

EI-051

RUTH BAECKER DICK

BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 27, 1920

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/30/1991

RUNNING TIME: 17:25

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: BRIAN FEENEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 5/1993

**FATHER WAS CHIEF OF MAIL, FILES AND RECORDS AT ELLIS ISLAND
CIRCA 1930**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 30, 1991. We're here at Ellis Island with Ruth Dick, whose father, George C. Baecker, was the Chief of Mail, Files and Records from about 1919, for a number of years.

DICK: 1919 was when he started his service, but then he worked up to that, to the position of Chief of Mail, Files and Records later on in his career until his retirement. In 1957 was his retirement date.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Dick, just tell me when you were born and where.

DICK: I was born in Brooklyn, in Ridgewood, Brooklyn, New York, on January 27,

1920.

DICK: I see. And let's start right off by talking about your father. Tell me a little background information about him. When was he born and where, and what kind of family did he come from.

DICK: Well, he was born in 1892 in a section called Williamsburg, in Brooklyn. I think that the street that he was born on was named Maujer Street. Maujer, M-A-U-J-E-R, I believe was the spelling of the street. Maujer Street. I have no idea whether it's still there or not. And his mother and father had come over to this country as immigrants from Germany. His mother came over as a teenager and she worked as a waitress in a place that was called Nederstein's in Brooklyn. I doubt that it's there any more, but old timers would recognize it because it was a very well known place. And that was where she and my grandfather met, I guess, and they were married, and lived in Williamsburg, and then they moved to Ridgewood, onto Forest Avenue.

SIGRIST: I see. So he came from immigrant stock as well.

DICK: Yes, he did.

SIGRIST: When did he go to work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service?

DICK: Well, right after he was discharged from service after World War I. I suppose I could find that date someplace, but right at the moment it's not at the tip of my memory.

SIGRIST: Was Ellis Island the first place that he went to work?

DICK: Well, he worked in the Postal Service first. He used to work on postal trains. And then he went from the Postal Service to Immigration Service and I guess he started out at the beginning, and worked on a number of years. I believe he was always concerned with Mail, Files and Records and then he worked up to the promotion and position of Chief of Mail, Files and Records.

SIGRIST: I see. And his last name is spelled B-A-E-C-K-E-R.

DICK: That's right.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about what he did here at Ellis Island.

DICK: Well, he had responsibility in charge of the manuscripts, as far as I, um, manifests. Manifests, that's what it is. The manifests. These were the records of all the ships that come into port, and all of the people who were aboard the ship. And there were occasions when he had to appear in court with a manifest to verify the time of entry or departure of someone from a country, for whatever the particular legal purpose might have been concerning the court case or court presence. And that was an assortment of things. And there was an article in the paper some time about a new installation of keeping a mail system of the names to help prevent misspelling and help to facilitate identification of names because of the complication of foreign names and foreign sounds and so forth.

SIGRIST: Did he enjoy this job?

DICK: Well, I guess he did. I'm sure he did. He stayed with it, and he enjoyed

association with the people. And I'm not too sure whether if he enjoyed all of the ferry rides every day to and from, but I recall that there were times when weather was bad, there were fogs, or for one reason or other the ferry couldn't leave the slip and everybody had to stay over here, and all the workers had to stay on the island overnight and this happened a number of times.

SIGRIST: Where did he stay?

DICK: Oh, that I don't know. (She laughs) I guess they just did as best they could. I don't know. They might have slept at their desks. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the Ellis Island ferry? Do you remember what it looked like?

DICK: Well, not exactly. I can't say that I remember the difference between what the ferries looked like then and now. They didn't have as much paint or advertising or anything like that on them, but it would be a difficult thing for me to recall and describe accurately what the ferry looked like.

SIGRIST: You said that your father was involved with various legal cases.

DICK: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do any of these come to mind? Were there any famous ones, or ones that he talked about a lot?

DICK: Well, I remember an article in the paper about an Adonis case, and I don't know what the purpose of, was for, he had to take manifests to a courtroom for

that particular case. I think I may have a newspaper clipping about that at home.

SIGRIST: I see. Did you ever come out to the island to visit?

DICK: Yes. As a youngster I came over quite frequently. And regularly at Christmastime there was always a Christmas service and . . .

SIGRIST: Who conducted the service?

DICK: I really, I'm not positive about that. I don't know if it was a member of the clergy who conducted it, or some other official, but a service was conducted, and it was for the participation of all the immigrants. They sang Christmas songs and carols, and they had a gigantic Christmas tree.

SIGRIST: Where was the tree?

DICK: Well, it was one end of the hall. If I could get up on that balcony and try to reconcile where we might have been looking from, I suppose that I might be able to find it. It was in the Great Hall, yes. It was in the Great Hall.

SIGRIST: And were all the children of employees invited out for this?

DICK: Uh, yes. The families were invited out and whoever wanted to come and had the interest to come was invited.

SIGRIST: As a little girl, were you frightened of being with the immigrants, or . . .

DICK: Why, no. It was fascinating, and I didn't have any sense of fear or apprehension or anything about coming here. It was exciting to have the ferry ride and to go where Daddy worked and all that. That was fine.

SIGRIST: Did he have an office?

DICK: Yes, he did.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where the office was?

DICK: Well, some place off that balcony. (She laughs) I don't know. The rooms might now be identified. If they are, I'd sure be interested in going back and seeing where it says Mail, Files and Records. But they perhaps aren't identified that way.

SIGRIST: When you said as a child you visited quite frequently, were there any other occasions other than the Christmas party that you came out that you can remember?

DICK: Well, I believe there were. Of course, the Christmas is a highlight and a recollection. I'm recollecting back about sixty years, you see. And that was the highlight of it, of the times that I came over.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she come out?

DICK: Oh, sure, sure, sure. She's the one who brought me over. (She laughs)

SIGRIST: I see. Did, how did she feel about her husband working with immigrants? I

mean, was she supportive of this job, because it was obviously very demanding of his time.

DICK: Well, sure. But there were never any, oh, what would you call it? Well, it was just it. That was his job. I mean, there was no thought about differences of nationalities or any such thing. It was just taken for granted. We didn't, we weren't so critical, then, I think, as perhaps we are now. There wasn't this same kind of sensitivity that was present. Everybody was here, and that was it.

SIGRIST: Did he have to wear a uniform?

DICK: No. He had to carry his badge and his identification.

SIGRIST: Did he bring his lunch?

DICK: I think he did. I'm not too sure whether he had to, if it was a matter of preference. I think they did ultimately have a cafeteria here, but a lot of times he brought his lunch. He brown-bagged.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, or do you remember your father talking about, were there any other groups on Ellis Island other than the Immigration Station? Was there anything else going on here on the island?

DICK: That I don't recall. I don't recall. I know that there was a medical facility. Who the people were who used this facility, or were hospitalized, if that was the case; I'm not sure who it might be.

SIGRIST: I see. How long did he work here?

DICK: Until the island closed, and then he transferred over to Columbus Circle. And then he retired in 1957.

SIGRIST: When the island closed, do you, was there any kind of, of course, you were older at that point.

DICK: I was older then.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, was there any kind of celebration or special gathering? Were families invited out for some kind of an event when the island closed?

DICK: I think that they did have some celebration about it, but by that time I was older and not so interested in this sort of thing. These are the things, in retrospect, that you wish you had paid attention to, like so many of them come along to us, and you wish you had paid more attention, but it's too late to do anything about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the people that your father worked with or worked for? You mentioned a couple of names earlier. Perhaps you would like to repeat those.

DICK: Well, I remember there was a Mr. Uhl, U-H-L. And a Mr. Shaughnassey.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what these people did?

DICK: Well, I guess that they were his superiors. I have some letters and

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correspondence at home between them and my father. I have things like that that do have their names. In fact, I have, I can't recall the name of the man who was his superior when he died in 1960, but my mother had mail from them and, I mean, so I could trace it if anybody would care for me to do that.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you just a couple more questions about the Christmas celebration. Did you as a participant get a little gift of some sort, or . . .

DICK: No. There wasn't any gift exchange.

SIGRIST: Anyone dressed as Santa Claus?

DICK: I think there was. I think there probably was.

SIGRIST: Was it at night, or during the day?

DICK: No, during the daytime. During the daytime. It was during working hours, just a time reserved for that particular thing.

SIGRIST: Do you ever remember coming out to the island during working hours?

DICK: Not during normal working hours, no. I am not too sure that people were welcome to interrupt, you know. I believe that the ferry ran on a worker's schedule anyhow. It isn't like now, every half hour a ferry. (She laughs) Because it wasn't a place for visitors. It was a place of business.

SIGRIST: What did Ellis Island look like at that time? Was it well kept, or was it . . .

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DICK: Oh, as I recall, yes. It looks just like it looks now. Well-kept grass and flowers and so forth.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people here at that time? Were there lots of immigrants?

DICK: Well, the only time that I saw immigrants was at this particular Christmas service, Christmas celebration.

SIGRIST: But were there as many immigrants there, as there were family members, or . . .

DICK: Hmm. Well, I would say that there might be more. It seemed as though chairs were lined up in the Great Hall and as I recall, well, it was better than half occupied.

SIGRIST: And you were allowed to talk to these people?

DICK: No, we were upstairs. They were, the service was conducted downstairs, and I was upstairs on the balcony observing and singing along at the proper times.

SIGRIST: Oh, what a nice memory to have.

DICK: Oh, it is a nice memory. It really is.

SIGRIST: So just very quickly, in our last couple of minutes, just kind of fill me in on what happened, you know, the rest of your father's career. You said he retired, they closed here in '54, so he worked for three more years . . .

DICK: At Columbus Circle, when he retired. And he had over forty years of service. I don't have my bracelet with me. I have a bracelet, and because I have this poison ivy on my wrists I didn't wear it, but it has little, his little emblems, the little charms that he was given on different occasions.

SIGRIST: Did the INS throw him a big retirement party or anything like that?

DICK: Well, I think that the people he worked with had a party, yes.

SIGRIST: And just tell me very quickly about putting his name on the Wall of Honor.

SIGRIST: Well, when I learned that funds were being solicited to help restore Ellis Island and a certain stipulation, a stipulated amount was given, and if you sent this in, you know, your name would be inscribed on the wall. I felt that my father had given so many years of service all of his working life on Ellis Island. And even though he did not come to this country as an immigrant, I felt that I wanted to have his name there as a kind of memorial to him.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's really nice. And you said your son saw it?

DICK: Yes, uh-huh. And I had received the verification information about the fact that this would be appeared, the inscription would appear such and such and so and so, and then last October my son and his wife and youngster were here to visit, and they saw it and they took a picture of my granddaughter with her finger on her great-granddaddy's name.

SIGRIST: Oh. Well, Mrs. Dick, I want to thank you for taking a few minutes of your visit and for coming up here and for telling us about your dad.

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DICK: Well, good. I want to thank you for wanting to hear about this.

SIGRIST: Oh, it was our pleasure. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW