

KECK-77/ESSEL

KECK-77

DORA PFEIL ESSEL

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INTERVIEWER: DEBBY DANE

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GERMANY, 1923

AGE 15

PASSAGE ON "THE SEYDLITZ"

DANE: This is Debby Dane and I'm speaking with Dora Essel on Wednesday, November 20, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 2:15, and we're about to interview Dora Essel about her immigration experience from Germany in 1923. She was fifteen years old. Dora Essel, if you would tell me when you were born and the town you were born in.

ESSEL: I was born July the 24th, 1908 in Germany.

DANE: What town?

ESSEL: What is now the Russian zone, the East zone.

DANE: Uh-huh. Was it a large . . .

ESSEL: It was a small town not far from Leipzig.

DANE: Do you remember the name of it?

ESSEL: Gera, G-E-R-A. Gera. Thueringen, that was. I lived there till 1923.

DANE: What was the town, what was the industry? Did people, was it farming, or . . .

ESSEL: Mostly farming. Mostly farming. Department stores, too. In fact, my mother worked in a department store. See, my father was killed in 1914, first year of the war. We were three children. I was the oldest, at that time eight, my sister was five months. I was six, my sister was three, my brother was three or four months old and he never saw his father.

DANE: Oh. He went off to fight.

ESSEL: Fight the war, and never came back.

DANE: Hmm. Hmm.

ESSEL: And my mother had to work. She worked in a department

store.

DANE: Did you go to school?

ESSEL: Oh, yes. I went to school eight years in Germany and I came over in '23.

DANE: Uh-huh. During the war do you remember, you were in Eastern Germany. Were you the target of fighting, or was the fighting more . . .

ESSEL: No. We were not, I cannot remember anything much of the war.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. How was it, then, that you decided to come to America?

ESSEL: I really couldn't tell you. You see, we were three children, and I was the oldest and I thought if I'm out of my way my mother would only have two more to support. And at that time my two cousins were ready to come over here, and I asked them, I asked my relatives here in Baltimore if they would take me and they said yes.

DANE: Which relatives were here?

ESSEL: My mother's sister. And they had a bakery and, of course, I helped there in the bakery.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Had you heard from them about what it was, what life was like in America?

ESSEL: Yes. In fact, we had visitors in 1922 from Baltimore and they told us all about it. And I think that's what got us going.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Had you heard from them about what it was, what life was like in America?

ESSEL: Yes. In fact, we had visitors in 1922 from Baltimore and they told us all about it. And I think that's what got us going.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. How did you describe it? What did they say?

ESSEL: Well, that it was wonderful. Big. Plenty of space, country.

DANE: Huh. And you were used to that in your small . . .

ESSEL: Yes, I was used to it. I was used to the country. I came over here and we lived in the city.

DANE: Oh, no. All that big space and you didn't get to see it. Did you ever live in the city in Germany, or was it always in a kind of town?

ESSEL: Mostly in the country. We had relatives in the city, you know, visits back and forth. But I left the country.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So you got together with your cousins. Did they help you get your passports and your papers and . . .

ESSEL: Well, my mother tended to all that in Germany. Uh, three of us came over, took us thirteen days to come over, landed in Ellis Island.

DANE: Do you remember when you left your home town, that day when you and your cousins got together and said goodbye to your mother?

ESSEL: Yes, I remember, yes. But my mother went with us to Bremen, Bremerhaven, you know where the ships, right. And . . .

DANE: Did she pack things for you? What were you able to bring? Do you remember?

ESSEL: Yes. Oh, yes. I had a, I had a big steamer trunk. I have it up in the attic yet. A great big steamer trunk.

DANE: What was inside? What did you pack?

ESSEL: Well, all my clothes and school things. You see, I stopped school in April and I came over in June. All my school things I brought along.

DANE: Uh-huh.

ESSEL: But with moving around I just, I lost practically everything.

DANE: Did she pack food for you for the boat or was it . . .

ESSEL: No. We were not allowed to take food along. You had all the food you want on the boat, you know.

DANE: When you left on the boat, do you remember the name of the boat?

ESSEL: Seydlitz.

DANE: Could you spell that?

ESSEL: S-E-I-D-L-I-T-Z [sic]. Seydlitz.

DANE: Had you ever seen a boat of that size?

ESSEL: I'd never seen a boat, never saw so much water and I was on the boat one day and I got seasick.

DANE: I bet you weren't alone.

ESSEL: No.

DANE: Uh-huh. When you, when the boat pulled away from Bremerhaven, was it at nighttime or day?

ESSEL: Daytime. It was daytime. Yeah, we could see the people wave.

DANE: Did you, how did you feel saying goodbye to your mother? Was it, were you excited about getting here, or sad about leaving?

ESSEL: No, I wasn't sad. It was, you know, it was a new experience, you know. And, uh, somehow I think my mother thought well, she'll be coming back. But I never did.

DANE: You never went back?

ESSEL: Well, I visited after, I didn't see my mother for

thirty-eight years and then I saw her once more.

DANE: And on the boat, you were with your cousins. Did you travel third class?

ESSEL: Yes.

DANE: Steerage.

ESSEL: Uh-huh.

DANE: Can you describe what it looked like?

ESSEL: Well, no. We had one room, there were four of us in it. We had bunk beds. And it was nice, we had nice meals and all. We had a storm, no one was allowed to get up on deck. Nine out of ten people were seasick.

DANE: Was it scary during the storm, because you'd never been?

ESSEL: Yeah, it was. We were not allowed to go up on deck. Everything was closed up and down.

DANE: So did you just stay in your, in your rooms?

ESSEL: No, we had big rooms there where you could sit around, lounge and all, nice. You could read, talk to your

friends and all.

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you meet anyone on the boat?

ESSEL: Oh, it was mostly all Germans on that boat and I happened to meet a young girl, she was younger than I am, she was only eleven years old, she came over by herself and she went to Philadelphia. But somehow or other we lost track of one another and I never, you know, could find her.

DANE: Wow. Eleven years old. You finally made it over, and do you r when you came into New York Harbor, and did you see the Statue of Liberty?

ESSEL: Yes. We saw, they announced it over the, uh, intercom, or loudspeaker, and everybody was on, you know, on deck, and looked at it. And before you knew it we were right there, landed right there.

DANE: Uh-huh. Had you heard about what the Statue of Liberty was? Did you know she'd be there?

ESSEL: No. We didn't know. We had no idea till they, uh, showed it to us and told us about it.

DANE: Did she make an impression on you, or was it just a

funny statue in the middle of . . .

ESSEL: It was just a funny, big statue.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When you came to Ellis Island, do you remember what happened when you were off the boat? Did they put you in lines?

ESSEL: We were standing in line, they called your name. Of course, you had to carry your luggage, you know, the small suitcase. And then we sat around.

DANE: Did you go through medical exams?

ESSEL: Not that I know of. Different ones said, said I did, but I can't remember.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And did they ever ask you questions individually about anything, how much money you had, or where you were going?

ESSEL: No, never did. Never did. In fact, I didn't have money.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you remember having, some people have told me that part of the boat ticket and transportation, there was a tag that they had to wear.

ESSEL: Oh, yes. We had a tag, a tag with your name on it and where you were going because they spoke English and we couldn't understand them, see. And there was everything on that tag. And then you sat around and waited.

DANE: What was the impression? What did you think about Ellis Island? What did it look like?

ESSEL: Look like? Well, I can't remember too much. We were in one room. We could not, we were, you might say, locked up in one room. There were Germans and Italians. They sat together. They spoke their language, we spoke ours, you know, it, um . . . And then we slept in one room, bunk beds, one on top of the other. We ate our meals together.

DANE: Did they call you to a big table or did you . . .

ESSEL: Yes. We had big tables. Only thing I remember about meals, for every meal we had hard boiled eggs. That is the only thing that really stands out. I can't remember the rest, but we had hard boiled eggs. (she laughs)

DANE: That's funny. Did you, a lot of people said they'd seen food for the first time, different types of food. One women told us that she tasted her first butter on Ellis Island. Did any, any . . .

ESSEL: No, we had butter home. Butter, margarine. Not too much, but we had it. Uh-huh.

DANE: Bananas?

ESSEL: Bananas were something new. Not oranges, we had oranges, but bananas, that was something new. You just sit around, three days was a long time, you know.

DANE: You were telling me earlier that, um, it was on Ellis Island that you saw your first black person. Can you tell me that, how that came about?

ESSEL: Well, what country they came from I don't know. They spoke a different language. And, of course, we thought they were Indians because over in Germany they, we, you know, we heard about Indians over here. We say, "Indianas," Indians. And, um, that's what we thought until somebody else told us different. (she laughs)

DANE: That's wonderful. When you were on Ellis Island, you were there for three days. Did you stay with your cousins? Were you all together?

ESSEL: For two days. And then somebody, their names was called, and they were going, I don't know what happened to them. But you see, there were two families here in Baltimore that sponsored us, and the others, I guess they were there earlier, they took them home and I was left by myself over twenty-four hours.

DANE: What did you think about it?

ESSEL: Well, what can you do? You couldn't run away. You just sit there and wait.

DANE: Were you afraid ever that you were going to be sent back to Germany?

ESSEL: No. I just never had, it never struck my mind. So, finally my name was called and my Aunt Irma came and got me and we came to Baltimore.

DANE: When you were sitting there for three days did you have any idea why you were being delayed or what the

holdup was?

ESSEL: Well, the way I understand at that time, they had to pay, or bring so much money with them. I didn't have no money. And we just had to wait till somebody came. And being it was my aunt here, they had a business, she just couldn't, I guess she couldn't get away. And she came on a Saturday, and we traveled overnight and we landed here in Baltimore Monday morning.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When your cousins walked away, did you know that you wouldn't see them, that they were leaving the Island and you were being left behind?

ESSEL: I kind of thought so, yes. Being someone else had sponsored them, you know.

DANE: Did you cry?

ESSEL: Yes.

DANE: Well, I would think so, fifteen years old, left on this island, not knowing when you were going to be picked up.

ESSEL: That's right.

DANE: Were you frightened?

ESSEL: No, not frightened. People would, they'd walk past you and they'd smile at you. Of course, they couldn't talk to you, but I wasn't frightened.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Some people call Ellis Island, in many different languages, um, but I wondered if you'd heard of this expression, if you'd had it in German, the Island of Tears.

ESSEL: Traeneninsel.

DANE: Say it again.

ESSEL: Traeneninsel. Traenen is tears and insel is island, yes. There were many a tear were shed there. Grownups too, not just fifteen-year-old girls. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Had you heard that expression before you'd come over?

ESSEL: Yes. We'd heard it in Germany.

DANE: And how would people, when they'd say you have to go through Ellis Island and that's Traeneninsel.

ESSEL: Turned around and said, "Well, you'd shed a few tears, too. We did."

DANE: Did that worry you?

ESSEL: No, no.

DANE: Would you do me a favor and spell that, Traeneninsel? Here, I'll give you a pen to do it.

ESSEL: Traeneninsel.

DANE: Just because I don't think my transcriber will speak German.

DANE: You see, we had Traenen. Of course, here you spell it T-R-A-E. If you would spell it, Traeneninsel. That's all one word.

DANE: So it's T-R-A . . .

ESSEL: You can spell it T-R-A-E, if you want to write E-N-I-N-F-E-L. [Traeneninsel]

DANE: Uh-huh. Island of Tears.

ESSEL: Island of Tears, yes.

DANE: When someone finally came for you were you pretty desperate at that point, or were you just having all the patience in the world?

ESSEL: Well, I was glad to get, what you would say, to get home. Because, you know, we were there three days and we could not change our clothes. You sit around three days, day and night, you slept in your clothes, so we were glad to get, glad to get home.

DANE: Yeah, get out of there. Did you see any people that were sent back? Were you aware that . . .

ESSEL: No, I didn't see no one.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Was the building itself, in the big hall where you slept, some people have told me that there were wire, the beds and the bunks were in wire cages.

DANE: Not cages, no. Uh-uh.

DANE: Was there wire?

ESSEL: It was like wires. The, what you call a spring, you know, wire. And, uh, you could not open a window. It was almost like a jail. Had the iron rails on there

and all. And you were just in one room.

DANE: And you weren't allowed to go outside and play.

ESSEL: No, we were not allowed. And when you went to the restrooms, of course, it was in English and German and different, you know, languages. You went in there. No doors on the toilet. No doors there. Everything was open. (she laughs)

DANE: And were there any interpreters there for you? Was there someone that, when they were asking you questions, you could . . .

ESSEL: Yes, there was someone there, but they could just about, you know, speak, like, speak German. But, uh, they didn't ask us too many questions, I think. We just sat around, and then they called your name and you went up there and he said, "Come." You just followed him.

DANE: And then did they ask you if you knew who your aunt was? Some people have said when the people that had sponsors that came to get them they'd have to go sort of go through this little quiz to prove that they knew who this person was. Did they ask you, "Is this your

aunt?"

ESSEL: Yeah. I didn't know my aunt, see. She came over here in 1907, and I didn't know her. I only knew her name.

DANE: When she came to pick you up . . .

ESSEL: Well, she talked to me in German. She said, "Ich bin Tante Irma.", "I am Aunt Irma," you know. So then . . .

DANE: Uh-huh. And what was your name at the time, your maiden name, your full name?

ESSEL: Pfeil. Dora Pfeil. P-F-E-I-L. Dora Pfeil.

DANE: When you came here did you change the name and drop the P at all?

ESSEL: No, no. I kept it. In fact, even on my, uh, American citizen paper it was the same name, P-F-E-I-L.

DANE: When you came did you take the train from New York to Baltimore?

ESSEL: Yes. The train. Uh-huh. Overnight. I remember that. In fact, we had a transfer in Philadelphia.

Don't ask me why, but we did. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did America seem big to you at all,
or . . .

ESSEL: Yeah, big. Very big, very big.

DANE: When you came to your aunt's, she had a bakery. Did
you go to school at fifteen, or did you go right to
work?

ESSEL: I helped her in the, uh, bakery. Now, I came over in
June, school started in September over here. In the
middle of September the truant officer came, asked why
I didn't go to school. But my aunt said I went to
school eight years in Germany and that was long
enough. So they never bothered me.

DANE: Did you want to go to school?

ESSEL: No. I didn't want to go to school. I went to school
a few years later on to get my citizen papers. You
know, we had to go to school for that. But . . .

DANE: Did you, you spoke German, but you didn't speak
English.

DANE: No.

ESSEL: How did you start to learn how to speak English?

ESSEL: Well, see, my aunt had a bakery, and I had to help in the bakery and wait on, you know, people, and that's how you learn. And I had two cousins here, they were born here. One was eight years old and the other one was four years old. And they spoke mostly English. And that's how I learned.

DANE: Do you remember ever listening to the radio at that time and hearing English that way, or going to movies? Did you ever go to movies?

ESSEL: Oh, yes. I went to movies and I learned that way, yes. Radio. Yeah, you pick up a little here and a little there.

DANE: And in the community that you lived in Baltimore, was it a German community or did you . . .

ESSEL: Yes, it was a German community, it was called Highlandtown. There were Germans and Polish people, and they got along swell. One had six (?), one had eight, but they got along swell.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When you were first here living with your aunt, they were strangers. I mean, they were relatives but they still were strangers. That first year, did you ever think about wanting to go back to Germany?

ESSEL: Yes and no. At times you were homesick, but then to go back and let them, over there, think that I couldn't take it here, you know, or maybe something happened that my aunt would send me back. Because my aunt more than once reminded me, see, I was fifteen, "Don't forget. Anything goes wrong, I can send you back to Germany till you're eighteen." So you knew I had to behave. (she laughs) I wouldn't think of being sent back, you know. So.

DANE: So those first few years sounded like they could be pretty rough.

ESSEL: They were rough, and it was hot here and we were not, we were not used to it. Not only that, in a bakery and, of course, at that time there were no fans, no air conditioners, nothing. That was rough.

DANE: What did you do in the bakery?

ESSEL: In the store. Helped in the store. And, um, one of my cousins was sick, and she always needed attention too, see. That was the reason my aunt more or less said stay here and help. Of course, I didn't make much money. (she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you ever make any of the pastries? Did they teach you how to do that?

ESSEL: I helped fry donuts, ice the cakes and things like that.

DANE: Was it German pastry and German bread?

ESSEL: German (?), German everything. My uncle, he was hot here in the summer. Lord knows it gets horribly humid. What other differences did you notice?

ESSEL: Well, I don't know. I got so used to it. When you're young you probably don't know things that maybe older people would complain about. But, uh, nothing, nothing special.

DANE: Any, um, did you, with your aunt, did they bring you over to help work in the bakery?

ESSEL: Yes, yes.

DANE: A pair of hands.

ESSEL: That's right.

DANE: Uh-huh. Was it a good working relationship?

ESSEL: Yeah, very good. Very good. She was what I call my second mother.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. You didn't go to school and you learned English during the next few years.

ESSEL: That's right. Yes.

DANE: At what point did you decide to become a citizen?

ESSEL: As soon as I was twenty-one. In fact, that year, it was 1929. I went to Germany, went back to visit. I tried to get my papers. It was just a month or two before I was twenty-one so they said, no, wait till you come back. And I got my papers in 1930, when I came back. I just wanted to be a citizen.

DANE: And you wanted to be an American.

ESSEL: I wanted to be an American, yes, uh-huh, to be able to vote and all. (she laughs)

DANE: What else made you an American?

ESSEL: Well, because I felt like I wanted to stay here, so why not become a citizen, you know. And then, of course, 19, 1931, '32, I met my husband. We got married in 1933.

DANE: And was he a German?

ESSEL: He was German too, yeah. He come from Bamberg.

DANE: 1933 you met.

ESSEL: It was 1933 we got married.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When you became a citizen, you mentioned you had to go back to school. Can you tell me about that?

ESSEL: Well, you had to go to night school. And all you learned about is the country here and the first thirteen states, and we had to study, oh, just history about this country, that's all.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Was that easy for you by then? Could you read English?

ESSEL: Yes, we could read English. Uh-huh. But see, at that time, when we made our examination, they just asked us questions. We didn't have to write nothing, thank goodness. You know, in front of a judge there and he asked questions, and we had to know the first thirteen states and about the Congress and representatives and senators and some of the early presidents we had to remember. I think we learned more about this country than some people that live here.

DANE: Uh-huh. You're probably right. And when you passed the test and you got your papers, what was that day like? Was it a happy day, or . . .

ESSEL: It was a happy day. We were in a court and it was, oh, about maybe twenty, twenty-five of us. And we were sworn in, see, and we got our papers.

DANE: Huh. When did you first feel like an American citizen, and not German any more?

ESSEL: I guess right then and there. When you got your papers you knew you belonged here.

DANE: Huh. German, you worked in a German bakery. Uh, were there other things, sort of customs or foods or

holidays or, uh, things German that you did here,
customs that were still part of the community that you
lived in.

ESSEL: Here, you mean?

DANE: Uh-huh.

ESSEL: Well, uh . . .

DANE: Like the Aryan . . .

ESSEL: The Aryan, my uncle belonged to a singing society,
too. It was called Eichenkranz.

DANE: Could you spell that? I don't know . . .

ESSEL: (she laughs) Eichenkranz.

DANE: Why don't you say it, because they take my place away.

ESSEL: E-I-C-H-E-N-K-R-A-N-Z.

DANE: And that was a singing . . .

ESSEL: A singing society. They meet every Tuesday and then
they had a fair, picnics and all.

DANE: And the Aryan Park, what was that?

ESSEL: What?

DANE: Aryan . . .

ESSEL: Aryan Park, well, in the city, Eichenkranz we were one side of the city and Aryan was on the other side of Baltimore. So we never had too much contact with the, with the Aryan. We were up, East Baltimore.

DANE: Oh, I see. Two separate German communities.

ESSEL: Yes. That's right. Uh-huh.

DANE: Would they sponsor socials, and . . .

ESSEL: Social affairs and, uh, as I said, we had picnics, games and all different, you know, children's get together.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Songs? Did you used to sing songs?

ESSEL: Yes. (she laughs) It was all German, uh-huh.

DANE: Uh-huh. And dancing, do Germans polka and all that stuff?

ESSEL: Oh, yes. We did. Polka and waltz, oh, yes. We had

German music, you know, German orchestra.

DANE: And literature? Were you reading at all very much when you came . . .

ESSEL: Not too much, no. I read the newspapers. Mostly English because, you know, you want to learn English and what you was reading in the German. Of course, we did have a German paper, but . . . Of course, I didn't have too much time to read. We were very busy.

ESSEL: When, oh, maybe I should switch sides. This is the end of side one with Dora Essel, number 077. It's 2:44.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two with Dora Essel, number 077. It's 24:45. We were just talking about things German here, dances and the park and the singing society. What about dress? When you came over, were you dressed differently than Americans? A lot of people have told me that they'd come in, clothes from the old country, they say, and their relatives. Is that, did that happen with you?

ESSEL: Well, that was, that my passport picture there. That was a blue dress with all embroidery. Of course, we did wear an apron at home and, I think, the dresses were longer than here. With high shoes.

DANE: Were they button or . . .

ESSEL: Button, yes. Uh-huh.

DANE: And would you describe this, since people can't see it.

ESSEL: That's a hair ribbon and that was just the style that time, like you have styles here now, too. You see how some of them wear their hair now. It was, I think it was blue, blue ribbon.

DANE: And how big is it?

ESSEL: It was real wide ribbon.

DANE: Up to six inches?

ESSEL: Yes, indeed.

DANE: And it sat right up on the . . .

ESSEL: Yeah, the bigger the better. (they laugh)

DANE: When your aunt saw you in this beautiful outfit did she want you to stay dressing like this, or did she ask you to . . .

ESSEL: Well, yes. I had to. I had no other clothes. Let me tell you something else about me. I was fifteen years old, but I was very small, short. I didn't start to grow again until I was eighteen. I was fifteen, and years ago when you went to the movie, until twelve you paid half the price. I was fifteen, I still went for half a price. Same thing with streetcars. We had streetcars here and we had to take streetcar in town. I was fifteen, sixteen, I still went for half price. It must be the American air or something, and I started growing when I was eighteen years old. Because I remember that Sunday morning, when I arrived here in Baltimore, an uncle of mine, my mother's brother, lived out of town, but he happened to visit there. And when he saw me that Sunday morning he looked at me and he said, "How can a mother send a small child like that thousands of miles away?" That's how small I was.

DANE: What did you think when he said that?

ESSEL: Nothing.

DANE: Yeah, but then you grew.

ESSEL: In fact, at the bakery, you know how tall the counters are, I could just about make it.

DANE: Oh, no. Oh, no. And did you, did you wear an apron when you were over here as you did in Germany?

ESSEL: Yes, I did. And, of course, as I worked in the bakery we had then the white aprons, you know. But by and by you discarded them, and they would buy me, you know, regular clothes from over here. More comfortable dresses, more comfortable shoes.

DANE: Huh. Huh. And when you were here as a German girl and learning English, you were fifteen, pretty. Did, did you ever feel, were you treated as though you were different by American kids? Did they think of you as a foreigner?

ESSEL: Yes, I did. In fact, I had cousins that were born here. At times they made fun of me, till I could understand. Then I hit back.

DANE: Hmm. Hmm. Would they call you names or just . . .

ESSEL: Yes. And I had the right name, Dora. They called me "Dumb Dora" and that name stuck for a while. And then later on, you know, I thought about it, what they meant. Like, "She can't speak English, she won't hear." Things like that. And I'm not the only one that, maybe you heard from different ones, too, that were. I was not mistreated, don't get me wrong. But they made fun. They were about my age. Two of my cousins were born here. So you . . .

DANE: Would your aunt say anything and come to your defense or anything, or were, did she disagree . . .

ESSEL: Well, at times I kept quiet because I don't like arguments and fights. Never did. So I just kept it to myself till I was old enough to understand. And then many a time later on we talked about it. I said, "Yes, I remember you made fun of me."

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And other kids in the neighborhood, did you meet . . .

ESSEL: What do you mean?

DANE: Other children.

ESSEL: Yes. As I said, we were Germans and Polish together and, uh, we talked German, they talked Polish. But we got along. No arguments, no fights, no nothing. No trouble like they have now.

DANE: Did they speak German, your cousins, or . . .

ESSEL: They could understand. Yes, they could understand. But they would talk to me in English to make, like, to make sure that I don't understand them.

DANE: Yeah. And then, you became a citizen, you didn't change your name.

ESSEL: No.

DANE: And then you married. Your husband, was he German also?

ESSEL: yes.

DANE: And had he come through Ellis Island?

ESSEL: No. He came, I think he landed in Philadelphia. And he was only seventeen when he came over.

DANE: You had a lot in common. Shared experiences. When you were growing up and had children, then World War Two came, and we were talking about this when we first came in. Again, now, we were fighting the Germans. Did you, was there any animosity that you remember, towards you as a German descendent? You were an American citizen . . .

ESSEL: None whatsoever. Of course, at that time we both of us, we were both citizens already. No one ever bothered us, no one came around, like they did some of them that were not citizen, I guess searched the house and all. No one bothered us. And my girls went to school. In fact, up to the time my girls went to school they spoke nothing but German but in school, well, then everything changed. But I can't remember that they ever came home and, you know, somebody made fun of them. No.

DANE: Huh. Do they still speak German?

ESSEL: No.

DANE: Do you still speak German?

ESSEL: Oh, yes. I speak German. I have a sister living in

Germany, see. And we visit back and forth. She was here. Oh, yes.

DANE: During the war, did you ever feel divided by allegiances? I know that was sort of a horrible time because, as you said, you know, you're a citizen of America, but you came from Germany, you must still believe in the home country.

ESSEL: Well, you do. Look, I'm German, no matter what happens, I'm still German. And then after the war we sent packages over to our, you know, relatives, my mother, and my husband's family. Of course, what happened during the war, even before the war, about Hitler. We don't know a thing about it because we were too young when we came over here. That never bothered us.

DANE: Uh-huh. What a hard thing because being a citizen and having your life here and then knowing that your family was still over there.

ESSEL: In fact, my husband was almost drafted here, because he was an American citizen. He said, many a time, he said, "I don't want to go over there and shoot my own

brother or brother-in-law." But luckily he was, he worked in a shipyard and then he was deferred, you know.

DANE: How old was he at that point?

ESSEL: In his thirties?

DANE: Oh, that would have been horrible, horrible to take.

ESSEL: Yeah.

DANE: And your feelings, this is always sort of my last round up question, it seems appropriate now because we've been talking about your roots, where you've come from, and here, where you live, and then become a citizen. Um, any thoughts on America as a country, as a place to have brought up your children. Have you ever thought about what would have been different, or if your life is better here than if you'd stayed in Germany?

ESSEL: No, I wouldn't. No, it was better here. It was better. It still is. And I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. I like it here. Some people complain but, I don't. I'm not rich, but I can have

Social Security, I make out, and that's all I want. My children are happily married and I've got five grandchildren. No. I wouldn't trade it. Even though my relatives in Germany asked me will I come over and live over there. I said, "No way."

DANE: How come? Why not?

ESSEL: Why not? Because I just feel like my roots are here. My families are here, you know. No, I would not move back over there.

DANE: Are you proud to be an American?

ESSEL: Yes, I am. And even though now, in Germany, they are just as modern as we are now. Years ago it was different, you know, when I came over. And they have everything like we have here. My sister has everything like I have, but I just . . . I visit over there, but I'm always glad to come back home.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you find that the standard of living was better when you came and lived in Baltimore than in your village in Germany?

ESSEL: At that time? Oh, yes. It was much better here, oh,

yes. Of course, after the war, 1920 and '21, '23, '22, we had enough to eat, but not the best. Did you ever try, did you ever eat horsemeat?

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you eat horsemeat?

ESSEL: Once a week we had meat. That's on Sunday. We never liked it, and then my mother cut it out.

DANE: And then when you came here . . .

ESSEL: We had, we got one orange for Christmas. And then you come over here and you see all that and it's, no, I would not like to go back.

DANE: Uh-huh. I can't think of anything else. (addresses the recording engineer) O.J.? Where you came from, at the time, in the twenties, was German and not in divided Germany. It was one of the still unified, when it became divided, after World War Two, tell me, did your sisters and your mother move away because of that, or how did that come about?

ESSEL: My sister had moved away. Her husband was transferred. They moved up near Hamburg. My mother was still in the East Zone. Three ladies, my mother

and two other ladies, left overnight, left everything, left everything behind, walked for miles and miles, walked through snow, icy water, and they landed in Berlin. How long they were on the road I don't know.

DANE: And what year was this?

ESSEL: That was, I don't know. It was after the war, a few years after the war. And then my mother got in touch with my sister and my mother lived with my sister then. But they left everything behind and there were three women.

DANE: Because they didn't want to stay and live under . . .

ESSEL: They did not want to stay there.

DANE: And have you ever been able to get back to your village, to your town?

ESSEL: No, I've never been back again. I don't know.

DANE: Would you like to?

ESSEL: I would like to see it again, yes. I was over there three years ago with my two daughters, but we did not go into the East Zone. I just, I don't trust it

altogether, because I want to come back here.

DANE: I can't blame you. And your, your mother's passed on by now, of course.

ESSEL: Yeah. She was eighty-six when she passed away. I was so glad I saw her once more.

DANE: Would you communicate and would you try and write to her when you were here at first?

ESSEL: Oh, yes. I did, oh, yes. All the time.

DANE: Did you miss her?

ESSEL: At first I did. Oh, yes. I'd write and once in a while she would. Of course, I don't write often enough, because I'm the kind I don't like to write.
(she laughs)

DANE: Uh-huh. Were you able to save any money to send to her?

ESSEL: Yes, I did, I saved. In fact, I sent money to send my sister to college. My sister's more educated than I am. But that's beside the point. I mean, I was only too glad to do it, because I know my mother could not

afford it.

DANE: You would send money back to Germany so your sister could go to school in Germany.

ESSEL: Yes. Yes, college and all. And she got a nice job at the Board of Education over there. She worked five years.

DANE: Was that your idea to send her to college?

ESSEL: Well, she wanted to go, but my mother could not afford it. The little pension she got was not enough. As I said, that was one of the reasons I left home. There was one less to feed. Everything, I was single, you know how it is, I sent her the money, and she went through college and all.

DANE: Did that make you proud, to know that you did that?

ESSEL: Well, I don't want to brag about it. After all, that was my sister. (she laughs)

DANE: And she's still in Germany.

ESSEL: She's still in Germany. She comes, she was over here a couple times, and I go over and visit.

DANE: Did she like it here? Would she ever consider moving . . .

ESSEL: No. See, her family is over there, too. She's got, I have two girls, and my sister has two boys. (she laughs) And the boys have been here already, too. My girls have been over there.

DANE: That's wonderful. And so you have roots there and a life here.

ESSEL: Yes.

DANE: On the boat coming over, going way back to when we were talking about that, did you ever get seasick?

ESSEL: Yes, I was seasick. Before we left Bremerhaven, my mother gave my cousin Paul, he was twenty-one years old, a bottle of wine. She told him, "If Dora gets seasick, give her a drink of wine." I was seasick for three days, I never saw a drink of wine. After I was okay, one day my cousin Paul, he was sitting on deck, so I thought, "Well, I'm going down his cabin and find that bottle." I did. I found it under his bed, empty.

DANE: OH. (she laughs) And you never tasted a drop.

ESSEL: Never got a taste of it. (she laughs)

DANE: I wonder if it would have made you feel better.

ESSEL: (?), you know, I made a fuss with him. But I never told my mother, no, I never told her. But that was funny. I found it.

DANE: I forgot to ask you, he was twenty-one, and how old was your cousin?

ESSEL: She was, uh, about eighteen.

DANE: Eighteen. So twenty-one, eighteen.

ESSEL: Over there, they were sister and brother, see.

DANE: And you were fifteen.

ESSEL: Fifteen. Uh-huh.

DANE: So they were even older than you.

ESSEL: They were older than me. They were supposed to take care of me but they didn't. I was seasick, laying in bed by myself.

DANE: And they didn't take care of you, or . . .

ESSEL: No.

DANE: And then they left you?

ESSEL: Yeah. Well, leave, when they left me in, uh, Ellis Island, that was not their fault. They were called, and they had to, you know, no. I didn't hold it against them. But I'll never forget that, that empty bottle. (they laugh)

DANE: This is the end of side two with Dora Essel, number 077. It's 3:06.