

EI-529

RUDY BURGER

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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COAST GUARD AT ELLIS ISLAND FROM 1940 TO 1942

RESIDENCE: RENTON, WASHINGTON

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Segrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, August 10, 1994. I'm in the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Rudy Burger. Mr. Burger was in the Coast Guard here at Ellis Island from 1940 to 1942. Anyway, welcome to the recording studio.

BURGER: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: May we begin by you giving me your birthdate, please?

BURGER: My birthdate is January 6, 1921.

SIGRIST: And um, can you tell me where you were born?

BURGER: I was born and raised in the city of Renton, Washington. Ah, by my mother Louise Burger. My father's name was Mike Burger.

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SIGRIST: What was your mother's maiden name?

BURGER: Maiden name, when she came through Ellis Island was Kutnar.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

BURGER: K-U-T-N-A-R.

SIGRIST: And can you give me sort of a thumbnail sketch about your parent's background, and where they came from, and...?

BURGER: They came from, well they came from Lublana which was ah, part of Austria before World War I. And my father came from the same area which was... I visited their home which is in the town of Lukaviza and Domjalia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell those please?

BURGER: That would be very difficult for me to do, is to spell those. I have been back there on a couple of trips. And ah, but, I have resided in Renton, Washington. I do live right at the present time in Enumclaw, Washington, which is approximately twenty-five, thirty minutes from Renton.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about why your parents came to this country and when they came to this country.

BURGER: They came to this country for, for better living conditions. The war was coming on. Mom told me that ah, they wanted to get out of there before the World War I started. It was getting pretty tough on 'em. Ah, living conditions and everything else was real hard on

'em. So they did make arrangements to come to this country. Both of them. They did not know one another until after they ah, migrated or what you might say, traveled to, they went to Cleveland, Ohio first. And from Cleveland they went to um, they ended up in Montana, Idaho area. And then they ended up in the Renton vicinity. Mom and Dad met one another in ah, Montana, which is where the copper mines was. My father worked in copper mines, gold mines. Mom was a cook in the different camps there. And that's how they got acquainted and ended up getting married.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Do you know what date or dates, obviously because they came at separate times I assume?

BURGER: They, Mom, I believe Mom said that she came here about 1912, and Dad was here about 1913.

SIGRIST: I see. Um, tell me again just briefly what it was like growing up with immigrant parents when you were young.

BURGER: I speak, speaking, it was very difficult because Mom and Dad spoke the ah, it's Slovenian, is what their native language is. It was not Austrian, although they did come from the Austrian country before the war. They spoke Slovenian. They taught us Slovenian. They taught us how to read Slovenian when I was a child. It was real difficult for me when I first went to school because ah, school was hard the first year and second year I flunked. I did not pass my first year of school, my second year they kept me back so that made me a little older as I went on. And ah, but it was tough, but everything in our home was the old fashioned, the old country way of living.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people from that part of the world who resided in your town in Washington when you were growing up?

BURGER: Yes. The city of Renton had a colony or a group of Austrians living there. They called themselves Austrians or Slovenians. Ah, they had their lodge. They had their ethnic way of living. We had their picnics. The Slovenian picnics. Um, Dad played the accordion so he was very popular with people cause anytime there was a party to be had, ah, Dad was always invited. We ah, had, made, Dad made his own wine. Bottled our own beer. And they did make their own moonshine.

SIGRIST: (Laughs) That's interesting.

BURGER: Which is slivovice from there, and they made it out of the grape which they called grappa, similar to the Italian way. And slivovice was made from plums.

SIGRIST: Huh. So they really sort of maintained a kind of Old World life style even though they were transplanted here in the New World.

BURGER: Definitely, they did. They ah, they lived their own old country style of living. Cooking the food. A lot of pork. A lot of sausage. A lot of what you'd call kielbasa. Ah, the, we had our own home where we, Mom and Dad had their own garden, big garden. And we had our own chicken coop. We had a lot of chickens. And as I said that, we lived the old country style.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BURGER: Yes I did.

SIGRIST: Could you name them for me.

BURGER: Yes. I had a brother by the name of Elmer Burger. Retired from the US Navy. I had a sister, half-sister by the name of Josephine ah, Massel. That was her married name. And um, Mom was married once before she married my father.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Massel?

BURGER: M-A-S-S-E-L.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

BURGER: Mm, hm.

SIGRIST: So there are just the two, Elmer and Josephine?

BURGER: Mm, hm.

SIGRIST: And they're older than you are?

BURGER: No. My brother was younger than I am.

SIGRIST: Oh, your brother was younger.

BURGER: Which he's passed away.

SIGRIST: Interesting that both men, both brothers chose a military ah, path.

BURGER: Well, the reason for me going into the service when I did, I joined in in 1939. Things was real tough. My father was in a ah, he was in a tuberculosis sanitarium which was in Georgetown, just outside of Seattle. They called it Georgetown, Morning, Georgetown (sighs) Sanitarium-Morningside Sanitarium in Georgetown. I've repeated that three times. But ah, Dad was there approximately for two and a half years to three years, and he died with tuberculosis. This day and age I would say it was probably cancer. It was probably black lung from working in the coal mines and working in the foundries. Copper mines and so on. But ah, we would visit Dad on Wednesdays and Sundays. And ah, but then Mom raised my brother and I by herself.

SIGRIST: And ah, did your father's death have some bearing on the fact that you decided to go into the...

BURGER: Yes. Things were real tough. It was, we were ah, living on, well, you might call welfare. Mom did work in a sewing room at the library for the government to, to make money to, the government did set up a program similar to the CCs, and she didn't get paid an awful lot, and I decided to join the Coast Guard. I was in my eleventh, half of my eleventh year in high school and things were tough at home, we didn't have the money. In fact, after I joined the Coast Guard I sent my mother home ten dollars a month 'cause I got twenty one dollars a month pay. And ah, as I got from apprentice seaman to second class seaman to first class seaman, then I could send her more money each month. (breathes deeply)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how you went about joining the Coast Guard. What is the procedure like?

BURGER: Well, procedure like? I was very disgusted with school. School was very tough for me due to the fact that I, I would say my first two years and then being from parents that didn't speak English. Well, in my first two years of school. I was always felt like I was backwards in school a little bit. I had a tough time with English. Tough time with arithmetic. School was tough on me. So I decided one day that I've had enough of school. I hitchhiked to Seattle. Went in and asked the Coast Guard, that's where I wanted to go because a friend of mine was in the Coast Guard and I thought that would be a great place for me to go. So I went down and ah, to the recruiting office in Seattle. I can't remember what building it was in, but I did find it. And ah, asked to join. And they filled out all my paperwork. And they sent me to the Marine Hospital for an examination. And I had two teeth that had to be filled. And if I got those two teeth filled, I could join the Coast Guard. So I went back to Renton, and ah, I hitchhiked back to Renton from Seattle. And I went to, the next day I went to Dr. Booth's office. Which was a dentist and told him my problems. And he filled my two teeth. And when I got my first paycheck I sent him three dollars. And ah, after I got 'em filled, he made up a note for me and I went back to the Coast Guard and that's how I joined. I went through boot camp in Port Townsend, which is on the other side of ah, the ah, Puget Sound which is on the, oh I would say approximately a good hour and a half out of Seattle. Today, by the bridge that they have that takes you there, but I had to go by ferry at that time.

SIGRIST: And then how long after you got out of boot camp, um, how long had elapsed before you were brought to Ellis Island?

BURGER: Before that, when I, I did my boot camp duty at Port Townsend. From Port Townsend I was stationed in Seattle at the repair base.

Coast Guard repair base. And I put in about approximately four months there at the repair base. And I kept asking to be on a ship. I wanted to be on a ship. And then, the time that I was at the repair base it was sort of a stopping off place to get you oriented with the Coast Guard. I was living at home and I was getting subsistence pay for approximately four and a half to five months. And I would take the Seattle trolley, I took the Rainier trolley in to Seattle, go to the repair base, and I would go home at night. I was carrying a lunch bucket. Just like I had a regular job. And from there I kept asking to be on a ship, and I finally got stationed on the Coast Guard cutter, Red Wing.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about that experience, and where the ship was going, and what your duties were on the ship.

BURGER: The Coast Guard cutter Red Wing was approximately 185 footer. She was an ocean going tug. We took supplies in from, well we took supplies on in Seattle and ah from Seattle we went to Alaska and delivered supplies to the different Coast Guard bases up there. Which were the lighthouses and all along the inside passage. Wherever there was lighthouses and they belonged to the United States government, that's where we went. We went clear on up to Unalaska and Dutch Harbor. And our duties were out of Dutch Harbor/Unalaska, and we took on a group of University of Washington. At that time it was like the, ah, oh, I can't remember what the name of the group was, but they would go out to take soundings of the ocean to see what was at the bottom of the ocean and stuff like that. You gotta remember now, I was only about seventeen years of age at that time, and it was just a big thing for me just to be on a ship. And at my age today, it's hard to remember all the things that you're asking me.

SIGRIST: That's all right. You're doing fine.

BURGER: Some of it's coming back. Little by little.

SIGRIST: Tonight, when you go home, and you're lying in bed, it will all come back.

BURGER: Right.

SIGRIST: What was the route of the ship? Where did the ship go?

BURGER: The ship went to ah, from the ah, we were on seal patrol up in the Pribilof Islands, St. Lawrence Islands in Alaska. We were pulled, our, we were stationed actually in Dutch Harbor in Unalaska. And any time, then we went out from there in Dutch Harbor in Unalaska.

SIGRIST: Now you said to me before the interview began that you ended up on a ship that docked in Brooklyn.

BURGER: That's right. It was the US Coast Guard cutter, Red Wing. After pulling, it was just before, before the war had started. We were, they asked us to bring the ship from Alaska to Seattle, which we went to Kirkland, which is a, used to be a naval base there. Repair base. And we had the ship, they went through the whole ship. And then we got orders to take the ship on around through Panama Canal, on around to ah, to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. And that's where they decommissioned the ship and turned it over to the Navy.

SIGRIST: You're seeing a lot of world for a little, for a young man from Washington State.

BURGER: Ah, I have to admit that. The Coast Guard was good to me. I can't say anything bad. That everything I did was great. Was good duty. I was surprised that when we brought her all the way around to Brooklyn, and then ended up on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how that happened. I mean, why did you have to go to Ellis Island when the boat docked in Brooklyn.
(sounds of Burger breathing deeply in the background)

BURGER: From what I understand at that time, I don't know why they brought us to Ellis Island, but this was supposed to be like a Coast Guard base. I don't know if it was a boot camp or what. But when we got here there were Coast Guardsmen here already. And they just brought our whole ship here. Some of our crew and officers were shipped off to other places. But all your seamen and everything came right here. I remember that ah, I spent quite a bit of time here at Ellis Island. Before they shipped me out of here.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about what you remember about Ellis Island. Can you remember the first day that you were on the island?

BURGER: The first day that I came to Ellis Island I couldn't wait to find a phone to call my mother to tell her where I was. And that was part of my, first thing I did. I called home, collect, to tell Mom that I was stationed on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Of course, Ellis Island would have a completely different meaning to her than as a Coast Guard station.

BURGER: Yes. Yes. It ah, in fact she was rather surprised that this was where I was. Ellis Island means a lot to me. Ah, my parents came from here. Came through the island. And being stationed here during the war, means a lot.

SIGRIST: When you first arrived on the island, was there some kind of orientation extended to you and your fellow Coast Guardsmen, or some kind of tour isn't the right word, but how were you introduced to the island, and ah, made to feel like this was going to be your home?

BURGER: Not much of anything except coming to the island, they brought us to, all I can remember from Brooklyn to the ferry landing where the ferry brought us over from the mainland to the island, and when we got over here, they assigned bunks to us. We were on the, if I recall correctly, we were on the main floor. If that's the main floor that you come in through the big doors downstairs. And I remember having my bunk there. Ah, the big doors were not opened when we came in here. For some reason or another, that throws me off a little bit. Where the big awning that you come in on, we didn't have that. That looks new to me. Ah, the building itself was not a real great building. It needed a lot of work to be done to it. Ah, everything, we had all of our eating quarters, I can't remember what room we ate in or anything like that. It's been a long time. It's been almost 50 years ago. When you ask me these questions.

SIGRIST: (laughs)

BURGER: Ah, they did at the time that we came over, they off-limited a lot of the buildings to us fellas. We did not get to go wandering all over the place. But ah, we were told to stay right in this certain area and that was it.

SIGRIST: Tell me what an average day in the Coast Guard at Ellis Island was like, starting from the time you got up. What time did you have to get up in the morning?

BURGER: Well, really it wasn't that tough on us. If I recall correctly, that we would wake up approximately around seven o'clock. I was shore patrolman here and ah, I would go ashore at night. And I used to pull duty in the, well, I call it Bowling Green over there. Ah, there are other names that you people call it over here. I call it Bowling Green. That's where we pulled most of our duty. And we used to patrol around there for the bars and stuff like that. And we did work around Lower Man -, you call it Lower Manhattan. And that was about all of our duty that we had. But when the war broke out over here, I was stationed on the island. And the first thing they gave me was a .45, and told us to put on, we call 'em leggins on your legs. They were white, and we went ashore. And that was our duties when the war broke out. And we worked with the FBI in rounding up, it's not -- I shouldn't say it like that, but picking up the Japanese.

SIGRIST: Oh, absolutely. We've heard this on a number of occasions.

BURGER: Yeah. We picked up the Japanese. And we had 'em ah, we guarded them over at the mainland. We had a building over there where they were bringing them in. A lot of them came in from around Brooklyn Navy Yard. And they were actually spies. It was

surprising. And they had suitcases of money. It was surprising to me to this day, how much money that they had in their possession at the time that they were picked up. I don't know what else you would like me to say...

SIGRIST: I'd like you to talk more about the rounding up of the Japanese. I'd like you to explain to me exactly what the procedure was. How were the people identified. And then how did you go and get them.

BURGER: The way it was... If I can recall correctly. The New York was working, the New York police were working with the FBI. We were guards at the detention center that they brought 'em to us, brought them to the ferry landing dock, on the mainland. And then from there, they would cuff 'em, bring 'em over here and we brought 'em on the ferry over to the island, and turned them over to immigration officers over here. That's all I can remember. There was FBI working with 'em. We were just guards. That's all we were. Coast Guard, Coast Guardsmen acting as guards. We, we, worked with the FBI, we worked with the immigration people, and that was all I can say on that. It's pretty hard for me to remember everything.

SIGRIST: Did um, so the Japanese that were, were detained here then. They were brought to Ellis Island. Certain ones, probably not everybody, but certain ones were brought here.

BURGER: They were spies. They were actual spies that they, that had homes set up. Apartments set up around the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Those were the ones that they brought in.

SIGRIST: Did the FBI have offices out here also? That you can recall?

BURGER: That I cannot say. But you know, being seventeen years old, I think that I ah, I cannot tell you if they had offices here. I know that the immigration people were here, and I know that the FBI was here. But I don't know where their offices were. We didn't get to get into that detail.

SIGRIST: In your time in Ellis Island were there any other circumstances where you functioned in some capacity for the FBI?

BURGER: No.

SIGRIST: For instance, if you had to accompany the FBI to pick up one particular person for some reason or something like that.

BURGER: No. No. They handled that themselves.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were just detailed on this one...

BURGER: Just detail. All we were were guards.

SIGRIST: What interaction, if any, did you have with the immigration part of the island? Did you...?

BURGER: I can't say that I had anything to do with that part. As I said, they would bring 'em in to the mainland. We would detain 'em until they were brought to the island. They did have their, some of their personal belongings. They had quite a bit of money with 'em. The Japanese people did. And mostly of 'em, most of 'em were men. We did not have any women. I don't remem-, recall any of the women. If they were, they were in a different area. All I can still remember was the men.

SIGRIST: Aside from the Japanese, did you ever assist the immigration officials in any capacity?

BURGER: No. Did not.

SIGRIST: Again, this was just that one special circumstance.

BURGER: Yeah. Just when the war broke out. And ah, I would say that lasted for approximately two weeks that I can recall that I pulled duty on that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you were when you found out that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

BURGER: Yes. I was downtown. I was in Manhattan at the Paramount Theater when the ah, when the lights came on at the theater, manager came out on the stage and he says all military personnel are to report back to their bases immediately. The war has, Japan has declared war on the United States. And when I got back to Ellis Island, they issued me a gun and we were protecting the island. Now, to this day I want to know what I was doing to protect with a thirty-ought-six. (laughs) That was quite amazing to me. But they, they didn't know what was going to take place. And that was, and then, within a day or two, then we start rounding up the Japanese.

SIGRIST: So the whole atmosphere changed then, at that point.

BURGER: Everything changed.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how your every day life here on the island changed because of the war? Because you were there during the early years of the war.

BURGER: The island was a, you gotta remember when we were stationed here there wasn't much on the island. And you were confined to the island. And they did bring in, we did have a ah, young man by the name of Marty Sirvel which was a boxer, and ah, he was supposed to box Sugar Ray, I can't remember the whole story on that. But he did come to the island and he did train here. Now, I don't, can't remember if he was in the Coast Guard or not. If he was in the military or not. But he, they did bring in their ah, Marty Sirvel was from, I think he was from the New York area. And ah, he ah, (laughs) he did use a lot of the different Coast Guardsmen for training, but he did have his own sparring partners here too. I recall when Jack Dempsey came here. He was on the island. We had a lot of different celebrities come to the island to visit with us. But ah, that's about all I can give you on that.

SIGRIST: Was boxing an important recreational activity here for the Coast Guardsmen?

BURGER: I, I, would say yes. We had a ring set up. It was on the main floor. It's right where the big double doors are, where the awning is. And I can still remember that boxing ring set up down there. And I can't remember what other doors we used to come in to this building. That throws me on that, cause those big double doors and that awning throws me, cause it's been a long time. Fifty years ago is a long time, to come back here and reminisce.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what other Coast Guardsmen were doing out here. Were you aware of there being other groups of Coast Guardsmen who were here for different reasons?

BURGER: Other Coast Guardsmen came here and they went. They would come here until they got their papers, shipping out papers. A lot of them got shipped out of here. I finally got shipped out of here and I was stationed on the French liner Normandy in the harbor here, in the Hudson River. Along side of the, just over from us was the Queen Mary, was stationed there. And I was stationed on the French liner, Normandy. I was a guard on that. And ah, I don't recall how many men we had on the French liner, Normandy, but I did pull duty on it until they decided to make a troop ship out of her.

SIGRIST: This is after you left, after 1942 when you left here.

BURGER: Mm, hm. Mm, hm.

SIGRIST: I see.

BURGER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Were you aware of the signal master's school, for instance, here at Ellis Island, where Coast Guardsmen were learning semaphore.

BURGER: Yes. They did have us... They were teaching use semaphore when I was here too.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, please talk a little bit about that.

BURGER: I can't remember anything about it. (they laugh) But they did teach us semaphore here. Yes. I recall that. Yes. Yes. But ah, all I remember is that they had signal corps here and they did let us, they did teach us that. And I don't remember the details on it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other kind of educational opportunities that you had while you were stationed here? Specific classes that you had to attend or something along those lines?

BURGER: None. I can't remember any classes that we had to go through. I don't.

SIGRIST: What about entertainment? What did you guys do for fun when you had time off?

BURGER: To get off the island and go on liberty to Manhattan.

SIGRIST: And that was sort of standard.

BURGER: That was standard practice for all the men on the island.

SIGRIST: How often would you have liberty?

BURGER: Just about every night.

SIGRIST: Oh, really? So you...

BURGER: Except if you had duty. If you were shore patrol, you went ashore and you pulled your duty. If not, you were on duty here on the island. You had to pull guard duty on the island.

SIGRIST: And if you had to do guard duty on the island, where would you do that?

BURGER: Well, just about any place in the perimeter of the island. You'd have to be along the water's edge, wherever the water's edge was, that is what you patrolled.

SIGRIST: And how does one patrol? What is it that you did?

BURGER: Well, you just, well, you had a forty-five ah, and just walked around out there. Maybe each guy had a certain area that they patrolled. Maybe be two of you walking along . But that was your duty on the perimeter of the water of the island.

SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape, for someone a hundred years for now, listening to this, a forty-five is a type of rifle?

BURGER: It's a pistol.

SIGRIST: A pistol.

BURGER: They did give us the thirty-ought-sixes, but they did give us forty-fives were issued to us too.

SIGRIST: And that's another type of pistol, right?

BURGER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Ah, was there target practice somewhere on the island, or...?

BURGER: No, no.

SIGRIST: You had learned how to use the guns prior.

BURGER: I had done all that through boot camp and they just assumed that we had knowledge how to use a gun.

SIGRIST: Good. We're going to pause for a second. Kevin will flip over the tapes and have some more questions to ask you.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: All right. We're now continuing on side two with Rudy Burger. Mr. Burger, can you describe for me your uniform?

BURGER: My uniform. I had a regular, standard Coast Guard uniform which was ah, blue. And had the white trim on it. White, if you had the first, second class seaman, you had three stripes on your, on your ah, cuff. Ah, then you had your shoulder patch. Warrior, you did have your neckerchief, what you would call... I don't know what you would call it, but that's what I would call it. Then you'd have the old fashioned Coast Guard cap, or hat, and it had the name of the ship that you might be stationed with. Which mine said USS Coast Guard Cutter Red Wing.

SIGRIST: Now did um, were you responsible for cleaning your uniforms or was there a facility on the island that did that?

BURGER: Yes that, that was one thing that the Coast Guard was very strict about. The officers were strict about your uniform. Had to be pressed. A lot of fellas had ah, Navy, they had their uniforms made

by a tailor. I had a tailor made uniform. I had my issued uniform. The issued uniform was a heavier, it would have been a wool type uniform. Ah, it was heavy. The tailor made uniform was more of a gabardine type cloth. It looked a lot sharper and dressier. And that's what you'd wear when you go on liberty. For dress inspection you always wore the issued uniform. They didn't allow us to wear the tailor made uniform for inspection. Our sea bag had to be a certain way. Our ah, locker had to be stowed. All your uniform, all your underclothing -- tee shirts, underwear had to be stowed properly. Because you had locker inspection Your bunk had to be made up a certain way. When you got up in the morning and took your shower and got cleaned up for the day, your bunk had to be orderly when you left it for inspection.

SIGRIST: Can you remember how many Coast Guardsmen would share the dormitory room where you were?

BURGER: Well,

SIGRIST: How many bunks there were?

BURGER: Well, on board ship we had a regular bunk area. I mean it was a ah, crew's, crew's quarter.

SIGRIST: But here at Ellis Island?

BURGER: In Ellis Island, I would say the whole dormitory, the whole main floor was men and bunks. And there was two tier bunks not three. It was two tier. And ah, I was telling my wife today when I was here, I can't believe, I said, where in the heck those bunks went. But I did see some bunks here, but those were the ones that the immigrants

used. Ours were single bunks, you slept alone. Ah, they furnished you a mattress, but you had your own pillow case, you had your own pillow cases and your own sheets. (coughs) But ah, it was ah, well, it was (coughs), clean. Your bunk, (coughs), sleeping area had to be very clean. (coughs) Excuse me.

SIGRIST: Would you like a glass of water?

BURGER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Could we just pause for a moment? I'll get you a glass of water. Okay, we're now resuming. You mentioned that one major form of entertainment was going into Manhattan. Was there any kind of entertainment supplied for you here on the island? You mentioned entertainers came out here.

BURGER: No. A few of them came out here due to the fact of Marty Servile, the boxer. Truthfully speaking, there was no real entertainment. We did, and when the war started and the USO started, we used to go to the USOs, and they used to furnish use with entertainment, ah, dancing, and then they did give us tickets to go to different events, like at the Madison Square Garden and stuff like that. The ah,...

SIGRIST: Do you remember where the USO was in Manhattan?

BURGER: (laughs) Oh, you're asking me a question that's real hard to find... I couldn't even tell you where the USO was. But the did a tremendous job for the service men. I remember going to the Madison Square Garden, ah, to different events. Ah, I did get to meet Max Schmelling. I did, different things that came up. Ah,

when the hockey was going on -- see what you gotta remember, when the war broke out a lot of things got discontinued. A lot of sports got discontinued. Boxing didn't. For some reason or other it just continued. But most of your big events like baseball, it hurt baseball. It hurt hockey. It hurt all the different, basketball. Different events because the young men were all gone, going into the service. So, really, we didn't get that kind of entertainment here on the island. No.

SIGRIST: And there were, were there any kind of sporting opportunities for you here on the island? You know, like a softball team or something like that?

BURGER: I don't recall. I don't recall that. No. I don't recall of any events like that. This was a military base. The war was on. They used us for guard duty. And you gotta remember that Ellis Island was a shipping out place. Just a stopping over place for Coast Guardsmen and they would only be here a short time, and away they would go. And they'd be off to a ship, put on a ship, or shipped overseas or someplace.

SIGRIST: And would you say that Ellis Island really then was just sort of a keeping place for Coast Guardsmen who were in between.

BURGER: Yes. I say that Ellis Island was just about the same for the Coast Guardsmen as it was for the immigrants that came here.

SIGRIST: That's right.

BURGER: A stopping off stop.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of emergency happening while you were here? Aside from the beginning of World War II. Some kind of something that either happened on the island, or perhaps in New York Harbor ah, that was a big catastrophe, a big emergency, something that sticks out in your mind?

BURGER: No. I do not have any knowledge of that. I really do not. Unless something came up that I could refresh, somebody would refresh my memory of something. But I can't remember any big thing that went in the harbor. I do know that there was an awful lot of shipping. There were ships going back and forth from all different directions. I will say that much. Due to the fact that I would say that New York Harbor was one of your big harbors for shipping at the time of the war. There was a lot of ships going and coming. All cargo type ships. And that's about all I can tell you on that.

SIGRIST: Were you ever allowed to go over to the Statue of Liberty for any reason?

BURGER: Yes, I did make it, I did make liberty to go over there. Yes. I ah, very much impressed with the statue. Then, if I can remember, I think they closed that off for a while when the war broke out. Yeah. I think it was closed off to the public, if I'm not... I know I did go over there when I was in the service. And I know I went down to Washington, D.C. when I was in the service from here. I did take the train and go down for that. But as far as goes for the statue, I did go in it. And I walked, and they did have at the time that I went into the statue, you could only go up into the head of it. The arm had been closed off due to the fact of the deterioration of the rust and corrosion and things that was on the statue.

SIGRIST: Tell me about holidays. For instance, at Christmastime, did they do anything for the Coast Guardsmen out here that you can remember?

BURGER: Oh, a lot of fellas went home on liberty. They got leave to go home for Christmas. Christmas you spent in the service, on the base or on board ship. And ah, Christmas was Christmas. If you were in a harbor some place they'd let you go on liberty and things like that. But ah, no. Christmas was Christmas, wherever you were, that's where it was.

SIGRIST: Do you ah, while you were stationed at Ellis Island were you able to see any of your family members for any reason, or were they all still in Washington State?

BURGER: None of my relatives ever came here. You gotta remember, that was right after the Depression and money was tight. And ah, I'm a little surprised of my visit back here in 1990-, '94, this date that I'm here right now, after going into Manhattan and the price of food, and the price of a glass of beer, to what it was when I was here. Because you could buy a glass of beer and a good pastrami sandwich and a corned beef sandwich for fifty cents. And ah, today, it's eight bucks. So that just goes to show you what has happened to the economy.

SIGRIST: Was there a little um, ah, ah, store for supplies that you could buy stuff while here at Ellis Island, while you were stationed here?

BURGER: They had the bare necessities. I don't remember where the store was on the island here. But you could buy like for, your toothpaste and things like that. Yes. Your razor blades and things like that.

SIGRIST: So that kind of stuff was not supplied by the government. You were responsible for it.

BURGER: No. No. That was your responsibility to supply your own toothpaste. Um, I don't recall anybody ever giving me. There was plenty of soap. And plenty of water.

SIGRIST: Was there a shower room connected to the dormitory room?

BURGER: Wherever the showers were on, I've been trying to find the showers here. And I tried to explain to my wife, cause she asked me where the shower room, where did you guys take a bath while you were here. And really, I cannot tell you. I did find the lavatories. It's down by the theater. I walked down there and I says, I remember this toilet in here and that's about it. Other than that, I can't remember where the shower stalls were.

SIGRIST: Does one of your, the officers that were on the island at that time? Is there one particular officer or perhaps one particular fellow Coast Guardsmen that sticks out in your mind for some reason because they were perhaps, something that they did, or, or something along those lines?

BURGER: The one young man that lived here in the city of New York. He lived in the Queens. His name was Dombrovsky. And that's the only person that I can remember that I was stationed with.

SIGRIST: Why does he stick out in your mind?

BURGER: I don't have any idea in my mind why Dombrovsky does. He does stick out in my mind. But that's the only one, and he was just a regular seaman like myself. But the officers, officers came and went. And I would say, as the war went on and they just got pulled out of here, they were just here as a dropping off spot. The officers that was running the, Ellis Island, or in charge of Ellis Island, ah, can't remember. All we did was bosun mates and chiefs would come up and say, Burger you got this? Or so and so's got to do that, and that was it. They'd had, they would just call your name out and this is what you had to do. This is the duty roster and stuff like that. But you didn't get to rub elbows with the officers. No.

SIGRIST: Well, and as you say, they're as transient as the Coast Guardsmen. I mean, they're going in and out quickly too.

BURGER: We were at war when I was here. The United States government was at war and as ships got commissioned, de-commissioned and I would say, and then all the landing crafts and LST's that they had, that they built. These men went out. They ah, they didn't keep us here very long.

SIGRIST: You mentioned the Normandy and the Queen Mary. Were those ships ah, converted for use during the war? And if they were, did any of you have anything to do with that?

BURGER: The only ship that I had anything to do, that I was stationed on was the French liner, Normandy. And that was the one that caught on fire in the, in the harbor. She rolled over on her side and I did get to go see her. I did see her laying on her side. And ah, that was fond memories. That was a beautiful ship.

SIGRIST: So you do remember an emergency then, that happened.

BURGER: Well, that might have been an emergency, yeah. They did have a French, when the war broke out, the United States government took possession of the French liner, Normandy. They did keep the French crew on there, which ah, I would say approximately, they kept the black gang which was the engine crew. They did not keep anybody on the main, on the decks of the crew. They shipped them all back to France. The only ones that they kept there was the men that could handle the engines. Cause they did turn the engines over every so often in the harbor, due to the fact that the harbor, the river would bring all the silt down and they had to keep the props cleared of silt. And ah, and I do recall that, yes. And I was stationed on her. I had beautiful quarters on there. We had an officer on there. I don't rem, know who he was to this day. Ah, it was a small crew that we had. And we did have a chief on board. And you gotta remember, fifty years is a long time.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have any opportunity to go to the medical facilities here on the island. Or if something happened to one of the Coast Guardsmen, how and where was it treated?

BURGER: Now, you're askin' me a question I can't answer to ya. I mean, I really cannot answer the, if we had a ah, medical dispensary here. But I'm sure we did. I never had to use it. I never cut my finger or anything, or I never got sick. I didn't have time to get sick. I was too busy doing everything else.

SIGRIST: (laughs) Well, tell me a little bit about how you got off the island.

BURGER: How I got off the island?

SIGRIST: Yeah. How was it decided that you would then leave this post?

BURGER: Well, I kept putting, I put in for duty off the island. Out of the clear blue sky got French liner, Normandy.

SIGRIST: Why was it that you wanted to get off of the island?

BURGER: Well, everybody that's in the service wants to do something besides sit on an island. I mean, the island was great. There was nothing to do here. You'd come here and ah, you'd spend your days here. Ah, guard duty. You go out and you put in your four to six hours guard duty and then you'd come back and ah, then you'd have your dinner or your supper and um, that was it. There was, like I said there was, we did have card games and stuff like that. Your entertainment on the island. But that was about as much. We did have movies on the island. I mean in the building here someplace. I remember we had movies. But ah, no. Liberty was the greatest thing. You could go on liberty. They gave us good liberty here. And it was real close to the main, the mainland.

SIGRIST: But really, you were just kind of bored and anxious to ah...

BURGER: Yeah. And you, everybody wanted to get off the island. Everybody wanted to get on a ship. We were at war, and um, I put in for ah, duty beside the island. And I did get shipped to French liner Normandy. I lived on the island, on the ship. That was my next duty. And then from there I went to the cornfield light ship which was outside of ah, New London, Connecticut. I went to New London from here. I was stationed at New London for a short time

and then I did get duty on the Cornfield Light Ship and that's where I finished out my service.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about why you came back to Ellis Island today, and what it felt like to be here.

BURGER: The reason I came back to the island, ah, we did come on a vacation, my wife and I, Chris is her name.

SIGRIST: What's her maiden name?

BURGER: Jorgenson. And she wanted to look up her family that came through the island. The Jorgenson family.

SIGRIST: That's J-O-R-G...

BURGER: E-N. J-O-R-S-E-N-S-O-N. She wanted to come to the island, just as bad as I did. And ah, look up the family three a little bit, on , if there was anything, any history on her family coming here. Ah, her, which would be, (thinking) her father, mother came here. I believe it was with five children when she came through the island. And ah, her father was born in the United States. Mark Jorgenson. And ah, that's one of the reasons we came here. She wanted to look up, come hear history.

SIGRIST: And when you came here, when you actually got to the island, what did it feel like for you?

BURGER: My friend, I will tell you this. I cried. I have a lot of memories here. (choking a bit).

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SIGRIST: You obviously felt some kind of an emotional connection to the island itself.

BURGER: Definitely. Yes ah, just by ah, my parents coming here, and then by being stationed here.

SIGRIST: Sure. Sort of a double connection.

BURGER: Yeah. It is.

SIGRIST: Do you think you'll visit again sometime?

BURGER: If I live long enough. If I live long enough, I would come back. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Great. Mr. Burger, thank you very much. I know you took time out from your visit to do this for us. I really appreciate it.

BURGER: I appreciate it. It's very awarding to me to be able to do this.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Ah, this is Paul Seegriss signing off, with Rudy Burger, on Wednesday, August 10, 1994 at the Ellis Island recording studio.

END INTERVIEW