

EI-506
HELEN (ILONKA) FISHER RYER
BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 29, 1917
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 29, 1994
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 77
RUNNING TIME: 50:21
INTERVIEWER: ELYSA MATSEN
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1996
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CORINNE BROWN

HUNGARY, 1921
AGE: 4

SHIP: THE "MOUNT ST. CLAIR"
PORT: HAMBURG
RESIDENCES:
* HUNGARY: PELLARD
* UNITED STATES: KEANSBURG, NEWARK, JERSEY CITY, CHATHAM, NJ

MATSEN: Good afternoon. This is Elysa Matsen for the National Park Service. Today is July 29th. It is Friday afternoon in 1994. I'm in the home of Helen Ryer, who came through Ellis Island in-see-1921-May of 1921, when she was-

RYER: Four.

MATSEN: Four years old. Can you please start out by giving me your full name and date of birth?

RYER: Alright. Helen Fisher Ryer.

MATSEN: So Fisher was your maiden name.

RYER: Yes.

MATSEN: Now, how do ya' spell that?

RYER: Well, dad first spelled it when we came to this country-he changed the spelling, but it was F-I-S-C-H-E-R. Now it's F-I-S-H-E-R.

MATSEN: Oh, okay.

RYER: And I was born January 29, 1917.

MATSEN: Now, where were you born?

RYER: Pellard, P-E-L-L-A-R-D.

MATSEN: And where is that?

RYER: In Hungary, Hungary.

MATSEN: Pellard. What—what size was that town? Do you remember anything about that town?

RYER: No. I don't, no. Not—

MATSEN: Now, you were four when you left.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: You were young.

RYER: I know it was near to Budapest.

MATSEN: Okay. So, do you remember what the major industry was? What did your father do there? What did most men do?

RYER: Well, Dad—we lived on the count's estate, and he was the overseer, the engineer, chief engineer. He took care of everything.

MATSEN: Of the estate.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: Now, what was your father's name?

RYER: Emery, E-M-E-R-Y, or I-M-R-I.

MATSEN: As it was spelled.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: Okay. What did he look like?

RYER: Dad was short, a very good-looking man. All I can remember is his white hair. He had red hair way back, I think, at the age of thirty, then he turned white.

MATSEN: Can you describe for me his personality?

RYER: He was a very quiet man. And he was more—a very European father.

MATSEN: Now, what do you mean by a "European father"?

RYER: Very strict. He—Mother would discipline us, not him, and he didn't have too much to say. We had to tow the line as children.

MATSEN: Do you remember any specific story from your childhood about your father, maybe something that happened between you and your father?

RYER: No, the only thing, since I was little? No, this isn't funny that I'm going to tell you, because I remember we had a dog.

MATSEN: That's okay.

RYER: We had a dog, and I think it had distemper, so dad and his—this other man that was working with dad, they took the dog out the back of the property and killed it with a hammer or something. That's—That was not a nice experience. We watched at the window and we cried, all of us, to think our dog was going to be destroyed.

MATSEN: What was your dog's name, do you remember?

RYER: Shoyau [ph]. I don't know how to translate that.

MATSEN: What was it?

RYER: Shoyau [ph].

MATSEN: Do you know how to spell it?

RYER: No.

MATSEN: Okay (laughs). Okay. tell me a little about your mother. What was her name?

RYER: Mom? She was—her name was Elvira Hirling Fisher.

MATSEN: How do you spell?

RYER: E-L-V-I-R-A. Her maiden name was Hirling, H-I-R-L-I-N-G, and Fisher was her marriage name.

MATSEN: Describe for me what she looked like.

RYER: Well, there's a picture of her right there if you'd like to see. She's a very good-looking woman.

MATSEN: Oh, she is.

RYER: Yeah. She's very—

MATSEN: Well, for the tape, can you just tell?

RYER: Well, she was, oh, she was—well, a little shorter than dad, but she appeared to be very tall because she was slender. And—

MATSEN: So she was in good shape and took care of herself.

RYER: She wasn't in good shape—she wasn't in good shape when she was pregnant—very sick. With all the four—all her children. She couldn't keep anything down. She'd be way down in weight. The only thing that kept her strong and going was a little sc—brandy. Yeah. So—

MATSEN: Did she have any job or occupation outside the household?

RYER: No. She had four children at home. We had somebody to help her, but she did all the cooking, baking. (she sighs) She did all the embroidery, sewing. She was very talented. Mom was very artistic, too.

MATSEN: Did she teach you or any of your brothers and sisters, any of these?

RYER: Well, cooking.

MATSEN: Cooking.

RYER: And baking her famous recipes that were used with a-a-a balanced scale my sister has, but we never got the recipes, because dad's second wife took it. But that was in Hungarian. We'd have to have it translated. But she had wonderful recipes.

MATSEN: Okay. Is there any story that you associate your mother with when you think about your mom? Is there something you remember from your childhood?

RYER: Well, once we came to this country I always remember before the holidays mom would be busy in the kitchen getting all the baking and everything ready. And she put them in big, tall tin cans till the holiday, and she-I say she would sew for us. She did a lot of embroidery.

MATSEN: It sounds like she kept a beautiful house.

RYER: Yeah, she did.

MATSEN: How about your brothers and sisters?

RYER: Well-

MATSEN: Tell me what their names are.

RYER: Charles is the oldest brother. He-well he lives in Vermont right now and been living there for the past fifteen years. He was the only one that went to college, and he got . . .

MATSEN: What did he study?

RYER: He studied art. So he taught art in high school in Newark, plus he got his doctorate degree after he was married. And he did a lot of traveling. He did the Appalachian Trail from one end to the other, and he's gone back to Hungary where he said it's quite changed. And there's only one man that remembers the family, and he's in his late eighties, so couldn't tell my brother too much.

MATSEN: So it was a completely different place?

RYER: Oh, yes, yeah.

MATSEN: Did he describe for you what that looked like today?

RYER: No. He says it's all changed, because there's highways now, you know, roads all paved and everything. He said it was different.

MATSEN: That was very rural where you grew up?

RYER: Yes. And I still have a cousin who he visited—my dad's sister's daughter. And he—

MATSEN: What was her name?

RYER: Her name was Magda, M-A-G-D-A. And he did spend some time with her and her family. That was last year.

MATSEN: So that's your oldest.

RYER: That's the oldest. Then my sister, Irene. Irene works, lives in Union, and she had been back to Hungary with my mother and my youngest brother that was born in this country—he also went back. And they spent three months in Hungary, and they took care of certain personal things that were left there when we came. And—And Mother visited my dad's parents' grave and took pictures of it, and brought back quite a few things that they couldn't bring when they came to this country.

MATSEN: And then who's next in line after your sister Irene?

RYER: Helen.

MATSEN: And it's you.

RYER: (she laughs) Yes, it's me, yes.

MATSEN: We'll learn more about you. And then you have a younger brother.

RYER: I have Emery, after me. And, of course, Henry, the one that was born in this country.

MATSEN: Okay. So tell me a little about Emery.

RYER: Emery, he was a clown. He—a lot of fun, hard worker. He had four children. Let's see, yeah. You know, with all this family, you lose track of everybody. He had four children and he learned a lot of the tool and dye making from my dad.

MATSEN: That was your dad's occupation.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: After he came here.

RYER: Right. So he—he opened up a business in Irvington, Emery. But he died very young, too. And then, of course, my youngest brother, Henry, I

say he was another clown. And he had five children. And he died at the age of thirty-something in a car accident.

MATSEN: What a tragedy.

RYER: In Oregon. That's where he moved to, from New Brunswick to Oregon, and that's where he lived. So I get to visit his family quite often, and see all...

MATSEN: So your family is still close.

RYER: Very close. We were brought up that way, yes. And Mother—one legacy she left for us—I always remember this when she was going in for surgery for cancer, she said, "Promise me one thing, that you will all stay together, and no matter what, never be angry at each other. Don't be mad."

MATSEN: What a wonderful thing to say.

RYER: Yea. I always say that was a nice legacy she left to her children. So we are very close.

MATSEN: Well, that's good. Let's switch here for a little bit. I want you to describe for me what you can remember about your house, in Hungary first, and then maybe one of the first places that you lived in this country.

RYER: Well, the house in Hungary, I know it was—see I—I should have looked for the picture that my brother brought back. It was a one-floor house. It was like a ranch home. And there was the kitchen. I don't remember this, only from what my brother was telling us. And it had a coal stove in there, and then we had the bedrooms.

MATSEN: How many bedrooms?

RYER: That I don't remember. I don't know how many we had. But it had a porch in front, and there were some flowers when my brother took a picture of the house. And, uh, I'd say there was a lot of grounds. And we did have our pet lamb. We had—

MATSEN: Did you have a name for your pet lamb?

RYER: No, I don't remember that. No. But—It wasn't too much that I could remember about, as a four-year-old child. Yea.

MATSEN: You were pretty small when you came here.

RYER: And all I could tell you is during the First World War...

MATSEN: What was it made out of? Do you know that? Was it a wooden house, or a brick house?

RYER: Yeah, yeah. It was wood.

MATSEN: Made out of wood.

RYER: But I say, I've been told by my dad that during the First World War, being my sister and I were girls—because my son laughs every time—but my brother finally clarified it—the Serbs would come into Hungary and they were afraid that they'd attack the girls, rape them or something. So Mother would hide us in the oven. And my--You're laughing, too. My son, he'd laugh, he'd say, "Yeah. Was the oven on?" I'd say, "Michael, no." But anyway, Charlie did verify it.

MATSEN: It must have been a large oven for you to fit in.

RYER: Well, I was, I don't know how old. During the First World War, that was 1917, wasn't it? So I must have been a baby.

MATSEN: You were very small, a baby.

RYER: And my sister, we're only eighteen months apart.

MATSEN: So you both were that small, okay.

RYER: That leaves...

MATSEN: The must have been right during the Russian revolution.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: Okay. Um, you told me a little bit about cooking and how important it was to your mom, and what a wonderful cook she was. Tell me a little more. What was your favorite food?

RYER: Favorite food? Mom would make the chicken paprika with the little dumplings, and our cucumber salad, which was delicious. She'd make it with sour cream. We used a lot of sour cream in some of our cooking.

MATSEN: I love that.

RYER: You do. And--

MATSEN: Did you help with the cooking?

RYER: Yes. On Sundays—one—my sister would make the beds and dust, and I would have to go in the kitchen and help mom. And then the following Sunday it would be my turn to make the beds.

MATSEN: Which did you like better?

RYER: I didn't mind either one. I didn't mind. In fact, when I was thirteen years old, Mother, Dad, sister and the youngest brother, they went back to Hungary, and I was left home, because I was the good cook. Dad said, "Lay—Let Helen stay home."

MATSEN: Oh, that says something.

RYER: So I was the chief cook and bottle washer for three months.

MATSEN: What was mealtime like on a Sunday?

RYER: Well, we'd all have this big table, and we--the table would be in the kitchen, and we'd all sit around. And, of course, we were always allowed in the winter to have a little glass of wine with our meal. And in the summer dad would give us a little beer with our meal. And, of course, many a time we'd start to kid around, and my dad would say, "Helen had enough to drink." I'd look at my father and I'd say, "I only had one." But we liked to clown around. In fact, I can remember the first time we decided--we were at the table and my brother, who was younger than I, he lit up a cigarette. And we'd go, "Oh, he's allowed to smoke in the house? Now it's our turn." So I said to my brother, "Give me a cigarette." Because I had been smoking, you know, and Dad and Mom didn't know. So my mother looked at my father, and my father looked at my mother as if to say, "I dare you," so I did. And they said, well, they'd rather me--my sister and I smoked in front of them than in back of them. So that's how we got to smoking. But, that was our vice.

MATSEN: So describe a little bit more about the kitchen for me. It must have been a large kitchen if the--

RYER: It was a large kitchen. It had a coal stove because there was no steam heat or anything where we lived. And the sink, in fact, we used to do a lot of--Mom used to go to the farmer's market in Newark and buy all the vegetables and fruit and all that, and can it at home. And we had to help. We had to scrub the cucumbers to--for pickles. We had to stir the grapes for the grape jelly. No pectin or anything went in. It was cooking it for a long, long time. And we'd take turns stirring that. And then we had to sterilize the jars that were--the old-fashioned way--and help Mom. We always had to help my mother.

MATSEN: It sounds like you learned a lot from her, though.

RYER: Oh, yes. In fact we never--I never worked for the recipe to this day. I know some of my friends or my children will say, "Mom, let me have the recipe." My daughter will say, "A little bit of this, a little bit of that. Just take a handful. That's how mother cooks."

MATSEN: A lot of people cook that way. I think that's the best way sometimes.

RYER: I can't give them recipes.

MATSEN: They'll have to come over and help you.

RYER: That's what I tell them. My grandsons, who lived in Floral Park, they always like my cucumber salad, so they say, "Nana, make it," when they come over. And I'd say, "Now, look. It's time you stand here and watch. What happens when I'm not here, when I'm gone?" So I started to teach them, but they still want me to make it.

MATSEN: Of course. Tell me a little about your grandparents.

RYER: I don't reme--

MATSEN: Their names?

RYER: Well, my father's mother and father, I don't remember too much of them, because they, they really weren't on friendly basis with my mother.

MATSEN: That's [not understood].

RYER: And my mother's mother, she lived in Keansburg, and she --she's the one that sent us the money.

MATSEN: She was in America.

RYER: Yeah. She sent our fair to come to this country, and we stayed with her for a little while until things got adjusted.

MATSEN: Do you remember what her house looked like?

RYER: Well, she had--she had so many houses that--the one house I remember was a double house and it looked like it had been a barn or something, but it was floors upstairs and then on the other side there were some rooms. And then in front of the property she had a one-family house that she rented out.

MATSEN: So, now, was this a boarding house?

RYER: No. The boarding house was in New York. That's where she made her money.

MATSEN: Okay. So this was her occupation?

RYER: Yeah. Yeah.

MATSEN: She ran a boarding house.

RYER: Yup. And then after she made her money, then she bought property in Keansburg. She had quite a few houses where she rented out for the summer--the summer or winter.

MATSEN: Was this in a resort area?

RYER: Yeah. Keansburg is down past Matawan. Yeah, it's a resort.

MATSEN: Is it on a lake, or is it on the shore?

RYER: No, it's by the water--the ocean.

MATSEN: Oh. Okay.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: So she would rent these houses in the summer?

RYER: Well, some of them were all year around.

MATSEN: Okay. What can you tell me about what your grandmother looked like? Do you remember what she looked like?

RYER: Grandma was short. In fact, she wore a size four shoe. She was very small.

MATSEN: Petite.

RYER: And she—she really favored more so my aunt's daughter than she did us. Although, every summer we were able to go down to Keansburg and spend the whole summer there. And Dad would come on weekends, and we were so glad when Dad would come because at night he'd take us down to the boardwalk and we'd get to go on rides and get our ice cream cones. And Dad—and then we'd see him off—go back to Newark on the train, which was only a short ways from my grandmother's place.

MATSEN: What can you tell me about religion in your family? What religion . . .

RYER: We were Catholic, yeah. But—

MATSEN: Do you remember anything about your religion in Hungary, before you came here?

RYER: No. All I know is what I was told, that Dad was going to be a priest, and then he changed his mind and he married Mother. But--

MATSEN: When you came here do you remember going to church, where you went to church?

RYER: Yes, in Newark, St. Aldridge's Church. That's where I got married also. And what else was I going to tell you about? Oh, church. My parents got married in New York. They'd come back and forth at different times. And they got married here in New York, the City Hall. And when they went back to Hungary, they weren't married in a Catholic church. And when we were born the priest put on our birth certificate (baptismal papers, birth certificate) "illegitimate children" because at that time Mom and Dad couldn't afford to pay the price to get married in the Catholic church.

MATSEN: Now did they ever later on go and get married in a Catholic church?

RYER: I don't know if they did or not.

MATSEN: Was the marriage legitimized, or -

RYER: Well, as far as we were concerned--don't forget, New York, City Hall—it was legal.

MATSEN: Right.

RYER: Now, I don't know if they did or not. That I don't know. But, anyway, I have it on my birth certificate and it says in Hungarian that I'm illegitimate. But it's a big joke to us because we knew our parents were married.

MATSEN: Do you remember how much it cost to get married? Did they ever talk about how much it cost?

RYER: No, no. It was—

MATSEN: It was more than they had.

RYER: That's right.

MATSEN: Do you remember anything that you did within your house, practiced religion?

RYER: Well, we went to church every Sunday, and Christmas and Easter we went to church. We made our Communion. Made our Confirmation. That's another thing, Mom always believed that religion was the same all over, and when it came time for my sister and I to be confirmed, Mom wanted to have our own sponsor. And, of course, the priest in St. Aldridge's says, "No. We're going to appoint the sponsors from the high school." So my mother says, "No." So she got special privilege that we could have our own sponsor for confirmation.

MATSEN: She sounds like a very determined—

RYER: Mom, when she—well, she said to the priest, "I thought the Catholic religion is the same all over, whether it's in Hungary or here." And the priest couldn't deny that.

MATSEN: Do you remember experiencing any prejudice of any sort when you came to this country? For being Catholic or—

RYER: No, nothing about—no, not prejudice about our religion, but the only thing is we couldn't speak the language, and we were called "greenhorns."

MATSEN: Okay, so from—from coming here, from your immigration experience, there was some, but not religious persecution.

RYER: Not, no, no, no.

MATSEN: Describe for me a holiday celebration at your house.

RYER: Well, Christmas was a big holiday. Dad would trim the tree, and we weren't allowed to see the tree until he was through trimming it.

MATSEN: Where would it be in your house?

RYER: It would be in the dining room.

MATSEN: So you weren't allowed in that room.

RYER: No. It was a sliding door that closed in the middle, and we weren't allowed. Then when we were allowed, and he opened the door. Then we had candles—tiny candles that were on the tree at that time and he'd light it and we saw it and then he'd put the candles out right away because of the fire. And, of course--

MATSEN: What else would be on the tree besides the candles?

RYER: Oh, there was candy that was wrapped in tissue paper, colored tissue paper. And also gilded walnuts. They'd be in either gold or silver. And he put--

MATSEN: Did you make those in your house?

RYER: Yep, yep.

MATSEN: How would you do it?

RYER: Well, we'd spray the walnuts, and Pop would put wooden matchsticks in the center of the walnut, and put wire around to put it on the tree. And the candy--he'd wrap the candy, and then he'd cut the edges so it was frayed, so it was a little more decorative. And we had some other ornaments that we bought—Mother would buy, yeah.

MATSEN: What kind of food would you pack? Christmas—would you have a Christmas dinner, or...?

RYER: Well, the dinner would be chicken—roast chicken and all the trimmings—stuffing. Mom would make all that. And then, of course, her pastries. I also remember making—my mom would make strudel. She'd make the dough, and then she'd have to stretch it out by hand. And we had to stay away from the table because if it's broke we'd get scolded, as though it was our fault. But she made the best strudel, and all her pastries and everything were fantastic.

MATSEN: Sounds great. Do you remember celebrating Thanksgiving? Did you celebrate Thanksgiving?

RYER: Only in this country, yeah.

MATSEN: After you came here you did start to celebrate that.

RYER: Well, we learned, yes. We learned the tradition, and the cranberries. We always made our own fresh cranberry sauce. And, you know, the vegetables and all. We learned living in this country.

MATSEN: To celebrate that holiday [not understood] until you came here.

RYER: Oh yes.

MATSEN: But your family would celebrate it.

RYER: Oh, yes. (a truck can be heard driving by on the tape)

MATSEN: We had a truck going by.

RYER: Oh. And Easter was another holiday.

MATSEN: How did you celebrate Easter at your house?

RYER: Well, that again would be very festive, you know, with all Mom's baking and cooking. Plus, to dye the Easter eggs.

MATSEN: So you would do that as children.

RYER: Yes, yes. That was fun.

MATSEN: How did you, where did you get the dye?

RYER: Well, they would buy it in the store. They had, Paz, or whichever one. It was a dye that we could buy.

MATSEN: Okay.

RYER: And we were able to dye the eggs. We'd have to cook them, bag them hardboiled. That was another ritual that we'd have to watch and do it.

MATSEN: Would you have an egg hunt, or do you remember Easter baskets, or anything like that like they do today, or...?

RYER: I don't remember. But we did—we must have had it because we did have Easter egg hunts for my grandchildren. We always--we'd have it outdoors. We'd all get together, a lot of the cousins and all would come, and they'd get paper bags. And we'd--towards the end we'd use plastic eggs and put money in it and hide them for the children. No, we had Easter egg hunts.

MATSEN: School. School in this country, and if you can remember anything--well, actually, you were too young at that point to be in school, I think.

RYER: At four. No, I was--

MATSEN: In kindergarten, or anything like that.

RYER: Well, when I went to kindergarten I would think I was five or six, yeah.

MATSEN: So tell me about school once you were here in this country.

RYER: Well, I was--school was fun. I enjoyed going to school.

MATSEN: Tell me about your first day. Do you remember your first day of school?

RYER: The first day, when I went to school, my brother took me to school, and I was supposed to—and I came out to wait for my brother to bring me home. We lived on Sherman Avenue in Newark at that time, and it was a busy street. So I—she put me on the line, and when he went to his class I about-faced and turned around and went home (coughs).

MATSEN: Now, is that because you were afraid, or...?

RYER: Yes. I guess I was uncomfortable, ya know. There was nobody around to stay with me until I went into the classroom. But I was—I was punished. I was made to sit in a little chair in the corner.

MATSEN: By your mom?

RYER: Yes, by my mom, and she was so upset because my brother, Charles, was supposed to bring me home, and he came home, he was frantic. He says, "Can't find Helen." She says, "She's right there in the corner, sitting there." And she says to me, "It's your birthday today, but you're not getting any cake, because you did something terrible" (coughs). So, that I remember.

MATSEN: So birthdays in your house, do you remember any other birthdays when you did get cake?

RYER: Not big birthdays. We didn't have, you know, we couldn't afford. It was fun—children, ya know—they couldn't, after a while, in this country. We'd get a present.

MATSEN: Do you remember any of the presents?

RYER: Yes. One year I got—when I got older I got a suitcase. It was small gifts, yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

MATSEN: Um, how about language difficulties? When you started going to school, was that difficult?

RYER: Yes, but it didn't take long, because being young you're adapted to pick up another language. Not like Mother and Dad. It was a little more difficult for them because they were older. Mom went to the Y to learn the language, plus she'd read the paper and she learned the language by going to school, and also reading The Daily News, The New York News. Dad—it took him a little longer, but he could speak when he wanted to.

MATSEN: Do you remember any of your teachers or friends from school—were small, or as you got older?

RYER: Yes. I had one teacher—I think it was—I was in the second grade—Miss Johnson. I was her pet. She said I was the best student because what I did. I was very quiet in class and I put my hand down on the desk and suck my thumb. She didn't know that. And I was a good student in

marks and everything. Not only that but, you know. And we corresponded up to—she and I—I think after my son was born, three children. No.

MATSEN: Oh, you're kidding.

RYER: No.

MATSEN: This is your second grade teacher.

RYER: Yep, Miss Johnson. She was fabulous. In fact, from Hawkins Street—we made quite few friends with the teachers.

MATSEN: That was the name of your school?

RYER: That was down back in Newark, yes.

MATSEN: What was the name again?

RYER: Hawkins (coughs). And Charlie—he got acquainted with Miss Taylor, our nature study teacher. We really did all right, the Fisher children.

MATSEN: What was your favorite subject?

RYER: I liked almost every subject.

MATSEN: You liked school.

RYER: Yes, I liked school. And not only that, report cards, when they came home, Dad would always reward the one that had the highest mark. And Helen was the one that would get fifty cents, and the other ones would get a quarter, 'cause I always had the highest marks. And, of course, Dad never felt—see, I was—should have gone to college, but Dad never felt that a girl should have a college education. Because, "Eventually she'll get married," he told my mother. So that was how I lost that.

MATSEN: It's an old world, I guess.

RYER: That's, exactly, European. And, of course, Charlie did go to college. And Emery, he went. Well, we all finished high school. We were allowed that. But the boys had more education than we did, you know, after high school.

MATSEN: Did you know any English at all before you came to this country?

RYER: No, no.

MATSEN: Nothing.

RYER: No. Only a little German 'cause Mother—well—it used to be Austria-Hungary and they spoke German. Mom went to parochial school, where she was taught German. And when she came to this country she talked German

to her mother or her sister so we didn't know what sh—they were talking about, but we learned to pick up some of that.

MATSEN: So you knew what—what languages when you came?

RYER: Hungarian, and a little German.

MATSEN: Do you know Hungarian now?

RYER: Yes.

MATSEN: Okay. So you kept that.

RYER: Yes. But I kinda chop it up, because I don't use it any more.

MATSEN: Oh, okay.

RYER: When Dad was living I'd have to talk to him in Hungarian, and he lived with me for about a year after his second wife died and—no —I got to. And, of course, I have a neighbor—two neighbors across the street, but it's very difficult for me to converse with them in Hungarian.

MATSEN: Well, I'd like to talk a little bit about coming to America. Now, I know you were very small and probably don't remember much, what can you tell me about your trip at all? Anything?

RYER: No. I can't tell you anything about my trip. All I remember that—
—

MATSEN: Do you remember the ship? Do you remember...?

RYER: Nope. All I can tell you is when we landed in—arrived in New York, I was taken off the ship and taken to Ellis Island. And so was my brother Charles, the oldest. And this I remember is they put me in a wagon cart, a carriage, and they covered me with canvas when they took me off the ship. So I don't know what I had, and I was there a while, because Dad told me by the time they were releasing me and Mother came to get me with her brother, I didn't know who she was.

MATSEN: How many days do you think you were there?

RYER: Oh, I must have been there a couple of weeks. I don't know about days. It must have been longer than, yeah.

MATSEN: Now, your brother—why was your brother—and which brother was that?

RYER: Charles, the oldest. He had scars on the back of his head, and they thought it was ringworm, and it wasn't.

MATSEN: So they just wanted to check it out.

RYER: He was released in a few days.

MATSEN: And no one else went through Ellis Island.

RYER: No, no.

MATSEN: Okay. Can you think of any childhood stories (just jumping back, I forgot to ask you)—stories or games that you played as a child?

RYER: Well, the only thing is, as a child we played a lot of marbles, jacks, jump rope. I did roller-skate, but I never was good at it. I'd do more falling than staying on the skates. And there wasn't too many--

MATSEN: Anything that you brought from Hungary with you?

RYER: No, uh-huh, nothing.

MATSEN: Games, or--

RYER: No, no.

MATSEN: What did you bring from—with you? Luggage. Do you have any idea how much your parents brought?

RYER: That I don't know. I don't know. It must have been in trunks or whatever. No, I don't know that. I don't even remember leaving Hungary and going to Hamburg to get on the boat.

MATSEN: Oh, okay. So that's was the port that you left from.

RYER: From Hamburg, Germany, yeah. That I don't--

MATSEN: Do you know how you got there? Did anyone tell you how you got there?

RYER: That I don't remember either.

MATSEN: Okay. What was the name of your ship?

RYER: Uh, I think you have it there.

MATSEN: Mount St. Clair.

RYER: Yeah, Mount St. Clair.

MATSEN: Okay. Do you remember who took you to the boat?

RYER: No, I say, I don't know. We went to the train station. We had to get the train first. I don't--

MATSEN: Who went on the journey out of the family?

RYER: It was Mother and Dad, four children. It was Charles, Irene, Helen and Emery.

MATSEN: And your youngest brother was born here.

RYER: Yes. That was Henry.

MATSEN: Did your brother or anyone tell you anything about where you stayed on the boat, or anything about the food, or...?

RYER: Charles is the only one I talked to. He's the oldest. He was eight years old when we came to this country. He—I said to him—"We had a stateroom," he said. (she coughs) I said, "Where did we eat?" You went in the dining room, but I don't remember that either.

MATSEN: Oh, okay. Is that what the story's from?

RYER: Charles.

MATSEN: Charles.

RYER: Because he even went to school in Hungary—Charles did, before we—

MATSEN: Came here.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

RYER: Well I think I must have been sick because—I must have been in the stateroom at the time.

MATSEN: Maybe. Okay. So you didn't see that. Do you remember seeing New York City after you left Ellis Island?

RYER: Oh, yes, because we stayed in Brooklyn for a year.

MATSEN: What did you think of that? What did you think of New York?

RYER: Well, it was kinda scary at first. But, my aunt—my mother's sister lived in Brooklyn and my mother's brother lived in New York. So..

MATSEN: Everyone was in that area.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: And you stayed with your grandmother. When you went to Ellis Island, do you remember feeling excited or frightened? Just frightened?

RYER: I'm sure I must have been frightened because it's part of my life that I cannot remember or pinpoint. Why I was there, how long, or anything else.

MATSEN: Now, when your parents came to get you, you said that you didn't—

RYER: I didn't recognize my mother. That's what dad told me. I didn't know who she was.

MATSEN: And then from there they picked you up and took you...

RYER: To Keansburg. Yeah.

MATSEN: And that's where they stayed.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: And your grandmother's house? Where did you stay, out of all those houses that your grandmother had?

RYER: We stayed right where she was, you know, in that same house there was enough room for all of us.

MATSEN: So you stayed right with your grandmother.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: And that was in Keansburg. Did anyone—you—you said that your mother returned for a short time from Hungary.

RYER: Yes.

MATSEN: Did anyone return permanently, or everyone stayed?

RYER: No. We all stayed in this country. Nope. The whole family.

MATSEN: Maybe you can explain a little bit more for me. Was there any tragedies that happened after you came to America, when you came to this country?

RYER: As years went by? Well, the only tragedy I can remember is when I was much older, married—was my youngest brother that was killed in an automobile accident in—in Oregon, and he left four children at the time.

MATSEN: Tell me little bit about—

RYER: And Grandma. When—but when she died (that was my mother's mother) she died at my mother's house in Newark.

MATSEN: Was she living with you? Did she end up moving with you?

RYER: No. At the end when she was sick—

MATSEN: When she was sick—

RYER: My mother took care of her. And I, as a person, very afraid of death. So I told my mother, I was married already, and I said, "Please, don't call me while she's dying." I couldn't take it. So of course they told me after she passed away. And that was the first dead person I saw.

MATSEN: Do you remember her funeral, or?

RYER: Yes. Grandma's funeral, yep.

MATSEN: Did relatives come from Hungary for this?

RYER: Oh no, no. This was my mother's. Only my mother's side was from this country. They were here, no. No relatives from Hungary 'cause they weren't related to my grandmother. My grandmother—when she died she was buried in Hollywood cemetery. And I do remember (I say I was married at the time) that they embalmed her in my mother's house. I knew how that was going, because I put two and two together. They were—I don't want to tell you anymore. They drew the blood out of the veins and flushed it in the toilet, and then they put the embalming fluid in her in the house. Then -

MATSEN: They did that right in the house.

RYER: Then, yeah. Then they took her to the funeral parlor.

MATSEN: Now, your—your mother's relatives were already in this country. How did your mother end up in Hungary to meet your father?

RYER: Well, I think originally that's where Grandma lived.

MATSEN: Oh, okay. There were no relatives that came from a funeral, although she was from Hungary at one point.

RYER: Yeah.

MATSEN: Okay, I understand. Tell me a little about your immediate family. A little about how you met your husband and maybe about your wedding and your family.

RYER: Well, I met my husband in Jersey City. I was working there at the time. I was a—sort of a nanny to a boy.

MATSEN: Now, did your family move there, or were you living there alone?

RYER: No, I was living with the family. No, my family lived in Newark.

MATSEN: Okay.

RYER: And I'd go to the store, to get to the butcher and all, and Eddie must have had an eye on me and he kept waiting. He'd wait until I'd get out of the store, and then he'd wait around the corner, and one day he approached me, and it happened to be April Fool's Day.

MATSEN: Now, where was his family from? Where was he from?

RYER: His family—he was born in Madison, right here in Madison. But his mother—he was four years (yeah, four years old) when his grandmother in Jersey City took him. And I asked his mother after we were married—I said, "How come you gave Eddie up? He was the first born, and a boy to boot?" She says, "Oh, I had four others." So, I mean, my mother

couldn't understand that. In fact, she didn't have too much respect for Eddie's mother. But they lived in Madison and, of course, Eddie lived in Jersey City. He was raised by his grandmother. And his—it was a—it was a very—His family, his father—they were very secretive. They didn't tell you all that went on. So, uh, in fact, when I got married I had to move in the homestead where Eddie was raised by his grandmother in Jersey City, and that's how I got to meet Eddie.

MATSEN: Now, were they always from this country, or were?

RYER: No, they were all, his—

MATSEN: Hungarian, or?

RYER: No, no.

MATSEN: What's his background?

RYER: Eddie's family is—one grandmother is Vanderhoof [ph], so she was Dutch. And his other grandmother was Yvonne Rear, which was German. I only know this through what they told me, and they didn't tell you too much. Very secretive.

MATSEN: The family kept to themselves.

RYER: Yeah. In fact, when—

MATSEN: Do you remember your wedding? You were married in the church ?

RYER: In St. Aldridge's. I had quite a nice wedding, yes. My sister was married a year before, so I got to wear her wedding gown. And it was in a champagne color. But I did get my own veil. And then for our honeymoon, Eddie and I, we went to Newton, New Jersey, because we had to be back, 'cause he was getting ready to be appointed as a fireman in Jersey City, so we had to be back. So—

MATSEN: How long did you go? A weekend or?

RYER: Yea, yes. A weekend. Two days, that's all.

MATSEN: The reception? Where was your ?

RYER: Our reception was in Irvington. And it was in a big room by a tavern. And the women—my mother's church group, they did the cooking and the baking. My sister's wedding, the year before, hers was in the hotel in Newark, and it was a big gala event. And she—Mother did all the baking for her wedding. Plus my brother, being that he was an artist, he made all the little Hungarian placemats for every guest.

MATSEN: What did they look like?

RYER: They were the, uh—

MATSEN: The markers of for the names, or ?

RYER: No. It was made out of paper. (she coughs) He painted each and every one in Hungarian costumes, with your name on it, and it was put on the table there, where ya sat. And Irene, I'd say, she had a bigger wedding, and I thought, "After a year later, I can't tax my mother and dad." I said-

MATSEN: Keep it small?

RYER: Yea, smaller.

MATSEN: Now, your husband was a fire-

RYER: He was a fireman in Jersey City.

MATSEN: How did you feel about having a husband with that kind of a career?

RYER: I did not like it, 'cause I've seen so many fires that he was in, and it's very frightening. And-

MATSEN: Tell me a little bit about your children.

RYER: My children? The oldest is Ilona [ph], and I kinda lean on her. Although all my children are good. I have Ilona [ph], then I have Sue, and then Michael. Michael was born last, about seven years after my middle daughter (coughs). They-well, Ilona's-She is very-

MATSEN: Just to explain the background noise, we have a lawnmower going and we had some kids riding by with one of those plastic Big Wheel type bikes. Okay. Finish.

RYER: [not understood] (coughs) Yeah. My-Ilona [ph] had three boys. Sue had two girls. She had three children also. She had two girls and a boy, and Michael has two children, a boy and a girl (coughs). Sue's the only one that moved to New Hampshire, away from us. First she lived in Floral Park for quite a few years, and then she went to New Hampshire (coughs). And I say all my children and grandchildren are very close. We were all very close. Plus I have great-grandchildren also.

MATSEN: So you have a big family now.

RYER: Yes.

MATSEN: That's terrific.

RYER: And I say I have a very close-loving children. After my husband died, they are very close.

MATSEN: That's terrific. Well, I have one last question to ask you. Are you happy that your parents chose to come to America, and that you are an American?

RYER: Definitely, definitely.

MATSEN: How did your parents feel about their choice to come to America?

RYER: Well, Mom was very pleased, because don't forget her family was here, her mother and her sister and brother. Dad, I guess he adjusted to it, and he used to say to me, "You kinda disowned your mother country." I said, "Pop, this is my country. The United States is my country."

MATSEN: Well, Helen, I want to thank you for this interview, and for allowing me to take the time to come out here and interview you for the National Park Service. This is Elysa Matsen. I'm going to sign off now. It is July 29, as I said in the beginning, 1994. It's a Friday afternoon, and I'm here with Helen Ryer for the Ellis Island Oral History Project. Thank you.

RYER: It was my pleasure.
EI-506/RYER