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BEATRICE COHEN CONAN

BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 7, 1914

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 25, 1995

RUNNING TIME: 32:13

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

USING THE PORTABLE DAT RECORDER

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 11/1998

HOSPITAL ATTENDANT AT ELLIS ISLAND:

1939

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, July 25th, 1995. I'm in the Ellis Island recording studio using the portable digital equipment, and I'm here with Beatrice Conan. Mrs. Conan was a hospital attendant here at Ellis Island in 1939. Present also is her daughter Vivian, and Stacey Menaker and Lydia Hanhardt, who are two student interns who have been with us here during the summer of 1995. Mrs. Conan, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

CONAN: 12/7/14.

SIGRIST: December...

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SIGRIST: 7th, 1914...

CONAN: 1914.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what your maiden name was?

CONAN: My maiden name was Cohen, C@O@H@E@N.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

CONAN: I was born on the Lower East Side of New York City but was moved to Brooklyn when I was about nine months old and lived in Brooklyn ever since.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me just a little bit about your family background?

CONAN: Sure. I'm one of nine children. And Mama had eight girls and one boy. She treasured the boy and tolerated the girls. (she laughs) I guess that's it.

SIGRIST: Tell, well, tell me a little bit about your parents'

background and where they came from and that sort of ô

CONAN: Okay, oh, sure. My parents came from Greece. My mother was born Ioannina, Greece and my father was born in Castoria [she accents the third syllable], Greece.

SIGRIST: And can you spell both of those place names, please?

CONAN: Oh, sure Ionnina is, I guess I'll spell it the Greek way, I©©©A©N©N©I©N©A and Castoria is ©©A©S©T©©©R©I©A. Papa's family is really from the Spanish Inquisition. In 1492, Queen Isabella of Spain said to the Jewish people, "Get out or get killed or convert." Papa is part of the line that got out and moved to Turkey and Greece. And the Turkish, the Turkish leadership was very benevolent and allowed the Spanish people to return their (correcting herself), to retain their language. So they, this, the Greek, the Jews of my father's family, even though they were born in Greece for hundreds of years perhaps, talked Spanish. Ladino is what they call it.

SIGRIST: These are the Sephardic Jews.
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SIGRIST: Tell me when your parents came to this country.

COHEN: My parents came to this country, I'm not sure exactly when. (she laughs) I would say 1902. And we've been, they have been here ever since. My daughter Vivian helped create a video about their arrival here at that time. And there's a very interesting story of how they were right here on Ellis Island and Mama had something wrong with her eyes. So the physician of the time separated her, indicated she can't stay in New York. She has to go back to Greece because her eyes were infected. And Papa was very upset and asked somebody in the Albanian language, which he knew. There was an interpreter there. "When am I going, what are they going to do with my wife?" "Send her back," he was told. And he was very upset and said, "What could I do?" So the, whoever was there in charge said, "Go over to her. Erase the chalk mark that's on her lapel or on her back, and bring her over to this side and just walk out as though nobody ever put a chalk mark on her." And he did exactly that. And that's how they both came into the United States at that time. (she laughs)ô
indicating that they came in 1903.

CONAN: Okay, I'll accept that.

SIGRIST: Okay. (he laughs) Let me just put the microphone wire here between your hands, if you'll unfold them.

CONAN: Sure.

SIGRIST: There we go. Well, good. So they came 1902, 1903. And then tell me just a little bit about your father, what job he got, that sort of thing.

CONAN: Oh, yes. That was really interesting. Papa was a tailor in Europe and when he came here he needed a job, did not know the Yiddish language because he was, spoke Ladino, and wanted a job. So he learned how to say "work" in Hebrew and he learned how to say "sewing machine" because he knew how to sew. And he would go from person to person saying "sewing machine" and "work." Then finally he got a job sewing. And Mama got the same kind of job, so they worked with sewing. And at that time, they had to carry the heads of the machines to wherever they were working. You had to own the sewing machine, not the wooden part, just the head part. So that's how they went to work. But that job didn't last too long because after a while Mama got a raise and Papa didn't. And Papa was macho and he said to the boss, "How come you give her more money than you give me?" And the boss said, "She produces more." (she laughs) So Papa, Papa refused to work where his wife was earning more than he was and he just quit and learned how to go into business for himself.

SIGRIST: That's a great story.

CONAN: (she laughs) Yeah. He was macho.

SIGRIST: It says a lot about the backgrounds that they came from.

CONAN: Right.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Let's talk about you now.

CONAN: Ah.

SIGRIST: You came to Ellis Island in 1939.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you went about getting this job.

CONAN: Okay, simple. I was a college graduate thinking I'm going to be a teacher someday. I graduated in 1936.

SIGRIST: From what college?

CONAN: Brooklyn College. No jobs for teachers. Board of Ed. had not hired teachers for about thirteen years by the time I finally got a teaching job. And I used to buy "the Chief," which is a newspaper telling what jobs, what tests are being given for jobs. And there was a test for hospital attendant. So I took it and I passed it. And at, and I still go through my house turning brooms upside down because part of the things

you need to know is you don't put a broom with the brush side down because the hairs wears out. So you have to turn brooms (she laughs) upside down when you're a hospital attendant.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of questions they asked you on this...?

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because I'm still turning brooms upside down. I don't exactly remember but I imagine a lot of them were logical. Maybe, maybe I went to the library to get a book of previous tests because I certainly didn't learn how to pass these things in college and learn how to clean. And as I said before, "hospital attendant" is a fancy word for "maid." I did not make beds. Nurses made beds. That was a professional thing to do. I did not give patients any medication. I just cleaned. I cleaned table tops and, and maybe floors. I don't recall exactly. And that was my job.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel, having been immigrants and having their own associations with Ellis Island? How did they feel about you getting a job here?

CONAN: Well, I don't think they thought too much about the place here but my mother was concerned that I wasn't sleeping at home. They put me, I slept on Ellis Island and they put me in a room with three other hospital attendants. So one day I said, "Okay, Mama, you want to see where I sleep? Come." And I brought her on the ferry and I brought her to the place where I sleep and she was content. And although I don't recall specifically, I'm sure I told her, "It's Ellis Island. It's where you were when you came to America." Ô

SIGRIST: Tell me about your first day of work.

CONAN: Well...

SIGRIST: Right from when you left the house.

CONAN: Right. (she laughs) Right, right, right. I don't really recall except part of my job, part of my interview, as a physical examination. I had to be in good physician condition. So I was examined. And I don't recall too much except that I was willing to do whatever it was they told me to do with dust cloths. And I remember doing things that probably I didn't have to do because I was, remembered Mama's spring cleaning. There would be lamps on the wall and I would get up on a chair and clean the tops of the lamps because there wasn't that much work to do. There were a few table tops and I don't even remember if I washed floors. I may have. But I also remember getting up there on my own to just dust things. I was trying to do it right. One time, I wasn't always Ô

assigned to the same ward. I was assigned to different places. And one time I was assigned to a ward where there was actually at least one child on the bed, maybe more. And this child had a communicable disease, probably the measles or chicken pox or something like that. The child was an Asian immigrant and the father would come to visit the child. Apparently, the family was allowed to go to New York but the child was detained because of a communicable disease. And that was the time I got my first and probably only tip in my life. The father handed me five dollars to take good care of the child. And I didn't want it. I was embarrassed. I said, "No, I'll take care of him anyway." But I finally took the five dollars (she laughs) and probably bought an article of clothing with it.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your commute to Ellis Island from the time you left your house and...

CONAN: Sure.

SIGRIST: ...was it, you were in Brooklyn at this point?

CONAN: Right.ô

CONAN: The subway, the subway to Whitehall Street.

SIGRIST: Which subway?

CONAN: Oh, the N train. At that time it was called the BMT. And I would get off at Whitehall Street, cross probably Battery Park and get onto the ferry. The ferry was quite an event because I was young, probably twenty two years old or something like that, and I don't know why there were a lot of Coast Guard young men on it. And that was kind of an attraction (she laughs), to have young men on the boat at the same time I was there. I don't know if we stopped at Governor's Island also, the same ferry. We might have because I don't think those Coast Guard men were on Ellis Island, so they may have come on at another point. And I enjoyed the ride but, of course, that was only once a week because I slept here several, most, all week and went, went on to New York only once a week and back to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Was it a Monday through Friday kind of schedule and then you'd spend the weekends in Brooklyn?ô

five or six days. Yes, it was exactly that way.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the Ellis Island ferry looked like?

CONAN: Well, not really. I think it, I think I just took it

for granted. It was just a beautiful boat ride and there I was riding on the boat. I think sometimes I would look impressively, not, I was not impressive. The other people were because I would look at the doctors and, I guess I was thinking, "It's be nice to meet a man," and I would look at the male doctors and think, "Now that person is a doctor." But I was never bold enough to approach anybody, not the Coast Guard and, and not the doctors.

SIGRIST: Where did the ferry dock once you got to Ellis Island?

CONAN: I didn't, I don't know if there's more than one place to dock. I just took it for granted that the captain of the ship and (she laughs) the ship crew are going to know exactly what to do and I paid no attention to where we were. But after we got off, we did walk to what I call, and recall, four red buildings. They ô

were the hospital. Probably not the building we're in now, a different section of this little island. And it was a hospital and there were four red buildings.

SIGRIST: And when you arrived, was there a, a check@in process of some sort?

CONAN: There should have been but I don't recall any. I just walked care free and just went where I was supposed to go. We did wear uniforms.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for...

CONAN: I don't think I, I don't think I came in a uniform but the uniform probably was in my room. It had to be blue. We were not, I was not a nurse so I didn't not wear white. I wore a blue uniform. And I do recall asking my sister Molly, I didn't like the ones you could buy so I asked my sister Molly to make me some pretty ones and, sure enough, she did. So I wore pretty, blue uniforms. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you describe the details of the uniform, like the hem length and the...

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It had pockets and a collar, shirtwaist@type of blue uniform. And that's about it.

SIGRIST: Was there a head covering of some sort?

CONAN: Oh, no. None at all.

SIGRIST: Describe for me the room where you stayed at Ellis Island.

CONAN: Sure. It was a room with three other ladies in it. There were four beds and one of the beds was mine. And I remember one lady's name, even. I don't remember her first name. Maybe we called her O'Malley. Her last name was O'Malley and she was kind of lively and vibrant and I liked the idea that there was at least one other young person there. The other two may have been older. And I remember what I learned from her about cleaning because I, I don't remember the conversation but she would say, "Oh, I just gave it a lick and a promise." (she laughs) So I learn the phrase and, and gave my, my sinks "a lick and a promise."

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CONAN: No, no, she was...

SIGRIST: Did you work with any immigrants?

CONAN: Not really, not really. We were all, nobody seemed to

have an accent in talking the English language so I guess we, we may have been all American born.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where the room was, what the location in terms of on the island?

CONAN: No, it was in one of the, it was dormitory@type. It was on the ground floor, and it was just four in a room. And the showers were elsewhere. I think, I guess there was no private toilet because the showers and toilets were outside the room. No private bath.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how the room was furnished?

CONAN: Just beds, not even a dresser. Just a little place to keep your things. And I don't even remember where I hung up my, my blue uniforms but there may have been a closet.ô
room?

CONAN: Yes, I think so. But, "a lick and a promise."
(they laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me, for instance, meal time and that sort of thing. Where did you go to eat and what were the times?

CONAN: Oh, right, right. We went to a dining room and I remember being very impressed at around Thanksgiving time, so I must have been here around Thanksgiving time because I enjoyed those meals. (she laughs) I really enjoyed eating here. They were, it was good food for me and I enjoyed eating here. There had to be a dining room but it was a central place. It had nothing to do with where the room was. it was a central place where we ate. And I enjoyed the meals, especially (she laughs) around Thanksgiving time.

SIGRIST: Was there a required bedtime?

CONAN: A curfew, you mean?
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CONAN: I don't think so. I, I think there was a radio in our room. I don't recall having one of my own. No, there wasn't a required bedtime. There were, it was, there were places outside where we could stay, like a bench and, and there was gard@@, like a garden but not a garden. Just paths with greenery along side of it. No, I don't think we had a curfew where we had to turn out the light but we worked, so naturally (she laughs) we went to bed at a reasonable time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what time your, what time you went to work, or if you worked in shifts?

CONAN: I think I went to work very early. I think it had to

be about six in the morning, if not seven. Possibly six in the morning.

SIGRIST: And then when would your first break be?

CONAN: Well, I don't recall the exact times. I'm assuming it would be like every four hours or so but I imagine we went till six at night with lunch in between. I remember something that I was envious of. There were some people that also, I think, came from the same tests and they didn't have to clean wards like I did. They were assigned to the nurse's, uh, probably dining room. They helped the nurses get the breakfasts and the lunch and I thought, "Gee, that's nice. They don't have to be maids and clean." They were just helping the nurses get their food. As a matter of fact, that's how come I quit. Toward the end of whenever I stayed, it was ten or twelve months, I was assigned to night duty and I didn't think I would like that but I did. It was a ward where there were women. They, they could have been the wives of seamen. One I, I think was the wife of a seaman. And they were mentally not too well. And there were only six to eight patients there. And I worked there probably from six or eight at night till six in the morning, and I liked that. There wasn't much to do. I didn't have to clean. The cleaning was done in the daytime. I just kind of had to be there in case there was a problem. And, when they were ready to assign, to take me off nights and put me back on days, I said to myself, "I don't want to clean anymore. I quit." So I didn't stay. That was what made me quit, going off nights.

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there any kind of organized entertainment for the people who lived here who were employees?

CONAN: Not at all.

SIGRIST: Movies or anything...

CONAN: No, I don't think there was. There definitely was radio if you, if you had one in your room. And definitely was a place outside to stay, to, to be. I recall taking sun, at that time I didn't know sun was dangerous. I recall being outside and just lying down on a bench and trying to get the sun on my face. No, we just had to make our own entertainment.

SIGRIST: Were, who were the other people doing the same kind of work? What sex were they?

CONAN: I only paid attention to the women. There must have been, maybe the men were washing the floors. I don't recall. I didn't pay much attention to the male hospital attendants, if there were any. I was basically familiar with the women hospital attendants.

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sort of skirted all around it.

CONAN: Sure. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You, you spoke about cleaning the tops of lamps. Tell me some of the other duties.

CONAN: That was rare. That was rare. That was just my own idea because it was boring, you know. It's kind of boring to have a job and not have much to do. (she laughs) There really wasn't that much to do. All I remember is cleaning the tops of these tables that are between the beds where the men, it was men. It was mostly, there were women in some wards but mostly there were men. And I think they were seamen and I don't think they worked for the government. I think they were merchant seamen, some of them. Basically, I recall cleaning sinks and, and the tops of the stands that were next to the beds of the patients.

SIGRIST: And how would you clean?

CONAN: Just moving things. Take a, take a cloth and clean the top and move something away and clean it and then ô put it back. And that was basically my job.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what was on the tops of these tables?

CONAN: Well, probably a glass or a pitcher or, that's about it. A glass or a pitcher. You know, I'm beginning to wonder now if I had anything to do with helping the patient eat when the food was served. I may have been involved in that. I may have been involved in the trays, the food trays that came for the patients to eat. I recall one patient who was, who was not a man. She was a lady and I felt particularly empathic towards her because she was old and, at the time, I thought she reminded me of my mother. And I, I think I had something to do with helping her eat from a, food from a tray.

SIGRIST: You've mentioned several patients that stick out in your mind; the Asian boy, the, the seaman's wife, this woman...

CONAN: Uh huh, right.

SIGRIST: ...were there any other patients and their situations that stick out in your mind?ô
don't know if it was nurses or hospital attendants, I guess it was nurses, they would kind of flirt with some of the, uh, I guess it was nurses, with some of the men, seamen patients. Because I recall one nurse that would put extra goodies on a tray so that the man that she was interested it would get special food and maybe they dated each other when he got better. I

think that was her aim anyway. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the relationship between the cleaning staff of the hospital and the nurses?

CONAN: Uh huh. Well, they were above, the, a nurse had a rank above a hospital attendant and I guess they gave us orders and told us what to do. I only remember one name of a nurse, and she was more than a nurse. She was a nurse manager. Her name was Miss Holgate [ph] and I think the reason I remember is I expect, my, my idea of logic was that when there's a vacancy, somebody from the staff should get promoted. And I didn't mean a hospital attendant. I meant a nurse should become a nurse, whatever that title was, manager. But it didn't work that way at all. Somebody totally from outside, (she laughs) her name was Miss Holgate [ph], came in and got the job. I guess it was civil service or something like that, that I was not experienced about. So I was surprised that it wasn't one of the nurses that got promoted.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the relationship between the nurses and the doctors, your observations of that?

CONAN: Not really. I didn't see too much. But I do recall, now that I'm thinking of it, a closet, a linen closet, I guess. And I recall seeing a sign on it where it said, "A place for everything and everything in its place." (she laughs) So I guess I was learning about housekeeping when I was there.

SIGRIST: Were you given any kind of instructions as to what you could or could not do, either for the patients or talking to the patients, anything like that?

CONAN: No, there were no rules or regulations about talking to them or going out with them or, I just took orders and was told, when I was told what to do I did it. And I learned what I could like "a place for everything and everything in its place." (she laughs) I learned a little bit about order. Ward, for instance a holiday celebration or something along those lines, for the, for the patients specifically?

CONAN: No, I, I don't recall any special events. I only recall people who were not well. I do recall one man, and I was particularly impressed because he was reading. But he couldn't use his hands. Either he didn't have them or they wouldn't move. He would, he could only lie on his back and somehow there was a gadget that got the book above his face and he was able to read this book that was above his face. I guess the nurse helped put the books there. And I don't know how the pages turned but I remember I was very impressed because this man who couldn't hold a

book was reading it.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

CONAN: It was.

SIGRIST: Huh. Can you remember, you said that most of the patients you thought were male and were, were seamen of some sort.Ô

SIGRIST: Do you remember, perhaps, if you had any interaction with, how did they treat you, I guess is the question I'm asking? I mean, were you invisible to them? Were they nice to you?

CONAN: I wasn't literally invisible but I think sometimes I was a little self-conscious, especially when I climbed up and cleaned the, the lamp up on top of the bed. But basically, no, I was there. And sometimes they might make a remark but I don't recall any remark that stood out. And I don't recall being especially friendly of especially unfriendly. I was just neutral.

SIGRIST: Do you recall the death of any patient?

CONAN: No, I do not, fortunately. (she laughs) I, I didn't form relationships. Maybe they didn't stay long. Certainly the old lady didn't and the child didn't and I don't know how long the seamen stayed. Mostly they were seamen.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the layout of the ward, how the furniture was arranged in the ward? Ô

CONAN: Sure, because that's easy. I think there were white beds. I think they were metal with rounded tops. And there was one bed after the other with a little table in between and a big, and on both sides of the room. A very long room. There must have been ten beds on each side, probably twenty beds in a ward if not more. And space in the middle, and that's about it. The space in the middle would be where the food cart would come down. And we would take the food off and give it to the patient. I may have been part of that. I'm not sure if I was part of putting the, the food for the patient. I remember being around.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the type of floor that was in the ward?

CONAN: (she laughs) Not really. I'm willing to take a guess, a linoleum, but I don't really remember.

SIGRIST: My, my point for asking you that is, is how did you clean the floor? You spoke about sweeping. Were there any other ways that, that...?

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washed. My guess is it was linoleum or some other type of tile. But they, they were floors that needed to be washed. They were not floors that were vacuumed.

SIGRIST: And did you have any responsibility for the linens?

CONAN: I must have. How did I ever get to that closet to see, to see the sign (she laughs) that said, "A place for everything and everything in its place." I, I didn't have the responsibility on my own. Whenever I was there, there was also a nurse there, so she may have given me linens to put in different places, on different beds. But not to make the bed. That seemed to be the domain of the nurse.

SIGRIST: Is there anything else about your, your experience, you were here almost about a year,...

CONAN: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: ...that you would like to relay to us that I haven't asked specifically...

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SIGRIST: ...about that experience? (Mrs. Conan pauses, he addresses Mrs. Conan's daughter, who wishes to speak) Or Vivian, if you want to speak just speak loudly so the microphone will pick you up.

MRS. CONAN'S DAUGHTER: (addressing Mrs. Conan) Okay, you told me you had to check someone's head for lice.

CONAN: Oh, yeah. I may have had to do that but that didn't happen too often. And I remember my last ward that I worked in was a ward for women who were mentally not too well. And I, I kind of befriended one of the wives of a seaman, mentally not too well. And I recall her. She was, well, I was attracted to her. I was impressed with her and I think she was wondering why I was working there and felt I should be doing something, uh, I don't know, I guess she meant more important or more, I guess more important.

SIGRIST: You relayed to us briefly that you left because you didn't want to go back to days.

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Days, I didn't mind working days but working days on that job meant cleaning. And I, I think I, it was six of one and half a dozen of the other. I wasn't too happy with nights but (she laughs) I discovered at night you don't have to clean. I guess I, I think I read a lot of books that year, especially when I worked nights. I did, I did a lot of reading. I think the library was here on Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So you had access to books.

CONAN: I think so. I, I really think so because I don't recall going to a public library. So I think there were books here that were available to me. And I did a lot...

SIGRIST: Do you have any other recollection of the library, like what it looked like or where it was?

CONAN: Not really, not really. But I do recall that I read a lot of books and, and I don't think I brought them from the mainland. So there must have been, they must have been available here.

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"good bye" gathering...

CONAN: (she laughs) No, no.

SIGRIST: ...or anything like...

CONAN: No, no. Nobody said, "Good bye and good luck." And nobody made a party for me. It was easy for me to get a job sewing because my family, Papa started his business and, and his brothers and sisters, his brothers came to America after he did and opened up factories. So I kind of was raised in a sewing machine factory and I went back to a sewing machine factory. I guess I thought a government job would be better, so I took hospital attendant but then I went back to sewing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you were paid for your job here, if I might ask that?

CONAN: No, but it was obviously enough. I don't remember. Somehow the number twenty is coming into my mind but I doubt if I got as much as twenty dollars a week. (she laughs) I think it was less. Perhaps we were paid by ô the month, I'm not sure. But the number twenty is something that I'm remembering. And it could have been twenty dollars a month.

SIGRIST: And do you remember how that payment was given to you?

CONAN: It was not cash, so it had to be a check. But I don't, I don't recall that part. Somehow that, I, I always had enough money to, to pay for the subway so I must have gotten (she laughs) money here.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: What did you do with your uniforms when you left Ellis Island?

CONAN: Well, I just took them home and used them as dresses around the house and that's it.

SIGRIST: How do you look at your experience at Ellis Island now, these many years later? Ô

CONAN: You know, I look upon it as an adventure. I brought my mother here while I was working here so that she'd feel that her daughter wasn't out sleeping around and (she laughs) that I had a place to sleep. And when I met the man who became my husband and I married him, that's Vivian's father, I brought him here to show him where I used to work. And, you know, I don't even think I took, I don't even think I paid to get on it. We didn't pay to get on the ferry to come to work. Somehow there must be a ferry, maybe there still is. You would know better than I. There was a ferry where you just get on and you don't pay and you come. So, apparently, I still remembered where the ferry docked and I just got on it and I took Jack there or my mother or whoever.

SIGRIST: Well, that's interesting.

CONAN: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Conan, thank you very much for letting me ask...
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SIGRIST: ...these questions of you. You have a good memory.

CONAN: I wished it were better. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Beatrice Conan on July 25th, 1995 here at Ellis Island. Thank you.