

EI-912

FRANK CHARLES STEINER

BIRTHDATE: APRIL 23, 1922

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 29, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 75

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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- **AUSTRIA: VIENNA**
- **CZECHOSLOVAKIA: PRAGUE**
- **US: PHILADELPHIA. PA; SCOTIA, NY**

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Steiner is also present.

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, July 29, 1997. I'm in Scotia, New York, that's spelled, S-C-O-T-I-A and I'm here with Mr. Frank Steiner. Mr. Steiner was born in Czechoslovakia, lived most of his life in Europe in Austria, came to the United States in April of '39 and celebrated his seventeenth birthday when he was at Ellis Island prior to being released. I should also say that we may hear a coffee pot going in the background. Mr. Steiner, can we begin by giving me your birth date please?

STEINER: I was born April 23, 1922.

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SIGRIST: April 23, 1922 and can you tell me what your name was when you were born?

STEINER: I was named Franz F-R-A-N-Z Karl K-A-R-L Steiner.

SIGRIST: S-t-e-i-n-e-r.

STEINER: That's correct.

SIGRIST: Right. And was that altered at all when you came to the United States?

STEINER: It was changed to Frank C. standing for Charles Steiner. And has never been changed thereafter.

SIGRIST: I see. So, in America you were known as Frank Charles Steiner?

STEINER: I have not used the Charles very much, just a middle name to---.

SIGRIST: Were you named after anyone in your family?

STEINER: Not really.

SIGRIST: Now, you were telling me a little bit before we started that you do know something about the circumstances of your own birth.

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell us, tell me about it again?

STEINER: Yes. Both my mother and my father came from Bohemia, which at that time -- their youth -- was part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. My

grandparents lived in Prague, Czechoslovakia. My uncle lived there. However my father was employed by the Austrian national railway and had a very good position. He had a degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Vienna, lived there. The fact that I was born in Prague can be attributed to the fact that my mother felt that she would have -- for one thing -- a very cheap delivery by having my uncle deliver me. He had just received his medical degree a few years before and he was a gynecologist. So therefore just before she was ready to deliver, we came to Prague. I was born there and shortly thereafter, we all went back to Vienna where I spent my youth.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother, what was her name, first of all?

STEINER: Her name was Rose.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

STEINER: Steinbach S-T-E-I-N-B-A-C-H and the person with whom I came (her brother) was Karel which is Charles in Czech K-A-R-E-L Steinbach.

SIGRIST: I see. So when you came to the United States, you came with your uncle.

STEINER: That is correct.

SIGRIST: Your mother's brother.

STEINER: Right.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your mother's family background? And her history? What kind of stories did she tell about her childhood?

STEINER: Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, I have seen the place where she grew up -- a small town in Bohemia that is difficult to pronounce. Strečno, S-T-R-E-S-B-O [sic]. Her father owned a small grocery store and she, even as a child, worked -- helped work there. My uncle, her brother, was the one that was -- received the benefit. He was the youngest of four, he went to the medical school in Prague and became a doctor.

SIGRIST: Was this the gynecologist?

STEINER: Correct.

SIGRIST: The doctor?

STEINER: That is correct, yes. My mother actually also attended a private school in Vienna. This way she was very -- she spoke German as well as Czech extremely well. As a matter of fact, she learned English also later and---

SIGRIST: And we should say for the sake of the tape that Bohemia is, is sort of what Czechoslovakia is now, that sort of area that was---

STEINER: (superposed) That's correct.

SIGRIST: Germany. Well, I guess I should be -----.

STEINER: Right. After 1918, it became the Czechoslovakia. And then, of course, in the last -- I think in '89, well maybe a little later -- Czech. The Czech Republic split from the Slovak parts and now it's called the Czech Republic. Yup.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality.

STEINER: She was a very outgoing person, she smiled a lot and she was able to tell wonderful jokes. She married my father who was fifteen years older. And she did not work as such while she was in Vienna. But when she came to the United States later on, she did work as a means of supporting herself and my father.

SIGRIST: I think of two questions. One is -- when she did work, when she came to the United States, what was her attitude about having to work?

STEINER: Well, she accepted that quite readily. Maybe this might be a good time to tell you a little bit more about my family.

SIGRIST: Sure.

STEINER: We were both, we were all Jewish. But did not -- we were -- we were sort of assimilated, which is very common at that time in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Since my father had a high position and was already retired before the Nazis marched into Austria, he felt -- didn't feel the pressure of, or the danger, that was inherent by staying in Vienna after the Germans marched into Austria and occupied it. So they were there and once that happened, it became very difficult to -- emigrate. While I was able to leave. I left Vienna in 1938 and came to Prague and then to the United States in 1939.

In 1941, both my mother and my father were transferred by the Nazis to a concentration camp called in Czech (it's Bohemian) Terezin, T-E-R-E-Z-I-N -- the German name Theresienstadt. And wonderfully, they survived being there for three and a half years. In the meantime, I had -- as you may ask me later on, I was in the American Service beginning in 1943. I was in Europe when I found out that they were alive and so we met in

Europe. And then I stayed long enough for them to come to United States in 194—. Let's see what -- I was in the service. In 1944.

SIGRIST: Did you know that they were in the camp during that time?

STEINER: No. From 1939 until 1941, we corresponded and I have even a copy of some letters that I wrote in 19---November '41. After they were sent to Terezin, there was no more communication. I had no idea where they were. It wasn't until they were liberated in May 1945 that an American war correspondent whose name is Ira Levin (who was a rather prominent writer) visited with the American troops who had come there. And my mother gave him a copy of a letter addressed to me, which eventually came to me while I was in the Service. That's when I found out, that they - -- where they had been and the fact that they were still alive.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about when you went to see them?

STEINER: Yes. I was stationed at that time in Europe, in Germany. I had undergone a number of basic trainings but the last one I had was in the military intelligence. The fact that I spoke German eventually became known to the army officials and I had a minor injury while I was on combat exercises. So at that point, I was sent to what is now Camp David in the -- near Washington. A school for training people to be in military intelligence. I was trained as an interrogator of prisoners of war. So, when I went in Europe, I was stationed in -- at that time -- in Stuttgart and we did German intelligence work.

That's when I found out that they were alive, had been sent from Terezin to a place on the border of Germany and Bohem---Czechoslovakia called Deggendorf D-E-G-G-E-N-D-O-R-F which was run by the United Nations relief and rehabilitation UNRA. And this was for people who had the

intention of coming to the United States. So my first visit was when I, actually before I, drove, I hitchhiked from Stuttgart to Deggendorf, and visited them. We had a very joyous reunion, but later on---

SIGRIST: Did they look any different to you?

STEINER: Well, amazingly, they -- in spite of very difficult times -- they had not changed that much. There was -- it was -- I -- you can even see a photograph of that reunion. My -- I was in my -- I was a sergeant in the army. And I think they had been in the UNRA camp for several months by that time so that they had better food and recovered fair well. So, it was only a matter of another four or five months for them to come to the United States.

SIGRIST: That's a wonderful story.

STEINER: It is a good story (Sigrist laughs). As a matter of fact, you'll find also in that little article that---

SIGRIST: We've kind of gotten ahead of ourselves here.

STEINER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me go back -- but I want to pick up a thread that you brought up a little earlier. You were talking about the assimilation. Can you first tell me what the difference is between the Jewish culture in Europe -- maybe the Orthodox Jewish culture and the assimilated Jewish culture.

STEINER: Well, we did attend the synagogue very --. I -- I had what's called a Bar Mitzvah when I was thirteen. That was one of few times that I was actually inside a synagogue. The -- the trend was to be, you know, we

partook of the culture that existed in the German speaking Austrian or in the Czech and German culture in Prague. And there were a number of Jews from the Eastern Polish region which also had been part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. They were considered the -- Orthodox. And actually, maybe this is unfortunate, but there was very little communication between these groups.

SIGRIST: (interposed) I---I---I --

STEINER: As a matter of fact --

SIGRIST: -- actually wanted the relationship between the two groups.

STEINER: Yeah. My father was always -- although we had Jewish, personal Jewish friends -- my father's acquaintances include a lot of people that he worked with. And, however I must say this since you were ready to ask about that. The Austrians, Viennese, always had a great streak of anti-Semitism which existed then and has not gone away completely. So, um, but I attended school and I----most of my friends --. There was only one other Jewish boy in the class and I had lots of friends among the others. So I never really felt different from any of them.

SIGRIST: And---and, am I right in thinking that this sense of assimilation or this assimilated culture gave your father this sense of security to some degree.

STEINER: Probably or maybe --

SIGRIST: That he felt he was protected somehow.

STEINER: Yes. That's correct. He had actually a very impressive title –*Ober Baurat* [Chief Architect]. The Austrians (that goes back to the tradition of the Hung---Austrian-Hungarian Empire) believed a lot in titles.

SIGRIST: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, very bureaucratic in certain ways.

STEINER: Yes, yes, right.

SIGRIST: This is a good time to talk about your dad. What was his name?

STEINER: His name was Johann, J-O-H-A-N-N. When he came to the United States he became John. Actually, the -- somebody by the name of Johann, the — the -- in the family circles, he's called Hans. He---

SIGRIST: What was his background and his (not understood)?

STEINER: Well, he came from Moravia, which is another part of the -- what is now the Czech Republic -- Bohemia, Moravia. In a town near Brno, B-R-N-O. He grew up there. But when he was eighteen or nineteen, he applied to and was accepted at the technical university in Vienna -- which was probably at that time the best technical school, still exists. And we have -- -on our trips to Vienna shown it to our children and grandchildren. And he did very well.

And when he graduated with a degree in mechanical engin--, well I guess it's a combination of civil and mechanical engineering -- started working for the railroad company in the administrative offices. And his specialty was safety aspects. In other words, controls that need to be applied so the trains wouldn't collide and so on. And he worked his way up, but he was a very humble person and he was member of the Social Democratic party. He always---and his lifestyle never really changed even though

they could afford to do better. And I have inherited some of this from him.
(laughs)

SIGRIST: (laughs) I can see that you're smiling as you're telling me this. Tell me a little bit about his personality.

STEINER: Well, he was much more reserved. Where my mother was very charming and outgoing, my father was more reserved. My mother used to call him phlegmatic to some extent. However, he was an excellent writer. And he wrote poetry and with it these little epigrams. And my mother still up---she died at the age of eighty-eight---in her eighties was able to quote some of the things that he wrote (in German, of course). And so---

SIGRIST: When you were a small child what were some of the things that you did with your father?

STEINER: Okay. Well, first of all, by being an employee of the railroad company we were able to travel for free. All the time within Austria and several times a year in other parts of Europe. So, we did a lot of travel and I remember spending some time in the Austrian Alps with my parents. But more with my father because my mother visited very frequently her parents, who still lived in Prague, especially at the time when they were very ill. So there were times when my father and I did some hiking in -- in the Alps and we -- it was a very nice relationship and we got along very well.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that your father wrote poems and epigrams.

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What else did he do for his own pleasure?

STEINER: Well, when he retired, he took advantage of what was called a *café haus*. The coffee house in Vienna were the places where you could stay for two, three hours and read several newspapers that were there. So when he retired, he spent a fair amount of time in the afternoon at these café house. But he was a very wiry, small, he loved to walk and in a way that helped him survive also---

SIGRIST: Is that different physically from your mother?

STEINER: Well, my mother was actually more -- I wouldn't say chubby but she was taller, actually. And --. But she too was ver-- she knew how to swim and - --. But at that time, people at that age did not----no, sports was not what is today.

SIGRIST: So they weren't so active as today

STEINER: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me talk about you and your childhood.

STEINER: Sure.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your life in Vienna as you were growing up in your childhood, why don't we start with the actual house that you lived in.

STEINER: Okay.

SIGRIST: I should also say Mrs. Steiner's joined us and she's pouring coffee (laughs) and being a very gracious hostess.

MRS. S: Leave me out of this (all laugh)

SIGRIST: Oh, thank you.

STEINER: I attended -- I went to school from the age of six -- the elementary school, which was four years and then -- . The European system is such that at the age of ten you really make already a decision as to whether you're gonna be in a *gymnasium* (which is a school that you attend for eight years) or in a school that you only attend for four years (mainly for those who then go into a trade, a craft or to a commercial school where they learn to -- typing and so on). So I attended then what's called *realgymnasium* which is a combination of *realschule* which is a school where there is the emphasis on sciences as compared to *gymnasium* where you actually would have Greek and Latin.

So therefore by attending a *realgymnasium*, I had the best of both worlds. I had Latin for six years but I also had descriptive geometry and phys--- chemistry and physics. And so I had a rather good education in this school. And I was, either the fi-- number one or number two in the class, *primus or secundus*. And I still remember the name of the fellow with whom I -- I had a competition as to that.

SIGRIST: (laughs)

STEINER: His name was Philip Markus.

SIGRIST: Well, Philip if you're out there listening (both laugh), I'm sorry, you're remembered. What was your father's opinion about education? Or your parents in general, how did they view education?

STEINER: Very important, yes. They certainly encouraged---well, actually, you didn't have to encourage. It -- it -- the school system was such that once you

decided that you wanted to be prepared for higher education, you went to one of these schools. And the school standards were such that you had to do a fair amount of work. I enjoyed Latin---was good enough so that my first jobs (when I was thirteen or so) was tutoring somebody else in the neighborhood -- lived near me -- in -- in -- Latin.

SIGRIST: Shall we pause for a second so you can fix your coffee? No, you're okay?
(laughs)

STEINER: We'll continue.

SIGRIST: Alright. Well, let's get back to the house that you lived in and---

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: If you can describe that a little more.

STEINER: Yes. It was an apartment house and it---

SIGRIST: In the city proper.

STEINER: Well, yes, in the city. Vienna has twenty-one districts and it was in the twelfth district called Schönbrunn. Now Schönbrunn is actually the -- also the name of the summer residence of the Austrian emperor.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

STEINER: S-C-H-Ö-N-B-R-U-N-N. Which means a beautiful fountain. *Brunnen* *Schöne Brunnen*. It's a huge castle with almost a thousand rooms. It's--- was patterned after Versailles. And it---at the time, when I grew up, there was no more Austrian monarchy. So, but the place is there and it is

beginning to show it's sign of age, but the park is just as beautiful. Last summer, we took our oldest grandchildren (granddaughters age seventeen and sixteen) to Austria. We showed them the place where I grew up in the apartment house facing this beautiful park. So after school at three o'clock, my friends and I would go to the park and play soccer. And we used the beautiful ramp going up to the staircase, with it's supporting pillars as a goal post for shooting balls. So that was a (laughs) --.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your actual apartment.

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What floor were you on?

STEINER: We were on the second floor and we had a bedroom that my parents had and the living room and then the small room which was my room and the kitchen, of course, and bathroom. The -- I had musical training. I learned the piano from the age of ten and my teacher actually lived on the fourth floor of the same apartment house.

SIGRIST: Did you have a piano in your apartment?

STEINER: Yes, we did.

SIGRIST: Did---did?

STEINER: It was a very good one. It was one of the best and that stayed behind. And at the time my parents were still there, a Nazi came by and offered to buy it for practically nothing. So that was the end of---

SIGRIST: Does the piano itself have a story? Where you got it?

STEINER: No. No. No. No.

SIGRIST: What was the brand of the piano?

STEINER: Bösendorf. Which is one of the well known brands.

SIGRIST: Were?

STEINER: (superposed) It's equivalent to the Steinway in the United States, Bösendorfer.

SIGRIST: (laughs) Better in some cases.

STEINER: Well, in some -- yes, yeah, yeah. It was a small, what do you call the, not the upright but-

SIGRIST: The spinet?

STEINER: No, it was not a spinet but the small --

SIGRIST: Grand piano.

STEINER: Grand piano, yeah, small, yeah. Now---

SIGRIST: How many, was this a big apartment building?

STEINER: Yes. It had four floors and the owner of the apartment house lived next -- was in the apartment next to us. As a matter of fact, the family of these people still lived there and we --. I showed them my--- . Well my wife and

I had actually been in Vienna without our grandchildren—children at--- some years before and there were actually some people that we met going into the house that remembered my parents.

SIGRIST: (laughs) Well tell me a little bit about

STEINER: This was a typical thing, I'm sorry to.

SIGRIST: (superposed) No, go ahead.

STEINER: It was typical for people in Vienna to live in apartment houses. Very few people in Vienna lived in private homes except rather wealthy people. But the norm was to live in an apartment house.

SIGRIST: So as a child, you would go to school---

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Each day. Your father would go off to work, what would your mother do, you said she didn't work as such, but what?

STEINER: (superposed) Well, yeah, yeah. My mother was perfectly willing to be a *hausfrau*. And she had a lot of friends. And as a I said, she was---she -- her sister lived in -- one sister lived in Czechoslovakia and one sister lived in the same apartment house where we lived on the top floor also. So she was very dedicated to her family. So. Being the wife of a federal official, she could travel to Prague like we would decide to go to New York. And it was a six-hour railroad trip and she did that quite frequently.

SIGRIST: You talked a little bit about school.

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little about, we talked a little bit about religious life.

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: You didn't go to synagogue very much. Were there any ways that you practiced your religion at home?

STEINER: No, not really. No, again by being assimilated as I mentioned before---

SIGRIST: That was not implied necessarily.

STEINER: No, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the political environment in Vienna at that time.

STEINER: Gladly.

SIGRIST: At that time. This is probably a good time to start talking about that.

STEINER: Yes, okay. The type of government that came into being after World War One was -- it was a democracy. At the earliest part, the Social Democrats had the main power in Austria. And they were very socially minded. There were a lot of apartment buildings built for workers in both our neighborhood and in the district down in the central part. Beginning around the early '30s, the Catholic group became to power and the chancellor at that time was somebody by the name of Dollfuss, D-O-L-L-F-U-S-S. Under his government a lot of the reactionary groups became more -- I shouldn't say powerful but vociferous. And it turned out that one of the milit--- semi-military units; a member of that unit assassinated

Dollfuss around 1937. And his successor was Schuschnig, Kurt von Schuschnig, S-C-H-U-S-C-H-N-I-G, who actually came to the United States and became a professor of political science somewhere. At that time, the Nazis became very, put a lot of pressure on the Austrian government to provide, to put some of these reactionary people into the government. And Mr. Schuschnig was forced to accept a man by the name of Seiszinquart into his cabin who was openly a member of the Nazi party.

SIGRIST: What was his name again?

STEINER: Seiszinquart, S-E-I-S-Z-just a second-I-N-Q-U-A-R-T.

SIGRIST: And he was also Austrian born?

STEINER: He was Austrian born, but a member of the party. Now it turned out there was quite a bit of illegal Nazi parties. The way I found it out myself is -- among the many people in the class (with whom I was on very friendly term) -- on March 14, (couple days after the *Anschluss*, the time when the Aus---the Nazis occupied Vienna) -- many of the students in my class wore the swastika, an indication that they already had been members illegally of a Nazi party. So. But I was in that school, I was allowed to stay only a week or two. Those of us who were Jewish all were sent to one school in the central part of the city. And actually during the short time that I was there, until June, I had the best education in Vienna (laughs). As a matter of fact, one of the pictures that I have provided is a class picture of those of us who were in that particular *gymnasium*.

SIGRIST: This group of Jewish students who had been sent?

STEINER: (superposed) Yes. But that didn't last very long, I'm sure that within months even that there were no further schools of that kind.

END SIDE A, TAPE 1 BEGIN SIDE B TAPE 1

SIGRIST: As a---as a young man in his early teens at that time, you were what? Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, at this point---

STEINER: Correct.

SIGRIST: Did you have---what kind of a consciousness did you have about what was going on around you and it's potential seriousness?

STEINER: Well, I was very aware of what was going on but not of the seriousness. I think one of the problems of growing up in a middle-class Viennese society was that we felt very protected almost. So I never had any feeling that I was not part of the same culture.

SIGRIST: Well it seems that your own family, like your father, had this sense of everything's fine, so it's---

STEINER: (superposed) That is correct.

SIGRIST: To understand. Were there other ways that this affected you or your parents, this particular change?

STEINER: Well, certainly. At the time I left, my parents were still in that apartment house where I grew up. And I was very fortunate that I was able to come to Prague to live with my uncle. Since I had been born in Prague, he was able to get me a Czech passport – even, I was an Austrian citizen. But in 1939, he was able to arrange for me to get a Czech passport and with that

one, the Nazi authorities allowed me to leave legally. I was able to emigrate.

SIGRIST: Why---why go to Prague?

STEINER: Well.

SIGRIST: Who made that decision?

STEINER: A combined decision between my uncle and my parents. The Czech government used to be Tomas Mazaryk , the president, who made the Czech---Czechoslovakia, a model democratic republic in Europe. He was followed by Mr. Benes. In 1938, in thir-- even early '39, it did not look yet that the Nazis were going to put a lot of pressure on Prague. It seemed like a safe haven at that time. But -- as we all know --- after the Munich Pact in 1939, Czechoslovakia had to give up the border region which included the ethnic Germans to the Nazis. And Mr. Hitler said, "This was -- this is all I will ever require. You have met that." But in March 1939, he marched into Austria, into Prague and occupied Czechoslovakia. And that was really the end of life for anybody with a Jewish background in Austria and Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: Were there brothers and sisters?

STEINER: No.

SIGRIST: I did ask that. You were an only child.

STEINER: Only child.

SIGRIST: Am I to believe then that somebody began to realize that there might be some danger and that's why you were---?

STEINER: Well, the fact that I – I went from Vienna to Prague was obvious that there was no future for me in Vienna.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about this move? I mean how active was your participation in this decision?

STEINER: I was very readily – you know, I mean -- obviously I missed my parents. But I immediately attended school, a German school in Prague. There were two *gymnasium* in Prague where actually the courses were taught in German. So it was not a culture shock at all. And I understand Czech and I speak it except I never had schooling. So. For me to go to a Czech school would have been very difficult because I do not know how to write grammatically.

SIGRIST: When you were getting prepared for this trip, what was the idea? You would go and stay for so long and then come back? I mean how did you think about it?

STEINER: Well, I didn't think I would come back. But I had hoped that my parents would eventually also get out of this environment. But things just worked too fast and---

SIGRIST: When you left for Prague, and you say now that you didn't think that you'd be coming back---

STEINER: That's right.

SIGRIST: What did you take with you to Prague?

STEINER: Just didn't have to take very much (laughs) just my clothes and a --.

SIGRIST: I was wondering if there was a personal object or something. If you didn't think that you'd be coming back, what would you take with you?

STEINER: Well, I don't think that there was any such thing that (both laugh), that I---. Because I continued---music always meant a lot to my life. I attended the opera in Vienna almost every Saturday. I walked to the opera. I stood for the performance. And I was---so I was able to continue to attend opera, concerts and operas in Prague. And – and my uncle was a bachelor and always remained a bachelor and he was fairly well off as a doctor so I was---

SIGRIST: How long did you live in, in Prague?

STEINER: From June 1938 until April 1939.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little about your life in Prague, going to the opera and school.

STEINER: Alright. Yes. There were a number of other Aus--- Viennese refugees who had come to Prague. And I met some---a young girl who was my girlfriend in those days and this was quite nice to have somebody like that. I -- I lived in a -- an apartment that belong to a high school or *gymnasium* - - professor they were called, the teachers. And there were probably three or four of us living there and during my---our last trip last June when we took our granddaughters to Prague, I pointed out that this was the house I lived in Prague. My uncle, being a bachelor, didn't want me to live in his apartment. He had a very small apartment with his medical practice. So (laughs) it turned out that at the ground floor of this apartment building in

Prague where I lived was now one of these famous black light theaters -- which (laughs) is -- which is one of the specialties of Prague.

Entertainment. I also--- well it was a very pleasant life really, I wrote to my parents very frequently and they were happy that I was out of the environment and---

SIGRIST: What were they telling you about what was happening?

STEINER: Well, we know that from, we knew that they had -- they were evicted from that apartment house where I grew up and had to share an apartment in the second district. Which were the -- there were more Jewish families with another family actually distantly related to us but this was---

SIGRIST: When you say evicted, do you know the details about---?

STEINER: (superposed) Well, I -- I think, I don't know the details. But I can assume that it was just a letter thing beginning June 15, you are no longer allowed to live in this apartment. It's---it didn't take very long for the Nazi ideologies and rules and regulations to be—to become come permanent in Austria. As a matter of fact, Austria's name was changed to the *Ostmark* -- the eastern province of the German *Das Dritte Reich*, the third empire.

In Czechoslovakia, they did something differently. They did not make it part (after March 1939) it was not part of the German Reich. But it was called, it was a protectorate. Poland and Czechoslovakia had a governor-general. But they still had their own stamps, different from what they used to be. And, however, the net effect was no different. It just meant that the Germans wanted to have in the Third Reich only ethnic Germans. They were -- were not interested in having Czechs, Slovaks, and Poles. However, they wanted them occupied because---as a barrier against---you

know, they knew already that they were going to enter the war in September 1939.

SIGRIST: So in Prague, there really wasn't a Nazi presence there until March---

STEINER: That is correct. However, they had their own Quisling and I'm using the term quisling because in Norway you know that term has become a traitor who---. Here was -- I forgot the name of this man who was ethnic German and represented the Nazi in the Czech Republic, So---however, they had no official role yet.

SIGRIST: That's right.

STEINER: That changed of course in 1939.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how life changed after March of '39 and what your next step was.

STEINER: Well, okay. Seeing what happened, my uncle immediately went--- used some of his connections and was able to obtain a visitor visa for himself and for me from the American consul in Prague whose name was Mr. Engel.

SIGRIST: A visitor's visa?

STEINER: A visitor's visa because he knew that within weeks, the Germans were going to close the borders and after that it was only a matter of illegally at night leaving the county. So it turned out that once we had that visitor visa, the Nazi occupational authorities gave us a permission to leave and we left on April 5, I think, 1939. And it was one of the last trains that were---some Jewish people were able to legally leave. We went by train---

SIGRIST: Again, did you, at that time understand the seriousness of the situation?

STEINER: I think at that time, I was aware, yes. It – it was quite---. I -- I should go back a little bit and say that in---. After the Munich Pact, the Czechs realized the difficult position and my uncle as a doctor actually was called into service as an army major. And the Czechs were perfectly willing to fight for their independence. However, those (Mr. Daladier, the prime minister of France and Mr. Chamberlain, the prime minister in England) made no effort--- did not say that they would come to the help. So, even though there was a token resistance it---they could not count on any help. And so the situation was very bleak in 1939 and so it was---the only way to really save yourself was to leave and a lot of people did. And if I may say something about that trip?

SIGRIST: Please, let me just ask this one question before you do that. Did you notify your parents as to what you were going to be doing or could you notify them?

STEINER: (Superposed) Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: So they knew that you were---

STEINER: Yes, yes and they were happy to hear it. You know they---at that point they realized that no matter---being the only son, you know, their thoughts were save Franzi, as they called me (you know, Franz with an I at the end). And so they were---anything that they knew would happen to get us, my uncle and me out of this environment, they were very perf-- happy.

SIGRIST: And yet they didn't feel they were able to get themselves out of this situation?

STEINER: Well, we made attempts to get them visas through Cuba or others. And maybe at this point, I think I will maybe mention the attitude of the State Department when we talk about Ellis Island. But I can say in anticipation of that that the quota system that was set up by the State Department, particularly the immigration department under Mr. Brackenridge was such that the quotas made it very difficult for people to---. You had to take your turn, you know. If the quota is ten thousand people a year for Czech nationals to come to the United States and a hundred thousand try to leave, you know, you talk about ten years before your turn would come. I may not have the correct numbers but the quota system made it extremely difficult.

SIGRIST: It's a long process.

STEINER: A long process. The only thing that some people were able to do was to get a visa, let's say an exit visa by Cuba. Come to Cuba and then the Cuban quota being such they were able to come to the United States. Some people came by China. So they were, some people who had been deported to France, or from France to---were able to come via Portugal. So there were---there were special things. Some people of course went to Israel. Younger people. For older people that was not a---at that point. See, my father was born in '77. So let's see -- in 1937, he would have been sixty. So he was sixty-two and my mother was younger, forty-five, maybe forty-five.

SIGRIST: You had that kind of relocation.

STEINER: That kind of relocation was---so they unfortunately stayed behind.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, tell me what you remember leaving Prague.

STEINER: Okay. You don't mind details?

SIGRIST: No, this is wonderful, this is the kind of information.

STEINER: We got on the train. The train went from Prague first to Leipzig in Germany.

SIGRIST: So was it just you and your uncle or were you traveling with a large group?

STEINER: A large group. Mm-hmm. We came to the border from---we---oh, we---I might say that we already had tickets that were bought to come to the United States on the *Hansa* which was a ship on the Hamburg-Amerika line that would leave Southampton on April 10 or so, whatever it was. So when we left, it was the week before that. Let's say a week before leaving Southampton, at the border from Germany to Holland. You see the train would go through Germ---to Holland and then by ferry to England.

The authorities---at that time the border was guarded by S.S. troops. Those are the most vicious of the Nazi organization with the death head on their---. The train was put on the siding and everybody who had to appear before the Na--- the S.S. troops. Now the passport was stamped, that made it obvious that you were Jewish. There was, in addition to your regular name, Franz at that time, they added the term Israel for man and Sarah for woman. And a stamp that identified you as Jewish.

So it was—these people knew who was Jewish and not. You had to come individually. Now at that time I was almost seven---, sixteen and a half. Somebody in the train said, "Well, you're young. You're not gonna have any trouble. They'll let you go. Here's a letter that I---when you get to London, would you put that in the mail?" And it was addressed to a

relative of that person. Well, as I faced this S.S. man and we had to strip and put everything that we had in our pocket on the table. They saw this letter. They said, "What's this?". I said, "Somebody gave it to me." "Open it and read it."

Well, the letter was written in Czech and as I explained, even though I understood and spoke, I could not read very well. So I was halting and my uncle who was worried why I was still there for such a long time was outside. And at that point he came in even though he was not supposed to and explained that my Czech wasn't good enough. He read it. Fortunately, there wasn't anything in that letter, that somebody might have said something very uncomplimentary about the Nazis and that would have been the end. That was not there.

So, after half hour this I was allowed to go. And those of us who were allowed got back into a coach, but my uncle was not---hadn't been called yet, so I actually left without him. And I came to London. My uncle told me where to stay. Without going into details (laughs), not having much -- enough money, I didn't -- decided not to stay in this expensive looking hotel, which I should have. Not only that, I didn't leave the address where I was going to be. So my uncle came the next day and didn't find me. He was quite upset but within hours I got to him. But it was something that he held against me for many years (laughs).

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you felt during that whole process with having to take your clothes off and present yourself to the Nazis and then the whole interaction with the uncle.

STEINER: Well, I might say this. It was scary. On the other hand, everyone of these situations I was in (including my days on Ellis Island, which you will probably ask me about) I looked at as an adventure. So really there were

scary moments but the rest of it I looked at it an adventure. Actually, my parents helped me in that by sending me away as a child to summer camp when I was maybe seven or eight years old. So I had learned to be a little independent and I think in days like this, this helped. So my experiences in London, my trans-Atlantic trip on the ship, and my five---four or five days on Ellis Island, to me were actually an adventure. know, examined by the Nazis and then getting to London on your own. What sticks out in your mind about all of this?

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you remember about leaving after being, you know, examined by the Nazis and getting to England on your own. What sticks out in your mind?

STEINER: Well, I met a young fellow in London and he actually said, "Oh well, I -- I know rooming house where you can stay for a pound for a night." and invited me to have dinner with him and so I immediately found a friendship (laughs). So. Now I, in one of the letters that I wrote to my parents, I wrote about that as well as my -- what I did to my uncle in not giving him these headaches about where I was. And I described a few things we did in London. That we went out to dinner. It---my uncle was -- was smart enough to have had (clears throat) a few --- some money in the Swiss bank and while he was in London, he was able to transfer that money. As you know from the papers now, these Swiss holdings have become a matter of controversy.

SIGRIST: True.

STEINER: He didn't have large amounts but he had enough so that there was no financial problem at that time because that money was transferred.

SIGRIST: After you were reunited with your uncle in England, how long were you there before you got on the ship?

STEINER: Another, I think we left on the fifteenth so it was a matter of---less than a week.

SIGRIST: Did he take you to the expensive looking hotel? (laughs)

STEINER: Yes, not the whole time. I mean once he knew that -- where I was, he was--- . But I think the last day we both were at that same hotel.

SIGRIST: Did your uncle recognize your independence? (both laugh)

STEINER: Yeah, he may have recognized my independence, but he knew when--- when I was just careless and thoughtless, you know.

SIGRIST: Sure, he was responsible---

STEINER: He's responsible for my life and I, you know I had a good relation with him. He actually lived to ninety-six. And -- and as I will explain maybe later, he -- he was very good to me and to my children. You know we---he, I think our relation was good. But when he was furious, you know he (laughs), he made it known and so I knew that I had made a boo-boo (Sigrist laughs). But after that I was a little more cautious.

SIGRIST: Did you get on the *Hansa* in Southampton?

STEINER: Yes, yes, we went by small ship on the *Hansa*..

SIGRIST: A small ship to the *Hansa*..

STEINER: Yeah, yeah right because it was ---

SIGRIST: So it was like a tender going out to the large ship.

STEINER: Tender, tender, right. Now this was a German ship, a German crew.

SIGRIST: What line was this?

STEINER: Hamburg-Amerika, Hapag, I think is the abbreviation, H-A-P-A-G. Hamburg-Amerika, whatever. The *Hansa* was a very nice trip, the food was superb. We had first class accommodations. I had learned to play bridge as a child and I had learned ping pong and I was good in both of these. So between bridge and ping pong, I was able---I had no problem spending a day on the ship. The first day was very calm and I -- I know all these because I have re-read the letters before you came -- what I wrote to my parents. But beginning was -- second, third day the weather turned bad and you know sea sickness became a problem. Never the less, the food was such that I myself at least -- even was not always feeling the best -- I partake.

The crew was actually very polite. It is -- in retrospect, you know -- they did not look at us -- I mean they looked at us as clients. Even though they may have had their personal feelings about ---many of us were Jewish who were on that trip. There were quite a few from Prague and from Vienna that came on the *Hansa* on this trip. And I don't think there were too many. I know as a fact that during the war the Germans converted the *Hansa* into a troop carrier and it was sunk during the war. So it -- there were probably not too many more trans-Atlantic crossings because the war started. World War II started in September 1939.

SIGRIST: Did you and you uncle share that cabin?

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Were there anybody---were other people in that cabin with you?

STEINER: No.

SIGRIST: Just the two of you.

STEINER: No, no, just the two of us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing anything on the ship that you had never seen before?

STEINER: Sure. There was a kind of food that I'd never seen and when we---there were lobsters and things like this and that was not the kind of diet that I was familiar with. I mean our---we ate well in Europe, but it was, you know, veal and beef and that sort of thing but -- . I don't think there was too much in the line of entertainment.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time that you had been on a ship?

STEINER: Correct. Well, certainly of that size, yes.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that even you got a little sea sick.

STEINER: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that? (microphone falls) Tell me a little bit about your recollection of being seasick.

STEINER: Well, I guess that's one of my weak points. I, even on -- when I was taken on the (later in my life) on a fishing boat, I felt sea sick. (coughs) My next trip was going then on---well I should answer. I really, I probably threw up a couple of times, but I recovered very quickly.

SIGRIST: Did they offer any kind of treatment?

STEINER: Oh, they may have given us to pick a pills that you -- .

SIGRIST: How long was the trip?

STEINER: It was, it was, I would say six days. We left on a Monday and I think we arrived in New York on a Saturday.

SIGRIST: And the date, that was?

STEINER: The date was the sixteenth when we arrived.

SIGRIST: Of April?

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: April 1939.

STEINER: Correct.

SIGRIST: Because, because of the situation in Europe were there any precautions that were taken on the ship? I realize the war really hasn't broken out.

STEINER: No, No.

SIGRIST: Nothing.

STEINER: No. You probably will pretty soon ask me about the events upon arrival
(laughs)

SIGRIST: Yeah, what I think we're gonna do is I'm gonna stop this tape. We're
gonna take it out and I'm gonna put in a new tape and we'll get you to Ellis
Island when you were there for how many days?

STEINER: Five or six days.

SIGRIST: Five or six days. Alright, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Frank Steiner
and this is tape one. It's Tuesday, July 29, 1997.

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

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning tape two with Frank Steiner. This is Paul
Sigrist for the National Park Service. It's Tuesday, July 29, 1997 and
we're still in Scotia, New York and we're gonna talk about Mr. Steiner.
He's just about to arrive in America. We've got you across the ocean on
the *Hansa*. And I guess I'd like you to tell me what happened when the
ship approached the America shore.

STEINER: Mm-hmm. As probably as most of your interviewees have told you that
the first thing one is aware of is the Statue of Liberty and I was very
impressed. Actually, before the ship docked at the docks-- which were on
the East River. I don't know whether ocean liners still dock at that part of
New York (laughs). By tender some of the immigration officers came
already aboard and looked at papers. And when they came to my uncle
and me, they looked at each other and I could see from their reaction that
we weren't gonna have an easy time.

So when the ship finally docked on the East River pier of the Hamburg-Amerika line, we were told that we were not, we could not leave the ship, that we---that they had certain questions and we had to stay. Well, we had no choice. We had---we had sent a telegram when we left London to my uncle who's my -- the cousin of my mother whom I could call uncle to. His name is Dr. Berthold Pollak, P-O-L-L-O-A-K -- P-O-L-L-**A**-K. He's a gentleman who already had given us, or me rather, an affidavit for eventual immigration as a regular immigrant. But -- as I explained -- because of the turmoil and the quickness of the time, I did not arrive as that.

SIGRIST: Where did he live?

STEINER: He lives in, he lived in Jersey City. Jersey City had a mayor by the name of Frank Hague who did a lot for Jersey City including building a huge medical center. And Berthold Pollack (who had come from Europe as a small boy) had gone to medical school and became a doctor. And he became the director of the tuberculosis hospital in the medical center and it was named after him. Even today it is called the Berthold S. (S standing for Steinbach, which is my mother's maiden name) Pollak Hospital. He was at the pier, as well as his son-in-law.

And they had hoped or expected that -- you know -- as soon as we got off the ship, they would take us -- . He had even a limousine that -- you know -- he had as part of his job. He had a chauffeur and the driver and so --. However, that didn't happen. The—we were told that we had to stay behind. But, again. I was, you know, an adventure.

My uncle of course was very upset and he had an expression which said, 'I see problems, I see problems.' in Czech, *vědem so mrak*, which means I

see dark clouds on the horizon. So, we stayed overnight on the *Hansa* and the next -- and there was actually a policeman, not just to guard our cabin but on board walking by. So, we knew we were in a position of being almost, you know, detention (coughs). And the next day which is a Sunday, we were taken by taxi from (and a policeman present) from the pier to Battery Place and then by ferry to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Did you know what Ellis Island was?

STEINER: No, no. No, just, it – it was obvious that something was wrong but—

SIGRIST: Just part of your adventure.

STEINER: That's right. There we had to wait several hours before we had a interview with an official of the immigration service. This -- I just re-read the letter that I wrote to my parents about that and I said in my letter, "The interrogation was terrible. Right from the first moment, it was clear to me that we were not going to be allowed to go ashore. The reason given was that the officials did not consider us as tourists." And that is understandable. Somebody with a Jewish background arriving in 1939 from Nazi occupied territory wasn't going to come to the United States and go back.

Now, in 1939, there was a World's Fair in New York City. And we actually had given as a reason for coming, maybe among other reasons, to visit the World's Fair. Guess you had to give some reason if you came as a tourist. Well, they said that they would not accept us as---that we would not---they didn't consider us tourists and therefore they would not give us permission to go ashore. However, that we could appeal to Washington on this matter. Now, my uncle, my American uncle, Berthold Pollack, had actually with him, a letter from Roosevelt, President Roosevelt about his

own work and tried this way to convince people that they -- we would not become a burden to anybody. But that didn't help. The Czech consul in New York City also made phone calls to the immigration offices and that did not, immediately at least, help.

So, we were told we have to stay on the Ellis Island. I can already now say to you that after one week, the situation was cleared, probably through some phone calls from Washington. But the people on the Ellis Island would not take the responsibility in saying, you may leave. Now, if I may make a comment at this point, it may not -- I am a very patriotic American so what I'm going to say now does not reflect any opinions about the United States -- but having done some research later on, it became clear to me in reading that Mr. Breckenridge who (I forgot the Secretary of State under Mr. Roosevelt, he was a senator from Tennessee -- white haired gentleman, very good looking gentleman. I can't think of his name.) but Mr. Breckenridge was known for his attitude toward Jewish immigrants.

Actually, it was a matter of maybe policy. To make it rather difficult for people to come. I mean, rules weren't going to be broken at that time to allow people. Now later on, you know, Mrs. Roosevelt made it possible for a thousand people to come and they were able to come to Buffalo and were there. This is a well known fact. It is unfortunate in retrospect that this was the case but it -- it made it difficult for many people to come to United States who might have been saved at that time. But that's, you know, water over the dam. So, would you like me to talk about Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: Yes, I do. I just wanted, I'll fix your microphone. It's kind of fall--- (microphone noise). So you said you were there for about five days you think?

STEINER: I know that the last day -- it may have been longer. Because I received a telegram with birthday (my birthday wishes from Berthold Pollak's daughter) while still there that I've read, re-read this morning. so that must have mean -- we must have still been there on the twenty-third.

SIGRIST: So that would be --

STEINER: That was probably the last day which would have been six d---a week. So we were, I can say we were there for a week.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what sticks out in your mind about being there.

STEINER: Okay.

SIGRIST: But I have one specific question.

STEINER: Yes?

SIGRIST: You said that you had to wait when you first got there prior to being examined and questioned. Where did you wait and what do you remember about having to wait?

STEINER: Well, having been at Ellis Island when I was fortunate enough to meet you.

SIGRIST: [superposed] Just recently.

STEINER: I remember this large ha—hall where there were benches and you sat and you waited until somebody said to call you into a cubicle. So, I would not have remembered it except I wrote to my parents on May 1 that we had to

wait several hours before being interviewed. And I know that we spent a good part of each day in this large, op---interior room, in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Doing what?

STEINER: Well, I can tell you what I did (laughs). They must have had table tennis tables. Ping pong tables. And it didn't take me long to find some other young person and we were---and I spent quite a bit of time. I'm a good table tennis player. And I also played bridge as I wrote to my parents. We were, I'm quite sure that we were segregated. We had a men's dormitory and a women's dormitory. We had cots. I wrote to my parents that we received clean linen everyday. I don't remember it, but I re-read that. I also said that the food was good. I do remember very vividly that when we went to take showers, we walked as a group with a uniformed person walking along with us who then would wait outside the doors. Shower facilities were such that, you know, there were several showers. But you were---wouldn't have gotten out of the shower, gotten dressed and walked off. I mean those were the times when you were aware that you were detained.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the other people that you were detained with?

STEINER: Yes, I do. Yes I do. And it became part of a -- almost a joke of this.. An entrepreneur in the United States gathered a lot of midgets in Europe that came into be entertainers at the World's Fair. It was like a side show type thing and I do remember that there were a lot of these midgets in that same large hall where we spent the day. They were all kind of nationalities—Serbs, Croats, Yugoslavs, Germans. And (laughs) my uncle (who has a very vivid way of describing it) has -- sometimes we were in a gathering of friends and relatives and he would talk about that. And he would say, "All these midgets running around." I would say, "But

uncle, they weren't midgets. They were just small people." You know, to try to spoil his good stories. To him, it made more – I mean he was more aware of it (laughs) than I was. He was sad, he just sat around. You know, he was---I think we had – we could read a lot. There must have been all kind of paperbacks and magazines and newspapers available that we could --

SIGRIST: In different languages?

STEINER: -- in different languages. Yes, Yes. But my English was already quite good at that time.

SIGRIST: When did you start learning English?

STEINER: Well, I -- in – in the fifth year of *realgymnasium* --. I started actually with Latin in the beginning. But beginning the fifth year, one took a modern language -- French or English and I chose English. So I had already probably two years of good training. So my – my English was fairly good.

SIGRIST: What about your uncle, did he speak any?

STEINER: Much less so. You know. His-his-his culture was Czech, number one, German, somewhat and he was involved with all the Czech intellectual hierarchy. I mean, he knew, he was a friend of Jo-- Karel Čapek the famous writer who was the author of Are You Are and if you look behind you there are some sketches and these are sketches that Karel Čapek made on some of his travels to – to European places. His brother actually, Joseph Čapek was more the painter and less the writer. But together they wrote a story called The Insect Comedy which was given in Saratoga.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Čapek for me?

STEINER: Yes, Č-A-P-E-K, and over the “C” you put a little tridict[ph] mark, what do you call that mark?

SIGRIST: Not a schwa.

STEINER: Not a schwa, but it’s like inverted with---

SIGRIST: A little squiggle

STEINER: It’s a v, a small v. Not a squiggle, no. A small “V” which makes it pronounced Chapek and if you put it like Dvořak, Dvořak the famous Czech composer D-V-O-Ř-A-K but over the R you make that same thing. That makes it, instead of Dvorak Dvorajak, not Capek but Chapek. Anyhow, he knew all these people. He was in -- for him this was a culture shock. And he was depressed in -- during the days in Ellis Island. He -- he was--tended to be pessimistic anyhow. As I said, he had this expression *vědem so mrak* ‘I see a dark cloud.’ And what was happening during that time did not help his spirits. Fortunately, Dr. Pollak -- our relative -- came at least three times when we were there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about his visits?

STEINER: Well, he was upbeat and he said, “Oh, we’re -- we’re doing things, won’t be long.” And it turned out on that Monday then when we were finally released, he came with the -- with his chauffeur-driven limousine and his lady friend. His wife had died, but he had a very nice lady friend who also came. And that’s, again, you probably may have asked me other questions beyond Ellis Island. But from then on things were perfect. But if you have other questions --

SIGRIST: Oh, yes sure. But I had a couple more about Ellis. You talked about finding friends to play table tennis with. Can you talk a little bit about how the various detainees interacted with each other? If they did?

STEINER: I think if they did, it was probably by ethnic groups. But as I had mentioned, there were a number of people from Vienna and Prague -- mostly you know intellectual, professional people, lawyers, doctors and so on. One I remember was a conductor, Kurt Hermann Adler, who became rather prominent later on. So it was a---. Now these people would be together and obviously these midgets that I had mentioned would be another group. And there no doubt were other groups at that time who may not have necessarily been immigrants to get away from Nazi -- Nazi areas -- that probably had very little to do with the rest of us.

SIGRIST: Were there other people from the *Hansa* that were detained?

STEINER: I think two or three. There were not too many because most people were -- had the regulation immigration visa and therefore that was a matter of the st---. They went from the ship directly to the pier and that's it.

SIGRIST: Did you help -- whatever luggage that you had? Did you have that with you when you were at Ellis Island?

STEINER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what that was exactly?

STEINER: Well. I would say we both had, at most, two suitcases. Certainly nothing very enormous -- I mean the type of thing that you could easily carry.

Because I know when we were taken in by our relative, Dr. Pollak, by limousine; all that fitted [sic] into the car. It was just clothes---

SIGRIST: (superposed) Because you couldn't bring very much.

STEINER: (superposed) Couldn't bring very much.

SIGRIST: You mentioned to the guard that attended you when you showered, what other recollections do you have of the staff?

STEINER: I – I – I – I can say that because I made that comment, they were very nice. They were very pleasant. These people were very pleasant as compared to the people who had the interrogations, who were very -- almost would say nasty. They were gruff and they were, you know. But these people were much more humane. They laughed, they smiled. We were---they were really very frie—very pleasant.

SIGRIST: Is there any other employee that sticks out in your mind other than that man?

STEINER: No, no, the only other people would have been in the kitchen and I already said that the food was good and we certainly got plenty of it. So, you know, I had no com--- but the other ones I remember. He may have been even a black gentleman who was uniformed. But that was his job to walk with us. But he certainly didn't say, "Hurry up or do this."

SIGRIST: Had you seen a black person before?

STEINER: Not too many. Not too many. That was, I did go then to a (well, this is maybe a subject of other question) to a high school in Philadelphia which

was fifty percent black. So it didn't take long for me to live in that environment and I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: When you were interrogated at Ellis Island, was it done with an interpreter or were you using your English skills?

STEINER: I don't know. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being able to use your English while you were there?

STEINER: Definitely. Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, so tell me a little bit again about when you were released. Exactly how they told you that you could go and.

STEINER: Well. I don't remember too many details except just the long awaited statement that you can go. You know (laughs). That's really all we needed to know, I think.

SIGRIST: When you said that you celebrated your seventeenth birthday there and got a telegram from Dr. Pollack's daughter, does anything else stick out in your mind about that particular day?

STEINER: No, no. But it was kind of nice, you know. That's -- to receive a telegram saying, "Congratulations" or whatever. It probably said very little. But it --. I think, the visits by Dr. Pollak and his daughter who came once, too, helped a lot to keep our spirits up.

SIGRIST: Did they ever bring gifts?

STEINER: I don't think so. I don't think that—you know -- we weren't miss—we weren't deprived of anything. You know. We had hygiene and food and things to read, So, you know. All we wanted is thing -- things are getting taken care of. Don't worry. I'm sure we wanted to hear that.

SIGRIST: Did Dr. Pollak take you to his home to live initially?

STEINER: Yes. That is correct. That is correct.

SIGRIST: In Jersey City?

STEINER: In -- we left the pier and we stopped at several places. The Empire State Building. And Horn and Hardart which he thought we would be interested because it was a automat.

SIGRIST: An auto-mat? Where you get the food?

STEINER: Where you get the foot out of the---

SIGRIST: What was the name of it again?

STEINER: Horn and Hardart.

SIGRIST: Hardart.

STEINER: Hardart. Horn H-O-R-N – or-N- H-A-R-D-A-R-D-T. Hardart As a matter of fact, you know who Peter Shickele is? He has the ---one of his numbers is a composition that he calls A Symphony for Horn and Hardart. So.

SIGRIST: (laughs)

STEINER: But it turned out that he didn't surprise us so much with that. Because in Prague, they already had an automat type thing. And it still exists, we saw it last year. You know, where you go put in the coin and it turns around. But of course, the downtown area with the skyscrapers was something that we had never seen so. So. And then we went across probably the -- well, the East River [sic] to Jersey City. Dr. Pollak, being the medical director, had a whole floor for his personal use. He occupied it. His older daughter, Rose, her husband and son, and his younger daughter who was married to a doctor who also worked on the staff. So in -- in spite of that there was still room for my uncle and me. And that was quite a feeling to be all of the sudden, you know, in that luxury (microphone noise).

SIGRIST: So (superposed--inaudible)

STEINER: I stayed---I stayed one week and as prearranged I went from there to Philadelphia where another cousin (first cousin of my mother) lived. Her name is Florence Steinbach Hahn, H-A-H-N. And that was all arranged, that I would live with them and go to school in Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: Did your uncle stay in Jersey City with Dr. Pollack?

STEINER: Correct, for about six months. Now I might --one thing I forgot to tell you, Paul. We got permission to stay for six months when we left Ellis Island but with the understanding that this could be extended by app-- application. Now what one had to do in order to become then a regular immigrant and which we did eventually, you apply to a American consul in Montreal and you get on the Czech quota there. And they -- there of course it -- you don't wait ten years. And when your quota number comes up, you're notified by the American consul from Montreal to appear on such and such date. So my uncle and I independently because these

were different days then came to Montreal, got our regular immigration passport and entered this time as regular immigrants.

SIGRIST: How long did it take?

STEINER: Well, it was probably a matter of one or two years and I had an alien registration card which those of us who were there who were in the United States as non-res—non-immigration had to have. But except for having it, it was not an enemy alien card. It was just an alien card.

SIGRIST: Were there occasions where you had to produce this?

STEINER: I doubt it very much. I doubt it very much. I can, if you're interested, tell you about other parts of my life, but I did become an American citizen after entering the army. But

SIGRIST: Let's yeah, I'd like to, because I'm very curious about what those first few years were like for you.

STEINER: Well, that's very easy for me to tell you. Okay, so I came in May, May 1 or so. I came to Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: 1939.

STEINER: 1939. And I lived in a nice house in Oxford Street, Philadelphia which is not as good a neighborhood now as it was, not far from Temple University. And the next day already my---Florence's husband, Frank Hahn, took me to the high school. He knew the principal of this high school. It was called the Benjamin Franklin High School, used to be called the Central High School. But, which was a very well known school, high school in Philadelphia. But they had moved to a new location in the suburb. And

Benjamin Franklin High School remained there. And Dr. Michener, who was -- had gone to high school with Frank Hahn was the principal. And so he said, "Here's Frank, he's all yours." You know. And within days I attended high school.

SIGRIST: What kind of differences did you find from the European school system when you got to the American school system?

STEINER: I was ahead in many subjects so---math or chemistry and so on were no problem. American history was new to me and English, but therefore I was put into the end of the junior year. I probably age-wise could have been a senior there but it helped because -- that during that remainder (from May until the end of the junior year) I learned -- I quickly learned everything and I actually was a very good student.

SIGRIST: Were there things about America that you initially had a hard time adjusting to?

STEINER: Well, the, as I had mentioned before, the Benjamin Franklin High School (being in the center part of the city) had a large black population which was new to me. However, the kids were very friendly and -- you know -- I made friends among them. By the -- by the nex-- being the only immigrant from Europe, I was -- I was a person of interest to everybody.

SIGRIST: Very exotic.

STEINER: And I became class president the next year and president of student association and won a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania in my senior year. And it's mainly because—you know -- here's this Frank Steiner, came from Europe. That -- it -- it -- I was sort of a---I don't know -- a unique person there. But, and I had a very good teachers. The---some

of the faculty you know Central High School was even allowed to give a B.S. degree there which very few high schools did that. But some of the teache---therefore they had very good teachers. Not everybody moved to the new building that they had so I had an excellent high school teacher Dr. Wolf, for chemistry. And it was because of him that when I won the scholarship that I decided to become a chemical engineer. You know. It's the reaction to having very good teachers in a certain subject.

END SIDE A TAPE TWO

BEGIN SIDE B TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: It seems as I've listened to your history that education has played a very important part for you

STEINER: Well, yeah, I guess.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how long you communicated with your parents and then you lost the communication with them and maybe a little bit about what you know about their experiences.

STEINER: Sure, I be glad to. I wrote about once a week, in German, and---

SIGRIST: They were still in that place where they moved to.

STEINER: Well, they had moved from the apartment where I grew up to the Center City. But, you know. The one thing that there was no limitation was letter writing. You could and the letters all were received. And I knew about their hardships and I tried to--. Usually, in each letter, I -- I started with telling them how much I missed them. And that I hoped---that a-- some of the efforts that we wer-- my uncle was making would lead to their leaving. You know, to keep up their hope. But the major part was to describe my life to them.

You know they, my -- they were interested in what courses I took and I described that in great detail. Every once in a while my mother would say, "You are," I -- I don't, "You are not cordial, what is this?" so , you know. I had to keep the balance between what I wrote about my life and being their son. So. And even though they are not -- they weren't complainers, I could see the difficulties that they had. My father had to work (well, maybe it was a partly volunteer) there was a large Jewish cemetery in Vienna and he had something to do with maintaining it. I think he was not -- it was not his choice, I think. And food became difficult and there was this feeling of hopelessness that came from their letters.

But they always wrote we are so happy about all the things that, you know, you're doing. And, let's see. I had -- since I had won the scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, I was able to write that. I was able to write to them that the courses I took at Penn -- because I wrote to them until 1941. I entered Penn in -- let's see I came in '39. I graduated from high school in 1940 and I entered the University of Pennsylvania in September 1940. So from then until [not understood] November '41, they---I wrote to them about all the things I -- I did.

SIGRIST: How did you find out that you were no longer able to communicate with them?

STEINER: For -- it were the -- no letters came from them.

SIGRIST: So you're letters aren't coming back?

STEINER: No, no.

SIGRIST: Nothing was coming.

STEINER: But you know, that was pretty apparent. I don't know whether they hinted that this could happen. Because they may have said this and this person has been transferred to Terezin. But -- you know -- they never said that. Because these decisions were made as (as you probably know from literature and movies) at night an S.S. officer would come, knock on the door and saying tomorrow morning you are allowed to take one suitcase and you are to be at such and such a place. That's all, you know. There was -- now my parents--. You may be wondering how come I have copies of my letters that I sent to them. Well, one of the things that they kept was all the letters that I sent to them and before they left for Terezin. They left some of these letters with a gentile friend of my father's -- saying, "Well, would you mind keeping some of these things?" Also some other belongings. And after the war in 1946 when my uncle went back to Europe for one year, he also went to Vienna to visit this---these people that had--. And all of a sudden, all this -- these letters were all there.
(laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a great story.

STEINER: And I had kept many of their letters to me but after a while I, well---

SIGRIST: Would you like to talk a little bit about their experience of what you know about it?

STEINER: I can -- I can do that. I -- I -- I think I'll make that brief but---. Terezin was a transit camp -- people from Vienna, Prague. It was started in 1941, when Eichmann and his deputy were in charge of setting up these concentration camps. It was a---it existed for a hundred years already before---it was an old---German word is *festung* [fortress] a -- a place where soldiers stay.

SIGRIST: Barracks?

STEINER: Yeah, but very permanently built barracks. And it lost its importance. Except there was one very prominent person who was kept there, who was the person who assassinated the crown prince of Austria which led (in Sarajevo) which led to World War One. He – he was kept in detention until he died at that place. But then for many years, it just sat there. There was no (after World War One) there was no more use for it. But then the Germans said, “*Ach*, this is a place we’re going to use.” So there were permanent buildings there as well as other buildings that were built to house people. But not like Auschwitz where there was nothing and they build a --.

Now. The Germans, the Nazis, had decided to have one place that they could show to the international Red Cross to prove that they weren’t as inhuman as everybody was saying. And that was Terezin. So six months before -- months before a visit by a Red Cross representative from Switzerland, they would all of a sudden spruce it up. There were a lot of musicians and authors there -- very famous people. Kafka’s sister was there and it was a very active intellectual life, very active. They are still playing concerts at Tanglewood, at Saratoga with compositions written by people who were in Terezin.

So they would show off and say, “Look, people.” There -- I can even show you -- they had, they had their own money. Couldn’t buy anything, but printed. However, beginning in 1942, ’43, it became primarily a transit camp for people sent to Auschwitz. Everyday, trains would come, trains would leave. Now, why did my parents survive? My mother worked twelve hours a day in the place where they were splitting mica. You know mica is a mineral that has a transparent layer inside which has insulating

properties and to get that, you have to do something to that. So she spent two-three years splitting mica.

As long as a person was able to work in Terezin, they were not transferred to Auschwitz. As long as they were useful for the Nazis. My father was in charge of the potato fields. They were bas-- the basic nourishment for people—the potatoes. But you had to have somebody to---as in the entire administration of – of Terezin was really in the hands of a Jewish Council who had to do what the Nazis asked them to do. But if -- if they needed a thousand people for transport to Dacha—to Auschwitz, it had to be done through them. Which is – again, in very -- in a cruel way, but--.

So the fact that both my mother and my father were actively working, saved them from being sent. And my mother was quite often ill, but they had good doctors there. Among the -- not staff, among the inmates. So she was saved there too. Now in, in early 1939, I understand that the S.-- the Nazi chief was ready to build gas chambers there. At one of the visits by the Red Cross representative, this man said to him, “Look, you know Germany’s losing the war.” Now, again this is an anecdote, I have no way to prove it. “If you stop directing these gas chambers, I’ll see to it that you get some kind of -- we’ll get you out if--.” So they did not install gas chambers. A lot of people died there, a lot of people. I think eighty-thousand people died there from malnouri---malnutrition and sicknesses.

SIGRIST: How willing were your parents to talk about their experiences?

STEINER: Unwilling. Completely unwilling. My mother, the one thing that affected her life was she became, she easily cried. It was very easy to upset her. One unkind word by myself or my wife was enough for her. So these kinds of discussions, we --. I read the books, I had books about Terezin.

SIGRIST: But you know –

STEINER: But I – I have a card that says Rose Steiner is -- her work assignment is splitting mica. And so I have documents that prove all that. That didn'-- But that they would tell us. They would tell us how grateful people were for getting an extra tom—potato, you know.

SIGRIST: How long were they there?

STEINER: They were there from November 1941 until they were liberated in May 1945. Now. You know the American army was already in Pil—in Pilzen, moving and the Russian army was already in Czechoslovakia. During the -- one of the meetings between Roosevelt and Stalin, they essentially de-- decided on the demarcation line. So Au---Terezin could have been liberated by American forces but by consensus it was left to the Russians. I don't know whether you know -- have seen the movie *Schindler's List* but there you have the same situation. That place that Schindler had in Moravia was liberated by the (laughs) sad looking Russian soldiers on the-- --. And what happened there, the Russians came and there was quite a bit of typhus---typhoid. And so people were held back for a while and inoculated against that. And then very shortly thereafter American workers, amongst Ira Levin came. And that's how I found out about their survival. And then they said, "Alright, those of you who want to come back, go back to where you live, you're – you're at liberty to do so." But my parents really had very little desire to go back to Vienna. They knew that I--- they -- they knew that about me all from the correspondence. So they said, "Yes, we'd like to come to the United States." So therefore they were sent from Terezin (probably in June of '45) to the small town, Deggendorf. Which was a place that had people like them but also ethnic DPs, Displaced Persons. Yugoslavs that may have been in the--- conscripted into the German army. You know, there were quite a few of

that peop—type. That were not necessarily very friendly to the people like my parents, but they were displaced so-- . This was a transit place. And after I made, after I learned how to drive a jeep (and I was taught by a German lieutenant who worked for our little unit. I was in an intelligence unit) I took that jeep several times to Deggendorf and I had oranges and food. Again, I -- . We were there -- I was the only American sol-- soldier who would come. So I was very popular there. Now, I could have gotten out of the service in June, but they were still there so I extended my service by six months. And I went with them to Munich where there was an American consul and as parents of an American G.I, they had preferred treatment. And so they got their permanent visa and got on the train to Hamburg or Bremen -- Bremerhaven, the port. Came while I was still in Europe. But my uncle was in -- at that time, in S---. They were received by him and within months I came.

SIGRIST: But (laughs) that really brings this full circle because we began this interview by telling me about seeing your parents after the war.

STEINER: I know. I know. Yes.

SIGRIST: I think this is a good place for us to end. Mr. Steiner, this has been wonderful, I think we could probably do another hour but I have to run off to do these other interviews.

STEINER: I know. I hope that some of the things weren't too trivial to be included in -- in this.

SIGRIST: No, it's a fascinating story, really, it's very interesting. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Frank Steiner, on Tuesday, July 29, 1997, in Scotia, New York. Thank you, sir.

STEINER: My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW