

EI-424

RENEE CHNEOUR (LAURA TOLEDO)

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AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE NAVEMAR"

RESIDENCE: PARIS

US RESIDENCE: NYC

PORT OF EMBARKATION: SEVILLE

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, January 5, 1994. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Renee Chneour. Ms. Chneour came from France in 1941 when she was eleven years old, had passage on the infamous boat, The Navemar, and was detained here at Ellis Island for approximately twenty days at that time. Can we begin by you pronouncing correctly your full name, and your date of birth, please?

CHNEOUR: Okay. My name is Renee, that's with the French pronunciation, Renee Chneour. I was born January 16, 1930.

SIGRIST: And can you spell Chneour for us, and tell us about the name, because you mentioned to me . . .

CHNEOUR: Well, actually my father came from Russia, and he, actually originally it was spelled with an S-H, and in France they decided it didn't sound right, so they changed it to C-H. But now in America it was back to S-H, because according to my father, the name Chneour came from the antique name Senyour [ph], which actually was a Sephardic name. Apparently we're descendent of Sephardic people, in Russia.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how your father and his family, or whatever, got to France.

CHNEOUR: Well, my father was a, was a very well-known poet, by the way. Especially, I mean, he wrote in Hebrew.

SIGRIST: What is his name?

CHNEOUR: Uh, Zalman Chneour.

SIGRIST: And can you spell that for me?

CHNEOUR: Z-A-L-M-A-N Chneour. He was very, he was even, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize of literature, but since he was a very liberal man he was against very extra-

religious people. And that was in Israel, they worked against him, because he said we were in a modern country and we had to live in modern times, and he was free. We are completely, we are completely free in the sense that I wasn't brought up in a religious atmosphere at all.

SIGRIST: So how did it come that he settled in France?

CHNEOUR: Well, he settled in France because, first I think he went to, he lived in, uh, well, he lived in a small town called, he was born in Shklow, in Russia, which is White Russia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CHNEOUR: Shklow, I think, is S-H-K-L-O-W. And, uh, he was recognized already, when he was thirteen he left home, he was recognized by another famous poet by the name Bialik [ph], who is quite well-known also, I mean, very well-known among, among the, uh, the Jews, the Jewish literature. And, uh, he, he started to, he left home and he went to, he went to Odessa, and from there he decided to go to Germany to study medicine, and then he was stuck there in Germany when the Revolution started, and lost everything he owned, and

he was even, I think he was even put in jail for a while or something, because he didn't have the proper papers. From there he decided to come to France, because France, Paris at the time was really the most marvelous epoch. It was the time when all the artists, uh, he knew, uh, Modigliani, he knew all kinds of fabulous people, you know, impressionists and people in Paris. And, uh, and he, uh, he liked France. It was a wonderful country for him to live with. He married a, my mother, actually, he met her in, on one of his trips back to Germany, or he met her in Danzig, or he married her in Danzig, which is Gdansk. I don't know, it used to be a no-man's land at the time.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

CHNEOUR: My mother's name was Salomea, Salomea Landau.

SIGRIST: And can you spell all of that for me, please?

CHNEOUR: Salomea, S-A-L-O-M-E-A, Ladau, L-A-N-D-A-U. And she was born in Warsaw. And, uh, she's one of the only ones who escaped out of a family of eleven people with children and everything. What happened in the Holocaust, everybody was lost, everybody. We lost,

close to us we lost eighty people, eighty. And according to my uncle, who made a list of all the people with second cousins and whatnot, in our one family we lost three hundred and twenty people. It seems incredible, but that's what, uh, they told us. Well, anyway . . .

SIGRIST: What else do you know about your parents' courtship and their marriage?

CHNEOUR: Um, I think they met, apparently they met on a New Year's Day, a New Year's Eve Day, and, uh, I don't know much about their courtship, except that my father fell in love with her very much. And he was quite, I think he was thirty-six by the time he got married. He didn't get married very, he was quite, a very handsome man.

SIGRIST: What was his personality like?

CHNEOUR: He was very, he had enormous, um, what's the word, uh, when he would walk in a room everybody would look towards him. I mean, he had enormous personality, enormous . . .

SIGRIST: Very magnetic.

CHNEOUR: Magnetic. And very, he was witty, and, uh, very, very charming, also very nervous and very unpleasant at times, I must say. Very difficult to get along with.

But aside from that he was, he had a very enormous, fantastic personality that really sort of, um, kind of shadowed my mother's personality, and she was always fighting to get her personality. That's something psychological, quite complicated.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like, your mother?

CHNEOUR: Well . . .

SIGRIST: We're looking at a book right now, yes.

CHNEOUR: Well, anyway, uh, my mother was, came from a rather well-to-do family. I can't say the same about my father. He came from a very small town. My mother came from a well-to-do family. It think they did things in leather. And, uh, it was very, they called it, she was assimilated also. She didn't, they weren't religious or anything. In fact, they were less traditionalist than my father was, because he used to accuse her of being an assimilated, whatever.

Actually it turned out that I don't know anything, almost. I'm learning now, more or less, about

Judaism. I don't know anything about it because I always lived in the world. And I find, I feel like I'm a citizen of the world, that I belong everywhere.

And, uh, of course, I've got to thank America for being alive, that's for sure. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit more about your mother's personality. We kind of got sidetracked. What was her personality like, her demeanor?

CHNEOUR: Well, my mother, uh, was a, I don't want to be, you know, uh, she was, she had moments, she said thanks to us, thanks to her we are alive because my father, at the time when everything was going wrong and the Germans had already occupied France, my father said, "We're lost. I remember he kept saying, "We're lost, we're lost." And my mother went on to Paris, because we lived in Font Nesoubois [ph], which is, it's a little bit, banlieu [ph], a suburb of Paris. We lived, we had a nice house, a house in Norman style house, with beautiful windows in the stairway, like church windows in the stairway, and a nice garden. It was a very lovely house and, what was I saying?

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that either your mother or your

father ever related to you concerning your birth,  
specifically?

CHNEOUR: Well, the only thing is my father wanted a son. He  
has one, I mean, my parents have a son, my brother. I  
have a brother.

SIGRIST: Older?

CHNEOUR: He's older. He lives in California. Right now he's  
in Paris.

SIGRIST: How much older is he?

CHNEOUR: Four years.

SIGRIST: And what is he name?

CHNEOUR: Elie.

SIGRIST: Can you spell it, please?

CHNEOUR: E-L-I-E, Chneour. And he's, uh, he's in science, and  
he does things, he's a very bright fellow, but we  
don't see eye to eye somehow, because he never agreed  
with the fact that I was in the theater, and he  
thought that that was not right, so he was never on my  
side. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: But did they ever relate any stories about your birth, or maybe your early childhood, to you? A story, something you did, maybe, or . . .

CHNEOUR: Well, the only thing that I can remember, my mother said that I would, I would put on the radio, and I would, uh, listen. It wasn't, if it wasn't classical music, I would look for it until it came out classical. I would start dancing, moving around and dancing, so they decided to give me classes, ballet classes. But I always loved dancing, from the day I could remember, I was a dancer, I think. ( she laughs ) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, then, about your early childhood. What's the earliest memory that you have?

CHNEOUR: Well, the earliest memory I have is the house in Font Neuf. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: Something specific, though, a certain event?

CHNEOUR: Well, I remember the plants, that I always loved plants. I was always planting and taking care of, no, my life was very normal, there was nothing, I can't say anything particularly, except I can't think of

anything.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about, uh . . .

CHNEOUR: Oh, yes. I remember one thing, though. I used to go, I used to go upstairs. There were three floors. My father had the top floor, and I would sit, and he would have me sit on his lap while he was writing, because he was a writer. And I would sit for hours and say nothing, and watch him write. And since he write, he was writing in Hebrew, so little signs going from right to left, and that was absolutely fascinating. That's the only thing I can remember. Also that he, uh, he had, he took care of, sometimes birds would come there, and he would feed them. And he would feed, uh, even there was a bat, he fed him honey, and the bat would keep coming back, and things like that. And, uh, I just remember having marvelous walks with him in the park, in the Vincennes, the Bois de Vincennes, which was right near us. And we would take walks, and my father would describe nature to me, and it was just marvelous. I mean, it just opened the world to me.

SIGRIST: How was he supporting the family? With his writing?

CHNEOUR: Yeah. Because in those days he had six million readers, more. I mean, in Poland and Russia and Germany and Austria, and he was very well-known. And he would publish, he published in newspapers, uh, pieces of, he wrote forty volumes, actually. And he, we were living quite well, because we had, we had a maid who was always in, and we had a maid who would come in every so often once a week to do more work, and then we had a governess. I remember something. ( she laughs ) That reminds me. We had a governess, and this governess happens to be, she was from the, uh, the Russian court. She was a noble from the, uh, Russian court. You know, there were a lot of Russian people in those days in France looking for work, who had escaped the Revolution. And, of course, I think her name was Mariana Nikolaevna [ph]. That was her name, Mariana Nikolaevna [ph]. And she was mean. ( she laughs ) Because she, the fact is, to come to, from where she was, as an aristocrat, to come down to this kind of life, taking care of Jewish children, you know, that was really like the last possible. And she, I think she used to pinch me a lot and do things. Because at one time my mother, one day, took care, was watching, I was full of black and blues, and so

they decided, "This lady better leave." ( she  
laughs )

SIGRIST: Now, was it just the two of you, just you and your  
brother?

CHNEOUR: Yes, that's all. That's all.

SIGRIST: Those were the children. Um, can you tell me a little  
bit about your relationship with your brother as  
children, when you were children how you got along?

CHNEOUR: Well, I loved my brother very much, and I always  
defended him. And, I think, but he never forgave me  
for losing his main, the main place he had, because he  
was the one child first, and then I came over and I  
took over everything. And I don't think my parents  
were very clever about that, and he was jealous of me,  
and I think he still is at this point. I'm not sure,  
but I have a feeling that he still, in fact, he  
admitted it to me, so there's something, there was  
something there, always. But I adored my brother, and  
even when we went to school in America, when we came  
to America, can I jump that far? No.

SIGRIST: Um, no, let's not jump that far yet. ( they laugh )

Tell me a little bit, you've already alluded to this a little bit, but something about your religious life at that time, in Paris, when you were a child. Um . . .

CHNEOUR: Well, the only religious life I remember, I was never, I never went to a synagogue, never. Only once, when my brother was doing his bar mitzvah, you know, his confirmation. I only remember that everybody brought lots of presents. He had a roomful of presents, nobody brought me anything. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: What about, were there ways that you practiced your Judaism at home?

CHNEOUR: We didn't.

SIGRIST: You didn't.

CHNEOUR: We just didn't. The only thing we did do once in a while, for New Year's, was Rosh Hoshanah. My father would give us some apples with honey, and say, "This is so that your year will be sweet." That's about as much as we did. And then, uh, for Hanukkah, we had an old oil lamp, and he would light the oil lamp. But once in a while, not every year, when he felt like it.

I mean, he wasn't, and, uh, the only thing that I do remember very much is, um, is Passover. Passover was the one thing, because we used to go to family in, in Paris, who would invite us, and they were marvelous people, and they were Schnerson [ph]. They were sort of related to us, vaguely. And that was very nice, I remember. Because the atmosphere of Passover is the only thing that I remember as something of Judaism, as far as I'm concerned, yeah.

SIGRIST: The friends of your parents, and maybe your own friends, were they Jewish, or was it just sort of a mix?

CHNEOUR: There was, no. They were, it was always a mix. I mean, it was never particularly Jewish at all, at all.

SIGRIST: It's interesting because, of course, your father being this writer in Hebrew.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. But he liked very simple, oh, there's a difference here, I can tell, between my mother and my father. My father liked very simple people. He liked people of the street, people, our best friends, for a long time, this is in the States already, but I remember more because I was older, there were people

who made umbrellas, and they were our best friends. And my mother would complain, "I don't know why you always have these people? Why don't you invite, you know, great poets and wonderful painters and people, intellectuals?" And my father would say, "I don't like. They bore me. I want, you know." He liked simple people, and I agree with him ( she laughs ) because I think I feel the same way. My mother was a bit of a snob. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Well, she came from a whole different background.

CHNEOUR: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about going to school in France.

CHNEOUR: Well, in those days, uh, I remember when I went to school already, during the, when the war started, because before that was quite normal. But when the war started, we went to a small town called La Chapelle-aux-Naux.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CHNEOUR: Chapelle is C-H-A-P-E-L-L-E, dash, A-U-X, dash, N-A-U-X. La Chapelle-aux-Naux, in the Loire Valley.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CHNEOUR: My, uh, my mother, we decided, because we were afraid that Paris would be bombed, so we went to the, uh, we went out of Paris, and actually in Paris was never bombed, and where we were we were bombed to death. So we had a bad time there. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: Well, maybe this is a good time, then, to start talking about the war and the effects of Hitler, and what you knew about it as a small girl.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. Except, you know, as I said, children always see the good things. They don't see the tragic things. At least that's the way I, maybe it's my personality, or the way I think. I don't know. Well, I remember being at school, where all the grades were together. And I think the teacher was a communist, by the way, because of the way she thought. I remember we had to, we had to knit, uh, headwear in wool for the soldiers at school. And all the, you know, all the first grade, second grade, they were all in the same classroom. It was a small town. It was a very small town. And, uh, and, uh, I would stay and have lunch with her sometimes, because my mother, because

the school was, we had to cross the river, and we had a maid, a Polish maid, who was a wonderful lady, a peasant, sort of from the peasant stock. And she would take me on her bicycle to school and back. And, uh, and that was, that was very nice because at school, well, the teacher, she was good, you know. And if you were a good student you didn't, I wasn't a bad student, I studied, I liked to study. I remember that she used to slap, when she decided to slap everybody, she would go down the, uh, I'm talking about the teacher. ( she laughs ) Would go down and slap everybody on right and left, and then that's it, you know. But otherwise the school, that was nice. One time, after a while, uh, the war was getting worse, and where there were lots of bombardments, and, uh, we used to go, we had to go and lie in the field, because it was, you know, lie in the field while the bombardments were going on. And in the, in the fields, in the Loire Valley there are a lot of vipers. I wasn't bitten but, anyway. And, um, I also, I remember one time that I had a, my parents had gone to Langeais. Langeais was a town near La Chapelle-aux-Naux, which, where they tried to get working visas to get to the United States, and they were already

working on it. They went to Langeais, and while they were in Langeais, or Tours. I don't remember it was Tours or Langeais. Langeais is spelled L-A-N-G-E-A-I-S.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CHNEOUR: And Tours is a famous city, T-O-O, T-O-U-R-S, Tours. And, um, they had gone, and we had, we had been left with the maid, with Vadya [ph], Vadya [ph] was the maid. And they started to bomb. And, uh, I remember you could recognize the sound of the bombers because they made a, the German bombers made a special sound. They went like a, "Ahhhh, ahhhh, ahhhh." You could tell far away that they were German bombers. And there were no sirens. You just could tell that they were the German bombers. And we'd go and lie in a field and they were, you know, just bombing. And I remember one time I was looking for my dog. I had a little dog. I wasn't going to go in the field and leave my dog all by itself, and I was running after the dog, and the maid was running after me. And finally, they were bombing already, and I was already, you know, it was one of these things, well, nothing in particular. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: When you left Paris, did you sell the house?

CHNEOUR: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the circumstances, about leaving Paris?

CHNEOUR: Well, about leaving, yes, uh . . .

SIGRIST: And what year was that, roughly?

CHNEOUR: This is, this is, we're not, we haven't left, because we went back to Paris after this, in Loire Valley, we went back to Paris. And the way we went back to Paris was with, hidden among straw and things, because we weren't allowed, by that time the Germans had already occupied. But I have to tell you something about the occupation. During, during the last bit, when we were in the Loire Valley, we haven't gone back to Paris before we leave, you know. But, uh, we were, uh, during the last bit, there actually was fighting battle in the town where we were. And I remember that we went with a, with all the farmers, we went with the cows and the farmers and everything. We went into the big caves where the wine was, I don't remember the names of the caves, but there were caves where wine

was made to take age. And, uh, that's where we would hide. It was in the mountain. They were rock mountains, rock caves. And we went there with animals. We slept there with dogs, with cows, with horses, with goats, the works. Whatever, and, you know, whatever the, uh, farmers took along with them, and, uh, and we used to play a little game, my brother and I used to play a little game. I remember the Germans would come, and they would machine-gun people in the caves, and we would just go out and look and wait and see until they would come and machine gun us, and run into the cave. It was a game, a children's game, you know, to see if we could make it or not make it. ( she laughs ) It was charming. Anyway, after that we, the Germans had come in, came into the, to the, it was the, actually the Wehrmacht, they weren't bad people. The soldiers, the Wehrmacht, you know, the, uh, army soldiers, German army soldiers, they were regular people. They weren't the S.S. or anything. And I remember that since our house, we had a house, it didn't have a bathroom. It had an outhouse. But the outhouse that we had was the cleanest. So, of course, the Germans wanted to use our outhouse. So my mother says, "Okay, if you want

to use the outhouse, only the officers," she said. "But if you want to use that, you have to empty it also." So this is probably the only example in the whole history of what happened to the Jews that the Germans emptied the Jewish outhouse. ( she laughs ) Well, anyway, that's, well. So after that we had to leave because one day, my father looked more Jewish. My mother didn't. And they saw, and my mother spoke perfect German, because she had studied in Germany. My father also spoke German, but my mother spoke perfect German, and she understood them to say, one day they were walking on the river, by the river, and the Germans were walking, and there were some officers, and they said, in German, "How can we let these Jews walk so freely around? We have to get rid of them, do something, you know." So my mother said, "That's it, we've got to go." We had to leave, and we left that same night. But you had to have a permit to travel in those days between one town and whatever. So we had to, we were put into a place among straw and things that were being carried to Paris, and that's how we got to Paris, we got to our house.

SIGRIST: Well, what was happening with your house while you

were in this town?

CHNEOUR: It was closed.

SIGRIST: How long were you off in this town?

CHNEOUR: Gee, how long?

SIGRIST: We're talking months, years?

CHNEOUR: I think it must have been about a year, or maybe eight, nine months. Because it was just toward the end of the war, the end of the, it was in 1939. 1939, '40, part of '40, because we stayed in, in Paris again, in Font Nes [ph] to '41. We left in about, I think July or June, end of June we left to go to America, when we started our trek.

SIGRIST: Would you say that your mother was much more keenly aware of the impending danger for you people as being Jews in France then?

CHNEOUR: My mother, I think, was, she said God took her hand, and she saved us. I mean, she was the one who wasn't going to just sit back. She was going to do something about it. And she, uh, she said that when we got back to Paris one day she went to, she was walking around

Paris, and then suddenly she saw Thomas Cook, and she says it's as if he, and she went there, and she got the whole, the whole trip organized through Thomas Cook to go to America. And, uh, and we started to pack, and I didn't even know what it was. She didn't want to, she says, "wE're not talking to anyone. We're not saying anything. We are not telling anyone we are leaving anywhere." And we were packing, and I said, "Well, what are we packing?" She said, "Don't worry about it. She didn't even want to tell me, in case I would say something at school or something."

SIGRIST: So you didn't know you were going to America? You just knew you were . . .

CHNEOUR: I knew we were traveling, but I didn't know where we were going exactly, no. We didn't know.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your father during this time.

CHNEOUR: My father during this time, I'm afraid was a bit, kind of, the only thing I remember is he kept saying, "We're lost, we're lost."

SIGRIST: He had kind of given up.

CHNEOUR: He had given up, like so many. And, uh, my mother,

no. She was a fighter. So she, she, uh, she really organized the whole thing. And, uh, she even went so far as to give us anti-typhoid pills before we left. She had had typhoid fever, and she knew that during the war, or in times when you had to drink different waters, whatever, that there was typhoid, and, actually, we were saved by that, because later on in the boat people were dying like this from typhoid fever, you know.

SIGRIST: She's amazingly far-thinking.

CHNEOUR: Exactly, yeah. She was quite, quite, she was really, that was her moment, her great moment in her life, I think.

SIGRIST: What do you know about the arrangements that she had to make to get you out? I mean, did she ever talk about that later?

CHNEOUR: Uh, well, she organized it through Thomas Cook, and we were supposed to leave, and it was all organized because at that time it there was occupied and non-occupied France. You know, it wasn't before they took the whole of France. And we had to cross La Cher, which was, it's a river, C-H-E-R, which I don't

remember exactly what town, the name of the town, but we had to cross, that was the crossing line between occupied and non-occupied France. We had to take a train to go to that part. And, um, the first thing, of course, my father's manuscripts, that was the important thing. The one thing I didn't mention, before we left the whole town my, the maid saved my father's manuscripts, this I have to say, because when we were still in La Chapelle-aux-Naux, uh, there was an actual battle raging in the town where we were staying, in the house where we stayed. And she left on her bike while a battle was going on because my father hadn't taken his manuscript, just to pick up his manuscripts and bring it to the cave. I mean, that's, she put her life out for that, you know. And that's really, that was something marvelous on her part.

SIGRIST: True. It's like saving someone's life.

CHNEOUR: Absolutely, yeah.

SIGRIST: And you were, I had asked what you knew about your mother's dealings to get your proper papers and that sort of thing.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. Well, we went through, as far as I know, she organized something that we had to cross that line. It was all organized. You had to, you paid ahead of time, and there was somebody who was going to take you across the Cher to go to the other side of. So, I remember also we took, um, we took a train and, uh, oh, they told my father, "Don't go to the bank. Don't go to the bank, because the Germans, that's where . . ." Oh, we left on a Wednesday from our house in France, in Font Nes [ph]. We left on a Wednesday. On a Thursday they came to get him. They would have deported us, the day after. So we just, by one day we left. And we left with, I remember there weren't taxis, there were these taxis with bicycles, so you had, you know, uh, trunks and things on bicycles to get to the, we had to take a subway. This was going to get to the train. They wanted to take it to the train, the big suitcases, without taking taxis. And we took a subway. We went separately from, so they wouldn't connect us with it. We took a subway, and the subway broke down, and we almost missed the train, I remember that. The subway stopped, and it stopped almost an hour. But we came and we ran into, we got the train. Once . . . Yeah.

SIGRIST: We need to pause now so that Kevin can flip the tapes, and we'll get you on the train and get you on your way.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's get you on the train. The subway broke down. You were broken down for almost an hour. Tell me what happened.

CHNEOUR: And then we got very upset, of course. My parents were having fits because they said we weren't going to make that train, and we had to make the train. Because by the time, all the hours were all organized, so that by the time we got to the Cher or whatever town, I remember, the name of the town, I didn't look it up lately.

SIGRIST: It was all very choreographed, wasn't it?

CHNEOUR: It was all done from Cooks, it was all, Cook organized that. And, um, there was a man who was supposed to come, to make us cross the river and, at a certain hour. So he had to come and pick us up at the train, and we had to go to exactly where the crossing was.

And, uh, but we made it. And, uh, we got off there, I remember, and first they crossed, they came. And I remember that this man was sort of drunk, the one to help us cross the river. And, uh, he also asked for double the money that he had received. And he started to, and my father started to discuss with him, she says, "Give it to him!" And my mother just told him, "Give it to him. Don't discuss." And so he did. And the man got us across the river. But by the time we got to the other side there was a patrol, a German patrol, on the bridge, not far, who started to see us, and we were getting rather nervous about it. And, but I think they were paid off, because they must have been paid off. Anyway, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Is it just the four of you, or are you traveling with a group?

CHNEOUR: No, no, no. Just the four of us. No, no. Absolutely no group. No group at all. And, uh, I remember it was very slippery getting out, and I finally fell in the water up to here. And, uh, and we waited in the bushes on the other side until, there was some sort of bus that came to get us, to pick us up, to take us to a town, to the town there. And, on the other side of

the, unoccupied France. But in the meantime, we, my father's manuscripts were on the wrong side. And, uh, it took forever. I remember we stayed there until evening, because we left, we were supposed to do it during the night so people wouldn't see us, but they, we did in the middle of the day. We must have crossed about twelve o'clock noon, and we waited till about six o'clock, or later, till my father's manuscripts would be across, and he was, I think he was dying, because his manuscripts. I kept saying, "I wonder why he's so worried." But, boy, now I understand, I appreciate the fact that he was, so his manuscripts got across finally, and we took a little, a car, and we went, we went on to, toward the South of France, and eventually to Spain.

SIGRIST: Were you staying in hotels, or in people's houses?

CHNEOUR: Yeah. No, we stayed in hotels. We went to Lyon, and then we went to Marseilles. And in Marseilles, that's another story, in Marseilles, this was the epoch when all the foreigners were the first one, the Jewish foreigners who were not French were the first ones to be, to be caught by the Germans. Even though it was unoccupied France, the French police was always on

the, they were very happy to help the Germans. So I remember that we, we were in a hotel, this hotel, in Marseilles, and we heard a lot of noise next door. My father and my brother had one room, and my mother and I had another room, and there was all this noise, and my mother says, "Go see what's happening," and I see that they're taking my father away with, what do you call them?

SIGRIST: Handcuffs.

CHNEOUR: Handcuffs. He's being taken away. And my mother gets up, and she's in a slip. She doesn't even get up. She says, "What are you doing?" You know, she raised, "Be quiet, or we'll take you, too." "Yes, you better take me. You better take me." She wasn't going to let my father go by himself, and she went with him and left us, the two of us, alone in the hotel. Incredible. But she went with him. And, apparently, and she was discussing, she spoke French perfectly with no accent, even though she wasn't French, and we were born in France. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: What did you speak at home?

CHNEOUR: French.

SIGRIST: You did speak French at home.

CHNEOUR: Yeah, we spoke French. My parents, between them, spoke Russian. So, um, she, she went with him. And they were gone, they were gone for, like, they were going to throw her out in the street, because they were gone all day till the next day. They didn't show up. And suddenly my father comes in, because he was diabetic, and he was coming, running to get his insulin, to give himself a shot. I said, "Where's mother?" "Well, she didn't come back." "Well, why she didn't come back? What happened to her?" Because apparently she was fighting with the commissar, and saying she didn't believe him. She said, "Don't joke with me. Where's my husband?" "We let him go, we let him go." She wouldn't believe him. "No, I don't believe it." "Go home, you'll find him." And she wouldn't. She said, "What do you mean?" But the thing is, at the time, apparently, they were putting, they were telling him to go downstairs, and that stairs was going to a ship that was going to North Africa. From there they were taking everybody to the, to the end of the line for Jews, right? And my, my mother said, "No, you're not going down those stairs."

And the guy came up to her like this. He had a, he had a gun, or he had, with a bayonet or something, and she said, "Go ahead, go ahead. Why don't you kill me? Don't take him." You know, that kind of thing. "No, no. He's not going down. He's going to be a dead man in two days, because he doesn't have his, uh. "So what do you want? Lady, your children are French, you're free, you can go, you can, you're not, you know, he's not going now one step down." I think we were the only ones that day that escaped, the only one. The only one family. Everybody else was taken away. And she was really something incredible.

SIGRIST: A tiger cat. ( he laughs )

CHNEOUR: She was tiger, yeah. And, so, uh, then, after a while, my mother came back. And there she was, so we all got together and ran, took the next train to Pau, in the Pyrenes. I remember that. And in Pau, and then we went from there to Comfaux [ph], Comfran [ph].

SIGRIST: How long is all of this taking? From the time you left Marseilles, how long did it take you before you actually got to Spain?

CHNEOUR: To Spain, from Marseille it was quite quick after

that. But I think, I don't know, it seemed like, I really don't know. I don't have the idea of the span of time, but it could be two weeks, or it could be . . .

SIGRIST: But it was a length of time.

CHNEOUR: It was a length of time. Oh, yeah. We stayed several days. We stayed several days in Marseille, also. And, uh, we were waiting for something. I don't know if it was visa to Spain or anything. But at the time you have to say that Spain was very good, because they let people go through, and they saved a lot, a lot of Jewish people. And Franco did a lot of wrong things, but one thing he did right, he kept the, he didn't put any, you know, he didn't make any, he didn't stop people from getting through Spain. We got through Spain, it was 1941, and we went right through Spain, no problem.

SIGRIST: As a little girl, and also maybe what you know of your brother, was this an exciting time for a small child? Did you understand the gravity of the situation, or was it just all kind of . . .

CHNEOUR: No, no, it wasn't that. It wasn't exciting, no. No,

no, no, no. We had a feeling, a complete, I understood perfectly that it was a very grave, very, very grave, we understood that perfectly. We had seen what was happening. We had lived before when they were shooting at us from the caves, and we had an idea what the whole story was all about. Not as much as, nobody knew what was really going to happen in those days, but was knew we had to . . .

SIGRIST: Which made it worse, in a way.

CHNEOUR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I mean, just the not knowing.

CHNEOUR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about Spain and once you got there, and what happened once you got to Spain.

CHNEOUR: Well, we got to, we got to Spain through Canfranc, which is near Barcelona.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CHNEOUR: C-A-N-F-R-A-N-C, Canfranc.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

CHNEOUR: Well, I remember always feeling very, you know, when you're brought up in France as a child, they always, they give you the national, all the feeling of nationalism, of very, and I said, "Oh, here we're leaving the French tracks." And I saw the difference between the tracks, the Spanish tracks are broader. And so we left, we went into Spain. And there we went to, uh, we went to Madrid first, and, uh, I remember we stayed, right across the street from the museum, Museo de Prado, and the people were very nice, very, very nice. I just remembered that they were particularly nice. And my father being who he was, an artist, he kept saying, "Look at these people, they've suffered so much, and yet you don't see them cry there, they keep their head up. You don't see them complaining about their lot. They're very, very proud people. And, um, from there we went to Cadiz, and in Cadiz the boat was supposed to come, and it didn't. We waited a long time in Cadiz. Nothing happened there. We only caught a lot of stomach trouble. I think that's where people started picking up typhoid fever, or something was, you know, we didn't. My mother had the, gave us, before the trip started she gave us pills, typhoid.

SIGRIST: Were you in a hotel?

CHNEOUR: In a hotel in Cadiz. And from, uh, there we went to another hotel in, in Cadiz I remember going to the beach there, enormous beach, fabulous, big, big. But everybody was dressed on the beach. I never, you know, in those days, ladies had to wear skirts, and, you know, it was the, um, the Franco regime was very pro, very Catholic, and very, everybody was very covered.

SIGRIST: Very conservative.

CHNEOUR: Very conservative, yeah. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: It's an interesting thing for a small kid to remember, actually.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. I remember everybody was, ladies had skirts, and little kids. But most people were going swimming in their underwear. ( she laughs ) They didn't have bathing suits. Maybe they didn't have it. There was, this was supposed to be, El Ano de Hambre. I know now it was the year of the hunger in Spain. There was nothing. And I remember when we got to, uh, when we got to Sevilla, I think it was Sevilla, no, it was in

Cadiz. In Cadiz we were in a hotel, I think it was the Hotel, I don't remember the name of the hotel. I'm writing my memoirs, and I'm checking all these things out, and I tried to remember more things, and, uh, so we went, in the hotel, they had nothing to feed us except chickpeas, and chickpeas, every day, all the time. And my father couldn't eat that, because he was diabetic. He couldn't eat that, you know. So, and he asked for something else, I said, "We haven't got it." So he said, "I'm sorry, I can't stay here." "No, you can't, you can't leave." "Well, I can't? I'm leaving." So he stood up and he told other people, "Anyone who wants to get up," you know, he made sort of like a revolution for people to get up, and we left. We left, they threw us out afterwards. We went to another hotel, which was marvelous. It was Hotel Playa, which was right on the beach. And that was a beautiful hotel, whereas that was a, it was a, the first one was an awful hotel. And this was a nice hotel, and the sun, you know, you could see the sun, the marvelous sun. And, uh, I remember, that I remember, the light, and I remember also that that was the first time I had a, sort of a paella, which is rice with all kinds of, uh, seafood in it, and, uh,

you see, Jews are not allowed to eat that, but we ate everything, so forget it. So it was delicious, because it was rice with, I loved it. And also olives, all you want. So I had lots of olives. It was wonderful. So.

SIGRIST: Were you carrying, not you, but your parents, carrying a lot of cash on them? I mean, is that how you, they left France?

CHNEOUR: Well, they had enough cash because he didn't go to the bank. You couldn't go to the bank because they would catch you.

SIGRIST: Right. That's what you said.

CHNEOUR: But my uncle was in Paris.

SIGRIST: I see.

CHNEOUR: And somehow he managed to get, I think he's the one who brought the money. He brought money to my uncle.

SIGRIST: Because obviously you need to have cash on you as you were going through this.

CHNEOUR: Obviously. I'm sure that he had cash on him. He had as much cash as possible. He may have taken a lot of

it. But I don't know if he, he couldn't take it through his bank. Maybe he did it indirectly through somebody, my uncle brought it to him. I think that's the way it must have been. I'm not sure about that, but that sounds like this.

SIGRIST: Children aren't always privy to these things.

CHNEOUR: No, no. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about getting to the boat, and that whole process.

CHNEOUR: Well, yeah. We waited for the boat, and then we went to Seville, as I said. After Cadiz we went to Seville, and we waited some more, at the port in Seville, and finally the boat had arrived, and we walked through Seville, which is a beautiful city. And my father kept saying, it was marvelous walking with him, because he made all kinds of marvelous remarks, which I still remember. But, so we went to, um, uh, we went to see the boat. And there it was, and it didn't look like, you know, it wasn't a passenger ship, it was a cargo.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the Navemar for me, what it looked

like to you.

CHNEOUR: Can I tell you, if you want a perfect description of the Navemar, you remember the film made by Charlie Chaplin, "The Immigrant?" That's exactly what the Navemar looked like, exactly. ( she laughs ) It was just a boat, you know. And there was, the refectory was exactly like, it's exactly like that. If you want to get an idea what the Navemar was like, that's what it was. And, um, but it was a cargo ship, and it had about, a place for about three hundred people, more or less, in the cabins, the few cabins that it had. But there were twelve hundred aboard, and the others were on shelves in the hold. There was a hold for men and a hold for women. There were six hundred in each. And, uh, there were three shelves, and there were about two people on each shelf. And you didn't have much room, because if you wanted to turn you had to say, "Hey, wait a minute, I want to turn," you know, when you were sleeping. Well, kids didn't have that problem, but the grownups did, because there wasn't much, there wasn't any space. And I remember one thing. Well, my mother was immediately seasick, because the minute she sees a boat she gets seasick.

But, uh, what made you seasick, even if you didn't want to, was that there were wires on the side of those shelves where people slept, and the wires, people would put clothes on them. And they'd put their clothes on them, and the ship, the slightest movement of the ship, zoom, you know. And then there was still a hold below that where people fell in a lot of times, because it was, you couldn't see. There was very little light. And some people fell in. I think a few killed themselves. And I remember it was very hot, and, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it?

CHNEOUR: This must be July, August. Because we got to New York on September 12th. It took thirty-six days, thirty-seven days, so it's got to be August, August, end of July, August, end of July.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about the other people on the boat, you know, were there other refugees trying to get to America? Who were all these people?

CHNEOUR: There were a whole bunch. Exactly. There were lots of Russians and Jews, apparently, Russian and Polish and French, and also German Jews. And somehow we

didn't get along. ( she laughs ) Uh, I remember that the German Jews are the ones who had the cabins, the deluxe cabins, because the deluxe cabins were the ones, the three hundred places that I told you were available for people, and, uh, the rest was for, uh, for us, and there were about, and for us, on the, in the women's side there were six sinks for six hundred women, and three showers, which only spewed salt water, by the way, never had sweet water. And the, uh, I remember that, uh, there was a group, we used to, the Russians, there weren't too many, but the Russians had, one of the lifeboats, there were several lifeboats, you know, but they were all nailed to death. If anything would have happened, we would have, we wouldn't have made it. They were nailed. And, uh, there was a very famous painter aboard. His name was Rojankovsky [ph], and he painted, you know, he painted the, during the voyage he painted that, uh, that little boat, the lifeboat, and the Russians would come there, and they would sing, and they would talk to each other, and they would, and there was a dancer there, and I loved dancing. There was a ballet dancer. And there was another very famous, who became very famous, a dancer, Jean Gueles, who later became

quite famous in France.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CHNEOUR: Jean.

SIGRIST: Jean.

CHNEOUR: G-U, G-U-E, accent aigu, L-E-S. Jean Gueles.

SIGRIST: So you would say that there was quite a diverse cross-section of people in this ship.

CHNEOUR: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes. And it was quite nice. I mean, I remember that as fun. You know, going to the Russian, to the Russian lifeboat. But most people slept on deck, because it was terrible below. And, uh, so I slept with, I had a little girlfriend whose name was Annette Bahabash [ph]. She was Russian, from Belgium. Well, Russian Belgians. And, uh, her father was an engineer. He had worked in Africa, in mines, in gold mines or diamond mines or something. And, uh, she was, we were all together. I was always with Annette, and we would go and sleep in the lifeboats, the empty ones, because that's the only place you could breathe. It was horrible. It was just terrible below. And, um . . .

SIGRIST: What about, was there any livestock on board?

CHNEOUR: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did they feed you?

CHNEOUR: Oh, boy, the livestock. I think when we got to the Azores, was it the Azores?

SIGRIST: Was that the first stop on the boat?

CHNEOUR: No. We stopped in Portugal, in Lisbon, but the Azores, I don't remember, according to, I don't have a map on my head right now. But I think the Azores came first, and then we got, we went to Lisbon, I'm not sure. And they brought up, they brought like six cows on board, yeah. And, uh, after a while they decided those cows were sick, so they killed them. And they put heavy rollers on them and threw them overboard so they wouldn't float. And some of them, one of them, or a couple of them, in the beginning they had cut them up and put them in a fridge that was on board. I remember when they opened that fridge door you could, the smell was, you know. And so I told my mother, I said, "Don't have," you know, they served bouillon of some sort. I said, "Don't touch it." A lot of people

touched it. Some of them died. Some of them got very, very ill. And I don't know if the typhoid didn't come from that sick cows, you know. But, um, I remember, I think when we stopped in Lisbon, we had to get off the ship because our visa had, our visa to the United States had expired, and we had to renew it, so we got off the ship and went to, went to renew the, uh, visa.

SIGRIST: Where, would you have gone to the consulate?

CHNEOUR: We went to the American consulate in Lisbon. The boat was staying fora while in Lisbon. And so, and then we went back on board, and then when we got to the, uh, but I've got to say that it was quite terrible during the trip, because food, the only thing you could really eat was olives. I mean, they had lots of olives. And, uh, I don't remember, I remember that my father bought a lot of, I think it was in Lisbon, in the heart of Lisbon there were little kids who would swim, and you would throw them money, and they would attach, you know, you could buy sardines, canned, and we bought lots of cans. We threw money at them and they, we had cans of sardines and cans of things that we picked up from the ship that they would, uh,

that's, we could eat a little bit better that way.  
But the food was, uh, I don't remember much about it,  
really.

SIGRIST: (?)

CHNEOUR: The only thing I remember eating was olives. But, I  
mean, I don't remember much about the food. I  
couldn't tell you in detail the food. But I remember  
those poor cows that, uh, you know, that they tried to  
feed us. I don't know.

SIGRIST: So the ship left from Lisbon. I mean, it left from  
Seville.

CHNEOUR: Seville.

SIGRIST: And then it either went to the Azores or Lisbon, or  
the other way around.

CHNEOUR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But that was the first . . .

CHNEOUR: Yeah, stop.

SIGRIST: Stop. Then where did the boat go?

CHNEOUR: It went to Bermuda.

SIGRIST: So it went across the Atlantic, down to Bermuda.

CHNEOUR: Toward Bermuda, yeah. And, uh, wait a minute. I know we went to Cuba. Could that have been before Bermuda?

SIGRIST: Hmm, or maybe after.

CHNEOUR: Because I remember that in Bermuda the British gave us a party to the children. So we got off the boat, and they gave us a party, and they gave us some food, and they gave us presents, and, uh, we could go swimming in the harbor. But there was a sunken ship in the harbor, and we all got full of oil. So that was even worse. ( she laughs ) But, uh, but they were very nice, you know. And they gave us clothes, but we didn't want the clothes. We just wanted, uh, well, they did that for the children, the British. And, uh, and then a lot of people were very sick, got off at Cuba, I remember. They were supposed to go to the United States, but they couldn't. They were dying or something from typhoid or whatever, and they were disembarked in Cuba. So it did quite a lot, quite a, and then finally we got to Brooklyn Harbor when we arrived here.

SIGRIST: So how long were you on the Navemar?

CHNEOUR: About thirty-six, thirty-seven days, I think.

SIGRIST: With a series of individual stops?

CHNEOUR: Yeah, that's right. And I've got to say that, um, it was quite terrible, because it was quite dirty, and it was terrible, because in the ladies washroom, for instance, the camaneros [ph] installed a lawn chair, you know, a deck chair, and they would watch the ladies get undressed, and it was their Folies Bergeres, their private Folies Bergeres. But they never touched anybody, they just looked, you know. And the showers were unusable, because everybody had diarrhea, so forget it. The showers were being used as much as the bathrooms. It was, uh, and my father, on the other side, he was a, he had studied medicine, and he took care of a lot of people. Because there was one doctor and one nurse aboard for twelve hundred people, and they couldn't do anything, so they didn't do anything. and he even, he went around giving aspirins, and even gave some of his insulin to people. And, uh, he took care of, on the men's side he took care of, uh, of people, that he could.

SIGRIST: Other than the, other than the little Belgian Russian girl that you remembered, is there anyone else that sticks out in your mind on the boat that you can remember, or an incident that may have happened to someone?

CHNEOUR: Well, yes. I remember, for instance, an incident. I remember that they used to throw people overboard almost every day that died. And, uh, it was fun. So I said to Annette, "I think they're going to bury so-and-so, they're going to throw some people overboard. Why don't we go get up early?" ( she laughs ) So we'd get up. We were sleeping anyway in the little boats, and we were watching the way they were throwing people overboard. And one day I think there was a woman and a man, they were sleeping on deck chairs, on the deck, and the man must have died during the night, and they were wrapping him up in his blanket. He already had rigor mortis, because he was, they couldn't straighten him out. And she didn't know. She was sleeping. She didn't know he died. And there was, and when she woke up, it was terrible, because I remember that they tried to, they were holding onto her because she wanted to throw herself after him.

And she didn't know, you know, it was quite a scene. That was something I remember. That really shocked me. But they were throwing people overboard all the time. A lot of people died.

SIGRIST: But you and your brother and your mother and father managed to stay reasonably healthy through the trip?

CHNEOUR: Yeah, absolutely.

SIGRIST: So you were lucky.

CHNEOUR: Well, my father had a throat infection, that got rid of. My brother cut his foot, and had a big abscess on his foot, and he himself with a knife, he himself cut his, you know, cut his foot to get the pus out, by himself.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything else about your brother on the ship? Anything else that might have happened to him, or . . .

CHNEOUR: No, not that I know of.

SIGRIST: You probably didn't see him that much.

CHNEOUR: I didn't see him, no. They were on the other side.

SIGRIST: On the other side.

CHNEOUR: But when we were, um, well, the one I liked very much was Jean Gueles, the dancer. He was doing pirouettes. I was looking. I was absolutely fascinated by it. I mean, he could do six pirouettes, just like that. And here I loved dancing, so that was my, uh, and also Rojankovsky [ph], the painter, was wonderful, I remember. And there was a, next to me was a ballet dancer, a sort of retired ballet dancer. She wasn't terribly pleasant. But, you know, the people weren't terribly friendly. I was mostly with my friend, and the Barabash [ph]. Barabash [ph] was the name of my friend, Annette. And we were sort of close, the family, the two families, the Barabash [ph], they were Russians, and us. And we used to sort of talk to each other more, and had more rapport.

SIGRIST: Do you have a lot of luggage with you?

CHNEOUR: Yeah, we had trunks. And we had my father's manuscripts. We had trunks. We had a trunk or two, I don't remember. And we had the manuscripts, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about arriving in New York Harbor?

CHNEOUR: Well, uh, we arrived in New York Harbor, it was September 12th, I believe, 1941. It's in The New York Times. It's called The Hell Ship of the War, I believe. And, uh, I remember they were writing Pepsi-Cola in the sky, and I don't know what that means. Pepsi? I said, "What the heck? What's that?" I had no idea what that was. And, uh, everything was, uh, it was very cold because from the, you know how weather changes in New York. Suddenly it's warm, the night before it was hot, and the next day it was freezing. The thing is, a lot of people, when we docked, we got off the ship for a while and stood in a line outside, and we weren't allowed in. Because other people came to get families to take them, they took them to, they took them to hotels, to hospitals, whatever. And the news had come, my father was quite well-known here, because he had, he wrote for Fowards, the famous, well, the paper that's still . . .

SIGRIST: The Jewish newspaper, yeah.

CHNEOUR: He wrote for Fowards. But he never touched the money that he earned in Fowards. He left it in a bank in America. He never had it sent over. So we had a little bit of money here. But the thing is the news

had come that my father was, that he had died, that he had been taken by the Germans, so nobody came to, although he was quite well-known, nobody came to the boat to meet us. So that's why we went to, I guess that's why we had to go to Ellis Island, because a lot of people. That night, after we got, I remember getting down and being hungry. I remember feeling hungry. That's the only time I really remember hunger. And I remember that the, um, the customs officers were having a hamburgers and hot coffee, and i could smell the food, you know. And here we, we hadn't . . . ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Well, before we get you onto Ellis Island, we need to just pause, and Kevin needs to put another tape in, and then we'll get you onto Ellis Island.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now beginning tape two with Renee Chneour.

CHNEOUR: Very good. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Who came from France in 1941 at age eleven. Uh, we had just, the Navemar, the ship that you came on, had

just docked in, in New York. And before we get away from it, I just want to ask you, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the Navemar.

CHNEOUR: Well, something I skipped, and it isn't to be skipped, because I think twice the, um, the Germans had found out that the boat was carrying Jews, you know, was carrying mostly Jews. I think they were mostly Jews. And, uh, and here, and they paid, they offered to pay the captain money to take us back to, uh, North Africa. And, uh, suddenly somebody found out who had a compass that we weren't going west. We weren't going towards the United States. We were supposed to go to America. And, uh, they went to the captain, I remember, and we had to bribe him to continue on the course. And they bribed him. And, I think, then the Germans gave him another offer, and he started getting off, this happened at least twice during the trip. Also I remember one time they were mentioning the fact that, um, that a sub, a German sub was following us. But I understand that the Navemar was sunk on the way back, it was sunk. And I believe it could have been because, uh, it was sort of like, uh, the Germans didn't get what they wanted, so they sunk them. But I

did, this was quite, I remember that, although I was a child, I remember there was quite a going on with the pourparlers with the captain, and all the people, sort of the heads of groups would get together and bribe the captain to continue on the course.

SIGRIST: The whole thing is a big shady deal, isn't it?

CHNEOUR: It certainly is. ( Mr. Sigrist laughs ) We paid more, finally. I understand that the trip cost more than first class on the Normandie to get. That's what I heard. I don't know exactly the price. I can't tell you.

SIGRIST: People were desperate enough to pay for those conditions.

CHNEOUR: Absolutely. Definitely.

SIGRIST: All right. So the boat docked on September 12, 1941.

CHNEOUR: ( she coughs ) I do believe it was then.

SIGRIST: And you said that you were brought to Ellis Island because there was no one there to claim you.

CHNEOUR: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about what happened at Ellis Island. Tell me about arriving at Ellis Island and what happened.

CHNEOUR: First of all, I want to say that we were told to get back on the ship that night. We arrived, and a lot of people were taken away. And we, uh, were told to get back on the ship. We had to sleep one more night on that ship. And my mother was worried to death because we had heard about the fact that so many ships had been sent back to Europe from America, to death. That's for sure. So we were sent back. I wasn't aware of that. It was freezing that night. I remember it being very cold, sleeping on the board, and the next day we were taken to Ellis Island. And, uh, uh, I remember that, the one thing I loved about it is that I could take a bath.

SIGRIST: Is that one of the, what happened to you first when you got here?

CHNEOUR: First? You mean, when we got to Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Yes. When you first arrived at Ellis Island. What did you do?

CHNEOUR: I think there was a, there was a big hole. I think they were taking, they were taking notes. I suppose they were checking who we were, and they took a while. We were there quite a long time.

SIGRIST: Was there a group from the boat?

CHNEOUR: We were quite a group. There was a group from, there was a large group from the boat. And, uh, but they were quite nice, I think. I don't remember. I was just standing around. You know, I was a child. I wasn't aware of what, exactly, I couldn't tell you. But they took a, it took a while to get through, uh, and we were worried, I don't know how our visa was doing, whether it was still good, or it was just about expired. There was some talk about that. And we were very, I remember my parents were very worried about that, but I didn't know exactly what it was all about, frankly. And, uh, I remember that then we were taken to, uh, we were able to bathe, to, that was wonderful. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about that experience.

CHNEOUR: And it was with sweet water.

SIGRIST: Where did you do that, and . . .

CHNEOUR: It was a place where a lot of people were bathing. It was sort of a big place where a lot of people were. It wasn't, you didn't have a private bath or anything. It was a lot of people were bathing there. And, uh, there was soap and sweet water to bathe. It was wonderful. I washed my hair, and I thought it was marvelous. And, uh, then we were taken, then we were taken to eat, and I was fascinated by the quickness in which we were served. I never saw anything like it. I mean, I wasn't used to this speed that, in America, that there's such speed in doing things. I remember being completely fascinated by the speed by which we were served at the table, and by which they cleared the dishes. And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember what they fed you your first time?

CHNEOUR: Uh, no, I don't remember. But it was edible. But I don't remember. I don't remember. I couldn't tell you.

SIGRIST: Something other than olives.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. ( she laughs ) I don't remember. It wasn't

anything, it was food, it was good food, and it was fine.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on Ellis Island?

CHNEOUR: It was a dormitory where, it was like a dormitory with a lot of other people, uh, with nice, white sheets. My mother cried and said, "Oh, I don't know!" I don't know why she was worried. She was worried about something. But I don't know what she was worried about. I really don't know. But she didn't like it because it's like being in prison, really. And so she didn't like that. She was worried about that. But the women were separate from the men, of course. ( she coughs ) I also remember that we were allowed to walk ten minutes outside during the day. We had a ten-minute walk outside, took a walk. I don't remember. It was things with a lot of wires. You couldn't get out, you know, that kind of thing. And, uh, then we stayed. And I remember that, oh, my father bought some chocolate. He wasn't supposed to eat it. He always bought things he wasn't supposed to eat, so he bought, they were Mounds. That was the first chocolate I ever tasted in America, with, uh, coconut inside, and I thought that was marvelous.

( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Did they do anything for the children here? Was there anything, any kind of provision made for . . .

CHNEOUR: No. No, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing?

CHNEOUR: Absolutely not. We just stayed with our parents. No, they didn't do anything that way.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay here?

CHNEOUR: Well, I suppose it was, I don't really, I can't remember. It must have been quite a long time, a couple of weeks, or twenty days, or something like that.

SIGRIST: What else sticks out in your mind about this experience at all? Like what did you do during the day? You said you could outside for ten minutes.

CHNEOUR: Ten minutes.

SIGRIST: What did you do the rest of the time?

CHNEOUR: I don't know. I don't remember very well. I really don't remember. It's like a blank. I think we just,

I think we stayed with our parents, we talked about things, and we read. I think there were things to read, and there were things to read, and that's about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing anything at Ellis Island that you had never seen before, maybe a certain type of person that you had never seen before?

CHNEOUR: No.

SIGRIST: Does anyone stick out in your mind?

CHNEOUR: No.

SIGRIST: No?

CHNEOUR: No, no, not really. I just think that it was sort of a general thing. I was sort of, I wasn't watching things much then. ( she laughs ) I'm afraid I can't tell you much about this.

SIGRIST: Well, and then it's understandable in a way, you know. New York is right there, and you can't get it. You're stuck here.

CHNEOUR: I didn't feel stuck. I was very happy. ( she laughs ) I was very happy because I, uh, I slept in a

marvelous bed. I was able to eat, I was able to wash myself, and I thought that was marvelous. I was very happy. ( she laughs ) I didn't have problems.

SIGRIST: Of course, anything would be good after coming off of the Navemar.

CHNEOUR: I'm sure.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if you had your luggage with you, or where your luggage was?

CHNEOUR: The luggage, yeah, came along with us. Yes, it was here. And they went through everything. And I remember they, we had some silverware, and they put some sort of acid on it to see if there wasn't gold inside. I don't know what they were looking for, but, uh, they went through everything, absolutely everything we had. But, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you left France, did you take something that was very personal to you, maybe a toy or a book or something, something that was very unique to you?

CHNEOUR: No, because we took the minimum, and my mother didn't let me take anything. I didn't take anything. The

one thing I had left behind was my dog, which I missed, I missed terribly, and we left him. And that was our dog. That's the only thing I would have liked to have taken. I didn't have any other attachment, really.

SIGRIST: What about your father during, during the whole Ellis Island experience? I mean, what did he do during the day? What was he thinking during all of this?

CHNEOUR: Gee, I don't know. I couldn't tell you. That's terrible, because I really couldn't tell you. The only thing is he must have been thinking, or got in touch with people, so they'd know he was around, so that people would start moving to get us off here.

SIGRIST: Did you, did he have personal friends in New York?

CHNEOUR: I'm sure, I'm sure.

SIGRIST: But no one specifically that you . . .

CHNEOUR: No one, but I'm sure he had lots of friends, and a lot of people knew him. I mean, he was quite renowned, you know.

SIGRIST: Sure.

CHNEOUR: So I'm sure he would have, you know, he tried to get in touch with people and told, and he didn't speak English, so I guess that was a problem. Because you had to, to say, "Well, I'd like to get in touch with so-and-so who knows me, and whatever." And I think finally he got through. Somebody came. I remember somebody came to see us who, it was a friend of my father's, who came to the dock, no came afterwards, came to here, to Ellis Island, and spoke, and helped to get us off. Uh, and that's about it. I don't remember much except, uh . . .

SIGRIST: Well, in our, since you have people you need to meet sometime soon . . .

CHNEOUR: I'm not in a hurry.

SIGRIST: Why don't you tell me a little bit about getting to New York and the first six months in America, and what that was like for you and your family.

CHNEOUR: Well, uh, my brother, I know my brother loved everything immediately.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the first night that you spent in New York after you left here?

CHNEOUR: It was in a hotel. It was in a hotel. It didn't mean anything particularly, the hotel, no. I just remember, uh, my brother just loved everything. He loved Coca-Cola immediately. We never had touched it. I didn't like it. I was, uh, I was quite, I was different. I was the opposite. I mean, I didn't like, first, one thing that disturbed me as a national French, which is silly, but, you know, when I saw these big American flags here, that hit me in the face, and I didn't like that. But, of course . . . ( she laughs ) That's to be expected. Uh, and, uh, but I don't know, I was, uh, I know that in America immediately, almost immediately, we were sent to a private school. We were sent to a school in Connecticut. So I didn't really spend much time in New York. And, uh, I don't remember, I remember Connecticut more than I remember New York, because we were sent immediately to school.

SIGRIST: Were your parents . . .

CHNEOUR: They stayed . . .

SIGRIST: Living in New York?

CHNEOUR: They lived in New York. They stayed in a hotel.

SIGRIST: Well, how did you feel about that, being sent off to school? How long, how long before that happened?

CHNEOUR: Very short. I mean, we, we got here, and we got here in September so the school year started almost immediately, and somebody got, got us, got us a special scholarship in a school in Connecticut, in Darien, Connecticut. And, uh, both of us were sent off there. And I, uh, I don't know, I'm not, I'm also very, we're both independent. We didn't suffer very much from the separation. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, in your own life, in those first six months, or when you first went to the school, what was really hard for you to get used to?

CHNEOUR: Well, at the school, I have to say, the school I went to, there were a lot of kids in private school who came from broken families. And, uh, they had problems. They weren't very nice. And they did all, they played tricks on me. They did terrible things to me, and I didn't like it. Uh, we went to a school that, the name was Cherry Lawn School. The director was a Swedish lady who believed that people should sleep outside. So we slept outside, sort of on

porches, in Connecticut in the winter, and we had to have parkas and everything, and it was very unpleasant. I was very cold. And, uh, the kids were mean. And I didn't speak the language, so they made fun of me, and they weren't nice. They weren't nice.

SIGRIST: Tell me, tell me, you said you didn't speak the language. Tell me how you learned the language.

CHNEOUR: Well, it took me about three months. I had a very good teacher.

SIGRIST: One of the teachers at the school.

CHNEOUR: At the school. And he was Europe, he was German, and he was, he, uh, they gave me special, I think they gave me special things. I made records, and I started, but it was easy for me. I learned quickly. You know, children learn quickly.

SIGRIST: Do you remember making a mistake, or words that you confused, or . . .

CHNEOUR: I remember that after a few months, two months, I thought, "I'll never learn, never learn this language, impossible. I can't do it." I was completely, I was a very good student in school in France, and I always

had the best, you know, the best, and here it wasn't exactly true. And also the fact that they put me back, like I had already been, like they put me back in the seventh grade, and I was already doing eighth grade, eighth grade work in France. I was doing, I was studying Latin, I was studying English, I was studying geometry, Algebra, and here they were back to mathematics, and I was bored. I mean, they took me back. They took it, because of the language, so they took me back. But, anyway, I didn't like the school at all. I didn't like being in school. And we were there six years.

SIGRIST: Six years. Do you think that you were made fun of because you were, you know, "just off the boat," in quotes, I mean, why, why do you think they made fun of you?

CHNEOUR: Because we're different. Children just see somebody who's different, who's different, who's from another country, who can't speak the language, and who wears funny clothes. And don't look the . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me about your clothes. How were they different?

CHNEOUR: Well, the clothes weren't very good. I mean, they

weren't, those kids probably came from families that were well-to-do, you know. And they always had these marvelous sweaters and things, and I had, I didn't have anything with holes in it, but it wasn't that, they weren't pretty. I remember the time that I went to, uh, my mother used to buy shoes that would last me forever, so they were about three sizes too big. I looked terrible. ( she laughs ) And I remember one time there was proms, they had proms, and I didn't have any dress to go to the prom, and everybody was going to the prom, and they were making fun of me because I didn't have shoes to wear for the prom and things, and my mother wasn't, uh, she wasn't aware of those things. She didn't take care of that.

SIGRIST: Um, tell me about your parents' adjustment to this country? Say, talk about their first year here.

CHNEOUR: Well, it was rather, I know my father was difficult because he was used to having his big room upstairs in France, with the whole floor for himself, and the garden. And here you're closed into a little hotel room. And he continued working, and I think he even got a, uh, he got a very, he got some arthritis in his shoulder because of having, being cramped for writing,

and he always, uh, but he'd always took long walks. He had a way of organizing his day. He would work early in the morning till about eleven, and then he would go take a long walk in the park, and then come back and continue work or eat or something. He always, he had an organization. And one thing he always told me, because I was in the art world, and he said, uh, if you want to be an artist, it's not right, don't think that it's, you can have any kind of life, a crazy life, that you go to bed any old hour and do this. You have to have, you have to organize your life, which is much more difficult than somebody organizing it for you. And if you don't organize your life you'll never be anything, it'll just be, you know. So he, uh, he taught me how to study, how to be something, at least a little more important, a little more profound.

SIGRIST: Did he like America?

CHNEOUR: Yes. Yes, he liked America. He knew America. He had been, at least a couple of times before, because he was invited.

SIGRIST: Oh, you didn't say that.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. It wasn't his first time. He knew America.

SIGRIST: Did he speak English?

CHNEOUR: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, did he learn English?

CHNEOUR: He learned English. They went to school and learned English, both of them.

SIGRIST: Do you know a little bit about that?

CHNEOUR: I know they went to school because they want to become American citizens, and they had to answer things, and they wanted to speak English. And they went to English, to speaking, to study. And, uh, in order to, and they wanted to get their citizenship. Because my father was also a displaced person in the First World War. He was a, he had a nonsen passport. Nonsen, in those days, it was called, instead of displaced persons. This war was called displaced persons, the last war was called nonsen. You had a sort of a world passport.

SIGRIST: What do you . . .

CHNEOUR: Nonsen.

SIGRIST: Nonsen.

CHNEOUR: Nonsen. N-O-N-S-E-N. Nonsen passport. That's what my father had.

SIGRIST: And it meant the same thing.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. And he tried to become a French citizen, and they wouldn't give it to him. They were real rotten in France with him. I don't know if it was anti-Semitism. It could be, very easily. But he never was able to get the French citizenship. He lived quite a few years in France. And he couldn't get it. And so he wanted to get the American citizenship. It was a party the day he became American. He became American, my mother, and we became American immediately through them.

SIGRIST: How long after your arrival did that happen?

CHNEOUR: Well, they became American, I believe, in 1948.

SIGRIST: Okay. So not that, seven years, not that long after.

CHNEOUR: No. They, they studied, and they were very happy to become Americans.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she ever go to work in this country, or . . .

CHNEOUR: My mother never worked.

SIGRIST: She never worked.

CHNEOUR: She comes from, I mean, to her work was, uh, you know, you had to be a lady and do nothing.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

CHNEOUR: But she didn't do nothing. I mean, she wasn't used to doing dishes, to cooking. We always had a maid. We had, we had several maids in the house in France. We had a gardener. We had a maid, a live-in maid, and we had a maid that would come in, I told you, several times.

SIGRIST: Right.

CHNEOUR: We had a gardener, and we even had a governess for the children. She didn't do anything. My mother was a lady who didn't do anything.

SIGRIST: And she . . .

CHNEOUR: And so suddenly she had to start living in cramped

quarters and cook in one of these, it was a closet, a closet with a cooking stove, a little cooking stove. And she would cook for my father, and, uh, and that's why they got rid of, because my father said he couldn't work with having the children in the house. He would go mad. That's why they sent us away, so my father would have peace and quiet to work.

SIGRIST: Did you, uh, because your early experience in this country was negative, you know, you were not happy, did you ever wish that your family hadn't come here?

CHNEOUR: No, I'm very happy. In fact, I'm very happy, whenever I . . .

SIGRIST: But that's later. I mean, then, when you were a kid.

CHNEOUR: No, I didn't think that far. I thought that, no, how could I wish anything else but to come here to, I knew that if we stayed anywhere else we weren't going to make it. So how could I think that? I couldn't. On the contrary, I couldn't wish that at all. I had to adapt. I realize I had to adapt, whether I liked it or not, I had to adapt. And I didn't have anything against the country. The country was beautiful. I mean, I was in, Connecticut is a beautiful town, you

know, a beautiful state.

SIGRIST: Did your brother have an easier time of it at school than you did?

CHNEOUR: No, I had an easier time than he did.

SIGRIST: You had an easier time.

CHNEOUR: Yeah. Well, I was younger.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the troubles he had in school?

CHNEOUR: I don't know. He didn't do so well in school.

Although he, he turned out to have an IQ much higher than mine. They took all these tests. He's a quite brilliant person, but he didn't get along with people.

He, uh, he was kind of very delicate and very nervous, and the boys were big boys, and they would, they would start picking on him. And the kids picked on me, too, but they picked on him even more. And they were men, boys, who had more strength. Sometimes they would, they did bad things to him. And I remember defending him. I remember once I took a, I found a stick, and I smacked somebody to, you know, defend him. Because they took advantage, they made

him feel bad, also. The children were terrible. The children are very, are very, uh, sometimes, you know, they don't have a sense of, uh, they took advantage when they can. I don't know, it's . . .

CHNEOUR: They are cruel. That's the word, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: In our last remaining minutes, we have just a few left. Why don't you explain to me how your experience as a child colored the rest of your life?

CHNEOUR: Gee, that's a big question.

SIGRIST: ( he laughs ) Can you do it in three minutes, or four minutes?

CHNEOUR: How did it color the rest of my life? Well, all I can say is that I, the one thing that I always loved was dancing, right? And I, uh, when I came out of school, I was very happy I came out of school, and I met my dance friends, which one of them is with me now. I met my dancing friends and we, somehow I suddenly felt those are my friends, and all the kids that were so awful had nothing to do with me, and now suddenly I found my world, I found my world, which was in the dance world, and artists. People who were in the art

world, they were my people. And I found that I did have my people. I wasn't lonely. Before I had been lonely. I felt I didn't belong. This is, "Where did I come to? What did I do?" You know, it wasn't a matter, it was the wrong kind of people that were with me. And then I met the most marvelous people, and I found that I'm always defending the sense, the great sense of art and of, uh, sensibility that the Americans have if you know them, if you get to know them, and I think that mostly, I'm American too, now, so I can't say the Americans, no? But I think it colored my life in the fact that it made me also, the travel made me, meeting things, and also I travel a lot because I dance. I've seen the world with companies, dancing. So I found that the world is my, it's my orange. And I find that I'm a citizen of the world, in a way. But I do find that America is really my home. My home, my sole home, although I don't live here. But I always have to come back. I have to come back here. Don't ask me why, but it's something that, I have to come back.

SIGRIST: How often do you get back to America?

CHNEOUR: Well, sometimes once a year, sometimes once every two

years, but I always manage to get back, particularly New York.

SIGRIST: We should say for the sake of the tape where you live now.

CHNEOUR: Oh, I live in Madrid. I live in Madrid, in the city. And, uh, and it's very nice, it's quieter, it's better. Because if you live, uh, by yourself or something, a woman by herself in New York is not so good, especially that I'm not so young any more. And so I, uh, it's better. I feel safer somehow. But otherwise I miss America quite a lot. I miss New York particularly, because that's what I knew. And, uh, my friends. Many of them have gone already. That's what happens. But, uh, there are quite a few. I just love . . . ( she clears her throat ) I can never be in a, you know, in a group of businesspeople. I find that it's just not my cup of tea. I find that I'm like in Mars when I'm with them. ( she laughs ) So that's the only thing I can say. In America I've found my people, and my people are the artists, the people in the art world.

SIGRIST: Truly your niche in life.

CHNEOUR: Yeah, that's exactly right.

SIGRIST: Well, Renee, I want to thank you very much for coming here, sort of all the way from Madrid. ( they laugh )  
Um, and telling us this fascinating story, and especially the information about the Navemar, which I'm particularly interested in. Um, thank you very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Renee Chneour, on Wednesday, January 5, 1993, in 1994, at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum Recording Studio.