

EI-043

MARGARETHE STERN SUHL

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 13, 1920
INTERVIEW DATE: 5/2/1991
RUNNING TIME: 1:01:24
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: BRIAN FEENEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1994
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1995

GERMANY, 1940

AGE 19

SHIP: FAHNENDAM (ON MANIFEST SAID "WESTERLAND")

PORT: ANTWERP

RESIDENCE:

- **GERMANY: BERLIN**
- **USA: NYC**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday came from Germany in 1940 when she was twenty years old.
Good morning.

SUHL: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Suhl, can you please give me your full name, and your maiden name included in that, and your date of birth?

SUHL: My full name is Margarethe Suhl. My maiden name is Stern. I was born April 13, 1920.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

SUHL: I was born in a small village called Lichenroth, in Germany, which is not far from Frankfurt on the Main. When I was about six years old we moved to Berlin. I lived in Berlin till 1940, till we left for the U.S.

SIGRIST: I see. Could you spell the town that you were born in, please?

SUHL: It's L-I-C-H-E-N-R-O-T-H. It's a tiny village, as a matter of fact, when I went to visit this village about twelve years ago, and I inquired about it at a travel bureau, the lady couldn't even find it on a map. She had to look it up in a special book, and it had four hundred one inhabitants.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it a little bit for me, what you remember as a small child, a very small child?

SUHL: Yes. I remember it, of course, better from the time I visited it. We had a house in this little village which was right around the corner from the school building. We, this house was inherited from my grandfather. My mother was born in Beerfelden in the Odenwald, near Heidelberg.

SIGRIST: Can you spell all of that, please? (he laughs)

SUHL: Near, Beerfelden is B-E-R-F-E-L-D-E-N [sic: Beerfelden]. That's a small town near Heidelberg. And we were five children. We, I went to school for a few months in that little village. They had one class from age six to fourteen. It was too small a town to have several different classes. We, there was a small Jewish community, perhaps twenty Jewish families, at the time when I was born there. And I remember that I was a happy child. We were probably a fairly poor family. I remember that we had a maid

which, even though you are a poor family everybody could afford that. It was a young girl who came to my mother's house after she left school at age fourteen and she stayed with us till we left Germany. When I went to visit Germany in, as I said, about twelve years ago, I was looking at the house where I used to live and people came over to me out of curiosity and asked me who I was and I told them that I had once lived there. And they remembered me and my family very well. And suddenly a man came over and shook my hand and said, "I'm the brother of Lena, who used to be your maid." Which was very exciting, it was a very exciting moment.

SIGRIST: What did the house look like?

SUHL: Um, I, unfortunately I didn't bring pictures. (she laughs) It was a wooden frame house. There was the living section of it and there was also a stable next to the house. We had a few cows, and I think we had a horse or two, I don't remember exactly.

SIGRIST: What did your father do?

SUHL: My father was a butcher and he also was engaged in the synagogue and he did perform some services there. When we moved to Berlin my father opened a butcher shop and that's what he did until he died in 1934.

SIGRIST: I see. What was his name?

SUHL: His name was Feist Stern, F-E-I-S-T, Stern.

SIGRIST: You say he was a butcher. Was he a special kind of butcher, or just sort of a general butcher?

SUHL: Well, a general. Especially a kosher, I think, there had to be, a Jewish butcher was a kosher butcher, and animals and chickens had to be butchered in a certain way. There was not much opportunity in this small village for him to be anything else. He had five brothers who all left for the United States before the First World War. And, of course, that also helped us to come over to the U. S. later on.

SIGRIST: Was your father from this town?

SUHL: My father was from this town. He was born in this town. As I mentioned before, my grandfather owned that house where...

SIGRIST: Is that his father?

SUHL: That was his father, right. And there were I think six boys in that family. One girl that, who had died as an infant, I think. And, as I said, all the other brothers went to America after, before the First World War, but my brother was the youngest, so he remained there.

SIGRIST: (correcting her) Your father was the youngest.

SUHL: Yeah. He was the youngest.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandfather?

SUHL: Yes, I do.

SIGRIST: Can you describe him for me?

SUHL: Yes. He moved with us to Berlin, and I remember him more from Berlin

from before. Oh, I also remember him from Lichenroth. We had a dog, which was a pretty fierce shepherd. He was kept outside in a dog hut and nobody could go near him except my grandfather. He was the only one who could get near that dog. I remember him from Berlin more. He was then eighty-six years old, and he was always sitting in the corner near, near a big stove that we had in the living room, and smoking his pipe. And he did not say much. He was, to me he was a very strange person. He was too old (she laughs) for me to pay much attention to him.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother. What was her name?

SUHL: Her name was Jenny Stern, born Meyer, M-E-Y-E-R.

SIGRIST: Janice, you said was her name?

SUHL: Jenny.

SIGRIST: Jenny.

SUHL: Yeah. My mother was a very bright woman, and, but had also very little formal education. She married my father. It was sort of in a sense a come down from Beerfelden to Lichenroth. Beerfelden was not a big city either, but had a little more culture than that tiny village.

SIGRIST: How did your parents meet?

SUHL: I assume by introduction. I'm not sure. And, (she pauses) my mother had a very hard life bringing up five children. I remember that she baked her own bread. In the village, everybody did. There was a village oven that (she coughs) was used by the villagers I guess once a week or once

every two weeks. There was a big trough and I remember my mother kneading that dough. And then we would go to the village oven, and the bread was formed, big, round bread. It was put on a wooden shovel which was shoved into that oven, which was heated probably by wood. And the bread had to last for either the week or the two weeks that you, until your turn came to use the oven again.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help her make the bread?

SUHL: Well, I used to try, yes. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You said there were five of you. Could you tell me who your brothers and sisters were?

SUHL: Yeah. My oldest sister Selma, who was the one who had come to the U.S. before us. The next sister was Martha, and then Trudel. They were each two years apart. Then for five years was nothing, then myself. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Surprise.

SUHL: And then another four years and my brother was born. So four girls and one boy.

SIGRIST: Was it a crowded house?

SUHL: Yes. It was always crowded. We always had visitors for holidays. My father was a very generous person, although we had very little, but whatever little we had was shared. And we always had poor visitors who may have come to visit the town. Also later on in Berlin the same thing. So

we were already seven in the family. My grandfather was eight. My, the invited guests and after a while my mother's mother also came to live with us in Berlin. So we always were a big crowd, and we always had friends. My older sisters always had friends come over, so there was always, it was always a lively house.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you a musical family at all?

SUHL: No. My father had a good voice and sang very nicely, but, as a matter of fact, he made my brother and me study the violin for a little while, but it was shortly before Hitler's time and that sort of broke up everything. And then my father died fairly young. He was fifty-two years old when he died in 1934.

SIGRIST: And that was after you had moved to Berlin.

SUHL: Yes, yes. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: When did you move to Berlin?

SUHL: About 1926 or early '27. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about when you moved to Berlin, where did you live?

SUHL: I had an uncle, my brother's, my mother's brother, who was fairly well-to-do. And he saw that we had no opportunity in Lichenroth, so he asked us to come to Berlin. We lived with my uncle for a short while. My uncle and his wife, for a short while. Two of my sisters, Martha and Trudel, went for a short while to visit another aunt who lived in Lauterbach, Germany, until

we would get adjusted in Berlin, and until my parents found an apartment, which they did in a neighborhood called Schmargendorf.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SUHL: S-C-H-M-A-R-G-E-N-D-O-R-F.

SIGRIST: What is the nature of that neighborhood?

SUHL: It's a residential neighborhood bordering another section which was called Grunewald, which was a very exclusive beautiful section.

SIGRIST: I'm going to have to ask you to spell that too, please.

SUHL: Grunewald, G-R-U-N-E-W-A-L-D.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

SUHL: And it was a, what we would call here a four-and-a-half room or five room apartment. And we were very crowded there, obviously.

SIGRIST: Do you remember moving, actually moving, to Berlin? Do you remember packing and going to Berlin or how you got there.

SUHL: It's funny that that part I don't remember at all how we moved. Yes, I think we sort of packed and left fairly late at night. There was no train in Lichenroth. We had to go with the horse and buggy to a train. But that I remember very faintly. Other things that happened earlier like a visit to the town where my mother lived in Beerfelden, I remember very well.

SIGRIST: Did she have, she still had family there.

SUHL: She still had, yeah. Her mother was still there.

SIGRIST: Well, tell us about the visit that you remember.

SUHL: Well, I remember that we went on the train and remember that my mother gave my age, I think children under four didn't have to pay, and she said I'm three-and-a-half or four and I said, "No!" (she laughs) "I'm not four!" I embarrassed her. And I remember that when I visited Beerfelden and my grandmother was there and another of my mother's brothers was there. He had a dry goods store and (she coughs) he asked me to pick out a fabric for a dress that my mother could make for me, and I wanted a dress with a red, a fabric with red and white polka dots, and it was a very poor material. And my mother tried to talk me into another fabric, but I insisted on that particular one. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your mother's family like? Were they a close family?

SUHL: Well, my mother was close to her mother. Obviously after a while my mother lived with her. She had, they were also five children. She had two sisters and two brothers. My mother was the oldest in the family. They all went to different towns to live. The one sister lived near the Rhine in Ingelheim, I-N-G-E-L-H-E-I-M, on-the-Rhine. The second sister in Lauterbach, and one of my uncles to Berlin. The other one stayed in Beerfelden and then came to the United States.

SIGRIST: Were they a more affluent family than, say, your father's family?

SUHL: Uh, a little more. I don't think they were very wealthy either, but perhaps a

little more affluent.

SIGRIST: What did your mother's father do for a living?

SUHL: My, I think he had that same dry goods store that my uncle later on had, yes. But I know very little about that grandfather because he must have died fairly young, and I also know very little about my father's mother, who also had died young.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, let's go back to Berlin so that we had sort of started with Berlin. Let's talk about, let's talk about religious life in Berlin. Did your father hook up with a synagogue there also?

SUHL: Yes, he did. There was a synagogue very close by. It was a small synagogue, but we had a very, very nice and intelligent rabbi there who was also a writer. His name was Bernhart Cohen. He later on also came to the United States and died in the car crash. As he always had a service, after the regular service he always had a service for children on Friday nights which I remember where he told wonderful stories, most of them, of course, Jewish stories. And I went to regular school, but I, we also went to Hebrew school, which my brother and I hated. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did the rabbi teach?

SUHL: He taught at the Hebrew school, and there were some other teachers, too.

SIGRIST: Why did you hate it?

SUHL: We hated it because we had to, we liked to play and came about two thirty in the afternoon my mother would yell out of the window, uh, I was called

Gretel by my family because Margarethe is, Gretel is short for Margarethe. And my mother would call, "Gretel, Herbert, you have to go to Hebrew school." And then we had to go out and get our books and stop playing, (she laughs) and we had to march to Hebrew school twice a week.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the inside of a synagogue for me?

SUHL: Uh, well, as I said before, it was a very small synagogue and, of course, to me it looked vast. There was an upstairs section where the woman had to sit, and there was also naturally the downstairs section was for me, and in the front was the cabinet where they kept the Thoras.

SIGRIST: As a child did you sit upstairs?

SUHL: Yeah. I had to sit upstairs with the women.

SIGRIST: Did your brother sit with your mother, too?

SUHL: No, my brother had to sit with my father. And most of the time I was terribly bored (she laughs) in the synagogue. There was a short period in my life where I became super-religious. My parents were religious, and it was a religious house. But for a while I became super-religious, and that happened when I was about thirteen, fourteen years old. And the reason for that was, because at that time Hitler had come to power and I was in, I was attending a German *Lyzeum*, which is a high school for German girls. The German school system is very different from the school system here. You could either attend a public school until you were age fourteen and leave school then and, or you could, when you reach age ten you go to a high school where you take foreign languages and you attend a high school until you're about eighteen years old and then are ready for

college. I attended that German *Lyzeum*. I had a scholarship, but after Hitler came to town I, they took away the scholarships for Jewish children. And I went to, I went to a Jewish school, which was a very religious school. And I studied Hebrew. I became very fluent in Hebrew. Unfortunately, I forgot everything. But I could speak it quite fluently, read it and knew the grammar and everything. So during that period I became super-religious. But that didn't last very long. I also joined an organization which was a Zionist organization, and most of the people there were non-religious at all, and slowly I gave up (she laughs) religion. And I wanted to go to Israel on a youth, they called it a youth alia. Young people could, would try to go to Israel at that time. That's why I really concentrated on studying Hebrew. And I left school when I was fifteen years old, and I felt I had to learn a trade because in Israel you needed a trade. And I went to a, I learned how to sew, and I took a job as a seamstress. I mean, I learned how to sew.

SIGRIST: Where did you take the job?

SUHL: In Berlin, with another Jewish...

SIGRIST: In a factory?

SUHL: Yeah. It was a Jewish, well, it wasn't really a factory, a small dressmaker who employed two or three people. And I did that because I felt I needed that, something like that for Israel. One of my sisters left, when I was fourteen years old left for Israel. And she was, that's my sister Trudie, who is five years older than myself.

SIGRIST: Are you saying Trudel or Trudie?

SUHL: Trudel, Trudel. We call her Trudie, but it's Trudel, Trudel. And she got married at age nineteen and left for Israel and went to a kibbutz in Israel. (she coughs)

SIGRIST: Were you communicating back and forth with her?

SUHL: Yes, we were communicating. And my mother was extremely unhappy about the idea that I wanted to go to Israel, but I was determined. And, but as time went by there was no more, there were no more ships going to Israel. There were some going, and you heard all kind of horror stories where they were turned back, and then there were no more ships going, so I decided to go with my family to America.

SIGRIST: I see. I want to talk a little bit about, you said you had this sort of big, open household, everyone could come in. Did you celebrate holidays?

SUHL: Yes, we did celebrate all the...

SIGRIST: Did you have Passover at your house?

SUHL: All the Jewish holidays, yes.

SIGRIST: Could you describe what that might have entailed, or who would have come?

SUHL: Yeah. Well, usually my father invited some poor people. I don't know where he always picked them up but... (she laughs)

SIGRIST: He just found some.

SUHL: He found somebody. And my mother had a woman friend and her son who had no family. They would be invited. And the holiday was performed according to, the Seder was performed according to tradition. My father would read the things, we would sing the songs. And all the traditional foods were being served, which my mother had to cook for days, I guess.

SIGRIST: Was she a good cook?

SUHL: Well, I would think, average. She did, was not a gourmet cook. She would, but she also, she always prepared very healthy meals. We always had soup, salad, vegetables, some meat. And, as children we offered complaint, "Every day is soup and salad and meat. We don't like it." She said, "Well, what else could you want?" (they laugh) I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was there one thing that she made that was really special to you?

SUHL: Well, she baked very good plum cakes and apple cakes. Huge portions, huge trays of cakes, because we were a big...

SIGRIST: Were those for certain occasions?

SUHL: Well, we ate them at any time when my mother wasn't looking. (she laughs) And she would, for every Friday night she would bake a *challah*, if you know what that is.

SIGRIST: The eggy bread.

SUHL: Yeah. Which I learned to make very, when I was very young. I think I was about twelve, and I kept on watching her, and then I learned how to make it, and I started making it, with great success. When I saw my mother pour

in a little oil I poured in a little more, (she laughs) so everybody liked it, and it was, it became my job after a while. But for the holidays she, I guess everything was cooked well. Nothing fancy, of course. Just a...

SIGRIST: Now, you said your grandfather is living with you at this point.

SUHL: Yeah, my grandfather.

SIGRIST: Then your grandmother, your mother's...

SUHL: Moved in, right. She also came from Beerfelden and came to Berlin and lived with us.

SIGRIST: Had your grandfather died by that point?

SUHL: No, he hadn't yet. But I think he died fairly soon afterwards. It was a very uncomfortable living quarters. One of my sisters lived, my older sister lived with my uncle till she left. In 1935 she came to the United States. And, but we were still quite a crowded house.

SIGRIST: Talk about your grandmother a little bit. What was she like?

SUHL: Uh, I remember that she was fairly heavysset. She would take my brother to the nursery every day, to a kindergarten every day. And I personally didn't like her that much. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Was she tough? Was she hard?

SUHL: She could, she probably was, she wasn't a bad woman. My brother, being the youngest I guess he was always the pet of the family. And so I guess it

was disturbing to me to have so many people in the house, and I didn't care for her. I didn't hate her, but I can't say that I loved her. And...

SIGRIST: Did you have to share a bedroom with some of the kids?

SUHL: Oh, sure. (she laughs) I forgot really what the sleeping arrangements were for a while. One room, I think my grandfather and my father shared, my oldest sister slept on a couch in the bedroom. My mother and my grandmother had the big beds in the bedroom, and there were several other beds, for I was, my other two sisters and myself and my brother. It was...

SIGRIST: Very crowded.

SUHL: It was very, very crowded. I'm, really, when I think how my mother managed to keep the house neat and clean it's amazing, it is amazing. And she did it all by herself without any help when we were in Berlin. So...

SIGRIST: Now, you said your father died in '34.

SUHL: Right.

SIGRIST: Your sister left in '35.

SUHL: Five, right.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about that period a little, because it must have been a period of great loss.

SUHL: It was a great loss. It was, I, of course, realized that my father was very

sick. He died of cancer. And...

SIGRIST: How old of a man was he?

SUHL: Fifty-two. He was fifty-two years old when he died. And, well, I remember his sickness. I remember when he was in the hospital and he wasn't sick very long. I guess he was sick for perhaps only about six months. At the time they didn't have too many good cures for cancer. It was stomach cancer. And I also believe that he hardly ever went for a checkup. Afterwards I heard that he often complained about pressure on his stomach for quite a while, but he didn't give it much thought and kept on working and then went to the hospital. And I think once he was in the hospital he died after about two months or so. Yes. It was a big loss and, of course, it was extremely difficult for my mother. But then my sister Martha and Trudie were working as secretaries in the, in an office, so they helped financially. When I started working as a seamstress, I, I mean, I got practically got a few marks a week, you know, you had a system there in Germany where as an apprentice, you know, you practically got no money. And then my Trudie left for Israel. I know she was nineteen and I was fourteen, so she must have left very shortly after also.

SIGRIST: I see.

SUHL: Yeah. She left shortly after my father died, too.

SIGRIST: And then your other sister left just a year after.

SUHL: Yeah, yeah. She left a year after that. That area is a little hazy, actually, in my mind. Those years, of course, were not pleasant years in Germany. As I said, I had to leave the high school, and I had friends. Oh, we lived in

Schmargendorf. I mentioned we lived in Schmargendorf. After a while we had to leave that particular building.

END OF SIDE ONE
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SUHL: I, you know, I lost most of my childhood friends just because we had to move away from Schmargendorf to a section in the city, because Jewish families weren't allowed to live in those buildings any longer.

SIGRIST: So you were forced to move.

SUHL: We were forced to move. By then it was just my mother, my brother and myself. And my father had a cousin in Frankfurt, a woman who was then about sixty years old. Her name was Sarah. I don't remember her last name. She came to live with us then. We moved into a huge apartment that was, somebody sublet a few rooms in a very huge apartment in an area in the city near Alexanderplatz, which was really not that nice an area.

SIGRIST: How were you compelled to move? How did they tell you?

SUHL: Because it was...

SIGRIST: Did someone come to the door? Did you...

SUHL: Either somebody or, I don't know how my mother was informed that Jewish families had to move out of there. And by then we began to, you

know, certainly think about moving to America also.

SIGRIST: Your sister had already gone by this time.

SUHL: My sister had gone and we never expected that it would take that many years till we could leave. But then there was the quota system, and we could not get out of, out of Germany. And finally, we did get affidavits, but it took a long time. And then we were supposed to leave in September of '39 and, because Germany invaded Poland we couldn't get out in '39 and we had to wait. We then moved. We had to get from Germany to Holland and from Holland to Antwerp, and we left from Antwerp.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about all this process, getting to Holland and then getting to Antwerp.

SUHL: Right. (she sighs) We, of course, my mother made all these arrangements. We had to pack. We could not take more than ten marks. And we were allowed to take our personal belongings.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took, specifically?

SUHL: Just clothing.

SIGRIST: Just clothing.

SUHL: Just clothing. And, because the furniture was packed and stored, but we were not allowed to take it. And we took huge boxes of clothing, maybe some tablecloths that my mother brought and linens and things like that we were allowed to take. And, as I wrote in this letter, in this letter that you saw, right, my mother insisted on taking the feather beds.

SIGRIST: Why?

SUHL: Because in Germany you slept in very cold rooms. You didn't heat a bedroom. You, we didn't have central heating, and you never slept, heated a bedroom, so you needed very warm featherbeds. They're like heavy quilts, but they weren't quilted. They were like an oversize pillow, huge featherbeds, and my mother felt that we needed that. (she laughs) And she took it.

SIGRIST: So you actually had a lot of stuff you were carrying.

SUHL: Yeah. Well, we weren't actually carrying it. You know, it was shipped somehow. I remember it was wintertime. It was late January, freezing cold, and we went by train to Amsterdam and we, of course it was a great thrill to get into Amsterdam, away from Hitler's Germany. And I remember my mother had a friend in Amsterdam who picked us up from the train. We went, I think, from Amsterdam to Rotterdam, if I'm not mistaken. And I remember that we went on a bus and the bus driver was very jolly. He left, at one point he got out of the bus and he went to a store and bought something and he showed us whatever he bought. It was a very different atmosphere, obviously, than it had been in Germany, and we saw all the food in the stores, because by then there was strict rationing in Germany. And especially for Jews, we hardly were allowed to buy any food any more.

SIGRIST: As you were traveling and, say, while you were still on the train getting out of Germany, did you experience any sort of anti-Jewish feeling?

SUHL: Oh, absolutely, until you came to the border.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things would happen to you?

SUHL: Well, there were the Nazi officials and the fact that we were, my brother was small, was young. He was, how old was my brother? My brother was fifteen. And it was my mother and one other sister and myself. So they left women and children fairly much alone. They weren't too bad. But there were slurs and, you know, good, you know, they said, "It's good that the Jews get out," you know, "Out with you." And things like that.

SIGRIST: But no physical violence.

SUHL: No, no, no. We did not experience any physical violence. And, as I said, because my father had died in '34 he wasn't picked up to go into a concentration camp which most men in the families were. After a while all, you know, a lot of women, whoever was left in Germany, this cousin of my father's, she insisted on staying in Germany and we never heard from her again. I'm sure she was sent to a concentration camp. From Holland we went to Antwerp and there we were not allowed to get out of the train. The train went right to the boat, and there was, I remember the train stopped and there was a big gate in front of the train, and people who had relatives and friends in Belgium came to the gate to either send regards to people in America or send presents over. And my sister also, my sister Martha had a friend who lived in Belgium. She came to the train, and people tried to find each other. We had to look out of the window. That... (she is moved) I'm sorry. (break in tape)

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

SUHL: From there we went right to the boat, and it was a small Dutch liner. I think

it was called Fahnendamm [At the Manifest she sailed with the ship named Westerland]. There were three small liners like that, and we went on one of them. And the Dutch crew was very, very nice. We enjoyed the trip. Of course, we were seasick most of the time. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What were your accommodations like on the boat?

SUHL: Uh, I remember we were probably downstairs where you really got sick. I don't remember that too well. But in general the boat ride was, I, I remember it as very pleasant. It took about two weeks to get over here.

SIGRIST: Did you go up on deck at all?

SUHL: Yeah, oh, yes. We went on deck. And my mother and my sister were particularly seasick. At one point I got a little seasick and I ran into the bathroom, and my mother was standing in one corner, and my sister was standing in the other corner. And when I saw them both, I started laughing and I forgot about my seasickness. But the trip took so long because we went through the English Channel and there was danger of mines, so they had to go very carefully. I think they stopped at night. And then at one point there was, the boat suddenly turned back and everybody was terribly worried. We thought maybe we couldn't go to America. And the story was that a purser had committed suicide. He had jumped off the boat and they had to go back and search for him even though there was no hope, but I guess that was the law of the sea.

SIGRIST: This is what they told you.

SUHL: That's what they told us. What, whether that was the true story, of course, I wouldn't know. And the rest of the trip was kind of smooth, and...

SIGRIST: Did they have organized activities for you to do or anything like that?

SUHL: I doubt that. It was a very small Dutch boat. I do remember that whatever clothes we had we did dress up, and I, so there must have been something at night. I don't remember anything in particular. There were a lot of other Jewish families and we were all very friendly and there was a very friendly atmosphere, very comraderie, because we all were going to America for the same reason.

SIGRIST: Right. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

SUHL: Yes, I absolutely did.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

SUHL: I do remember it was the greatest thrill. It was a very clear, crisp cold day in February. And it was such a thrill that it's hard to describe. And everything else, you know, to get off the boat and to see the officials and all that, to me it was all fun, and I described how we saw my sister, and of course she had very, she had become very Americanized.

SIGRIST: Did the boat dock...

SUHL: Right...

SIGRIST: ...up, do you remember where the boat docked, I guess is what I'm asking you.

SUHL: No, not exactly.

SIGRIST: How did they take you to Ellis?

SUHL: I think, I don't remember that we had to go on small boats. So I thought we could just step off the boat. I don't know whether it could come that close. I may, it was a small liner. I don't know. I don't remember that we had to get into a small boat to come to dock. I have the feeling that we just were able to walk off.

SIGRIST: Did everybody go to Ellis who was in your boat?

SUHL: Yes, everybody who was on the boat went to Ellis, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, describe the Ellis Island experience. What was that like for you?

SUHL: Well, of course, we were searching to see my sister, and then we saw her, and we hardly recognized her, she had gotten so Americanized, she had gotten very thin. And she had a lot of makeup, on which we weren't used to in Germany. And, of course, we were thrilled to see her. She was thrilled to see us. And everything seemed to go very smoothly. The officials were, I remembered them smiling, laughing, being very friendly and, but we had to open all our luggage, and I, then when that featherbed, that carton with the featherbed was opened, my sister almost died because feathers had come out. And they started flying around, and my sister was ready to throw it out right then and there. (she laughs) She didn't want to take it to her home. She had gotten married in the interim and lived in Astoria and we all came to her house, and we met my brother-in-law.

SIGRIST: How long were you at Ellis?

SUHL: I think just a couple of hours. It didn't take very long.

SIGRIST: Then how did you get to Astoria?

SUHL: I don't know whether, I really don't remember. I imagine once we got to the mainland we got a cab. I don't think we went by (she laughs) by train or bus. I would think we went by cab.

SIGRIST: What do you think your mother was thinking about during all of this? She's been through a lot.

SUHL: She had been through a lot, and I don't think it was too happy an experience for her to have to be dependent on her oldest daughter and my brother-in-law, and the crowded, I mean, the crowded conditions, of course, we were used to. Actually, it wasn't that bad, because it was my sister and her husband and my mother, my other sister, myself and my brother. I mean, my sister had a two-bedroom apartment, so it wasn't too bad.

SIGRIST: Which sister was this again?

SUHL: That's the oldest sister who had come here, Selma.

SIGRIST: Selma.

SUHL: She had come here, yeah. And she had gotten married and had the apartment in Astoria. My brother-in-law was a Fuller Brush salesman. It was during the Depression and, but my sister was, I can't say that she was well-to-do, but they were okay. They did all right, and they could keep us

for a couple of weeks. But my other sister Martha and I were looking for jobs immediately which...

SIGRIST: But you didn't speak English, did you?

SUHL: Well, I, in high school, yeah, I had studied some English. I mean, I thought I spoke pretty well. I remember one incident where I went on the subway and I asked somebody for directions in English and I thought, gee, I spoke it so beautiful he doesn't know I'm a foreigner, and the man answered in German. (she laughs) But we, of course there wasn't, there were no jobs to be had, and we find, both my sister and myself, we became maids in different households. But I...

SIGRIST: In Manhattan?

SUHL: In Manhattan, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about that. What was that like for you?

SUHL: Uh, it was horrible. (she laughs) And, of course, I felt I was made for bigger and better things than that. Oh, I also know, being that I had learned how to sew I thought I could find a job in a factory, maybe sewing. And I was told to look in the garment district. I went there, and somewhere I saw a sign, "Machine Operator Wanted." And I went up there, and they said, "Do you belong to the union?" I said, "No." They said, "Well, you first have to join the union to become a sewing machine operator." And so I said, "Where's the union?" They told me where to go. I went to the union and I said, "I would like to join the union." They said, "Do you have a job?" I said, "No. I was told I first have to join the union." They said, "Well, you can't join the union unless you have a job." (she laughs) So that was my

experience as a sewing machine operator. And, but I...

SIGRIST: So you got the domestic work.

SUHL: I got the domestic work. I had, the first one I found with a Jewish family and, near Central Park someplace, or near Riverside Drive. And they were Polish Jews who hated the German Jews like poison. And I was there for a very short while, and I hated it, and I left. And then I had another very short-lived job with a family who had, they had a small child, and I was left alone every night with this child who was, a very young child who cried all the time and was very difficult. And I wanted to find a job where I could go to school at night, you know, finish my education. And it took a while. I, finally I found a job with, in the doctor's office, but he, they were Germans. The wife was a non-Jewish woman. The doctor was a Jewish doctor who also, they were both Germans. And I had to do the cleaning. I also was the, you know, had to put a nurse, you know, a white coat on when visitor's came and was sort of like, not a nurse but I helped a little bit in the office. But there, too, they, in those days you didn't have answering machines, and whenever they went out at night I had to sit in this huge apartment, and I hated all these jobs. (she laughs) And my uncle, my mother's brother who had a big business in Berlin, he had invented a suitcase in which you could hang up garments and it was called Simpac. It was one of the first models of these type of suitcases where you, you know, could hang dresses and suits. He had this big business in Berlin, and he traveled to America on business. But things got so bad that we told him he shouldn't dare come back to Germany. So he went from, I have to tell this story to explain what happened. He went from America to Cuba and was that way able to immigrate to America, and he tried to start a business here of making these kind of suitcases, a soft kind of luggage. Being that I knew how to sew whenever I had time on my evenings off I

helped him making the first models at night on a little treadle machine. Subsequently he started a factory here and I helped him and I became an employee in that factory sewing these, that kind of luggage. And, but that gave me the opportunity to go to school at night and I picked up my education from where I had left it, and I finished my high school. I went to Stuyvesant, not Stuyvesant, um, Irving, I forgot the name of the high school. High school, you know, which you could finish at night. And I, from there I went on to college. I worked for my uncle a few years in the factory and from there I worked, I went to a publishing company. I worked in an office.

SIGRIST: You've done all kinds of things.

SUHL: Yeah. And I got my high school degree, and then I went to college, all at night. Then I got married, and I got married in 1944. I had a daughter in 1946 and I stopped, in the interim I had matriculated for City College and I went to college. And my husband also went to college at night and I interrupted school after my daughter was born in 1946 for quite a number of years. We got a divorce in 1956 and I went back to school at night. In the meantime I started, I had found a job with Merrill Lynch. I worked for Merrill Lynch, and I went to school at night and I got my Bachelor's and my Master's in economics, and I worked for Merrill Lynch for thirty-five years until I became a securities analyst. And I retired in June of 1989.

SIGRIST: My goodness!

SUHL: And here I am! (they laugh) Being that I was retired, I had time to come to Ellis Island one day during the week.

SIGRIST: One thing I do want to ask you in our final couple of minutes here is talk

about how your mother adjusted to America.

SUHL: My mother stayed with my sister. She somehow adjusted. My mother never complained about anything. My mother died fairly young also, also of cancer. She was about sixty-one or sixty-two years old.

SIGRIST: She had been here ten years or so people.

SUHL: Yeah, she had been ten years. She stayed with my sister. My sister had her daughter and my mother helped taking care of her grandchild.

SIGRIST: Did she learn English?

SUHL: She learned a little bit of English. She took the dictionary (she laughs) and studied English that way. (she laughs) She tried to remember all kind of, the words. And she learned a little bit of English. But, you know, she didn't speak it very fluently, but she could make herself understood. And...

SIGRIST: Was she...

SUHL: I don't think it was a happy time for her.

SIGRIST: She'd lost just about everything except for her kids.

SUHL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, of course, it was sad that one sister was in Israel, and she had lost her husband, and her home. And, but, as I said, she never complained, and so, but I doubt that she really was very happy in that situation.

SIGRIST: Yeah. And just in our last minute tell us about going back to Germany and,

you started telling us a little bit.

SUHL: My visit, yes. I had a tremendous desire to see Germany again. I went with a woman friend. We flew into Frankfurt, and we rented a car and drove, I insisted that I wanted to go to my little town, Lichenroth. Village, rather.

SIGRIST: Four hundred and one people. (they laugh)

SUHL: Right. We drove from Frankfurt. We, through Lauterbach where my other aunt had lived who had, who we had never heard from again. She and her daughter were sent to a concentration camp. Her son had left for England earlier, and he then went to Australia. As a matter of fact, he became a judge in Australia. I saw him for the first time in about forty-five years a few years ago when he came to visit here in America. We, as I said, we went from Frankfurt through Lauterbach through some other lovely cities in Germany, and then to Lichenroth. And when we saw the sign "Lichenroth," we were out of town already. (she laughs) We had to turn back.

SIGRIST: Was it an emotional experience for you, or did you feel very removed from it all?

SUHL: It was emotional. My friend whom I traveled with is a very impatient person and, of course, she doesn't speak any German, so I couldn't spend too much time there. But I showed her the house where we had lived. That house had, in the interim, become the house for the mayor of the town, so it had become a landmark. And I recognized that immediately because the maid that I spoke about earlier had corresponded with one of my sisters and send her a picture postcard of that house, so I recognized it. So I showed it to my friend and it's, being that it's such a small village people

are very curious and they kept, started staring at us. We obviously looked very different than the villagers. We came with this little Fiat, I think, that we drove, came through Lichenroth, where there were still very few cars. And we had to stop at one point where the cows were crossing the street. (she laughs) And some people came up to us, and we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by villagers and I, as I said before I explained who I was and this woman, the older woman, said, "I thought I recognized you by the family resemblance." And this man who had become, the brother of this maid who had become the mayor of the town was the one who came over and shook my hand and said, "Do you remember I'm the brother of Lena, your former maid." So it was a wonderful experience, and I asked whether they could show me where the synagogue used to be, and they explained it to me. We drove there. And at first I couldn't find it because they had made a dance hall out of it. If you think a hall, it's probably not much bigger than these two rooms combined. And the, where the Jewish star was there was still, of course, it had been removed, and you could still see, you know, the spot where it had been. And the villagers were telling me about the other Jewish families, that they all had left town eventually and, I mean, they all had left the village eventually. There was just no way of being able to stay there during Hitler's time.

SIGRIST: Well, what a great opportunity that must have been.

SUHL: Yes, it was extremely interesting. Of course, we also went to Munich and saw one of the former concentration camps. I went to Berlin where I used to live, and I went to the house where I used to live, and I saw still names of people who lived there when we, that was the building where we had to move away because we were Jews. And I rang somebody's bell, the neighbor's bell, and an old man came out and he said, "We gave already." And I tried to explain who I was, and from the background a woman said,

"Father, it's Gretel Stern who used to live next to us." And she came, and she let us in, and she told us about another Jewish family who had lived in the, in the building, and she, how she had survived the Hitler period, because these people were not Nazis. We knew they weren't. And I think because she didn't join the Hitler Youth at the time she had to be sent, she said she was at a certain work camp for a while. And I also dug up my girlfriend from when we were six, seven, eight years old. Her name was in the telephone book, and we met after all these years.

SIGRIST: Isn't that amazing!

SUHL: Which was amazing, yes, in Berlin. So there, oh, I could tell a hundred stories about Germany, but that's not the point.

SIGRIST: Well, what a trip that must have been.

SUHL: Yes.

SIGRIST: Anyway, I want to thank you, Mrs. Suhl, for coming out to Ellis Island...

SUHL: You're very welcome.

SIGRIST: And for telling your story for our tape file. Thank you.

SUHL: You're very welcome. It was a pleasure.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF THE INTERVIEW