

**EI-911**

**PHILIP BUEHLER**

**BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 20, 1956**

**INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 26, 1997**

**AGE AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW: 41**

**RUNNING TIME:**

**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: INES JIMBO, MELANIE DANIELS**

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**RESIDENCES:**

- **THE US: BRONX, NEW YORK**
- **THE US: NEW MILFORD, NEW JERSEY**

**Historian's NOTE: Mr. Buehler is a US citizen living in the US who came to Ellis Island un-officially in 1974 to explore and take photographs,**

LEVINE: —Today is July 26, 1997, and I'm here at Ellis Island in the oral history studio with Phillip Buehler who came to Ellis Island on a 14 foot aluminum row boat in January, February, and March of 1974. He made about six trips here for the purpose of exploring. He was seventeen years of age at the time and taking photographs of Ellis Island just mid-way between the time that it closed in 1954 and this time which is July 26, 1997. Anyway this should be a, a very, interesting and unique interview and why don't we start. Phillip, just if you would say for the tape, your birth date and where you were born and raised.

BUEHLER: Oh. Um I was born on October 20, 1956 in New York. I grew up in the Bronx, of Tremont Avenue. It was part of the fleeing middle class in the early sixties and then spent the rest of my childhood in New Jersey.

LEVINE: Okay. And what first-- do you remember when you first paid attention to Ellis Island? I mean what, what happened or that you took an interest in it?

BUEHLER: um. I was involved with a friend who actually came out with -- who --. We were involved at the Young Filmmakers Foundation in New York making sixteen millimeters movies. And we had just finished one and we needed a topic for our next film. And we were making documentaries, we'd just finished one on Coney Island. And we both heard of Ellis Island. It's seein' the Island off the shore, knew it was kind of abandoned and thought that would be kind of a neat place to go to. And had heard just a little bit about it in school. I mean, it wasn't anywhere near as talked about as it is today. So we thought that would be a both, you know, a, an exciting experience to row out, as well as, an interesting film to make.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so where were you in school at that point? What grade?

BUEHLER: A senior in high school.

LEVINE: Senior. What high school?

BUEHLER: New Milford High School. In New Milford, New Jersey.

LEVINE: New Jersey. So, so you and your friend...

BUEHLER: Steve

LEVINE: who also. What, what was Steve's name, last name?

BUEHLER: Steve Siegel.

LEVINE: Steve Siegel. You, you both, where did you get the boat?

BUEHLER: Well, Steve had it. We, he had done this -- the Hackensack River and so it's kind of a flat bottom, small can-- rowboat that you would -- you know -- take out on the river. So yeah. We put it on the roof of my car because I had just gotten my drivers license [(laughs) and would drive down here and then, a, and then row out.

LEVINE: Well now before you started rowing out here you actually took a tour?

BUEHLER: Yeah, yeah. We knew we were going to make the film, and then we contacted the -- the Park Service to see if we could get the lay of the land and if we could officially get permission to make a movie. And, a, the, the - - I guess, periodically -- and they were doing one, it was coming up. They were taking people out here. So you would have to go out to Liberty Island and then they take a small boat over here. And, you know, you'd wear hard hats and kind of wander around -- I guess, the main island, the registry, and then -- but not the rest, of the island.

LEVINE: Well, so in other words, you had to row out to the Statue? To the Liberty Island?

BUEHLER: Oh, no, no ,no, no. I took the regular ferry --

LEVINE: Oh.

BUEHLER: --- from New York, from the Battery. Took the ferry out to the island and then the Park Service took a launch out to here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what kind, what kinds of people were coming out here at that point?

BUEHLER: Academics and, I guess-- I don't know -- social policy people. Mostly, you know, academics.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Ummm.

BUEHLER: We were, I guess, the youngest of the crowd.

LEVINE: And did, did, were you granted permission or how?

BUEHLER: No. They was like -- impossible. You know, to grant some students permission to make a movie on the island -- that many trips over here, and how long would we need. And no, we never got permission.

LEVINE: Well, now, maybe you can describe a what, everything you can remember about the condition of the place in 1974.

BUEHLER: Umm. Well the, the-- . I know we -- we came across the -- on the New Jersey side was the, I guess, the Central Railroad of New Jersey. So, that was still there. Right now it's, I guess, a big park. But there were all these rail road tracks and with box cars on them. And -- and before they tore it all up -- and piers jutting out from the New Jersey side. They came very close to Ellis Island -- you could actually ---

LEVINE: Umm.

BUEHLER: -- get almost within the stones throw the island. And...

LEVINE: This is where Liberty State Park is now ?

BUEHLER: Right, right.

LEVINE: What you're talking about. Uh-huh.

BUEHLER: And there were Liberty Ships from the World War II, docked on those piers. You know, kind of just, I guess being stored there. These big gray hulls of these big freighters that were used in the war to bring supplies over to Europe. So yeah you could, you could row half way to the island without -- along side a pier. And then there was this small, expanse of open water. We hoped the currents didn't catch you and take you out into the harbor. And then on the far side of the island was, what was a small dock. I saw a boat there this morning when I came in. And if you came when the tide was high you could easily climb up and --. I guess it's where the, I guess there was an incinerator back there. And we kind of knew some of the his-- because we had been on that tour. So we knew some of what things were. But most of the things on the island we didn't really know what they were, or what the rooms were or the parts of the island we were in.

LEVINE: How about the Great Hall?

BUEHLER: Uh. The Great Hall was a, wasn't so great. [Laughs]

LEVINE: [Laughs] Wasn't

BUEHLER: It a, it was -- yeah, it was --. I mean the chandeliers were still intact. The island was basically moraine—I -- you know, I have photographed a lot ruins and this one, because of its inaccessibility, was in very good shape. It had most -- there were no broken windows.

LEVINE: The tiles?

BUEHLER: The tiles on the roofs were fine. The tiles on the wall was still on the walls. The paint was peeling and there was a lot of, like, dirt and dust but the -- there weren't many pigeons living inside. There was lots of furniture and mattresses and beds and things. There was a lot of -- in the offices, there was lots of paper, paper work on immigration and deportation forms and things in the offices that were just kind of lying around in file cabinets. Up and down some of the halls were just enormous rows and rows and rows of file cabinets, I guess for any kind of bureaucracy of processing paper. So it was kind of, like, it looked like one day they just closed and every body left..

LEVINE: I've heard it described that way before so that's what it fel--

BUEHLER: Yeah.

LEVINE: -- seemed liked, huh.

BUEHLER: It had that hollow -- I mean it was -- you know, you got more and more used to it like anything that at --. At -- at first, we thought we were going to get caught and then pretty soon it was like our island. (both laugh) So you w-- we explored more and more and more of it. And every time we came we would try to find some place we hadn't been before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BUEHLER: Umm. And so we would take pictures as well shoot film of the island and focus on a lot on the signs that were around. 'Cause the thing that really told you any kind of story were either the paper or the signs. You know -- 'Communicable Disease Ward' or the signs to the 'Put Trays--', 'Trays and

Dishes Straight Ahead' and it would be in six languages or those kinds of things were fascinating.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you have a special interest because of your own ancestry --

BUEHLER: Umm.

LEVINE: --in Ellis Island?

BUEHLER: That's funny. Not at the time. My, my -- I guess both my father's side is German and my grandparents on his side came through Ellis Island from Germany and my mother's side, the same thing through Italy. But not really at the time. It wasn't so meaningful. Now it's different, so...

LEVINE: Hmm.

BUEHLER: I'm trying to trace my roots and find out if there is any artists in my family so...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BUEHLER: I'm involved in that now but at the time it really wasn't about that. I think it was more about finding a place that I think had a historical significance that you can make an interesting documentary about and tell a story...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BUEHLER: but it wasn't such a personal story. But it's become that.

LEVINE: At least you didn't know that.

BUEHLER: I didn't think so at the time.

LEVINE: And how about your friend Steve, was his, how -- what was his -- did he have some other kind of connection here besides the filming?

BUEHLER: Umm. I'm not, I'm not sure. I think it was more the same of, you know, this random adventure that we would always go on to some -- I mean we've been to most of the islands around Manhattan.

LEVINE: Ohh.

BUEHLER: You know from North Brother Island and, and so forth -- that you could get to. Or Roosevelt Island or there was like the, the, these sides of the inaccessible parts of New York that were kind of unfamiliar to people -- that had some historical significance. And he is a --. I guess he eventually went into -- I guess he got his degrees in like urban planning so -- at Columbia -- so he was very interested in that part of the, I guess the -- I guess I'm assuming Ellis Island's role in New York City. Because he's, he's, you know a big New York City -- New York was a big part of his life.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. I see. So you -- there were ferries going to the Statue?

BUEHLER: Right. Yeah. The typical.

LEVINE: That was like a typical tourist...

BUEHLER: Right.

LEVINE: -- route, I see.

BUEHLER: From the Battery, not from New Jersey. New Jersey this side there wasn't a park, it was just a big wasteland of railroad tracks, and they were just starting to tear them all up at the time. So there was no, really, way to get out here except walk.

LEVINE: On your six trips, did you ever encounter anyone else on Ellis Island?

BUEHLER: No, no, that was -- that was one fortunate thing when -- take pictures in ruins -- and especially around New York -- there is always a chance that, you know, homeless or drug addicts or somebody'll be inside. But Ellis Island was pretty much, I mean, nobody alive. I mean there was -- there were defiantly that, that kind of eerie, creepy feeling you'd get when you went to some rooms, you know.

LEVINE: Like ghosts, you mean?

BUEHLER: Or yeah, or you would be in the ba--especially in the dark basement areas. You kind of be -- kind of wander in and your flashlight would not go across the room, (both laugh) and you would be like, "Well, maybe we're not gonna go down here 'cause we really don't know." And I don't think it was more, it was just, you know. I mean, it's like -- yeah, it's like sometimes walking around a haunted house.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BUEHLER: So, It wasn't like we were totally afraid of going in there. It's just that -- and we went in the winter so there was snow on the ground on the outside so you could see animal foot prints going inside. So, and sometime -- I remember one area we wouldn't go in because the footprints were bigger than all the others we'd seen...

LEVINE: [laughs] ‘

BUEHLER: [laughs] And we -- we peeked in and I don't -- I don't know what it was. At least it wasn't -- you know this 'cause it's inaccessible -- it wouldn't be feral dogs. But we had no idea what was down there and the flashlights couldn't get that far. So we were like, "Okay, this is one -- the one room," you know, "place on the Island we won't go to."

LEVINE: Oh. Well, did you go, like, late afternoon? Or...

BUEHLER: We'd go in the morning, we'd stay all day. We'd pack lunch and then sometimes ride the tides. If we timed it wrong, we'd get back to the boat and the tide had gone down ten feet. And, you know, you'd have to kind of throw this rowboat out, hope it landed bottom side down and then kind of hang on a piling. And shimmy down to this boat and then get in it. [laughs]. 'Cause and it was cold, I mean we went in the winter. So if you fell in you were, you were going to freeze.

LEVINE: Did you ever?

BUEHLER: No. Couldn't, yeah, no. We used to -- .Not here, I mean, we'd both fallen through the ice on the New Jersey side crossing over the, you know, into like two feet of water or something. But nothing where we would drown.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And how about the filming and the photographs you took? Could you, could you kind of just describe the kinds of things you were looking for?

BUEHLER: Well we really here -- want to make a movie and the photographs were just kind of -- at the time, were just documenting what, you know, just what we saw on film. The film was, was the big part of it. So we would shoot different -- it's almost broken into the three parts of the island. At the

registry when people arrived, and the cafeteria and dormitory building, and then the hospital side of the island. And we would have just lots of, you know. Well, it's different now-a-days when you have video. You can shoot for hours and it cost you nothing. Back then, two -- two minutes of sixteen millimeter film cost, probably, ten dollars for the roll of film, and ten dollars processing (which in today's dollars, it's like fifty, sixty bucks per -- per two minutes). For a high school student, it was kind of dear. So it was a lot more controlled then, you know. And, and that was part of it. We in-- we did interview a few immigrants as well, after we shot on the island...

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh

BUEHLER: Did our own little oral history because we didn't -- shooting sync-sound was beyond our capabilities (laughs) at the time. So as a background to the film.

LEVINE: And what was that like, the interviews?

BUEHLER: That was fun because we had, we shot those, or, or recorded them after the island experience...

LEVINE: Oh- Good.

BUEHLER: So we had experienced the island not knowing anything about it. You know, not kno-- not knowing nothing but we knew it was more of its history rather than anything firsthand. And then when you interviewed these -- talked to these immigrants, it added a whole 'nother -- you know -- how afraid they were or how excited they were. It added a whole 'nother layer of our trip out here.

LEVINE: And also you knew what the island was like more when it, when you interviewed them...

BUEHLER: Right.

LEVINE: Had you interviewed them first, you wouldn't of -- . Yeah.

BUEHLER: Right. The approach from (I mean, today I drove over in my car) but back then it's just the approach they would talk about from the water and how isolated it was here and passing the Statue of Liberty on their way in and all those kind of exciting feelings. So we did add. We went back on the Staten Island ferry just to shoot some pass-bys of the Statue -- just to try and capture some of that. But there was, it was interesting the -- their recollections of, of coming across as kids (most of them that we talk to). So that was a big part of the film.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now we have your film in our library and...

BUEHLER: Uh-hmm. I brought a better copy with me today.

LEVINE: Okay. And what's the name of it?

BUEHLER: Umm. Ellis Island [laughs]

LEVINE: [laughs] Oh. Okay.

BUEHLER: I mean, They weren't any films on Ellis Island. There were like no channel thirteen documentaries. It was -- it was that, that period (and hear this a lot about buildings) it's before their, its kind of after they were ban --. They served their usefulness but before anybody discovers their historical significance, they kind of lay out there and -- and decay. And this was in

that period of -- nobody talked of Ellis Island. It was too recent and fresh. So, so it was kind of a unique topic, but it also had hard time, you know It was co—it was a high school student film, a sixteen millimeter. It won awards and festivals and things.

LEVINE: Ohh. What festivals and what awards?

BUEHLER: It won -- I think it won a – a k – it won a Cine [Golden] Eagle, and Kodak student filmmaker thing. I'm not sure of all the titles of the-- New – one -- I think the New Jersey -- I guess it was -- back then it wasn't, wasn't New Jersey College of Tech, whatever the -- in Newark. It was the Newark College of Engineering back then. Had a film festival and we entered with that. We were the only high school students around that were making 16 millimeter films, so. We were making them in New York 'cause there was nothing in New Jersey to make them, you know, there were no facilities.

LEVINE: Wow. So did you go on to make other films together?

BUEHLER: Yeah. We did, right through college and graduate school. A few more documentaries and I think at the time, both of us -- Steve's still making films, as a side hobby. I went off to graduate school and then went into advertising so that kind of --. Right when we were both graduating was when Ronald Reagan was elected to office and they cut all the arts funding. So, most of our films after high school were supported by grants – things. And they all kind of dried up. So it was a really tough time to be an independent filmmaker. So I took the more traditional route and went into business.

LEVINE: When you look back on that, on that period of doing this film do you think its had any ramifications for you, I mean?

BUEHLER: Oh yeah. I mean, part of what I do now. I work in an ad agency. I – I – and, I guess, I'm the strategic planning director at one of the largest ad agencies in the world. And one of the things I do is to understand people and why they buy products and what they think. I interview people. So part of that whole interviewing people, like we did on Ellis Island. I still do that and I take pictures of them. You know, so I go into people's houses or into their factories or their places of business and I do almost oral histories for my job. I'll take pictures of their, you know. If it's a small business -- the owners, the factory, the office, the people he works with and the, maybe the car he drives and follow him home and then do a big interview and that's how I then take the understanding of who we're advertising to back to my agency. So that, that skill set of like documentary interviewing, I still do.

LEVINE: Wow. And how about like today? Do you have any ideas of what you want to take here that will somehow compliment what you did earlier?

BUEHLER: Oh yeah! I brought, just to show you as part of this project. Wanted to do like 'then and now's' of my -- this was about, I guess it was twenty-three years almost twenty-five years ago. And shoot. Back then the ferry was still, you could still see it, it was --

LEVINE: In the slip, you mean? The ferry that's mostly sunk.

BUEHLER: -- in the slip, right, the Ellis Island. Yeah. Yeah. It was, now its just -- I guess, the hull is underwater but the, the superstructure was still there. So I want to get from the same angle. You know, of the picture I took, "Here's the ferry now". And I did, and the, and the registry. Here's, cause a lot of people have pictures, I guess of the registry back in the hay day and then, you know, I would have one twenty years ago and then have one now with the tourists running around. Or the, I guess the

cafeteria, there's a couple of shots. There's actually down there, all these -- it was -- fascinated to see them. Because twenty-five years ago, there were these bentwood chairs -- like a hundred of them stacked up on top of each other in the corner of this, I guess, from the cafeteria. And I just saw them, you know, and they're still, they're still there!

LEVINE: Dusty, I assume!

BUEHLER: Still as dusty as ever! But they're still all packed and stacked up on top of each other. So I want to get a picture from the same angle of those. So as many pictures I -- I could, I'd love to get from the same spot.

LEVINE: These are stills you're talking about?

BUEHLER: Yes. Yeah. Like there's that little arch leading out to that, there's kind of a, it's almost like a very cloisterish corridor where there's these brick arches. And I have a picture of that twenty-five years ago and now it has a big beam in the middle of it propping it up, cause it's, I guess, going to fall apart. So I'd like to get the same kind of angle there. 'Cause the island really has dramatically deteriorated, from what I could see. I guess they don't even let you in buildings -- Islands Two and Three anymore.

LEVINE: Right.

BUEHLER: Which were the, the most fun, because the -- visually they just had these really long corridors of, of glass. And, and --

LEVINE: The walkway, is that what you're thinking of?

BUEHLER: The walkways. We did a lot of tracking shots down the walkways. We turn into like the isolation wards, or whatever. And, yeah, and the way the sun would come in and hit the peeled paint would be wonderful. Unfortunately, I can't. You're not allowed in there anymore, I guess.

LEVINE: Well, there's a lot of asbestos in those buildings, so.

BUEHLER: Yeah. That's bad. I guess it's the, I find that across the board when you shoot in ruins. The insurance is what kills the official-ness of that.

LEVINE: Now are you going to do video, do you have video with you also?

BUEHLER: No, no, I didn't bring video. So, I just brought my still camera. Actually it's the same camera (both laugh) I used back then.

LEVINE: Is it!? Oh, wow!

BUEHLER: Yeah, it's the same old Nikon. It was -- it still works for me and I still have it.

LEVINE: Great. Well, now, is there anything else about this whole experience that maybe I haven't thought of? Or that, that you, you think of when you think of it? Or any other aspects of it that maybe have, have gained some -- or that maybe you didn't, weren't thinking at the time but you think of now in relation to it?

BUEHLER: Yeah, well, actually, I'm in -- in the process with, you know. I put up my -- all these -- it almost had rep---. The Ellis Island pictures I took sat in, you know, in my collection for twenty years. And about a year ago, I put a homepage up on the internet of my work and there's a section on my Ellis Island pictures and maybe twenty-five pictures with little stories of,

you know, I wrote out here and here's this and here's that. And far and away, that's the most popular-- probably five, six thousand people have visited the website. And I get all this fascinating e-mail from people. Some of it's, you know, "How do I find ,my mother, my grandmother came through Poland, how do I find out?". But a lot of it being other interesting people. Like, I guess, it's how I got connected here. It was Kevin Daley, stumbled across my homepage and, and sent an e-mail. And that's how I -- we got into a conversation. And like I said, I get a lot of email from people around the world about Ellis Island. Lots of questions.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, now, like, just as an example, what kind, what are some of the pictures, and, like, what do you say, on, on your web page?

BUEHLER: Oh, It might be, well, the ferry. Well, some of it's the his— the -- almost the political or whatever, "How – how could the country or the Park Service let the Island deteriorate like this?"

LEVINE: That's something you might say under a picture?

BUEHLER: Right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BUEHLER: If, you know. If only a small amount of money had been put aside for maintenance it wouldn't of cost a hundred and fifty million dollars to fix up the main hall or the registry. And the rest of the Island, I guess, they're now going to – read in The Times that they're going to try to stabilize the ruins but they wouldn't of been ruins if --. I wouldn't have been interested in coming out here to take pictures, but they wouldn't have

been -- wouldn't have been ruins if just bare bones minimum maintenance had been done.

I guess kind of like Governor's Island now. They're going to turn it over to the city but the city doesn't want it unless they have maintenance money because they know to maintain these kind of institutional structures is enormously expensive. So that's a --. Or it would be a story on -- on the web page on --. There's a, a photograph of a monopoly board, and you're like, "Why's a monopoly board at Ellis Island?: And the story behind it is, I guess, that -- that group called, NERO (and I don't remember what it exactly stands for) I guess took over the island for a little while

LEVINE: It was a drug rehabilitation project heavily.

BUEHLER: Right. And, and there were -- there was a whole section of the -- one of the buildings where there was like clothing and, and this monopoly board. So, I guess, that's where they camped out -- lived. So, it had that little story in there. Or the 'Before and After', which I'm going to update it now, with the before's and after's, if I can do that. So, and the signs of, you know -- the "DEPOSIT TRAYS AND DISHES HERE", the cafeteria signs. To do more of that, and people. It's interesting, I guess when people search to --. Whenever they're gonna -- on the internet, people who are into the internet (which will be the whole country soon) if they go on a trip to Manhattan and they want to go to Ellis Island, they look up on the web 'Ellis Island' and my page pops up. And then they can actually see the physical, what the buildings look like.

Or I get a lot from teachers who are teaching Ellis Island and then cou-- and they teach, use the internet to teach now. So they come to my web page and and I get this e-mail about how nice it was to put this up. You

know -- to go to the effort to put this up and, and to pass along some of this to people. And then I direct them. Now, I, I link to a couple of books so that like "Write to Amazon.com if you want to find out more about Ellis Island. Here's a book you can buy, from Amazon.com." And they can click on the book and go buy it. And even, even that part of it is really explo--. It's funny, these are pictures from twenty-five years ago I took when I was seventeen and here I am forty years old and they've been -- have a new vitality to them. 'Cause now, they're historical.

LEVINE: Yes.

BUEHLER: Rather than just artistic. I'm engaged with a, a German theater group now that found my homepage on Ellis Island. I'm trying to--. They're gonna try and celebrate their hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the first direct mail service between the old and the new worlds in September of '97 -- this year. And they found, they were look -- wanted to find the grandchildren of immigrants that left Bremerhaven to come to the United States. The port of Bremerhaven. And they thought I might know cause I had a homepage on Ellis. Everybody thinks I know everything about Ellis Island 'cause I have this homepage! And they thought I might know, or could tell them who would know. And as it turned out, I asked my father. My moth-- my grandmother came from Bremerhaven so I was one of the children they were looking for.

LEVINE: Wow.

BUEHLER: But I'm gonna try and work with them to --. The idea is to set up an internet workstations in Germany and some in the United States -- either on Ellis Island, or maybe Liberty Science Center. And then have German kids talking to English or American kids. And maybe with

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videoconferencing. So, I'm playing with that no. So it's this, this Ellis Island thing has become big again.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, that's wonderful. And I think, maybe this is a perfect place to end. It sounds like you've come a full circle .

BUEHLER: A full circle.

LEVINE: And I want to thank you so much for a most interesting and unique perspective (laughs) and I've been speaking with Philip Buehler and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And it's July 26, 1997. Signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW