

EI-525

ERICH MEYERHOFF

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NORTON: Good afternoon. This is Cathy Norton for the National Parks Service. I am a student intern and bachelor's degree candidate from New York University's School of Continuing Education. Today is Monday, August 8, 1994, and I'm in the recording studio of the Ellis Island Oral History Project with Erich Meyerhoff who is the Archivist Emeritus of the Frederick L. Ehrman Medical Library of New York University Medical Center, and the retired director of the Cornell University Medical College Library. Mr. Meyerhoff came to America from Germany in 1935 when he was 15 years old. Welcome, Mr.

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Meyerhoff. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please.

MEYERHOFF: It's Erich, E-R-I-C-H, Meyerhoff, that's M-E-Y-E-R-H-O-F-F, and I was born on November 24th, 1919 in Braunschweig, Germany.

NORTON: What size town was Braunschweig?

MEYERHOFF: Braunschweig was at that time a town of about 30,000 inhabitants, and ah, it had ah, a ah, somewhat unusual history. It was not one of the Hansa cities, but it was for a long time an independent ah, it was an independent city and therefore was not part, under the Prussian administration.

NORTON: You say it has an unusual history, I'm curious about that. What do you mean by the word unusual?

MEYERHOFF: Well, it was governed for a long time by Henry the Lion, and ah, ah, he was actually buried there in the church. It was ah, one of the first cities after World War I that had a totally Communist government. It was also one of the first cities that had a completely Nazi government and I think that was in 1928, or '29. And if it were not for Braunschweig, Hitler would not have been able to participate in the elections of 1933 because he was not a German citizen. He was an Austrian citizen. And he received a ah, state position through the ah, I guess call him Governor of Braunschweig, and ah, there was, he got his German citizenship. And therefore was able to run in the elections of 1933.

NORTON: Can you describe the town? What did it look like?

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MEYERHOFF: The town is a typical medieval German town. Ah, it is surrounded by a river, and ah, actually totally surrounded by a river. The Oker, and ah, so that made a natural fortification. The ah, town had a typical medieval buildings. Streets were very small. They were narrow. And ah, you could hardly see the sky because the houses were built in such a way that ah, they would come forward into the street from one ah, story to the next. Outside of the river was then the new development of the town. And it had some significant industries. Among them was a very large ah, ah, factory making trucks, ah Bissing, and that later on became the Herman Goering Works. It also was known for its agricultural products, which came from the immediate neighborhood. And so there were quite a number of canning factories in town, or in the immediate facility, and ah, so ah, all sorts of ah, vegetables and fruits were canned there. Especially white asparagus that was known around the country, really around the world. Ah, it was also known for the fact that Till Eulenspiegel spent a certain amount of time in the city and he was a baker's apprentice. And ah, as you know, he was a jolly fellow and tried to make fun of everything and during his apprenticeship he made monkeys instead of bread. And there is a, and still is today, a fountain where he sits in the middle and is surrounded by these monkeys. Ah, it also of course is known for its cold cuts, especially liverwurst which is known as Braunschweiger to this day. And ah, finally for a non-alcoholic drink that was made of malt mostly, called Mumme, M-U-M-M-E, and I don't know whether that's still being made or not. It was a very thick and ah, sort of sweet, ah, drink. A little bit like the dark malt that ah, you get from Mexico and other places.

NORTON: Tell me about your home.

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MEYERHOFF: Well, ah, my father ah, was initially in a joint business in ah, wholesale fruit and vegetables with his father ah, and his brother, and his sister. Ah, they all...

NORTON: What was your father's name?

MEYERHOFF: My father's name was Kar, K-A-R. And he was born in a small city where my grandfather lived outside of Hildesheim, the place was called Bockenem, and he went to school there. Basically to elementary school and partly to a kind of high school that they had there. But then they all moved to the larger city which was Braunschweig and they had this business together. Eventually, by the time, from the time that I can remember, they had all split up. My grandfather continued the business on his own with his daughter, and my father and his brother, Theodore, they all established their own businesses in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business. Around 1927, my father went into a partnership with a man named Heine, H-E-I-N-E, and they started a canning factory that was known as Heine and Company. My uncle, my father's brother, continued in the wholesale business and my father tried to get my mother to continue the wholesale business as well. She was very unhappy in that. Anyway, ah, there were ah, three boys. I was the oldest. I was born in 1919 in ah, November. My brother Alfred, was also born in Braunschweig in ah, 1920 on December the 10th. And my third brother, Hans Peter, was born in, on September 20, 1925. Ah, so, it was my father, my mother, my brothers and ah, various aids, as was not uncommon in those days, that constituted the household.

NORTON: Can you describe your father's personality for me?

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MEYERHOFF: Well, ah, my father was a very busy man. Although he would come home regularly for lunch every day, he would take the walk from the factory, which was a good twenty minute walk away. And ah, he would have lunch, he would go to sleep for an hour, and then usually he would meet with his brother, Theodore, somewhere and they would walk back because Theodore did his ah, apartment and his business was not too far away from where my father had the factory. Ah, he was very interested in that we should succeed in school. Ah, our, I think ah, collectively all of our remembrance of him initially was that he was a pretty stern fellow, and ah, he ah, I don't know that we had a very warm kind of relationship with my father. And ah, my mother was a very, extremely kind person and ah, although she occasionally had flare-ups of temper, they subsided very quickly and ah, we all remember her very fondly. I didn't really make a real peace with my father, and I didn't recognize ah, you know, his real accomplishments until ah, he himself had come to the United States and it was really shortly before I was myself ah, I myself was ah drafted into the army that we had some reconciliation. I don't know that that ever happened with either one of my brothers and we still talk about this, this process.

NORTON: You say that it was a period of time before you made peace, what was the difference between yourself and your father? Did it have to do with your father's attitude towards his work?

MEYERHOFF: (sighs) We all spent some time working in the factory. All of us. I don't know about Peter. Whether he did. But certainly my brother Alfred and I were there and we spent part of our vacations somehow working in some capacity in the ah, in the factory. Ah, of course my father was one of the bosses and ah, there was a good deal of ah, respect for him. Ah, ah, I think ah, he was, as I said he was very

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interested in ah, how we were doing with our education. That was all part of ah, the problem of being Jewish in this town. Among other things, I would say that anti-Semitism was ah almost endemic in Braunschweig, so that we very, very early on saw, you know, the brown shirts, the Nazis, march in mass numbers through the town. And yelling and so on. And I myself, during the time that I went to school, I was beaten up a couple of times. I was rescued by somebody, ah, a man that was driving a wagon with horses by and he brought me home. But so, the emphasis was that ah, you ah, ah, had to do more than just to drift along. And ah, his classic statement was that you, in our classes, especially later on in high school, we were seated according to our grades. So that those that had the best grades were all the way away from the teacher and those that had the worst grades were right in front of the class. And ah, my father used to say, Well, you don't have to be the first, but you gotta be among the first ten. And I think, eventually before I immigrated I did achieve that, and ah that was ah, you know, that was the best shot that I had at it. Of, so ah, ah, he would try also to help for example, with math. This was later on. In, when I was in high school, and I remember that it was an utterly frustrating experience because my father was not necessarily a patient man and he ah, ah, he would expect you to be able (laughs) to follow his ah, his pedagogy, and if you didn't he, he, he sort of got, he gave up and there was a feeling of some defeat about some of these exercises. So it wasn't that he wasn't involved with us. He would take us out on walks and we would go on bicycle trips with him. It was later that I felt that ah, ah, mostly when I was already here in the United States and perhaps even earlier, that we had very sharp political differences. Ah, during the time that ah, ah, I think all of this is a kind of a, people had very divided attitudes about many, many things. You couldn't escape. There was no way of escaping being

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Jewish and my father identified very closely with the Jewish congregation in the town. On the other hand, he was also a leading member of the Jewish war veterans and the war experience for him was also a very, a very significant one. My mother, who came from the south, basically came from an environment where ah, the people were very sympathetic to the Socialists and ah, ah, during the ah, ah, during the '70's, '80's and '90's, particularly during the ah, time of Bismarck, ah, you know, Socialists on the smallest excuse were jailed for whatever because they were basically for a Democratic ah, Germany. Of course Germany was a ah, monarchy at that time. You would have some ah, conflict there. Ah, and I must say that already in the early days, certainly in the '30's, my own political leanings were definitely to the left. Now, as I say, perhaps in part, also through my mother's influence, we went to an elementary school, both my brother and I, that was a, an experimental school. And people, we were not asked to learn by rote as was the case in the regular schools, and by and large we had very fine teachers and connected with that, that was also very unusual, was a ah, a ah, sort of a summer camp. It was actually on a farm. And the classes would go there for two weeks and we were out there on the farm and there were instruction in botany and ah, we learned something about the ah, surroundings there. It was a territory where there were still some old castles and ah, the robber barons ah, had been around there. And so ah, ah, that was all very progressive and that was not something that was really available in other schools. So that my father agreed for us to go there, that was a sort of a progressive side of him. You would never have expected that.

NORTON: I want to take you back for a moment to something that you mentioned. I want to ask you what it was like for you, growing up as a boy in Braunschweig. You mentioned the other boys, the Brown

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Shirts, I think was the term that you mentioned. There was a lot of, certainly a lot of diversity there and how did that feel growing up as a boy amidst all of this.

MEYERHOFF: Well, ah, it was always a frightening experience. You had to ah, you were on your guard. You were prepared in some ways to ah, ah, be confronted with ah, anger, sometimes with hatred. That might vary from time to time. It wasn't as though we didn't, I didn't have other kids my age that ah, ah, we would meet with regularly. Initially, for example, we lived in an apartment that was right next to an automobile repair station and ah, the son of ah, ah, the man, the owner, ah, our gardens, I mean the gardens of these, of the, of that repair station and the one for our ah, house, just ah, were right next to one another. I mean they were just separated by a fence. And so it was with a son of this fellow that we used to play fairly regularly and there were things to do. You could climb trees and ah, ah, ah, (laughs) and there were, there was another fellow in the neighborhood that we were friends with, his father was a waiter. And I think either the mother had died or they were, she was divorced, they were divorced. That was another fellow that ah, we played with. Ah, there was a son of ah, in fact about a year or so ago, when my brother Peter went over there, he had contact with them and then he started to write to me. He lived in the very first house we lived with his mother. His father had died. And he also was ah, ah, a fellow that I used to meet with and ah, and played with. In a house where we ah, lived, there was another family. I don't remember their name, but they had a girl, Lisa, and ah, she would ah, she was sort of close to us because ah, ah, my mother and her mother would come together. As a matter of fact ah, I think my brother Alfred, they would take, they would get ah, ah, sort of wash together. Getting into a bath was a big deal because in the

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beginning, we still had ah, bathtubs where you had to ah, ah, boil water and put that in and then mix it with cold water. Well, Alfred was in the tub with Lisa, and Lisa noticed that there were some anatomical differences between the both of them, and she asked about that and my brother who was basically a very kind-hearted person I think, said, Lisa, don't worry, that is still gonna grow with you. So ah, that was... And we carried this on, I don't know how that got in. But we heard about it and we still remember this. Ah, let's see. In the people, of the people that were in my class, actually, I don't remember that there was anybody that we were ah, very close with. And ah, it wasn't really until I got to high school, that ah, high school started when I was ten years old by the way, that I got to the point where I didn't care anymore and there was one fellow in particular who used to really harass me. I've forgotten his name. And finally I broke up and I started a fight with him, and ah, he ah, in the course of this, whatever he called me, you know, I don't remember what it was, but it was definitely an anti-Semitic kind of thing, I managed to land a blow to his ear and he had, he developed a haematoma. So my father was called into the director's office and ah, there were all kinds of complications but basically ah, my father didn't, wasn't unhappy about the course of events there. And it was within a year or so that ah, I left the school then anyway. I came to the United States. So it was when I was twelve or thirteen that this happened.

NORTON: Tell me about your mother.

MEYERHOFF: My mother, ah, came from the south of Germany. She was born in Offenberg, in Baden. Her father was the ah, cantor of the Jewish community which was, it was a very small town, Offenberg. And ah, she was the last of five siblings and she was born almost ten or

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twelve years after the last ah, after her last sibling was born. My grandmother was already in her forties and it was sort of, that was, you know, considered very unusual (laughs) in a way to have children that late. It ah, it isn't so unusual now, but she was mainly at home alone really. Ah, my grandfather whom I never knew, on my mother's side, besides being the cantor, was also the teacher. And he had what you would call Sunday School. They were regular classes in Hebrew. And he was also the ritual butcher in that town. So, he ah, had quite a few things to do. Well, from what I know, it was almost the same sort of situation. He was a person that had a ah, sort of irascible temper. Not that that was always the case but it was there. They still kept two kitchens ah, for a kosher household. The whole culture of the southern Germans and the northern Germans are very, very different. The southerners are more like the Italians. Ah, both in terms of the food that is eaten, which is mostly farinaceous kind of food, and also the ah, the temper. There's a different dialect. When my brother and I once visited Munich when we were already ah, I guess we were thirteen years old then, we couldn't understand what people were saying. I mean, it was, the dialect was so different. And ah, my father and mother met when my father was wounded in the first war, and he was hospitalized in a hospital near Offenberg. And my mother sang in the choir of the synagogue. And he heard her voice. That was the story. I don't know that my mother ever said so. Anyway. He heard her voice. He wanted to get to know her, and before long he had courted her and my father, and they were, I think they were married. My father went back....

NORTON: Mr. Meyerhoff, I'm going to interrupt you for a moment so we can pause...

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END SIDE A, TAPE ONE

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE

NORTON: This is Cathy Norton and I am with Erich Meyerhoff, and Mr. Meyerhoff you were telling me how your father and your mother became acquainted.

MEYERHOFF: Right. They ah, they ah, they ah, were married and ah, ah, I think it was either 1917, I think it was 1917, I have to look it up, but anyway, I'll, I have the date someplace. Ah, but then ah, to live my mother had to come north to Braunschweig. And ah, that apparently was ah, a really traumatic experience. As I said, my father was very much involved in his business. He tried to make good, and he tried to do well. He tried to provide well for his family. All of my mother's ah, ah, siblings lived in southern German, ah, one of them became a very successful ah, ah, she really had a, a ah, dressmaking establishment where dresses were made to order with ah, a fairly sizeable number of employees. Something like ten or fifteen and she had moved to ah, to Manheim. Ah, another sister was married to a very successful restaurant owner and chef in Munich. And ah, my grandmother was still alive and she then lived with one of her daughters. The one that had the restaurant in Munich. My impression was that the initial years for my mother were very difficult. And ah, ah, I remember particularly a time, it must have been around 1929. We were very small. We ah, lived in the second apartment we were in. And ah, my mother was then in a state of,

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what I think was sort of hysterical blindness. She was in bed, she thought she couldn't see us. We came in to her room and ah, but she ah, you know, she recovered from that. And ah, basically she ran the household. She was ah, anybody who knew her, ah, always remarked what a giving person she was. And she was very warm. She was an accomplished in the piano. She sang well. And she played the guitar. And ah, I think her, early, her thought had been that she really would have liked to go to the university and ah, ah, study. And ah, instead however, the university was in Freiburg. My ah, grandfather insisted that she learn a trade. In fact, she learned the same trade that her sister, who got into this business did. She became a seamstress and I still have ah, her diploma, I think, is still around. And you know, you went through a regular routine. You were an apprentice, and you, ah, then, ah, came to the next level and you finally may have ended up as a Master at this. This was your old guild system that you went through. And ah, she always would, you know, she would fix our clothes and, and ah, and ah, she ah, ran a sewing machine and ah, ah, ah, (pauses) she ah, she was a, a very kind and basically progressive, understanding kind of person.

NORTON: Did your mother work while she was raising her family? Did she work with your father in his business?

MEYERHOFF: Well, ahem, my father thought that she could do what my aunt, who was my ah, uncle's wife did. Ah, that she would be able to run, to continue to run the ah, wholesale business from our apartment and that he would give her somebody to work with her. Well, my mother was everything but she was not a business woman. It was a, ah, it was ah, ah, more than a ah, a ah, difficult task for her. It was virtually impossible. And nevertheless, she tried very much to make

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this thing go. The result was that the business lost money. And eventually my father saw the light and he gave it up. And ah, she simply was not ah, ah, one that was able to see, as you had to, and rather quickly about what the advantages would be in a market situation, where basically you were buying wholesale from farmers and you would then sell to ah, some of the ah, factories basically that produced various fruits, canned various fruits and vegetables there. And ah, it was in a way a very ah, anxiety provoking business. Because between the buying and the selling, that was all you had really. And that's where you would manage to make money if you could. And it just, she continued for a couple of years. And as a matter of fact, when my ah, youngest brother was born, in 1925, she was still trying to run that business.

NORTON: Mr. Meyerhoff. Who made the decision to come to America?

MEYERHOFF: Well, to a large extent it was me and ah, to a very large extent it was ah, a, ah, a decision which seemed to be imperative. The reason was that in 1933, after Hitler came to power, ah, my father, as I said, my father ah, had the, was part then, was a leading member of these Jewish war veterans. It was his idea, partly running I think in some ways parallel through all the ah, the ah, paramilitary kind of things that went on with the Nazis, that if Jews were going to protect themselves, they would have to learn ah, how to do that. That they would have to learn how to fight with their hands and possibly even with weapons. Although how they thought that was going to come about, is still a great puzzle to me. In any way, there was a group of young men. I was the very youngest among them. Basically, they were in their 18's and 19's. Maybe some were 17. My cousin, who was my uncle's son and who also immigrated to the United States, Hans, was in that group. And we would meet sort of regularly. We

would go out and they would ah, march with us and we would run and in general try to improve our physical, ah, ah, ah, status. And we would meet in various places. Among them was a sort of a local wursthaus, where people would eat and drink. And we had a room there that we would meet and discuss various things. Well, as it happened, the SA, the Nazis, got wind of all this and by a sheer miracle, my cousin and I were absent the night that they came, this was in '33, in the Fall of '33. And they ah, this was not the police, this were the black, Brown Shirts. They took everybody to ah the place that they had already occupied which was the socialist newspaper, the [said in German] and ah, they beat them up and one of them ah, died there. Ah, they then took them to another place that they had occupied which was the buildings of the ah, local health insurance place. And ah, they were there, and ah, we actually had to bring them food. I remember going there with a couple of sort of metal containers like you would in the army, and they would be brought up to these kids and then, when they got through, they came back. In the meantime, the Jewish community went to court to try to free these kids. At that time, there were still the remnants of some kind of a legal ah, system in Germany. As you know, that completely disappeared, the Judiciary became completely subservient to the Nazis. And ah, within a few weeks, and ah, I think they even paid some bribes to the, that is the community paid some bribes to the ah, Brown Shirts there, these kids were released. At that point it was clear that they had to get out of the country. Because there was no assurance whatsoever that they wouldn't be ah, arrested again. I also saw some of them when they came up to our apartment and we had moved by that time into the last place where we were. And ah, as has become you know, fairly common to see these days, these people were just totally shaken. They were white, they were fearful. They could hardly

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control tremors that they had. So, ah, and they did succeed in getting all of those that survived out; either to Sweden, some of them to France. Ah, basically into various European countries, Sweden and Denmark. And ah, since I was the youngest I was just, I was still fourteen going on fifteen then, ah, it was at that time the beginning of an American intervention. It was called the German Jewish Children's Aid. And ah, you had to apply. You had to get the consent of the parents. And ah, it wasn't that at that time I was so afraid, actually, but ah, I thought coming to America would be a real gas, to go. And it would be getting out of the house and into a different environment, although there was nobody here. I had no relatives here. Nothing. And it was a long protracted affair. It took nearly year to get all of the papers finished. And I think it was finally ah, in ah, December when I was just past fourteen that I got my visa to come to the United States, and then at the end of January, beginning of February I got out. And ah, when I got here, it was the German Jewish Children's Aid that had responsibility for me. The thing that made it all possible was that the State Department agreed to what was known as Collective Visas. The visas could be given by a, what was really a corporate entity. It didn't have to be a situation where visas were given simply on a one on one basis, by one person for one person going out. And ah, since the German Jewish Children's Aid took complete responsibility for our economic thing, they agreed, and this finally came through and that's how some people got out. In my town, ah, some youngsters of my age, well, the ah, I don't remember that there was one ah, yeah there was one person who did come out the same way. He was the son of a local painter. A ah, an artist. His name was Erlanger. And he ah, painted rural scenes. And he came up with me, or shortly after, and I think he had relatives here in this country that he went to.

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NORTON: How did you feel about leaving your family behind?

MEYERHOFF: Well, when I first went, um, I didn't feel that ah, you know, that diminished. Ah, the first year here I was homesick a lot. And I went around and ah, in those days, correspondence was really the only way in which you could communicate with anybody. And so a lot of that went on. I remember being ah, being pretty troubled during that first year.

NORTON: What did you pack to take with you?

MEYERHOFF: What did I pack? (laughs)

NORTON: Was there anything special that had a very special memory for you that you took with you?

MEYERHOFF: Ah, there were some books. Anyway. (intake of breath) This is the list of the things that went along with me.

NORTON: Would you read that for me.

MEYERHOFF: A lot of it is in German, and I don't know it might take . . .

NORTON: Okay.

MEYERHOFF: ... too long. Anyway. Ah, there was a ah, there was a box that basically contained shoes. There were four brushes in there, there were five brushes in there. One of them was a dirt brush and the other were brushes for black (laughs) and brown shoes. There were some polishing, three ah, clothes to polish with. Three ah, ah, there were three tins of shoe polish. There was a brush for my clothes.

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There were two mirrors. There was a pair of sneakers. There was one piece of soap. And there was something to brush, for the bath. There was an English dictionary. There were some books, among them was a Jewish, a small Jewish encyclopedia called Philo. There was a book on Shubert. There was a book on art history. There was a book on geometry. There was a book on algebra. There was a book on ah, oh ah, correct spelling. Ah, there was a book on, a textbook in Latin. Ah, there was something for geometry, a little circle. There were ah, there were ah, pens. Ah, there was (laughs shortly) a sack in which you carried your ah, sandwiches. (laughs)

NORTON: Did you bring any food with you?

MEYERHOFF: Did I bring food?

NORTON: Did your mother make anything special for you to take with you?

MEYERHOFF: No. I think you couldn't. You couldn't do that. There were some medicaments. Like aspirin and so on. There was stuff to shave with. A small knife. My skiing outfit came along, ah, with everything, with the ski shoes, the ah, twenty one socks. (chuckling) Ah well. (pause) And then shirts and ah, a trench coat, ah, and ah, my grandfather's violin. No. No food.

NORTON: Do you play the violin?

MEYERHOFF: I still have the violin. No, I don't play. I played the piano for a while.

NORTON: From what port did you depart?

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MEYERHOFF: I departed from Hamburg. And then went over to England. To Southampton, and then from there to the United States, to New York.

NORTON: Is there anything that you can tell me about your journey getting to the port. Did anyone from your family see you off?

MEYERHOFF: They must have although I don't remember it. Seeing somebody off, somebody seeing me off in Hamburg. But I'm sure somebody was there.

NORTON: What class did you travel?

MEYERHOFF: Well, we traveled the ah, there was no steerage any more, but there was third class. That's how we came. And there was a whole group of us. Young kids that came together. Ah, and ah, ah, we still stayed together for a brief period when we arrived here. I remember that I think the food that was cooked for us was kosher food. We didn't have a kosher household at home, and ah, my recollection is that the chef, the chef of the boat, it was the SS Washington, his name was ah, Gewertz, which is the Jewish word for ah, ah, you know various ah, ah, you know like salt, pepper, it's ah, can't think of the word right now. So ah, and ah, it took us, more than, it took us about ten days to make the crossing.

NORTON: Can you tell me about your trip? Describe your accommodations? What did you hear, see, smell?

MEYERHOFF: Well, about that trip is first of all, I'm not a good sailor. And ah, while I didn't have to throw up, I was really pretty woozy during a lot of the time. I felt uncomfortable. And remember, we crossed the Atlantic in

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January, early February, which is the worst time of the year you can go. It's pretty stormy around that time. And I remember that, I don't think we saw the sun during the entire ten days. We were up at the deck. If it didn't rain, it was wet anyhow cause the water came over. It also was my first acquaintance with Americans. And there was an American family there with two boys and I remember on the ship's list, these boys were listed as Master, Master So and So. I can't remember the name any more. And ah, ah, you know, the setting of where we ate and so on, that was like a hotel. I mean, there was service and Mr. Gewertz would come out from time to time and ask us how we like the food and it was also my first acquaintance with Coca Cola, which I just found awful. I thought that it tasted like medicine. And ah, I didn't like it. All of us were busy with various kind of self-learning systems, ah, some thing like Berlitz, to try to study English. The language that I had in high school was really French, and Latin. I started off with Latin and French. And I would have gotten into English I think the next year. So I tried to, you know, I tried to get some English under my belt. I didn't get much though.

NORTON: And how did you feel when you saw land for the first time?

MEYERHOFF: Well, you know my recollection is that we were in quarantine here on Ellis Island. The boat stopped and I think ah, people from Customs came aboard and there must have been some physicians that checked us out. And ah, I, I have my passport, but for some reason there is no indication that we stepped, stopped off, the last thing. In other words, in later, at later times, the immigration service would always stamp my passport when I came back. But this time, the only thing I have is the ah, immigration visa number from the consulate in Hamburg. And ah, that was on the 10th of January,

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1935. And ah, the person in charge was Lloyd Yates. And he must have been around for quite awhile, because when I tried to get my parents and my brothers out later on it seem to me that he was still there in 1939. Anyway...

NORTON: Did anyone tell you why the ship was placed in quarantine?

MEYERHOFF: Yes. I mean, they told us that they were, they were concerned about checking out anybody that might have a disease. I think they may have mentioned tuberculosis or some other communicable disease. And ah, so we were here overnight, as I recall it and we saw the lights of the city that night and then the next day, we were coming into the harbor in New York and of course, I mean, in those days as is now, it was an absolutely fantastic sight. To see these buildings and to see, I remember looking at the Woolworth building. I think that was the most prominent building that I saw when we came in. And then ah, of course we ha, were leaving the boat and there were people there to receive us and ah, my recollection was that the pier ah, this was United States line. The pier was not in the fifties, I think, the pier was down in the twenties, I think still in those days and that's where we got off. And they're not there anymore now, I mean it all went ah.... But each line had a pier that was dedicated specifically to that ship line.

NORTON: Okay, Mr. Meyerhoff we're going to pause for a moment while Peter changes and puts in a new tape.

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE

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BEGIN SIDE A TAPE TWO

NORTON: This is Cathy Norton for the National Parks Service, and I'm here in the recording studio of the Ellis Island Oral History Project with Erich Meyerhoff, as we begin tape two of our interview on Monday, August 8, 1994. Mr. Meyerhoff, when we left off we were discussing your impressions of Ellis Island when you arrived in America.

MEYERHOFF: Well, my impression was that everything was very bleak. I can't remember whether we were briefly taken off the boat and went on again. I remember these inspectors coming on. Somehow in my recollection is that if we went off, and we may have, I don't know what the procedure was then, that things were extremely bleak here. You know there were ah, benches. They were wooden benches somewheres around. Ah, and ah, they were worn and they, you know, everything was gray. Of course it was at night anyway, and there were things in there. So the impressions ah, ah, the whole set-up was not exactly inviting as I remember it. And ah, we were glad to get back aboard and get into the city the next day.

NORTON: Were you frightened? To, what was your reaction?

MEYERHOFF: It wasn't fright, no. It wasn't fright. Ah, perhaps the best I could say was it was a disappointment because you come with ah, ah, you know with ah, perhaps totally (he laughs) unrealistic expectations. But ah, I think you do. You, the, the expectations of ah, what you would see and so on was ah, they were ah, ah, they were of sort of a friendly, welcoming kind. I think seeing the Statue of Liberty, that was something of a... you know, that is impressive. I don't know,

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good, bad, I couldn't read what was written there (laughs) anyway. But it's sort of a you know, that massive figure. The big things were really the lights. The lights of the city when you come in. That's a, it's a gorgeous sight, yeah.

NORTON: You mentioned the mood ah, being bleak when you got to Ellis Island. How were you treated by the officials at Ellis Island here?

MEYERHOFF: Ah, (long pause) neither badly nor particularly, ah, they were, I must say they were really matter of fact about whatever they had to say and ah, don't forget we had an escort. That person spoke English perfectly. So individually we had very little contact with any of the authorities here.

NORTON: Did you have to go through any examinations?

MEYERHOFF: Ah, did I go through any examinations? (thinking) You mean that whether we ah, had a physical exam?

NORTON: Yes.

MEYERHOFF: I don't, I don't believe so. I don't believe we did. We were examined thoroughly at the consulate in Germany. This was all part of it. And I just don't know. But I don't think that we were, that we had a physical exam.

NORTON: Were there doctors that ah, came on board the Washington, the ship, when you docked at the pier, because you had mentioned that the ship had been quarantined. Did the doctors actually go to visit the ship?

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MEYERHOFF: I believe they did, yes.

NORTON: Okay. And what were some of the reactions of your shipmates around you when they saw the lights of the city and when they saw the Statue of Liberty.

MEYERHOFF: I think it was pretty happy. Right. They were, they were ah, excited. There was a, you know, a lot of talking about what was going to happen and where we were gonna go and so on. But as I said, we had an escort with us. A young woman who ah, ah, who also spoke German.

NORTON: What was the range in age of ah, the persons the children? You mentioned it was the German Jewish Children's Aid.

MEYERHOFF: All about the same age. We were fourteen, fifteen. Ah, I think that's what it was. Fourteen, fifteen, maybe somebody was sixteen. But I, I don't recall that. I think they were all, we were all very much alike in age.

NORTON: Were you detained at Ellis Island for any period of time while you came here?

MEYERHOFF: No.

NORTON: Okay. When you came, when you left Ellis Island, is there anything that you can recall outside of the lights of the city, any experiences that you had where you came into contact with something brand new? You mentioned your experience on the boat with Coca Cola.

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MEYERHOFF: I think we had a good breakfast here the next day, (laughs) in the morning.

NORTON: And where did you go when you landed.

MEYERHOFF: That was another thing by the way, that was very ah, unusual for us. Was an American breakfast with eggs and ah, things of that sort. It just, we, we wouldn't, our typical breakfast consisted of ah, usually some bread with maybe some marmalade on it, and ah, then ah, we drank milk. The kids drank milk. My parents might have had coffee or something in the morning. But there wasn't anything elaborate at all. I mean this, this was you know, ah, was very unusual to eat that much in the morning. Because you know, basically our main meal was really lunchtime, that was the hot meal. Our father came home and there was very little ah, at breakfast. Nothing. (laughs a little) Anyway.

NORTON: Where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

MEYERHOFF: We were taken to the ah, what was then the Clara DeHirsh Home. And I arrived there on ah, February 7, 1935. It was on 225 East 63rd Street in New York City. And it's now occupied by ah, the Manhattan Eye Ear Nose Hospital. It was basically for young, Jewish women who ah, were working here. They had, and ah, so ah, they ah, there was a floor for us. I think it was one floor, ah, that, that they ah, made available for the emmig-, for the emigrate boys. But otherwise it was totally occupied by young women. And ah, we were to be there only for a very short time until we were sent out to foster homes out in the country. Unfortunately I had caught a throat infection already on the boat and when I came off, shortly after, I developed a fairly substantial temperature. And there was a nurse

there, and ah, her major treatment was to ah, paint my tonsils with iodine. As a result I developed an iodine burn. And ah, the infection got worse and I ended up (clears throat) at Mt. Sinai Hospital. So that was my very brief stay at the Clara DeHirsh home. And I then got on to Mt. Sinai hospital here in the city, on 100th Street and I was placed on a ward. And ah, my English was really non-existent then. So ah, however, next to me, there was a Turk, a young, ah, a middle aged Turkish man, who ah, spoke French. So it went from me to him to the doctors and nurses and ah, ah, that's how we ah, we managed to communicate. And then ah, there were a couple of things that were totally new to me. The last time I had been in a hospital had been in Berlin in Germany and they done a mastoidectomy in my ear, and it was a Catholic hospital and the sisters all wore caps. And the story was that their heads were shaven and that's why they had the caps. I was four years and I was dying to get these caps off to see whether they really, they really were shaven. Now at Mt. Sinai, the nurses by and large were young and they were attractive. They looked very well. And the guys that were on the ward, they would, ah, ah, there was a banter going on always with ah, ah.... And ah, ah, the doctors made rounds. That was another thing. So there were maybe six, seven, eight interns around besides the, the chief. And you know, they would open my mouth, they would feel my belly and so on. Well, you know it was a time that there were no antibiotics and what you did was basically was supportive therapy. You got fed well. They ah, would watch carefully ah, the infection. They would very, very carefully do something in order to ah, keep that area more or less free of germs if you could do that. And I think I was in there for four weeks, (pause) gradually getting better.

NORTON: And where did you go when you left Mt. Sinai Hospital?

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MEYERHOFF: Then they sent me to recover to a family in Stepney, Connecticut. Stepney is not far from ah, well, from the capital there. Ah, what's the capital in Connecticut, ah...

NORTON: I'm afraid you've got me.

MEYERHOFF: Got you too. It'll come to me.

NORTON: Yes.

MEYERHOFF: Actually, ah, the, the family, the man worked in the city,

NORTON: Okay.

MEYERHOFF: And he came in and he worked for an advertising firm. His name was Bernard. And the wife was taking care of the farm. They had a chicken farm. And ah, ah, again, you know, for me this was altogether new. She was a blond woman, very good looking. Jewish, she took care of the farm. And specifically of these chickens. The chickens, the eggs had to be collected very morning. And I remember that I was absolutely terrified, cause you had to go in there, and of course the hens would pick at you because they weren't particularly interested in you taking the eggs out. So we took the eggs in, they're picking, I'd be absolutely (laughs) frightened of the whole process. And besides that, as you are, I couldn't really stand the smell of the place. It was farmland and especially that chicken smell. Okay. Then in the evening, we would sit and candle the eggs to make sure that they weren't hatched yet and so on. And then she would bring them into town, Hartford, into Hartford, and ah, they didn't have children themselves. I think that's how this whole

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thing came about, and so ah, I was there for about (thinking, pause) maybe ten days. During that time they also took me to a movie. And I don't remember what I saw then, but that was another big experience. I had seen movies, but by and large in Germany, kids were just not admitted to movies, period. You couldn't, you had to be seventeen or eighteen, I think, before they, before they let you in, except for certain special occasions. And ah, so after that I came back to the city and they were trying to make up their minds about where to place me. That was basically it.

NORTON: How did you come to learn English?

MEYERHOFF: I tell you the quickest, the, the biggest advance I made is during that summer, of 1935, I, I went to a camp. In Thetford Center, Vermont. It was called Camp [Cacosing.] And the director of that camp was a teacher named Rothenberg. And ah, so there I was with these other kids and ah, ah, I couldn't speak the, (laughing) it was impossible to get anything done speaking German. So I learned English very quickly. I also liked one of my counselor, a man named Braunstein, who was ah, he taught us ah, sort of geology. And he helped me, and believe it or not by the end of that ah, camp period, in ah, end of August, there were these color plays, you know, the camp was divided up into blues and grays and there was competition between the blues and grays and there was also a dramatic presentation for both sides. And I wrote the play for our side, wrote the play. That is, by the time the actors got on the stage, they were still handed scripts to read I could do this. I could write, I could write a play. And I did. It's the only play I ever wrote. And I've been looking for it. I've lost it, but I remember what it was about. Anyhow, that's how I learned English. And by the time I got out of camp, my English, at least, was serviceable.

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NORTON: Okay. So you stayed with the family in Hartford for a summer while you were convalescing.

MEYERHOFF: No. I convalesced. I got out of the hospital. I stayed with them for about ten days. I briefly was with a family in ah, ... No. Ah, I then went to Brooklyn and I stayed with a family, Michael Rosen, on Fifth Street in Brooklyn. That was on March the 20th. And ah, ah, from there, I went to camp (pauses) that summer of '35.

NORTON: What was your religious life like in America?

MEYERHOFF: Well, I wasn't very religious. I mean I ah, although when I was in Braunschweig, I, really on my father's behest, I attended the synagogue and so on. By the time I got here I was ah, I was really ah, out of that. The family that I stayed with in Brooklyn, for example, ah, they were ah, they belonged to an Ethical Culture group. They were Jews but they also had, you know, moved into another direction instead of either becoming Orthodox. They weren't Orthodox, they weren't ah, ah, they weren't ah, ah, Rabbi Weiss Free Thinks, they went into Ethical Culture, which basically has no direct connection with Judaism whatsoever. The founder was a Jew, but the services, everything about it, has nothing to do with ah, um, ah, with Jewish ah, protocol.

NORTON: Did you experience any bigotry or persecution in America?

MEYERHOFF: (lets out breath) Not then, no. I was, you know, already grown and ah, that was much later.

NORTON: Did the rest of your family eventually join you in America?

MEYERHOFF: Oh, yes.

NORTON: Can you tell me a little bit about that process.

MEYERHOFF: Sure.

NORTON: And how you were reunited.

MEYERHOFF: Well, ah, as I mentioned to you. My father visited me here in ah, ah, '38 in the summer and went back. He did not think that he was gonna move at that time. In the ah, December, he ah, was put into a concentration camp. And at that point he, he wouldn't have gotten out unless he had a visa to come to the United States. From that point on I ah, started to ah, work very ah, ah, I really worked in order to get a visa for my father, for my mother, and ah, my brothers. At that time, the requirement made for a visa to get to the United States was that you had to have a cautionary fund set aside of \$5,000. Ah, in order to guarantee in some ways that the people would not become public charges. And I remember there was a young woman, a girl from my town, who happened to end up briefly with a family. Their name was also Erlanger as far as I know. And the man was some kind of an officer in BVD underwear company. They lived on 63rd Street between ah, Madison and Park in a townhouse. So I went there and ah, actually under the pretext to visit her and she wasn't there anymore. And I tried to get \$5,000 from him. I didn't really need quite that much because I had saved up ah, oh, something like \$500, \$600. Remember this was 1935. Well, I didn't get anywheres with him. He said, you know, I can't respond to individual cases. That's why I give money to the United Jewish Appeal. Whatever outfit he come from. And ah, I still remember

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getting into that house. I, of course, got into the wrong entrance and I got in through the kitchen where, you know, it was like Upstairs, Downstairs. I mean, they were polishing silver there. (He laughs) Then he took me up to the library. Well, make a long story short. Eventually the amount of money required was ah, reduced to \$2,000. And this is how it came together. There was a physician from my home town who gave me \$500. There was a relative who had come over from Germany, Jewish. He gave me \$500. I worked for RKO at that time. They gave me \$500. I had \$500. That was the \$2,000. And then the consul did give, finally, in that ah, it was in May of that year. My father came out of concentration camp in March, towards April. He was ah, totally out of his head when he got out. For fright. And ah, ah, my brothers came in June of that year. And my parents made it just in August. Just maybe a week before war broke out. They took a flight to Holland and from Holland they took a boat over. And then ah, we ah, ah, found an apartment on 84th Street, near Broadway. And I remember it was a walk-up and we all lived there together. My brothers and me and my parents. And ah, in the beginning, I was the only one that had a job.

NORTON: As an archivist, you're responsible for preserving information. What are your thoughts about the loss of literary and artistic treasures during the war?

MEYERHOFF: Well, that was ah, you know, an incredible tragedy. And ah, ah, for whatever motives, the city of, the archives of the City of Braunschweig, started to put together a series of documents and a kind of a history of the Jews in Germany, and particularly for that period, during the Nazi regime. Ah, the ah, but, I mean the documents ah, were ah, simple destroyed. The synagogue in Braunschweig was totally destroyed and was burned down. The ah,

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ah, the ah, possessions of individual families were also largely destroyed during that November attack on all of these homes. And ah, I think what needs to be remembered is that there was a kind of a, I would almost call it a class segregation in the Jewish community in Braunschweig. There was the level of those that were ah, well-to-do merchants that had often ah, ah, ah, department stores for example. There were the lawyers and physicians and surgeons. There were the factory owners then, some very successful. Among them I guess my father. There were merchants. Sort of a middle class. Then there were people that still lived in the Old Town really. In a kind of a ghetto. And they were ah, they were also merchants. Some of them were ah, horse traders, which was a common... And ah, of course among those that were either the middle or upper class, there were gifted people. There was a woman painter, Shaya, who had some national renown, actually. They bought art. Ah, in general there was a kind of a tendency, I would say that, I would say that if your father was a Jewish banker, he wanted to be sure that the son somehow got into an academic position or became a writer, something in the free arts.

NORTON: Excuse me Mr. Meyerhoff, we're going to pose, pause for a moment as our recording engineer flips the tape.

MEYERHOFF: Yeah. Because I gotta...

END SIDE A, TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE TWO

NORTON: This is Cathy Norton for the National Parks Service and I'm here with Erich Meyerhoff. And we were discussing the loss of some of

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the literary and artistic treasures during the war. Are there any more thoughts that you have on that subject, Mr. Meyerhoff.

MEYERHOFF: No. Not right now.

NORTON: Okay. Are you happy that you came to America?

MEYERHOFF: Oh, yes. I mean, I wouldn't have survived otherwise, so... Not only that ah, my family wouldn't have survived. And of course there are members of my extended family that didn't survive. So ah, ah, that ah, is certainly very ah, a very, very good thing, yes.

NORTON: Is there anything else about your life in America that you'd like to share with us? Any other thoughts that you might have at this time?

MEYERHOFF: Well, there were many opportunities that I got that I might never have gotten otherwise. For example, it was possible for me to get a college education by going to City College and being admitted there. It was possible for me to continue my education because I got the ah, I was in on the GI Bill of Rights. And ah, ah, ah, so ah, it was a, a traditional way of ah, ah, of ah, getting into a, a, a better kind of life through, ah, you know, through education. And ah, ah, all of my brothers did well. They all got an education here. They all went to City College and some later to ah, private universities. And they all did ah, extremely well.

NORTON: Well, Mr. Meyerhoff on that note, I suppose this is a good place for us to end this interview. On behalf of the National Park Service and the Ellis Island Oral History Project, I would like to thank you for taking the time to share the story of your immigrant experience in

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America. This is Cathy Norton signing off with Erich Meyerhoff on Monday, August 8, 1994, for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW