

EI-937

CARMEN ELOISE BOWER TREICHLER
BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 14, 1947
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TOMMY MITCHELL
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INTERNEED AT ELLIS ISLAND 1947-1950

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, September 17th, 1997, and I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Carmen Eloise Bower Treichler. And Mrs. Treichler was born on-- at the Marine Hospital in Staten Island. Her parents had been detained up to that point for approximately two years here at Ellis Island. You were born, you were brought to Ellis Island when you were three days old you we-- your family was finally released sometime in 1950. I think I have that all correct.

TREICHLER: Yes. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: I should also say for the sake of the tape that Peter Hom is running the recording equipment. May we begin by you giving me your birth date please.

TREICHLER: I was born on September 14th, 1947.

SIGRIST: September 14th, 1947. And as you said to me earlier, it was today, 50 years ago today that you were brought here to Ellis Island--

TREICHLER: That's correct.

SIGRIST: September 17.

TREICHLER: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Great. I guess the best place to start this interview would be with your parents and can you-- first of all let's talk about your dad. What was his name?

TREICHLER: His name was-- if I tell you all the first names--

SIGRIST: And spell everything for me if it's difficult . .
.

TREICHLER: I don't think all the first names I could-- his name was-- original name was Fritz Emil [German] and he was born in Germany as you can, um-- see.

SIGRIST: Where in Germany? Do you know?

TREICHLER: He was born in Ersa (ph) which was at that time German and is now French. And he immigrated to the United States I think in 1929. He came over on the Brayman and luckily as he had some money he did not have to come on a ship like that and was not detained at Ellis Island at that time.

SIGRIST: What did he do in Germany?

TREICHLER: He was a patent attorney or at least he had started to study law and so on-

SIGRIST: A patent attorney-

TREICHLER: A patent attorney-

SIGRIST: Can you just explain to me a little bit-- what that meant. What-- what is a patent attorney?

TREICHLER: They-- how should I say it? Well, they bring into a-- a form to be-- a-- an in-- an invention to be presented to the patent, whatever office, to be patented. And he worked for Seamen's awhile in-- in the United States and I don't know exactly how it went on. Anyway, he was naturalized to be an American. I don't know what year, either.

SIGRIST: Do you know how old he was in 1929 when he first came.

TREICHLER: Well he was born in twen-- in 1905.

SIGRIST: I see-

TREICHLER: So he was 24 then. He worked in Washington for a-- for a patent attorney and-- oh I don't know exactly how it went on. Anyway he wa-- he was in the army-- he-- in the American army when he met my mother. And the-- in the army he was a photographer.

SIGRIST: Was your mother American born?

TREICHLER: My mother is born in-- was born in Indiana, American born, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

TREICHLER: Wilma Marie Hite was her name.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Hite for me please?

TREICHLER: H-I-T-E.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

TREICHLER: They met I think in Indianapolis and married on Christmas Eve in 19-- I would, let's see, three years before I was born. (laughter) You'll have to figure that out quickly. That would be '43 I guess. And-- well they hadn't been-- should I tell the whole story--

SIGRIST: Yes, please--

TREICHLER: Oh my goodness.

SIGRIST: It sounds interesting.

TREICHLER: Anyway, my father was in the army and he suddenly disappeared. This is all that I know from my mother of course and--

SIGRIST: When you say he was in the army, he was stationed here in the United States?

TREICHLER: In the United States, in Indianapolis. Anyway, he disappeared and my mother didn't know where he was or anything, and quite a while later, two or three weeks later she saw him on the-- a-- saw him walking along in-- in some official building, she was trying to find out what had happened to him, with two guards. So he had been arrested as a German spy. And of course she didn't know anything about this and so on and my father has always, since that time, said that he had never been anything in that direction. He had never done anything like that. So, how does it go on . . .

Well, I can't tell the whole story that long. He was taken-- no, they wanted to deport him without ever having put him under what-- what do you call it? I live in Germany, so I don't use these words all the time--

SIGRIST: Take your time, you're doing a good job.

TREICHLER: He was never put before court.

SIGRIST: Never had a hearing.

TREICHLER: He never had a hearing, to take away-- and they wanted to take away his American citizenship without him being-- having-- what do you, I can't think of the word.

SIGRIST: A trial?

TREICHLER: Yes, without a trial, and he was going against this. So he was put onto Ellis Island during this time that he was fighting for his citizenship and-- and the United States government or whoever this was wanted to take it away.

SIGRIST: May I ask, and you may not know the answer to this question,

TREICHLER: Yes, okay.

SIGRIST: But what-- what made them suspicious of-- of his activities?

TREICHLER: Um, in short. He came to Germany in --I don't know exactly, in the end of the '30s some time -- in order to-- that must have been middle--middle '30s-- he wanted to marry. A woman that he had only met shortly and had always corresponded with and they had decided that they would marry. And he came back to Germany to marry her and take her back to the States.

When he wanted to go back to the States, they wouldn't let him out again. The-- I think it was the Gestapo took him in and said if he wanted to go back, he would have to promise to spy. And he refused and so on but he saw that he would never get out of the country again. They would not let him go back. So this was what he once told me and he's been dead for quite a long time. He said-- he said, "Okay, I'll do it." And his plan was then to go to the States and sort of give himself up like that. And--

SIGRIST: Just something to get him back here--

TREICHLER: Yes. He wanted to leave the-- he wanted to get out of there and he went through this spy thing, he had to learn how to make little micro writings and things like that and so they told him he should go back to the States via Russia and Japan.

SIGRIST: And this training was conducted by the Gestapo.

TREICHLER: Well, yeah, all by the-- some kind of a secret-- secret intelligence service.

SIGRIST: That's fascinating. (laughter) I'm just curious is this something that he liked to talk about later on or was it something that was sort of dangerous ground to--

TREICHLER: Well, he didn't like to talk about it especially, but he didn't really-- he never said, "No, I'm not going to talk about that." It was a time-- acu-- you know, he was here five years and-- and before that the-- he had lots of troubles and so on so it was a bad time in his life and we came back to Germany in '50 and that was all in ruins and so and so. It was very hard.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about you-- you mentioned the micro writing. Did he ever--

TREICHLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about anything else that-- that they taught him how to do?

TREICHLER: Pho . . . photography or to make little, tiny . . . develop the films that they could be hidden some place and uh, they did stupid things like they wanted him to take a-- what do you call it a-- a microscope along in order to-- to read these things and he said, "Are you crazy? If they find a microscope in my luggage, what do you

think they're going to think?" And he took a camera, a-- like a-- he took along from Germany.

SIGRIST: I'm-- I'm curious, can you give me just a little-- a thumbnail sketch of your father's personality?

TREICHLER: His personality, when I knew him-- I was born he was 42 years old so he was for that time already a pretty old father, he worked a lot. He had to get his family back on the-- on their feet. But what I know of stories, he was as a young man a very-- a ladies man. He liked to dance, he liked to drink and he took life pretty easy but I think when he married my mother he was sort of settled down.

SIGRIST: Well he's a little bit older.

TREICHLER: Yeah. Well, of course.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

TREICHLER: And-- well, do I go on?

SIGRIST: Well, you mentioned that they wanted him to go back--

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: To the United States via Russia--

TREICHLER: Yes. And he-- he said-- when a-- when he went to the train station to go to Russia it came through the loud speakers, War with Russia and he said this war has to be lost because even the Gestapo doesn't know one day before that they're going to have war with Russia and they want to send me by that-- way of that country, which was crazy, of course. So then he was sent to the states by way of Spain and Havana where he somehow met another spy type.

SIGRIST: Was he married at this point or--

TREICHLER: Yes, he mar-- was married to this German woman. I don't know how she gave-- came over, I really don't know that.

SIGRIST: He was on his own as far as you know.

TREICHLER: Yes. Yes, he was on his own then and she came sometime later. Maybe because he was over there, she could-- anyway, when he came to the States, exactly that time, another German reported himself into-- like he had planned to do, to the FBI and was arrested and they didn't believe him. It was in the newspapers at that time and I don't know his name. But my father then was afraid that that would happen to him. That's his story, so all I can say is this. And so he never reported what had happened. He just went back in-- to work and so on or to the army. No, he wasn't in the army at that time. Later on he went into the army.

SIGRIST: Just tried to sort of sneak back into American life.

TREICHLER: Yes, well he-- he was always in there it was just a short time that he was in Germany in between.

SIGRIST: Do you know exactly how long? 'Cause it sounds like he's doing a lot while he's there.

TREICHLER: Yeah, well he married I guess and-- and he had this--

SIGRIST: Training.

TREICHLER: Training. I don't think it was a long training.

SIGRIST: A year?

TREICHLER: I think it was less than a year but I'd have to find that out.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

TREICHLER: Uh, well, then he met my mother and so on, nothing happened and then he was arrested because another guy-- (laughter) a real spy was arrested and he had known about my father coming over and in order to get off easier with less punishment or whatever. He told about everybody that he knew. So that was it. And from that time on, my father was fighting for his-- but he was never put under-- what do you call it-- accused-- officially accused.

SIGRIST: But during that ambiguous time, that was when he was held here--

TREICHLER: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: When his status was ambiguous.

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: When he wanted to stay and they wanted him to go.

TREICHLER: Well, I'm-- and then my mother was allowed to come to Ellis Island to live with him. He was-- but she was free to go, she could go back to New York and whatever.

SIGRIST: Did they-- did they officially marry in the United States--

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Because--

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: You know, there's this other--

TREICHLER: No, he was divorced from her-- they weren't married very long, I think maybe a year.

SIGRIST: I see.

TREICHLER: They never really knew each other and they didn't work out I guess.

SIGRIST: You said you had an older brother?

TREICHLER: No, a younger brother.

SIGRIST: Younger brother. I see. All right. So your father is brought to Ellis Island and he's in his what late 30s at that point or--

TREICHLER: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: About 40?

TREICHLER: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Your mother's allowed to come out here and live.

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what you know about that experience prior to your birth, what maybe your mother has told you about that situation where-- where they're living out here and you know, some of the-- the feelings that surrounded that period.

TREICHLER: Well, my mother always says it was pure hell. And they were really treated badly by-- by most officials. Then of course they got to know a lot of other people, immigrants, and also people that were supposed to be deported. My father, then-- he had nothing to do, so he started working for these people writing legal letters and so on for the courts and some of them didn't know good English so he did that for them. And--

SIGRIST: This is two years before you were born, you said that-- that this happened that they were brought out-- he was brought out here?

TREICHLER: Yes. Let's see. Yes, two years.

SIGRIST: Nineteen-- so 1945?

TREICHLER: Yes. Uh-huh. Yeah, shortly before the war ended. No, after the war ended it must have been. Yes. And-

SIGRIST: What-- what-- what are some of the other things that your mother has said to you? Because she's sort of a-- an observer of all of this, I guess.

TREICHLER: Yes, well, what did she say? Well she-- she always is-- she's always talking about Ellis Island how it looked then, you had to go in through a-- some kind of a glass tunnel. The-- the ferries went-- didn't stop here in front of the building but they went on to the end and then you went to sort of a-- like a tunnel into the building, you know that?

SIGRIST: Yeah. Could be the back of the island, where, you know.

TREICHLER: Uh-huh. And we had that one corner room toward the-- toward the harbor on the third floor.

SIGRIST: What could you see from the windows--

TREICHLER: Um, if you look out to the left, you can see the-- the skyline and toward the-- to the right-- the right window you can look over to the hospital. And well, always behind two double fence-- double fences and barbed wires. Not a very nice feeling I don't think. And--

SIGRIST: What did your mother ever tell you about being pregnant with you here at Ellis Island?

TREICHLER: Oh--

SIGRIST: The experience of-- of-- of being pregnant and being in this situation.

TREICHLER: Um hm. Well, I-- about being pregnant, I don't know anything about that. I only know she wanted a child, even under these circumstances which I don't understand but she-- she did. And you know, well, like I said, I was born in-- on Staten Island in the marine hospital. And they wanted another child and my brother was born. I don't know why they did it but--

SIGRIST: What year was he born?

TREICHLER: Forty nine.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

TREICHLER: His name is Frederick Valiant Bower (ph), she called him because she thought my father was so valiant. (laughter)

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Um, you mentioned a little bit that your father was doing-- was it some translating of letters and things--

TREICHLER: Yes. Well he did a lot of legal work, he did-- made the legal letters, he wa-- was a-- a lawyer. He was a patent attorney and had a degree, bachelor of laws or-- or law, you call it I guess. And

be deported and he-- he wasn't a German, he would have been a-- a-- what do you call them-- without-- without a citizenship.

SIGRIST: An alien, an illegal alien.

TREICHLER: A displaced person or something like that. And they-- the authorities found out about that and that did it. Because you can't apply for a-- foreign citizenship and still be fighting for the-- the American one. And then they were deported to, they could pick out if they wanted to go to South America someplace. I think Venezuela was-- they talked about or Germany and so they picked Germany, of course, my mother, she must have been in love very much because (LAUGH) otherwise she wouldn't have gone along to a country that was really in ruins at that time.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of yourself, your own, of here?

TREICHLER: Here.

TREICHLER: When I came here and I walked around and I thought I-- maybe I'll remember something but I can't.

SIGRIST: What about --

TREICHLER: I remember just one thing on the ship when we were shipped back, there was a very bad storm and I felt terribly sick. But I was three years old, that was all.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever express to you about how she felt about this turn of events about-- I mean you say she must have loved your father very much.

TREICHLER: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: I mean, how did she really feel about suddenly having to uproot herself and go to Germany with two small children?

TREICHLER: Well, she must have felt terrible, of course but she decided to go along with him. She did feel terrible but she also felt terrible and I remember that through my whole childhood that she always felt that he had been treated so badly by the authorities. So-- I don't know what's true and what-- you know, what you're told as a child but I believe my father of course what he said.

SIGRIST: It's a fascinating story. (laughter) It really is.

TREICHLER: Oh it doesn't say too much about Ellis Island of course--

SIGRIST: That's all right. That's . . . but, there's a bigger picture here. You know, this person, especially your father, in a series of circumstances.

TREICHLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did-- did your mother ever talk about any of the specifics like where they had to eat or anything that happened when they were eating here at Ellis Island, anything like that?

TREICHLER: I know that they had different rooms, not just this one. They had really awful rooms, she said, and then at-- the last-- they got that big room--

SIGRIST: This was a corner room-- this was where you would have been a small child, I guess.

TREICHLER: Yes, yes. I've-- that's where those pictures were taken that I brought along.

SIGRIST: Yes, I should, I should say for the sake of the tape that you brought some really wonderful pictures of your family when they were here being detained here. There's a wonderful picture of I believe it's you in a-- in a baby stroller with of course chain link fence behind you and the Statue of Liberty behind you--

TREICHLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: That's a wonderful picture you're very lucky to have.

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: One thing I did want to ask you about you specifically is when you got back to Germany, and of course this is really where you begin your childhood, tell me how-- how the American experience of your parents affected you as you were growing up.

TREICHLER: Oh--

SIGRIST: Because your mother's American---
TREICHLER: It affected me very much, of course.

SIGRIST: Yeah, can you talk a little bit about that.

TREICHLER: Uh, my mother-- this is sort of a little bit complicated I suppose but the Germans were the enemies for an American and so she was actually in an enemy country and she felt that all Germans were Nazis. And this was a-- such a conflict, she had to live there and of course lots of old Germans and-- were at that time-- were and still felt that they were-- they lo-- lost the war but still they-- they felt that probably-- lots of them felt they were in the right even though they had lost. And this was-- lots of conflict like that. If she was treated bad in a store, got a-- old bread or something like that she always thought it was because she was an American.

And I always stuck out because children never like to be different from other children, but now I have this American mother and she was very flamboyant and not at all like all the other German mothers. So, sometimes it was embarrassing for me, I didn't blend in very well with other children. And my father, he-- all he did was work, work, work, to get us you know, getting started to live.

SIGRIST: What communication was allowed between your family and like your mother has family in America I assume. I mean were you allowed to-- to communicate, by letters or . . .

TREICHLER: By, what do you mean allowed? By whom?

SIGRIST: Well, by -- by the American government. If you were being deported, I'm just wondering if they screened letters that were coming into the United States from your family or anything.

TREICHLER: No, no. Well, my mother wasn't deported.

SIGRIST: Right.

TREICHLER: So they couldn't do anything against that and we have a dual citizenship, my brother and I because we were born in the states, they didn't, I mean they didn't nu-- do anything about that either. Well I'm-- but my mother always, always was home sick. Always. And I-- she then later they-- very later she-- they got a divorce but I don't think it had anything to do with German-American things. And she went back to the States and married again an American, and now she's back in Germany with me as-- and-- she -- anywhere where she is, she doesn't feel at home because she's been too often torn out of the-- an environment, that she was just getting used to, sort of.

SIGRIST: Sure. Because-- you know, having gone from home and then she would come here to Ellis Island to live during that period--

TREICHLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then going to Germany and I mean I can see-- I-- I guess that the experience affected your mother enough. You say that she's writing a book about--

TREICHLER: Uh-huh. (AFFIRMATIVE)

SIGRIST: About--

TREICHLER: She wanted to-- we told her get it ready by the-- by the opening of-- of Ellis Island. She didn't make it and-- I-- she goes into such detail also about all these other people. Every story is in there. I mean if you want stories, there is--

SIGRIST: Well, I hope some day maybe I'll get to meet your mom and-- and certainly-- is the book-- is she writing it in English--

TREICHLER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Or German-

TREICHLER: English.

SIGRIST: Does she speak German?

TREICHLER: She speaks it but much too bad for being there so long. (laughter)

SIGRIST: Well I don't want to take any more time away from your visit here but I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions. This was a fascinating story and-

TREICHLER: Well, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more about Ellis Island itself, because--

SIGRIST: You were just a little kid.

TREICHLER: Yes. (laughter)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Carmen Treichler.

TREICHLER: Yes.

SIGRIST: On September 17th 1997 a Wednesday afternoon with Peter Hom running the equipment. Thank you very much.

TREICHLER: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW