LEVINE: There was salmon, you say? Fish? When you would visit your grandmother?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. There was, in, uh, the place was (?), and, uh, and I had many uncles and aunts, and they were all living around there in, in Segne [ph], we call it. And it was right up for Christiansen [ph]. And Christiansen [ph] was one of the big towns there. And so, we were visiting from one uncle to the other, and it was, I had a grand time, yeah. You know, when I was a kid there. And all there, they had quite a big farm. They had a lot of cows, and they had goats. I was so scared of them goats, because if I come too near, they will push you. And they will be . . . (she laughs) And they had a horse. They had a big farm there. Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that what, what your grandfather did? Did he farm? He had livestock?

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: That was his business?

SWANSON: Well, grandfather, he was, he died, I think, when the children were small, so I never saw him. But, uh, I, uh, I think they were all well-to-do. My uncles and, they all had farms, yeah. And . . .

LEVINE: So your grandmother must have hired people to take care of the animals?

SWANSON: No, they did that themselves.

LEVINE: They did it themselves.

SWANSON: Oh, yeah, yeah. They milked the cows, and they, no, they took care of themselves. They had the children, so they worked on the farm, too. So . . .

LEVINE: Did you ever have chores to do? Did you have chores on the farm?

SWANSON: No, they never asked me to do anything. And, uh, I, I wasn't one that would be on the farm, because I, I wanted to, I wanted to come over here, even from when

I was a kid. I don't know. I had a longing to get out. Even so beautiful Norway was, I had a longing, I'm the only one. They all did Norway, but, so my sister said, "I give you six months." I had a nice job. "I give you six months, you'll be back home." I was so happy I was here. So . . . (she laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what was your sister's name?

SWANSON: My sister? Aagot.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

SWANSON: A-A-G-O-T.

LEVINE: And did you have other sisters and brothers?

SWANSON: Yeah, Alfhilt, A-L-F-H-I-L-T, sister living, and (?), so nice. Yeah, yeah. My sister, my brother Carsten is still living, too. He's three years younger than me. But he can't write. His eyes is failing him. So I just write to him, yeah. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: How do you spell his name?

SWANSON: Carsten? C-A-R-S-T-E-N.

LEVINE: So there were three girls and one boy?

SWANSON: No, no. I had one named Alfred, and he was an inventor. Yeah. He was, uh, he was the brain in the family, we used to say.

LEVINE: What did he invent?

SWANSON: He invented something with the engine, some, something that turned the wheel, what is that, like a belt.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SWANSON: To turn the wheel, he invented that. Well, I don't know if he exactly invented, yeah, he, well, anyway, he, he got, then he invented something with glue, some working gloves, and different things. I know he got orders from, I think even from here, from Sweden, Denmark, England. He had, he got orders, so he had the people working for him, yeah. And, uh, when he died (she laughs) we all inherit money, yeah. Because he didn't make a will. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Oh, well. Well, tell me about your family. When you were, when you were at home with your mother and

father and sisters and brothers. Do you remember the house you lived in?

SWANSON: The house?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SWANSON: Yeah. We had a big, big garden. Oh, a beautiful garden. And with all beautiful fruit trees. And my father, he was a, he had his own boat. He had a, he went to Denmark and England, and (?) in Scotland. And he went to Denmark. And he came home one time with even dirt from Denmark. And my mother had a most beautiful kitchen garden with all kinds of things because of that beautiful rich dirt that my father had to her. And, uh, I remember all, (she laughs) all Daddy's beard, they were so long, so we thought it look so long time because my mother made the most wonderful bread. Oh!

LEVINE: Tell me about the bread.

SWANSON: It was so wonderful, and there we had to eat this here. So my brother, he (?), Alfred. So he said, so he, so my mother said, "Now, we eat so much tomorrow,

then we eat so much more the other day, and then we eat more, so by," whatever the day was, "then we will be finished." (they laugh)

LEVINE: So you had a little bit each day.

SWANSON: Now. And now, you know, now when we are, when we got grown up, we used to (?) that we loved so much. But, you know, when we were . . . (she laughs) Because my mother made it, oh, such a wonderful bread. I tried to make it, but I couldn't . . . (she laughs)

LEVINE: What kind of bread was it?

SWANSON: Well, she had, um, uh, three different kinds. She had white, she had whole wheat, and rye, together. And then something they call sour . . .

LEVINE: Sourdough.

SWANSON: Yeah, sourdough, in there. And, you know, she made twenty-four loaves, I remember. And they lasted fourteen days. Well, they were just as fresh after fourteen days as it was. So I tried, I made, I bought

the different kinds, but I didn't have that sour, uh, dough. So it didn't, it wasn't the same, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember other dishes that your mother made, other kinds of food that your mother cooked that you liked?

SWANSON: Well, they just made Norwegian food, you know, they made, uh, what you call head soup. That's meat. And then, you know, my father had all kinds of wonderful vegetables from Denmark. And he made cabbage and carrots and celery and things like that, and it was wonderful, yeah. It was so good. But that, that time they didn't have roast beef like we have here. They have, it was all pot roasts, you know. They cooked it in a pot. But we had wonderful food, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What was the name of . . .

SWANSON: I guess it was on account of my father. He had so much good things with him from Denmark.

LEVINE: Why was your father going to Denmark? Was that his business?

SWANSON: Yeah. He had his own boat, uh, wood. He, uh, he got wood. I remember people came and, you know, a businessman. And he bought their woods, and he carried them to, carried it to Denmark, and (?), too, yeah.

LEVINE: So he would buy the wood in Norway.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then he would take it to these other countries.

SWANSON: Yeah. And then he took it on his boat. And, that, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: So it must have been a big boat.

SWANSON: No, it wasn't too big. There were only about two and three persons there on the boat, you know. But, uh, it wasn't a big boat. It was just, uh, you know, a small boat.

LEVINE: Did you go on the boat at all?

SWANSON: No. Sometimes I, when it was, sometimes he couldn't get all the way into the pier, so he, he had it out on

the water in the harbor, so sometimes, you know, he came, and I went with him out there, I remember. I steered, you know, I was steering the boat. I was so proud. Oh, it was so wonderful. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember any other things that you did with your father, any activities that you remember?

SWANSON: Yeah. I remember that he loved to walk, and me, too. I just, I still do, I love to walk. And so, uh, him and I, we were walking, and we were, you know, there were wonderful berries up there in the woods, so we went up there and picked berries, I remember, yeah. And he just, both of us, we just loved to go. Yeah. And that's why I think I have been keep in good health, because I walk a lot. Yeah.

LEVINE: How about your mother? What did she like to do?

SWANSON: Well, she, with so many children, you know, there were, we were five living, but she had, she had nine, yeah.

LEVINE: Was that typical, that children would die often?

SWANSON: Yes. She said, "I don't like to go to America, but the only thing they don't have so many children."
(she laughs) Oh. It was, I remember, I remember one only, but they were born before me. So I remember one, I remember when he was, he was buried, I remember. My mother couldn't go with to the cemetery. She said, "I can't see," she said, "my children go down in the ground." She couldn't see that, no, no.

LEVINE: Were the funerals in Norway similar to the ones here?
When there was a funeral in Norway . . .

SWANSON: A funeral?

LEVINE: Yeah. A burial, was it just like here?

SWANSON: No, no, no. You know, in the small town, no. All they, they neighbors, they follow, they say, there's a big line behind there, you know. It isn't such a big town. It's only, they had one hearse, and then people were two and two walked along behind the casket. That's how they had it now. They can't do that here. Well, they had cars here. They have, you know, it's almost the same thing. The only thing, they were

walking. They couldn't walk here, it's too far.

LEVINE: How about weddings? Were the weddings in Norway . . .

SWANSON: Oh, it was cold. Yeah, it's cold. I'm so happy I'm here. Because, you know, the fall start in November, and that's about six months. So it's, uh, in later years it's been much warmer there, though, but summers and winters has been much better than it was when I was a kid. It was a lot of snow, and very cold.

LEVINE: What did you do in winter? What kind of activities did you do as a child?

SWANSON: Oh, we were skiing and skating. There was a big, big lake near me. And oh, we had a lot of fun. We went there on the skating there, and we were a whole line of us there, and we were, we went way down in the back and picked some kind of little trees, so we had, you know, then we went back, we were sweeping the snow with it. And then we were skiing, skiing and skating. That's what we did when we was kids. Funny, I always had a good time. It was always something going on. And, uh, and still in all, I had a, you know, I don't

know, I had a longing, I wanted to get out, and then my niece came from over here home, so she said, when I was about eighteen or so, so she said, "Oh," she said, "I would like to take you to America." And that's how I, I wasn't exactly thinking of America, I just wanted to get out somewhere. But then I was thinking, yeah, that would be nice, yeah, yeah. So then a couple of girlfriends gave it all here, and they come back, and they said, "Come on." We had two in (?), three in the summertime, so you come and oh, I'm telling you, we had, at the time, I had, I'll never forget it, all three of us, that beautiful, uh, estate, and we went to. So there was other rich people ahead of us there. So I remember one time they, people went away, so their cook invited us over there. And, uh, and he had a lot of good food there, and we got a little late, by twelve o'clock, before we came back. So they, uh, Mr. and Mrs. (?), you know. They were walking in the kitchen. We could see them walking back and forth. They were so worried for us that we are not home, that they couldn't sleep before we come. You know, they were so nice.

LEVINE: Now these were . . .

SWANSON: They were so nice, the people that I worked for, that they told, you know, "You'll have just like a home here. Just think of it as your home." I don't know, this is a wonderful job. And then I met a husband, and I come into a very nice family. I'm telling you . . .

LEVINE: You've had a nice life.

SWANSON: I've had a nice life.

LEVINE: Tell me, was this job that you just mentioned, was that in this country, or in Norway, the job where you were working?

SWANSON: I was working for four years in a grocery store in Norway. And they couldn't understand I wanted to go to America because they were so nice to me. And, but I, when I came over here I had just as nice jobs. And then when I got married . . .

LEVINE: Well, before, before you talk about getting married, let's just, uh, finish talking about before you left Norway.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did, um, was your family religious?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah, very religious, yeah. They were, in fact, the boss, she used to be a teacher in the, for me, when I was in the church, and she used to be, you know, Sunday school teacher, yeah, and see, she had to be my teacher, the one I work for. And . . .

LEVINE: Oh. Well, what church was it? What was the kind of church?

SWANSON: Oh, it was, she belonged to was the free church. We, I went there for Sunday school, but we really belonged to the State's Church, but I think my mother told that they was teaching more religion in a free church, and the one they were running it was such a wonderful singer. Oh, boy, it was so nice. So we, uh, I went there.

LEVINE: So, and what was school like for you in Norway?

SWANSON: Oh, regular, uh, school, you know. (?) school, what you call it here.

LEVINE: Public school?

SWANSON: Public school, yeah, yeah. And so, they didn't have all the classes. You have to be two in each class. I think there are only four classes. So when I came in the last class, I had been there for a year, and I couldn't think I was going to be there a year again, so I said to the teacher, because a friend of mine, she had to quit because her parents needed her in the store. So I said to the teacher, "How about me? Could I leave, too?" Because it will be the same thing I hear over again. So I was six years, and I was supposed to be seven, so I was six years there.

LEVINE: And then what did you do when you finished with school?

SWANSON: Well, then my mother sent me to a finishing school. We were, we were there for six months, so we slept there, we had our food there. And, uh, and we had a regular schooling there.

LEVINE: What did you learn in the finishing school? What did you study?

SWANSON: Well, I think they really was more for, they will teach us. Yeah, yeah. That was like a religious school there. My mother was a lot for religion. She was religious, and our father. So, but that was, that was just wonderful. And, uh, and, uh, but my mother said she would like me to be a pharmacist. But then she got another baby, and she needed me home. And I'm happy. (she laughs) I was so happy, I came over here. Maybe I wouldn't have come here then, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we, uh, pause here, and Kevin will turn the tape over, and then we'll continue.

SWANSON: No, I didn't hear that.

LEVINE: We're gonna just pause for a minute.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: So the tape will be turned.

SWANSON: Yeah, okay.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: We're now on Side B of the tape.

SWANSON: There, this son, the two of them had a dog, I never seen it before or since. It looked exactly like a goat, with a big beard.

LEVINE: A beard, uh-huh.

SWANSON: A little (?). Oh, he loved me because, you know, I fed him, and so I guess that was this, the dog, wherever. He followed me. Well, anyway, so then the waitress, she was saying, "You know, it looked awful, it looked like a goat. Shouldn't we cut it off?" "Yeah, yeah." The chambermaid and me. I was the cook, you know. I never cooked but, you know, she, my girlfriend, she says, "You get so skinny cooking." You know, people usually get so fat, but she gets so skinny cooking. So she said if I would do the cooking. They were in the four hundred people we were working. So, one of the four hundred. So I said, "I never cooked." I said, "I never cooked." So how can I cook? "Well, we teach you." All right. That was

all right, then. And so she became the chambermaid, what I should have been. Well, you see, (?) and Katherine and I, we all thought it was hell, this here big beard here, you know. And oh, "He would be so much nicer," we said, "if you cut it off." So Katherine took and cut it off. And their son came home. He had a, it wasn't our dog that we had a (?) with the summer society they were showing off dogs. And here had had no, this was his trade part, you know. I never saw a dog before or since like that with a big beard. And, "Why in the world they have ruined my dog? Who have done that?" Well, Katherine had to say, "She did it." "Oh, my." So then, they kept us in the summertime, then they had a place in the city where they could have two girls. Well, so then they might have said she wanted to fire Katherine on account of that she cut off the dog's hair. So I said, "No, I'm, I want to go to Brooklyn." I said, I said to myself how in the world could I do a thing like that? They got me this beautiful job, and how could I go and take her place?" I couldn't, I couldn't see it. So I said, "Now, I'm going by

myself." I said, "I'm going to the city." And so, anyway, so she wanted to fire her on account of that.

She had nothing against the girl, she was perfect, but there was this son. But I couldn't see that.

LEVINE: So you left?

SWANSON: Yes, I left.

LEVINE: You left, and Katherine stayed?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah. So I left, yeah.

LEVINE: Well, let's go back to when you left Norway. How was it arranged that you would leave, when you first left Norway to come to the United States.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: How did that get decided, that you would go.

SWANSON: Well, uh, you know, we had some friends here. We had some, really had some relation here. Really, I didn't know which one to go to, but my friend, uh, well, it wasn't my friend. I think it was my mother's family. But, anyway, it was in Brooklyn. I wanted to go to

Brooklyn. The others, my family, my husband's brother and the family lived in, in Jersey, and I, I didn't know, I wanted, everybody was in Brooklyn. I was going to there, too. So I went to Brooklyn, she came there and met me (?).

LEVINE: Well, um, when you left Norway, you left with your two friends?

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Your two girlfriends?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

SWANSON: What their name was? Well, Katherine Larsen was her maiden name, and the other one was her cousin, that was Tordis [ph] Larsen. Yeah, they were two cousins.

LEVINE: And you had the job waiting for you, the job that was here when you . . .

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah, when they come back they come right, they come right back to the same job. They had a French

couple there, but they let them go. They wanted them to come there. And then I came there, too. And then they had a, a Danish couple that took care of the garden. He was a gardener there. And they had two, a boy and a girl, my age. And, uh, they took us home, you know, we were there like one family. They were Danish. And, uh, I don't know, everything was so nice.

LEVINE: What was the name of that family?

SWANSON: Uh, that I worked for?

LEVINE: Yeah.

SWANSON: Lobchons.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

SWANSON: L-O-B-C-H-O-N-S, I guess, Lobchons.

LEVINE: So Katherine and her cousin worked for them.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then they went back to Norway.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you went back with them.

SWANSON: No. I was in Norway, and then they came home for a vacation.

LEVINE: I see.

SWANSON: And then when they left, I went with them.

LEVINE: And where did you leave from? What port did you leave from?

SWANSON: From Lillesand, you know. We all came from Lillesand. We were all . . .

LEVINE: And where did the boat leave from, the boat to . . .

SWANSON: Oh, from Oslo.

LEVINE: From Oslo. And the name of the boat?

SWANSON: Stavangerfjord. Stavanga, that's a city in Norway with Stavanga. And fjord, you know, so Stavangerfjord. Then they had another named Christianafjord. That was Oslo, I mean, the capital's

name, um, yeah, when, uh, yeah, Christiana yeah. So that was Christianafjord, the two boats.

LEVINE: And you came, what, when you traveled, you didn't travel on steerage or third class. Your ticket?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah. Second class.

LEVINE: Second class.

SWANSON: Second class.

LEVINE: And do you know why it was that you went second class?

SWANSON: Uh, well, I don't know. Third class, I didn't, uh, well, we were, I don't know, maybe better class we could afford it. I borrowed from my mother. I remember (?), and I sent it back so fast. So my mother said, "Don't send it back so fast." You know, I'm so honest, you know. So she said, "Maybe if you get sick or something you could need something for yourself." So then I didn't send it so fast. So then I put something in my bank, and then I, I sent, sent half to her and half home. So I paid it off in no time, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Did you, had you heard anything about Ellis Island before you came to this country? Did you ever hear about Ellis Island?

SWANSON: Oh, about Ellis Island? Oh, yeah, oh, yes, I heard about Ellis Island, yeah. Well, it didn't, there wasn't such a good report I heard.

LEVINE: What did you hear?

SWANSON: So that's why we went on the, it was a no-good report, as I say.

LEVINE: Do you remember particulars, anything that you heard about Ellis Island?

SWANSON: No, no. I don't remember anything. I wasn't interested in it, you know. I just, people said, well, I guess there was a long wait, and some even were sent back, and it wasn't nice at all. It wasn't, it wasn't at all nice. So I, uh, I didn't think anything of it, because I certainly wasn't going to be sent back. That was one thing. I wanted to, to be sure. Yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: And what was the boat trip like for you? What was the voyage like?

SWANSON: Oh, how long it took? Eight days.

LEVINE: And was it pleasant?

SWANSON: Yeah. Crowded? Oh, yeah, yeah. We were, oh, yeah, we were, I think, eleven hundred, I think. Yeah. They were all, everybody, it wasn't good times in Norway that time. So I think most everybody wanted to come over here, yeah. And I'm glad they did.

LEVINE: Do you remember the boat coming into the New York Harbor? Do you remember when the boat came . . .

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah, oh, yes, yeah. It didn't, it came to, uh, I think, 42nd Street in New York. Yeah.

LEVINE: And what happened when the boat pulled in?

SWANSON: Yeah. My friend was there. I just got out, and I came to her. Oh, it wasn't 42nd Street, 39th Street, it was 39th Street. That, I think, is in Brooklyn, isn't it? I think so. 39th Street. Yeah, yeah. It wasn't 42nd. It was 39th. And she was there. And,

uh, so there was nothing to it. It was just as easy as could be.

LEVINE: Who was there? Was that Katherine? Was Katherine the person who met you?

SWANSON: The captain?

LEVINE: Katherine.

SWANSON: Oh, Katherine. No, I think they went before. I wasn't on the same boat with them. No, they went before. So when I came, you know, they, they came and took me, yeah. They come into Brooklyn and took me out to that place. No. I went, they went before. They didn't have that, I had to wait in Oslo for the papers to, uh, it took some time before I got my papers to go.

LEVINE: So you were traveling by yourself?

SWANSON: Yeah. Well, another friend of mine, yeah. She, uh, her and I, we went together.

LEVINE: Were you, were you, how did you feel when you were coming . . .

SWANSON: We had a wonderful trip. Oh, it was wonderful. The ocean was beautiful, you know, in April, it wasn't rough. It was so nice. And, and, uh, I remember the captain came over, we were four of us sitting there, the captain came over and talked to us. So he said, "You know," he said, "I know, you're looking for a way to come to America. But," he said, "it isn't all, everything is this and that. Everything isn't fine." He says, "You have to take care of yourself." And if you take care of yourself, all right, you're okay, but if you don't," he said, "you're in the gutter. And," he said, "there's many that do that," he said, "if they start with drinks or, uh," with drinks it was that time, and he said, "if you take care of yourself you are all right." Yeah. That's what the, that was the advice he gave us. So, that's true. Because I remember the two sons from my (?) there in my home town. They came over here. And I was, I'm sitting on the subway one day, and there was a hand there, so swollen, it was terrible, and it smelled, and I looked around, and here was one of them, his father was captain of a big boat, and a wonderful family, and

then first he came over, and then the brother came over, and the both of them, same thing, they was like the captain said, they were in the gutter. So it's, it's up to yourself.

LEVINE: Are there any other things that you remember that your mother and father tried to teach you, like values or attitudes?

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: About life? Do you remember anything that sticks in your mind?

SWANSON: They teach us honesty, yeah. And I feel that. That's what (she laughs) I think my son, too, I said, "That's the only people that have luck." If you read the Bible, it seems to me not only one place and two places, but all over there it seems to me, Christ, he teaches the same thing, yeah. You have, be honest. I think it's the main thing, yeah. I think. I think God gives you luck if you just keep what the Bible tells you, yeah. I think if, the Bible is the most wonderful book. I wish more would read it. Yeah. I

read it every day. I, it's a thrill. It has something that other books don't have. Do you read the Bible?

LEVINE: Sometimes. Not every day.

SWANSON: It's, uh, it seems no books have what the Bible has. It's, it's something. I tell you what it is. It's food for the soul. You need food for your body, but you also need food for your soul, yeah. Right? Yeah.

LEVINE: Have you read the Bible ever since you were young, or is, when did you start reading the Bible every day?

SWANSON: You know, it's a funny thing. When I first was married I, uh, you know, I find a four-leaf clover, and I put it in the Bible. I thought, you know, maybe they give me luck. And . . . (she laughs) So I was born to read it. Isn't that funny?

LEVINE: So when you went to Brooklyn, when you left that first job and you went to Brooklyn, you went to relatives?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: From Norway, who were here.

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And then did you take another job when you got to Brooklyn?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Then I took another job, yeah. Yeah, I took a job in Forest Hills.

LEVINE: What were you doing?

SWANSON: Oh, I was a cook there, yeah. She was, she was an alcoholic, and she drank one bottle of scotch a day. And she was, by four o'clock she was so drunk, so she, and then she had another girl, a Swedish girl. And one day she, she said, "Oh, a fire upstairs!" And she had a, the madam had a, uh, she had a, what was it, one of those heating pads, and she had rolled it up without taking it, contact, and it catch fire, and the whole bed was. And I don't know, I had read that if you can take a rug and put over the fire, the fire will go out. And funny, I was, I had a love for reading, and it sticks. I remembered it. And I put that rug over there, and, well, first there was two men standing down below on the street. But I

couldn't, I was so scared I couldn't get up my voice.

(she gestures) Impossible. I just couldn't get my voice up. So then I thought, well, there was a throw-rug there. I put that over there. Then that made a dent. He was a big, uh, artist, so she called him right away. And I don't know how in the world he could go, there was no airplanes at that time to come, and how he could come. He was there inside half an hour. He must have taken a cab right away, and they must have gone to some speed to come out there in half an hour.

LEVINE: This was her husband?

SWANSON: No. That was her husband, yeah, yeah. She was writing books. She had a woman come in, but she was a cripple because she fell on the ornaments from the fireplace, and she broke her hip. And she had so much alcohol in her body, that it wouldn't knit. So . . .

LEVINE: So what was her name, this woman who lived . . .

SWANSON: Elsie [ph]. Elsie [ph]. So then, then I married and

I met my husband when I was there. I mean, my husband-to-be. And so I quit and got married.

LEVINE: How did you meet your husband? How did you happen to meet him there?

SWANSON: Oh, in a dance. Because my, Brita, the Swedish girl, she was so much for dancing, so she took me there. I went to a dance, and there I met him.

LEVINE: In Brooklyn?

SWANSON: In Brooklyn, yeah. And then I read in the paper a famous artist dies, and so he died, I think, of cancer. And then . . .

LEVINE: This was the husband of the woman?

SWANSON: Yeah. So then she, you know, he brought her, there was the prohibition. But he brought her scotch. I remember they came, somehow he brought that to her. And she needed that. She needed it. Drank a whole quart every day. And so then, when he wasn't there, he had nobody, I guess, to give her stuff, so she wanted to go to Scotland. She was Scotch, she was

Scotch. And so he said on the way to Scotland, the wife of famous author dies. So she died on the boat going to Scotland, I guess so she could get, yeah.

LEVINE: Who was the famous artist? Do you remember his name, her husband?

SWANSON: Uh, the first name, no, I don't remember that. But you know what he did? He gave, there was a nurse there, his mother came with a nurse one time there. And he gave us tickets to see Rio Rita. Well, I have never seen anything so beautiful. Oh, that play with Ziegfeld here. It was so wonderful. And he, he said, "You'll be sitting on the first row, in the baldheaded men's row." And we were sitting there. And you know Gladys Glad, that most beautiful, you heard about her? She came with a big, big hat with a stick, one of those, what do you call them . . .

LEVINE: A cane?

SWANSON: Shepherd, shepherd, you know. And she had a gray veil over her, and she came walking with the big hat and that shepherds, she came walking, you know, like that,

completely naked, you could see here and everything, it was on the first bench, everything. And, like she was born. And she, it was the most beautiful girl in the world, she was at that time. She married that famous, uh, reporter, what was his name now? Well, anyway, then, then they had men, the cowboys, coming in that big, big line there, and shooting, you know. And one, he was just looking at me. He was just looking at me. So when he came, then he shot right on me, you know. And I thought to myself. If he knew I was a servant girl, he wasn't going to look at me. But, you know, he talked, that was my mother, and we were sitting there in the first bench. He thought I was some rich girl. Yeah. And it was a treat, you know. And he gave us tickets to several one of those but, you know, I didn't know the English, I didn't know the language, but it was a treat to see it anyway.

LEVINE: Did you have difficulty learning English? How did you learn English?

SWANSON: Oh, well, reading the news, because that's very good.

It's easy to understand, and so I really read it. So I, uh, I came to a Norwegian, he was teaching English, but he said, "You know it," he said to me. You know.
(she laughs) So, I . . .

LEVINE: Do you remember other things that you saw and experienced that were different than anything you had seen before when you were in Norway?

SWANSON: Well, everything is different over here, yeah.

LEVINE: What other things struck you as really, uh, exciting and different?

SWANSON: Yeah. But, uh, the thing is I was too old to come over here, to go to school and learn how to speak really perfect English, you know. I went (?), you know, like I'm in America, they can hear, of course, right away, that I'm a foreigner. But that can't, because some of my friends that they had, when we got over here, they came over here when they were fifteen, sixteen years old. And maybe before that, and they went to school and, you know, they spoke perfect English. But I was too old for that. Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: What was your husband's name?

SWANSON: Arthur.

LEVINE: Arthur?

SWANSON: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And how many children did you have?

SWANSON: I just had that one.

LEVINE: And his name?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah, I have just one.

LEVINE: Yeah? And his name, your son's name?

SWANSON: Roy.

LEVINE: Roy. And do you have grandchildren?

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: How many? How many grandchildren?

SWANSON: Oh, two.

LEVINE: Two.

SWANSON: Yeah, I have two. Yeah, (?), yeah.

LEVINE: And what do you feel proud of that you did in your life? What makes you feel good?

SWANSON: Oh, what you mean?

LEVINE: In other words, something that you did in your lifetime that you feel very proud of having done?

SWANSON: Well, I, uh, well, uh, I did the defense work. I came, uh, together with some friends of mine, and they said, they were just starting to go and they said, you know, we want to go to the defense plant. So, but first we have to go down and get the citizen paper. "Oh," I said, "can't I go with? I would like to do that, too." Because we were married three years before I had the boy. And, uh, well, of course, I was, there wasn't, I had him in '31. The 1940's started, so I was big enough to, I could take a job, I thought. And, so we went down there and get our citizen paper, and then I went down to Armour [ph], that's a big defense plant at that time.

LEVINE: And what did you do?

SWANSON: And, well, we were doing some, first I was doing a cable for the submarine, and one day . . .

LEVINE: I'll tell you, maybe we should pause here, and we'll put on another tape, and then you can tell about your job in the defense.

SWANSON: Yeah, but don't you want to talk to, oh, no.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're beginning now with tape two, side A, and I'm speaking with Olga Swanson, and she came from Norway, and we were talking about when you took the job in the defense plant, why don't you tell about that?

SWANSON: So we were making cables for, for the submarines. And one day the boss came in, so she said, "Look," he said, "here. This is the cable that you are making. It's all shot to pieces." There was a fight, you know, with the, in the sea, the Atlantic Ocean. "And here, this here was in one of the submarines, and

look, it's all shot to pieces." So he came in to show. And a girl, because we had all numbers, so I was sitting here, that girl was there. Her number was on it. Yeah, yeah. So, uh, he brought it just to show us that it was in action, those cables that we made. Yeah. So, you know, we had, we had about this much wires, and we had to put this sleeving, we called it. We had to put, like that. I did it with my left hand. Well, we all did it. I wore out my wedding band.

LEVINE: Oh!

SWANSON: Yeah. Not my wedding band, but my diamond. I wore out my, a diamond. And so, so then, uh, we went over to, uh, it was a big store, and next to Bloomingdales, that he had bought the diamond. So, so then I said, uh, I have to turn it in and get another one, you know, because it was, oh. So he said, so he gave me this one. So he said, "That come from a big estate," he said, "and that's a beautiful diamond." And, he said, "You take yours and pay so much for free." And he said, "I guarantee you'll be happy with that."

Now, now my, oh, my finger's getting so small. It always turns around." My daughter-in-law said, "I can put it in and get something here," so it would . . .

LEVINE: Well, tell me, what was the feeling, when you worked in the defense plant during the war, do you remember how people felt about going to work?

SWANSON: We were about eighty girls. No, uh, yeah, yeah, eighty girls. And we had a foreman to show us what, you know, we, none of us had it done like that before. So, you know, some got so nervous that they were (?), but I never was nervous. I had to call him sometimes. So I said different things. I said, "I don't know how to do this here." "Nothing to it, Olga. Nothing to it." He was a Scotsman. And, well, then, there was nothing to it. (she laughs) He showed us. But, you know, he was so wonderful, that we all loved him. And when it was his birthday, well, we all chipped in, and he got some big, big cake. And then, and then it was mostly people that had the soldiers at war that was there, young people. And, uh, sometime they come back from there. There they had to be in so

many, I remember a flyer, we had to have twenty-five missions over Germany, and he came back, but he was with (?). But I never forget when he, when he got, he took his arms around the wife. He wouldn't, I think for half an hour he just wouldn't let go. It just, it was wonderful for, so it was wonderful to look at. And we had, and everybody was telling their stories, some good, some bad, some, it was so interesting. It, I, you know, it was a thrill to get in there. Yeah, yeah. It was, it was. The foreman was just so wonderful. And, uh, I don't know, the foreman, like I told you, you know, he made you feel at ease, yeah. Nothing to it. Yeah.

LEVINE: And people were, people were all pitching in for the war effort?

SWANSON: Yeah. And people from so many different countries, and it really, it was nice. Yeah, yeah. And then, and then they had it, we were down here in, uh, Bush Terminal. But then we were going to move out to Garden City. They built a place there, and then we had to go out. So I told my husband, so he said, he

said, "Don't go," he said. "You can't, you have to drive an hour to get there in the morning, get up early and go back, and then work all day. How can you do it?" So I said, I told the foreman, I said, "I'm not going." "What?" he said. "The others is going. Why can't you go? I won't take no for an answer. You just go." So I, and I'm so glad I did. I never knew how beautiful it is in the morning if I hadn't gone. Oh, the sunshine, I mean the . . .

LEVINE: Rise.

SWANSON: Sunrise in the morning, and the sunset in the evening, and the different colors in the sky, and the trees, and all, it, I tell you, and the beautiful ride out there, you know, they were so careful, those chauffeurs, they drove us, they was afraid of accidents, and they were so nice, and we never had an accident. And we saw plenty of accidents. But, and, I tell you, everybody loved it there. And so, it was just a thrill. And still in all, sometimes when they laid off people. They said to me, "Your husband is working, so why don't you quit and you can, we can

have your job?" So I remember one time I went to the boss and I said, "I think maybe I should quit to give somebody else a job." "No. You don't. Because they wouldn't get your job. You have a different work." You know, we were working for airplanes in the end. It was just in the beginning we had those big tables. You know, you call it, uh, exact. So I said, he said, "You don't, because they don't get your job, so you don't have to quit on account of that." (she laughs)

LEVINE: So now your husband came . . .

SWANSON: So I stayed there, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, your husband came from . . .

SWANSON: From Sweden.

LEVINE: From Sweden.

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And, um, what did he do?

SWANSON: Uh, well, they called it engineering.

LEVINE: Engineering.

SWANSON: Yeah. He wasn't exactly an engineer, but he did that work.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SWANSON: So he had a nice job.

LEVINE: Did you or your husband bring any customs from your native countries, your countries in Europe? Did you carry on certain customs?

SWANSON: Oh, yeah. Different, uh, yeah. They have different, they have something they call Lucia festival. Have you heard about that? Oh, they just had it now, and I was going to there, and something happened I couldn't go. Well, I was there last year and saw it. (?), my niece is a president in the society there, and they had to have a Lucia festival. That is a Swedish custom. I think really it's from Italy in the beginning. The songs, the Lucia song. That is from Italy, but anyway, they made it over into Swedish. And they came, they come singing. It would have to be someone who's a good singer. And they have a crown

over the head with candles, real candles, about seven, eight, around there, lit. And then, then they have ten, or they call it a lot of girls dressed all in white, and they are all dressed in white dresses. And they sing it, a beautiful Lucia song, and they come. And that is the beginning of Lent. They have that in Sweden. It has something to do with the light, yeah.

And then they, the people, the children come in with the, with some special Lucia bread. They, into the father and mother's bed, and serve them breakfast in the morning, yeah. That's a Swedish custom. We don't have that in Norway.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did your husband like to celebrate that?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So he, uh, we, my husband and I went, now I go alone and see it, yeah.

LEVINE: How about your own customs from Norway? Is there anything that's carried over to this country?

SWANSON: Yeah. They have different square dances. They have square dances. I remember when I was a youngster I belonged to that. But, uh, now my son and daughter-

in-law, they belong to it, too. But that's different altogether, being with them, you know. They have special dresses, you know, with the white skirt, and they have special, uh, skirt, but it's different when we had it. We were singing, you know, when we were doing the dance we were singing, and there were special songs, you know, Norwegian songs, special for that dance. And they have a different altogether, they have a music. And so he calls out, maybe you belong to it too, sometimes. And they call out, they're different, and it's beautiful there, about two hundred there. I've been with them several times and look at them dance. They're very nice. And, uh, we didn't have that. We had it different. Yeah. And Swedish, they do the same thing. They have, they sing when they dance. Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember any songs that you would want to sing on this tape, any Norwegian songs?

SWANSON: Oh, I don't know many.

LEVINE: Do you think you could remember any of them?

SWANSON: Many, many, but, uh, I couldn't, you know.

LEVINE: You don't want to . . .

SWANSON: That's all Norwegian.

LEVINE: Yeah, that's what I mean.

SWANSON: That would be no good.

LEVINE: To sing in Norwegian. We would like to have it on the tape.

SWANSON: Yeah, but I can't sing any more. I have no voice any more. I lost my voice.

LEVINE: Okay.

SWANSON: Yeah, it's terrible because I love to sing, but now I just lost my voice, I can't. I can't carry a tune, even, now.

LEVINE: Do you think there's some sides of you that are Norwegian and some sides American? Can you say what it is about you that you retain that's of Norway?

SWANSON: No, well, uh, I don't know. Only that, only that, uh,

them square dances, that's all. And, uh, holding, maybe a dance underneath, you know, was very nice, very nice songs, you know.

LEVINE: Was it one of those square dances where you met your husband? Was it one of those kinds of dances?

SWANSON: No. Him and I, we went to regular dances, yeah, that's all. Yeah. He loved to dance. I never cared much for it. I was no good dancer, but he, he, when he was old, he wanted to go and I didn't want to go with him. So one time he told me, "Yeah, you come down there with me now one day," he told me, yeah. He wanted to show that he had his wife, because I think they wanted to marry him, I think he . . . (they laugh)

LEVINE: Do you think that the fact that you came here as a young woman, that you came to this country, do you think that made a difference on the rest of your life here, the fact that you started out in Norway?

SWANSON: Yeah. I was so happy I came here, because more activity, you know. It's, it's very slow there, at

that time, when I was a youngster. Everything, well, maybe they had a dance once a year or once every, once, something like that, and there wasn't much going on, you know, no. There wasn't, only Christmas time there was something. No, it wasn't . . .

LEVINE: Was Christmas . . .

SWANSON: Then in the summertime with the boats and on the island, in the summertime, but there was, well, we had the skiing and skating, I must say that, but it, here is so much more, here is much different.

LEVINE: And how about this time in your life? How do you feel about this time?

SWANSON: This time, I tell you, they're all dead, my friends and family, of this big family they're all dead and, except I have a cousin left now, but they're old, too, now. But, uh, there is nothing, there is only a couple of friends left, that's all. And I have my niece, but then I have God, and I, you are never lonely if you have God. That's true. And I was just in the church, and there was a Christmas festival.

They had a candlestick, and it says, there was a big tag on it, and it says, "You are never lonely if you have God." And it's true. Yeah.

LEVINE: Is there anything else that you'd like to say before we . . .

SWANSON: You have a, it's just like you have a companion, yeah. You're, so, it's, uh, you are not, you don't feel alone.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So are you enjoying this time, this time in your older age?

SWANSON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you enjoy this period of time?

SWANSON: Yeah, yeah. I'm happy. I'm happy. Yeah. I'm, uh, you know, my son just took me to Florida, and that was first of November, after I came out from the hospital. And we went to Espo. And boy, oh, boy, was that nice. Beautiful, and so many people. There were thousands of people, and so many with children. I think, I said to my son, "I think they must come here

on vacation, they take a week vacation here," and they have these children, and there was so much to see. Have you been there?

LEVINE: No.

SWANSON: Oh, you must see it! It's so wonderful. Room after room, one story, two story, with fishes from all over. I never saw anything like it. It's many rooms with fishes, they're all swimming there, all kinds of fishes that you can think of. And it was wonderful. And all the different, from every country they had the pyramid, and they had one in Norway, too. And China, oh, was that wonderful. You're all over China, and I don't know how in the world, there's a big screen there, and it, they follow you. You go all over, all over whole China. You see the, except you don't see the slums. Because it's such a beautiful country with all the, uh, mountains, and we saw that big road, you know, the famous road there, and you saw beautiful buildings. Oh, gosh, what beautiful buildings. And so I was thinking, "How come that so many Chinese people come over here when they have such

a beautiful big country?" Yeah. But you don't see the slums. You just don't see the bad part, but just the good part of the country. But, gosh, it was beautiful. And how in the world they, you go, you are right there. It was wonderful.

LEVINE: Well . . .

SWANSON: And in Norway have it, too. You see the skiing, but so little, and you see Oslo. But I guess it's very expensive to make it, you know, that beautiful country. Norway, if they had something like China, it would have been something. But you didn't see much of Norway. Then we went, then you go in a boat, and like in a river, and boomp, boomp, boomp. I didn't enjoy that. But then we went into a restaurant. That's a famous restaurant they have there. And, uh, I enjoy that.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like you still enjoy a lot of things.

SWANSON: Yeah. And then I have such a wonderful friend that lives down in Fort Meyers. In fact, she wanted my husband and I to come there, and she had it. She

showed us some beautiful homes. And it was about half the price, not even half what they cost, what homes cost up here in up north. But I couldn't leave my Norwegian churches, and I couldn't be happy down there. I have to be here. I'm used to Brooklyn, and I love it here. And so, then that, I remember a special house she showed us one time. I happened to see a movie when I came back home, and here was exactly the same house with the swimming pool and with the big, big ground around it, you know, where you had chairs and tables, and the house was exactly the same. It was the funniest thing. And it wasn't much, it didn't cost a fortune, no. So we could easily afford it, but I wouldn't be happy down there.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish?

SWANSON: All right for a vacation, it's wonderful, we have been there many times, but only for a vacation. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: You're happy in Brooklyn.

SWANSON: I wouldn't like to be there. It's the same thing. You see, there is no change. You see the same thing every day and every month and every year it's the same. It's beautiful, but not, not for a daily cost, no. I wouldn't like it.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we stop here. I want to thank you very much. It's a pleasure to hear how still full of wonder and interest you are with everything in life.

SWANSON: It's a, you know, I don't know, you, this is your home. Brooklyn is your home, and it's, our being here, well, I came in '26. I've been here over sixty years. We were married fifty-seven years before my husband died, and so I'll be in, that's about nine years ago.

LEVINE: So you're ninety-two years old now.

SWANSON: Yeah. So I've been here. Well, I guess it's time for me to go.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're going to stop here. I've been speaking with Olga Swanson who came from Norway in

1926 when she was twenty-four years old. We're in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio. It's December 14, 1993, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.