EI-902
GEORGE G. MEYER
BIRTHDATE: NOVEMBER 13, 1931
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 3, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 65
RUNNING TIME:
INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: MELANIE DANIELS
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

GERMANY, 1941
AGE: 9

SHIP: THE NAVIMAR
PORT: CADIZ, SPAIN
RESIDENCES:
* GERMANY: FRANKFURT
* BELGIUM: HEIST-SUR-MER
* THE US: ANNAPOLIS, MD; NY, NY; SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for The National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, June 3, 1997. I'm at The Ellis Island Recording Studio with Dr. George G. Meyer. Dr. Meyer came from Germany in 1941. He was nine years old when he arrived here in The United States and he was detained about a week here at Ellis Island. Dr. Meyer, can we begin by you saying your full name for me and your date of birth please?

MEYER: Let me start with the date of birth, if I may, it was November 13, 1931. It was Frankfurt am Main, Deutschland. It was, in short, Germany. And I'm Dr. George G., which stands for Gotthold, Got hold

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

MEYER: G-O-T-T-H-O-L-D.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

MEYER: And my lifetime, probably we'll get into this; my name has been Gaelk [ph], which was G-E-O-R-G [ph]. It has been Georges, with G-E-O-R-G-E-S. Now, it is in San Antonio, Texas, where we speak Spanish a lot, is Jorge, which is spelled entirely different. And in short, I've had different utilizations of the word George with different spellings.

SIGRIST: Spell Jorge for us please.

MEYER: Jorge is J-O-R-J-E, or G-E, I think it's J-O-R-G-E. Jorge.

SIGRIST: And it was Georg when you were born?

MEYER: It was Gaelk [ph] when I was first born

SIGRIST: Okay. Great.

MEYER: And one of my early memories is being called both Gaelk and Georges, which was the harsh, the German pronunciation in the region where we were at the time. And they called me Georges, in that harsh, guttural German.

SIGRIST: You said that you were born in Frankfurt am Main. Can you tell me if you know anything about the day you were born? If, if, a, there was ever a story related to you?

MEYER: What I know is that I was late. What I know is that I was viewed as being a problem and I always think of it as, it was the times that were the problem. And I know we will get into that. But I'm gonna say, the sad thing is, I remember nothing of Frankfurt am Main, or Frankfurt, now. The reason being, that a year and a half later, I was apparently eighteen months old. My family moved from Germany in the middle of the night. In one of those miracle, life saving events, where my father knew somebody, or let's put it the other way, somebody knew my father and respected him will enough to say, "Get out today, don't wait, don't pack." Out, out of the country.

And he was alert enough and aware enough and I'm going to say, gutsy enough, at the time, 'cause a lot of people weren't, and to their sorrow, to just go. The bottom line is, that I was eighteen months old and we ended up in Belgium. And we may get into that a lot more, but it's Belgium that I remember. And Belgium I remember, not only because we lived there for seven and a half years, to follow then, but because my father's way of making a living. Please understand he was a physician, he was Board Certified, as a specialist in public health in pediatrics, from Berlin University. Which was, at that time, said to be class of the world. Very proud of these kinds of things in his background.

In Belgium, his, what we would call board certification, and his skills, were not only not recognized --- they were not acceptable. And they were not acceptable because Belgium was still at war with Germany from World War I history. The bottom line being that they would not recognize anybody who came from Germany because they were viewed as a quasi enemy, certainly an intruder. And so my father was unable to make a living as a physician for those seven and a half years. And what he and my mother creatively were able to do; she was a teacher who taught young children and he was a pediatrician and a public health man. They opened what was called then, a kinderheim, and that's a German word for a children's home.

MEYER: K-I-N-D-E-R-H-E-I-M.

SIGRIST: May I ask you what your father's name was?

MEYER: My fathers name was Hans Meyer, and he had no middle name. And no Hebrew name, which is interesting because I was given a middle

name and incidentally George was my maternal grandfather. Gotthold was my paternal grandfather. Both of these men were dead years before I was born and because they were dead of --- I was named in honor of them. Not only in the German language of that time, but because we were Jewish and my parents, in some directions, were religious and were observing and what they did was to provide Hebrew names for their children.

And so my Hebrew name, which I knew all of my life, was Yitzak Ben Zwi. And Yitzak is Y-I-T-Z-A-K, and Ben is Hebrew for 'son of', and Zwi Z-W-I is a Hebrew name simply signifying "deer". The psychiatrist in me says, "Somebody who knew how to run fast." and that came true and came to be a useful skill in later years of my childhood. But the bottom line is that my dad opened a children's home which was essentially a recovery stage for sick kids. Kids who were recovering from Tuberculosis, from, it wasn't called that then I only knew these kids had a lot of diarrhea, now it would have been called colitis, or ulcerative colitis. 'Cause I know we had some kids who were very seriously ill, physically ill.

SIGRIST: I'd, I'd like to talk about that

MEYER: Please! Interrupt me.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your father's background? His growing up and his childhood?

MEYER: My dad was born in Berlin and he was the son of Gotthold Meyer, who was an editor reporter. In the times of, I'm told, Bismark, originally. In other words, in the 1800's.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year he was born?

MEYER: My father, thank you, I'm sorry, I should have said, my dad was born October 26, 1900. It turned out my mother, who was born December 15, was also born in 1900. My dad was the elder of two sons of Gotthold Meyer and Selma Heimen Meyer.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Heiman please?

MEYER: Heiman is H-E-I-M-A-N. And my grandmother, Selma Heiman, is a person who lived into her middle to later eighties. And who followed from Germany to Belgium to everywhere else. All of the traumas, and also the recovery and the success, so that she was able to come to The United States. She came through Ellis Island, as did my father and my mother and I, towards the end of what I call a sad story with a happy ending. And the happy ending was not only Ellis Island, but Ellis Island was the first happy chapter in the happy tale after pretty difficult years.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you know about your father's childhood?

MEYER: Thank you. Dad was apparently a very bright guy. A good student, very energetic, interested, well behaved, and I think that's meaningful. He always did what he was told by his mother. She was what I would call a martinet. Or we would call her a autocratic woman who was bossy and who was demanding and who wanted to be the head of the

household. His mother and he had a love-hate relationship because he was not the favorite child. He was the older child and apparently the smarter child but his younger brother, whose name was Lothar Meyer, very important, L-O-T-H-A-R. Lothar Meyer is a, a famous name in chemistry from hundreds of years ago and apparently Lothar Meyer was named after that original chemist.

Dad came from a family which had many physicians and used to say things like, 'well, you're really the seventh son of seven generations of physicians'. He was a physician, his brother, Lothar became a physicist, as a matter of fact, became a nuclear chemist in his later years. We'll get back to that. But we're talking about their early years. Dad was on the verge of being drafted by the German army in 1918 when that war ended, but they had lived through four years of what was a very difficult time for them. Partly because they were Jewish, partly because they were an intellectual family who had, quote, "made it in Germany" and that was something envied at difficult, economic times, which it was in Germany in both World War I and World War II.

What dad tell --- told me while he was living was that they starved in World War I and that he and his brother earned money by working on farms picking fruits and vegetables. Some of which they could then bring home as a barter pay and the implication of the -- all that was that they survived the war perhaps better than some other people. But traumatized by wartime, I'm going to say, shortages.

The paradox of how life gets lived is that my uncle Lothar in, we're talking now 1971, or '72 , died of an illness which was called Tuberculis Pericarditis [ph]. Pericarditis is the sac around the heart which contains the heart when it beats. Well, Pericarditis and Tuberculosis go hand in hand and it turned out, and we didn't know this until after Lothar died at the age of 65, that he had had childhood and adolescent Tuberculosis during those years of World War I. Which eventually killed him. In his life, World War II came to pass again and he lived all through World War II, and we may get into further details on that, but he starved during World War II. Survived, but again survived with a lot of malnutrition, and it was not just psychological scars which both he and my dad carried to their graves. And I'm sure I still carry on their behalf to my grave because it was, they were survivors of an earlier kind of, if not holocaust, at least pogrom kind of cleansing of various kinds of things which influenced their adult lives to the very end.

And thirty years after they had entered The United States they still considered themselves displaced persons, refugees, people traumatized by the war and I think that was passed onto me. And I pray to God that I don't pass onto my children and grandchildren that kind of feeling that everyday of your life has to be, you've got to be careful because, you know, Dad is nervous, or Dad was starving during the war, or Dad has terrible dreams and so on, because of what happened to him in his younger years. But that kind of thing apparently was a big part of my father's life, my uncle's adult life, and certainly my childhood from early on into my adult years.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother. You said she was born in 1900. What was her name?

MEYER: Hilda. And that was H-I-L-D-A, the German spelling. Lesser, L-E-S-S-E-R. Eventually, Hilda Lesser Meyer. She was one of two, I -- I --- I like to call them the famous Lesser sisters. Her sister became a physician in Germany and was a physician in this country for many years. And her sister lived to be eighty-nine years old. And mother became a teacher. And the two sisters, I'm going to say were educated, viewed as successful, they were certainly bright. They were certainly ambitious for their children. And it paid off.

But I would say that my mother had a pretty sheltered early background by comparison with what I've described as my dad's sense of, he had a traumatic and a difficult, and I'm going to say a disadvantaged early life. My grandfather, Gotthold, although apparently at some point of his life a powerful man, meaning an influential reporter, he was a short man. Less than five years, uh, five years!, five feet in height. And I have a picture of him being this little guy standing on a field where all the soldiers and others were saluting, apparently, the Kaiser, although he doesn't appear in the picture. But here's this little man, among all these big men and this proud, huffy, angry, I'm going to say, little man, just huffing and puffing himself up to be, even in the picture, I always thought, more important than he really was cause there were dozens and dozens of people there.

SIGRIST: This is your mother's father?

MEYER: This is my father's father, and I apologize. I was telling you that my mother, by contrast, led a sheltered life. Excuse me. The sheltered life was that her dad was in business, as opposed to profession. Certainly in --- not health profession. But her dad owned what we would call depart-ment stores. And she worked in those stores when she was younger and middle years. And I had the feeling, was used to having most of what she wanted and needed. When she was younger.

SIGRIST: Was this reflected in her personality as you were growing up -- in anyway?

MEYER: Yes, I would have to say, in some ways it really was. The ways were, I'm going to call to her detriment, and to my detriment certainly. And what I mean by that is that my mother always had the sense of not being able to cope with life. My mother always had the sense of, "I had all of this and it got taken away and I never got it back". And that was an unfulfilled festering sore all of her existence, which was passed on to me, you know. That she, her father used to be rich, and her father used to own many buildings and her father used to do this and this and this. Well, I never knew the man, of course, but she viewed him as an influential, perhaps, giant of a person. And she didn't marry a man like that and if he had been important earlier in his life and he clearly was talented, and I'm going to say, important professionally. Up till 1931, '32, '33.

Then, he lost everything, or so it seemed. And he and she spent the rest of their lives mourning for what should have been, might have been, could have been. And at one level thereby expected it from others, but specifically expected it from their son, George, who had apparently these potentials from very early times. And I've been a very lucky man all of my life, in terms of ability to function well at school, and things like learning new languages, and getting along with people easily, even if they were total strangers with a totally strange language. Bottom line, my dad reached the level of what was called stadt arzt. And that's translated, city doctor, really loosely translated, "public health physician". In the city of Frankfurt ---- stadt arzt is S-T-A-D-T, I think --- arzt is physician A-R-Z-T. So he was a public health doctor who had clinics in Frankfurt and they were both private clinics and public clinics. And he took care of people who had infectious diseases and that kind of thing, which was rampant in his time.

SIGRIST: What year did your parents marry?

MEYER: Ah, thank you. They married in 1926 and had a daughter, whose name was Gerda G-E-R-D-A, born in 1928. And that's very relevant; we'll come back to it 'cause she's an important person. And, [Catches breath] pardon me.

SIGRIST: Take your time

MEYER: In my life. Let me stick with the tale and we'll come back with why all this is so emotionally meaningful.

SIGRIST: Were the two children, you and Gerda, born in Frankfurt?

MEYER: Two children were born, not in the same town as Frankfurt, but she was born in Dortmund, which is D-O-R-T-M-U-N-D. Which I gather is very close to Frankfurt, an hour or two of travel in those days. And that was very slow travel, there were no cars, and there were no planes, and so on. But she was born in '28 and I was born in '31. And she was really the embodiment of what they wanted and needed in their lives, or so they felt. She was, what I've always called, a, the martyred angel. And what I mean by that is, we'll get into it. She was killed. In the war, in 1940. The very beginning of the war in Belgium and France.

The war in Europe had begun in 1939 and in those days, we huddled around radios, which had these little green lights that flickered around a circle. I remember looking at that, that was like, you'd look at the CBS seeing eye nowadays. This was the seeing eye for the Meyer family. You sit at the radio and listen. Well, the news from Poland, which is where World War II started really, was a nightly event to be observed. Not just to listen and hear but it was absolute silence in the house. Any interruption was not only resented loudly, but severely punished because my father needed the peace and the quiet to listen to the radio and the news. And he carried that to his death and it extended from the news of World War II eventually to, my wife and I have always laughed about all of the radio programs, Ed Sullivan, the hour of Ed Sullivan, on Saturday or Sunday, whenever that was, was similarly sacred.

Everybody sit down, everybody sit at attention, nobody move, nobody say a word, if you whisper to your neighbor it was, "How can you interrupt them, how can you, he's listening, and he's enjoying and he needs this time." And this kind of, I'm going to say, extreme control. It was something he could control or try to. Our home. Let me come back to where Gerda fits in. She was, what I've come to recognize, as a goody-goody child. She was, when dad said anything, she rushed, did it, dropped everything else. When dad said, "Do this, do that, do that", I was the one who, "Well, I've got to finish this first. I don't want to do it now." I was in short, rebellious is too strong a word, 'cause that was not allowed in our house and I was not rebellious at that point of my life. Later, I became so, when I was a little older. But early in my life, it was, I was just afraid, I was cowed, I was yelled into silence.

But equally important, I was viewed as "the troublemaker", the one who always gets into trouble, the one who always caused problems. And this lasted until, I'm going to say, I was a physician. I'd finished my medical school, internship, I was in residency and my father would get furious because when he was with somebody and I was with that same person, I would feel free to interrupt, I would feel free to look around the room, or I would feel free to ask a question. Here I was, after all Dr. George Meyer, but to Dr. Hans Meyer I was this little five-year-old troublesome kid. And that's something I want to underline because you're asking about the ambiance of our home. The ambiance of our home was periods of tense quiet. Unnatural quiet, punctuated by eruptions.

And eruptions were, almost universally from my father to anybody handy, but I was the handiest because I was always the one with my chin out. And the eruptions were pretty regularly, not only screaming. When I was younger, they were accompanied by slaps. When I was younger, until I was about a teenager, they were accompanied by clearing of the table. Whatever was on the table, his arm would sweep across it, and was a desk, it was a set table with plates and cups and fluids. And then, as soon as the table was cleared by his eruption, he would stomp out of the room angrily and say, "You clean that up" and "you" was George. And it took me many years to be able to say, "You knocked it over, why don't you clean it up?" And the first few times that that was said were very soundly suppressed, loudly suppressed, but they came. And this was maybe when I was fifteen, perhaps when I was fourteen years old. When I stood up and finally said, "I'm not cleaning it up, you clean it up, you threw it down".

SIGRIST: Dr. Meyer, we need to just pause for a minute so that Kevin can flip all the tapes over. So this is the end of the first thirty minutes.

END SIDE A, TAPE ONE BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning side two of tape one with Dr. George Meyer. Dr. Meyer, what I'd like to talk about is life in Belgium. You, you spoke to me about the fact of how you got to Belgium, you were, you were quite young, a year and a half, I believe, when you got there. And you've set up very nicely sort of, sort of the atmosphere of your family and the interaction of the, of the various family members. Tell me some

of your earliest memories of living in Belgium and, and sort of the everyday life of being there, being Jewish in Belgium at that time. Anything that comes to mind.

MEYER: Well, I think the first thing to emphasis is that although there were these private tensions and these world shaking events, which I didn't understand until, I'm going to say, eight, nine, ten years of age. Belgium was throughout a pleasant experience for me. I enjoyed it, I loved it, I made friends. I had adult friends, including one elderly gentleman who taught me how to play chess when I was five years old, apparently. And well enough that I was able to play him for the next five years, and have very fond memories of this gentleman. And I suppose I should spell it because his name will come up again. His name was Mr. Mueller-Kuhlenthal, and that's the German M-U-E-L-L-E-R, dash, hyphenated K-U-H-L-E-N-T-H-A-L. Mueller-Kuhlenthal was a man, apparently, from Denmark originally. Kindly, old man who looked like a, if you've ever seen pictures of George Bernard Shaw, or Monty Woolley or even Santa Claus.

He was --- it was Saint Nicholas in German, in Belgium. But there was a Saint Nicholas at that time of the year. He was a kindly, wonderful gentleman who taught me to play chess. But more importantly, who treated me like a human being, talked with me man to man about the world, accepted me as I was. Didn't want to make something of me, which I always felt my parents were trying to do, be something that you are not. Belgium was Mueller-Kuhlenthal, a place called Heist-sur-mer, which still exists to this day. We've been back to it, our kids, fortunately were able to see it.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

MEYER: Heist is H-E-I-S-T. Now, if you look it up on the map it's still, but it's now Flemish. That part of Belgium was Flanders and since World War II has become trilingual. It's this part is Flemish, this part is French, this part is Walloon in Belgium. When I was a kid and when I was there, it was one country and everything was interactive in the sense that you spoke French at school. And I went to school very early, and we'll come back to that. But at school you spoke French and you didn't dare speak Flemish in school or you actually were hit. This was not just, you stay after school, it's whop! You know, you're told not to speak French, to speak Flemish in school, you speak French in school. And so here I learned French in school, very early, very; I'm going to say, successfully as a survival skill, I'm going to call it. Flemish on the playground and on the beach.

And the beach is important; we'll come back to it. And German at home. And thank God and thank the I.Q. and thank whatever powers there may be I was able to, not only learn, but differentiate these languages and then eventually use them appropriately. Because life was very different, as you could imagine, inside of the kinderheim, the children's home. I'll ask you to visualize a place which went from only the nuclear family, dad, mom, grandmother, and Gerda, and myself, to nine to ten months of the year anywhere between twenty and thirty children physically living in the house.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the, the structure itself?

MEYER: Yes. There were two structures over the seven or eight years that we lived there. The first was small, dark, overcrowded, cramped, and I'm going to say, not nearly as appropriate, much less pleasant, but it was all my parents apparently could find. It was, everybody was, my wife would say higildy, pigildy, on top of each other and belongings all in every corridor and not enough room to have any private space. Which leads to one of my earliest memories, and you asked about those. One of my earliest memories --- and this is fed by other people who told me this was ---- one of the earliest things, this is mom, grandmother. I apparently said very early, I'll give you the German first and then the English. Hier bleib ich nicht "I don't want to stay here". Hier sind mir zu fiel kinder "There are too many kids here for my taste." in other words. I said, "I don't want to be -- live here with all these other kids." Well, here came the paradox of life in the Meyer household of those years. And that paradox was, it's those other kinder who paid the freight. They were the reason my dad could live, I'm going to say, pretty well, in Germany --- In Germany! --- in Belgium of that time.

We had what we wanted and needed. It was pleasant. My parents and the people they hired, and they hired a number of people who helped them. We would call them aides, orderlies, counselors; we would call them a number of those kinds of names. But that's what they were, they were there to help feed the kids, bathe the kids, dress the kids, take the kids on outings. I was one of the few who went to school, when school was in session. Many of those other kids did not go to school, they were there as a hospital, they were there as a convalescent home. So again, here were kids who were treated in a markedly different fashion and the paradox again was, "You shut up, I don't care who started it. They are right because they are guests in our home." And guests in our home got to be a problem for this George who was a, you know, boisterous, and eager to escape from the bounds psychologically and physically.

So, I'm describing the first home was really too small and much too crowded. The second home apparently was built, how they did this, I don't know but apparently they got the money together to do so, to my dad and mom's specifications with help from people like architects, and builders. I remember all kinds of workmen coming in and out and the second home was really, I'm going to say to a kid, beautiful, spacious, modern, clean. And its biggest advantage was that it was exactly one house from the beach. And the sand actually came to the door but you had to get past this other house before you were actually, physically, on the beach. Or on, what I will call, the boardwalk which they called digue. D-I-G-U-E. It's the French word for boardwalk.

But the bottom line is, that I could go to the beach much of the time, almost daily for those years and living at and near the water meant many wonderful things to a child. Seafood, being able to dig up mussels and clams. Being able to catch shrimp in little nets and they would take the kids, us on outings on fishing boats. And the fishing boats would catch larger crabs, a kind of shrimp they called languoustine, that's L-A-N-G-U-O-U-S-T-I-N-E, languoustine means really, little, tiny crab. They're

more like crayfish, but they're larger than crayfish. Delicious, I'm going to say. And I'm going to say childhood memory. Memory number one is I was able somehow to open these things up, although they could sting you pretty badly and you could get rashes and all that. I enjoyed eating live languoustine freshly caught from the sea. And I would almost be quote infamous unquote because I would do things like that.

But I also would open mussels; I'd catch crabs and bring them home live from the beach. I remember catching a crab, which was twice the side of --- size of my two hands, just by picking it up out of the sand. Having stepped on it and it moved and I could see that it was a buried crab. And I knew by that time how you pick up a crab from the back and then as long as you don't get in front of the claws, you could bring it right in and have it done that day for the meal. And you could get a better portion, better taste of it, if you will. So, those are I'm going to say, some of the pleasant memories of Belgium. There were some less pleasant. The more quote "different" we were, and we were different. The more it ---

SIGRIST: Different in what way?

MEYER: Sorry. Different in the sense that, I'm going to say, by the standards of Heist-Sur-Mer. Which was a tourist little town, tourist town where people would come from Britain and from France. Rarely from The United States, to spend a summer, or to spend a week, and maybe to spend only a weekend. But what I was saying is it was a place people came to, but then they went back. The people who stayed behind were us -- with our group of, I'm going to say different children. They were sick, they had casts on, they had canes, they were pale, they were in a chair being pushed. Different in that sense. Most different in the sense that my parents spoke German at home, they spoke French with the kids who were French speaking, they spoke Flemish. Which we all did cause that was a language of the streets. But people in that town spoke Flemish.

And it turns out, now, now I can see why, they hated French-speaking people because the French had treated the Belgians badly. And the French speaking Belgians had treated the Flemish speaking Belgians badly. And so, eventually, when they were able to do this, the people who were in Flanders said, "The hell with this, we're not gonna speak French in schools like we used to. We're gonna speak Flemish in school." And I'll give one tiny anecdote on that, even though it's not from childhood, it certainly completes a circle of sorts. Twenty-five years later, I'm now a big professor ----- I'm now taking my family back to Europe to see the places where I had lived and where I had been traumatized. And we went back to Heist-Sur-Mer.

Heist-Sur-Mer is still there and I recognize and I'm trying to figure out where did we used to live? Well, the town -- the street was named Rue Royale. Royal Street. Our home was number one. Un Rue Royale, number one on Royale Street. That was our home, that was our status in the community if I could say that and I take no credit for it at all. This was happened because I was five, six years old at the time. We asked for Rue Royale, nobody knows where Rue Royale, Royale is. And I asked three,

four people until I found an old gentleman sitting on a bench, who was obviously a war veteran from World War I or II or wounded, ill. And I went to him and I asked, "Ou est la Rue Royale?" And he said, 'Ah, Konigstrasse, da', and so he showed me where Konigstrasse was and of course they had renamed Rue Royale in Flemish. It was now deemed Konigstrasse, and if you ask ten people, and not the right one, you will not learn where Rue Royale is even though it's a plenty, beautiful, big, house. Now it is a, a boulevard. So we go there and we find that old place but it's now Konigstrasse.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the, the relationship between the Jewish population ---

MEYER: [Softly] Ah, thank you.

SIGRIST: and the non-Jewish population in Belgium.

MEYER: The short of it would be that my dad and mom had already been so traumatized by their earlier experiences, that they basically denied their Jewish-ness and tried to pass. If I ---

SIGRIST: How did they do that? What were some of the ways they went about doing that?

MEYER: Well. Very important. Number one goes back to my birth. Every other male member of my family was, as all Jews are, who are observant in any way, circumcised. I was not circumcised until I was seventeen years old and at John Hopkins University and I was now making my own decisions and I said, this was not the way I wanted to be. I've had to hide all these years that I am not circumcised. But the bottom line is, my parents tried to pass even in Germany. And we'll give it one sentence and then we'll leave Germany because actually, in my life, I did not live in Germany except vicariously. But it was everyday in our lives.

It was, we did not observe Jewish holidays except in very, I'm going to say, quasi secret. You lit candles on Friday night, only if there were other Jews present. Or people, who would, quote "understand". And in the kinderheim, it was only when there was only Jewish children that we would have the Friday evening and Sabbath services and all of the other observances that have become very important to me and my family and are to most Jews, not all. But the bottom line is my parents tried to ignore this. They were not the only ones, it was Mr. Hitler who decreed, that in Germany, if either of your grandparents were Jewish, you are Jewish. And it was Mr. Hitler who's able to take people three generations later, who had lived a totally, non-Jewish life. My uncle Lothar would even say if Hitler hadn't been so anti-Semitic, there were lots of Jews who would have made wonderful Nazis and would have been glad to be as prejudiced against the rest of the Jews as anybody else because that's the kind of people they were.

But the bottom line is our Jewish-ness was hidden. Not entirely. My cousin, Gerard, who is the son of my aunt Lucy, sister of Hilda Meyer, there were two sons there. Cousin Fred and cousin Gerard. Cousin Gerald

was bar mitzvahed (rite of passage at thirteen) in our home in Heist-Sur-Mer, Belgium. Now, how was he bar mitzvahed? You're supposed to have a Rabbi there, you're supposed to have, what is called a minyan (quorum) in the Jewish religion and that means ten people who are, quote, adult in the religion. Well, we had a minyan many times in our home, 'cause they were a large number of Jewish kids there. But, we didn't have a Rabbi, we didn't have a cantor, a person who sings the prayers.

We had, however, a --- an enlightened view of Judaism, I'm going to call it. And the enlightened view of Judaism was, if there is no Rabbi present at a ceremony that really requires a Rabbi's presence, whoever is in this group present, plays Rabbi. End of story, my father played Rabbi to my cousin Gerard's bar mitzvah, when Gerard was thirteen. And so there were some Jewish things. There were lots of huddled meetings, pst-pst-pst, you don't tell anybody. You don't say anything to somebody you're not positive is Jewish or is family or is on our side, not dangerous to us. And so they came this and this is part of the answer to how did Heist and we interact and how did they view our being Jewish. I'm sure they knew this, and I'm sure of it because, eventually, we were, betrayed, is the only word that can be used when we were arrested and taken off by the Nazi soldiers in 1940 and '41. But we were different.

We had strange rituals that people heard about and the reason they heard them was that in this home most of the workers were not Jewish. Most of the workers were Belgian slash Flem -- Flemish. Some of them were German, and I may come back to that, but I'll just say it in passing quickly. Some of them were being hustled out of the country, in what I have come to call, the Underground Railroad. And our home was indeed such a place, where a child would be sent for his vacation or for his convalescence from Germany by his parents. And from Belgium he would be, he'd already have the ticket on the ferry from Ostende, which is very close to Heist-Sur-Mer. Ostende is O, capital O-S-T-E-N, or T-E-N-D-E, depending how you want to pronounce it, in which language. But Ostende had a ferry that went right across the Dover Straits to England. As did my two cousins. That's how they got from Germany, to Belgium, to England and thence to The United States. And that was part of their journey.

So we had closet Judaism with people who were being spirited out and everybody in the home knew it, but everybody in the home said, "Don't you dare tell anybody on the street." Meanwhile, however, we had three or four or five people who were these aides and cooks and all kinds of helpers. Drivers for certain, because my dad didn't drive and there were no vehicles owned by us. But they hired buses, and cabs, and so on. And what I'm saying is, I'm sure the vast majority of those people were very clear about, not only that we were Jewish, but what was going on with being Jewish, in those times. Because Europe was really, use a term nowadays, what was a village. Everybody spoke languages from across the borders; everybody had families across the borders and all different places. And everybody heard the gossip and the gossip, all the time we were in Belgium was, how horribly, badly things were going back in Germany. And that was always the underlying threat of our existence in Belgium.

SIGRIST: This would be a good time for you to, to begin to talk about how you got out of Belgium. Why you chose to leave Belgium.

MEYER: It was unfortunately handwriting on the wall that was not read -- clearly enough. And I'm saying, not just by my parents, by a lot of people. As I said, the war started in '39 and now we move to May of 1940. May of 1940, a life of the Meyer family changed. Dramatically. May 10, of 1940, was the day that the Germans invaded Holland, Belgium, France, and Denmark. And for all I know, Norway, and other, but it was the day all the German troops declared war without declaring war. They declared war by landing and starting to shoot everybody. And they declared war by arresting everybody that they could catch, who were of any, I'm going to call it, importance --- teachers, doctors, and heads of a kinderheim.

Because the very next day --- this was the second day of the war in Belgium and Holland ---there came to our home, a French soldier. And if you know what the French helmets look like --- every kid knew what a French helmet was and what a Belgian helmet was. And every kid knew this is a French policeman and not a Belgian policeman. They were in our home and they were there for one purpose, to arrest and to take off my father. Which they proceeded to do. The miracle in this is, number one, that they didn't need or want any of the rest of us. But this caused a lot of things, which we'll get back to as we talk, but what happened was, my father was taken off on the eleventh of May and we did not hear anything about him or from him anymore for the rest of that year until November, or it may even have been December of that year.

SIGRIST: Of 1940?

MEYER: 1940.

SIGRIST: Were you present when he was arrested?

MEYER: I was physically present.

SIGRIST: Can you just describe how it was done please?

MEYER: Oh, that's hard. Has to be done. This'll be a little slow. [Breathes deeply] My father hugged me for one of the -- I'm going to call it -- few and very welcome times in my life. [Sobs] And my father said a prayer. And he said a prayer over me, which is a prayer that you say when you are not sure you're ever going to see that person again. And it's a prayer that has become very important to me and it's a prayer that turns out to be a beautiful, wonderful blessing. May the Lord bless you and keep you, is the gist of how it goes. [Continuing sobs] This I'm going to say, probably no more than a half an hour total ---- ceremony, they came, they arrested him, he grabbed and hugged me, he said these words. He wasn't allowed to take anything, not a toothbrush, not a piece of clothing, not, you know, my mother came rushing with some food, and they said, 'no', and so on. It was just, "We're outta here", and he was out of there, and he was out of there in a paddy wagon.

Very important because for the next months, life was hell. Life was hell for a number of reasons. The war was almost -- it seemed --the least of them, for a while --- though it sure came to haunt us very quickly. But, how does this go? Other people were arrested, the sirens were very, regular, daily thing. The blackout was a total thing. If any light shown through from your windows --- even a sliver of light on the corner --- the windows were simply shot out, that was the hint, that you were to have a better black out. And this happened, actually, both from the Belgian side ---- and they were at that time, defending themselves still against the German invasion ---and I like to say, the French invasion. Because how in the devil did the French get off having soldiers in Heist-Sur-Mer the second day of the war, unless they had simply crossed the borders and decided, and maybe jointly it was decided. But I never heard about it. That they would have power in that way, but they had the power, no question.

SIGRIST: Dr. Meyer, we're going to stop for a minute and Kevin's going to put some more tapes on and we'll continue with your story. So this is Paul Sigrist signing off with tape one with Dr. George Meyer.

END SIDE B, TAPE ONE BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning tape two with Dr. George Meyer, who came from Germany in 1941 at age nine, was detained at Ellis Island about a week. And today is Tuesday, June 3, 1997. I'm Paul Sigrist and Kevin Daly is running the equipment. Dr. Meyer, you, just before we started said you wanted to clarify a couple of things before we go on about things that we've already talked about. If you could do that briefly.

MEYER: Very briefly. I said that we hadn't heard from Dad for the rest or most of the rest of that year, 1940. And I have to introduce, that we must've heard sometime in the month of May, before the end of May ---1940. And I know how we heard, we heard from Mr. Muller-Kuhlenthal, who had a daughter, and the daughter had a sister in Denmark, and that sister had a sister in Sweden. I remember, and the three sisters were able to communicate that time with each other, by mail, or by phone. And so, somehow, my dad was able to get the word to the sister in Sweden, who told the sister in Denmark, who told the sister in Heist-Sur-Mer, that dad was in, what later was to be called, Vichy, France --- the southern part of France --- in a camp. The address of which we were able to get. And the relevance of that is that my mother's reaction, having heard where he is was to say, "We're going, we're gonna go where he is. We're gonna do what we can to help him. And so we're closing up Heist-Sur-Mer".

And I wish I could tell you the exact day that we left Heist-Sur-Mer, then, but it had to be end of May, or perhaps, June 1, of 1940. Important dates because this was how ---- make it short --- we got to Dunkirk, and how Gerda got to be killed. Because my mother, who I think, did the right thing, was able to sew coins into clothing, was able to bring, I think, food, belongings, with which to, it turned out, bribe guards at borders --- very needed things in those years to survive. But the bottom line of it was, that we closed up Heist-Sur-Mer and started

walking ---- west, it would be. Because you walk from Heist to Ostende, and then you go to La Pon [ph] and then you're in France -- at Dunkirk.

We joined, what I'll call, the throngs on the road, in those days. And the throngs were other people like us, who piled all of their belongings into something and tried to carry everything with them. And these were still times when the roads were being bombed --- they were being strafed. They were mined at night. And these were roads that were so overcrowded that, on the one hand, you couldn't get through, you couldn't pass anybody. On the other hand, these military vehicles of all varieties, kept trying to get through --- past all of these civilians. And I remember, especially, it was the French who were hostile, impolite, vicious, and would club people out of the way. And I have to say, you know, they were trying to save their lives and these were difficult times.

But in that small corner of the world, from Heist-Sur-Mer, to the border of France, is a couple of days of walking, even with your belongings. We did that walk, we got to Dunkirk, and we got to Dunkirk at a bad time. And what I have to introduce here, is that at the same time that Belgians and the French were fighting the Germans, the British were fighting the Germans and were trying to get away, while they were losing the war -- at that point. And the British embarkation point, where the soldiers went to England from France, was called Dunkirk. And Dunkirk is a famous battle, is a Vietnam, Holocaust, is a, every time I see a refugee, a source of tears. If you ever see - ever seen the movie, 'Gone With The Wind'. Gone With The Wind has a scene that I always said, "That's Dunkirk".

SIGRIST: What do you remember about what happened in Dunkirk?

MEYER: What happened when we got to Dunkirk is -- first -- there were millions of people there. And there were interminglings of soldiers and civilians there. The soldiers making their way to the water where there were ships. And there were ships in numbers never seen by me or anybody perhaps, before. If you've ever seen the movie of, 'D-Day', it was D-Day in reverse. All the ships were coming from England to go to pick up soldiers in Dunkirk to take them back to England and of course, they only could take soldiers. And part of the mayhem of Du-- Dunkirk was we were like the turtles on the beach when they're born from their eggs, you know. Everybody wants to make their way to the water, but the water was shut off. The inland was shut off by soldiers with guns -- with -- the guns were used as clubs. The civilians simply were not allowed onto the military transportation. And so what you remember of Dunkirk is screaming, mayhem, disappointment, anger, and death [Sobs].

And death is because we were being strafed on the beach by German planes. And the German planes were both huge bombers and Stuka -- they were called S-T-U-K-A --- Fighters, which were like, dive-bombers. And they were the vicious planes that would dive for the people on the beach and their aim was to create this mayhem. Obviously, they were soldiers in a war, and they were trying to stop the British from getting on the ships. But it was very clear, at Dunkirk, that the way they were doing it was to kill the civilians. And to have the civilians glut up all of the

avenues. By not only walking and carrying, but by lying there dead in the road. And I haven't gone into details of what that kind of migration was like, but it was hell. Of a kind that I have never seen [Sobs]. And fortunately, never have since.

I like to say, nowadays that I'm thirty, forty, how many years past it --- '40 to '97, fifty-seven years past it. That everybody has their Dunkirk in their lives. And every time I see a patient now, I try to remember what is this person's personal Dunkirk --- that they have to survive and overcome. The strafing, in short, hit my sister in the leg. And she screamed, and then she became strangely quiet. And even I, three years younger than she, could see that she was, what we would call, mortally wounded. But she had to lie on the beach until all the British soldiers were on the boats. And I remember this distinctly; there was this one night, where the British soldiers were going off. There was this terrible, quiet night, with only screams in the night. And the next morning, the Germans came in. And they came in with their motorcycles and their spanking new vehicles and all of their marching goose step battalions. Never saw so many soldiers in one place. And of course, that was a corner where the armies of several countries were congregated at that time.

My sister Gerda was wounded on June 4, 1940. She died on June 6, 1940, in a hospital in Bruges, that's B-R-U-G-E-S. But at that time, it was Brugge, B-R-U-G-G-E. Because Brugge is very close there. And in Brugge, there was what they called a beguinage, B-E-G-U-I-N-A-G-E. Beguinage is a convent for young ladies to become nuns. And everybody knew people who were going off to the beguinage. Well, the bottom line is, that the next morning when the Germans came, they were full of efficiency. And one of the efficiencies was, you pick up all the wounded and get 'em off the beach. And they picked where they went and they didn't make a bad choice. They picked her up and they told us, "You'll hear where she is." and we asked questions like, "How will we hear where she is?" And they said, as I gather it, "Go back home. You can't stay here."

And go back home means, you walk back to Heist, which we did. And we were back in Heist; I remember something like, June 10, 11. And Heist was a shambles, by that time. And our home was a shambles. I remember the door was opened. Amazingly, it was not yet destroyed. It was a shambles because it had been looted. But miracles on miracles, the famous brick in the fireplace, where my parents had told me, never tell anybody about this brick. This is where we've hidden our most secret belongings --- which were gold coins. Those gold coins stayed in that fireplace till after World War II and my uncle was able to go back to Belgium, something like 1948. And go to that home, and get that brick out, and pick up all those gold coins and bring them to The United States.

SIGRIST: Dr. Meyer, I want to make sure that we save enough time to, to talk about The Navimar, the ship, and Ellis Island too

MEYER: Oh, of course, my

SIGRIST: But we need to get you out of Europe, so perhaps

MEYER: Okay

SIGRIST: In a nutshell, you can tell me

MEYER: What happened

SIGRIST: How you guys got to, to, to get on the ship.

MEYER: Briefest summary of, what is year and a half later now. We went back to Heist, we lived under the Germans until somebody betrayed us. Somebody betrayed us, and the Germans arrested us, this time, and took us off. And put us on a train and we were on that train and miracle of miracles, you wouldn't believe this, but here is where I heard, what I call the voice of God. Which was that one of the guards on the train was a kid from the town where my mother had been born. And she knew him and he knew her and he told her, we're going to stop in Dinant, that's D-I-N-A-N-T. That's in Belgium, near Luxembourg. Get off the train at that place, I'll be right here. In other words, get off the train at my station; I will look the other way.

Miracle of miracles, we got off that train, which he had told us by that time, was headed for a place that was already infamous called, Dachau -- which we knew what that was. We got off that train. We were able to get from that dismal part of Belgium, walking to France, from France to unoccupied France, also called Vichy, France. My father had wangled a way to become the physician in this camp. It was a concentration camp; there was starvation and death there. There was typhus and typhoid and tuberculosis. And what he had wangled was to become one of the physicians of this camp. But he was the inmate physician. And as the inmate physician, he was able to wangle some medications and an occasional, believe it or not miracle of miracles, a pass. We made our way to Ghirst [ph]. We found him in Ghirst [ph]; he was able to get a pass. Excuse me, this isn't quite complete, but I'm summarizing, he was to move to another camp by that time which was nearby, near Marseille in France --- famous port, famous drug smuggling port. Dad was able to wangle a pass from this camp, for one day, and was told, "You, if you're not back by x hour, you're under arrest, and you will --- ", you know, I don't know what they threatened. But he was to be out of the country by twenty-four hours.

And that's where the miracle comes in; we were able to get from there into Spain, across the border of Spain. Part of the way was walking over The Pyrenees at night --- bribing guards at both ends of this border --- carrying everything that you could carry, which wasn't much, for a kid. But I remember I had coins in my clothing around the seams. We got to Spain over The Pyrenees Mountains during a night, and we got from there to Seville, in Spain. And in Seville, in Spain, it was known apparently, that you could get boats to go to The United States, which is what they'd wanted from the very beginning. I can't leave that story without telling another miracle. One of the kids in Heist-Sur-Mer, in our home, was a man -- now a man, named Rene, R-E-N-E, Tillich, T-I-L-L-I-C-H, whose father was a famous theologian named Paul Tillich, world famous man. The

Tillich family sent their two kids ---who became good friends of mine, they were our age --- to Heist, more than one summer.

At the darkest time, when my father knew that The United States was not accepting refugees, was not accepting Jews, and you couldn't get there, contacted Paul Tillich --- who was by that time, in New York City. And was able to get news to him. Paul Tillich was able to sign and send, what was then called a visa. And a visa then is different from a visa now, which allows you to cross a border to another country. A visa then meant you were responsible for that family if they needed any help at all and couldn't make their way. There was no loans, there was no unemployment, there was no welfare. There was, the person who gave you that, visa. Affidavit. -- affidavit was sworn out. It's a swearing that you will do this. Paul Tillich is single handedly responsible for our being able to be pulled out of a swarm of people all of whom wanted the same thing. But without this visa and affidavit, you couldn't get out of the country. Somehow, they were able to do this, by telegraph, mail, whatever, and in enough time, that we were in Seville, we heard that there was going to be a boat leaving from Cadiz, C-A-D-I-Z. Which is a port, it's the port from which Columbus sailed. It's the port from which the Sephardic Jews of Spain sailed in 1492.

It's the port from which a ship called, The Navimar sailed from Spain to The United States, taking, as I recall, five and a half weeks from port to entry in New York. Stopping in Cuba, and Bermuda on the way, maybe stopping in the Azures, but I'm not quite sure about that. Would be Azures first, and then Cuba, then Bermuda, then New York. The bottom line is, Paul Tillich made that possible for us. And the miracle of timing, The Navimar left Europe in mid-September of 1941. It was sunk on the way back to Europe. We were all afraid, all the crossing to here, that we were going to be sunk. Everybody knew about U-boat sinkings, everybody had heard of something and somebody. Everybody had atrocity tales to tell. Somehow, we made it that far. Here comes the little glitch, and the little glitch is George Meyer, who by that time was a pretty traumatized kid --- having nightmares, having what we would now call post-traumatic stress -- having what we would call phobias.

I had phobias in those days of planes overhead. I would go bonkers. For many years, when there was a plane overhead, because I remembered, overhead planes were bad news. I wouldn't take a bath for months at a time. I washed with washcloths, but I would not take a bath. Small aside in the story, I was taking a bath the night that our house in Heist-Sur-Mer was bombed, and it was bombed big time. Destroyed, would be a good word to say --- with us in it. And I don't want to get into that except to say, we managed to survive it with a bunch of scrapes and wounds. Some of which I can still show people because they're well healed but they're still scars. But we were on this ship called The Navimar, which, although it was a miserable tub, we had been told it was a freighter. And we certainly were baggage on this trip. There were, as I recall it, thirteen hundred, may have been eleven hundred, but it was in that range, passengers -- all European refugees desperate to get out of Europe to The United States.

We had bunks that were four levels high on that ship. I remember nothing but people, people, people. No space, but when you went to bed at night, there had to be the people up above you, going to bed first. One, two, three, in the bottom one. I was lucky enough to be allowed to be the bottom one. But the reason was, not because they were kowtowing to anything special about me; it was that I was seasick every day of that journey. Five and a half weeks, and I've been seasick every ship that I've been on ever since, with motion sickness in some planes. But what I'm saying is, through God, that ship made it. It was sunk on its way back to Europe. It was the last ship that left Europe for The United States, we understood, at that time. And we barely squeaked in, September '41, before Pearl Harbor, which was December 7, '41.

The tiny story that has to be added here is, George Meyer, rambunctious kid, found other rambunctious kids, of course, on a ship who had cabin fever. You want to talk about cabin fever? I was just looking at pictures of Ellis Island baggage, immigrants, that was how we were on The Navimar. One huge, overcrowded railroad station of people who had hardly any movement space. The kids were running on the deck, including me. I managed to fall. The pipe on which I fell, of course, was rusty and was broken. Everything on that ship was rusty and broken down. It was an old tub with a sluggish motor, everybody, didn't have to be a mechanic to say, "We'll be lucky if this ship makes port." It was that kind of a --- aside from all the anxieties of the time. What happened was that, of course, George Meyer not only cuts his ankle, but develops a fever. And the bottom line of that is that when George Meyer and family arrive on Ellis Island, that fever is discovered by those people, public health doctors, one of whom I became many years later. Because I was in the public health service for years and proudly so.

One of those doctors said, "This kid can't come into The United States, he's got a fever of unknown origin." And in short, they hospitalized me at this hospital that you look right across the water here at Ellis Island. It is like going across the street, if you could get across the bridge to it. The hospital is where I ended up, upstairs, I remember that, but I couldn't find the ward. I was hoping to when I came to Ellis Island last time and this time, but it's not renovated yet. I was able now through people like yourselves to get the registry of the ship, the names, the ages, all the things they had about me, including my hospital records of Ellis Island. Their hospital and I was apparently in that hospital for nine days.

SIGRIST: Nine days.

MEYER: And the nine days were meaningful in this sense. I was not allowed to see my parents until the very end. Gerard and Fred were not allowed to see us, even though they knew we had arrived. They couldn't see us because we were in quarantine because the doctors had to check on ---did we have typhus or typhoid or TB? And of course, I was a candidate. I had a fever of unknown origin. So mixed blessing, that hospital was the best thing that ever happened to me in my life and I have nothing but wonderful memories of it.

SIGRIST: Before we talk about that, I still have some questions about the ship.

MEYER: Please. Of course.

SIGRIST: First of all, you, you described where everybody slept. What kind of sanitation did they have on the ship?

MEYER: Miserable sanitation. Bad enough that a kid could see, this isn't the way things should be. What I remember is, you couldn't get clean towels. You, your towels smelled and looked like they were rags to clean your car with. I remember the food was, yeechie. And that's the only word I could use. Yuck.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about where the food came from and what it was and how it was served to you? Course you were sick, I realize.

MEYER: I was sick and so I didn't eat much and I stayed away from crowds, which I hated, at those times. I think I ate barely enough to stay alive and I remember drinking a lot of water. I remember very fondly bananas in Cuba, and bananas in Bermuda and bananas were not only the food of choice. I gorged on bananas. Turned out, they were healthy for what was ailing me but they were something I could keep down. I remember that being fed on the ship was an adventure. You couldn't get fed. You were in line, you were being pushed back, there were other people who always wanted to be ahead of you. There was nothing like, you ate in the dining room at your assigned place. This was, everybody fends for themselves, kind of situation. And so I remember chaos. And I can tell you my father the physician told us even then, "Don't tell anybody because we will have a riot." that there was on this ship typhoid fever and typhus. Enough that he and several others were burying corpses at night in the water.

SIGRIST: Okay, we need to stop so Kevin can flip the tapes again

MEYER: That's a good place to stop!

SIGRIST: That's a good, good place to stop! This is the end of side two, side one, tape two, with Dr. George Meyer.

END TAPE TWO, SIDE A BEGIN TAPE TWO SIDE B

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning side two of tape two with Dr. George Meyer, who came from Germany in 1941 at the age of nine. We were discussing some of the more lurid details about being on The Navimar, things that your father told you about. Do you remember how long the ship took to get to New York? I realize it made a couple of stops along the way.

MEYER: The figure that I was given was that it took five and a half weeks from the leaving Cadiz to arrival on Ellis Island, or let's call it New York Harbor.- 'Cause I didn't know at that time, more about New York harbor. I knew it was Ellis Island, though, and we knew what that was.

SIGRIST: You, you, you mentioned earlier that you, you said that the ship left in September. Now on your oral history form, I have you listing this as August. Is it just that you're not sure or?

MEYER: No, it's that it's September and I mis-identified the August one. We should be able to find it out because I have the manifest of the ship.

SIGRIST: Okay, we can look at that afterwards.

MEYER: And we have some other witnesses, I understand,

SIGRIST: We do indeed.

MEYER: Which is wonderful! They'll tell their version of this. I think it was September and not August that The Navimar left. And I think it took five and a half weeks to arrive in New York.

SIGRIST: Do you know why it stopped in, in a Bermuda and Cuba?

MEYER: Honest, complete answer is no. Guesswork is it was such a lunker that it needed repairs or that it couldn't carry enough fuel to get it to the next stop, or something like that. Or maybe they had to get food and water for these people, 'cause they fed us junk, I can promise you that. But we did have enough water to drink, I remember that. And there was not that kind of diarrhea, dysentery on the ship, which as a physician would say, "Oh, everybody would need IV's when they arrive." If they were all vomiting diarrhea --- and typhus and typhoid are not good diseases to have and they're very serious. And as I said, my father did bury some corpses. He said in blankets --- in the water late at night. In short, I think the ship took that long for a variety of reasons. Which may have included something like the U-boat problems of the time because we were told to watch for U-boats. Everybody did, we all heard these horror stories, and now I'm reading about them. And indeed, there were horror stories because we were part of that before the allies were able to hunt down the U-boats. And the submarines were premier on the seas at that time. We could see that. And we were just a little freighter limping along.

SIGRIST: Well tell me about; tell me about arriving at Ellis Island. First of all, how did they get you from the ship to here?

MEYER: I remember only crowds and crowds of people and noise and clean uniforms of public health service officers. I remember those because I always had the feeling that the people we were meeting with in Europe were slovenly and dirty and didn't care and they needed shaves and that kind of feeling. With the exception of the Germans when they first came. They wanted to impress everybody with how beautiful, handsome, clean-shaven they were. Ugh, I don't want to digress here, there are digressions galore. But what I'm gonna say is the public health service officers were polite, cleanly, efficient. They did the crowd monitoring; you go here, you go there. And it was very clear, you go there, and it was bye mom, bye dad, and you know, come visit, and when can we visit?

And they said, "We can't tell you", and off I went, and I was whisked upstairs.

SIGRIST: Do you know if everyone that got off the Navimar was brought here?

MEYER: I don't think there were any, I'm gonna say, first class passengers on The Navimar. There may have been five or ten or fifty, but it would be of that variety. And we never saw them or spoke to them. I don't remember The Navimar stopping in Manhattan and then going over to Ellis Island, or anything like that. I remember The Navimar arriving at Ellis Island and disgorging these hundreds and hundreds of people, all of whom were very anxious, and who knew that this was the triage point. This was, if you couldn't get through here, you were dead. That was how it was felt. And dead was you were going back to Europe. And we heard of such, and indeed there were such. I don't know the dates of when a ship was turned back in totality, but we all feared that. And it was very clear that those who were quarantined --- and that was us --- were on the bubble --- we could call it now. You know, we're not sure whether they would make it or not. I did a lot of praying, I know that, and I was a very devout child in those days.

SIGRIST: How did you feel when they took you away from your parents?

MEYER: Oh, it was the worst feeling in the world. It was, you know, I'd already lost a father and then regained him. I'd lost sister, and never got to say goodbye to her at all. And I'd lost acquaintances, friends, who disappeared from our lives. So I'm gonna say it was terror, you know. Terror of the kind that is ---- one false move and you're dead, kind of terror. Because at those times, and for, I'm going to say years afterwards, I assumed that anybody in authority carried guns, and had the power of life and death over you. I had seen people shot on sight by somebody. Just taken the gun out, [Imitates shot] gone, keep moving. And n-- once you've seen that and you fear it's happening right around you, by this one or that one, it's sheer terror. And as I say, I had nightmares. I had a hard time going to bed every night. I was --- had very little sleep, and what I had was very disturbed. And I had these phobias. I mean, I was a scared kid --- fraidy cat. And I'm gonna say for a couple of years, even while --- when I was living in New York and we were, you know, eating everyday and my father had a job. I was still, like I was in Europe. For a long time.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about this experience, being here for nine days. What sticks out in your mind about all of that?

MEYER: It was one of the most reassuring, wonderful, marvelous things that I had ever had. I think the first and most important thing was caring. The people who took care of me in that hospital were, seemed like they were, you know, I didn't know the name, Sister Nightingale, benefactress, or doctor, you know, Santa Claus. But they were wonderful people. They looked so healthy; they looked as I say, so neat and clean. They smiled and that was so rare in those days to see people smile at you, you know? And ice cream, ice cream, ice cream, it's like kids who have tonsillectomy's remember, "Oh, I could eat all the ice cream I

wanted too." but I didn't feel like eating that much ice cream in those days. I did eat ice cream, I remember, and they fed me all the ice cream that I wanted and I gorged on ice cream. Apparently, I was not malnourished enough that I would have diarrhea or vomiting from ice cream.

So what I remember is these kind, wonderful people who smiled and they fed you well! And they never let on anything of what I feared in my worst nightmares. You know, that you might not, quote, make it into New York. That you, we never talked about anything like, what if? I mean ---- nobody came to talk to me about anything like that. I kept asking, "When am I gonna see Mom? When am I gonna see Dad? When am I gonna see my grandmother?" And they said, "You will, as soon as possible. You will, as soon as possible." It was days before I was able to see them, and it was not until the last day that I was actually reunited with them. There were some visits, which were like, you look across this, I call it railroad station here, this big one. I seem to remember a, a huge staircase, which may be my fantasy, but I can remember people going up the staircase. That was, it seemed, you went one way or you went the other way, and I don't remember which was which. I remember only that I was physically separated and forced to stay separated from my parents.

And I know I tried, and somebody had to hold me obviously. I don't remember having a tantrum, because I wasn't the tantrum kinda kid, but I would remember being deathly afraid that I was never gonna see them again. I'm gonna say, family secret here, my father blamed me for the Ellis Island retention delay. And indeed, there was a grain of truth to that. But what he blamed me for was, again it was me, and again it was, I was doing things I wasn't supposed to and how could I? And, most important, again, it was how could I do that to him. As he saw it, and as he never let me forget, you know, it was your fault that we were on Ellis Island, we would not have been on Ellis Island, we would have gone directly to Fred and Gerard and Lucy and New York and so on. Well, it obviously was a big deal at the time and he was worried also, and his way of worrying was to let loose on who was safe, and I was safe.

And so I loved being around the public health service officers and the nurses and I remember that. And I remember being afraid to be around my father because of his volatile temper. I should say that my mother, in those days, was the strongest that she had ever been in her life. She was more capable of saying, "This is the way it's going to be", including with me. And my wife and I like to say nowadays, she did a wonderful job and she got the passports and she stood in line and I stood in line with her in Gestapo headquarters and all kinds of horrible things. She did that, and then we say, 'then she retired'. I mean, she worked for thirty, forty years and she didn't die till the 1980's, but she retired as far as, you know, making any decisions. "Whatever you want, whatever you want, whatever we want, I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it." But in those days, she was a tower of strength, whereas, I would say in those days, my father was a shell and he had been starving and he had seen, I mean, much worse than I ever saw. And my grandmother became the witch of the west, in those times, I'm sorry to say. So I guess I turned to my mother, and perhaps away from father and my grandmother, psychologically.

SIGRIST: Were they all detained here at Ellis Island while you were in the hospital?
MEYER: They were all detained the whole time I was on Ellis Island.
SIGRIST: Did, did any of them speak about their experiences here while you were in the hospital?

MEYER: They wouldn't talk about it, and I asked them years later, and I asked them at that time. It was one of those family secrets, I'd, I would call it. They viewed it as a family shameful incident. The Yiddish word is shanda (scandal). Shanda is something we're terribly afraid of, a secret you don't let other people know about. So shush. You don't talk about those things. They wouldn't talk about this thing, except to blame me.

SIGRIST: Why was it, why was it shameful to them?

MEYER: Good question!

SIGRIST: I mean, does this reflect their opinions about Ellis Island, I mean, what was

MEYER: Not at all! This was the country where streets are paved with gold. And this was the fulfillment of their dreams, the dreams having gone back to Germany, from which they tried and couldn't. Belgium from which they tried regularly and couldn't. And then all the rest, France and unoccupied France and then Spain. We really weren't sure until we got to Spain. And that means, Seville, that we were gonna be able to get on a ship and get into this country. It looked like we were going to get stuck in Spain for the war, which was something I wouldn't have liked because the Spanish people were worse off, at that time, than we were. And that was pretty bad. I remember, I was feeling hungry and I would eat shrimp, and I would throw, as everybody did, the shrimp shells on the ground.

And to this day I remember, this is now 1941. Spanish kids scrambling to pick up those shrimp shells, which they would wolf down. Like they had been staving, and indeed they had been starving. And I always wondered, how could they possibly do that and why did they do that? Well, I knew really why they did it. I've now decided they must have gotten some nourishment from whatever's left of the tail or the head of the shrimp that they could get, and they decided, well, this is better than having an empty stomach. But they were worse off than we were and I've taken you aside from what you asked me. Why did they think it was such a shame? I think because my family felt that way. They felt, you hide. And anything you do that calls attention to you is a no-no, because you might be seen, recognized, identified, and then whisked off.

SIGRIST: Which is sort of what happened to you?

MEYER: Unfortunately, it not only happened to us, it happened to my uncle Rudy, it happened to other family members. It happened to many of my close friends that were from Heist-Sur-Mer.

SIGRIST: But, but specifically to you, that's what happened. You, you were identified as having a fever, being sick and being taken away.

MEYER: It had happened to me. Yes. Oh, yes. Tell me about it!

SIGRIST: You, you were identified as having a fever, being sick and being taken away. Can you, can you talk a little bit about that? You, you, you said that you had a fever. What do you remember about the medical treatment and or what they were looking for? What kind of a fever was it?

MEYER: Some of this is now, I'm sure some of this is background for why did I go into medicine? And why are three of our sons doctors? Why are their wives in health care? My wife, she's a psychiatric social worker, and so on, so I'm sure this all got laid down. I'm going to call it, from good examples. I think the care that I was given was, what I would consider even then, first class care. And by that I mean, not just the smiles and the caring and the gentleness, they bathed me everyday. They bathed my foot everyday. They bandaged my foot everyday.

SIGRIST: Was it your foot what hit the pipe on the ship?

MEYER: It was the back of my right ankle, which had a one-inch tall wound, right where the Achilles tendon is sitting. And the skin was split, and the wound was infected. And I could see that, I mean, there was yellow pus coming out of it and it was red and it was swollen. And it was also clear, that everyday, it was less swollen, less red, less pussy, and more healing. And I remember these gorgeous, clean, white bandages. And I remember the contrast because my parents, who were hoarders till the day they died, would save bandages. And we're talking about these gauze-rolling bandages that people had in those days. They would keep those for decades, you might need it someday, you never know when you might need it. Well, I remember these gorgeous, big, clean bandages with tape, all the tape that you needed it seemed. And this wonderful, I'm going to call it, soothing medication. Now my father said, they had sulfa phiasol [ph], in other words, sulfa drugs, in those times and they must have used an antibiotic. Which we had no access to -- -- as refugees. So the summation is Ellis Island was a dream and a Mecca. So much at variance with what I had seen so recently and what I feared so much. They began to reassure me that there were decent people in the world, that there was a future, etcetera.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the other patients in the hospital? Any other kids or?

MEYER: I remember patients and I remember kids, 'cause this was a pediatric and adolescent type ward. I don't remember any names or

SIGRIST: Well, not names but I mean

MEYER: Anything like, who had a crutch or who was, was there, you know, somebody who was bleeding or somebody who died. I don't, I'm sure nobody died. I just thought these were other kids. Remember that I had known sick kids for the last seven years in all phases of recovery, so

illness didn't frighten me. As a matter of fact, I know, I can remember going, 'why are they making such a big deal of this? You know, this is gonna do fine'. I know if I just get time, I'll bathe it and it'll be fine. Well, fever of unknown origin; I used the word earlier and pardon for my using it in language. In health care, F.U.O. stands for, you better get on this and find out what it is because it could be something very serious --- meaning infectious. Not just meaning fatal but something that could spread too. I mean, they had after all a thousand people all of a sudden on their hands so I'm sure that what they were worried about was tuberculosis, or typhoid, or typhus. Because I'm sure they heard those words. If not from others, they would have heard it from my father, the public health doctor who was proudly expert in those areas.

SIGRIST: Was he given exposure to the doctors? Was there any interaction that you know of between the doctors here and your parents?

MEYER: Yes, excuse me, not, not so. Not at Ellis Island. On the ship and connected with the ship, apparently, there were some, a doctor maybe, or two doctors. My father called them butchers --- in private, to us. And my father blamed them almost as much as he blamed me because he felt they blew it. They didn't take care of it when they should have. The way

SIGRIST: When you initially hurt yourself?

MEYER: When we were on the ship and the ship was moving. But the doctors at Ellis Island and Dr. Hans Meyer know no contact. He was another refugee, Jewish person, Hebrew, they called then, and he didn't have a license to practice in this country. His boards were never recognized in this country and he always took that to his grave, you know. "I went to the best school and I took the best and....". But he never could bring himself to risk failing board examinations in this country, after he failed them the first time that he took them. And the first time he took them, it's no surprise that he would fail from what, all that I know now, now I'm a board examiner. And I know the other side of all this and we know half of the people fail their first try's. But once he failed --- never again, I will not expose myself to that shame.

SIGRIST: Describe being released to your parents and, and how, what can you describe the scene for me and how you felt?

MEYER: There were two times in those days when I can remember running at the top speed in order to grab and hang onto and just hug and never let go of my father. One of those times was when he was in the camp and we had finally arrived at the gates of this camp. And the guards, again gun toting, very short shrift people, you know, angry people, took pity, I would say on me. Maybe because I could speak their language, and I could speak it as well as they could, French. They let me through the gate into the camp! And I remember rushing to him and hanging on and never letting go until he had to push me out the door of the camp again. We'll see you at the next weekend; they'll let you in again next weekend. Which they did, to their credit. Although there were a lot of horrible things as well.

I'm saying to you, when I was let go from this hospital and they were across this railroad station, I ran and I screamed and I yelled and I know that it was one of those epic moments. You know, where you say, now it's gonna be okay, now at last we're together again. We, that is, those of us who've survived this far. And in short, that was, that would be the happy ending of a terrible movie which causes everybody to cry. At the end, they would cry with happiness because here's this kid reunited with his parents and he's gonna be okay. And he's going to become an American citizen someday. And now here's where, if you pardon a family in-joke briefly, and then I'll shut up.

My wife and I this morning came in a limousine to Battery Park, which left us off and which will meet us when we get off the ferry again. And everybody picked up this, well, you're arriving at Ellis Island in a limousine now, I guess it's gonna be okay this time! And it's a sort of wonderful ending to a, you know, a sad story with a happy, happy, happy ending. This has been the most wonderful country in the world from day one and I'm the proudest American you could ever want to see. And we have three of the most wonderful sons in the world [Tearful].

SIGRIST: Give me the name of your wife, please.

MEYER: My wife, my soul mate, Paula. P-A-U-L-A. Saslaw. S-A-S-L-A-W. Meyer.

SIGRIST: And when did you marry?

MEYER: Came to my bar mitzvah when I was thirteen, so she knew me before I was thirteen in Annapolis, Maryland. Knew me all through high school, she was my high school sweetheart. Knew me through college, she was my college sweetheart. Married me when I was a sophomore in medical school in Chicago. And

SIGRIST: What year was that?

MEYER: Now, we married in 1953. We will have been married on the seventeenth of this month forty-four years and counting. And we say, three sons, six grandchildren, and eight-ninths of another grandchild. And my father, who was always worried about, "You're the last Meyer, you better have a family." And by that he meant you better have sons -- to carry on the name. Well, now I say it's no longer the Meyer family, it's the Meyer clan. And it's wonderful and all the people who say, "Dad is so sentimental about these things.". I am unabashedly sentimental about these things. And I say, hoorah for The United States and for Ellis Island [Overcome]!

SIGRIST: Well, Dr. Meyer, I think this is probably a good place for us to end. I think that we've had to gloss over so much, I think but

MEYER: You've been great.

SIGRIST: We've been at this for two hours and you got to get back to the limousine, you're probably the only person I've ever interviewed that came to Ellis Island by a limousine!

MEYER: [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Anyway, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Dr. George Meyer on Tuesday, June 3, 1997 at The Ellis Island Immigration Museum, with Kevin Daly running the equipment and Mrs. Meyer in attendance. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

EI-902/MEYER