

EI-508

STEFAN WEISING AND THERESA (THEA) BRINKHAUS WEISING  
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HISTORIAN'S NOTE: This is a joint interview.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today in Blairstown, New Jersey at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stefan and Theresa Weising. We are going to be talking about Mr. and Mrs. Weising's trip from Germany when they came through Ellis Island in 1953. They were married at that time. It was a--a honeymoon. And both Mr. and Mrs. Weising are tw--were twenty-three years old at that time. So today is July 30, 1994, and I w--we are going to do the interview all three together. So I want to say that I'm very much looking forward to hearing your story. I think it's gonna be a little different from the usual one, so let's get started. Perhaps if each of you would say your birth date, just to start us out.

THERESA: I'm Theresa. My birth date is July 26, 1929.

STEFAN: And I'm Stefan Weising and my birthday is March 8, '29.

LEVINE: Okay. And where in Germany were you born?

THERESA: I'm born in a little town. The name is Bokel. And that town had only thousand people living there. It was a little farm town.

LEVINE: Could you spell that town?

THERESA: B-O-K-E-L. And it's in West Germany.

LEVINE: Okay. And--and you, where were you--?

STEFAN: I was born in a neighbor town. It was a little bigger, had about eight thousand people, and it's about three miles ap-part, and we lived three miles apart.

LEVINE: And what was the name of that town where you . . .

STEFAN: Wiendenbrück. W-I-E-D-E-N- B-R-U, dots with umlaut, C-K.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. So-

STEFAN: And that's in the county of Westphalia.

LEVINE: And both are in the same county. And maybe one of you could spell that, the county name?

STEFAN: Well, Westphalia. I have to say it in German, so it is Westfalen. It's W-E-S-T-F-A-L-E-N. They call it in English Westphalia.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Well, who would like to start telling about your town?

STEFAN: Well, this whole trip of the whole, leaving from Germany came all about-I was-I was--I'm a cabinet maker by trade.

LEVINE: Well, before we talk about leaving, just tell me what life was like for those twenty-three years. Were you in the same town the whole time until--?

STEFAN: I was born there, and I was still livin' there when I left.

LEVINE: Okay. So if you could tell me about what life was like before you thought about leaving.

STEFAN: Well-

LEVINE: What kind of a place was it?

STEFAN: The war just was over and-and we -- Germany got-just organized themselves again and- . So, what you heard always that the-the New World was more -- to find new things and, you know, and get a better head start, you know. And I-I just finished my apprenticeship as a cabinet maker.

LEVINE: What did that consist of, your apprenticeship?

STEFAN: Three years of training in a place where you can't -- the first year you can't use machinery, in order to be a cabinet maker. The second year they let you use machinery. In the third year, you can --. So then when you go through this and you're qualified, you get your certificate.

LEVINE: Well did you have, were you apprentice to a particular cabinet maker?

STEFAN: No. Well, furniture.

LEVINE: A furniture maker.

STEFAN: Furniture, yeah.

LEVINE: I mean, did you have, like, one person who was your teacher?

STEFAN: No. Yeah. One person as a teacher. And I was in a factory where they made bedroom furniture, but we—the only apprentice was not in—working directly in the place. It was a building connected to this furniture factory, but you couldn't go inside and work with them; you learned your trade separately. And this company had six hundred people working in that time. But we were only—the apprentice section was only—we had (I think) three apprentices the first year, three from the second year, and three from the third year.

LEVINE: Oh.

STEFAN: And they always hired only three people.

LEVINE: So was this, was this quite a honor, or was it a difficult to get to be an apprentice in this place?

STEFAN: See, most -- mostly in our area there was only—only a—a—a couple of jobs you could get. Because our towns and the surrounding towns were only furniture factories. So, and there was another place in our town that they made the Volkswagen campers. And that was—you could work there and learn a trade there, or you had to be a cabinet maker, or you had to be a like, a - a barber or a - a dressmaker, or—or—or a couple of—a shoemaker. And that was about the only schooling you can get. Because, see, in our household my brother had become a cabinet maker because that was the only thing that was available.

LEVINE: I see. So how many children were in your family?

STEFAN: Three.

LEVINE: And what were their names, and where did you fit in the order?

STEFAN: Well, I'm the oldest. My brother Wilhelm is the second oldest. He's in partnership with me now, and my third brother is Paul, and he was here in the United States, but he left and went back to Germany, again. But he was an electrician, and he worked in a factory where they made plywood.

LEVINE: Well did your brother Paul stay here many years?

STEFAN: He was here—I—I forgot it.

THERESA: (whispers) Fifteen years.

STEFAN: Fifteen years.

LEVINE: Oh. So do you know why it was that he chose to return?

STEFAN: Well, first of all my mother is still living in Germany, and she is—right now she's eighty -- eighty-nine years old, and nobody was left in Germany so he decided to take care of her.

LEVINE: Okay. So how then—

STEFAN: And he has no children, so that's why he had no connection left in the United States. And then he wasn't in good—really good health either. You know, he had problems with his neck and so in Germany he thought he could get better social medicine.

LEVINE: Medicine.

STEFAN: Medicine. Right.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name?

STEFAN: Maria.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

STEFAN: Schnitker.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

STEFAN: Yea. I have to write it (writes). S-C-H-N-I-T-K-E-R.  
Schnitker.

LEVINE: And your father, his name?

STEFAN: Martin.

LEVINE: Okay.

STEFAN: Martin. See and they all have only in Germany, our family—what I know, is only one name, no middle names.

LEVINE: Oh. How about grandparents? Did you have any in Germany?

STEFAN: Yeah. I have, from my father's side—I knew only Opa, Grandfather. Grandma was dead already. And from my mother's side, I didn't know anybody. But—they were dead already.

LEVINE: How about the grandfather that you knew? Do you remember anything—

STEFAN: Yeah. Both had farms, you know. From my mother's side had a farm, and my father's side. And they only lived two houses apart, two farms apart, you know.

LEVINE: So did you have a lot of contact with that one grandfather?

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Especially during the war, because that's where the food was (laughs).

LEVINE: I see. I see. Wh-Can you remember any experiences with him?

STEFAN: Well, in the summertime I went there and I always helped him on the farm, see. That's what, that's what I liked doing also, and that's what I'm doing today, you know. That's why I came back, but my dream was a-a-always to-to be a-have some land and do some things on it, and grow things, you know.

LEVINE: What kind of farming was your grandfather doing?

STEFAN: As an all-all-around farm. I would say they had cows, they had chickens, they had pigs, they had all kinds of-and he also-corn, not corn th-they'd call it-

LEVINE: Maize?

STEFAN: No. Now, corn is corn, see, but corn is an overall name for barley and for rye and for wheat, you know. They-they raised that, but a lot of stuff got-some good stuff got sold, and the rye got used for-they only use it for making bread. They brought it to the bakery, and they-and they got like things for it, you know, like paper clips for it. Then they could go to the bakery and say-and they-and they changed it, got a bread back, see? They paid-they brought their flour there. First they brought their-their rye to the m-to the mill. To the mill. And then they'd pick it up there, and then they brought it to the baker, see? And then let's-let's say, a couple of hundred pounds. And then during that year, you know, they had so many tickets for this, and they paid a fee for baking it, so then they went there every couple of days and picked the bread up, see.

LEVINE: I see.

STEFAN: So they brought a ticket there, and then they paid them so much for baking, for baking the bread, and that's how they got their bread, see?

LEVINE: What else do you remember about the war years in Germany?

STEFAN: Well, the war years-I-I was-actually I was-Oh, okay. I was fifteen years old, and I-I-I-I went-that was the Hitler years, and I went into-I had to go into the youth organization for-But I only chose it because there was -everything is free (like flying gliders, shootin' events). I was a sharpshooter, you know. I learned to-I had interest in. And while I was doing that, then the war came almost to an end. Then what happened was the-whoever had experience in flying gliders, they got chosen to be going into the air force. They took me when I was fifteen-and-a-half years old. But by that time, a half a year later, then-the war ended, see, and everything was over. I wasn't really in combat at that time. I was in training.

LEVINE: So when you were with the youth group, would-would you do that, like every day, or was that something---?

STEFAN: No, no, in summertime when you had vacation from your apprenticeship, you know. You got-in Germany you get three weeks vacation when you're an apprentice. So you're earning almost no money, but (laughs) you-you-you-you- you were --. That's what I chose in that time, you know, to go-to go to-and when I was in school, I went to my-my-my grandfather on the farm, see? But after I got older and I went in the youth group, I-I went where-where I got something, what I enjoyed, ya know -- flying gliders.

LEVINE: So you-so you had a good experience, I mean, as far as the training you got and what you got to learn?

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. How about you, Theresa? Can you talk a little bit about the town where you were born and raised?

THERESA: Yeah. The town had one church, one Catholic school, one grocery store, and that's all, and a cemetery. Well, I went to school, I was almost seven years old. We had to go nine years to school because we missed so much time during wartime. We had to run into a bunker, you know. And then -- for one year I graduated mit [with, at] fifteen, yeah, mit fifteen years. And it was a quiet town.

LEVINE: Do you-did you-Well, why don't you give me the name of your mother and then father.

THERESA: My mother's maiden name? Ida Austermann. A-U-S-T-E-R-M-A-N-N. And my maiden name is-my short name was T-H-E-A Brinkhaus, B-R-I-N-K-H-A-U-S. And they both came from the same town. My mother was twenty-seven when she married, and my father was forty-two, and I'm the oldest child of seven.

LEVINE: And, so-Well, why don't you give your brothers and sisters' names?

THERESA: I'm the oldest -- girl. Then my oldest brother is Antonius, my second oldest brother is Henry, my third oldest brother is Hubert who died mit fifty-four. We lost him two years ago. And my fourth oldest brother is Bernard, and my youngest brother is Connie, and my younger sister (who is seventeen youngest - seventeen years younger than I am) is Maria.

LEVINE: And how about you? Did you have grandparents?

THERESA: My-

LEVINE: That you knew?

THERESA: My grandparents, both side of my parents died when I was two years old. They died within a year, all four grandparents. I never remembered them.

LEVINE: Did you have aunts and uncles living nearby?

THERESA: Yes, yes. A lot of aunts and uncles. Oh, my mother had three brothers, and I think four sisters. She had four sisters, and they died all at a young age, sixty-five, sixty-three.

LEVINE: Do y—Was there any reason that—

THERESA: A heart attack, a heart problem, yeah.

LEVINE: So do you remember family gatherings? Do y—

THERESA: Yes.

LEVINE: What—what were they like?

THERESA: Wonderful. We had them once a year. To each family member, we went one Sunday to the other one. Once a year, we had a big family gathering, my mother's side and the other side. It was very custom in Germany.

LEVINE: What would you do? Like—just, if you could describe the day, maybe.

THERESA: Oh, we had a big dinner, and we all got new dresses, you know, going to the family gathering. And we ate good, you know, coffee, cake and everything. It lasted from twelve 'till four or five, six o'clock.

LEVINE: Do you remember any dishes that your mother made, or that you remember eating as a child that were strictly German?

THERESA: They made mostly all pork, because they had their own farms, and they slaughtered at least five— we -- my father and mother, they slaughtered five pigs a year. So we live from our farm produce. From vegetables we had ourselves and meat and everything. We never went to the store because there was not such a thing to buy any beef meat, no.

LEVINE: And how about religion? Was your family religious?

THERESA:: Yes, very religious.

LEVINE: And how did they observe? What were the—

THERESA:: Every Sunday we went to church, and in afternoon we had to go out for prayer hour on a Sunday. And during school time in the morning we had to go to church every morning seven o'clock, and then after that we had school. It was a Catholic school. That's all, the only school in town.

LEVINE: Oh, the Catholic school was the only-

THERESA: All Catholics.

LEVINE: It was an all-Catholic town, then?

THERESA: Yeah, it was an all-Catholic town, yeah.

LEVINE: How-was that true for you?

STEFAN: No, not quite, but I think in our town-I'm Catholic, and we had to go through the same that my wife said, but we had one Lutheran sch-school. And there was maybe-maybe in eight thousand people, there were thirty kids, Lutheran. Of course, with the neighbor town, it almost-was almost complete Lutheran. And today there are two towns that combined, so there-that's one town now. But we had mostly Catholic.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the Catholics and the Lutherans? Was there any conflict about that?

STEFAN: Yeah. At that time it was conflicts. There -- even-it became-it became-we, as kids-we found out in early years already, you shouldn't stay away from and you should play together with them. But a lot of times the older people said, "No, don't talk to them. Don't talk to them!" And still their religion was strong against, you know, mix-mixing. You know, and even mixed marriages didn't go over too good, you know. So-so-but I always got along with the Lutheran kids, and even their parents and...

LEVINE: So how did you meet?

THERESA: Well, oops, okay.

STEFAN: Well, we-we-we she worked nearby in the cafe, only a couple of hundred feet from wherever (pauses) (the sound of writing and whispering can be heard on the tape)

LEVINE: Did you know each other from when you were very young?

STEFAN: Oh, she-see-no. She had to, see, she-she learn-- learned to home economics school, and what happened there, she had to go into a apprenticeship. And this cafe was a apprenticeship-approved apprenticeship. That's how she got there, and that's how we went there.

STEFAN: So she helped me out about that.

LEVINE: So do you remember the meeting?

STEFAN: What?

LEVINE: Do you remember the meeting, the first meeting?

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: So, what did you like about each other?

STEFAN: Well, I think it's -

THERESA: I -

STEFAN: -- clicked right away (he laughs) So.

LEVINE: Do you remember first meeting him?

THERESA: Yes.

LEVINE: And what do you remember?

THERESA: At the, this restaurant apprenticeship, it was my father's cousin's son who owned that restaurant. And my mother, she made arrangements. And so I got there in February when I was twenty-one. What year was that? (softly) Ninety - seventy. Anyway, I don't know the year. Anyway, I saw him that night, you know, and I said, "Gee, he's a nice looking guy." And I think we fell in love right away. He asked me out, go to the movies. And I'd been there almost a year, but then we had to go to America.

STEFAN: There were no cars there either (laughs).

THERESA: Oh no, no cars.

STEFAN: No cars.

LEVINE: How did you go—How did you get around?

STEFAN: Bicycle.

THERESA: Bicycle and walk.

STEFAN: Walk.

THERESA: Yeah.

LEVINE: But you had a movie theater in the town?

THERESA: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, your town was bigger, yeah.

THERESA: It was in his neighborhood where I was assigned for my apprenticeship.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what your options were as far as what you could do for any kind of work at—at that time.

THERESA: Oh, you mean in apprenticeship?

LEVINE: Yeah. How did you choose that apprenticeship, and what else could you—

THERESA: I—I went one year to school. It's like a girls' college. And you learn s— you learn sewing, you learn agriculture, you learn home economics, you learn how to slaughter a pig, you learn how to be a bi—midwife, everything, everything.

LEVINE: And what was that called—what you had?

THERESA: Home economics. Home economics in Germany, yeah.

LEVINE: So then—

THERESA: It was an only a girls school.

LEVINE: So did everyone then have an apprenticeship?

THERESA: No.

LEVINE: No.

THERESA: No, no, no. No, you could go—because I liked that field. And I also liked nursing. But I started here in nursing, here in America.

LEVINE: I see. So when you did that apprenticeship in your husband's town, what would—what would be the outcome? What would it lead you to do then?

THERESA: Well, it was actually then a two-year college. And this lead me to—I could also be instruct other people—also apprenticed, you know.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember—do you have memories of the wartime, the First [sic] World War?

THERESA: Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

THERESA: Well, (sighs) we went to school, and a lot of times, you know, the sirens went. We had to run out of school and we had to go into shelter under, you know, in underground. And a lot of times we had to go -- how they call them—the little things? Phosphor things - the overnight—the airplanes. They threw them out into the fields. Those phosphor. You had—you had—you had a stick and the—the teacher gave us a bucket mit sand in there, and you had to put a stick in there and put them in sand. Otherwise when the sun hits, it burned. Yeah. I think as a child, as a young, you think this is just fun. Everything, you know (laughs)?

LEVINE: Did you see any bombing? Or did you see any—

THERESA: Well, yes. We had seen—we had been—we went to town, oder [or] we walked to town. They had this one manhole, you can jump in there, you know. If there was a way to know, and the bombs came, you jump in there and cover yourself. Yeah. Everybody knows.

STEFAN: I remember one event, and even my brother—we talked -- the other day about it, from the war. On the last end of the war when I was in—in actually in the air force then (it was a year before) there were low-flying airplanes came over lots of times. And they were shooting, especially at people on the streets or in the fields. And my brother was actually in the field, and he had to run and dive into—into a hole or into—see, most—on the sides of the streets there were like—like this—there weren't pipes in the ground. There were open waters where drainage from the a—from the water from the sink, you know, from the—whatever water they use in the household went into this—this -- they don't call it little rivers.

LEVINE: A sewer?

STEFAN: Not sewer, it wasn't sewage, no. The sewage was kept in—in in sewage—

LEVINE: In another place.

STEFAN: Yeah, separately. But that's where you dove into [not understood] times.

LEVINE: Wow.

STEFAN: And one time I remember there were—see, when—when the air-- when the—when the—when the Allied airplanes came flying over, and they went further and dropped their bombs, on the way back they had to drop their tanks with gasoline, the empty ones, and there were still some left in there. And one time, I—I was a near miss. I got almost hit.

LEVINE: So you must have seen people who were hit.

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

STEFAN: We seen craters nearby. But—but we also had a—a—a—one that—well, that's what we found out in later years. In our town was a spy mission in—by the nuns. (Mrs. Weising laughs) Where—where the—we had a—a convent in our town, and that's why we never—our town never got hit. It was an English spy station in this convent. And that was not too far from where—the house where I lived.

LEVINE: Do you remember the pub—the public sentiment about the war while it was going on in Germany?

STEFAN: You know, I'll tell you something. We never knew during the war—we found out later that concentration camps—

LEVINE: Existed.

STEPHAN: Existed. We never knew! My parent didn't know. See, my-my father is - is missing from the last war. He's, he never came back out of the war. We had no -- where he is -- if he's dead. But-but now-but-but with his age he should be, I mean, he's dead. But-

LEVINE: Do you remember sentiment about Hitler as a-as a leader, as a-

STEFAN: No, no.

LEVINE: Was he revered in your town?

STEFAN: We-we-we thought Hitler-why, you know-why did German people really pull for him was he-he brought bread and butter on the table. Even in the worst times, there was always something to eat, you know. And he gave everybody a job. That was why-why this all happened. We never knew how bad he was. That's why I said before, we never knew that concentration camps existed.

LEVINE: So how was everybody employed? In the-in the war effort, you mean?

STEFAN: No. See, we-in-in the place where I worked, there-it was a big company, and we-we-we made bedroom furniture there. But the last three years of, you know, from '42 till '45, we made parts of airplanes and-but they were all made out of wood. The fuselage from the rump of the airplane. See, and that's how a lot of people were employed there and-

LEVINE: So during that wartime were people-were m-were people who maybe ordinarily weren't employed, were-were they employed?

STEFAN: No, no. They were all employed, they were all employed. There was no unemployment. And another thing was there was no crime either. You could leave your bicycle outside on the street in the town for-for half a year, and it was never stolen. And then, see-another thing was Hitler did, was when, there was a bad-that's how this all started-what I remember. He build the Autobahn, you know, the highway-the superhighway.

LEVINE: Yes. Yes.

STEFAN: What he did, there were a lot of unemployed people in-in-in Germany, and he gave notice to all fa-you know, fathers and their sons who were eligible to work and had no work, they could work on this project. And what they did, they-they-they made small housing available and they started, let's say on the French-on the Holland- that Belgian border there (that's where it started) and the autobahn went to Berlin. And so they started there and they finished till they were in Berlin-Berlin.

LEVINE: I see. And were they paid?

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, they were paid. And there they could buy food for -- whatever food was available in the stores and, you know, feed their-- feed their families.

LEVINE: Now, were the families also traveling?

STEFAN: No, no, no. They stayed home.

LEVINE: They were--

STEFAN: But then I think once in a while, whoever was in this program, they could of --I think after a month or so--they could of gone--they--they--they went home and--

LEVINE: Oh, they gave them like a furlough or something like that.

STEFAN: Right, right, right, right. Everybody was employed. There were government projects they're created to get rid of unemployment.

LEVINE: So when was the autobahn initiated? Was that a while before the war?

STEFAN: That was before--that was before the war, yeah. That was before the war. I don't--I don't remember exactly. I could look it up, but I don't remember exactly.

LEVINE: So by--by the time of the war starting--

STEFAN: The Autobahn was there.

LEVINE: Yeah. I see. So maybe you could tell a little about how--oh, well. First of all, did you have a typical German wedding.

STEFAN: Yep.

LEVINE: Okay. I'd like to hear that, about that.

THERESA: Yes. We had a big wedding. When my parents heard that we wants--had to go to America--we wanted to go because my husband was chosen from six hundred, how many people?

STEFAN: Yeah, from the company where I worked, to represent that company in the United States here where we exported furniture parts, you know, like bedroom furniture parts into Newton, New Jersey. And that's where the company was.

LEVINE: So they wanted you to come to--

STEFAN: The United States.

LEVINE: To--and do what?

STEFAN: To help - help the people who work in this company, show them how the parts were assembled. See, and we were chosen from, I mean,

there was three, four people from this company. They were -- but not in the same time.

LEVINE: So were you already married when you learned about?. . .

THERESA: No.

STEFAN: No.

LEVINE: No. You didn't . . .

STEFAN: That's how, that's when our marriage, and that's where we both went over on this side.

LEVINE: I see. I see. So, um, so tell me about the wedding.

THERESA: So when my husband found out that he had the chance to go to America, well, I was very happy. And he said, "While we're engaged, what we going to do?" "Well," I said, "Maybe you go by yourself and I come after you." "Oh, no," he said, "No, no, no. Either we're going to go together, or we don't go at all." Well, we had to bring the news to my parents. My father was for it, my mother, no. And his mother really liked it very much, because my father had a bad experience years ago, that he had the chance to go to America, but he couldn't, he didn't want to go because his mother got so sick. He said, "Don't ever let this happen to you what happened to me." He said, "You're going to go."

Well, we made arrangements, and we bought a nice suit, used to like a -- not a big wedding, just a small wedding with the family. Oh, no. My mother, when she found out, "No, you have to have a big wedding." "Well, Mother," I said, "this is just a short time before." We supposed to go two weeks after our wedding, but in something was delayed with the ship, and we couldn't get a ship. And so, "Well," I said, "Okay, then I'm going to go." My girlfriend, she was a seamstress, and within two weeks we had everything arranged for a big wedding. ( she laughs ) There was no phones. We had to send them cards, you know, or we went with the bicycle and told them. So we had a wedding of a hundred and twenty-five people. It was beautiful.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Is it, was it like a wedding here, or was there something different about it?

THERESA: Yes, well, we had, in the morning we went, we had seven cars in the bridal party, and then we went home to my father's farm. We had lunch, and then afternoon we had cake and coffee at the restaurant. And then at night we had a big dinner, and it went through the whole night, till six o'clock in the morning. It was beautiful. And then . . .

STEFAN: But the difference between the wedding and the festivities in Germany, see, the main meal is not only one plate, it's, uh, you have three complete . . .

LEVINE: Courses.

STEFAN: Courses. You eat heavily.

LEVINE: Is there a traditional dish that people serve at a wedding dinner?

THERESA: Yes. There is, first comes soup. They have a big, good soup. It's a beef soup. Then they have, like the brat - the - the wurst, bratwurst, they call that, with vegetables. Then they have goulash, with another vegetable.

STEFAN: No, that was . . .

THERESA: And then they have the main meal. It's either roast, pork roast, or they also have a lot of food.

LEVINE: Um, so, why was it that your mother didn't want you to go to America?

THERESA: Well, she was so attached to all of her children. She thought, well, they're going to get married and live close by, you know. She was very sensitive, and she don't want to let me go so far away.

LEVINE: So what were the, what were the, uh, then, conditions under which you came that time? You had a visa for a limited period?

STEFAN: I didn't know about all this, see. We, we got, we got notice that we supposed to go then at that time, and go for one year. That we knew. We couldn't stay longer here than for one year. So they gave us a visa, they gave us a ticket, and they said, "Don't tell them, when you arrive there, that you want to work." So we went on a boat, and then after, what was it, eight or ten days, ten days, I think it was.

THERESA: Eight days.

STEFAN: Eight days, right. The USS America, we came here. We, uh, also took a German shepherd. See, I was breeding German shepherds in Germany, we both were, actually, and we took one with us. We knew where we were going they had a -- we were supposed to live with the owner from the company where I was supposed to work. And he had five hundred acres, and, uh, we also knew that she had to take care of the household. So that was the arrangement we made, so that's why she came, actually, too. So when we came here, we came off the boat, and, uh, then, when the immigration comes -- came, that is off the boat, we had to clear our papers. And then it said, "Uh, what do you want to do here?" "Well, we want to visit." Then, "You have somebody to pick you up?" "Yes, by the name of Mr. Tipon [ph]." Uh, they wrote that down.

And then, uh, "Where you want to go?" I said, "To Newton, New Jersey." "Well, how much money you have with you?" I said, "Four dollars." And then they said, "Well, let's see, call out if Mr. Tipon [ph] is there to pick you up." So he called over a loudspeaker. We couldn't even hear it. No Mr. Tipon [ph]. And he sent a representative,

a German fellow, and we didn't know him. And he was there, but he was in a cafe or getting coffee and he didn't hear it. So when everything, all the paper arrangements were made, we came off the boat. This fellow was supposed to pick us up was there, on the steps, when we came off the boat, but he took our dog, but he, we had to tell him, or the agents who took us, they said, "You have to go to Ellis Island till everything is cleared." So that's how we, uh, came onto Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see. So if Mr. Tipon [ph] had picked you up . . .

STEFAN: Picked us up, then we would have never gone on Ellis Island.

LEVINE: I see, I see. Well, what was your, what do you recall about Ellis Island?

THERESA: Well, I, uh, I want to start there when we almost came into the harbor, with the S.S. America. It was around one o'clock at noon, right after we had dinner. And the captain announced, "Now, I like to everybody go up on the deck and greet the Statue of Liberty when we get into the harbor." So I went upstairs with my husband and I said, "Let's go first." So I see the railing, right on the railing. ( she laughs ) So, and I saw the big Statue of Liberty, and Mrs. Beans, who was actually like a mother to us on the ship, we made friends with her. She came from Baltimore. And she said, uh, "Oh, isn't that beautiful?" I said, "Yeah, what is that building behind this Statue of Liberty?" "Oh, that's Ellis Island. You will never go there." But I, like I sit here, I'll never forget the words, I said, "Some day I like to go and look." Well, it wasn't three hours later we went there to Ellis Island. ( she laughs ) But it was just like, here I come, you know, we want to have a new life, build a new life, and I knew everything would be all right. So when we came to Ellis Island we were treated so good. There was a lady, she took care of us. And . . .

LEVINE: A German lady?

THERESA: No. She was not German. She spoke a little German. And, uh, I don't know her name. I . . .

LEVINE: Was she employed at? --.

THERESA: She was employed down there. And she showed us a bedroom. She said, "You sleep together in one bed, but I have to lock you in." And I got a little upset about that, but then in the morning we get up, we had our breakfast, you know, we went through a long hall down the steps from the recreation hall, the big recreation hall. I remember it so well. And we stayed there for three days. And the following morning our Mr. Tipon [ph] came with his lawyer, and right away they went into the office. And they asked my husband all kinds of questions, for three days, for three days. And then that afternoon he came, the third day, that afternoon they picked us up, Mr. and Mrs. Tipton [ph]. It was the day before Thanksgiving in 1953.

STEFAN: And I told him that I would work for eleven months for a special visa. Our lawyer told me, "Why you don't tell him that you want

to work for a special visa. It's only good for one year, or it was eleven months, and then you've got to go home anyway.

LEVINE: So you, when you were at Ellis Island, were you saying that you . . .

STEFAN: I was saying, because they told us in Germany not to say you want to work.

LEVINE: You want to work, uh-huh. And then would, did that cause a problem? Because Mr. Tipton [ph] was actually connected with your work.

STEFAN: But still, we didn't have no return visa, I mean, no return ticket. They asked us, that was another problem, see. We didn't have no return ticket. See, we only had a one-way ticket.

LEVINE: Right.

STEFAN: So, and Mr. Tipton [ph] was supposed to buy us the other ticket when the eleven months were gone and we had to go back, see?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFAN: So, uh, but then after, after three days, the third day, you know, the lawyer - the lawyer for Mr. Tipton [ph] said, "You'd better tell him that you want to work."

LEVINE: Oh, so you did?

STEFAN: So then everything was cleared, and we were free to go.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFAN: That was held -- held everything up.

LEVINE: Now, were you traveling in steerage? Was there steerage at that point, or were you in a first class, a second class --

THERESA: In tourist class,

LEVINE: -- on the ship?

THERESA: In tourist class, beautiful.

LEVINE: It was beautiful.

THERESA: It was not much difference than from first class. Because a lot of times we sat on the first class deck, when the sea was very rough. We couldn't go open on the open deck, and they let us, it was wonderful.

LEVINE: So you were really there because there was a question about, that you had four dollars, and that you . . .

STEFAN: How you want to get to Newton.

LEVINE: Right, yeah. Uh-huh.

THERESA: And when I - when I went to Ellis Island, I said to, what was the special officer, I said, "I hope I don't have to go back." "No, no, no," he said, "no. This is just a little mistake they had made, you know." Custom agent, he was, and he said, "No, don't worry about that." But, still, I was worried.

STEFAN: Even while we were on the - on the ferry, you know, to go onto Ellis Island, I said, "I hope they don't hold us here." I don't know, you know. "No, no, don't worry. It's just a little misunderstanding."

LEVINE: And how did you feel, like, the second day when you, just being there?

STEFAN: Well, it was, you were, you know, Ellis Island, in that time, I reme-- that's what I remember. When we looked out of the window, we couldn't go outside. You know, they were at the machine -- gun towers there still. They had the electric fence there still, and, uh, there were searchlights all night going around. That I remember. Like in prison, you were in prison, really

LEVINE: Well, did you, were you hopeful, or were you feeling like . . .

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. Hopef-- we were hopeful. We didn't done - we didn't do nothing wrong.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

STEFAN: We were clean and clear, you know, and we needed to get everything settled, and I did.

LEVINE: Okay. So Mr. Tipton [ph] and his wife then picked you up. Then where did you go from Ellis Island?

THERESA: We went, we went to Newton. They had a big estate down there. They had a - a ho-a private home, and they had a farm. So we stayed in their home. We had our own apartment, and it worked out beautiful. They had so many guests, so I did the guests, you know, and I cooked for them. And, uh, so we had a good time there. We enjoyed ourselves, and we, every Saturday and Sunday we walked to Newton. It was a long, six, seven miles walk into Newton. And they've been very nice to us, and they sent us Christmas cards the following years. And then we visit them here in '57 when we came back.

LEVINE: Well, um, how did you get to Newton from, from, uh, Battery Park, after you left Ellis Island?

THERESA: They came with a big Cadillac and picked us up. ( she laughs ) I thought, "Oh, I will like - just think some day I'd like to have a car." ( she laughs )

STEFAN: And that's the first time we see a television too, now.

THERESA: He saw a little tiny television.

STEFAN: They were the first people that had a television. That was in '54, right?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, uh, what, can you remember some of the things that, that struck you as being very different? The television was one, and I guess the Cadillac, but is there anything else in those first few weeks or month that you remember?

STEFAN: Well, I would say this. Uh, when we came here, and we were here, even the first couple of days and later on, I says, "I have to, we have to go back here. Here's - here you can make an existing living. It's better than Germany. You can raise a family. And if somebody really wants to work here and save their money, he can come to something." It's true.

LEVINE: Well, what would be the difference, like, say you were a carpenter here, or cabinet maker, here versus there?

STEFAN: You couldn't, you couldn't be in your own business up there. It would be very, very hard. First of all, you'd need a lot of money. Here you can start out, if you want to be in your own business, you're (?). Up there is regulations. You have to have your Master degree in cabinet making (what I have) but that wasn't the difference. There's - there's people here in this country who don't have this degree who can start a business here, but can't do it in Germany.

LEVINE: But you could have done it in Germany.

STEFAN: Yeah, but I didn't have the money.

LEVINE: Oh, you have to have a lot of money to start out with, uh-huh, whereas here you can start small, is that it?

STEFAN: Here you can start small with one - one guy, you know, one. So it's very easy here, you know. You buy yourself a couple of machines, and you start your own business. And if you're a mason, for instance, you -- all you need is a wheelbarrow and, you know, a level and, uh, you know, a level and I don't know what to call it.

LEVINE: I know what you mean.

STEFAN: And, uh, that's all you need.

LEVINE: So it seems like in Germany if you were to go into a business, you sort of had to go into it in a big way.

STEFAN: Right. And you had - you had to have a business degree, or you'd have to hire somebody who has a business degree.

LEVINE: Besides the, besides knowing how to do the craft or the work, you had to, uh-huh.

STEFAN: Here anybody with a craft can start.

LEVINE: I see. So you stayed here this year, and you had a good . . .

STEFAN: We didn't like to go back. We wanted to stay here. We tried, even, we tried to even to - to uh, to get a sponsor, but we couldn't find it. We used to contact the churches, we contacted some people, we had no relatives here, so . . .

LEVINE: So what did, what did that require? What did a sponsor have to do?

STEFAN: A sponsor has to, uh, guarantee you a job, and housing for five years, I think.

LEVINE: Well, now, how did it work out with the work you were doing for the furniture company? You work . . . ( disturbance to the microphone ) Whoops. You were working at that. You were working at that here for those eleven months. So then, um, were you going to continue to work for them, or no?

STEFAN: Yeah, but for peanuts. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: I see, I see. So you had a sense, you wanted to . . .

STEFAN: And then he wanted to sponsor for us a year --.

LEVINE: I see. You wanted to stay here,

STEFAN: Right. Right.

LEVINE: But on your own terms. Uh-huh. Okay. So, uh . . .

STEFAN: And then later on we af--we went back to Germany and, uh, then, after three years, from my mother's neighbor came back after twenty-five or thirty years. He's -- was in the United States. Everybody thought he was dead. And he wasn't married, so my mother said, "Let's go and visit him. Let's see if he's going to sponsor for us, for you."

LEVINE: Oh.

STEFAN: And then we went to visit him while he was . . .

LEVINE: Because he was a U.S. citizen, but he had just returned back.

STEFAN: Right, right, right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFAN: And he sponsored for us, and in about how many, half a year later, one year, one year later, you know, we came back in the United States for good.

LEVINE: So when you were back in Germany those three years, were you thinking you were going to make a life there, or . . . ( a telephone rings ) Should we pause for a second?

THERESA: Yes, please.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause now for the phone. [ pause ] We're resuming now after a phone call. And we were talking about those three years when you were back in Germany before you came back to the United States. Were you thinking of making your life there at that time?

STEFAN: No. I think, we've always wanted to come back here. Oh, and then, that's where we found, we found our sponsor, and that's how we got back in the United States. So after one year we came to the United States.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like your mother was really helping you to get what you wanted, which was to come back.

STEFAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you came back, and did you come back by ship, or fly, or . . .

STEFAN: Ship.

THERESA: (whispers) Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

THERESA: (whispers) Same ship.

STEFAN: The same ship.

LEVINE: Oh, the same ship. The S.S. America. I see.

STEFAN: So we landed in Boonton first, Boonton, New Jersey, because we, that's where we got our apartment.

LEVINE: I see. So you went, you mean, you went from, uh, New York.

STEFAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Where you came in.

STEFAN: Right. And then - the -- our sponsor picked us up, and we landed up in Boonton. That's where we have an apartment. And a year later we bought our own home already. That's how much money we saved. So we knew there was money to be made there. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what did you do for work when you first got here then?

STEFAN: I worked in a furniture store, repaired furniture. And we had, both had two or three jobs. ( he laughs ) Work and sleep.

LEVINE: What else did you do?

STEFAN: Well, I - I - I worked then as a regular in a -- shortly after that I had a job in a kitchen cabinet company, and I still repaired furniture, and she was working in, uh, in the furniture store also, and also she had a job taking care of -- clean houses, and then also in a company where they make underwear --

THERESA: (whispers) Then [not understood]

STEFAN: Then [not understood], yeah.

LEVINE: So you were doing three jobs?

THERESA: Yes. And then sometimes I work for a dentist. I cleaned his house, took care of the children, babysitting. We worked seven days a week.

LEVINE: Why were you working so hard?

THERESA: We liked to have our own home.

LEVINE: So within a year you had bought a home in Boonton. ?

STEFAN: Yeah.

THERESA: (whispers) Rockaway)

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFAN: Uh, Rockaway.

LEVINE: Rockaway, uh-huh. I see. So, uh, how did life change, just, sort of briefly, about your work careers. How . . .

STEFAN: Well, life really didn't change. We lived the same way. The only way to come ahead, we have to live the old way. Eatin'wise, or living, you know, your living standard had to be the same as in Germany. That's how we could save money. You couldn't go out, like people lived here, because you couldn't save that much money. So we stayed with the same, for years and years we stayed the same.

THERESA: When we moved into the house we, our car broke down. We had a down payment for the (laughs) house, and we been poorer then we came here. We only have one dollar left in the bank. I said to my husband, "As long as we stay healthy," I said, "I don't mind." And it worked out fine.

STEFAN: And then when we started our own business, then everything broke again, too. We had our first chil-- . . .

THERESA: Well, I was pregnant then. I got pregnant. After eleven years of marriage I got my first, our first daughter.

STEFAN: And then everything broke down, and then we had no money left.

LEVINE: So you had started your own business then?

STEFAN: Yeah. In our own garage, you know.

LEVINE: And then what was that?

STEFAN: Kitchen cabinets.

LEVINE: Kitchen cabinets. Uh-huh, uh-huh. So, uh, how many children do you have?

STEFAN: Two.

LEVINE: Two.

THERESA: We have two children, a girl.

LEVINE: And their names?

THERESA: The girl is, uh, Barbara, and Stephen.

LEVINE: And, uh, do you have grandchildren?

STEFAN: Yes. I have one grandchild. My daughter, she has a little girl by the name of Ashley. She's four years old. And my son, and Maria, they got married last year in June, and they have one on the way. And she is expecting in October.

LEVINE: Do you think there are some customs that are German that you learned as children growing up in Germany that you still maintain even though you've chosen to live here?

THERESA: Um, I . . .

STEFAN: Well, my daughter speaks very good German. That we kept alive. And she reads and writes German.

THERESA: (whispers) Also Stephen.

STEFAN: And the s-- my son, Stevie, too. But my daughter's a little bit better, because we practice, we talk in the house more German at that time. So, and that helped along the years -- really good. She has an excellent job now, and my son, he went up the ladder very fast, and they're doing all right. And it helped, German helped them out.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Actually speaking the language helped them in their jobs?

STEFAN: I think so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there anything else, Theresa?

THERESA: And, uh, when the children grew up, I al-- we've always been there when they came home from school. You know, I went for training in nursing, but we always been there. And especially we kept him occupied in sports.

LEVINE: So where did you fit in the nurse's training? When was that?

THERESA: Well, I went mostly when -- in the morning, in the morning. And by the time they came home, you know, I never finished, but I am a practical nurse.

LEVINE: So you started after your children were born.

THERESA: Yes, yes. Uh-huh. I started as a home health aide. I worked as a home health aide for fifteen years. Yeah. And then I went, we moved here, and then I joined a squad, and then we had to go for Emergency Medical Technician, and I'm with them for seventeen years.

LEVINE: And you're doing that now?

THERESA: Yeah, I do that now, too.

LEVINE: What do, you can each answer this, but what do you feel most proud or grateful for that you've done in your life?

THERESA: Well, I tell you, we've had our own home and everything. Two good children, a good family. And they went to college, and they both have a good job. So I said, they had a good home life, too.

STEFAN: We figured, you know, uh, when we bring them through college, see, our daughter still is in college . . .

THERESA: Is still going.

STEFAN: I told her, I said, "As long, as long as you do good in college and want to better yourself, we pay for your -- your tuition fee." And we're still doing it.

LEVINE: Well, that's a good endorsement.

STEFAN: And the other day she came back and, uh, said, "Boy, I got a letter. I, I'm on the National Dean's List." And that's only half a percent of all the United States.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

THERESA: So, our Stevie went, when he went to college, he went for criminal justice, and also each quarter here he went on the dean's list.

STEFAN: Well, he had to make a decision, you know, see, we have a cabinet shop, a business, and my brother has, is a partner in there, and he has two children, two daughters. So he had to - had to make a decision to, he learned to be a cabinet maker, too. He's a very good cabinet maker, our son, but he chose to be in the criminal justice system and -- . So he can go either way now. So he has actually two educations.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, tell me, now, about this farm where you live now. What, what is involved? What kind of business?

STEFAN: Well, it's actually a hobby. It's a hobby farm. It's not a, we have twenty-three acres, you know, we like land, and we like neighbors, but we still want to have our . . .

THERESA: Privacy.

STEFAN: Privacy, you know. And that's why we - we - we built a home here, and where look outside, you can't see the houses, but you can see it from a distance. That's what we like. And I like to grow things, she likes to do things. So, and we enjoy. I like to raise animals.

LEVINE: So you're raising sheep, and you're growing trees.

STEFAN: Right.

LEVINE: That's, uh-huh.

STEFAN: Right.

LEVINE: And are you doing cabinet making in any way?

STEFAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah, you are.

STEFAN: I'm doing cabinet making for, for, uh, see, I'm sixty-five years old, and I'm doing cabinet making fifty-one years. From an apprentice, when I was fourteen years old, till now, that's fifty-one or fifty-two years. And I think by that time you should quit, and do things what you really like, see. That's why I'm growing trees.

LEVINE: I see. That's what you really like, growing trees.

STEFAN: Growing things.

LEVINE: Do you think the cabinet making that you've done reflects a German kind of cabinet making?

STEFAN: Yeah. It's craftsmanship. Every, see, we have a clientele where it's not the average cabinet shop. We do work what you can't

really, when we're gone, you know, we can't sell our business, because nobody can replace us. I mean, it could be replace, but they should have the knowledge to --. See, if you buy a business and you want to sell it, you couldn't sell the business, because there was nobody who could take it and do the same things.

LEVINE: I see. So it's really a kind of craftsmanship that you . . .

STEFAN: Craftsmanship.

LEVINE: That you learned in Germany.

STEFAN: See, the only pieces you see here is the, that's what - that's what I make, see?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, gee, yeah.

STEFAN: So, uh, and going back, uh, my wife just wrote me a little note, by - by the farming, we did it also, see. It helped both, see, we were involved in 4-H for many, many years, and we both were 4-H leaders for many years to teach younger children, uh, you know, life on the farm, and that's why we raise the animals. I mean, we had a lot of meetings here where lambs got born, and we - we timed it most of the time that we knew about when the lambs would arrive, and then we had the kids in the barn to see actually when they were born.

LEVINE: What motivated you to do that 4-H work?

STEFAN: Well, I always, both people would try to help people. That's why she does, uh, you know, ambulance corps work, helping people, nursing. She helps older people. Uh, and, uh, that's, uh, that's what, what made this, to help people, advocate, you know, advocate, and . . . Oh, and our son was in 4-H. That's - that's - that's how it really started. He was with young years. Our daughter was at 4-H also, but we had horses before, too. (Mrs. Weising coughs) But then when she grew older, you know, and the horses went, and they went, we went for more practical -- sheep. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: I see. So how is this phase of your life, this time now?

STEFAN: Well, what do you mean by, uh, we're healthy, and I hope I can stay healthy, you know. And, uh, and keep active, you know. We're not people who take big vacations, you know. I didn't have vacations in five years, six years. That's when we went the last time to Germany to visit Mom. So . . .

LEVINE: So you still have family who are alive in Germany.

STEFAN: Yeah, my mother, yeah, and my brother, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFAN: And she has . . .

THERESA: Four brothers and my sister. My parents both died. Yeah. They died twenty years ago.

LEVINE: Uh, how is this phase of your life?

THERESA: Here in America?

STEFAN: Yeah.

THERESA: I'm very happy here. I'm very happy. And I don't feel any older now than twenty years ago. ( she laughs )

STEFAN: I'm happy here, too.

THERESA: I try to continue working nursing, and stay as a volunteer in emergency squad, as long as I can do it, you know.

LEVINE: Good.

STEFAN: I don't think I never would go back to Germany. A lot of people say, "Oh, when you retire, go back to it." No, this is my land.

THERESA: This is our home.

STEFAN: This is my country.

LEVINE: That might be the perfect place to stop. I want to thank you both very much for talking with me. It's July 30, 1994. I'm here in Blairstown, New Jersey, and I'm pronouncing it Weising [ee], but it's Weising [ay].

STEFAN: No, it's Weising [ee].

THERESA: Weising [ee]. Weising [ee]

STEFAN: But people make us to say Weising [ay], and it's not Weising [ay], it's Weising [ee].

LEVINE: Okay. Mr. and Mrs. Weising, who actually came through Ellis Island when they were coming to the United States, and it was kind of a postponed honeymoon, and they were detained there for three days. Well, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

EI-508/WEISING