

EI-927

ARTHUR STERNBERG

BIRTHDATE: APRIL 3, 1926

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

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UNDERWENT MENTAL TESTING AT ELLIS ISLAND 1950

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, August 19, 1997. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Arthur Sternberg. Mr. Sternberg, as part of an application for a medical residency—he was brought to Ellis Island in January of 1950 for psychological testing. I said say also, for the sake of the tape, that Peter Haum is running the recording equipment. Mr. Sternberg, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

STERNBERG: Yes, I was born April 3rd, 1926.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

STERNBERG: In Brooklyn, New York.

SIGRIST: Great. Can you just tell me very quickly your ethnic background and where your parents came from?

STERNBERG: My grandparents are all east European people, Jewish, came to this country in—the two grandparents—in 1899.

SIGRIST: That's right. We were talking about that on the elevator.

STERNBERG: So my parents were born in this country and, of course, I was born here.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about how you became interested in the medical profession and how that happened.

STERNBERG: I have to tell you. This is a—really a funny story because I went—during the Second World War—I graduated high school in 1943. And there was a Navy V12 Program under—going at that time. The country felt that this would be—was going to be a long war and they wanted a—a group of professionals. And so they developed this program, developing engineers, doctors and line officers. And I applied to become an aeronautical engineer. I went up to the University of Rochester in July of 1943 and, when my turn came, they sent me to this line, and the line was the pre-med line. And I said no but they wouldn't let me off. And so I continued with that and actually discovered Freud. And I figured I'd become a mind [chuckles] pioneer instead of a space pioneer. But my original purpose was to study engineering.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about what led up to your being brought to Ellis Island for this testing.

STERNBERG: Okay. As—oh, so I went to medical school just at the end of the Second World War in '45. I went to the Long Island College of Medicine in Brooklyn, and in '49 graduated and I got my medical degree. I'd been married and needed to support myself and my family. And I had some bent, some military bent, I would say. And so I applied to the Public Health Service—adequate internships and that paid well and I could [chuckles] also be part of a large organization, and was accepted and then came to Staten Island Hospital. And I was there as an intern and then I was planning to go onto to the psychiatric residency, applied to the Veteran's Administration and also to—applied to the university in Denver. And it was a part of that application to Carl Baumann's [PP] Department of Psychiatry that I was sent h—they requested a psychological test. And I came here because that's where the United States Public Health Service had its Psychological Services Department.

- SIGRIST: Before we talk about what actually happened here, what were the other parts of this application? Obviously, the psychological test was one part of this application. What else did you have to do for this application?
- STERNBERG: Okay. B—basically, there was not going to be an interview. They—they were relying heavily on the Rorschach. And the rest of it was a written application with my history and then the records of my undergraduate work and my medical work and my conduct as—as an officer and—and a surgeon in the Public Health Service.
- SIGRIST: How long were you in Staten Island before this happened?
- STERNBERG: Well, I'd been there maybe seven months.
- SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the scheduling of having to come out here and getting out here.
- STERNBERG: Well, I have to tell you. Yeah, I remember they said, "You have to go to Ellis Island." And I said, "My God. Why would you send me to Ellis Island?" [chuckles] And—because I didn't understand that the—I thought that that this was only a place for immigrants to—to come. And I wasn't aware that the United States—the Public Health Service had—or any other branch of government had offices here and actually did work. So it was kind of surprising and it was the first time I'd come to Ellis Island and it was an—an enjoyable experience to get on the ferry and—you know, on the boat and come here.
- SIGRIST: Was the appointment made for you or did you have to do the actual [unclear]?
- STERNBERG: No, I had to do it. As a member of Public Health Service, I had the right to request of my own group the—the—such testing. And I could have gone to a private source but elected for the Public Health Service psychologist to administer.
- SIGRIST: Tell me how you actually got out here, specifically.
- STERNBERG: As I remember, and that's a little bit vague, I came out to the Battery and took the boat to Ellis Island. It was scheduled. I don't know. I got—got out here probably nine o'clock in the morning, maybe a little bit earlier, actually. Earlier than nine.
- SIGRIST: Were you living in—where were you living at that time?

STERNBERG: Okay, I was living in—in Richmond—on Richmond Terrace in—forget the name of the—well, within a quarter of a mile of the ferry terminal on Staten Island.

SIGRIST: So you actually had to go from Staten Island—

STERNBERG: To New York.

SIGRIST: —to New York.

STERNBERG: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then get on the Ellis Island ferry?

STERNBERG: No, I lived on the waterfront and I could see the island and the Statue of Liberty from my front windows.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what you remember about—about the experience—from—from the beginning. What was the first thing that happened when you got here?

STERNBERG: Okay. Well, I came and I—and I met this somewhat pleasant but not—s—I would say somewhat serious and a little bit grim fellow. And I was tense, I would say, because it was important to me to get accepted to the residency. And so he gave me the Rorschach. And he said—and I'll just tell a little story. He said, "Answer as—with as many answers as you have." And I proceeded to give him 141 replies to the 10 cards of the Rorschach. And it took—he was getting progressively more depressed [chuckles] as the morning went on, because it meant that we were going to go through lunch and had to come back. And we weren't finished until probably three o'clock in the afternoon. It was an all-day affair for him and—

SIGRIST: Can you explain, perhaps to people who are listening who may not know what a Rorschach test is, what the procedure was and what it was you were looking at?

STERNBERG: Okay. There was a—a German psychologist by the name of Rorschach who developed what is called the ink blot test. And it consists of 10 cards of rather vague shapes, silhouette shapes. And a couple of the cards have color in them but most of them are black and white or shades of gray. And the request is for the examinee to—to state what they see, what shapes, and identify shapes in the cards.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Do you remember where this took place on the island? When you got off the ferry, which direction you went in?

STERNBERG: Ah, it feels to me and I—that when I got into this building, I came on the ground floor to the left. I had that sense of familiarity when I walked in today but I ca—can't be certain about that.

SIGRIST: Are there any other details of that day that stick out in your mind? You—you mentioned breaking for lunch. What—do you have any recollections of where you went when you broke?

STERNBERG: We went to a cafeteria. We worked—[chuckles] we worked very hard and when we finished he felt responsible, I think, for us as colleagues. I must say, I don't think he was feeling terribly comfortable. We went to lunch and talked and kind of talked shoptalk. And then after lunch we hustled back to the office and—to—to finish up. He probably was—was busy and not too many people give that many responses. That was [chuckles] unusual.

SIGRIST: Do any of the individual cards or your responses to the card stick out in your mind?

STERNBERG: I must say no.

SIGRIST: Are there any other details of what you may have seen walking through the building or in the gentleman's office that may stick out in your mind?

STERNBERG: Ah, I'm remembering age—old. And I remember my own feeling of being—the word venerable comes to mind. That—that—that's pretty much it. I—I had a little thought about my grandparents and, at that time, I thought they were here. I've since learned that in the year that—that both of my grandparents came here, the—the place was closed because of the fire.

SIGRIST: Were there—did you have any other interaction with staff members who were here?

STERNBERG: I think I was in—I was introduced to a couple of other people and that. But basically, no. I was here for the—as a patient for the examination and then the report was sent to me and to the place in Denver that I asked them to send the report to.

SIGRIST: And did you get the position?

STERNBERG: They turned me down. [laughs]

SIGRIST: After 141 answers? [laughter]

STERNBERG: Well, I don't know what the re—response was but as it turned out, I was—I'd been—I was accepted at Langley [PP] Porta Clinic in San Francisco, a prestigious psychiatric institution and also at the Veteran's Hospital in Northport, [PP] New York, which is where I went.

SIGRIST: Does any other detail stick out about—about your ex—time here, that day that you spent? Perhaps the process of leaving the place? Anything that you remember?

STERNBERG: Not—I'm reaching a little bit. I would say that, since I love boats and love the water, it was a—for me, it was a personally delightful experience. I had a chance to get on the boat. And waiting for the—for the ferry, I—you know, I sat at the dockside and that was fun.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious. Do they provide you with a copy of the results?

STERNBERG: Ah—

SIGRIST: Were you able to see that at some point?

STERNBERG: Yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, great. Well, Mr. Sternberg, I—very unique opportunity for us—

STERNBERG: [chuckles] Okay.

SIGRIST: —to interview someone who experienced Ellis Island in that way. This is Paul Sigris signing off with Arthur Sternberg on Tuesday, August 19th, 1997 in the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]