

EI-943
ELIZABETH JOSEPHINE REITZ
BIRTHDATE: MAY 6, 1897
INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 19, 1997
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 100
RUNNING TIME: 31:48
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JENNA CIACCIO
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

GERMANY, 1898
AGE: 10 MONTHS

SHIP: [NOT KNOWN]
PORT: [NOT KNOWN]
RESIDENCES:
? GERMANY: FRANKFURT
* US: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK; NEW MILFORD, NEW JERSEY

SIGRIST: Good morning.
REITZ: Good morning.
SIGRIST: My name is Paul Sigrist. I'm Paul.
REITZ: Paul.
SIGRIST: Yes. And I'm from the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.
REITZ: Museum.
SIGRIST: In New York City.
REITZ: New York City.
SIGRIST: We're run by the National Park Service.
REITZ: Run by the National Park Service.
SIGRIST: Yep. And, I'm here today. Today is Friday, September 19th, 1997.
REITZ: Yes.
SIGRIST: In New Milford, New Jersey. At the Woodcrest...
REITZ: Nursing.

SIGRIST: ...Center. Woodcrest, what is the name of it? Woodcrest.

REITZ: Woo-- Wood-- Woodcrest.

SIGRIST: Woodcrest. And I'm here with Ms. Elizabeth Reitz.

REITZ: That's right.

SIGRIST: Ms. Reitz is a hundred...

REITZ: That's right.

SIGRIST: ...years old. And she came to America...

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...in, from Germany.

REITZ: That's right.

SIGRIST: In March, of 1898.

REITZ: That's right.

SIGRIST: When she was ten months old.

REITZ: That's right.

SIGRIST: Great. Ms. Reitz, thank you so much for letting me ask you these questions.

REITZ: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

REITZ: My, my what?

SIGRIST: Your birth date.

REITZ: Birth date?

SIGRIST: Yes.

REITZ: May the 6th, 1897.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

REITZ: Frankfurt, Germany.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the day you were born?

REITZ: No. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you a story about when she had you?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: Okay. Let me...

REITZ: If, if she did, I-I, I have a, nobody has asked me those questions before.

SIGRIST: [Laughs]

REITZ: Right? But...

SIGRIST: Well let's talk about your parents. What was your mother's maiden name?

REITZ: Oh, Maria [not understood]. It was Un --Unter-something but I --- right now I c---.

SIGRIST: But her first name was Marie?

REITZ: Maria.

SIGRIST: Maria.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you know about her growing up and her family background?

REITZ: I know very little.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about, what did she ever tell you about her parents or her growing up?

REITZ: [Pause] No.

SIGRIST: Nothing?

REITZ: Well, you see, there was a little hard feelings between her and the rest of her family. But after she came here, it --- they had borrowed money from her. And when she asked for it, they said, "Well. Now that you're in America, you won't need it."

SIGRIST: Was she from Germany?

REITZ: Yes, Frankfurt.

SIGRIST: She was from Frankfurt?

REITZ: My father was from Wiesbaden

SIGRIST: Your father was from Wiesbaden and your mother was from Frankfurt.

REITZ: Frankfurt.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality. What was she like as a person?

REITZ: Oh, wonderful. My father died February 18th. I was --- and then on May the 6th I was fourteen years old, when he died.

SIGRIST: So your father died just before you turned fourteen?

REITZ: Pardon me?

SIGRIST: Your father died just before you turned fourteen.

REITZ: Yea. That was it. May 18 --- February 18th, and I was fourteen May 6th. At first there was five of us. So, my mother says, "Well, now that I have to go to work." she says, "You'll have to discontinue saying --- speaking in German." Because when my father was alive, we --- all we can do at home was speak in German. See, but mother, she said she had to learn the English language. See, so, she through a friend of --- she made, she went to high s -- night school. And that's how she learned how to speak the American language.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother; do you remember your mother trying to learn how to speak English?

REITZ: No, not how. But we had to speak it, yeah. Yeah, we...

SIGRIST: Did you ever help your mother learn English?

REITZ: Well, not really. 'Cause as I said to you, she went to night -- night school.

SIGRIST: Where were you living at that time?

REITZ: In Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: You were in Brooklyn, ah-huh. Tell me, did your mother have to get a job after your father died?

REITZ: Well, sh-- a job, she did odd work. See, and then after a while, she was a, what you call, a practical nurse. She got into that through a neighbor. Her, she had a young married daughter. And she was expecting. And she asked mother ---- at that time, they were used to have somebody take care of them for two weeks after a child was born. I know that earlier, know this or not. And, that she, she was ---- well or was she --- when she was doing that, and I had to take care of the house. See, but she used to come home a couple of times a week at night, to visit with us, see how we were doing. See, and that's how we grew up.

SIGRIST: Let me talk a little bit about your father. What was your father's name?

REITZ: John Steven.

SIGRIST: John Steven Reitz.

REITZ: Reitz.

SIGRIST: And you said he was born in Wiesbaden?

REITZ: Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: What do you know about his background?

REITZ: Huh?

SIGRIST: What do you know about his background?

REITZ: Nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you know what, what profession he had in Germany?

REITZ: What do they call that again? A carpenter. He helped build --- what was there a canal or something there? Well see, it was through a man he was working with at the --- at the canal. He came to America. When he came --- he was in America --- he went to St. Louis. And there they were doing a lot of building. And so he said to my father, he says, "Why don't you pack up and come to America? And you wont have to worry about work. Then there'll be plenty of work for you." So my father thought --- well, he though about it for a while and then he says, "Well I have to try sometime." So he decided he would come. And as soon as he got --- obtained work he would send for my mother, my brother, and I. My brother was seventeen months older than me.

So he sent, so we came. So, you said we landed in Ellis Island. And, and he got the - the --- he, when he landed they, they wanted a ma-a man in a ho-- houwe --- house building in that --- construction I should say. And, with tools. Then he had his own tools. And he brought them with him when he came here. And, but when he got, when he got to America, he never met the man that told --- he --- he inquired all over to find out how he could find out where he was. But he never did, so my father was stuck in Brooklyn. But, see, so there's where he lived until he died.

SIGRIST: How, how many, how long had your [Reitz Coughs] father been in America before you came over to America.

REITZ: [Coughs] Oh, that I can't, that I really ---- strange to say that's one of the important things I should have known.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] But the point is, he came over first.

REITZ: Yeah, he came over first. And as soon as he got the, got the work. He sent for -- sent for us.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or your father ever tell you about the house or the apartment that you lived in, in Frankfurt?

REITZ: In where?

SIGRIST: In Frankfurt, before you came to America.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the house that you lived in? Where you lived in Frankfurt?

REITZ: No, not really. They did tell us about friends they had. That were used to visit and things like that. You know, but really describe our residence, no.

SIGRIST: Did, did your mother or father ever tell you a story about when you were a baby, coming over on the ship to America?

REITZ: Well, my mother said --- sh--- my mother said she saw very little of my brother and I because she - she was always sea sick, seasick. So she said --- but fortunately -- says --- wonderful other people on the ship, And she said, they and we would, at that time, we were two cute youngsters so everybody wanted to take care of us, see? So she says, that, that way, she says, God was good to her in finding these people. So, when she wa--- couldn't do things for us, they did.

SIGRIST: You said your brother is seventeen months...

REITZ: Older.

SIGRIST: ...older than you. What was his name?

REITZ: Joseph Steven.

SIGRIST: Joseph Steven Reitz.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And, let's see if he were seventeen months older, what year was he born?

REITZ: Oh, he was, I don't know the year, December 8th, was his birthday.

SIGRIST: December 8th, so let's see, you were born in '97.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So, '96 would be one year, seven months, that would be like December of 1895 when he was born. Does that sound about right?

REITZ: That sounds about right.

SIGRIST: Yeah. You, do you happen to know the name of the ship that you came over on with your mother...

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: ...and brother. Did your mother ever tell you a story about what happened when they got to New York? You mentioned Ellis Island.

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did she ever tell you a story about what happened there?

REITZ: No, she said, she, the only thing she said, the day after we landed, my father came over to greet us.

SIGRIST: What's the first memory that you have, when you were really little, what was the first thing you remember?

REITZ: [Long pause] Uh.

SIGRIST: Well, okay, did you go to live in Brooklyn?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Okay. Do you remember when you were a little girl, where you lived in Brooklyn?

REITZ: In the, [long pause] they ca-they called it a certain section. But right now...

SIGRIST: Did you live in an apartment?

REITZ: Well, in a, what they called a flat.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the flat?

REITZ: Oh, it was very nice. And, we had almost all the conveniences that you needed.

SIGRIST: Remember how many rooms it had?

REITZ: I think it was five.

SIGRIST: Did you take in boarders who lived with you?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: No. So what work did your father get in Brooklyn?

REITZ: Car-- he worked in a factory, as a carpenter.

SIGRIST: He worked in a factory as a carpenter. And, did your mother get a job?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about [clears throat] -- excuse me -- when they put you into school for the first time?

REITZ: Oh, the only thing I know is that I liked school. I was always --- always very fond of school.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite subject?

REITZ: Arithmetic.

SIGRIST: You were good at math?

REITZ: Yeah?

SIGRIST: You were good at arithmetic?

REITZ: Very.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What language did you speak at home?

REITZ: Well, it was a lot o' time, we speak nothing but German. When I told ya, when my father died, then my mother says, "Now we have to cut out the German, because I have to learn the English language."

SIGRIST: Did you learn English before your father died?

REITZ: Oh, yes, surely. Fourteen years old, I had to.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you learned English?

REITZ: How I learned?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

REITZ: Well, I think mostly through a neighbor. But ---- lived next door to us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first words that you learned in English?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] What games did you play when you were a little girl?

REITZ: Hopscotch, [long pause] there's play house, we used to play school.

SIGRIST: Were there other German families in this neighborhood?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. And what about German businesses, shops run by Germans? That sort of thing.

REITZ: Oh, yes. They were there --- several, several of them.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

REITZ: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Was there a Catholic church near by?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. And what do you remember about going to church when you were a child?

REITZ: [Pause] The first time, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: But what, what sticks out in your mind from going to church when you were a little girl? Not the first time, but...

REITZ: Yeah. Well, I know that I always liked to --- liked to go, see? We used to go mostly in groups. I'd meet other friends and then we'd go to church. At first of course, I went when my mother took us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what language the service was, was conducted in?

REITZ: American.

SIGRIST: it was --- it was conducted in English?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: The, it wasn't a German speaking church?

REITZ: No, no.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

REITZ: Huh? [Long pause] Well my mother taught us always to do right. In fact she said that was very important. But, you do right, especially now. And then when you grow up you wont have anything to be sorry for.

SIGRIST: Did you pray at home?

REITZ: Did what?

SIGRIST: Pray at home?

REITZ: Oh yes, surely. Pray the rosary.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a prayer in German that you learned as a child?

REITZ: [long pause]

SIGRIST: Maybe the Lord's Prayer in German.

REITZ: Right now, I can't tell you.

SIGRIST: Okay. [Laughs] It was a long time ago. [Laughs]

REITZ: I know, a hundred years.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Yeah that's right. Tell me about what your brother did in America. Did he get a job when he got older?

REITZ: Oh yes.

SIGRIST: What was your brother's first job?

REITZ: His first job was... weighing coal.

SIGRIST: Weighing coal.

REITZ: Coal. See, where they worked they, they used a lot of coal. And when --- and the furnaces that they used there, and he has to weigh it before they take it to wherever it has to go.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how old he was when he got that job?

REITZ: I think fourteen; we had to get working papers.

SIGRIST: What kind of food did you eat when you were growing up?

REITZ: All German cooked food.

SIGRIST: Can you describe some of that for me?

REITZ: Hasenpfeffer (stewed hare)

SIGRIST: And what is that?

REITZ: Rabbit.

SIGRIST: Where did you get the rabbit?

REITZ: My mother bought it in the store and -- and --- what is that sour meat that Germans eat?

SIGRIST: Sauerbraten (braised marinated beef, sweet-sour)?

REITZ: Sauerbraten.

SIGRIST: Ah-huh.

REITZ: Oh, I loved that. Even to - to --today.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how that was made back then? How did you make.

REITZ: The sauerbraten?

SIGRIST: How did you make it?

REITZ: My mother used to have to marinate it, put it in, well vinegar and something else, and a lot of spices. And you used to have to turn it several times a day. And it had to marinate about two or three days. And then you cook it like pot roast --- with spaetzle (noodle specialty

SIGRIST: Can you describe what that is?

REITZ: Huh?

SIGRIST: What, what is that?

REITZ: Oh, dumplings, flour dumplings.

SIGRIST: Did you help your mother cook?

REITZ: Oh surely.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite thing to cook?

REITZ: That's so long ago. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Actually I should ask you, how did you do the cooking back then?

REITZ: How did I do the cooking?

SIGRIST: Yes, what, what, what did you have to cook food with?

REITZ: What did I have to cook?

SIGRIST: Yeah, what did you use to actually cook the food?

REITZ: A co--- coal stove. And the stove had to be cleaned, polished and shined at least once a week.

SIGRIST: Whose job was that? Your job? How did you feel about doing that job?

REITZ: Well I felt, I just had to. I was the oldest daughter. There was three of us.

SIGRIST: There was your older brother.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then?

REITZ: Margaret.

SIGRIST: Was Margaret born in this country?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes. She was born after you got here.

REITZ: The first one.

SIGRIST: Ah-huh. Do you remember what year she was born?

REITZ: Oh, no. But she died when she was about sixty-eight. She had rheumatoid arthritis and that left her with a weak heart. And, she had several spells. And the doctor used to put her in a sanitarium for a week or two. And then finally she had a spell when [coughs], pardon me, I'm unfortunately, there was nobody home at the time. Other times when she had them, there was always somebody at her home. And they could call for help. But this time, there wasn't. And she passed away that way. My brother-in-law come home and found her dead.

SIGRIST: You said your father died when you...

REITZ: Right.

SIGRIST: ...almost fourteen.

REITZ: Almost fourteen.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

REITZ: Pneumonia.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

REITZ: Nothing. [Long pause] I know he was sick a few days before he died.

SIGRIST: Where did he die?

REITZ: In Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: But at home or.

REITZ: At home.

SIGRIST: He was at home. How did your life change after your father died? You, you said that your mother suddenly wanted to learn English.

REITZ: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How else did your life change?

REITZ: Well, I had to do things then, that I didn't do before.

SIGRIST: What?

REITZ: Well, as I told ya, I helped my --- I had to take care of the house when my mother was on a case.

SIGRIST: Was she already doing her nursing by that time?

REITZ: No. No she only started after. The first what she did, she used to --- she used to clean dentist's office and things like that.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

REITZ: But that was very hard.

SIGRIST: Did you get a job outside of the house?

REITZ: Yes, when I was ---- I think I had to get my working papers too. You had to get them at fourteen.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: And what job did you get?

REITZ: My first job? Minding children.

SIGRIST: Somebody else's children?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Ah-huh. Do you remember how much you got paid?

REITZ: Oh, [long pause] I don't think I even got a dollar a day.

SIGRIST: Were you still in school when you were doing that.

REITZ: Oh yes.

SIGRIST: Did you stay in school all the way through high school?

REITZ: Never went to high school.

SIGRIST: How far did you get up to in school?

REITZ: The last grade in grammar school.

SIGRIST: Is that eighth grade?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

REITZ: Oh yes, in German though. After a while she got to do some writing in English too.

SIGRIST: And could your father read and write in German?

REITZ: Oh, surely.

SIGRIST: What, what, what was your, what was the opinion about education? How did your parents feel about education in general?

REITZ: Very important.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever go back to Germany?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: Your mother never went?

REITZ: No.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go?

REITZ: I did, in 1970. I went with a group from our church. They had, I think it was about fifteen of us. I --- it was the year after my mother died. She died in '69. And, when, it --- the notice came in the bulletin in church on Sunday. My -- the sister next to me --- she says, "Oh", she says, "There's an opportunity for you to see where you were born.", she says, "In Germany." Because the first stop was Frankfurt. So, she says, "You should go." I said, "Oh no," I says, "Mother isn't -- isn't even dead a year." I says, "And here you're asking me to go on a, a joyride." I s-- she says, "Think if over." she says, " You may regret it if you don't go." So I finally, then got to talk different people. They said, "Oh, by all means go. Because not only that, you'll never get it so reasonable." See, cause going with a group, that way it was a lot cheaper then if you had to pay for everything yourself. So I went and enjoyed it very much.

SIGRIST: When you were in Frankfurt, [clears throat], when you went to Frankfurt, how did you feel when you were in Frankfurt?

REITZ: I felt very good. Especially when I saw how nice it is over there. It was so clean. You couldn't, it didn't find a piece of paper in the street. Everything was immaculate. Even the priest that was with us, he says, "Isn't it marvelous?" When you see how clean a place can be.

SIGRIST: Do you like to keep things clean?

REITZ: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...yourself? Yes. What part of your personality is, is...

REITZ: Huh?

SIGRIST: What part of your personality is truly German?

REITZ: [Long pause] Well, one of the things is, learning that you don't have to have everything but you can make things do. Just because this one have a, may have a beautiful fur coat, that doesn't mean that you have to have one.

SIGRIST: Great. That's a good place for us to end I think.

REITZ: Okay.

SIGRIST: Ms. Reitz, thank you very much.

REITZ: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: For letting me ask you these questions.

REITZ: I'm, I'm sorry I couldn't say more.

SIGRIST: Oh, you did a good job. It was a long time ago, that we're talking about.

REITZ: I know. A hundred years ago.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] A hundred years ago. So I think you did a good job.

REITZ: Thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off with Ms. Elizabeth Reitz on September 19th, 1997. A Friday morning in New Milford, New Jersey at the Woodcrest Center. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW
EI-943/Reitz