

EI-988

MICHEL HUYSMAN

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, March 25th, 1998. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Mr. Michel Huysman. Mr. Huysman was born in Belgium of Dutch—of parents, Jewish parents from the Netherlands. They had gone to Belgium; he was born in Belgium. He came to the United States in 1942 on a Dutch passport. He was 14 years old at that time. And he was detained here at Ellis Island for one or two nights. I should also say for the sake of the tape that Kevin Daley is running the equipment, and Mr. Huysman's wife, Carol, is out in the recording studio listening to us. Mr. Huysman, thank you very much for—

HUYSMAN: My pleasure.

SIGRIST: —coming all the way from Florida.

HUYSMAN: My pleasure, sir.

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

HUYSMAN: February 5th, 1928.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about how you came to be born in Belgium.

HUYSMAN: My father was a diamond cutter in Holland and, since Belgium and Holland are both diamond cutting places in the—they were in—they were in Holland during World War II. And right after World War II, they moved to Belgium because, apparently, opportunity might have been better there for diamond cutters. So that's when they moved to—to—to Belgium.

SIGRIST: World War I, you mean?

HUYSMAN: World War I.

SIGRIST: Yes.

HUYSMAN: I'm very sorry.

SIGRIST: That's okay. World War I.

HUYSMAN: Yes, World War I, they moved to Belgium. And it was after—a little bit after, because they were married and I think—in the—in the '20—right around 1920, '21. And from that time, they stayed in Belgium. As a matter of fact, my last name spelled here, H-U-Y-S-M-A-N originally was H-U-I. But the Belgians spelled it H-U-Y and that's where one of the changes came in.

SIGRIST: So the—the original spelling should be H-U-I—

HUYSMAN: I. Yes, that's the original spelling.

SIGRIST: —S-M-A-N.

HUYSMAN: Has never been used since—

SIGRIST: I see.

HUYSMAN: —[unclear] during my lifetime.

SIGRIST: And was your first name the same? What is—

HUYSMAN: No.

SIGRIST: —your full name? The name that you were born with?

HUYSMAN: The name I was born with was Machiel Huysman, M-A-C-H-I-E-L H-U-Y-S-M-A-N. But everybody called me Michel. In Belgium, the name Michel was more popular. So that was it and I kept that.

SIGRIST: What was the town in Belgium that you were born in?

HUYSMAN: A suburb of Antwerp called Borgerhout but it would be Antwerp, Belgium, really.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Borger—

HUYSMAN: B-O-R-G-E-R-H-O-U-T.

SIGRIST: Thank you. We try to get all the spelling out—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —at the beginning of the interview. [laughter] Do you know anything about the day you were born? Did anyone ever tell you a story about the day that you were born?

HUYSMAN: [sighs] A lot of story but it's—it's hard to recall exactly which one. Well, it was a great joyful occasion. I was the first male child born in my family in a great number of years. [chuckles] That's about it. But that—I was born at home and otherwise, that was the beginning of a long adventure. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: All right. Well, before we start with your adventure, let's—you've spoken a little bit about your parents. I'd like a little more information. First of all, what was your father's name?

HUYSMAN: Jacob.

SIGRIST: And tell me what you know about his family background.

HUYSMAN: Working people. He had lovely parents. My grandparents were wonderful people. I was—my grandfather's name was also Michel and so I was named after him.

SIGRIST: What was your grandfather's profession?

HUYSMAN: He was a diamond cutter and then later on a diamond broker. Now, all this sounds big but these were very hard working, very average-paying type of professions. I was his favorite, of my grandfather. My father

had, let's see, three brothers and two sisters. Very close family, very loving, close family.

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that your father used to talk about about his childhood? Maybe a story he liked to tell over and over again?

HUYSMAN: Oh, many of them. I really haven't thought about too many of them. But I've—he was the caretaker of the family. Even as a young boy, he was the one that always was very responsible and very—very close to—to his family. I remember my grandmother became ill with pneumonia a number of years before the war. I was rather small, of course. I remember him being the man who really took everything in hand and really actually saved her life through his great care, because there was no penicillin or any of those medications available.

SIGRIST: Had your grandparents also gone to Belgium?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes. Yes, they moved to Belgium at the same time with—actually, with the entire fam—with—not the entire family. There were one brother and one sister of my father that remained in Amsterdam, and one sister and two brothers that moved with them to Antwerp. Unfortunately, those people died at the Germans hands. But not for my grandparents. They were—they—they died—I'll tell you as we go along.

SIGRIST: Okay.

HUYSMAN: If you want to.

SIGRIST: Can you sort of characterize your father's personality for me?

HUYSMAN: My father was a sort of a—yes, he—he had a wonderful, wonderful sense of humor, an instigative type of sense of humor. He was a man—he had a sixth grade education but was extremely well read, very intelligent, very—oh, I mean, he led us out of the—out of the dangers through these—through all of these years. He was a kind man, a hard worker.

SIGRIST: As a small child, is there a specific story that sticks out in your mind or something you enjoyed doing with your father, as you were a small child?

HUYSMAN: [chuckles] Every time I come upon one little thing with him, [chuckles] we took a—we used—he took me on a tour of the port of Antwerp. There were special boats, the flandry [PH] of boats. I don't know why that one sticks out so much. But we went through the locks. And

[chuckles] as we were going through one lock, it broke [chuckles] and we got stuck on this boat for about seven or eight hours until they repaired the lock. And unfortunately, he hadn't brought any money with him. He just got on, you know, to take a little ride. And on the boat they were making foods, French fries and all this stuff. I was begging him for—because he—he just couldn't do anything [chuckles] because he didn't have any money with him. What I do remember most about him though, really is the trips we would take. He would take me to museums every weekend, practically. Or we'd go to Amsterdam to visit his family to the Reichs [PH] Museum. On Tuesday night, I remember sitting with him every Tuesday night turning on Radio Milan and hearing the opera from the [unclear] of Milan. So by the time I was six, seven or eight I could name almost every Italian opera and singer. And we would sit and listen to that. So this is one of—I'm—I'm—I'm so grateful that he introduced all of these things to me.

SIGRIST: As a child, did you have a particular favorite opera or did he have a particular favorite that he liked to listen to?

HUYSMAN: Well, I used to love to hear “Benyomino Jili” [PH] at the time. That—my favorite—an opera [unclear]. I don't know. He loved the things like “Poliachio,” [PH] the Verdi operas and so on, the melodious—you know, very melodious things.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that your father was a diamond cutter.

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have any experience with his work as a child? Did he ever take you to his—wherever he did this?

HUYSMAN: Oh, yes. In fact, he had a dif—he had a specific type of profession, which was a—diamonds were cut without—with—in those years, they had a mechanical dop that holds the diamond. They also had one—

SIGRIST: Dop?

HUYSMAN: Dop is the—the tong, the—the piece of equipment that holds a diamond on the wheel to polish the facet.

SIGRIST: Is that D-O-P? Dop?

HUYSMAN: D-O-P, yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: And there's one type of the profession in which you have to make a very small, delicate facets. You can't use that—at those years, couldn't use a piece of equipment for that. So they had to put in lead. And that's what he did. He would melt lead, make a form and put the diamond in the lead with that part protruding that would have to be polished very carefully. And that was a very special profession, which—and he would take me to the factory and I would go in and, you know, see—

SIGRIST: Does something specific stick out in your mind about visiting that factory? Or maybe something that happened one time when you were visiting that factory?

HUYSMAN: No, not particularly. Not that I can think of right now. No, no. Except I was always amazed by—for example, one factory had this huge steam generator with this huge belt. I mean, I was, you know, very small. It looked like I was walking into some gigantic wonderland.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] [unclear].

HUYSMAN: But I remember. Everybody was sitting there polishing and everybody was singing because it's a very dull, boring profession. So people joke with each other and they sing and they keep the time busy. Putting facets on those stones is not exactly a—exciting. It looks exciting to the outside. Oh, a diamond cutter. [chuckles] I spent 10 years doing it and it was dull.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. [chuckles] What was your mother's name?

HUYSMAN: My mother's name was—she was born—her name Judith but they call—they called her Judith or Julia.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

HUYSMAN: Kryn—K-R-Y-N.

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

HUYSMAN: Well, her family background was interesting. Her mother's—my grandmother's maiden name was Lopes Cardoso. They descended from the Sephardic Jews that came from Portugal to Holland in the 1500s, I think, early 1500s.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that name, please?

HUYSMAN: L-O-P-E-S C-A-R-D-O-S-O.

SIGRIST: Is that hyphenated in the middle?

HUYSMAN: No.

SIGRIST: No. Just—

HUYSMAN: No. And it's—but it's a Portuguese spelling because these were Portuguese Sephardics. And they were considered the bluebloods of Judaism. And my father's family came from Northern Germany at the time after Martin Luther's—there were pogroms because the Jews didn't [unclear]. They left and they came into Holland. And Holland is a country that accepted both sides completely freely. And these people lived free lives from then on till Nazi times. And my grandfather was one of the few to marry [chuckles] with a Sephardic woman because they also did not intermarry a great deal. And the—she was a magnificent looking woman, my grandmother. I remember. She was like a, you know—the grand dame, although she wasn't by nature. She was a big softie.

SIGRIST: Is there a story you can tell me about—about your interaction with your grandmother

HUYSMAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Something—

HUYSMAN: I sure can. I couldn't stand losing games so my gr—we had a game like Lotto and this sort of things. And my grandmother would lose on purpose, just so that I wouldn't cry. So this—she died when I was six or seven. I still remember those things about her. Strange how you can remember things, you know, so well

SIGRIST: That's why we're here. [laughs]

HUYSMAN: Oh, she was—she was just—she was a wonderful woman.

SIGRIST: Did they move to Belgium also?

HUYSMAN: I don't know when they—yes, they did. Yeah, yeah. They did. And they must have moved with my—when my mother moved because my mother had a brother and a sister that lived in Amsterdam that did not move, although my uncle, my—which, the younger, they had to be

moved to Belgium. Then they probably returned to—to Holland. I'm a little vague about that part of it.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that your mother used to tell about her childhood? Something that happened when she was a little girl?

HUYSMAN: No, she very rarely—she very rarely talked about that. Oh, she talked about her family and—and her—what her—her brothers and so on. Otherwise, she—I don't remember her telling, you know, the interrelationship with her brother, her older brother, who was drafted in the Dutch Army and who did all kinds of things to stay out of it, including making believe he was deaf. And as he walked out of the medical room they dropped a bag of coins behind him. And he turned around he said, you know—and one time he decided to be crazy and they took him to a madhouse, to a—to hospital. [chuckles] And he begged to be let out to get into the army. That kind of thing. I remember these sort of—I don't know, they're certainly unimportant little things but they—

SIGRIST: Fascinating details.

HUYSMAN: —were fun.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: They were fun.

SIGRIST: Can you characterize your mother's personality for me?

HUYSMAN: Yes. She was a—a heavysset woman, not obese, but a heavysset, very beautiful woman. She had the—she had the Sephardic look.

SIGRIST: What is the Sephardic look? What do you mean by—

HUYSMAN: Dark—dark-complected and dark eyes and—but she was just very, very gentle, very gentle. I don't think she ever laid a hand on me, which is more than I can say with my father. But she just—big gentle person, big—as I grew up she wasn't that big. When—when I was little, she looked like a very big lady to me.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little about your relationship with your mother when you were a child, or a story that sticks out in your mind about something you did with your mom?

HUYSMAN: No, just—well, basically, the—the—she used to stay—on Saturdays, sometimes, school in Belgium was—have all week, including

Saturday. But Wednesday and Saturday afternoon you had time off. So she used to take me to different shows for kids, specifically for children. And I would go with her on Saturdays [unclear].

SIGRIST: Did your mother have a job outside of the home?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes. Diamond cutting was a very precarious job. Times were good. Times were bad. When times were bad, she would actually go on the road and sell ladies garments to the rural areas in Belgium. And because of her personality, she was unique, so sweet. Because of her personality, she used to get letters and orders from these people, "Please come, and we need this and this and this." She had a clientele that, unlike anybody else that would call her, keep calling her back because they just trusted her. And she was a very trustworthy person. Yeah, she worked. Whenever diamond times were bad, she would go out there and help.

SIGRIST: Did you ever accompany her?

HUYSMAN: No, no, no. And [unclear]—another business they had was, for example, my father bought a grocery store when I was about five, six years old. And a beautiful store but he would get up in the morning about four to get the stuff to supply the store. My mother would be in the store all day. But the store failed because it was a very beautiful store, but the Belgians are extremely xenophobic. They don't like dealing [chuckles] with non-Belgians. And the little old Belgian store across the street did very well. But our—my father, somehow, didn't. Although he spoke perfect Flemish, it didn't work. [chuckles] You know.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Well, tell me about the—did you live in one place in Belgium prior to—to getting out of Belgium?

HUYSMAN: Well—

SIGRIST: Did you grow up in one house, I guess—

HUYSMAN: No, no.

SIGRIST: —is what I'm asking.

HUYSMAN: No, no, no. We lived in—in—in—in [clears throat] where I was born. We moved twice before I was six. And then we moved into another area of Belgium, another—an area, another suburb. And I lived there from age six to 12.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of that suburb?

HUYSMAN: Deurne South. D-E-U-R-N-E South. Zuid—Z-U-I-D, which is right, all next to each other around Antwerp.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your day-to-day life as a child growing up.

HUYSMAN: It was playing games and playing games, going to school and playing games, being with friends, with—with kids, other children my age. And a lot of parks there, so you go and play in—in parks. The second place, Deurne, from six to 12, which of course I remember better, there was an old fortress right next to where we lived. Then we would play cowboys and Indians in Dutch, or in Flemish.

SIGRIST: [laughs] Other, perhaps a nursery rhyme or a little child's poem that you remember in Flemish that you could speak, say for us on tape, or even in Dutch, for that matter?

HUYSMAN: Oh, I—I speak both languages still to this day. I have no—

SIGRIST: Something that you learned as a child.

HUYSMAN: Well, on St. Nicholas Day. I could—guess I could do that one. “[speaking in Dutch].” That's thank you, St.—on St. Nicholas Day, which is not Christmas, December 6th, they would give us—we'd hang our socks or shoes up and we'd get candy. It wasn't anything, you know, like here. But those type of things we would, you know.

SIGRIST: And which language was that?

HUYSMAN: Dutch.

SIGRIST: That was in Dutch.

HUYSMAN: That was Dutch.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: Flemish, I don't remem—we—we spoke Dutch at home.

SIGRIST: As a Jewish family—

HUYSMAN: It's the same language.

SIGRIST: —did you celebrate St. Nicholas Day?

HUYSMAN: Everybody—it was not really a religious day.

SIGRIST: I see.

HUYSMAN: It was a children's day to get chocolates. That's chocolate letters.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: In—in Holland, we would get [unclear], both letters, which was a pastry type. And we—it was that kind of a celebration. We did not celebrate Christmas. But I'll tell you [chuckles], my family didn't celebrate any religious holiday.

SIGRIST: Well, I was—that was going to be my next question. Can you kind of characterize how your family approached their religion and how you did practice?

HUYSMAN: Only, they approached it culturally. In other words, we were Jews and anything that was derogatory to—said derogatory to us, we—we objected to very strongly. But religion would never—in—in—in Holland, if you were—the Jews that were religious were orthodox, and in Belgium too. The Bel—in Belgium, of course, you had a lot of immigration from Eastern Europe. And those Jews were quite religious. But the Dutch Jew, who were 400 years in Holland, had sort of shed that. Now, some of them remained religious but they remained very orthodox religious. This is something, which we just never got into. But we were Jewish.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little about—were there any ways that you did practice your religion at home or in a formal way?

HUYSMAN: Not in any formal way. I mean, once—well, we'd get matzas [PH] and eat them on Passover. That would be it. But there would no real Passover. My—apparently, my grandmother had been—my father's mother had been the last veg—vestige of religious person. But my grandfather didn't—somehow [chuckles] didn't follow with. It may sound very irreverent but she—from what my father told me, that—that she decided she was going to have a seder or Passover dinner. And she invited all of his brothers and—over for the dinner. And as they started with the first cup of wine, they all broke out into a drinking song and that was the end of the seder. She [chuckles]—so that was it as far as the religion is concerned. Bar mitzvahs, for example, were celebrated in—by our families. I was bar mitzvahed later, which was a story I'll tell you later. But a bar mitzvah was like a big party at home. Everybody performed and so on but it was not a religious day. But it

was a Jewish day. It's hard to explain. They were strongly Jewish but they had no re—they—they did not conform to the religious rules.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your grandmother's attempt at a Passover seder.

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there any other traditionally Jewish holidays that you did observe?

HUYSMAN: No, no.

SIGRIST: Hanukkah or Rosh Hashanah or—

HUYSMAN: Oh, Hanukkah was a—they used to—once in a while they would get some—again, chocolates or something like that. But I didn't. I—my father was just, you know—that's why the whole thing was ironic.

SIGRIST: Tell me a—a little bit about school as you were growing up.

HUYSMAN: Interesting. I—what I recall—probably the most interesting part was my—was my—like the—the kindergarten area of the school, which was a special type of school. And they had a Belgium, called Froebel [PH] classes, which is—Froebel is an educator who—your—your education was sort of when you—you went through these classes. And when you were considered ready for the first grade, you went into first grade.

SIGRIST: Foible was the name?

HUYSMAN: Froebel. I think it's F-R-O-E-B-E-L.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HUYSMAN: Or E-U. I'm not sure how Froebel is spelled but—so I got into the first grade at four and a half, and which helped me later on because I lost a few years moving from country to country. And I enjoyed school. I was a good student.

SIGRIST: What was your parents' educational background? You—actually, you said your father—

HUYSMAN: My father—

SIGRIST: —went to—

HUYSMAN: B—both my parents didn't have much of education. My father was a—was at sixth grade and then they went to work at age 12. They worked in a trade. But I never saw him without a book.

SIGRIST: Well, what were their attitudes about education? How did they feel about it?

HUYSMAN: They just wanted me to have good grades. There was no pressure of college. This was a whole different cultural thing. These—these West European Jews did not have that pressure of—of, "My son, the doctor," or so on. Whatever I did, I did—wanted on my own.

SIGRIST: You—you would characterize that as a more Eastern European—

HUYSMAN: Definitely.

SIGRIST: —focus—

HUYSMAN: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Because these people came from such—they were so poor and they came over here and they saw the opportunity. And so they wanted—you know, they didn't want their children to—ever to be so poor as they were. And my parents were very happy, very happy family life. So I guess it was okay with them if we had the same kind of life.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about—you mentioned your father always had a book—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —[unclear].

HUYSMAN: And Mazalo [PH] was his favorite author.

SIGRIST: Really, Mazola?

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I—I was going to say, do you have any recollections of them teaching you something in your childhood? Teaching you how to do something or how to—

HUYSMAN: No, no. Well, as I said, the music, yes. The museum. My fath—my mother was not as interested in it. My mother was not the level—intellectual that my father was. And she had her own good points. You know, just a warm, loving person.

SIGRIST: But your father had a—had a—a desire to—

HUYSMAN: My father had a desire to impart what he enjoyed to me.

SIGRIST: Right.

HUYSMAN: It had nothing to do with higher education or anything of the sort.

SIGRIST: He liked music. He liked paintings.

HUYSMAN: He liked music. He liked art. He—and—and thank God he did, you know. I'm still enjoying what he taught me.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Well, tell me a little bit about the next chapter in—in life. You know, we've gone through your childhood. Then what happened?

HUYSMAN: Well, I have to tell you. I have a sister too.

SIGRIST: Oh, yes. I didn't ask. Thank you.

HUYSMAN: Yes, Annie.

SIGRIST: And her name?

HUYSMAN: Ann.

SIGRIST: Ann. Was that her name when she was born?

HUYSMAN: Anna. No, Anna.

SIGRIST: Anna.

HUYSMAN: A-N-N-A, named after my grandmother [unclear].

SIGRIST: Do you know what year she was born?

HUYSMAN: Yes, 1924, September 7th. She lives in Florida now. Yeah, she—she was one of the reasons we left [unclear]. Very big influence on me as a child. She had—

SIGRIST: Can you talk about your relationship with Ann?

HUYSMAN: Sure, a good relationship then, a very good relationship. She—I was—always very protective to me, taught me a lot about interrelating

with my—with—with people. She—she was my older sister; that's all I could say. She really was. She was a good—good woman, good girl.

SIGRIST: Is there a story you can tell me about your interaction with her or something that happened with you and your sister in your childhood?

HUYSMAN: A lot of times I would chase her with a fork or a knife or something. [unclear]. She used to—[chuckles] she used to tolerate what I did to her. It was unbelievable. Very tolerant. No, our—just—she had a group of friends and sometimes I would go with them. You know, some little trips and so on. Not too often. They had their own circle and so on. And another important person during those years that was important later was my father's younger brother's daughter, Lea, was my cousin, L-E-A, who was deaf, became deaf at an early age. And we—she and I were like—she was a year older. Still is, I guess. And very close relationship. That was my—that was my sis—my other type of sister because we—we were such close friends.

SIGRIST: Is there a story you can tell me about how she negotiated her deafness in her everyday life, or how the family negotiated her deafness?

HUYSMAN: Oh, it was a shock when she became deaf. She was in a summer camp and came back and suddenly the child was deaf. And—

SIGRIST: From what cause?

HUYSMAN: They don't know. Mumps? Un—un—untreated or whatever it was. Something happened to—and she was deaf from then on. Took it in stride. Amazing. Went to school—to school for the deaf, very top of her class. Just amazing. That family had a bunch of people that really were good survivors, very soft, very gentle little girl.

SIGRIST: Did—getting back to my question, was there a story that you can tell me about—about maybe being out in public with your cousin, or, you know, something that—that happened that concerned her deafness that you remember?

HUYSMAN: Well, actually, I would go with her with her other deaf friends very often. And—and, you know, to lip-read and so on. And I—I was gregarious. I liked them and they liked me and it was—it was nice. It's hard—you know, I mean, I'm 70 now and this was—we're talking about 55—more—

SIGRIST: More.

HUYSMAN: More than that.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HUYSMAN: Fifty-eight years ago.

SIGRIST: Well, before we leave your early childhood, is there anything else that—that sticks out in your mind about your life at that time that you think is significant that—that we should record? Maybe—maybe describe a little bit about what you were like as a little kid. How would you characterize yourself? Before we flip the tape over.

HUYSMAN: Well, very gregarious, very talkative. My teachers used to complain to me, to my father, “Oh, he—boy, he talks a lot.” My father says, “Nothing wrong with that.” [chuckles] “If he—you know, if he wants to know questions, curious”—I was small. I was a—I was a little fellow.

SIGRIST: What were the things you didn’t like to do as a child?

HUYSMAN: It’s hard to remember. I know I didn’t like to eat.

SIGRIST: Well, what did—what did you like to do, other than listening to the radio?

HUYSMAN: Oh, play. I mean, pl—play—I had cowboys and In—we used to go to the—what I liked to do was Wednesday afternoons with—all the kids would go spend 25 [unclear], which is probably like fraction of a penny to go to the movies, and cowboy movies, western movies. I mean, I go back to the days of Tom Mix, you know. I mean, we would go and have—I’d carry my little gun on the side and we would shoot. You know, the whole thing was just absolutely hysterical when I think back. I liked that. I used to like to go with my parents or with my mother to the—to the shows, you know, that would—entertainment, and even to cabaret shows they had on Saturday afternoons in Belgium, which were for adults too. They would have, you know, music and entertainment. I—I enjoyed that very much.

SIGRIST: Is there a toy you remember that you liked, particularly, that was yours?

HUYSMAN: Yeah, sure did. It’s called a mecano set.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

HUYSMAN: It was pieces of metal that you bolt into one another. You built structures and steam engines. I remember even—I was—I couldn’t

have been older than six or seven. I would build this—have this little steam engine to do with an alcohol fire and build a train. And the train would run on steam. It was built—

SIGRIST: What was the name of that again?

HUYSMAN: Mecano.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

HUYSMAN: M-E-C-A—I think it's M-E-C-A-N-O or M-E-C-H-A-N-O.

SIGRIST: I see. All right. We're going to pause for a second and Kevin's going to flip the tapes over. And we've gotten you through childhood and we'll now pick up the story—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: —a little bit later.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now beginning side two with Michel Huysman. Tell me a little bit about what happened next. Tell—tell me about the political climate and the rise of—of Nazism and—

HUYSMAN: Right, okay.

SIGRIST: —the atmosphere at that time.

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah. I remember—you know, of course, at age 12—this were right—11, 12—1939 to 1940. Things were getting very, very difficult in Europe. There were the—the Russians and the Finns were at war. A game we used to play with—we were Russians or Finns. We always wanted to be the Finns because the Russians were the big bullies, you know, so the games—but I remember my father kept saying, "I—we're not going to be staying out of this. Something's going to happen here. We'll—before long, we'll be at war." And I remember in September—end of September of 1939 I was at a park in—in Antwerp where there was a swimming pool and—with some friends [unclear]. All of a sudden, my father came running over and got us out of—out of the place and said, "Come on home." Said, "What happened?" Well, "Germans invaded Poland and we're at—France and England declared war. So it'll be over soon." You know, France and England

and all this stuff. And my father said, "Well, let's come home be—until we know what happens." So nothing happened, actually, in Belgium, except the—the—the tension, which as a child, you don't feel so much. But my—I remember my father commenting that, before long, we probably would be into it somehow. And we were, May 10th.

SIGRIST: What were—what—were there any signs prior to that in—in your everyday life that—that things were becoming uncomfortable?

HUYSMAN: No, no. Not really. Not really. Not that I can recall. Yeah, in a way, with—I—I'm saying not really. We were getting people coming through from Germany that would—Jews that would—people that would—neighbors of mine would have them over to dinner. And they would go on through to boats to wherever. They were passing through. Belgium was a very open country. Belgium always had open—open doors to everybody. That's the nice thing I remember about that country. Unfortunately, opening the Belgium doors didn't help anything. It was—you know, it was a—it was a dead end. But they opened the doors and—and a lot of—there were a lot of refugees coming through. Yeah, I remember that.

SIGRIST: As a—

HUYSMAN: I didn't relate to them but [coughs] there were a lot of refugees coming through.

SIGRIST: As a young adolescent at that time, what—how did you get most of the news that you got? How did you find out about these things?

HUYSMAN: Radio.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: Newspaper.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned your father, of course.

HUYSMAN: Yeah, my father, who kept following it very avidly. He was a fol—a great follower of things that happened. Yeah. So that we—we kept getting that. And I was always curious to get into it so we knew what, you know, the surprise, how Finland defended itself against these massive Russian armies and actually defeated a great many of them before they finally, you know—although they fought on the side of the Germans, I never considered them, you know—they were sort of forced to. But—

SIGRIST: As a young adolescent, what—what kind of a consciousness did you have about Hitler and the—you know, the invasion of Poland? Did you understand—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —on some level what that all meant?

HUYSMAN: Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely. Just didn't realize the—the extent of it. But, yes, we did realize and we did see—we did see pictures. We did—of—of—for example, of—of the Germans invading Austria and—oh, they didn't invade. They were welcomed there. Or in—in Czechoslovakia, we would see pictures of them mistreating the Jews, to have—[unclear] looking at the Jews scrubbing the streets, and Germans standing around and Austrians standing around and laughing. Yeah, we—we did get—that—that hit me. It hit me. It started—it started to develop into a tremendous resentment.

SIGRIST: What about among the—the Belgians that you lived with around—in school or—

HUYSMAN: No, the Belgians were—it's hard to generalize but they really—no, I didn't—didn't hear much from them [unclear], except they called me dirty Jew more often than before.

SIGRIST: Well, but that's something in itself—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —that they're not doing that beforehand.

HUYSMAN: Not as much beforehand but—

SIGRIST: What kind of—was there any anti-Semitism prior to this?

HUYSMAN: Oh, yeah. There's anti-Sem—I knew there was tremendous anti-Semitism in Holland. People, you know, think, oh, this country was so—so great. A lot of people were but—

SIGRIST: And how did that manifest itself?

HUYSMAN: Well, I knew that the NSB, the National Socialist Bund of Holland and—and its leader, Mr. Mussert [PH], were very well known and—and we would—Holland, come to think of it—in—in Belgium, I remember a Boy Scout meeting or some type of Scout meeting in town where kids got together and a we watched. And they were making fun

of the German government, of Hitler and—and all—and of his henchmen. They were making fun of it so, you know, it's strange how you think back on things that you never thought of for years. And there were some of the political things like that, yes.

SIGRIST: How did your father decide to—to cope with the situation?

HUYSMAN: In what way do you mean it?

SIGRIST: Well, you mentioned he—he got you home. When—

HUYSMAN: Yes, he—

SIGRIST: —Hitler invaded Poland, he brought you home.

HUYSMAN: That's right. Apparently, he was ready to—to make some kind of decision as to what had to happen.

SIGRIST: What were his options?

HUYSMAN: Not many. [sighs] There was—you know, to run. But where to? And what—there was no reason to run at that time. And he had not thought about leaving the country, although he had plenty of friends. He had some friends that came to the United States before then and possibly could have gotten them in through—in various reasons—for work, who was a diamond cutter. Or I don't know. I'm not—now, I'm an immigration lawyer. But then, of course, I had no idea what, besides family relationship. And the quota, we knew that the quota, Dutch quota is a wide-open quota. It was a large quota. Our government, you know, preferred getting people from there, to be quite honest. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Well, so what happened? Tell me what—what happened with your family at this point?

HUYSMAN: Well, waiting and then all—all—well, the war, May 10th, 1940. About 4:35 a.m. we were woken up by—I didn't know what the sound was. It was huge noises. And I thought it was thunder or whatever it might be. But it was—it was already daylight and we lived on the third-floor apartment with a terrace. And we ran out on the terrace. And the strangest sight. There were, you know, like a mass of planes about a mile or so away [clears throat]. And they were dropping bombs. And I don't know what the [unclear] was. It was like a big white circle of sm—of—of—of—of smoke in the sky and in—in that circle, the planes were just dropping bombs. What they were bombing, I don't know. The Antwerp Airport was there but there was also some hospitals and

so it was really terror bombing us more than anything else that I could—looking back upon it. And we ran out on the terrace and just—I mean, my sister got panicked. I thought it was exciting because I was a plane nut as a kid. So I pointed, you know, at everybody with a plane. I'd say, “[unclear], Messerschmidt, [PH], a Heinkel [PH], a Stuka.” My father grabbed me, said, “Get inside.” And the old fortress that I mentioned before where we played became a bomb shelter. It was a very good one. I mean, it was deep and heavily reinforced. As a matter of fact, they grew mushrooms in the cellars there. Everybody from the neighborhood fled into—into that mushroom cellar of the fortress and waited out what was happening. And the bombings would come and go and come and go.

SIGRIST: With what kind of frequency?

HUYSMAN: Oh, probably about every hour and a half or so, another wave would come over. I used to count the planes. There were about 40, 50 planes. But since Belgium and Germany are so close, they probably just landed and took off. And then my father was concerned about his parents, who lived in another part of town, and hopped on his bicycle. That was our method of transportation—and went to their area and then came back an hour or two later. And I swear, I thought his hair was whiter. He had quite an experience. He was—his—his bicycle had a dent in it with shrapnel, had—but he said it was quieter over that—that area of town, “So let's go over there.” And we went over to that—to his parents' home, and the moment we got there, the sirens—they lived closer to the harbor—so [chuckles] the moment we got there, another raid came in that vicinity. And we all stood in the basement while the bombs came raining down and, you know, plaster falling and everything. It was quite an experience. Then we went back to our old place because we felt that that one was safer. And it was a—it was just running back and forth.

SIGRIST: How long did this keep up for, this particular raid?

HUYSMAN: Well, this was May 10th. It came down pretty solidly until—well, that particular day was the worst. The first day was the worst. Then we heard that Rotterdam had been smashed. The Germans were, you know, coming through, that the Fifth Column, as we called the German—Fifth Column had set things up so that Belgium had a defense system with canals and bridges. And the bridges were supposed to be blown up and all of that but nothing happened. There was a lot of Fifth Column people working with the Germans. Very clever group.

SIGRIST: This is 1940, you said. May 10th?

HUYSMAN: Yes, May—

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HUYSMAN: —1940.

SIGRIST: May of 1940.

HUYSMAN: So my father would be—we got to—he got together with his brother, Henry, my cousin Lea's father, and we decided, you know, we better start thinking about leaving. And we wanted to take my grandparents too, my father's parents. And they said no, they're too old. "We're not going along." I think back in 1940 they were—they were in their 60s. No, they were 70 and they said they were just too old to go. They were going to stay, "But you go." So my fa—five of us—se—no, seven of us, the four—my father, my mother, my sister and I and my unc—uncle and aunt and cousin all left together.

SIGRIST: And how much time had elapsed from May 10th to the time you left?

HUYSMAN: May 13th.

SIGRIST: May 13th, so this all happened very quickly then?

HUYSMAN: Very quickly.

SIGRIST: Yes.

HUYSMAN: The Germans were getting in there. They—they were besieging the town of Liege—Liege and they cut across southern Bel—southern Holland. So Holland was cut off. So I mean, it was a matter of fact if—we didn't realize it but these were Germans were maybe 20, 30 miles away.

SIGRIST: What did you take when you were leaving the house?

HUYSMAN: Mostly stuff pack—we packed clothes and that was it. Clothes, basically. Maybe some, you know, stuff like soap and things like that.

SIGRIST: Does something stick out in your mind that you took for yourself?

HUYSMAN: Not really.

SIGRIST: Something that was a personal object?

HUYSMAN: No, no, no. We walked out the door. We had packs, you know, like the hobo packs, a suitcase. And I—but we used to have—we packed mostly with—in—in—into—into sheets. We packed up not that many things either. I mean, it wasn't that—and then we just started walking. And I think we took a trolley or a bus or whatever, just to get outside of Antwerp a little bit. And then we were on the road the whole time.

SIGRIST: As you were leaving, either in the bus or on foot, what did you see around you? What was happening in the town in this environment that you could see?

HUYSMAN: I can't recall exactly. I don't recall. All I recall is that we were marching. There were a lot of people. I recall a lot of troops going through. Then we finally hit another little town outside of Antwerp called Melsele—M-E-L-S-E-L-E. That apparently was a—a—a—a military supply route. So Dutch and French soldiers [clears throat]—Belgian soldiers and Dutch soldiers going in different directions, Dutch soldiers fleeing from the front, some badly wounded. French soldiers coming in. And in Melsele, I remember the church bells were ringing so we didn't hear an alarm. And the German Heinkels and mostly twin-engine planes came over low, started machine gunning. And bullets [chuckles] right across the—right in front of us on the—on the road. I remember jumping behind a tree and my mother jumped into a ditch, a dry ditch with thistles. My sister, I think, ran to a church and that planes—those planes passed by. We got up again. That was our first experience with close-up fire. It was very sobering.

SIGRIST: Yeah, what were you thinking during all of this? Because how—you're—you're 12, right?

HUYSMAN: I always look back on it and I—I—I—the strange thing is I—I know my sister panicked. My father was his solid self and my mother too. The two of them were just—and I—I was 12 years old living an adventure. You know, it—I think at the age 12 you're immortal or you think you are. I thought I was because, you know, I looked at the planes. And I remember one—afterwards, I remember another plane coming in low and everybody ducked. [chuckles] And in the middle of the road was a French soldier, a [unclear] standing there looking up, [unclear]. It—it's—it's a—it's a—it was a Brigitte [PH], a French plane, a [unclear], you know, one of ours. And that was that. I thought that was a very courageous man. He's just looking up there, like that plane could have been [chuckles] a German. And we went on to there and got a bus. There were buses standing there [unclear].

SIGRIST: Were there other people coming from Belgian?

HUYSMAN: Yes. Oh, yes. Masses of them. I mean, at that particular point, refugees were starting to—like the movies, you see them with their—you know, some on bicycles, some with little carts and all that sort of stuff. They were trying to—they were being moved off the road because it was a French supply road, which was kind of a joke because the French Army had no supplies. They were the poorest looking army I had ever seen.

SIGRIST: Somewhere along the line in this process, either when you were still in Belgian or moving out, did you actually see German soldiers?

HUYSMAN: No. No, not at that time. I saw them later in life but I didn't see them then. No, no. We were trying to run from them. Saw German planes galore. And then we—we got into a bus that brought us to Ghent, which is a railroad center in Belgium. J—G—H—E—N—T. You know the city there. And we ran into a deep—in a train station and they pushed us on trains. And we—the train actually left the station and if—I remember seeing a—a French troop train or supply train pull in. And right as we got out of the station, Stukas were coming in and they leveled the train and the station, I hear, afterwards.

SIGRIST: Stukas?

HUYSMAN: Stuka, German Stukas. The dive bombers.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

HUYSMAN: You must have seen it with that bent wing and [unclear]—

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: Nasty planes.

SIGRIST: How do you spell Stuka?

HUYSMAN: S-T-U-K-A.

SIGRIST: Thank you. How—

HUYSMAN: They also attacked us—they were the ones that bombed—bombing us in Antwerp when we were with my grandparents' house, because when they dive they have a high-pitched scream. I don't know whether there were pipes on the planes or on the bombs. And it was just, you know, terrifying, terrifying sound.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that—that through this process you're carrying clothing and basics.

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: What valuables did your parents take with them? And how did they carry them?

HUYSMAN: It was a very modest family. We didn't have a great many valuables. I mean, my mother may have had a ring and some earrings and stuff. And we didn't—there were—we weren't just a, you know, diamond cutter. We were blue-collar type of family. They weren't—we were just a—so it was—it was not a—we—we didn't live where we had luxuries. We lived comfortably. We had food, clothing, et cetera and so on and a little money for entertainment. But we were not a—we were not a wealthy family at all. So there was not really any great items of value.

SIGRIST: Did your father have cash on him?

HUYSMAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: You know, how—did your father have cash on him?

HUYSMAN: Some. I don't think—

SIGRIST: That you know of?

HUYSMAN: Yeah, I don't think anything—any great amount from my uncle. They—but they had some cash on them, which apparently was pretty useless at the time, because everywhere we went we—so we—

SIGRIST: So how long were you in Ghent?

HUYSMAN: Oh, about—as soon as it took to get us from the bus into the train and out. And that train took us to the Belgian border at Knokke—K-N-O-K-K-E. It's a resort town near Ostend [PH] right at the French, Belgian border. And that was chaos.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the train ride?

HUYSMAN: The train ride. We were sitting in compartments crushed with a lot of people. But the train ride was maybe an hour, 45 minutes. Belgium is little.

SIGRIST: Right.

HUYSMAN: And [clears throat] so we—just a train ride, went through to Carraco [PH]. We got that in the—in the early evening and it was pandemonium. It was unbelievable.

SIGRIST: How so? What was—was so out of control?

HUYSMAN: People were—it was like they were all blocked in there. It was the—the Flanders Provinces. And later on I found out, in history, that's exactly what it was. There were about two and a half million refugees in this narrow—in this—in this small triangular spot. The Germans were pushing from one side and fr—from both sides, from the north and from the east. And these people were—where we were just—so we—

SIGRIST: So the accumulation of all the people that had been driven—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: —to get out.

HUYSMAN: So where to stay at night? It was nighttime. We—we looked around and there were, like, dance halls. [clears throat] Since it was a report area, they had a lot of these dance halls and entertainment areas. And they had straw on the floors and we—we all went to one and my father said, "We can't stay here. Let's find another one." So we found another one and they didn't have any room. So we said we—well, we had to go back to the first one. That was filled up so we went some other place; I don't remember where. But one of them that we missed on was hit by a bomb that night. So the next—

SIGRIST: How were the refugees cared for? D—were you offered food or—

HUYSMAN: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: —bathroom facilities or what did they do—

HUYSMAN: Army, like army type of things. I don't recall the bathroom facilities too well. But the—

SIGRIST: Just basic necessities—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —for these people.

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: They must have provided something.

HUYSMAN: There were army—I—I think there were—there was, like, Red Cross type of thing where—where some food was—was given. I—I don't—you know, I don't recall the exact feeding—the feeding habits of us as refugees was a very strange thing.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: I think my father might—we may have picked up some bread and stuff along the way and were eating that. I don't remember going hungry. And from there on, we were able to get out the next morning. Somehow, we crossed the border into France. And either by bus or by train, we wound up in—in a farm outside of Dunkirk where a French farmer who had been also an army officer, you know, gave us the run of the farm, find food—we foraged for food. I remember going into the chicken coops and picking up warm eggs right—but just freshly laid. And he furnished with bread and wine and stuff like that. French always have wine for you, somehow. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: How long were you at the farm?

HUYSMAN: Two days.

SIGRIST: Two days. Anything else stick out in your mind about that experience?

HUYSMAN: Oh, lots [unclear] that experience. First day, the French farmer said, "Don't worry. Our troops will be able to stop the Germans at"—wherever it was. And then the next morning the farmer said, "Get out as fast as you can. We can't stop them. They're going to run all over us." And I don't know whether it was—whether it was that afternoon or whether it was two days. Sometimes, those things get a little hazy. But I know at night, one night—the night that we stayed there, my cousin, remember, is a deaf mute. And we were—at night, we were—all of a sudden, planes were coming overhead. And everybody ran into a barn or we were just—you know, like the type of shelters, if it would have done any good. And the whole place lit up. The area lit up. Apparently, Germans were dropping flares to see where—you know, to rec—to try to recognize where they were, where French troops might be. And we were in a—in a—in—in sort of a barn with all the windows closed and no lights on. And I remember my cousin became hysterical, being deaf mute. And my father—my uncle, her father, said, "I don't care who comes in. My daughter's not going to get panicked." And he turned the light on. And it was a—and it was

just flares that were coming down. And somebody—somebody screamed, “Paratroopers!” Which was the great fear of all. The German paratroopers were elite troops and, you know, we were very much afraid of them. So everybody panicked a great—but it wasn’t. It was just that. And then the next morning they herded us to another train depot from that farm and we were put in a cattle—in this, 40-men, eight horse French cars, the—the freight cars, the well known French, you know, freight trains, little—the small cars. And we were crammed into those things to go with—to take refugees away.

SIGRIST: When you were at this farm, were you the only family there or were there—

HUYSMAN: Oh, no.

SIGRIST: No, there was—

HUYSMAN: Oh, no. There were a lot of people there.

SIGRIST: I see.

HUYSMAN: I don’t remember how many but a lot of them. And not just Jews. I mean, this was—it was a whole mixture of Belgians, mostly.

SIGRIST: Probably a lot of people wanted to get away from the Germans.

HUYSMAN: Yes. And most of the Belgians were not thrilled with us because they—we were Dutch and Holland had surrendered. And so, naturally, you know, when a country surrenders, whoever its members are a part of that surrender. You know, so they pointed fingers at us, saying, “You’re cowards. You gave up,” and so on. “We’re still fighting.” Yeah.

SIGRIST: So where did the French freight trains take you?

HUYSMAN: Oh, it took us zigzag through France for—we spent a—four nights and three days or five nights and four days—oh, the reverse. Four days and three nights we spent on that train zigzagging through France. It took us—Diep [PH]. I know we went from Dunkirk to Diep. Then it went inside. I forgot what cities it—it took us to. A—a most interesting ride. Half of us stood up while the other half would lie on the ground [unclear] and rest and so on. [clears throat] Bicycles were in there because that’s the Belgian transportation. And the pe—we—we were well fed. Every time the train stopped, people from town or—would—would come running up with bread and food and cheese and everything else to feed us. And we—what I remember, going through

a British army camp, and British troops came running up and gave us whatever food and anything that they could. Stra—very strange, you know, with pe—these people real ca—average people just came running up with whatever food they could find and—and brought it to us. It was a very—I still get touched thinking about that kind of thing. You know, the positive thing about the people.

SIGRIST: It's people realizing what a desperate situation everybody was in.

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: And—[unclear], sure.

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah. And these were average French farmers from small towns and so on.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed off the train when it made these stops?

HUYSMAN: Well, you—you had to get off the train every once in a while. Hu—human functions, you know, which was kind of embarrassing sometimes. I mean, you don't care. I mean, everybody's around so who cares? But the train would toot and go. And we'd never know when. So it was—the moments that they'd toot and go came. [chuckles] It was sometimes a little—it was funny. As a matter of fact, we would sit there. If we were not on the receiving end of it, which would be extremely difficult, we would be sitting and it was just funny. But it—we wound up in—the train finally wound up in Bordeaux. That's how we zigzagged from near Dunkirk to Bordeaux. And then we were distributed to different buses and places and then we were taken to a small French village south of the [unclear], the middle mountains of France north of Toulouse called Fronton—F-R-O-N-T-O-N.

SIGRIST: So Bordeaux was—was again, sort of a central point where people were then distributed—

HUYSMAN: Right, apparently.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: [clears throat] Apparently.

SIGRIST: Do—do you have any idea, any sense of how the decided who was to go to this village and who was to go to that village and—

- HUYSMAN: [clears throat] No, but it must have had to do with the nationality. I think there must have been a Dutch, just because we were all in constant touch at that moment with the Dutch government with the consulate somehow. They—I—I really don't know. Obviously, I'll never be able to find out.
- SIGRIST: What kind of papers—official papers are you traveling with throughout this experience? What do you have—
- HUYSMAN: None that I can really remember. My—my—we did have identity cards in Europe. That's about it.
- SIGRIST: Did you have—
- HUYSMAN: We didn't have passports. We didn't travel.
- SIGRIST: But you had some kind of an ID—
- HUYSMAN: We had identity cards. Yes, there were identity cards, cr—border-crossing cards that we go to Belgium or Holland, back and forth. But you could show that. Yeah. But that's about the papers. You know, I never thought about that. It's interesting.
- SIGRIST: Even photographs of yourself.
- HUYSMAN: No.
- SIGRIST: You know, identify—
- HUYSMAN: Yeah.
- SIGRIST: —it or something.
- HUYSMAN: Yeah. We—
- SIGRIST: I wonder what you had.
- HUYSMAN: Certainly not driver's license. My father didn't drive. And we had—we had identity cards. I remember they were yellow.
- SIGRIST: You're—you're pointing, what, six inches?
- HUYSMAN: Well—well, regular—yeah, a little larger than the old passports. And every [unclear] had photographs in them, my parents and—I don't know if I had one or not, if I was too young to have them. Because they were not—you know, Holland and Belgium were not—I mean,

these were very democratic countries. We didn't—identification and this sort of thing was—was not really that important.

SIGRIST: People traveled freely back and forth.

HUYSMAN: Pretty much, in between Belgium and Holland, and we never tr— again, you know, this was a pretty simple family. They did not have any great desires to go long distances. They would go visit the family in Holland every once in a while. I remember only taking three or four trips to Holland while I was growing up in Belgium. And as I said, my father had most of his family there. My mother had one—well, she—she did—her relatives were in Holland and one in South Africa. But that's about it. No—no—you know, we didn't have birth certificates with us. I [unclear] had to get one. I got it in Belgium later. But we were Dutch and, as you can tell by the language—speaking of language. And you know people spoke—everybody knew everybody. So—

SIGRIST: Okay. We're going to pause now and we'll probably take a little break.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: And we'll begin tape two when we come back.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: Great.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now beginning tape two with Michel Huysman, came to this country in 1942 when he was 14 years old. It is Wednesday, March 25th, 1998. I'm Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service, and Kevin Daley is running the recording equipment. Mr. Huysman, when we left off at the end of tape one, you were just about to go to Fronton—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —in France.

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And let's pick up your story there.

HUYSMAN: Okay. Of course, I didn't speak any French. I was—I only spoke Dutch. So—but they put us—we were given a—

SIGRIST: This is coming out of Bordeaux, I should say.

HUYSMAN: Or out of Bordeaux. I guess a bus took us to Fronton. They brought us over to a—in—in this little French town. If you—have you seen little French towns? They are sort of antique. They have very few conveniences. And we were given a room that was a stable, apparently, at one time, for the seven of us. Got the little—the little cots, canvas cots with straw bags on it. And we stayed in there, I don't know how long, but a few weeks though. It was quite a few weeks. And there was a—a little yard outside and a hole in the ground which was to be for toilet use. The French—the French type of rustic toilet is a hole in the ground. And that's—was our—those were our quarters for the ti—for the time being there. I don't remember, but some of the things we took with us in the bags were used then. There were towels and stuff like that. Yes, that's true. Hand cloths and things to keep—the Dutch have a reputation for—well earned, at least my mother and my aunt, of being clean. And that—I remember that sort of stuff. And then we went to—I was put in a school, a French farm school. They're funny because they have, like, three, four grades per classroom, not enough students. So—and I started to learn French, not so much in school as just by the environment, happened to like languages and I learned them very quickly. And it was springtime and summertime so we—a lot of the schools, we would take, like, picnics with the school and go out into the countryside and it was—it was a very popular part of the school's—whatever curriculum it was that I can remember. I remember one time going out and we didn't have anything to drink. So we stopped at a farm for—for—to get what I thought would be water. But you couldn't drink the water there. It was polluted so we had to drink wine. It was the first time I ever came home drunk at age 12. [chuckles] I staggered into town, much to the surprise of my parents. But that was the sort of a thing I remember there. I don't remember any people, per se.

SIGRIST: Did—what did your parents do during the day?

HUYSMAN: Nothing. It was—wa—walk around and, apparently, the Dutch government [unclear] was in touch with them somewhat. It was an area where the consulate was trying to help. And I really don't know. You know, at 12 there are certain things you just don't know or don't—don't really care.

SIGRIST: Sure, your consciousness is—

HUYSMAN: Right, so—

SIGRIST: —very different.

HUYSMAN: —I would have—Lea would be with me, my cousin, sometimes. And then my sister was [unclear] too.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Fronton?

HUYSMAN: I imagine it must—I really don't recall exactly how long. [unclear] I've got to figure it had to be quite a few weeks, because then we were told to go to Toulouse where we were put in a—another center, an old castle or an old lodge, villa, whatever it was, in a town called Lafourquette—L-A-F-O-U-R-G-U-E-T-T-E. And it—and a chateau—and I forgot the name of the chateau—chateau. They had a lot of big rooms, which were divided by wooden slats and sheets. So you would have, like, three or four families staying in one room. And I went—went to school there again. There was school so we went to school and we had to be there quite a few months, I suppose, because, you know, of the—of the time element of—of school and one thing and by that time, the Germans had completed their conquest of Belgium, Holland and France. So that had to be after June. Probably June—probably it was in Fronton. In July, we went to the other place to Lafourquette—Toulouse. I'm—I'm relating—equating the things to the things I did, whether—

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: —I went to school here or there and what months that's supposed to be.

SIGRIST: What was it like to go to school under these conditions?

HUYSMAN: [sighs] I adapted to everything like that. I—I—I started to learn French and was my sa—same, not aggressive but, you know, gregarious—I was a gregarious kid, for a little fellow. And the—it was kind of interesting, I remember. And it—in—in the—I'm—you know, the name of the—of the chateau has almost hit me. The Chateau—anyway—

SIGRIST: By the time we're in America, it'll just [chuckles] fall out.

HUYSMAN: Right. Anyhow, the—it sounded good—the place was not overrun with bathrooms. I mean, there were, like, 80 or 90 people in there, even more, in that building.

SIGRIST: Were there staff members there to take care of these refugees?
What—what kind of supervision—

HUYSMAN: It's funny. The supervision was the—the consul of—ap—appointed a man to supervise the whole thing, also a refugee, I remember from Brussels. He—he was given big room in the castle to operate it and—and he was in charge of getting the food and—and—and the refugees themselves took part of the work, the cooking and the supplying and et cetera. And we kept ourselves well enter—one thing, we entertained ourselves a lot. We would—there would be singing groups and debate groups and talking and all that sort of thing. But it was not an easy life. I mean, with three or four or five families in one room, you know, privacy was at a premium.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you don't remember your parents really doing anything during the day.

HUYSMAN: No.

SIGRIST: How—when you do think about your parents at this particular time, how do you think about them? What—what—what sticks out in your mind about their existence at this time?

HUYSMAN: It's hard to imagine. It's really—I—I know that—well, what I do remember is that my parents with—also had the company. In other words, my father's brother and his wife, there were four of them that somehow banded together and helped and—and tried to do whatever it was to survive, I suppose. I really don't know. You know, as a kid, you run around. I mean, th—this was a great place for kids. There's a huge pond in the place, you know, where—where we would go swimming in ice-cold water, but it was great. And we met new—new—new children, the French kids. You know, this was—this was very—

SIGRIST: Don't really care about what your parents are doing.

HUYSMAN: Don't really care, right.

SIGRIST: [laughs]

HUYSMAN: Come to think of it.

SIGRIST: Were they in contact with your father's parents through this—through this whole process?

HUYSMAN: No, no, no. Not at that particular time, no. No, the—the—they would write to them. I think they—my—my parents would write to—to—to

their parents, to my grandparents. But the—I don't recall getting mail back there. We were already established—they might have been—yes, they—they may have been in contact. But anyway, the—[clears throat] the big break happened a short time after that. When the Germans had invaded and the Germans had conquered, we figured they were coming—going to come into South France too. But it was—you know, Batan [PH], [unclear], all those people of unoccupied France, "Vichy," [PH] France—that's where we were in. And we thought that it wouldn't last long because the Germans would come down too. So everybody wanted to go back home. Homesick for Belgium. Homesick for—for the home. Homesickness is a very serious illness, believe me. We all wanted to go back. And there were arrangements at the consul of—the Dutch Consul in—in Toulouse. Mr. Van Dobben—V-A-N D-O-B-B-E-N (two names) was there. And he—they were—they were arranging to get a convoy back to Belgium of buses to get most of the people back. And my father and my uncle and we all inscribed in to go back. And the night before these buses were to go back, the convoy leader got sick. And another man took over and he wanted to see everybody, all the people that were going to go back. And he approved of everybody except me. I looked too Semitic; I looked too Jewish. Well, I don't know if I looked Jewish but, for a Dutch kid, I looked Jewish. I had jet-black hair and there were not many of us around with that color hair. There—the Sephardic part of me—and there was no way he would take us. So we were forced to stay. Everybody else went back and most of those people, including my uncle, wound up in Belsen and Auschwitz and places. And I was crying so and was—my sister was also upset. The Dutch Consul took my father, who was a very distinguished looking man, and a very intel—like I said, he was—had a basic intelligence. They were—were opening up a new center in Saint Simon—S—that's Saint Simon, another—another town nearby. [clears throat] "And you'll have the—you'll be the director there. You'll have your own room." That was a wonderful thing for him to do. And so that's what happened. And I spent almost two years—spent from—it had to be—when they went back, it had to be from September or October to April, 1942. It was from—from September of 1940 to April of 1942. There'll be—were in that other center.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—now, you said your uncle—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: They—they all went back.

HUYSMAN: They went back.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You were saying that you were crying. Th—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: That—that—because everyone wanted to go back.

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: H—how did your parents view that? About, you know, the brother going back? How—wh—I'm just trying to get an idea of how your father feels about this—

HUYSMAN: Well, my uncle—

SIGRIST: —shift in fate?

HUYSMAN: My uncle felt that it was too difficult for my cousin, Lea, who did not speak French, who was, you know, deaf mute, to adjust to that. And he felt, 'Well, at home she'll be back'—and h—his parents—their parents, they were also worried about their parents being there alone. So they decided he'd go back with the family. He'll stay and we'll see. "Maybe we'll come later." Except that my uncle said, "I'll let you know how things are when I get back." And he did. But they had a code they wrote up. If Mr. so and so was the Germans and Mr. so and so was anti-Semitism, and Mrs. so and so was this. So you could read whatever the names. You could have also—these were very bright men, these two guys. My uncle was also an extremely bright man.

SIGRIST: So I—I guess—I guess I'm just curious about the fact that there seems to be no fear about going back. Did—

HUYSMAN: None. There wasn't any fear about going back. We figured, "Oh, well. It's going to be tough. The Germans are mean," and all that. But we hadn't heard of anything about—and I think homesickness was really the thing that was, you know—

SIGRIST: Anything about the Jews being persecuted?

HUYSMAN: [unclear]

SIGRIST: You haven't heard anything about anything—

HUYSMAN: At that point, we didn't, although we—we didn't think back about the pictures we saw of Austria before. Somehow, these things disappear from the mind when you're homesick. Back to the familiar surroundings, the house, the—the business, the whole—you know, the whole thing was back.

SIGRIST: The Germans are there. How bad can it be? Is—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: Is that the attitude?

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: I see.

HUYSMAN: Yes, that's exactly—

SIGRIST: Okay.

HUYSMAN: —the attitude. Well, we found out how bad it could be. But [clears throat] the—excuse me. We wound up in San Simone in a villa. Villa Marie Louise was the name of it, a two-story, beautiful building [chuckles] with one little bathroom. But we had a nice—we had a nice room and a small additional alcove where my sister and I slept adjoining to the room that my parents—everybody else was back again in—in the divided rooms with the sheets and the—and, you know, in—in the larger rooms. And then there was a dining room downstairs and a kitchen.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how many people went to San Simone?

HUYSMAN: At that center, I would probably say—probably about 50.

SIGRIST: And were there people there when you got there?

HUYSMAN: No, no. This was new. We all got there—my father was in charge and [clears throat] that was it. The—the—I—but he did—there were—there was—there was people with all kinds of problems. I remember two elderly people. The name was Nunes Vas, Dutch Sephardic Jews again. N-U-N-E-S V-A-S. Two words.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HUYSMAN: They had a daughter and a son-in-law and grandchildren that committed suicide in Amsterdam when the Germans invaded. And of

course, these people were inconsolable. My father—in that center there was a tiny little room and he saw that—that these people needed their privacy and their grief. So he gave them that little room, which played a great role in my later life, because of my father's kindness. And that was it. I went to the school, elementary school there for two years called Paul Bes—P-A—Paul Bes—B-E-S, like for—but that was the name of the school. And in one of those classes where three different grades. I was there—it was in the seventh and eighth. I would grad—matter of fact, I graduated public school in France. And that was—was kind of interesting, the first time I ever had a teacher rap me on the knuckles with a ruler.

SIGRIST: Why?

HUYSMAN: [chuckles] Like talking. What else? Forever talking. He liked me, a lucky thing. He liked me. It [chuckles] would have been worse.

SIGRIST: So [clears throat] in the school, were there other refugee children as well—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: —as French children?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes, yes. There were about four or five others. And also, the children—the—this was like a—a big villa with a very l—with about 10 acres of land behind it taken care of by a caretaker, an Italian—French Italian family. Pezzutto was their name. They took care of the—of—of that place.

SIGRIST: Buzuto?

HUYSMAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Buzuto?

HUYSMAN: Pez—P-E-Z-Z-U-T-T-O.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HUYSMAN: Pezzutto.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: And they had three daughters, different ages that I played with there. And they had a vineyard in the back, about five acres of—of grapes

and stuff. And they grew vegetables and that, all kinds of animals, geese, the great French geese that [unclear] for the liver. You know, for pate de fra [PH].

SIGRIST: How much did you know about what was going on in the rest of Europe when you—when you lived in this environment?

HUYSMAN: Not much. Not much. We used to listen to the BBC radio at night [clears throat] to find out what was going on. We found out later on, of course, that Russia had been invaded. We found out that the—the Germans were having serious problems with Russia, which was—gave us great hope. We—let's see. When did it—the Japanese—war start? In 1941, in December. We found all of that out. Of course, that was already towards the later part. Oh, you asked if I ever saw German soldiers. Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, when it—once in a while we'd go to the city of Toulouse and there would be German officers that would walk around. But they were not in any position of—of occupation. The Vichy French did that all by themselves without any problems. [clears throat] They had their internment camps that they guarded people, mostly Jews, under German supervision. But they were the French that guarded them. The French are very schitz type of people. Here they helped everybody on the one way and then the other side they—you know, just unbelievable.

SIGRIST: You—you—what else sticks out in your mind about the family that your father gave the little room to in—in—in the villa that—

HUYSMAN: Oh, they were very grateful. They had a son and let me—I might as well put this one in right now. They had a son who lived in Canada. And you were able to get out of unoccupied France about—Vichy, France if you had a visa, an exit visa someplace. And the son sent a visa to them from Canada to—to Lisbon. And somehow, they were able to eventually leave after about—I think it was after about year there, these old people left and they went to Canada. Before they left, they went to my father and said, "We're going to see to it that—we will send a Canadian visa for you and your family to Lisbon. Somehow, we'll work that out because of the kindness that you had." And a number of years later, from—after they had left, my father thought about it said—had called the—called the consulate in—have somebody call the Canadian Consulate in Lisbon. And sure enough, this was towards the end of '41. The visa was there for the four of us sponsored by these people's son. They were diamond cutters over there and my father—so I don't know exactly on what basis. The visa I have is in my passport that I found; it's still there.

SIGRIST: And what—what sticks out in your mind about their personalities? Having—having endured this rather dramatic tragedy, what—what do you remember about them as people while you were at San Simone?

HUYSMAN: I—they—they were—they were small people, two rotund little people. And they were very kind, very nice.

SIGRIST: Was it just a couple? Man and woman?

HUYSMAN: Just a couple.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: Man and woman. Just a man and woman, yes. They were very nice. They were very quiet people but when—you know, as I said, when they needed to have their own—to be able to [clears throat] lean on each other without having a lot of people around, that my father did that. And there were—that was—you know, life is so strange.

SIGRIST: The kindness of strangers.

HUYSMAN: There was nothing heroic about any of these things except perhaps my father's desire to protect his family. My wife made me aware of that later. You know, says, "You know what kind of a hero my father was, dragging you guys through Europe and then all of the—and your mother?" And you know, come to think of it, if you're put yourself in their place, that was—that took courage. So after—so the visa was there. We still had to get some other things. Then it took quite a few months before we were able to get out.

SIGRIST: And you were in San Simone that whole—

HUYSMAN: At San Simone.

SIGRIST: That was the last place in France—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: —you lived?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Does—before we leave San Simone—

HUYSMAN: Sure.

SIGRIST: —does anything else stick out in your mind about that experience?
But that was the longest place that you were.

HUYSMAN: Oh, it was great. I—I—yes, a—a lot of things stick out. It was a very beautiful area. The Pyrenees Mountains were about 90 miles south and you could see them. On a clear day, you could see these huge mountains. And I would—I would—wh—but these far—the farmer, Mr. Pezzutto and his family, they had these huge Toulouse geese, weigh up to 40, 50, 60 pounds. And—

SIGRIST: That's a big goose.

HUYSMAN: Oh!

SIGRIST: [laughs]

HUYSMAN: And mean! And I used to guar—I used to—they used to tell me to watch them in the fields. I would walk around the fields trying to clip their wings. They couldn't fly at that weight anyway; I don't see how. But they were mean. I—they'd be running after me. I'd jump the fence so quickly. [chuckles] And also what stands out is the grape harvest in the second year, just in—you know, I think it's in August, the [unclear]. Big grapes and I earned money. Not a great deal but it was fun and I ate enough grapes. I got sick as a dog from them. I didn't wash them. They had copper sulfate on them. [unclear] you know. I had—I had a good time.

SIGRIST: A rather pleasant, pastoral existence.

HUYSMAN: I had—yes, it was. Exactly that. It was exactly that.

SIGRIST: Did your father receive a salary of some sort for his—

HUYSMAN: I think he got some kind of remuneration for—for his work, yes. Yeah. And he would travel into town of Toulouse and he would have the right to give passes to go—to the people to go into the city.

SIGRIST: Now, you mentioned that your uncle, who'd gone back to Belgium—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —and your father were communicating with—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: —with code.

HUYSMAN: [unclear] very important thing. My—my father received a letter from my uncle.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things your uncle was telling your father?

HUYSMAN: Well, some of the names given to some of the people. For example, anti-Semitism would be—it's a strange thing to remember—Mr. Hibelje [PH]. That's sort of a—it was an old Jewish joke and I don't remember the joke. But that name—it's doing very badly.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name for me?

HUYSMAN: I don't even know.

SIGRIST: Hibelje.

HUYSMAN: H-I-B-E-L-J-E would be—would be the Dutch—way the Dutch would spell it. Anyway, he—he said it was very bad and then comes the food. It was very bad. You know, having a very difficult time. “So and so is very sick.” So we knew that anti-Semiti—anti-Semitism was very bad. So any decision of ever trying to go back was wiped out from our minds. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Did—did your uncle talk about things that was hap—that were happening to his family, specifically?

HUYSMAN: No, he just said—yeah, [unclear]. Then he also said the parents were okay at that time. However, they died shortly after that.

SIGRIST: As a result of—

HUYSMAN: They—I think they was just one of the—when my grandmother died, he wrote us a letter that she passed away in her sleep without any pain, without any problems. And her last—and—and they had taken a photograph of—there was a photo of myself. She was lovely. She was—I was, like—you know, my cousin Lea and I were her—her real pets. And she died and they said—I think the last thing she looked was Michel's picture on the wall. That was there. And then four or five weeks later, my grandfather turned his face to the wall and he died in his sleep, which was a tremendous blessing because they didn't have to go through what my other gr—grandfather had to go through, which was a concentration camp.

SIGRIST: Your mother's father?

HUYSMAN: My mother's father.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Did your father make any attempt, especially upon first arriving at San Simone, to get back to Belgium?

HUYSMAN: No—

SIGRIST: To resist the decision to send your family to—

HUYSMAN: No, no, no. No, he just—he wanted to wait from his brother before anything was done. As I said, these two guys grew up together. My brother—my uncle was a little younger than my father. But they were very close and he was going to wait to hear from—and everything was bad, everything in that letter. We knew that this was no place to go back to.

SIGRIST: Do you know of your uncle attempting to get out of Belgium once he got there?

HUYSMAN: No, no. No, my poor uncle. I know what happened to him, unfortunately. He didn't make it. He—he was sent to a work camp in Northern France and then was told he could go home, because I heard that from a survivor. And they got on a train to go home and was in Belgium. And Belgium, being so small, he sort of—when the train hit a certain town, it veered off towards Germany. And he dropped the note. He found pencil and paper and dropped the note, gave it to somebody in the station, somehow, that my aunt found out that he was being taken to Germany. And my aunt and my cousin escaped. And they're—and my aunt died, of course, from old age. But my cousin is still alive in Belgium.

SIGRIST: Your cousin Lea?

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah, wow.

HUYSMAN: Survived it.

SIGRIST: One thing that just comes to mind. It sort of—we're changing the subject a little bit. But you would have turned 13 while you were in San Simone.

HUYSMAN: Oh, let me tell you about that bit.

SIGRIST: Okay.

HUYSMAN: In San Simone there is—in the—we had a rabbi. Not many Dutch rabbis around there. So there's [chuckles] one rabbi in that center. Kleerekooper was his name. K-L-E-E-R-E-K-O-O-P-E-R.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HUYSMAN: Means clothing purchasers. [chuckles] Means clothing buying. The—Kleerekooper. And he walked over to me one day and he said, "Would you like to be bar mitzvahed?" And I said, "I'll ask my father." [chuckles] My father—he didn't know any—he said, "Whatever you want." That's the way he was. "If you want to, go ahead." So I said, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind." This was, like, four or five months before my 13th birthday. And I started learning Hebrew. And when the day finally came and I really studied intensely—like I said, languages are good for me. I can—when the day came, they were able to get a Torah out of the city of Toulouse where there were quite a few Jews. And they built the little, what do you call—hopa [PH]. That's, you know, in—in—

SIGRIST: Canopy.

HUYSMAN: A canopy in the center itself and Michel Huysman was bar mitzvahed. It was—everybody from the [unclear]—our center, from the other center that was there before, came over. And it is a big thing. I mean, it—it was a very unifying thing. It was an experience that I—I carry with me to this day. It hasn't taught me anything great about becoming more religious. But itself, it has taught me how—the—the strength of being Jewish at that particular time. And it—it—it was a very, very solemn occasion. And the rab—that little rabbi, he died. He and his wife and daughter eventually also were deported when Germany finally did take over that part. And—but it was—it was—it was quite a day.

SIGRIST: Did you receive any presents of any sort?

HUYSMAN: Everybody chipped in together in the building and they bought me a silver watch. I mean, people were not—did not have—you couldn't get much. So I had a silver watch and I was very proud of that. So that—that—yes, that was a—that was a big, big, big day for me. [laughter] I remember I didn't have a yarmulke; I had a beret. You know, the French beret. And somehow, in the—I hadn't grown much, luckily, in those two years because there was not much food, somehow. And I still fit in my little blue suit with the dark knickers. And that [chuckles]—good day.

SIGRIST: So—

HUYSMAN: All the people—local French people, the Pezzutto family and their daughters and—came too and they thought it was, you know, quite a thing.

SIGRIST: Were there any refugees that were not Jewish but had just come out of Belgium at the time, for fear of—of the Germans? Or I suppose even French refugees that you're picking up along the way.

HUYSMAN: Right, none of—separated out, pretty much that most of them either had gone back or gone—but in our refugee center, I can't recall any. Not many non-Jews.

SIGRIST: Were some refugees more Jewish than others?

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have orthodox Jews among [unclear]?

HUYSMAN: As far as I can recall, that man didn't—I mean, they would eat eggs or they would eat vegetables. There was nothing—they—I mean, they stuck to whatever it was.

SIGRIST: Even in situations where food was hard to get?

HUYSMAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Interesting.

HUYSMAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Huh.

HUYSMAN: And survived it. [unclear], you know. Oh, the kind of survivors, anyway. Five thousand years of all this stuff and they're still around, you know.

SIGRIST: How did the Italian caretakers—

HUYSMAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: —treat you? The caretakers? The—

HUYSMAN: Oh, wonderful. They were nice people. They were plain, you know—I would probably say not very educated. But they were very kind, sweet people. Once in a while, I would eat over there and have some normal food. Matter of fact, we—they helped us buy—the refugee center got

together and we bought a pig, a small pig and put him in a pen. Whatever food was left over, we fed him, called him Adolph. [chuckles] Adolph grew to be pretty big. And then one day we got him—they slaughtered him and we had a big dinner. The rabbi, of course, didn't eat any of that.

SIGRIST: Of course.

HUYSMAN: But we did.

SIGRIST: All right. We're going to—we're going to stop now.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: And Kevin's going to flip the tape over and we're going to have to get you to America at some point. So—

HUYSMAN: Yeah, we're going to be there soon.

SIGRIST: Okay. [chuckles]

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning side two of tape two. Mr. Huysman, can we hear about how it was that you left San Simone and what happened when you left?

HUYSMAN: It was a—that was a very traumatic experience because in San Simone my father had—my mother had—were very popular with the people and we—we were finally leaving. This was in April of 1942 and all the papers were—

SIGRIST: The paperwork that you had—all the paperwork—

HUYSMAN: All the paperwork was being done. The Dutch Consulate helped with all of that. And the—

SIGRIST: And we should say for the sake of the tape that you carry a Dutch passport.

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Yes.

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Was that obtained at that time?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes. That—let me think. No. No, no. We had a passport that was obtained at the time from the Dutch Consul into [unclear]. This passport that I have now, I think, was made—it was—I think it came in—was in Lisbon.

SIGRIST: In Lisbon, okay.

HUYSMAN: The Dutch Embassy in Lisbon [unclear]. And everybody that was—it was a big goodbye party. We had a cousin in—in there too that eventually came to New York that was there, a distant cousin, [unclear]. Anyway, we—when we left there was an artist in the house called Max Appelboom—A-P-P-E-L-B-O-O-M. Apple tree, it means. Became a very famous artist later in Holland and a movie director. And he illustrated our life in—in—in a refugee center. And then there was a certificate signed by every person that was in the center. And that's when there were 40 or 50 people, because that's how many names there were with all of their names on there. That was given to us as a goodbye present. And somehow, I got it—my sister finally gave it—let—let me borrow it. Well, she's never getting it back. But anyway, I—I have it now. And it's really—it—it brought back a lot of those things. This artist—and I'm—I—I do artwork. I do quite a bit, some of it even being sold, believe it or not. His style of art, I copied when I was that age and it still is with me. I do my cartooning and so on according to his—the style of the—very interesting—

SIGRIST: And what kinds of scenes were—were portrayed in this—these drawings?

HUYSMAN: Oh, in the book he just portrayed the characters that the people were. You know, the—he made fun of—of certain characters in a nice way. You know, the—Max's father—Max Appelboom's father was my father's assistant. So he painted him in a lieutenant's uniform. You know, this—drew him that way. And very interesting, a very fine artist. Later, I saw his works in—in Holland sell for a very great amount of money. So I—I learned quite a bit of my art from absorbing his—his work. Anyway, we were allowed to go out and took a train to—to—to go to—through Spain, from Toulouse to—to Madrid, from Madrid to Lisbon, we're supposed to go.

SIGRIST: What things stick out in your mind? Because that's quite a long train ride.

HUYSMAN: Oh, it was an adventurous train ride. We—for example, we went from Toulouse to Po [PH], which is a French town in the Pyrenees Mountains, gorgeous town. And we used to—we were put in a hotel and we went through the dining room, ate whatever food was available. And while in the dining room in a table five, six feet away from us were two men sitting with hats and leather coats. I mean, they could have had a Gestapo neon sign, of speaking German. And there we were sitting with the four of us of that table right away from them. There was an anxious moment. My father said to me to speak to him because we—and my sister—and my mother not to utter a word because she didn't speak French. My mother was not a linguist. My sister and I and he spoke French, so that we spoke French to each other, sparingly. And then we got back and the next morning we took the train to Luchon—L-U-C-H-O-N, border into Spain. They almost didn't let us in because all—my sister and I were on my—my parents' passport. And my sister was, at that time—let's see. I was 14; she was 17. So she was too old to be on the passport. Finally, the—the—the Spanish border guard relented and let us go. Otherwise, we—we would have been sent back. But then we went to Spain, Lisbon and to Madrid, which was still suffering from civil war. It was all—the city had holes in the buildings and stuff. And then we went to [clears throat] [unclear]. We stayed in Spain just overnight and went to Lisbon. And they put us in—I don't know who did all of this work, the Dutch government or wherever—what—they put us in a little villa in that little hotel on the Portuguese coast for about six weeks. I learned to speak quite a bit of Portuguese, great experience. So then—

SIGRIST: So it's kind of a fast trip through Spain but you ended up staying in Portugal.

HUYSMAN: Staying in Portugal, yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. During that whole trip from France to Portugal, did you see anything along the way that you had never seen before?

HUYSMAN: Yes, in Saragasa [PH]. And I never saw—I saw prisoners of—of the revolution, of the Span—of the Spanish Revolution, the Republican prisoners being taken on the train in chains and in uniform, looking terrible. And the—they were supposed to be taken to Madrid, where they were going to be shot. I mean, this kind of thing. The cruelties—there for people, it's just—whenever I look back I say it's beyond belief that I didn't really look much as far as—as far as the scenery. Most of the travels that we went through Spain was at night. For example, traveled at night from—from French border on the afternoon, night by the time we arrived in Madrid, gave us a hotel. I remember it was a very nice place.

SIGRIST: Were you traveling with a group of people?

HUYSMAN: No, just my parents and sister and I.

SIGRIST: Just the family.

HUYSMAN: Just the four of us. And then through to Portugal. We had, apparently, transit visas and all of that. And in Portugal we went to Praiadas Macais, Apple Beach. I don't know how to spell that one. I think it's P-R-A-I-A-D-A-S M-A—M-A-C-A-I-S, I think.

SIGRIST: My transcriber will be most thankful. [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: [unclear] Praiadas Macais.

SIGRIST: Oh. [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: And we spent some time there and then finally—I remember going to port. We were going to see—we had a choice to go on one of two ships, the Guine or the Serpe [PH] Pinto. And this—these ships had been leased by the HIAS organization. And the Dutch government paid them for our passage. That I know.

SIGRIST: The Dutch government paid the HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

HUYSMAN: They paid for our passage.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, interesting.

HUYSMAN: And we had a choice on the Serpe Pinto or the Guine and we went to port to take a look at the ships. And the Serpe Pinto—the Serpe Pinto was about 16 or 17,000 ton, was a nice-sized ship. And then we looked for the Guine and there it looked like a—looked like a tugboat. It was about three thou—less than—2,500 ton was the Guine. It was a tiny little ship, except the Serpe Pinto was leaving three weeks later. So my father says, "I don't care. We're going to get out of here." So he selected the Guine.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Guine for me, please?

HUYSMAN: G-U-I-N-E.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

HUYSMAN: The co—Colonial Navigation Company of Portugal, [unclear] CCN. And the [unclear]—we—we got on the Guine and [chuckles] we left Portugal three weeks before the Serpe Pinto. Whenever—when we—let me—we skip this one ahead. When we arrived in New York, the Serpe Pinto was lying right there in front of us. [chuckles] Had been there for a week already. We took seven—42 days before we got [chuckles] to New York. [unclear].

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you'd ever been on a ship?

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what a 14-year-old boy—

HUYSMAN: Fourteen.

SIGRIST: —thought when he saw—when he was on the ship? You know, what—what—

HUYSMAN: I was—thought this was great. I—I loved it until they showed me where I was sleeping. There's 600 passengers and 200 crewmembers on that little boat. It was in a—I mean, it was—it was—had been built in England in 19—let's see, it was 1942. The ship was built in 1906 so it was really an old clunker even then. And the Serpe Pinto was a magnificent passenger ship. And—but my father said, "I've just"—at that point, his decision was, "We leave Europe as soon as possible." And they put him in—my father and myself into this little—into this bunkroom right next to a men's room where there was a loose door. So whenever the ship wobbled, you'd hear a clunk. I couldn't handle that. I went and slept on deck the whole trip. But anyway, we—it was exciting. It was exciting leaving the port. And the ship was filled with—we—we had about 300 refugees at that point, Czechoslovakians, some Dutch, Spanish, Polish, a—just a conglomeration of people that we were leaving Lisbon, and we were on our way to Casablanca to pick up Spanish refugees. And so this little ship left and, just as we were outside of the port, a British Sutherland [PH] —Sunderland [PH]—Sutherland or Sunderland bomber came over. It's an amphibian. Did it's the first time we saw a British insignia, you know. Quite a cheer.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: Oh, it was great. And then we went to Morocco to Casablanca.

SIGRIST: Did you—before you got on the ship, did you—did you purchase anything specific to take with you? Because the intention is to go to Canada, correct? Not the United States—

HUYSMAN: Right. Not the United States.

SIGRIST: —but to Canada.

HUYSMAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Right. So did you take anything specific with you or—or make a special purchase before you got on the ship?

HUYSMAN: Well, my parents made a special purchase for me, since the clothing I had was now starting to get to get—I was—[chuckles] they bought me a pair of wool pants, dress pants, except that they were knickers, which were popular in Europe. And I never wore them again when I landed in New York. But [clears throat] no, there were—we did—I mean, my—I think my father told me he got on—we got on the boat. He had about six French francs in his pocket; that was it. We did not leave with any great wealth.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: And then were on that boat for—Lisbon to New—to—to Morocco, from Morocco to Bermuda, where we stayed for seven days in port in Ber—in Bermuda. They wouldn't let us off. They let us off a—a little bit on the—on the ship. But that's all. They wouldn't let us walk any further than that. We had adventures on the ocean. We had one—before hitting Bermuda, we were stopped by a German sub. Were a Portuguese ship, lit up, you know, with the flags on the side. And the German sub popped up and asked us what—you know, where we were going or whatever. And apparently nothing happened. They—we went on.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that happened on that ship that stick out in your mind?

HUYSMAN: Oh, a lot of things. Af—that was the first one. Oh, I got seasick pretty badly. That—that—that sticks out in my mind, the first—the first day I—I made—I thought—when we left Lisbon, I made fun of everybody, you know, make—making believe I got sick. Other people got sick. Wise guy. I'll tell you, terrible. But [chuckles] I got sick anyway. But I went to—af—after that, that German sub. And then in Bermuda there was—the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth were there, full of troops on their way to Europe. I mean, that was a—quite a sight. And

after Bermuda, the American Atlantic Fleet stopped us. [chuckles] I mean, a battle cruiser came over, wanted to know where we're—you know, how our—our destination and so on. While we were in Morocco, we picked up about 300 Spanish refugees that were to be gotten off in Veracruz. So you can see that trip, Morocco, Bermuda down to Veracruz.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about the Spanish refugees? Something specific?

HUYSMAN: Oh, [unclear]—yeah, we—we—we—we tried to teach each other word—bad words. It was like—like a gang, like the—of the European kids and the Spanish kids. But it was not a violent type of thing. It was sort of a, you know—they're making fun of each other, as kids mostly do. It was pretty good.

SIGRIST: What about food? Where did they feed you on the boat? Or what did you eat?

HUYSMAN: Well, I will never eat codfish in oil again as long as I live. [unclear] is a Portuguese dish, dried cod, and they [clears throat]—the bread was great. The bakery was good. See, they fed us mostly—the food was not—not the—I wouldn't [chuckles] recommend it for a cruise. The only man that ate everyday at every meal was my father. People were dying from seasickness and he would be sitting there, go—having his meals and just not being bothered by anything. I admired him for that. I was—I mean, I couldn't look at food. My sister and my mother, forget it. It was a rough trip.

SIGRIST: Was there a special place that they fed you on the ship or—like a—

HUYSMAN: Yeah, a dining room.

SIGRIST: —dining room or—

HUYSMAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: Yeah. Dining rooms have several shifts and they just—I don't know. I remember there was a dining room with waiter service and everything else. [sniffs] The food, as I said, was mostly—well, because [unclear] people you know, dr—and the Portuguese like codfish. I like it too, to a point. But, you know, this—this—this dried cod was—and it's cooked with olive oil. And it was not our type of food but we ate, you know.

SIGRIST: You mentioned before we even began the interview that you would never eat a Jerusalem artichoke again too. What part in the story does that—

HUYSMAN: France.

SIGRIST: That falls in—

HUYSMAN: France. In Toulouse, France. Yes, we—the food there, we—I mean, we had no food to speak of. If we—we had the pig that we slaught—that was a—that was a feast.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: But there was practically no food. The bread was ersatz bread. It didn't have wheat in it. It was sort of like gummy stuff. And thank God for the American Quakers, the Society of Friends. In school, we would get powdered milk, vitamins, cod liver oil, which had—which I liked, by the way. [chuckles] Being Dutch, I guess I like fish oil. And a lot of things, and clothing and blankets, all given and didn't know who gave those things. There were no stamps or no—no—you know, they were the true givers. They didn't want it to be known who gave. But they did. That was very, very—this was—these are nice experiences to think of in the bad times. [clears throat]

SIGRIST: Back to the ship.

HUYSMAN: Okay, back to the ship.

SIGRIST: Back to the ship. Anything else stick out in your mind about being on the ship before we get you off the ship? It's a long trip and you said it's a—

HUYSMAN: Oh, it's—

SIGRIST: —rough trip.

HUYSMAN: Oh, it's a rough trip. And finally, we hi—you asked [unclear]—

SIGRIST: Was there a storm or something.

HUYSMAN: I—I was be—what? A storm? Yeah, we got a few storms. The big one was yet to come. I'll—I'll tell this quick because otherwise—

SIGRIST: That's okay. Go ahead.

HUYSMAN: We—we got to—finally, after Bermuda, we took a long trip into Veracruz. And I had been befriended—befriended a whole bunch of Czechoslovakian young men. They were probably in their early 20s and one of them was probably around 30, 35. And they sort of took me in as their mascot. And we went to—like, we went to land on Veracruz where we finally had fresh fruit and everything else, mangoes, bananas and pineapples. Unbelievable. You know, this stuff was incredible. The same thing, I got to go back to Lisbon for a minute. When we walked into [unclear], the main street of Lisbon, my sister looked—we looked in the shops and they were loaded with the finest foods. And she became totally hysterical. We never—hadn't seen this stuff in, you know, two years. So this—this abundance with it and—and Veracruz in 1942 was a pretty primitive town. I mean, dirt streets and buzzards and all that stuff. But I went around with him to all the cantinas.

SIGRIST: Buzzards? Like—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Like vultures?

HUYSMAN: Vultures, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Oh. [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: Like we have them in Florida too.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: [unclear] by the—

SIGRIST: Buzzards.

HUYSMAN: —[unclear] the garbage [unclear]. It was really an old, old town. [chuckles] [clears throat] Then we left all the Spanish refugees there, and then we left Veracruz and hit what must have been a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico because this ship was—I mean, we dipped water like, you know, under water, up. And around Florida, we came around Florida and Veracru—aro—we were st—there was some—Coast Guard planes were hovering above us and a guy tried to guide us to the coast. Our captain didn't listen so they started machine gunning in the water next to us. We didn't know what was going on. And finally, after much of that, the captain turned the ship towards the coast. And as soon as it—as soon as the—the Guine had turned towards the

coast, a whole bunch of these Coast Guard planes came over and dropped depth charges. There was a German sub hiding under our ship as protection and apparently he'd been spotted. And it was—it was—tell you, [unclear] adventure, big explosions all over, you know, away from the ship. And then I asked where—the American pilots came on board from—from—from the coast, a pilot for the ship, not—not on—and from—fr—we stayed overnight off the shore there, [unclear] Beach. They told us that that was the town. And then we went to New York. And the ship had been doing four to five knots all the way across. And all of a sudden, it speeded up to 10. The German sub was no longer below us. Apparently, this would—an arrangement with the—with the captain of the ship—one of the officers told me he was a pro-Nazi. And we went up to New York and finally got—steamed into New York, Statue of Liberty, the whole thing. The Serpe Pinto's laying right there in front of us. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: [laughs]

HUYSMAN: Everybody gets off the ship except my parents, my sister and I because we were—we didn't have a visa for the United States. We had a transit permit, as I said, and that's all we had. So we were stuck. I had one of my most beautiful experiences, that I must tell you, right there. I got off the ship, waiting on the side on the dock, and I see—this gigantic, New York appointment came down and called me over. I sat next to him. How I communicated, I don't know. I didn't speak English. But we communicated somehow. And he shared what was, to this day, one of my favorite sandwiches with me, with ham, mayonnaise and lettuce on white bread. He shared that with me and it was—it was—you know, these moments are—they're—they're strange little moments that are just so precious. So that was—

SIGRIST: How did your father react when you were not allowed to get off the ship?

HUYSMAN: Well, he took—he—he figured something, you know, that he—he was—he was kind of cynical about these sort of things. He was kind of cynical about the fact that we couldn't get off here. He had cousins living in here who were in the diamond business. He had friends that found out that we were coming in. As a matter of fact, one of his friends came to the ship and had some clothes from his son, who was about my size or bigger, so—so [unclear] because he saw me with these knickers. He said, "You can't wear that here." So he gave me his awful green outfit. [laughs] But I wore it.

SIGRIST: You would have been better off with the knickers.

HUYSMAN: No. [laughter] I might have been. And we sta—I don't know exactly how, but we stayed off the ship. We—they saw us. They—they could see us, said hello. And I think he—my—my father's friend got in touch with my father's cousins, who were also named Huisman, but with the I, the original I, here in New York. There's still some of their descendents here. And we were taken over. I don't know how we got there but we got to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Go ahead and open your candy.

HUYSMAN: We were—

SIGRIST: Just do it all at once.

HUYSMAN: Huh? No, that—anyway, we—we got then at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember getting over to Ellis Island?

HUYSMAN: Hmm?

SIGRIST: Do you remember coming over? How they brought you over here?

HUYSMAN: By boat. With a little—I think it was a small boat that, like a, you know—this is kind of a tough piece. I'm going to sit and chew that. I'll wait until the break. Anyhow, yeah, we came over to Ellis Island. How we got processed, I really don't know. You know, as a child, you just hang along.

SIGRIST: What—what sticks out in your mind about being here?

HUYSMAN: The control. The control. The—would walk in groups. Of course, we were separated. The men were given their certain quarters. My father and I were in certain quarters, my mother and sister to others. And every time you walked through a door there was somebody standing there with a counter, very annoying feeling. And the coldness. You know, you, "Gee, we're out of this mess. We're getting"—the coldness of—of the—of the people were—you know, you were like a—you were nothing. We were assigned someplace to sleep. I know it was a larger room but it was—I don't think it was a dormitory, per se, although it did have, I think, upper and lower bunks, were told to take a shower. My father was an extremely modest man. I don't think I ever saw my father undressed, fully undressed—in shorts, bathing suit, whatever, yes. But I never saw him fully undressed. And I knew in a shower, they hand you the towels, get undressed and walk to the showers. We didn't know how symbolic that would become later on with the Germans. But anyway, about, I don't know, a dozen people or

so had to walk that way to—to go to the showers. And I—I walked in front of my father so I didn't have to see him and went to the showers and [unclear] whatever. And then we were—were back at the—at the—to the rooms. I know we were fed during the day. I remember with the food came these things that I never saw before, this American white bread, which we [chuckles], you know, [unclear] Wonder Bread. [chuckles] And I don't remember exactly what—you know, where we were fed. I know it was a cafeteria type of a situation. And then the time was spent during the daytime. We were sitting in—what is it—the Great Hall. That, I'll never forget.

SIGRIST: And what did you see when you were sitting in the Great Hall? What—what was in there at that time?

HUYSMAN: Flag—

SIGRIST: Who was in there?

HUYSMAN: I know the flag was there. But across from us were a whole group of people, very well dressed and they had suitcases and everything with them, like steamer trunks and [unclear]. They were—we were told that these were access diplomats who were going back to Europe, who were being sent back to Europe. This was 1942 here in July, '42 already, they were still here. They were being taken back and they were apparently buying everything they could in the American stores and taking it home. But there was a—there was a—it was a very unpleasant, difficult, difficult feeling to—to know that these are the people that persecuted, that kicked us out of our homes. And we didn't really realize what they were still doing there, until we found out later. And then, after being—I don't know if we had one night or two nights—

SIGRIST: What do you remember about actually sleeping here? Does anything stick out in your mind about the experience of actually sleeping? The—what proceeded it or—

HUYSMAN: The—the whole experience was—was something that I found extremely difficult to—to—to integrate, to—you know, you're hoping you're going to be welcomed for—with something, some kind of kindness. There wasn't any. And we were then—then, apparently my father's cousins tried to get us out. So there was—had to—we had to have a hearing before an administrative—not a judge. At that time, there was—like I said, there were administrative officers with interpreter, a Dutch interpreter. And at the end of that—that hearing, apparently, they granted us a bond. They let us have a bond and we were able to leave Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Were you present at that hearing?

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What—what do you remember about the—the—the occasion itself, what—what was happening and what you were seeing?

HUYSMAN: I was—well, remember being questioned and my father being questioned and then the interpreters saying the answers. And I remember the interpreter telling my father in Dutch, “Be careful on your answers because this guy doesn’t like Jews.” I guess a lot of people [chuckles] don’t like them. But this is what he—he said to my father in Dutch. And whatever answers my father gave him must have been appropriate, plus the fact that my father’s cousins were very prominent businessmen in—in—in New York. And they posted a bond, which you’ll see in the passport is—

SIGRIST: We can look at that afterwards.

HUYSMAN: Yeah, was there for four days. Even the name of the guy who issued it is on there. Posted a bond then and we were able to get off Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the other people who were detained here, seeing something that—that made an impression on you, other than the—the German diplomats? But somebody else?

HUYSMAN: No, no. The—the—the administrative officer and the interpreter. Otherwise, we were—you know, like my father and I would be in this one place and then we would—my sister and my—and my mother [unclear] we would get together. During the day, they allowed us together. But it was a very prison-like atmosphere.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or your sister ever relate to you any of their specific experiences?

HUYSMAN: You know, no. And I—they didn’t and I didn’t ask. I don’t know why I didn’t but I just didn’t. It was—you know, today’s an unusual day but it—those were not easy days. This was not a great welcome. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Did you—

HUYSMAN: Know—knowing who you are, you know. You know you’re—you’re certainly a harmless person. You’re certainly not going to do anything

wrong in this—this country, knowing it yourself and then being treated [unclear], you know, like a quasi-criminal, posting bond. “We don’t trust you.” You know, we were the simplest, most trustworthy people. You know that yourself. Of course, they don’t look at it that way. That immigration act is a—was very difficult.

SIGRIST: Well, and especially for your father to be told, be careful what he says.

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: “We—we don’t like Jews.” [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: That’s right.

SIGRIST: You know, that—

HUYSMAN: I mean, this—

SIGRIST: That’s a terrible blow.

HUYSMAN: Terrible, exactly.

SIGRIST: That’s right.

HUYSMAN: Exactly.

SIGRIST: Um—

HUYSMAN: We—this guy, this particular administrative officer. [clears throat] Well, that happens.

SIGRIST: Did—did you have visitors while you were at Ellis Island? I can’t remember.

HUYSMAN: Pardon me?

SIGRIST: Visitors. Did—did—did these businessmen come to see you?

HUYSMAN: No, no. I—you know, I—my father’s cousin did come to see me. They’re the ones that posted the bond. They saw him. I don’t think they saw me. I think it was separate. I think it was separate. And the only visitor we had was somebody who came to the ship, was my father’s friend and brought me some clothes. But we didn’t see them close by. We saw them down below, really.

SIGRIST: And that was before you even got here, actually.

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: Still at the dock.

HUYSMAN: Right, right. We're still at the dock.

SIGRIST: Well, Kevin just gave me the sign. We've got two minutes left at the end of our second hour. What I would like to do, if that's possible, is to begin a third tape and go maybe 15 minutes into it.

HUYSMAN: Whatever you want. I mean, [unclear].

SIGRIST: Just so we can get you into America [laughs] because we're still on Ellis Island.

HUYSMAN: I'm at your—I'm at your disposal. I'm at your disposal.

SIGRIST: Because it is getting late and I don't want to take up too much time. So anyway, let's end tape two with Michel Huysman and—and we will begin a third tape and just go part of the way in it.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: Okay, good.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A]

SIGRIST: Okay, this is Paul Sigrist and today is Wednesday, March 25th, 1998 and we're beginning tape three with Michel Huysman, who came to the United States in 1942 at age 14, or was detained at Ellis Island, I should say, in 1942, age 14 on their way to Canada. And Mr. Huysman, when we left off at the end of tape two you were talking about getting ready to leave Ellis Island—

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: —and what had happened.

HUYSMAN: Right.

SIGRIST: And I'd like to—you to pick up the story there, please.

HUYSMAN: Well, we left Ellis Island, then went over to stay at my father's cousin's house and my father to—

SIGRIST: In New York City?

HUYSMAN: In New York City. My f—

SIGRIST: Did anything stick out in your mind about leaving Ellis Island or getting ready to leave or—

HUYSMAN: I know we were happy. [chuckles] What—I—I remember feeling of—of some kind of—of strange anxiety, anticipation or whatever. We were leaving Ellis Island and we were going to go to Canada, a country, which we had—knew—knew nothing about. But it was kind of exciting, you know, that all these sort of things. I've always been excited about not—about going into the unknown. But I do remember getting into New York and, I mean, it was—that was an experience. I still have the same feeling, not quite the same.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about it?

HUYSMAN: The height of the buildings, the walking of the street. The Empire State Building was quite—I mean, it was just unbelievable after you, you know, spent two years in rural Europe and on the boat and all of that. And this incredible town. I mean, it was just overwhelming, absolutely overwhelming, beautiful.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in New York?

HUYSMAN: Well, they gave us four days. [chuckles] That's service. We had to leave by the sixth to go to Canada. We [unclear].

SIGRIST: "They," meaning the INS?

HUYSMAN: The INS, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

HUYSMAN: Yes, they gave us a bond. I don't know what the amount of the bond was. Like I said, my cousin—my father's cousins, they wouldn't make much difference. But they were the wealthy ones. [clears throat] But then we went—you know, we—we spent a few days in—in New York seeing my father's cousins, seeing my father's friends, who had a son my age that I knew as a kid, as a child before they left for New York. They were diamond cutters. And then treating us and having, you know, all of this incredible food.

SIGRIST: Anything new that you'd never eaten before?

HUYSMAN: No. Well, yeah. I don't—I don't remember eating steaks and prime ribs and that sort of stuff. I just never had the memory of it. It was just—you know, it was just stupendous. It was just overwhelming. And then to go—then New York four days and then to Canada. That was a—kind of, you know, anx—again, not knowing people, except for the people that had—you know, two elderly people that had provided for our freedom.

SIGRIST: How did you get from New York to Canada?

HUYSMAN: By train.

SIGRIST: And where in Canada did you go?

HUYSMAN: Toronto.

SIGRIST: Went up to Toronto.

HUYSMAN: Toronto.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about the trip on the train going north?

HUYSMAN: No, just entering Canada was sort of, you know—no, no. No, the trip itself, I don't really—I seem to have—the boat trip I remember every day, practically.

SIGRIST: Oh. [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: But the train trip, no. I didn't—

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Canada?

HUYSMAN: Two years.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what those two years were like for you personally?

HUYSMAN: Very good. Very good. I loved Canada, except for the weather. [chuckles] I never felt such cold in my life, you know. We came from fairly moderate climates.

SIGRIST: Is there a story you can tell me about how you negotiated extreme weather in Canada somehow, or a blizzard you remember or something along those—

HUYSMAN: Well, no. I remember the—the miracle of walking to school not in—in the snow but on top of the snow. The snow was frozen. And the school was about a mile and a half away from where I lived in Toronto, and learning how to skate, which I never really did master. That's kind of an inferior feeling as you walk on the ice and you see three and four-year-olds do figure eights around you. You know. [chuckles] So I did—Canada—but Canada was good. I learned to speak English.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that?

HUYSMAN: I learned to spe—I went to First Commerce High School. Then we moved to—to Forest Hill Village, which is a very good area of Toronto. It's just that I—friends that I made there and—and, of course, being uprooted again two years later to go to New York, because di—my father being in the diamond cutting end of it, Toronto had only one factory and sort of limited. He decided he would—wanted to go to New York and we worked—I don't know how—we had a Canadian attorney friend of ours that did all the work to go to New York. But to this day, I wonder what would have happened to my life if I had stayed in Can—it was—it was a nice place. Canadians are very pleasant and I found a less hectic form of life in Toronto. I enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: What kind of place did you live in in Toronto?

HUYSMAN: In—in an apartment, a walk-up apartment, third floor or something. It was a very nice place. I went to school to Forest Hill Junior—Village Junior High School, became president of this—of this class, vice president of the junior high school. So I had a lot of friends.

SIGRIST: Was there a Jewish population in Toronto?

HUYSMAN: Yes, quite a bit. But I had someday Jewish friends. But Toronto was—was amazing. There was a lot of bigotry there when we arrived in 1942. This totally amazed me that there was such really strong anti-Semitism.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. Is there a—an experience—

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —that you went through that you can tell me about?

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah. I—I remember when I hardly spoke English that—was in a movie theater with—with—with friends of mine, also Dutch boys and speak Dutch and so on. And the—the—being called all of a sudden this dirty Jew and being—they wanted to beat me up. Luckily, I was carrying some roller skates at the time and I threatened to defend myself with them, which I would have done. And so that didn't go on. And later on in school, wanting to date and go to a little—to junior high school proms and so on. And asking a not—a non-Jewish girl for—said, “No, can't go with you because my parents won't allow me to date Jews.” Traumas. [sighs] After getting out of there, after doing—was happening, so these were—these we are dif—these were strange things to adjust to.

SIGRIST: In Toronto, were there any other European refugees that had settled there?

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah. But not coming with us but people—

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HUYSMAN: —settled there. Yes. [clears throat] And we—we had quite a few friends there. And then the people that—that sponsored us who owned the diamond—the boss of the diamond-cutting plant where my father worked. But otherwise, you know, besides that sort of thing, it was a—it was a difficult adjustment at first. But later on, it—that sort of calmed down.

SIGRIST: You started telling a little bit about learning to speak English. Was there anything specific you can tell me about that experience?

HUYSMAN: I loved it. I loved learning English. I loved the language.

SIGRIST: How did you go about learning it?

HUYSMAN: I can't tell you. I don't know.

SIGRIST: It just happened?

HUYSMAN: It just happens. I learn languages that way.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Do you remember some of your first words?

HUYSMAN: I don't want to say on this tape.

SIGRIST: [laughs] Okay. I understand.

HUYSMAN: A large number of four-letter words even then that I learned [chuckles] very quickly.

SIGRIST: What languages were people speaking in Toronto?

HUYSMAN: English. Just—just English. It's not—there's no French in—

SIGRIST: No French speaking—

HUYSMAN: No, none at all. No, no, no. Matter of fact, En—English and French Canadians were still not fond of each other. But, well—

SIGRIST: What about your mother and your sister? What—what—what were their experiences in Toronto?

HUYSMAN: My mother had a bunch—found a bunch of Dutch friends and it was quite a nice so—social—she became a member of a Dutch group of women that—that worked for the Dutch troops, for the Dutch Army, you know, for clothing and all of this sort—Queen of—Queen Juliana [PH], or at that time, Princess Juliana—Wilhelmina was still alive—came to Toronto and—and she—so she was very active with that. My sister was a diam—also a diamond girdler.

SIGRIST: Girdler?

HUYSMAN: Girdler. Yeah. That—that—they take the rough diamonds and make them round shape, or—or, as marquees, or a pear shape. You shape the rough diamonds. That—that was her job.

SIGRIST: So she was earning an income at that time?

HUYSMAN: Oh, yeah. She already worked in Belgium. She learned that. She went to work at age 13, 14. School was not one of her things, although she's a very bright woman. So she was a diamond girdler.

SIGRIST: What about your mother? Did she get a job in Toronto?

HUYSMAN: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Now, you say business was not great for your dad?

HUYSMAN: It was okay but he—

SIGRIST: Okay.

HUYSMAN: —didn't—it was very limited and he—he had opportunity to do better in New York, so that's why he [clears throat] decided to go because he had more friends there.

SIGRIST: What about communication with Europe while you were still in Canada?

HUYSMAN: There was none until the war was over and when we got all the bad news.

SIGRIST: Where were—when the war finished, where were you living?

HUYSMAN: We were in—we were in—no, when the war really finished [unclear]—I was wrong—the war finished, I was in New York. I was in New York. But there was no communication with Europe at all as far as between people.

SIGRIST: Right. So the—so am I to believe then the last significant communication that your father had with his brother was in San Simone?

HUYSMAN: Yeah, yeah. That was about the last.

SIGRIST: I see.

HUYSMAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about the relocation to New York and how that all came about.

HUYSMAN: Went there in—towards the end of 1942—no, in the summer of '42, late summer. And then it—went to Washington Heights. We moved to Washington Heights and—

SIGRIST: You said that you were in Toronto for two years.

HUYSMAN: Two years.

SIGRIST: So '44.

HUYSMAN: In 1944. Sorry.

SIGRIST: That's okay.

HUYSMAN: Yes, 1944, we went to New York.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving Toronto?

HUYSMAN: Unhappy. I wasn't happy at all. I had very close friends. I had developed close friends. I had—liked the prestige of being vice president of the school. And you really develop a, you know, a circle and I just liked Canada.

SIGRIST: How was New York different than Toronto once you got here?

HUYSMAN: Well, Toronto at that time with a population of 750,000 so—and it was a very conservative town. You know, Sundays, everything was closed. New York—I guess New York was okay. I w—I went there. No, I went to New York in the early summer, because my father's friend's son worked in a summer camp and he got me a job as a busboy. So the beginning of moving to New York I was a busboy up in Pennsylvania mountains for the summer. That was very good. That I enjoyed. I was, you know—so that gave me a social life and developed me a couple of fr—and I got a couple of friends that I remained friends with for quite a few years after that. So that was a very beneficial thing. And I went to school in New York, which was much easier than school in Canada.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: And—

SIGRIST: When the war was over, did your parents try to—to make connections with whoever was left in Europe?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You know—

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Or send them packages of stuff?

HUYSMAN: No—

SIGRIST: How—how was that?

HUYSMAN: There was—there was nobody left to send packages to. My father lost all of his—all of his sibs and their children, their wives, except for my—my aunt and cousin, the deaf-mute cousin. They survived. And my mother's—lost her sister and brother and their children. And—and she had one brother who was a South African who died of a coronary at

that time. So all of their—you know, all of their sibs were—were lost. And my father—we received a letter from the father of the artist, who was at Belsen, who survived Belsen, who wrote us a letter about what happened to my uncle. It was—it was awful. It was awful to get—to—I don't really recall my—my parents' reaction to these losses. I put myself in their place now. Those losses must have been absolutely horrendous. Everybody.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. Did they ever wish to go back to Europe? If not to live, at least to visit or—

HUYSMAN: Oh, they visited. Yes.

SIGRIST: They did?

HUYSMAN: They did. They went back to Europe to visit. And they enjoyed whatever—you know, they have—they still have some friends leftover so [clears throat]—

SIGRIST: Well, why don't you—the remainder of our time, why don't you tell me what happened to you? Your—your—the course of your life, from the time you were the busboy in Pennsylvania [chuckles] till now.

HUYSMAN: Oh, busboy, Pennsylvania. Next summer [chuckles] was a busboy—waiter in Connecticut. Then I—oh, so people—the men came back from the war. It was difficult to go to college to get—and my father never pressed it, should go to college. He would have liked it. I tried but I—at that point, it was difficult to get into the schools, to get a scholarship for a non—a non-citizen. I was not a citizen at the time. I decided to go, learn, become a diamond—get a diamond cutter. And I trained to be a diamond cutter and I—

SIGRIST: How'd your father feel about that choice?

HUYSMAN: Huh?

SIGRIST: How did your father feel about that choice?

HUYSMAN: Oh, it was okay. That—it was all right. And then I—the next phase to that, I went to—I moved to Florida to—to go into—I knew somebody who was in the land developing business. So I took the opportunity, went to Florida in the land development business. And while I was—that, I figured, 'Gee, I want to be a lawyer.' So I decided to go to—start going to college and moved to Miami to go to law school. So a diamond cutter, land developer, went to law school, continued developing land in North Carolina mountains and so on. And I didn't

like any of it, really. Then I started to practice law. Strangely enough, I started to practice immigration law, mostly. Now, that's where I'm at and I'm 70 now and I don't know what I'm going to do when I grow up. [chuckles] I'm a fairly good artist. My wife thinks I'm an excellent artist and I've been working some with that.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about your—your art a little bit? What kind of art do you do?

HUYSMAN: Mostly—well, what happened was I—I always could draw. I was—the artist that I met in France, you know, that—that I ta—I learned from him. He didn't teach me. I saw how he did it and I copied. And my wife is a commercial artist. And she said, "Well, why don't you"—you know, exactly how it started. I wanted to draw. "Well," she said. "I have some art supplies inside." She has art supplies. It's like a whole warehouse of art supplies, be—being a commercial artist and so on. And so I started drawing. And I be—I found I have an affinity for pen and ink, although I do sculpture too. But my illustrative pen and ink drawings are rather—and colors. I love doing colors. So I started doing that and I have boxes of it at home. But I sold quite a few pieces already. And that—found myself adept at doing miniature work, at being a diamond—having been a diamond cutter, it developed my eyesight. When I take off my glasses, I can look within a range of two to three inches and see everything greatly enlarged. And somehow, I have the talent to do it. It—I don't know. It's how I learn a language. And people ask me, "Well, how do you draw that way?" I said, "I really don't know." "How do you learn a language?" "I don't know. It just happens." And so here I am.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your wife.

HUYSMAN: My wife.

SIGRIST: What's her name?

HUYSMAN: Carol.

SIGRIST: Maiden name?

HUYSMAN: Fleischman [PH], born in Jersey City.

SIGRIST: And can you spell Fleischman, please?

HUYSMAN: F-L-E-I-C-H-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And how did you meet Carol?

HUYSMAN: I met Carol after I left a long, difficult relationship, about which I really don't wish to talk. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Okay, that's fine.

HUYSMAN: Okay. And I—I never met—had never known anyone quite—quite so—so—so—to the—well, we—we sort of hit it off immediately. And this is a person who sees right through, is very honest. And I never realized that you could live in that kind of a way. So she has influenced my life so tremendously. She has given me confidence. She has made me an artist, although I had it in me. I was an artist before but I never—she brought all of this out of me.

SIGRIST: What year did you marry?

HUYSMAN: Oh, we [chuckles]—'82.

SIGRIST: 1982.

HUYSMAN: But we knew each other since 1978. So we've really—almost 20 years. Twenty of the best years I've had.

SIGRIST: And are there children?

HUYSMAN: No, no, no, on. Almost once, but then we decided [unclear] that it didn't—had a miscarriage and we decided, "Well, that was a try. Now, let's—we are"—we sort of were each other's children.

SIGRIST: And I want to talk about you going to Europe too. Have you gone back to Belgium?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What was the first time?

HUYSMAN: The first time, oh—first time was about, I don't know, 30-some years ago. Let's see, six—six—seven—seven—I can't think. My—I have two children from [unclear] time. About '43—about 36 years ago—

SIGRIST: Yes? Did you go to the town—

HUYSMAN: —for the first time.

SIGRIST: —that you lived in [unclear]?

HUYSMAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: And how did—what were your feelings when you went there?

HUYSMAN: [chuckles] That was a very funny experience. I got back to Antwerp and everything is so small. You know, I was very little when I left there. I couldn't find the street I was born in because I kept passing the street. The blocks were too little. When I used to walk them then, I—you know, it would take some time to go from one block to another. But now, with my I—longer, more normal [chuckles] legs, I could—it was—everything was very small. I went to Amsterdam and I enjoyed Amsterdam because I never lived there, didn't really know it.

SIGRIST: Did you feel some kind of a—an emotional connection to what you were seeing, especially when you were in Belgium?

HUYSMAN: In Belgium, oh, to a certain extent. But I think I got very—the—whatever's past there is like it's—it's—it's like something I turned off. I really don't feel like getting—Bel—Antwerp is—you know, it's a nice town. But it's—I'm not—I'm not [unclear]—

SIGRIST: I meant specifically when you were seeing the places where you had—the blocks that you had walked that, you know—

HUYSMAN: That was interesting. It was—it was—it was—you know, perhaps if I had been older when I left it would have had a deeper—deeper kind of a—oh, I did—I did go—when I went to—I went to look at some of the houses I used to live in and where some of my friends lived. But it didn't get to me. It didn't get to me.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. How do you characterize yourself in terms of nationality?

HUYSMAN: [sighs] That's a very good question.

SIGRIST: You—you've got several rivers flowing into one. [chuckles]

HUYSMAN: That's right. That's exactly right.

SIGRIST: But when—if you had to define yourself—

HUYSMAN: Do you know the plant called the water hyacinth?

SIGRIST: Yes.

HUYSMAN: It comes from Japan. It came to—to Florida—

SIGRIST: Yeah, right. The [unclear].

HUYSMAN: It floats and grows and it floats, and the more it floats the more it grows. And that—I sort of float that way. I feel—I don't have any—I feel like a person without true roots. It's a very interesting question you asked me.

SIGRIST: Has that affected the course of your life in any way?

HUYSMAN: I'm sure it has.

SIGRIST: Professionally, perhaps, or—

HUYSMAN: I'm—I'm sure it has. I don't know whether it has professionally. I just—I guess I'm just not—a lot of—you know, I'm very grateful that I survived. I'm grateful. The country I'm really most grateful to is Canada. I have a very—you know, in spite of whatever—there might have been anti-Semitic [unclear], didn't bother me at all. They saved me. They g—let us in. And I've always resented that part of—of the things here, that they didn't. I've resented the St. Louis, you know, the ship that—

SIGRIST: The ship, uh-hmm.

HUYSMAN: The ship of fools, whatever they call that. And it finally wound up in Antwerp. These sort of things bother me, you know, in—in this great country. And I'll tell you, this is—I have the—I was the greatest admirer of this country, especially in the '50s. It was the most dynamic, growing—the—the power out of this land of—of brilliance of the United States was incredible. I think I felt closest to the United States during those growth years.

SIGRIST: As opposed to now.

HUYSMAN: As opposed to now.

SIGRIST: Forty-some odd years later.

HUYSMAN: As opposed to now. You know, it's—it's a bit disappointing to see that, you know, we don't really care who we are. It's—what we have seems to be more important.

SIGRIST: What did you do in your life of which you're the most proud?

HUYSMAN: I don't know. I really haven't—I think the—one of the fact that—
[unclear] being proud is it's—it's my philosophy. I'm very proud of my
philosophy of life.

SIGRIST: Which is?

HUYSMAN: Which is it's—it's okay to have things but don't let that overrun your—
it's more important to know who you are. Th—that is really—I call it
my dowist [PH] philosophy, my—my old [unclear]. [chuckles] Laud Su
[PH], the Chinese philosopher, whom I love. It's much more—that's
more—that's the most important thing. And I'm proud of the fact that I
really don't look to—to have things that belong to others or so on.
[unclear] and I'm not saying—patting myself on the back. I'm really
happy. I'm proudest to know that I'm a human being and my wife—our
life together. That's really all I could tell you.

SIGRIST: Have you ever speculated on how your life might have been different,
had you stayed in—in France? Now, had that—that twist of fate not
happened and—and you were able to get—

HUYSMAN: I think I'd been a pile of ashes. I know for sure I would have been
dead. I would have been with those people. I would have learned
what real fear—I would have—what real fear is, what panic those
people must have gone through, when they're in the ovens or when
they're—the showers, where—the ovens, of course, they weren't.
They were dead already. But when they were—if they were—I would
been herded into a shower, like my—like I picture my grandfather.
That's where I would have been.

SIGRIST: And for someone listening to this tape a hundred years from now, what
kind of advice would you give a person?

HUYSMAN: Don't interfere with anybody else's life and know who you are, and
that's all. Really.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, that's a good place for us to end.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: Mr. Huysman, thank you very much.

HUYSMAN: Okay.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Michel Huysman on Wednesday,
March 25th, 1998 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum with Kevin
Daley running the equipment. Thank you, sir.

EI-988/HUYSMAN

[END OF INTERVIEW]