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WALTER C. IRWIN, JR.

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AMERICAN EXPORT SHIPPING LINES EMPLOYEE
1940-1960's

MOORE: Good afternoon. This is Kate Moore for the National Park Service. Today is the 12th of January 1994, and I'm in Los Angeles at the Motel 6 with Walter Irwin who came, who worked, actually, for American Export Lines in the passenger department from 1940 to the late '60s. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please?

IRWIN: My name is Walter C. Irwin. I was born in Brooklyn, New York on March 15, 1922.

MOORE: And would you tell me your father's name, please?

IRWIN: My father's name, I'm a junior, Walter C. Irwin.

MOORE: And what did he do for an occupation?

IRWIN: He was the chief accountant for the Eastern Railroad Association.

MOORE: And what was your mother's name?

IRWIN: My mother's name was Grace Martin.

MOORE: Martin was her maiden name?

IRWIN: No, uh, yes, excuse me. Martin was her maiden name.

MOORE: And what was her occupation?

IRWIN: Housewife.

MOORE: And what neighborhood in Brooklyn did you live in?

IRWIN: Near the Bushwick center.

MOORE: And did you have brothers and sisters?

IRWIN: I have one sister, who lives in Virginia.

MOORE: And her name is . . .

IRWIN: Janet Elaine Irwin. Her married name is Miller.

MOORE: Miller. And is she younger or older?

IRWIN: She's younger.

MOORE: All right. Could you describe to us your work situation, maybe what led up to getting employment in American Export Lines, why the American Export Lines, just give us a little background as to what, before we get into what happened from 1940 on.

IRWIN: All right. Well, when I finished high school, I graduated from Richmond Hill High School in Queens, and after work, after graduating rather, I went to the American Export Lines. My father had known somebody there, and I went directly into that position. I worked for a little while as an office boy, and then I was transferred into the passenger department.

MOORE: So you went there right after high school.

IRWIN: Directly after high school.

MOORE: And how old were you, then, when you started in 1940?

IRWIN: Oh, around eighteen.

MOORE: Around eighteen. And were there many other eighteen-year-old boys working at that time?

IRWIN: You mean in that company, or . . .

MOORE: In that company.

IRWIN: No, I think, actually I think I was about the youngest.

MOORE: And what was your position in American Export Lines? What was the, tell about the company a little bit, and what was the purpose?

IRWIN: Well, the company operated for first class passenger freight ships that plied the Mediterranean. They went every Friday. They left for the Mediterranean. They went clear around from Gibraltar, clear around to Beirut and then back on out of the Mediterranean, and they were extremely popular ships because in that era there was no air transportation and all the people, Americans who were working in Europe as well as the diplomatic corps would come down and take one of those ships between a port, and that was their vacation as a little bit of America.

MOORE: What about, so the crew and everything was American?

IRWIN: The crew and the cuisine was all American.

MOORE: All right. And you say first class only. Were there other classes that had been . . .

IRWIN: No, no, it was a small vessel. There were only, it only carried one hundred and twenty-five passengers. Later on after the war we got bigger ships. As a matter of fact, it's the ship that Grace Kelly went on her maiden tour to, to marry Prince Ranier was the Constitution, which was one of our ships, and both of the ships, the Constitution and the Independence, are now traveling between I think it's San Francisco and Hawaii and go around the Hawaiian islands.

MOORE: So this company is still in existence?

IRWIN: No. The ships are still in existence, yeah, the larger ships, the Independence and the Constitution.

MOORE: And what was your position in that particular, the American Export Lines, what was your position, and what was your responsibility?

IRWIN: Well, when I started I was just, I was just an office boy. And when I left years later I was in charge of, I had opened an office for them in Washington, DC, and I used to sell transportation to the government as well as travel agents throughout the entire South.

MOORE: Now, in the period of 1940, could you walk us through

a little bit some of the things you saw? And you were, obviously, tell us about things relating to immigration, or things about the travel between Europe and New York on these lines.

IRWIN: Well, at that time Le Havre was open, and people were coming from Le Havre. Our ships, of course, as I said, only went into the Mediterranean, so we were bringing passengers in from, from France and Italy, and the Near East. My position, when I first joined, as I said, was that of an office boy.

MOORE: And so you didn't see much of the harbor life at all, at that time?

IRWIN: Oh, yes, I did. As a young boy I used to have to carry the ship's papers down to some of the freight ships that sailed, and that was quite an experience. I used to have to go over to Jersey City where the piers were, and this was early in the morning, I was there about seven o'clock in the morning, having commuted from Queens into the office, picked up the papers, went over to Jersey City.

MOORE: How did you get there?

IRWIN: By subway.

MOORE: By subway.

IRWIN: And there's the tubes going under. And there's a huge, huge box of ship's papers, the manifests and things, and I'd have to carry them. And these freight ships would be tied up at the dock, and they'd be loaded and ready to sail, and I used to have to go up the, the gangway which, it's difficult to explain, the, at full tide, or high tide, the steps were flat, and you could walk from step to step. But on low tide the ladder went to the side, and you had to walk on the edge of those steps going up with that big carton of ships manifest on my shoulder, and one . . .

MOORE: You never fell?

IRWIN: One time my foot went between the, went between the steps, and I managed to not lose the papers.
(he laughs) And get up and get back on the ship. One of the interesting, one of the things that was interesting was on my way to the ships all along the waterfront there there were bars, and what they were, they were the whorehouses for the seamen. And as a young boy I used to look up and the whores were waving

goodbye to the sailors, and the sailors were running out to catch their ship, putting their shirttails back in their trousers and things. (he laughs) Things like that.

MOORE: And what else did you see? What other, what type of neighborhood in Jersey City was it like? What was it like there in that area?

IRWIN: Well, I really didn't see too much. I went directly from the tube station to the waterfront. It was all small houses. Not houses, but buildings. Two, three, four-story brownstone buildings or wooden buildings.

MOORE: And did you see, all right. When people came into port, did you have any responsibility for papers or anything else? When the ships arrived, they went out of Jersey City, did they come into Jersey City?

IRWIN: Yes.

MOORE: And what did you, let me (?), what was your responsibility? You brought papers to the ship as they departed, and what happened when they came in?

IRWIN: Well, I would go down, when they came in, and we would check, we would set up tables for the customs and

immigration inspectors to inspect the passengers as they, inspect the passengers' papers and documents.

MOORE: Now, what type of people came through at that time?

IRWIN: Well, at the time, it was just before the, you know, the big influx of people, and it was just mostly Americans who had lived aboard and diplomats going back and forth on the ships, and then tourists who were making the full Mediterranean cruise.

MOORE: So basically they were full-paying passengers who were rather well-off.

IRWIN: Yes, yes.

MOORE: And that's in '40. Now, that's the beginning of the war.

IRWIN: That's in the beginning of the war. And our passenger ships were a combination freight and passenger ship. All first class accommodations, beautiful dining room, and so it wasn't just an ordinary freighter. It was made up, you know, to look like a regular, I mean, to be a regular passenger ship. It's just that it wasn't a huge one, and it only carried a hundred and twenty-five passengers at that time.

MOORE: And what type of freight were you carrying?

IRWIN: Oh, all kinds of freight into, into the Mediterranean.

I've been down on the pier when we'd have, not on the passenger ships, but on the other freight ships we would have actually animals that were going over to, to the Mediterranean to be used as breeding stock.

MOORE: Like what type of animals?

IRWIN: Oh, you'd be, there'd be ducks and geese and chickens and pigs and things.

MOORE: Interesting. Well, when did all this passenger, when did it start to change in terms of the clientele, the people who were aboard the ship? Did it ever change?

IRWIN: Well, that came later. See, the war had now started in Europe, and my first experience . . .

MOORE: You are obviously worried about the microphone here. That's all right. Your first experience . . .

IRWIN: My first experience that really got to me was the, an Egyptian ship that came from Egypt, and we acted, we, the company, acted as agents for the owners of the Egyptian ship called the Star of El Nil. Now, this

ship was chartered by the American Ambulance Corps. The American Ambulance Corps is a group of ivy league colleges, of students of ivy league colleges, who donated ambulances to the war effort of England. And they did that in World War One, and they did it in World War Two. And some of them volunteered to drive the ambulances in front. As a matter of fact, Hemingway mentioned the American Ambulance Corps. I've forgotten the name of the book right now. But, anyway, he had mentioned them. And . . .

MOORE: The Sun Also Rises?

IRWIN: No. (break in tape)

MOORE: A Farewell To Arms.

IRWIN: Yes. That was the name of the book.

MOORE: Okay. And . . .

IRWIN: Now, that was extremely interesting, because it was in the evening, and I had to stay on board as a representative of the company. And the crew members were something I had never seen. They were Egyptians, and they were some Negroes from the heart of Africa were there, and they would have their tribal scars on

their face and a V cut out of their ear, and the Egyptians would be wearing their fezzes, and as I sat in this lounge that looked like the lounge on the film, what is it, The Nile?

MOORE: Oh, yes, the, um, do you remember it? Yeah, I know what you mean.

IRWIN: It looked like a Nile River boat, the decor, anyway. And I'm sitting there in the evening looking, you know, looking at all these people who, to a young man, you know, in those days it was pretty strange, and looking across at Manhattan Island, which looked like a treasure chest of jewels sparkling in the sunlight, the moonlight, rather, not sunlight. And that was my first experience and impact that there was a war going on.

MOORE: And why were these people coming over?

IRWIN: No, they were going.

MOORE: Oh, they were going.

IRWIN: We were the American ambulance corps volunteers.

MOORE: The ones, these people from Africa and from Egypt?

IRWIN: Well, they were the ship's crew.

MOORE: Oh, they were the crew.

IRWIN: They were the crew.

MOORE: Oh, I see.

IRWIN: Yeah, and I was watching that and it was, you know, as I say, it was straight out of that film.

MOORE: (she laughs) That was when, what year, do you remember?

IRWIN: Well, that, what was that?

MOORE: '41?

IRWIN: No, '39, wasn't it, '39 or early '40?

MOORE: Yeah, maybe.

IRWIN: Because the war started December 7, 1940. So it was before we had entered the war. Then we entered the war, the United States entered the war. Well, wait a minute. Before we actually got into the war England had closed off the Mediterranean, and, at Gibraltar, so our ships could no longer go there. So then we sent our ships, which were called The Four Aces, the

Excalibur, Excandian and Exacorter were their names. We sent them to Lisbon, Portugal, the City of Intrigue, and spies, and refugees from Europe. And it's there, then, when we started going to Lisbon that I first recognized the escapees from the German concentration camps.

MOORE: And describe them.

IRWIN: Well, they basically looked like any other passenger except, of course, they would have the tattooed numbers on their, on their arms. (he refers to his papers) And, you know, they come here having escaped or bought their way out of a concentration camp, and some came on fraudulent passports. Now, Ellis Island had been not closed but originally Ellis Island was used, the passengers would go direct to Ellis Island. Then they'd be processed by the immigration, and then they would be allowed in the United States. Now, that procedure had stopped for a number of years. So what we used to do is we used to take the immigration and custom inspectors out to meet the ship as it came in the New York Channel. We met it at Ambrose Lightship.

MOORE: Which is where?

IRWIN: Outside of, past Staten Island and outside of Manhattan. There's a lightship that indicates the channel into the New York Harbor and piers.

MOORE: And how would you get there?

IRWIN: Coast Guard cutter.

MOORE: The Coast Guard cutter would take you.

IRWIN: Yeah. And that would be, that was pretty interesting because in the winter, well, I'm getting ahead of myself.

MOORE: We can go back.

IRWIN: Well, in the winter, cakes of ice would be floating in the Hudson River, and the Coast Guard cutter would come next to the ship, and it would stay next to the ship and go and roll with the sea in like a circular motion. And on the upward motion I'd have to jump from the deck of the cutter to a rope ladder hanging from the ship, and then climb up the ship. And, of course, if you missed, you'd be between the hull of the ship and the Coast Guard cutter on that roll in the freezing morning. It was very exciting.

MOORE: And did the officials have to do the same thing?

IRWIN: Yeah, the customs officials, sure.

MOORE: Did you ever miss?

IRWIN: No, thank God. None of us missed. I never saw anybody miss, really. But sometimes the rope ladders were caked with ice, and they used to have to take a sledge hammer to chop the ice off the rope ladders before they threw it overboard. When they threw it over the side of the ship, some of the ice still clung to the rope, so when we'd go up we'd grab the ice, and then our hands would be so cold our hands would stick to the ice, and you'd have to rip your hands off climbing up. (he laughs) Well, you can do anything when you're eighteen, you know. But actually the customs and immigration inspectors were much older then, and they did it, too.

MOORE: Well, describe, instead of getting ahead of yourself, go back to this, these people coming in who were now escapees. Could you describe more about them? Where were they coming from?

IRWIN: Well, they were coming from Lisbon, but they had come

out of, out of Germany, and they had made the trip down into Lisbon. They'd come, I think some of them came the southern route along the bottom of France and the top of Germany, and others went to Paris and then out.

MOORE: Were any of these people turned back by customs officials?

IRWIN: Oh, yes. We'd catch, when they came on board, and I had, and I had set up the tables in the main lounge, the immigration inspector, when he found somebody whose documents that he found suspect, he would call me and then I would have to go down to the pier and call the passenger's name off to see if there was anyone on the pier or any family or friend that was waiting for this gentleman. And when they did, then I was allowed to take them on board. However, I was not allowed to take anybody else on board, you know, for fear of being fired and the company being fined for allowing strangers on board the ship during the immigration process.

MOORE: Now, did you ever hear any stories about these people, how they got to Lisbon, how they got out of camp?

IRWIN: No, I didn't have the time to talk to them that much, but it obviously was a struggle for some of them, for many of them.

MOORE: And, okay. So that was when? When did this start happening again?

IRWIN: Well, this was '40, we hadn't entered the war yet, you see.

MOORE: And once we did enter the war, then what happened?

IRWIN: Well, once we entered the war then, of course, there were no passenger ships going. But just before we entered the war, or after we entered the war, rather, immediately after, like December we entered the war and this was about February, my company, the company I worked for, was made the general agent for the interchange ships of diplomats. And a Swedish ship called the Gripsholm was assigned to that service, and we operated that ship for the government. And that ship came in with Americans, the last Americans from Europe who had lived there. Businessmen, priests and nuns, diplomats, etc., and they were the last Americans out of Europe, and they came in, and, uh, (he taps his finger), the Gripsholm, which was the

exchange ship, diplomatic exchange ship that I had mentioned, arrived and brought the last remaining Americans out of Europe. The U.S. Customs and Immigration Authorities and myself took a Coast Guard cutter out, and we met the ship and, to process the passenger en route. I used to set up, or have the steward set up tables for the immigration inspectors, and then direct the people into lines, into, to the inspectors to have their papers processed. And these Americans, this was on the American exchange ship, as I had mentioned, and as we came, started to come by the Statue of Liberty, I didn't, I hand't noticed, but all of a sudden I noticed that the passengers were disappearing off their lines and out of the main lounge, and I didn't know what that was. So I went out to the deck to see what was happening and, as a matter of fact, so did some of the stewards. The ship actually tilted, listed to the side that all the passengers were on, and we were passing the Statue, (he coughs) We were passing the Statue of Liberty, and they would hush. Yeah, there was a hush, uh, cut it. (break in tape) (garbled off-mike voices) You could almost hush over the whole ship. You could almost hear a pin drop as they passed the Statue. And

then suddenly out of the crowd a man's voice.

(he is moved) (break in tape) Out came a man's voice, and he began to sing "Dixie." They all joined in. They all joined in, and then sang "Dixie," and after "Dixie," and after they finished singing "Dixie" the whole deck started to sing "The Star Spangled Banner." (he is moved) It was very touching. It still brings tears to me.

MOORE: And everybody on board were Americans? Who was singing the songs?

IRWIN: These were the Americans, the last Americans out of Europe.

MOORE: Okay. If we could go back, again, to your tale of refugees and people who escaped from Nazi Germany, we talked earlier, and you had a story about that. You had a story that served as an example of that time that you have written, and perhaps it would be easier to read if you find it, to . . .

IRWIN: Well, it was a very, very touching thing. It wasn't a pleasant idea to have to tell these people that they were going to Ellis Island. There was one particular . . .

MOORE: Now, who went to Ellis Island, actually, at that time?

IRWIN: The only ones that went to Ellis Island were the ones that had fraudulent passports, or passports in which there was a question about their documentation.

MOORE: What kind of fraudulent papers did they have? I mean, would their passports would be wrong? What else? Would there be, where did they get them? Did anybody know?

IRWIN: They were counterfeit.

MOORE: They were counterfeit.

IRWIN: They were counterfeit papers.

MOORE: So going to Ellis Island was not considered to be a good thing.

IRWIN: Well, going any place to a government enclosure is not, (he laughs) under the circumstances, wasn't particularly good. So that, you know, they were a little frightened when I had to tell them, you know. And I'll never forget one very handsome elderly, actually beautiful elderly German couple. You could take a picture of them, and it would be the tintype

picture of an old German couple. He was about eighty-four, or in his eighties anyway, and she was in her late seventies. He had gray hair, he had a gray moustache, but the bottom of it was stained by tobacco, you know. And she just looked lovely, too. And he sat there with a, with the old celluloid collar and the tie and the vest and all, in a navy blue suit, and he had a black cane with a golden cane head on it.

And I told him that he's going to have to go to Ellis Island, and he looked up at me with that hand on that cane head. (he is moved) The cane, the hand on that cane had just shook, and it was a reflex action.

I went right down on my one knee and I grabbed that hand, it was shaking so. And he said to me, "What is das, Ellis Island? Ein concentration camp?" And I said, "Nein, nein, Grossvater." I says, "Das is God is in Himmel, alles good." It was the only, it was the only German I knew. (he is moved)

MOORE: And what happened then? They sent them to Ellis Island.

IRWIN: Yeah, I had to take them to Ellis Island on a, on a tugboat.

MOORE: Did he understand you, when you said that?

IRWIN: Yes, he understood, and he calmed down a little bit. He knew I was serious, but still he was a little apprehensive, as he had a right to be.

MOORE: And what was wrong with them that they couldn't get through?

IRWIN: Well, it was something on their passports.

MOORE: And did you ever find out what happened to them?

IRWIN: No, I, unfortunately, I didn't. Yes, he got off very soon. He was only on Ellis Island a day or two, then he got off. He was a wealthy German, or he appeared to be a wealthy German.

MOORE: Was he Jewish?

IRWIN: Yes.

MOORE: Oh, I see, and that would be a concern.

IRWIN: Yeah. That's why the concentration camp came into it. Later I was talking to a customs inspector, not about this couple, but about, you know, the refugees in general, and the custom inspector said to me, "Well,

we finally found out why the Volkswagen bugs weigh more, uh, that comes in with the refugees, and they weigh more than the bugs that are imported here for sale." And I said, "Why was that?" He says, "They were bringing their money in by putting platinum bumpers on the Volkswagen bugs."

MOORE: Is that true?

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: So you said you brought them to Ellis Island. What did you do? What did you, take them to Ellis Island, then . . .

IRWIN: Well, actually, I took them, on this tugboat we went to Ellis Island, but that's as far as I actually went was to the pier at Ellis Island, and then there'd be somebody there to meet us that would take these people on in.

MOORE: Now, how often did you have to do that?

IRWIN: Oh, frequently, very frequently.

MOORE: Like daily?

IRWIN: Oh, no, no. It takes a while for a ship to go back

and forth. So, maybe twice a month or something like . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

IRWIN: Twice a month, or something like that.

MOORE: For every shipload that came in, was there someone who often went to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: There was, yes.

MOORE: So it was . . .

IRWIN: It was not an uncommon practice.

MOORE: Right. And what were all the people's reactions about going to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Well, they didn't like it at all, and they were frightened. And many of them, particularly the Jewish people, their fear was, you know, of being arrested, you know, and locked up, but more so of being sent back to Germany. That's, that was the big thing, the fear of going back to Germany. When I, see, I would go down to the pier at the request of the immigration official to find out if any relatives were meeting

these people, and then I'd bring them up. Then these people would verify, well, yes, we can take care of them or get a lawyer, or whatever. And a lot of them were let go, but some of them had to go to Ellis Island. And when I went down to that pier and called their names off, you can imagine how anxious the people waiting on the pier were to see the, to see the passengers, which was their family that had escaped, and they were desperate to get on, and I, they used to crowd around me and I used to have a, get a box that I could stand above the crowd while I called out the names. And as I did that they were all dropping money in my pockets, bribing me in the hopes that I would take them on board. I was young. I didn't know what to do with the money, and I didn't want their money, you know. So I did the only thing I could, or the only thing I'd thought of. That was after I'd finished reading all their names, I just stood there and emptied my pockets onto the pier floor, which emphasized that I couldn't take, you know, to stop doing this. You know, on a debarkation, I'd be down to the pier doing this two or three times.

MOORE: And they'd fill your pockets?

IRWIN: Yeah. Well, see, a dollar was, you could get a, you could get a good, thick ham sandwich, a small glass of beer and a half a dozen cherrystone clams for a dollar. So there were a lot of coins, and occasionally a dollar was put in my pocket.

MOORE: Now, what happened when, what was that scene like when they were around you, when you said the names, and somebody said, "Yes." You said the names, and they identified themselves. What did they do then?

IRWIN: Well, then I took them on board the ship. They had to step aside.

MOORE: Would people cry when they didn't hear their names?

IRWIN: No, no. Because they, you know, they knew more were forthcoming, and they didn't. As a matter of fact, I don't recall personally meeting anybody whose family had not come in, that were on the pier.

MOORE: What were the, what were the profiles of, of the people you brought to Ellis Island, what do you think was their profile, the most likely person to be brought to Ellis Island? What were those cases, that would be rejected in the first round?

IRWIN: Well, there were two groups. There was the fraudulent passports.

MOORE: And they were who, basically?

IRWIN: Most of them were refugees from Germany. The other group, which could also be refugees from Germany, but not necessarily, was doubt about their being able to subsist in the United States, and part of the reason of my going down to the pier to bring the relatives and friends up was for them to testify that they would support them.

MOORE: I see. Now, was it the case that in Germany at that time it was impossible for the people to get real passports if they were refugees out?

IRWIN: Uh, there is no flat answer to that. In some cases yes, in other cases no because, as I said, some of them were fortunate enough to be able to bribe officials, in which they could then get the proper papers.

MOORE: Well, in the two categories, what was the most frequent age and what was the sex of the person involved? Were there more men than women, or more

women than men?

IRWIN: Oh, no, it was mixed. It was mixed. I can't say more or less of any one sex.

MOORE: Were there any children?

IRWIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. There were children.

MOORE: Were they alone?

IRWIN: No.

MOORE: They were all accompanied.

IRWIN: They were always accompanied.

MOORE: And the children went to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Well, if that was the case, yes. But the immigration inspectors were, they were lenient people, and if they could allow somebody to vouch for them and let them go on, you know, let them assure that they were on their own recognizance, why, they would do that.

MOORE: What about medical concerns when people came over? Were they ever rejected for medical concerns and brought to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Yes.

MOORE: Okay. What type of medical concerns brought them to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Well, smallpox, typhoid, things of that nature.

MOORE: And you had to escort these people to Ellis Island with these diseases?

IRWIN: Well, yeah, yeah. They got on there.

MOORE: And so you were amongst people who had smallpox and typhoid?

IRWIN: Well, not, these were exceptional cases. They weren't . . .

MOORE: Was there something that was really, really . . .

IRWIN: They were amongst the passengers.

MOORE: And you got on a little boat with these contagious disease people and brought them to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: It wasn't that little. It was a big tugboat.

MOORE: Oh, all right. (an automobile can be heard in the background) You weren't concerned about that?

IRWIN: No.

MOORE: Oh, okay. So was there a doctor available where you were?

IRWIN: Yes. The, when we went on the ship with, you know, out on the Coast Guard cutter, there was the immigration, there was the customs and there was the Board of Health inspector, and myself.

MOORE: What did Ellis Island do for these people that your own, what I don't understand is since there were officials from the government there, and you set up that little place at the dock, what was it about Ellis Island that made it more determinate as to the, as to the status of these people? Why couldn't the officials right there make that decision? Why did they send them to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Well, they made that decision right there when they could, and allowed them could go ashore. And, as I said, they were trying to be lenient, but there were just certain cases that they just couldn't stretch the rules, and those people went and they were confined until the situation was resolved.

MOORE: So in an instance where they thought they . . .

IRWIN: It was a court.

MOORE: There was a court?

IRWIN: Yeah, they had to go to a hearing, an immigration hearing.

MOORE: I see. Did you ever witness any situation where a sick child was taken from parents and brought to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: Oh, no, no. Families weren't split up.

MOORE: Families weren't split. So the whole family was sent to Ellis Island.

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: So if one person in the family, let's say it was the husband, there was a husband, a wife and two children, and one of them was suspicious, they would send the entire family to Ellis Island?

IRWIN: I don't want to say yes to that. I think the answer is yes, but I'm not that sure, because they weren't, you know, the immigration people were busy, but they

weren't harsh, you know. If there was a way to allow somebody, I don't think a family would want to be split up, if that was the case, anyway. I think they would ask to stay with their, their other member.

MOORE: Well, during this time did you ever set foot on Ellis Island to see what it looked like inside?

IRWIN: Once I did go in and see them separated, in these big cages of chicken wire.

MOORE: Who was separated?

IRWIN: Well, I don't know what the separations were, but there were groups in various huge divisions, divided by this chicken wire, wood and chicken wire.

MOORE: What was your impression of Ellis Island at that time? What year are we talking about now, about '40 . . .

IRWIN: Well, this is still '40, see. All immigration stopped in the wartime, so it was all prior to World War Two. And my impression (he laughs) was I'd rather not.

MOORE: Be there?

IRWIN: (he laughs) I'd rather not be there, yes.

MOORE: Do you remember the big hall? Do you remember the big hall?

IRWIN: Oh, yes. That's where it was.

MOORE: That's where the chicken wire was.

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: Was it clean, do you remember?

IRWIN: Oh, yeah, it was clean. It wasn't attractive, it was unattractive, but it was clean.

MOORE: In what way was it unattractive, would you say?

IRWIN: Well, a lot of bare wood was showing, and unpainted bare wood was just, you know, the chicken wire was attached to that. The gate though, was bare wood and wasn't painted.

MOORE: And what was the atmosphere amongst the people there?

IRWIN: Depressed. As I said, they, some thought they weren't going to be allowed in to the United States. They were frightened that they may not be allowed in the United States, and would be sent back.

MOORE: Where did they, do you remember people waiting for

their families outside, in the Great Hall area? Do you remember the point where they were released and there were families waiting? Did you ever see that at Ellis Island? You know, people came to greet their families. They were waiting for them to be released at Ellis Island.

IRWIN: Oh, no, I never did see that. I never did see that.

MOORE: Did you see bathroom facilities or anything like that at Ellis Island at that time?

IRWIN: Uh, no, I personally did not see it. See, as I said, normally I just left them at the pier, and on this one occasion I had the occasion to go inside. I have even forgotten why.

MOORE: All right. So after the war, when it opened up again, shipping opened up again, you were still employed with the company, were you not?

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: Tell us about the change in that. How was that?

IRWIN: Well, we were still getting refugees, but this is after the war now. And it was very interesting.

There were a lot of Americans going over to Europe to see how their families made out and to see their home towns immediately after the war, and others, other relatives of Americans, alien relatives of Americans, were coming here, and there was a great traffic.

There was a huge traffic because there wasn't the ships available to carry them all, and there were no airplanes at the time, so there was a huge demand for passage. The, let me see, I've forgotten now what I was going to say. But there were, as I say, there was a big demand for passage. The ships were loaded, and after the war we were given what was called a C4, which was a big troop transport, and it was all dormitories, and that's what the people came back in.

And then also, the return trip was full of war brides, the Italian, the Italian soldiers who were captured, they were sent over to the United States and they were put in camps. And for them, though, we put them in camps near Italian communities, and we allowed them to go out on passes, and they had Sunday dinner with some Italian families from their native village in Italy. And then those people would come, and they'd bring baskets of food and they'd have big feasts inside the prison encampment. So that allowed

the young Italian-American girls to meet the Italian soldiers. Romances developed, and we had a whole shipload of war brides. (he laughs)

MOORE: Brought from where to where?

IRWIN: Going from the United, New York to, uh . . .

MOORE: Italy?

IRWIN: Italy.

MOORE: That's interesting. So what about other, so your transport after the war became trying to reunite people with either their countries or their destinations.

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: And what class were they, again?

IRWIN: Well, that C4 was more or less of a one class. As time progressed and we had time to build ships we built the Independence and the Constitution, and those are the two ships, I told you, that are now plying around Honolulu, and I think they go to San Francisco and then to Honolulu and around the islands and back. The, by this time I had a branch office in

Philadelphia, and we booked Princess Grace Kelly, that was her wedding trip, she went on our ship to Monaco.

And then Mrs. Kelly used to come in my office after the wedding and give me little presents to be sent to the children. And I'd send them up to New York, and we'd send them on to Monaco.

MOORE: So, you mean the mother of Grace Kelly?

IRWIN: Yeah, Grace Kelly's mother.

MOORE: I see. Any other stories you'd like to tell about this time to give more information to us about shipping at that time?

IRWIN: Well, there was one story, two smuggler stories.

MOORE: We'll take those.

IRWIN: (they laugh) Well, every time you went on board the ships, you know, the purser would always bring out bottles of whiskey, and that was a traditional thing, to have a couple of drinks either before or after they started working. And I wasn't there on this occasion, but a custom inspector told me about it. They were up in the captain's office drinking, and there was a throwaway rug on the captain's floor and somebody

slipped on it, and it revealed the trap door. They opened the trap door and went down and there was gold being smuggled in. Then there was, then there was the case of the one gentleman who was a regular, who regularly smuggled into the United States and smuggled diamonds, and the customs had been warned on a number of occasions that he was smuggling something into the country. And, you know, if somebody warns the government that a smuggler is coming in and he's got certain merchandise, the person who does the warning gets a reward, he gets a percentage of the value of whatever's being smuggled in. So we thought it was, this was fairly legitimate advice that this guy was smuggling. And they could not find them. They strip-searched him, they pulled his luggage apart, and they couldn't find it, and this went on for a while. And one day an inspector, a custom inspector who was home, he was walking along Flatbush Avenue and saw this eye shop, optometrist's shop, and in it they were showing, in the window they were showing false eyeballs. And he said, "That's it." The smuggler had a false eyeball. The next time they came in they broke the eyeball, and there was the diamond.

MOORE: Oh, my God! (they laugh) What about espionage?

IRWIN: Well, I was on the pier, and there was this very aristocratic couple, and I couldn't help but notice them. They were handsome. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen, and he was a very handsome gentleman. And they were speaking French, and they spoke high French, which has a rhythm to it, as you listen to good French. And I was noticing them, and then all of a sudden I saw two men come up to them and pull them away. And later I checked with the men, who turned out to be FBI agents. His name was, the passenger's name was Wount, W-O-U-N-T. I think they were from Denmark, if I'm not mistaken, and his wife, Wilhemina. They were Nazi spies, and they were arrested on the pier.

MOORE: And they were, and they were trying to seek refuge in the United States?

IRWIN: No. This, they were going to spy on the United States.

MOORE: Oh, I see. Oh, they were going to spy here.

IRWIN: Yeah.

MOORE: I see. Otherwise, why would they arrest them.
(she laughs) Wow. Any other stories like this?
You must have seen a lot.

IRWIN: Well, not that I can recall. On the exchange ship,
and I was on diplomatic exchange ship. That's when we
send the foreigners back. There was some Japanese,
all the Japanese businessmen who were stuck here
during the war, and their diplomatic corps. We had to
put on the ship and send them back to Japan. And I
remember I was in charge of the first class at that
time, and I had to work on the pier a little bit
longer, when everybody else went up for lunch. So
when I got up to the main lounge, why, it was only one
seat available, and I sat there. And it turned out to
be the Japanese ambassador, who had delivered the
ultimatum to the president about Pearl Harbor. Like a
foolish young man, you know, full of war hate which
you didn't know anything about, I wouldn't talk to
him, and I missed a golden opportunity. (he laughs)

MOORE: Well, I'd like to thank you on behalf of the Ellis
Island Oral History Project for helping us and giving
us information, and this is Kate Moore in Los Angeles,

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California on the 12th of January 1994, signing off
with the Ellis Island Oral History Project.

IRWIN: Thank you. Thank you very much.

MOORE: You did great.

IRWIN: Huh? Okay.