

KECK-96

ERNEST BECKER

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AGE 19

PASSAGE ON "THE WESTPHALIA"

DANE: This is Debby Dane and I'm speaking with Ernest Becker on Monday, November 25, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 2:05. We are about to interview mr. Becker about his immigration experience from Germany in 1924. He--

BECKER: '23.

DANE: '23. That's right. He was nineteen years old. Mr. Becker, if you could tell me what town you were born in, in Germany?

BECKER: In Kassel.

DANE: And that's spelled?

BECKER: In Hessen?

DANE: And that's K-A-S-S--

BECKER: K-A-S-S-E-L and in Hessen. And that is between Frankfurt and Hannover.

DANE: Uh-huh. And what kind of town was it? Was it a big town, little town?

BECKER: Oh, it was a fairly big city. Uh, I should say maybe as much as twenty thousand.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And your father, what kind of business did he do? Was he a tradesman, or--

BECKER: He was treasurer of the Dresdner Bank, which is one of the biggest banks in Germany.

DANE: So you were fairly well off?

BECKER: Oh, he was very well off. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

DANE: Did you have lots of brothers and sisters? Big family, or little family?

BECKER: I was the only mistake. (They laugh.)

DANE: So you went to, you grew up going to school?

BECKER: Yeah. Yeah, I did.

DANE: How far did you get?

BECKER: Three years of grammar school and then, uh, let's see, three, five, five years gymnasium, what they call it. It's better than high school. Then, from there, when the inflation came I went out and learned a trade as a baker and what they call a fancy baker. It's two years in each. No pay, no pay.

DANE: So you worked with a master baker?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. That goes even further. He can make you do

anything. The bakery where I worked they had a farm beside it.

DANE: A what?

BECKER: A farm. I had to do a lot of farm work. And they only had the fancy bakery. Uh, a very nice man. Had a big place. And, uh, he taught me a lot and, uh, I was one of the family living there.

DANE: Was this in the town, in Kassel, or out of town?

BECKER: Yeah, that was right in Kassel.

DANE: Did you live there?

BECKER: Yeah. On, uh, like, uh, he would, uh, say we had a big window that faced out on the mountains, we'd start, "Too a good day, let's go for a ride." (They laugh.) It was very good, and so it was the other one where I worked as a baker, he didn't have to pay me. And this I never knew about. But I had a good education and he was elected head of the , uh, what would you could say, I don't know, of the bakeries, the guilds all over Germany. And he took me along as his secretary. And when I left him, which was understood that I go to the other fellow, he handed me a bankbook. He says, "I paid you for all that." (He cries.)

DANE: What a nice guy. And you didn't know that.

BECKER: No. I didn't know. I didn't know until the day I left. But they treated me very nice. They had no children on the farm and the parents lived there and it was very nice. It was some rough work, but when I think back of it today, it was rough.

DANE: Yeah, yeah. Was this during the war, World War One?

BECKER: It was the end of the war. It was the end of the war because, uh, one of the men, the, uh, foreman at the place, he had been the Imperial Guard and he had come back and was working. So it was that time.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember much about the war?

BECKER: Well, we were kids. When I was ten years old, that was when it started. Fourteen, we run out, we wanted to help. went up to the armory. Up to them, they had the fancy uniform. And then they put the filigree on. I helped the kids, putting the new, with the, uh, what you call them, uh, stencil, put the regimental numbers on it. (He laughs.)

DANE: Was that fun? You were part of the effort, then.

BECKER: Oh, ten years old, we were all in there, see. And, uh, outside of that we didn't know too much about it. We didn't feel it. Except towards the end when there was nothing to eat.

DANE: And that's when you were working on the farm?

BECKER: That was, that was really much later than that, when the war was over, when they lost. Ours was the first big city that they came to and everybody just went home. You hung the rifle on the tree and we, as kids, we took them, put in the ammunition and shot pigeons and made soup out of them. (They laugh.) And sat on the curb and ate a horse which the soldiers had just shot on the middle of the street, cut it up, put it in big kettles and gave it to the kids because we hadn't had any meat for a year, we hadn't seen any.

DANE: How long did that go on, a long time?

BECKER: Oh, that was quite a, for a few weeks, but till they were all dispensed, dispersed. Funny thing, uh, we had gotten hold of a whole case of rockets and the pistol to shoot them with. Oh, we had a barrel that big. Then when we get into the Revolution and they put the red flag up. Before the city hall, great big ones. And we kids, we were in form. We'd

be in the park a distance away, they shoot the rockets and set the flags on fire. Those were rough days. (They laugh.)

DANE: Did you understand about the red flags and what it meant and--

BECKER: No, we were just kids, that's it.

DANE: You didn't want it.

BECKER: No. We knew that, it was quite a thing. Uh, and, uh, when the Revolution came it started up in the northern part, but then they went, friends who came in, like they came in our city. They took over the city. And then the plundering started. They smashed the windows in the stores, took everything out they wanted.

DANE: Was that frightening?

BECKER: We were kids. It was exciting. So-- (He laughs.)

DANE: Were you at home? Did you--

BECKER: I was working, see. I was working then. But, uh, we got

through. We'd go out, see what's going on. And then there were some loyal troops. They called them in. And they set up machine guns. In our city there's two long streets, straight. They set them up, "Everybody clear the street, we shoot." We were in the street.

DANE: You got out of the way, didn't you?

BECKER: We laid down in the gutter. And they shot, and they killed quite a few people.

DANE: Oh. And you remember that?

BECKER: Oh, yeah.

DANE: Oh, scary. Sounds horrible.

BECKER: Oh, yeah. But I mean, this was different, different times, I mean. They really put in order in a hurry.

DANE: During all this time when the war and lack of food and the Germans were losing, did you ever think about going to America at that point?

BECKER: At that time? No, no, no. No, I had no idea at that time. I mean, in fact, I was kind of too young for that, I mean. I was from ten to fifteen, see. You don't think much about politics then.

DANE: Uh-huh. So then how was it that you came to start hearing about America and thinking about coming over here?

BECKER: Oh, in the first place, I was always interested in geography. But you get a wrong impression of distances. You have no idea big it is. Even educated, really more educated people than me, had no idea how big it is. When I first started I wanted to get, now I had a trade, I wanted to get on one of the German or American line steamers. And, uh, I thought I'd stay over in New York, be there two days and go up to Niagara Falls.

DANE: That afternoon--

BECKER: I had a map. You, you know, open up an atlas and there's two pages. One country on one and one on the other. They are the same size, but it's ten times that big, see. So I had ideas on that and I applied and just before that this fellow came to my father. I wrote him.

DANE: Tell me all about that because we don't know. Tell me

about the guy coming from Boston because we don't know that. Tell that story again.

BECKER: Oh, yeah. He came with his whole family.

DANE: From Boston?

BECKER: From Boston, yeah. Now, he had jumped ship, too. That's how he got here. He had worked on the ship but jumped ship, but he made good. He came over and he showed off his money and all of that, and gave my father the address. Your boy can write if he wants to come. And I got discouraged. When the inflation came there was no future. Nothing.

DANE: No jobs.

BECKER: No. And besides, I had a trade. I didn't fit with the rest of the family.

DANE: Explain that a little bit. What do you mean?

BECKER: I mean, there is quite a difference. If you work with your hands, you belong to a lower class. And the rest of the family, they were all big officials and, uh, my father in the bank and all of that. And

wherever I went I was Mr. Becker's son, but that's as far as it went. Every once in a while I got a remark, "Oh, you are nothing." So I got fed up with that and I didn't approve of some of my father's friends and the way they acted. I mean, they were aristocrats. So I thought I'd get out.

DANE: Did you know you wanted to go to America, or were you just thinking you'd leave town?

BECKER: No, I wanted to go to America, yeah. And so when that fellow there wrote back and sent the ticket by return mail.

DANE: Did he send you a ticket?

BECKER: Yeah.

DANE: Did you send him money?

BECKER: I had no money. I had no money. By that time my father had no money either. I mean, inflation wiped everything out. You had nothing. If you had any property that was all right, but even then you, you had a house and you had sold it or took a mortgage on it. It got so far out of line, the guy had a mortgage, he come in. Here is the money for the mortgage. It was a streetcar fare. I mean, from one day to another money

was nothing.

DANE: And how had you heard about America? Just through this guy or had you read about it?

BECKER: Oh, no. I had read about, see. I read about it. I always been a great reader and, fortunately, I had met a fellow, a teacher, who took an interest in me and asked me to help him in the library and he advised me what to read and so on. I've been lucky with that, with some fellows. And another professor was interested in history. and he asked me to come and help him work in the museum.

DANE: That's good. What was your image of America, then? What did you think it would be like?

BECKER: I really had no idea. No. I was willing to work hard and so they said if you work hard you make it. So I got over here and that was kind of miserable coming in on the Fall River boat. Ellis Island--

DANE: Wait a second. Wait till we get there. So he sent you tickets--

BECKER: Yeah.

DANE: And when you said to your father, "I'm leaving. I'm going now."

BECKER: Yeah.

DANE: Then, then where'd you go from your town?

BECKER: I went down to Hamburg. My father and mother went with me as far as Hamburg. They waved the boat, kind of glad I was going. (They laugh.)

DANE: Do you remember the name of the boat, by any chance?

BECKER: Yes. It was Westphalia.

DANE: The Westphalia. And didn't you tell me it was one of the, it was the last--

BECKER: The last, one of the last, I think it might have been the last one that went to Ellis Island. That you can check in the records.

DANE: When you left, did you have to go through medical exams?
In--

BECKER: Oh! First in Hamburg.

DANE: Yeah. Tell me about that. Do you remember?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Now, they had like a regular village where they
put people that were going on the boat. and it was
kind of, kind of nice. It was like motels, and so on,
very nice. And you got a physical examination and
everything. It was kind of nice.

DANE: Did they give you papers after you'd been examined?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, you couldn't get on without the
papers. See, then they took you on a small boat, took you out to the big
one. And, uh, it seemed awful big.

DANE: Had you ever seen a boat that big before?

BECKER: I had been in Hamburg before, but I never seen the big
liners. The time I was in Hamburg it was still a lot of sailboats. I was

six years old. The harbor was a mass of sails.

DANE: And you went, you traveled steerage, third class?

BECKER: Yeah, third class. Yeah. Steerage, they didn't call that any more. It still was steerage, but-- (He laughs.)

DANE: They called it third class?

BECKER: Yeah. Steerage or tourist class.

DANE: Right. And describe what that was like down there. What did it look like? What were the conditions?

BECKER: Oh, there were cabins, they weren't bad. Oh, and the dining rooms were very nice. And we got on there, the first time we really, uh, got some decent food. See, there was still nothing in Germany. I remember the first morning I came down and, gee whiz, there was an orange on each table. I didn't see an orange for years. My grandmother used to give us some for Christmas.

DANE: So there were actual tables you went to on the boat?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Oh, nice. White tablecloths and everything. I mean, it was nice even on third class. There were, uh, four to a cabin, four bunks. But that was nothing.

DANE: And this was a German line, the Westphalia.

BECKER: yeah. That was the Hamburg American Line. And, uh--

DANE: What did you do at night on the boat? I mean, how did you entertain yourselves?

BECKER: Oh, there'd be entertainment and there was dancing and it was good, see. But there are kinds of people there, I remember, when we left Hamburg, I was standing on the railing, too, and waved. And there was a fellow standing next to me, Polish fellow. And, uh, he was yelling to his mother and his mother was out there, "Give my regards to the pigs." (They laugh.) I mean, it was kind of sad. I didn't shed any tears. I figured, all right, this is new.

DANE: How about your mom, though? Did she want you to stay, or--

BECKER: No, no. I mean, women in that day didn't have much to

say. (He laughs.)

DANE: That's interesting.

BECKER: And besides, uh, once I was on the boat, I said, "This is it, this is new." In fact, I had met the fellow, we talked, and, uh, we went down, we sat down, played chess. We didn't even see the end of Germany. When it went out of sight we were playing chess. We didn't even go out and look.

DANE: Were you aware that you may never go back again?

BECKER: Oh, I had intended to come back after two years. But, uh, after the first year, if you'd ask me, I could've go, would have gone, probably. After that no more.

DANE: No more. How long did the trip take, coming across? A long time?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. We were on the way, I think, pretty near two weeks, fourteen days. Twelve or fourteen days.

DANE: Any storms on the way?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We had some bad storms there. And, uh, I didn't get seasick.

DANE: You didn't?

BECKER: No.

DANE: Did anyone on the boat?

BECKER: (He laughs.) The dining room was empty. I know, one of the days was the day before we got here. Nobody showed up. There were all the oranges on the table. And the few of us were around, and we collected the oranges. I came out with a bag of oranges. (They laugh.)

DANE: That's great. And did you make friends on that trip? Did you make acquaintances?

BECKER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Made some friends. With some of them. I know them for quite a while.

DANE: Did they have big plans coming to America? Were they

all-- Where were they--

BECKER: Some of them, they were better situated. They had relatives and so on. And somehow they helped me later on.

DANE: Were some going to Boston and all over?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Some going to Boston. and we got here on the morning of the Fourth of July. And they took all the first and second class passengers off and that was that. We had to wait because they didn't work on Ellis Island on the Fourth of July. We went out, we could see Coney Island. And, in those days, you know, it's not now, so, they had all kinds of steamers, excursion steamers with a band on it and everything. They're going up here, and then they had big fireworks at night. We could see it. I stayed up over on the first class deck. We had the whole ship to us, the passengers were-- With a young girl, and we talked about what kind of might we could expect, see what might happen. I never knew her name and I, (he laughs), but we sat there the whole night. Then the next morning we went to Ellis Island.

DANE: Did you know what the Fourth of July was? Had you studied--

BECKER: No.

DANE: You just saw these fireworks.

BECKER: Oh, they have a holiday. That's it. So--

DANE: Do you remember seeing, before we get off the ship, did you see the Statue of Liberty when you came in?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. We saw it really the next morning. When we got in there we stayed fairly well out. But then the next morning we went right by it.

DANE: do you remember what kind of thoughts went through your head when you looked up at this thing?

BECKER: Listen, I didn't know much about that. I knew that's the big monument and you get in there, see. But, uh, I went there later, and I went all the way up in the head when you still could go there. Now you can't.

DANE: No, uh-huh. Then you got taken to Ellis Island by a ferry, right?

BECKER: Yeah, by a ferry.

DANE: And you got off, then what did they do to you? Did they put you in lines, or get you--

BECKER: Oh, first you had to sit in the big hall, and that's where the mess was.

DANE: Tell me about that. What did it look like?

BECKER: They had those, like those street covers, you know, sewer covers. And all of a sudden the water started to come out of there. There were people there, they climbed up on the benches and sat on the back.

DANE: Was there a storm, or the tide, or--

BECKER: No, the tide came in there, see.

DANE: And it came right up through the floor?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. That was a mess.

DANE: Did it smell too?

BECKER: Gee, I don't really know. Most likely it must have. And then they called in, by alphabet, or whatever it was, I don't know. They called you in and take your clothes off and you went through all that whole rigmarole examination again.

DANE: Do you remember what kinds of things they did to you to test your health?

BECKER: They looked in your eyes, you know. They rolled the eyelids back. I don't remember that it was too bad. I figured it was a sensible thing to do. But I saw in the back there, describing, they used a shoehorn to open up the eyes. (He laughs.)

DANE: That's what they told you? A shoehorn?

BECKER: No, that's what the book says, I read. I didn't see it. No. They just did it and kind of folded it. And, jus, "Keep going, keep going."

DANE: Lots of you? Lots of people?

BECKER: Oh, there were hundreds of people. See, for the holiday, so many more boats came in. We probably had four, five hundred on it.

DANE: Do you remember if you had a tag that said your name?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Probably there. I think so, but I don't actually remember that. But I'm pretty sure we did because the Traveler's Aid picked me up on it, see, later on.

DANE: And what did it sound like? I mean, were there-- If you were a television camera and you were looking around, what did people look like? What did it sound like? Were there lots of different languages?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. There were, it was kind of a strange sight. But that I had expected. I mean, you had a lot of these Polish people with the women with the shawl around their head. And you had a lot of Jewish people, with the big hats and rag hats and, I mean, we met. I met then first in Ellis Island, not in Ellis, in Hamburg before we got on the boat. You saw them where they are collected and, uh, so each group more or less stayed by itself. You expected that. You were going to a foreign place.

Things were different, see. I got through there in about the afternoon.

DANE: You didn't spend the night?

BECKER: No, not on Ellis Island. No. No, I don't think they had any facilities for staying at night. Except they wanted to send you back.

DANE: Were you aware that you might be sent back?

BECKER: No, I didn't worry about that. I was healthy, so.

DANE: Did you see anyone else sent back or separated?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. There were, see, there's a funny thing they did, you know. You have to have twenty-five dollars or you couldn't get off. Now, I had it. The fellow had sent me that for that purpose. But the day before the officer came on the ship, "Who hasn't got the twenty-five dollars?" Some of them put up their hands and, "All right, we give you the twenty-five dollars." The line, they didn't want to send anybody back, so they gave you, just before you got ready to go out, they gave you the twenty-five dollars. And when you got by the guy, they had another guy take back the twenty-five dollars. You still landed and had nothing. (They laugh.) They surrounded, you know. They knew this was done, but they

didn't want to interfere either.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you remember any people, um, on the island that were trying to sell you things, or--

BECKER: No. I mean, they had a place there you could buy food. I thought it was really good. Cost a buck, and you got a big bagful, and there were cold cuts in it and rolls, French bread in it, all kinds of food. Uh, it was good. Because you didn't get anything anywhere else, see. I still had some of that when I got to Boston. Besides, I had my bag of oranges.

DANE: And you could but all that for a dollar?

BECKER: Yeah. You buy that for a dollar.

DANE: Huh. You were telling me--

BECKER: I had a few bucks extra, five or ten bucks, and I changed it. I got that, oh, I was going to bring it. I got my first buck, I forgot it.

DANE: Tell me, how did you, you paid for it, the lunch--

BECKER: I got it in change.

DANE: And they gave you a silver dollar?

BECKER: Oh, in those days, you got that, see. You got gold pieces in change.

DANE: Hmm. And your first American silver dollar?

BECKER: Yeah. It's a real old one, too. I think it's worth something. I think it's '78, 1878 or something. And the funny part is, I've been broke twice. I had to spend it. That was the last one I had. I told the guy, "Hold that. I want it back eventually." I got it back each time.

DANE: No kidding. And you still have it.

BECKER: I still have it. (He laughs.)

DANE: That's great. So then you got ready to go.

BECKER: One time I spent it, the last time I went, I was married, then. Took my wife, I didn't have a job, didn't have much. We had enough to eat in the house. So, I said, "The heck with it, let's forget it." We got to the movies. I spent my last buck. I told the girl to hold it. I got a job the next day and I got my buck back.

DANE: That's great. We should stop on this side.

BECKER: Oh, you want to stop on that right now?

DANE: Yeah. He;s going to turn it over. This is the end of side one, Ernest Becker, Interview Number 96. It's 2:35.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two, Ernest Becker, Interview Number 96. It's 2:35. Before we leave Ellis Island, I just wanted you to give me an idea of how they treated you. What was it like to be received there? Honestly.

BECKER: Impersonal, that's all. That's business. Impersonal.

Not rough. No, just impersonal.

DANE: Have you ever heard of the expression "The Island of Tears?"

BECKER: I heard that, yeah. I mean, I can see that, too. See, a lot of people, they come together there, and they got off. Some of them went so far as to California. They had made friends in two weeks on the boat. I can see that. I can see that. And, uh, a lot of the people on there, they'd never been anywhere.

DANE: And they were scared.

BECKER: Never seen anything. This, uh, quite a change. You don't know a language. I didn't know a word. I had a little book with all the phrases. And the first thing I learned, "Wait a minute." And I get it out. I made out pretty good. I made out pretty good.

DANE: Was that your idea to bring the book? Who gave you that book?

BECKER: I bought it over in Hamburg, I think.

DANE: That was a good idea.

BECKER: If you're going out, even if you were a tourist now, to go somewhere, you'd buy something like that, wouldn't you?

DANE: Yeah, I guess. Yes.

BECKER: Because you can't always depend on they speak English. Although, like, you travel. Most European countries you get away with your, they're all English. How does he feel about that? He had a lot of cousins up there. (Points to his son.) And I always told him, I says, "Why don't you keep up your German?" "why don't they learn English?" He's just been over there a couple of weeks ago.

DANE: Oh, that's great. Then you left Ellis Island that same day. You had your lunch, and you got on the Fall River line, is that right?

BECKER: Yeah.

DANE: Tell me what that was like.

BECKER: Oh, now that was a mess. We were down the bottom of the

ship, but then they had those three berths, not too clean. I had a fellow with me, I made a friend on the boat and we were friends a long while after that, and we had some bags to eat. We were, although the lower bunks were empty we took the two top bunks. We agreed one stay awake during the night, we'd take turns. And, uh, there were all those colored fellow. The only time where we'd seen them was in the circus. And they were shooting crap there, and they had a monkey with them, and you couldn't sleep. It was going on all night.

DANE: Were you surprised to see theses colored men?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. I had, uh, I hadn't given it any thought. Once I got here, I took it like it is. Towards the morning, I got kind of sick of this, so I got out, walked up. And they were very luxurious upstairs, those boats. And I lay down on the sofa and slept, really slept off. And then by morning there'd be put in the Fall River and they'd put us on the train. And I was impressed with the train, compared to German ones. Here it was all one class. Over there three classes. And--

DANE: And you liked the idea of one class?

BECKER: This one, yeah. But then, thinking back, three classes was fun, too. There were just on benches in there. And the farmers, they come in, they might bring a goat or goose or anything, going to market. (He laughs.) It was fun to watch. Here they didn't have that, see. It was all upholstered seats and everything. Very nice conductor. Very friendly. We got to Boston. South Station. That was still, they had the big glass dome and all that, over.

DANE: Was that impressive?

BECKER: No, they were like in Europe, they were all over. Smoky and everything else, you know. Smelly. And, uh, the conductor took me to the, uh, Traveler's Aid Society. They had a woman there on the desk, and so on. He said, "This fellow will be picked up later." And that was probably eight o'clock in the morning. They called up the people I was supposed to go to, the one who sent the ticket. "Oh, we're moving today. We can't come. Got to wait until late." So I got kind of bored there sitting in the station there. So I walked out. I walked all the way up to where Filene's is. Walked around. I have a good sense of direction. I could walk around, come right back to where I came from. And they were all upset. They lost him, the people, I went. Oh, that was all right. And I remember a big band playing there. Some big guy arrived from somewhere. I don't know who it was. I had no idea. So then they picked me up.

DANE: Were you nervous that whole day that weren't going to come and get you, or--

BECKER: No, I wasn't worried. I know they'd pick me up. I didn't give that even a doubt. I was wondering where I was going to go to. And, uh, so they picked me up in the car and took me to the new house. It was all a mess, we had to, actually, well, it was big house in a nice section of Dorchester.

DANE: Didn't you tell me that you were, didn't you tell me that you got put into jail or something one night?

BECKER: You know, the night in New York, not the night, the afternoon day from the morning when we got over to Brooklyn, they put us in jail.

DANE: What did they do that for?

BECKER: So we wouldn't get lost. (He laughs.) They put us in the cages and this fellow and I. Don't worry about anything, you know.

DANE: Until the boat from Fall River came.

BECKER: Yeah. That's why, it was a safe way to keep us. We wouldn't get lost. Didn't do us any harm. We had something to eat. It didn't do us any harm. I thought it was a sensible thing to hold us so we wouldn't get lost.

DANE: Okay. All right.

BECKER: It didn't bother me at all.

DANE: Okay, so then you came, you came to this man's house. Did he, you were nineteen years old, did you speak English?

BECKER: Oh, he did. I didn't. Not a word. Not a word. But he spoke German, and the whole family spoke German. See, they were, he and his wife and their two sisters and a nephew and they all spoke German, very strong Bavarian accent. Which I didn't speak, but I learned it. But, uh, it was all right. I had a very nice room and they had a nephew. He was next to me in the room. There was enough rooms in the house. Very nice section with a park in front. And so the next morning we had to go to work in the bakery.

DANE: So he had a job for you.

BECKER: Oh, yeah. Now, that's where the thing comes really in. Bill (his son) calls it indentured labor. That's really what it was.

DANE: He brought you over, two hands to work.

BECKER: He brought me over to work there. Cheap. Sixteen bucks a week. Now, those days that was not too bad, but it was bad enough. Ten bucks for room and board, five bucks to pay back the fare, I got one buck. (He laughs.)

DANE: And how, when did it occur to you that this is why he brought you here? Right away? I mean, when did you figure out what the score was?

BECKER: Oh, no. That time I didn't pay too much attention. I mean, I had a job, I had a nice place to live. There was plenty to eat, which we didn't have for years, so I was better off. And originally I sent every second buck home because a dollar over there was a fortune in those days, see. That's something you people, you have no, no idea. If you had a hundred dollars you could have bought the biggest apartment in town. So

well, then, it was hard work and all of that.

DANE: Did you ever wish you could go back during that first--

BECKER: I couldn't go back. How could I go? I had no money.

DANE: Would you have, if you had the money would you have gone home?

BECKER: I don't think so. Too stubborn. I don't think so. On a, used to go in the movies. There was one, one thing I didn't like, what he did to us, outside of the hard work. He says, "We got company coming today. I don't want them to know I have any greenhorns here. Here is a buck. Get out of the house at nine and don't come back until midnight." (He laughs.) Now, a buck was quite a bit of money, see. And in those days I was used to walking. I know exactly the first day I, the first Sunday he told that to me, not the first Sunday I was here, but one of the early ones. So I walked from Dorchester all the way down Dorchester Avenue, Atlantic avenue, and then I looked up to see, I ended up in Chinatown. (He laughs.) And from there, there is this street, I don't know if you

know Boston well enough, where the Schubert Theater was. "Gee, that sounds German." I take a look. (He laughs.) I went over there, and there I walked over to the public garden. And somewhere along in there in (?) I bought a map of Boston. I mean, in those days that wasn't much, a quarter, or something like that. And I sat down and studied where I was, where I was going to go, and I walked from the garden up Huntington Avenue, I looked around the library when I saw it and all the way up to, uh Brookline, along by Jamaica Pond. And then I crossed Franklin Park-- (He laughs.)

DANE: That's a long way.

BECKER: I was used to walking. You know, we walk a lot in Germany. See, and I hiked a lot. I used to go up there sometimes in the dark in the morning, want to be on top of the mountain to see the sunrise. So walking didn't bother me the least bit, see. Then I ended up in the movies. And in those days they had the big programs, and everything. It was quite a thing. I walked down Columbia Road and then later on back over. It was just about midnight when I got home. Three, four o'clock I had to be at work. (He laughs.)

DANE: That's rough.

BECKER: I was young. But, uh, and then, I wasn't to bring this in. We worked nights and there were a couple of cops. They would come by. And one of them, uh, had been in the American Army after the First World War. And he'd been stationed in Coblenz for quite a while. And he spoke some German. So, gee, I was glad with that. And he came in every time they make the rounds and talk. And then they come around. He says, uh, "We have a load of liquor out there." This was Prohibition. "We just got it off a boat on Freeport Street. Can you hide it?" (He laughs.) Me and the other guy, we hid it. We put it down underneath the, they had pallets, and we shoved it underneath the pallets. And then during the week they come and pick up a few bottles at night and they sell it, see.

DANE: Did you get a bottle out of it?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. We got some. Sometimes you even get a little money.

DANE: So this was America, huh? (They laugh.)

BECKER: That happened to me a lot later on. I worked there a year and this went down. I got wind of it, the other

fellow that had been with me on the boat when we came, he had relatives over outside Boston and he came, looked me up, and he took me with him in a German club and so on. And I got to know. And this fellow that I worked for, oh, he hated that. He said once, "You guys should rest. You can work more tomorrow."

DANE: But you were a young man.

BECKER: Yeah, but what could we do? We didn't have much money. Not out of that month. Out of what he gave us, we had a little more later on. But-- So, and then it came Thanksgiving. That, that was my second Thanksgiving already and I was sick. I had the flu and a temperature. And he insisted I go to work. I did, from the house, walked down towards the bakery, and I met the cop. I told him, I says, "I want to get out. I'm all paid up. I don't owe him anything now. I want to get out." He says, "Why don't you? I wait here." I went in, packed my things, and then he says, "You can't take anything. You can't get out." So I unpack, saw the cop, he says, "I go with you." He says, "You can't stop that boy. If he wants to get out he can go out. But you can't stop him holding his things." And he says, "I got some friends. I'll get you a place to stay tonight." So he took me, care of me--

DANE: Hmm. So he didn't want you to leave, this man.

BECKER: Oh, no. Heck, where would he get cheap labor like that, see?

DANE: And you were there, it took you a year and a half to pay back--

BECKER: Yeah. So I slept in the place where the cop left me, they were very nice people.

DANE: Were they German too?

BECKER: No. Good Irish people. And the next morning I went out looking for a job and, you know, those days, the Globe was the thing to buy. Now, I could speak quite a bit then. I'd gone to evening school already. And, uh, you saw the ad, and I knew about that already, through conversation. Sylor, the caterer, he was the big man in Boston. He got the big business. He had an ad in, he wanted a fancy baker, decorating and all that. I went. He had an office in a bakery right down by where the Statler is now. I sat on the steps there in the morning

at six o'clock waiting for him. He came in. "I, I don't want any greenhorns." (He laughs.) I paid him back later. Yeah, I don't know if I should bring that in now. He chased me out. Later on I had some real good jobs. There was one, working in the Chamber of Commerce. I got that by accident. I had worked out in the Bayburn Country Club. That was, sometimes you'd have twenty Rolls Royces out in the yard. I was very happy there. Not much work. And privileges, could play golf in the afternoon and I learned to drive there. One of the cooks was Italian. He had driven a tank in the Italian Army. And he had taught me to drive. On the, on the country club golf course. (They laugh.) They run that like a hotel. And finally it got so that, uh, we had eight people. about eight people in the kitchen, and eight guest. (He laughs.)

DANE: That's the life, huh.

BECKER: I had done, they had all the society weddings and so on. They used to let it out to a caterer. And I said, "I take it over." I made the big wedding cakes and all of that. I was making out all right there, see. The head of the, uh, committee, household committee came he says, "Ernie, you see yourself we haven't got enough work here." I says, "I

know it." He said, "Where would you like to go?" He says, "We've got a lot of influential members here." "Oh," I said, "I heard the Chamber of Commerce would like to make a change. They had a good man, and he died, and they haven't got really what they want." I says, "I'd like to go to the Chamber of Commerce." Besides it's handy for me. The hours are from six and South Station's right there with the train to Braintree. "Oh, we'll see what we can do." A few days later he comes back. "Got an interview for you. You go down and see, I'm pretty sure you get the job. We can put pressure on them." There was a, when their manager he was a real Prussian on a, you know, a lot of those guys got over here, they had been army officers, got involved in a duel and they had to leave. I knew several of them. They got here like that. Just knock them off. You got twenty-five dollars, go. And then you didn't have to go to jail. (They laugh.) He was one of those. Gentleman's name. He's long dead. Don't mention any names. I mad a mistake on that one. So, he took me down, he says, "All right. I've been pressured to hire you and pay you a good salary." He says, "Go down here. This is the shop." He introduced me around. And, uh, he says, "Now, uh, since I have to pay you so much money, before you go home you can fire two guys." (He laughs.) I didn't know anything about that, see. And he says, "You won't see me again before a month. You're on your own. That's it." Well, I did that. I spent the day there, I fired two. One of them was the one whose place I was taking. They, they weren't satisfied, see. I knew that. So next morning I come in, nobody showed up.

DANE: Why?

BECKER: The others quit in protest after all.

DANE: Oh, no. So there you were.

BECKER: There I was. I didn't know where anything was. And a big dinner, fifteen hundred people that night for Captain Stedman. He had rescued some people on an ocean liner. Another one sank or something. The Chamber of Commerce gave him a big dinner.

DANE: How'd you do it?

BECKER: Oh, I sat there. I didn't know. And then I thought of a fellow, he was out of work. I got hold of him. And then I knew of a German baker. He was always available because he drank too much. But they say he is the best around. I called him. I says, "Paul, I've got a job for you here. Would you come in?" "Sure, but you've got to have a pint." (They laugh.) I knew my way around by then. I got him a pint. I says, "Okay. You get the pint when you're done." He came, he worked for me a long while. He was the best bread baker, or roll baker, I ever saw. He could work like mad. He didn't know much of anything, weights, anything. It was all guess.

Oh, he was wonderful. We got along fine. No trouble with him.

DANE: I want to ask you. Before, I don't want to run out of tape, because when we were talking about how you learned English, on the phone? Tell me one of, you went to night school.

BECKER: Oh, yeah.

DANE: But then how else did you learn? You told me that--

BECKER: Oh, I, I learned a lot. First I went to grammar school, graduated. Then I went to high school and eventually graduated from that, too. And, uh, we were very fortunate there in the, that year. We had a teacher, big woman. She really didn't want to do much. And she, uh, started off, preparing us, we should have a debating team. She said, "You will learn a lot that way." And she was right. So we had a debating team. There was two Germans on it. A Jewish girl, a Danish girl and an Italian fellow. The five of us. We got along well. And they set it up where we first, just in the class, you know. And we went to the library. The library opened at one o'clock Sundays. And you'd be surprised how many, all the debates you can find in there. So we'd used to meet, we go in there, we study. Then we go out to lunch or dinner and off to a show, usually, and we stuck together.

DANE: And you all spoke English with each other?

BECKER: Oh, yeah. We had to. We had to, see. But we learned an awful lot together.

DANE: And tell me the other way. You said you went to movies.

BECKER: Yeah. And those were the ones they had writing in there all the time, yeah.

DANE: The silent movies.

BECKER: Yeah.

DANE: So you had the subtitles.

BECKER: Yeah. You learned a lot there. I mean, I had my book and tried to, my little book there, and tried to read out of there. And you know, on the debating team, we defeated pretty near every high school in Boston.

DANE: Good for you.

BECKER: We had a good, we had a good time learning. By that time we were really good, see.

DANE: We're running out of time, so I want to cover just a few more things. Um, you citizenship. When did you decide to become--

BECKER: Oh, really, right off. I was waiting five years.

DANE: Uh-huh. Did you go and take a test, or did you--

BECKER: Oh, you didn't have to take a test. You just applied, and they asked you one question. I don't know what mine was. I know my wife, that was years later, they asked you what the colors of the flag are. So that is silly. See, but, uh, so we did well and I went, after that, I went to Lowell Institute and I took some courses in, uh, in Harvard College in economics and bookkeeping accounting and--

DANE: When did you first feel that you were an American as opposed to a German any more? Ever?

BECKER: Oh, by the time I got my citizenship, yeah.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did you ever think about going back to Germany, even after you--

BECKER: No.

DANE: Why not?

BECKER: I didn't fit in there any more.

DANE: What do you mean?

BECKER: There's one thing I never liked. You probably never had experienced anything. German bureaucracy. I couldn't go for that. Now we're getting some of it here. It's not a good thing. And over there, that is, oh, my God. In my days even a letter carrier you probably had to salute him. Anything that had a uniform on you had to salute. I didn't go for that. I'll tell you one funny little story. As I was telling you, when I first came over the first few months there was a nice little Irish girl that worked in the bakery there. Carla. And I took her out to the circus. And her father spoke a little German. She took me home. He'd been in the Occupation Army. And they taught me all those things, "Thank you, glad to

meet you," and all of that. On the way home I had my head full of that. They were pounding on me all night. And I get in the streetcar, it was crowded. I stepped on a girl's foot. and I got a sixteen foot. I felt sorry, I says, "Oh, glad to have met you." The boyfriend got so mad I had to get off at the next stop and walk home.

DANE: Oh, that's wonderful. I think we're finished with this. This is the end of side two, tape one, Ernest Becker, Interview Number 96.