

EI-963

MAGGIE WAAGE

BIRTHDATE: MARCH 17, 1917

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INTERVIEWER: ROGER HERTZ [PH]

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PORT:

RESIDENCES:

WAAGE: [unclear] but they can't say [unclear].

SIGRIST: That's all right.

WAAGE: Pfft.

SIGRIST: Okay. Go ahead, Roger.

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: Good afternoon. This is Roger Hertz for the National Park Service and the Ellis Island Oral History Project. Today is September 30th, 1997 and I'm at the Catari Residence at the home of Maggie Waage, along with Paul Sigrist, who is the director of the Ellis Island Oral History Project, Jody Parsowith, who is a staff member here at Catari Residence. And Miss Waage came from Norway. In what year do you remember coming to the United States?

WAAGE: No, I don't remember that because I'm 150 years now.

HERTZ: [chuckles] Do you remember your birth date?

WAAGE: S—seventeen of March.

HERTZ: Seventeenth of March.

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: And what year?

WAAGE: 1917.

HERTZ: And about how old were you when you came to the United States?

WAAGE: I don't think I was born here. Maybe I was. 'Scuse me.

HERTZ: Well, just in case you were born, do you remember which town in Norway you were born in?

WAAGE: Hmm. Which town?

HERTZ: Where in Norway were you born?

WAAGE: Sire.

HERTZ: Can you spell that for us?

WAAGE: S-I-R-E. [knocking sound] [unclear] sneaking in.

HERTZ: The noise you heard was somebody knocking at the door. And I might want to mention at this point that there is an air conditioner that might be providing some background noise. Do you remember anything about the town that you were born in?

WAAGE: No, I can't remember that now. I'm 150 years. You just—I don't think many people could remember that. [sighs]

HERTZ: Can you tell us some things about your family? Your father?

WAAGE: He was dead when I was born.

HERTZ: What was his name?

WAAGE: Jens Tobiason [PH]. Tobiason.

HERTZ: Tobiason. Can you spell that for us?

WAAGE: J-E-N-S T-O—no, I can't.

HERTZ: Okay. And—and your mother's name?

WAAGE: My mother's name was Maria. Not [unclear] Maria. Regular Maria.

HERTZ: Can you t—you remember some things about your mother that you can tell us?

WAAGE: No. No, I can't remember anything about her.

HERTZ: What she looked like?

WAAGE: What she looked like? [whispers] She looked like a stupid ass. I can't say that high, you know, in high key.

HERTZ: Maybe you can describe it a little bit.

WAAGE: Hmm, I heard then that so many times that she'd be able to catch on now.

HERTZ: When you were a little girl, were there brothers and sisters?

WAAGE: Yeah, they killed them off.

HERTZ: Who?

WAAGE: The—yeah. Oh, yeah. That's—I—that's what I would like to—to know. [coughs] Excuse me. No, I don't think so because was so many different languages and—and Hatl [PH] was there. I remember that. And he was a goldfish on this atmosphere here, you know. And there was quite a few of them. [singing] "Tra, la, la, la. La, la, la, la, la." No, no, no.

HERTZ: Wh—what is that son—that tune you were just singing?

WAAGE: That—did I sing it at home now?

HERTZ: Something like a little song you were just humming or something. Would—did that have any special significance?

WAAGE: I don't think so. I know that if they come to my house, I wanted to come in and show them out.

HERTZ: This was in Norway.

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: Soldiers?

WAAGE: Probably. There was always soldiers around there. [clears throat]

HERTZ: About how old were you that you remember the soldiers were there?

WAAGE: Oh, I was born years before those people.

HERTZ: So you were still in Norway when those people came?

WAAGE: Yeah, yeah.

HERTZ: Tell us a little about the town that you grew up in in Norway.

WAAGE: There was two little towns there, Sire—

HERTZ: Uh-hmm.

WAAGE: —where I lived, and Skudeneshown [PH]. It was a town—oh, yeah. Most of the town they went to when they were selling fish and all [unclear].

HERTZ: Where the market was.

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: Can you spell that for us, that other town?

WAAGE: No, I don't think so.

HERTZ: And when you went to town—to this other town for—for the market, what was—was that a big event in your family or was this every day or—

WAAGE: No, it was—it was in early spring. And then all the fishermens came out and—and they bought fish and they bought what we called at that time—all us children called it s—shit on a shingle. And they—it was hard for them to pronounce that. So we children had fun.

HERTZ: Do you remember games that you played as a child?

WAAGE: Ludo [PH].

HERTZ: I'm sorry. Could you say it again?

WAAGE: Ludo.

HERTZ: What is ludo?

WAAGE: It's—[chuckles] I don't know. In all those years, I have forgotten most of it. And I would like to forget the rest too.

HERTZ: Hmm.

WAAGE: It was very nice, anyhow, so I don't think you will like it.

HERTZ: Can you remember a little bit about school when you were a child?

WAAGE: Yeah, we had the same teacher for seven years. And her name was Lena Laweik [PH]. And we all had her like a god. If we had trouble, we went to Lena Laweik.

HERTZ: I'm—could you repeat that? I didn't hear you. I'm sorry.

WAAGE: Len—if we had trouble, and we had trouble often because we were only tiny—yeah. And then we went from there and then we—she gave us lunch. She took very good care of her children.

HERTZ: The teacher?

WAAGE: Uh-hmm.

HERTZ: How many children were in the class?

WAAGE: Sometimes 18 or 20. She said we couldn't—we couldn't take more because you were—that's what they call [unclear].

HERTZ: That's what—

WAAGE: Very little education. But she took us in from Sunday school and said, "Remember this and remember that." And we said, "Yes, yes, yes." We yessed her to death. She says, "Yeah, that's enough for today."
[singing] "Ta, ta, dum, dum, de-dum, bum, be-bum, be-bum, be-bum. Ba-bum, be-de-de-da. Hmm, hmm, hmm."

HERTZ: Were there a lot of farms around in the town where you lived or was it mostly a city?

WAAGE: The—it was a city over in—in the—in the country. It was a city.

HERTZ: And what did most people in the city work at?

WAAGE: Fishing.

HERTZ: Fishing.

WAAGE: Yeah, that was the—I really don't—

HERTZ: So the town was near the coast?

WAAGE: Yeah. Very close to the coast. And we—when we sold fish to the farmer, she was smart enough to teach us tricks. [chuckles]

HERTZ: What kind of tricks?

WAAGE: I can't remember that now. But she said, "And—and don't be stupid. Act like gentlemen and l—and ladies." We have been acting like gentlemen and all that stuff that he want.

HERTZ: This was very important.

WAAGE: Yes, it was. It was very important. And he called us, when he got mad at us, he called us Yalona [PH].

HERTZ: He—he called you—

WAAGE: "Yalona," he said. "Jealous offspring," [chuckles] in English.

HERTZ: Uh-hmm.

WAAGE: And we didn't like the—the Eng—the English.

HERTZ: Didn't—

WAAGE: No, no, no. We didn't like him.

HERTZ: Did you speak English or did you speak Norwegian?

WAAGE: Swedish—

HERTZ: Swedish.

WAAGE: —English and Norwegian.

HERTZ: At home? Which one at home?

WAAGE: Did we have a home? I don't think so. Well, maybe we m—maybe I have forgotten that. Money was the main thing to remember, money, money, money and more money. And that he t—I—thinks he—he taught us to—to more rely and [unclear] to better [unclear] for us. And I believe it. I was so dullible—stupid that it wasn't funny. [clears throat] But it was nice to get out and those big ships coming in and going out and—yeah.

HERTZ: What—were people in your family involved in fishing?

WAAGE: Yeah. And also, they immigrated a lot to the—the United States because we couldn't make the kind of money where we was living. But if we went to the—to the—the Salvation Army, they open a—a door for us stupid—and the—he took very good care of us.

HERTZ: Who did? Who? Who took good care of you? When you just said that.

WAAGE: The—the—[sighs] that Salvation Army.

HERTZ: Oh. Do you remember how old you were when you started to think about money?

WAAGE: Since I was born.

HERTZ: [chuckles]

WAAGE: [chuckles] All we was thinking of was money, money and more money. Without money, we couldn't exist. And if they didn't give us some extra, Was she checking us?

HERTZ: No, it's okay.

WAAGE: I don't like when people check on us.

HERTZ: No, nobody's checking.

WAAGE: Okay. Yeah, in the meantime, I know they were checking. But I—what could I say? A piece of shit like me? No. They didn't listen to me.

HERTZ: We were talking about money and you, as a child—and you said that you always knew that money was very important to you.

WAAGE: Yeah, it was. From the day I was born, it was very important.

- HERTZ: Were there other things that were important in the house?
- WAAGE: In—in the house?
- HERTZ: In—or on your family?
- WAAGE: No, I—not that I know of. And if there was, you forget about it.
- HERTZ: Was it a very religious family?
- WAAGE: N—no, they were like a lot of people. But it was very honest.
- HERTZ: Very honest.
- WAAGE: Yeah. Stupid honest.
- HERTZ: So with money and honesty and dress, there were a lot of rules that you followed?
- WAAGE: Uh-hmm. And we children thought was stupid. And stupid it was, believe me.
- HERTZ: What did you hear about America?
- WAAGE: Not much because we—we couldn't care less about hearing all this and that and the other thing. All we was thinking of was money, money, money, so we could buy and sell stuff. And the teacher, who—who told us—she had a nice way to teach us too, you know, and she said, "But don't tell anybody what you learned because it doesn't pay." [chuckles] Which was true. It didn't pay. No.
- HERTZ: Can you just tell us before we begin the journey to America—can you tell us a little bit what your house was like?
- WAAGE: It was a solid, good house. It wasn't too big but the man who took care of that, he said he—that that was nothing. He said he should handle that [unclear]. And we did. And the—and the boss there called us Yalona.
- HERTZ: He called you what?
- WAAGE: Yalona.
- HERTZ: What does that mean?
- WAAGE: The jealous offspring. But in my daily language, nobody could understand it.

HERTZ: A lot of people who listen to these interviews are interested in food and kitchens and dishes. Do you remember some things about what food was like at home?

WAAGE: At home?

HERTZ: Uh-hmm.

WAAGE: Delicious food. Delicious food, it was. And we—if we had to go out and eat something, we always took a little package with us for the—hmm. Yeah.

HERTZ: Like a little knapsack or something?

WAAGE: Uh-hmm.

HERTZ: And what kind of food would you have at home?

WAAGE: I had real good food. That—that lady who took care of us, she was a really—really darling. No—nothing was good enough for us. I'm afraid she was very well paid. I—I know she was. Do I hear machine?

MAN: [sentence unclear].

WAAGE: Oh.

HERTZ: Now, when you started to come to America, do you remember how it was presented to you and what you—how you came here?

WAAGE: Hmm. Hmm, yeah. They took us right on a boat and showed us around the whole boat and—and we taught them to speak home English so nobody could un—understand us. It was very important. And I will—I will tell you, like this. Nobody could open that. And, oh, they—all the people come and ask if we—we will teach them the same thing. “No,” I said. “I can't do that.”

HERTZ: Maggie has her hands clenched in a very different type of a way.

WAAGE: Uh-hmm.

HERTZ: Who was it that took you to America?

WAAGE: Oh, that I don't know. But he was a good—an excellent seaman and he always come to my father and—and—and took us if we had to go and shop and things like that. He took us to the best store he could find.

HERTZ: Do you remember why you came to America?

WAAGE: Oh, no. No, no. I don't know that. I think it was—in Oslo, we had to—yeah, we had to go to Oslo. And there they gave us permit to go around and, if we had money, we could shop.

HERTZ: And what was the reason that you left Norway and came to America?

WAAGE: Because there was the—the—the land of God.

HERTZ: America was the land—

WAAGE: Mmm, yeah. That's what they told us. They—those jackasses who took us to the—'scuse me. This—

HERTZ: Do you remember the name of the ship? [clears throat] The name of the ship?

WAAGE: No, no, no. I can't remember the name of the ship. Stevangafeud, it was. Stevangafeud was the name of the—

HERTZ: Of the ship.

WAAGE: —ship. But they changed name every so often.

HERTZ: Uh-hmm. About how old were you?

WAAGE: Old enough to swear and—and tell them to go to hell. And then they—we was punished. Everybody got supper that day but not me because I was a big mouth. And—and the teacher said, "You have to learn to keep your mouth shut." "Never!" I said to him. "Never!" God gave me that mouth so I should use it. And he also said, "Never give in. Never!" And I never did. So they took me in—in the house—in the—yeah, in the house there and spanked me. I had never been spanked before.

HERTZ: This was where?

WAAGE: That was in Stev—in Oslo [unclear].

HERTZ: In Oslo.

WAAGE: Oslo.

SIGRIST: [whispers] Ask what year.

HERTZ: What year? Do you remember?

WAAGE: No, I have lost my mind since then.

HERTZ: When you were on the ship, ca—about how many days did it take to get across?

WAAGE: Nine days.

HERTZ: Nine days.

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: Was it a nice journey or—

WAAGE: No, that trip was nasty. But they could do it in eight days too if the—the weather was—

HERTZ: Hmm, so the weather was bad?

WAAGE: Mmm, yeah.

HERTZ: Were you sick?

WAAGE: No. I was too ornery and nasty.

HERTZ: [chuckles]

WAAGE: I never was sick. And if I was, I wouldn't tell him, you know. I was very bitchy and I learned a lot of bad language and I needed it, needed it very well.

HERTZ: Do you remember other people on the ship?

WAAGE: Yes. But most of them are dead now.

HERTZ: Hmm.

WAAGE: Or some of them have changed there now and completely from Norwegian to—

HERTZ: Do you remember doing things on the ship or what it was like to eat?

WAAGE: Yeah, we was treated very good.

HERTZ: Hmm?

WAAGE: Yeah. They were very nice to us and some of those people came and sneaked in. They said, "Did you do that? Did you put that down on—on the"—you know.

HERTZ: Were you still a child?

WAAGE: Yes.

HERTZ: About 10 years old, maybe?

WAAGE: Around that. No, I don't think I was 10.

HERTZ: A little younger?

WAAGE: Yeah, a little—yeah. But I could swear a lot in Swedish and Danish and Norwegian and—and, you know, and we needed that.

HERTZ: When you came to New York and—do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time?

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: What was—tell us about that.

WAAGE: Oh, that was—ah, [chuckles] do—I can't describe it. In—I thought I was on my way to—to heaven when I saw that because the atmosphere in our little country was very tiny. But he said, when we t—he asked us. He wanted—he wanted to see if we would change our name. So we said we never in thousand year. That's what I said.

HERTZ: Who—who is this doctor? Who—who is he that you said—

WAAGE: We were supposed to be very polite and say Doctor so and so. And that Doctor so and so was—he—he dried his tears and—

HERTZ: Was this somebody in America?

WAAGE: Yeah. And then he did like this to us. He was a nice guy.

HERTZ: Do you have any memories of coming to Ellis Island?

WAAGE: Oh, yeah.

HERTZ: Tell—can you explain?

WAAGE: Yeah. They scared us. “If you don’t behave, he will throw you into—in the water and wash—wash you clean,” he said they said to us.

HERTZ: Who—who said this?

WAAGE: It was some big shot, big, big shit, I mean.

HERTZ: At Ellis Island?

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: And how long did you stay on Ellis Island? Do you remember?

WAAGE: Nine days.

HERTZ: Nine days?

WAAGE: Yes. [clears throat] “Let us have them for a week or so,” he said, the man, because we—I think we kind of learn a lot from those jackasses. That’s what they call us.

HERTZ: Do you remember why you stayed here for nine days on Ellis Island?

WAAGE: Yeah, it was a hurricane going on all—everywhere. So all—everyone was seasick. So—

HERTZ: Did they—

WAAGE: Listen.

HERTZ: Did they—I’m sorry. Go ahead.

WAAGE: And when they come to me they said, “Oh, we—you can’t do anything with her because she’ll die anyhow.” So I said to myself, ‘I—I—you are the one is going to die first.’ And he did. They could make, you know, a lot of fun and have all kinds of sayings, half English, half Norwegian, half Americans.

HERTZ: Are there special memories, maybe one or two, that you have of Ellis Island?

WAAGE: I—[clears throat] I make myself sick.

HERTZ: What do you mean?

WAAGE: Because I was afraid of it.

HERTZ: Did they give you food?

WAAGE: Oh, we had the best food.

HERTZ: Anything new?

WAAGE: No, no. M—mainly Scandinavian food.

HERTZ: On Ellis Island, you had Scandinavian?

WAAGE: Yeah. They had—didn't have it before but they—they got it then.

HERTZ: And who met you when you—in America? Who did you meet in America?

WAAGE: I can't remember exactly who it was but—but it was a [unclear].

HERTZ: It was?

WAAGE: It was a really [unclear].

HERTZ: And—

WAAGE: So we had to behave that day.

HERTZ: What was it like the first day in New York City?

WAAGE: In New York City? We were scared shitless. [chuckles] In my country, the—it was small. You know, there was those big things like we had—we had here, you know.

HERTZ: We have about a minute left. Can you just tell us, did you get married eventually?

WAAGE: Yeah.

HERTZ: And what was your husband's name?

WAAGE: I have no idea.

HERTZ: Do you have children?

WAAGE: I n—yes, I was married to another—

HERTZ: Excuse me?

WAAGE: I was married to another seaman.

HERTZ: To another seaman?

WAAGE: Yeah, because that jerk I was married to before never showed up. He changed his name and he changed everything. So, whatever.

HERTZ: And were you, in the end, happy that you came to America?

WAAGE: No.

HERTZ: No? [chuckles]

WAAGE: No.

HERTZ: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Norway?

WAAGE: Now, that's—that, I couldn't tell you. I—I have no idea. I don't think it would be heaven on earth with my husband. But I think they shot him right there. So I'm not worried about that.

HERTZ: Is there any one thing that you'd like to tell us before we come to an end about, maybe, your experiences in America or whatever?

WAAGE: N—yeah, but not with all those people around here. But I—I would tell you a few little stories.

HERTZ: Just one?

WAAGE: A few.

HERTZ: A few?

WAAGE: Yeah. Little stories. And a lot of children there was very—they had—they were all scared. They were afraid of—you know, they—they called all the people animals. And I guess it was. The first one who—who learned about people, they was the children. And if they didn't get the answer the way they wanted, they went to the children and asked them.

HERTZ: Who was the "they?"

WAAGE: The government and the Norweg—and the English American government. But we couldn't care less.

HERTZ: Well, we—Maggie, we'd like to—to thank you very much for talking with us this afternoon.

WAAGE: Was nothing to talk about.

HERTZ: Oh, there was a lot. Thank you very much.

WAAGE: You're welcome, sir. You're welcome.

HERTZ: We've been talking with Maggie Waage and it is September 30th, 1997 in New York City. My name is Roger Hertz and this is for the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

[END OF INTERVIEW]