

NPS-137
CHARLES MYHRE
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NORWAY, 1920
AGE 11

SHIP: STAVANGERFJORD
PORT: OSLO
RESIDENCES:
NORWAY: FREDERICKSTAD
US: PHILADELPHIA, PA

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Myhre's wife is present.

RINKER: I have Mister, with me Mr. Myhre, and he had come from Norway. He now lives in a town right outside of the Philadelphia area in Pennsylvania. So, Mr. Myhre, where and when were you born?

MYHRE: I was born in Norway, the 8th of July, 1908.

RINKER: 1908. What was the name of the town?

MYHRE: Frederickstad.

RINKER: Frederickstad. And, uh, what were your childhood experiences like? Why did your father decide to come to America? What was his job?

MYHRE: Well, he was, he run - he was working in a mill in Norway mak-- you know, cutting lumber and stuff, and he wanted to better himself -- with six children in the family. So he came to America in 1910. So, uh . . .

RINKER: And how did he raise that money to come?

MYHRE: You mean, to come over? Well, he had built us a home, a beautiful home. Which, it was worth quite a bit. So, uh, my mother decided to come over. First my older sister come over, and then my older brother came over, and he had a house in Philadelphia, so we could move right in. So when we come over, if it's my mother, sister, two - two brothers and me. Two older brothers, and we landed, the 26th of June, 1920.

RINKER: 1920.

MYHRE: Yeah.

RINKER: And what . . .

MYHRE: I was then twelve days short of being twelve years old.

RINKER: Twelve years old.

MYHRE: So I was allowed to stay with -- on the woman's side, so I stayed with my mother, because I was less than twelve.

RINKER: Okay. Why don't you go ahead and tell, now the port you took off from. Where did you take off from in Norway?

MYHRE: Oslo.

RINKER: Oslo, Norway. And what was the name of the ship?

MYHRE: Stavangerfjord.

RINKER: Stavangerfjord. How long was your voyage?

MYHRE: Eight days.

RINKER: Eight days. Just eight days, huh? And it was a steamship?

MYHRE: Oh, yes.

RINKER: A steamship. What do you remember about the voyage coming over?

MYHRE: Oh, I was seasick couple of times.

RINKER: I can imagine. What was the food like?

MYHRE: Very good.

RINKER: Very good.

MYHRE: Oh, yes.

RINKER: What did you have to eat?

MYHRE: Well, most anything, you know. They fed us real good.

RINKER: So were you in steerage, then, or were you in second class?

MYHRE: No, we were -- I think we were third.

RINKER: You were third. You were the, the low, you were in steerage then.

MYHRE: Yeah. And we had more fun there than the first and second.

RINKER: I can imagine.

MYHRE: Of course, they had accordions, and they wanted to come down.

RINKER: Right. Because that was the party.

MYHRE: To the third, yeah.

RINKER: Did you get a bed to sleep on?

MYHRE: You mean here?

RINKER: No, no, in, on the ship.

MYHRE: Oh, yes. Yes. You had a cabin.

RINKER: You had a cabin?

MYHRE: Oh, yes.

RINKER: Oh, neat. That's great. Okay, great.

MYHRE: You know, like, bunk beds. And, uh, and I had, I think both my brothers was in with me, and we had the cardboard thing in case you wanted to throw up. (they laugh) So it was an experience.

RINKER: Yeah, oh, I can imagine. You were twelve years old when you came.

MYHRE: Two weeks less.

RINKER: Two weeks, yeah, okay, less. And then you came, okay. I got that. Ship (?). Why, okay, you came, why did you come to America, to follow your father, but why did he want to bring you to America?

MYHRE: So he could raise us properly.

RINKER: Properly. And he felt that Norway was not, at the time . . .

MYHRE: Well, it, uh . . .

RINKER: 1920 was just right after the second, uh . . .

MYHRE: The First World War.

RINKER: Right after the First World War. That's what you said, right. You could make a better, a better living.

MYHRE: Yeah, you had a better chance in this country.

RINKER: And when he came here, what did he do after he got here? Did he cut, was he a lumber man also?

MYHRE: Well, he -- . Yes. Well, he was a carpenter, finally. And he had a job. So, uh . . .

RINKER: Did you, other than your father, did you have any other relatives in the United States, in America, before when you came?

MYHRE: I had a -- my father, brother and sister.

RINKER: And sister, okay. So there were no other relatives, like your father didn't have any relatives here.

MYHRE: Yes, he did. He had one, two, three brothers and a sister.

RINKER: And did they all come over before he did?

MYHRE: Oh, yes. His sister's husband was a - a captain on the ship, and they lived in Brooklyn.

RINKER: Oh.

MYHRE: And my other brother, his other brothers was carpenters, also. And, uh, they worked around Philadelphia and various places.

RINKER: Okay. So when you came to Ellis, you were the youngest of all your brothers and sisters?

MYHRE: No, I had one, it's my youngest sister -- was the one that burned her leg, spilled coffee on her leg on the boat. So, uh, when she was examined here, they wouldn't let her go. They had to keep her for a week until she healed.

RINKER: Oh.

MYHRE: So, uh . . .

RINKER: So it was a pretty bad burn then, right?

MYHRE: Oh, yes.

RINKER: Second degree.

MYHRE: It was the wait-- one of the waitresses that spilled the coffee on her. So, uh, my father come over, and my brother, and my mother wouldn't leave my sister here. So we had to stay . . .

RINKER: Right, okay. You got to stay with the women.

MYHRE: Yeah. I was allowed because I was under twelve, and it was really an experience.

RINKER: So go ahead and tell us about Ellis.

MYHRE: Well, like, for breakfast for example, you'd come in, and there was a big, wooden crate, must had thousands of hard-boiled eggs in it. (laughs) So we each got two eggs. As you went in,. And there you had big rows of tables and benches, and had rolls and stuff, and all of the different nationalities in the world. So we sit down, and as soon as the bell rang to start eating, everybody was grabbing, so we got nothing. We were used to being served, more or less.

RINKER: Yeah, right.

MYHRE: So, uh . . .

RINKER: Did you speak any English?

MYHRE: Huh?

RINKER: Did you speak any English?

MYHRE: Oh, no, no. So, uh, then my mother, she was pretty strong. She says, "Go change this around." So my brother Harry, he was two years older than me, and Eir is four, so she put one here, one here and me over here. When the bell rang, all three of us grabbed at the same time, (laughs) so we got food.

RINKER: Uh-huh. Right, yeah. Or else you probably wouldn't have gotten food.

MYHRE: And then, to go to bed in the dormitories, you were getting . . .

RINKER: Now, did you go to sleep in the dormitories upstairs?

MYHRE: In the women's, yes. It had two-story . . .

RINKER: Bunks?

MYHRE: Well, not bunks, just, actually, iron frames. No sheets, no mattress, no nothing.

RINKER: Now, did they give you that when you went in? Did they give you the mattresses?

MYHRE: There was nothing, they give us a blanket at the door. And some women, I don't know if they were Polish or what, tried to grab it away from me. But my mother was strong, she just took it back. So then when you went -went to sleep, you put the blanket on top of the springs. Of course, there was nothing else. Then you lay on the blanket with the shoes under your head for a pillow.

RINKER: So there was no pillows and . . .

MYHRE: No pillow.

RINKER: No sheets or no linens or anything?

MYHRE: No, nothing. So . . .

RINKER: What were the conditions like? Were they clean here?

MYHRE: Well, they were --.

RINKER: Were the people friendly? I mean, they knew you couldn't speak English.

MYHRE: Oh, yes. Well, I played, played with kids that couldn't talk English either, so we had quite a thing. But, uh, it was . . .

RINKER: What were some of the games that you played?

MYHRE: Oh, tag and everything. Chas-- chasing each other around the Island. And, uh, the floors and everything was nice. The building was real nice in them days. I enjoyed it. So when my father came over, he had a pocket full of change, quarters, dimes and nickels. So my mother got the quarters, my two brothers got the big nickels, and I got the little dimes. And I was crying. (they laugh) So they had like a PX out in the middle -- pretzels and matches and stuff like that.

MYHRE: Who ran this? Do you know?

RINKER: It was run by . . .

MYHRE: Was it, it was run by the people who ran Ellis?

RINKER: I imagine so. It was a buil-- brick building right in the middle. So, uh, I bought a box of matches, because I was curious, you know, matches you could strike anywheres -- instead of striking them on a box. So I gave him a dime, and I got a nickel and four pennies change. And then my brothers start chasing me for the dimes. (he laughs)

RINKER: Wow!

MYHRE: So, uh, then I had money, I had dimes and nickels and everything. So in the morning I would order two fried eggs and bacon, twenty-five cents.

RINKER: You had to pay for your own food here?

MYHRE: Well, if I ordered them separate.

RINKER: Oh, yeah, okay.

MYHRE: See? All the rest of the stuff is paid by the - by the line, Norwegian line. Imagine, enough for you to keep in here. So that was quite something, too.

RINKER: So what was the extra things that you had to pay for, I mean, as far as . . .

MYHRE: No.

MRS: The hard-boiled eggs and one is separate

RINKER: Oh, okay.

MRS.: And one is separate --.

MYHRE: I take the hard-boiled eggs, too.

RINKER: Was there a kosher kitchen here? I mean, for the people who --.

MYHRE: I really don't know.

RINKER: As far as, like, what was, what were the type of meats that they served?

MYHRE: Gee, I don't remember the meat.

RINKER: I mean, as far as, probably breakfast wouldn't have been a very big meal anyway?

MYHRE: Well, breakfast you had, uh, bread and rolls stuff like that - was good. And we al-- we also had prunes, and I think plums.

RINKER: Plums, hmm.

MYHRE: So it was nice. So, uh . . .

RINKER: Oh, okay, let's see. Did you have any papers, documents, etc., with you?

MYHRE: No.

RINKER: Do you remember if your mom had any?

MYHRE: No. No citizen papers or anything.

RINKER: So did you have, did you have a manifest tag on you? Did you have to be tagged?

MYHRE: No.

RINKER: You don't remember any tag?

MYHRE: No. We just came in and then we went through all that.

RINKER: What was the inspection like in the Great Hall? Do you remember that, I mean, as far as you know?

MYHRE: Well, they - they checked your eyes and your heart and stuff like that. They were very serious about your eyes.

MRS. : They were, okay. There was a disease known as trachoma.

MYHRE: Then they checked you over, and I was okay. Mother was all right. My brothers was all right. So we could have left and went to Philadelphia, but then they'd have to come back a week later for my sister. So . . .

RINKER: Now, did your father come? Did he know the exact day you were in ?

MYHRE: Oh, yes, yes.

RINKER: So he was here when you got here?

MYHRE: No, but he came right after we were, we were processed.

RINKER: Uh-huh. So do you remember anything about a legal exam at all?

MYHRE: No.

RINKER: Questions that were asked of you?

MYHRE: Nah, nothing.

RINKER: Just the medical?

MYHRE: No. Because we had some place to go.

RINKER: Oh, yeah, okay, that's true.

MYHRE: See. All right, if we were strangers come in here, then they wouldn't take you in unless you had some place to go where you knew somebody, you know. So, uh, that was it.

RINKER: Huh. Do you remember anything about your stay on Ellis as far as, I don't know, the (?) or anything?

MYHRE: It was routine, the same, day after day.

RINKER: Right.

MYHRE: But I enjoyed it. It was an experience.

RINKER: And you came during the summertime, or . . .

MYHRE: Yeah, the 26th of June.

RINKER: Of June, okay. What experiences as a newcomer to America do you remember, as a little boy? What were some things, what did you think about the Statue? Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty? What were your first impressions? You said, "Oh, my goodness, a big statue!"

MYHRE: Yeah. Well, we passed it coming in.

RINKER: Uh-huh, yeah. Did you say anything to your brothers?

MYHRE: No, we all looked.

RINKER: You all looked. (she laughs)

MYHRE: Yes.

RINKER: Huh. Anything else, like cars? Did you have cars?

MYHRE: Well, we were on Ellis Island, so I didn't see any automobiles or anything like that. And as far as New York went, when we left Ellis Island, we got on a train and went right to Philadelphia.

RINKER: A train.

MYHRE: So I didn't see New York or anything.

RINKER: Okay. When you got to Philadelphia what was that like? Was that new and different from your other life?

MYHRE: Yes. We went down to where my father had his home in South Philadelphia.

MRS<: [not understood] Jewish -

MYHRE: Yeah. It was mostly all Jewish. And, uh, after we got in the house, I went out on the street, and I had a wristwatch on, a big one. And they were looking at me like I was, you know, a freak. And they were pushing me around, and circled around me. So, I started doing that in a pattern. But, uh, this one - one kid, Sam, he says, "As soon as he learns English a little bit, I want to knock him." He use-he used to fight all the time, this kid. And I was pretty strong. So, my brother is sitting on the porch and he heard this. So the next evening, he come home with a box. He says, "Here" So he gave me the box, and there was a pair of five-ounce boxing gloves. (he laughs)

RINKER: Wow.

MYHRE: He says, "Go see Sam." So I got the gloves. Sam was tickled to death. He was going to lick me. So I - I watched him fight, and he would rush in. So this time he rushed in, I stepped aside. And he come back again, as he rushed in, I stepped in and knocked him.

RINKER: Did you knock him down?

MYHRE: Poof, flat on the ground. (Ms. Rinker laughs.) He got up, ripped the gloves off. He says, "I'll get you later." I says, "Okay, any time." And we're the best of friends today.

RINKER: Uh-huh. Great! Now, did his family, did Sam's family come over? I mean, was he an immigrant?

MYHRE: Oh, no, no.

RINKER: He was born here?

MYHRE: He was - he was born in South Philly. He was Jewish. So, of course, most of the kids were Jewish there, and their mothers didn't talk English. They would call the Jewish boys in. So I learned Jewish at the same time I learned English.

RINKER: And how long did it take you to learn English and Jewish together. You learned Jewish on the street.

MYHRE: No. We landed in 1920 in June, I went to school in September.

RINKER: Was that experience different than in . . .

MYHRE: Yeah, well, I had finished sixth grade in Norway, so they put me in fourth grade in South Philly. So, uh, of course, I had to learn English, but as far as arithmetic and stuff like that, I could have taught the teacher.

RINKER: Great.

MYHRE: So every time you had a test, she'd have me collect them. And I'd bring mine up first, and I'd get a hundred. And she says, "You mark them." And they would say, "Charlie, Charlie, fix me up." I says, "Nope. I'm honest." So I marked them. And - oh, I went -- I skipped Fourth B. I went to Fifth A. I skipped Fifth B, and then I went to the sixth. And then junior high in the seventh. It was then seventh, eighth and ninth. So, uh . . .

RINKER: And a lot of, still, schools in New York, a lot of schools still in America have that, the seventh, eighth, and then . . .

MYHRE: Now it's changed to five, six and something. But, uh, I learned pretty good English. And - and history, of course. Well, I knew the his-- European history. But I had to pick up some of the others. And geography I knew. But the rest of the stuff went smooth.

RINKER: Oh, great.

MYHRE: So, uh, I had one set-in - not a set-in with a teacher, and he was a history teacher, Jewish. So he said I didn't have this or have that in my book, and I knew I had everything underlined in red ink and everything. And one of the fellows in the class had copied out of mine, and he gave him a G and told me I didn't have nothing. And I was seventeen years old. So I - I says, "Forget it." So, I said, "You can flunk me right now." So he flunked me for a term.

RINKER: He did!

MYHRE: Yep.

RINKER: So you had to repeat that course then?

MYHRE: No. I was seventeen. I quit.

RINKER: Oh, okay, oh, yeah.

MYHRE: See, I was going to go to high school. My two brothers were bricklayers. So my one brother says, "Come on out, start laying bricks." So I went out, I'm a bricklayer. So, uh, I got sixty cents an hour to start. And I worked six - six months for this man, and I only got sixty cents. So my brother, Ervin, he was getting a dollar and a quarter an hour, which was good in '20-- '26 and '27. Because it was '26 when I graduated from junior high.

RINKER: Before that when you had just came, and you were twelve years old and went to school and stuff, you never worked.

MYHRE: Oh, no, no.

RINKER: You always, you were just . . .

MYHRE: I used to run errands for the American Store next door. So, uh, he told, huh? So he told the man he was working for, he says, "How about bringing the kid out?" And I was the kid. He says, "He's making the dollar-and-a-quarter an hour now, and he wants to better himself." I was only getting sixty. So, okay, so I went out, and he gave me a dollar-and-a-quarter. So I was making fifty-five dollars a week, and, oh, I'd be working overtime, too. I wasn't in the union at the time. So, I bought a Chevrolet and quit work. Took all the boys in the neighborhood around. So, then when I joined the union in 1931, I worked in Pittsburgh, Washington, DC and different places. I was with John Kelly.

RINKER: Oh. (voice off mike) Oh, yeah.

MYHRE: The biggest brick contractor in the world.

MRS.: [not understood] In Philadelphia.

RINKER: Now, so it was mostly on the East Coast that you settled.

MYHRE: Oh, yes.

RINKER: Because your father had settled here in and [not understood]
.

MYHRE: Yeah. Well, he worked all through Philadelphia until he, he got killed and they were building a hospital and the concrete mixer come down a run and run over his leg and broke his leg above his knee, and a blood clot went to his heart and killed him. So he was only fifty-four at the time. But all my other brothers was married. His father's the only one left. So I stayed home, and my sister and I, and took care of Mom -- until she[sic] took me. (they laugh) So after we got married, we, I was lucky, I had a good job with Kelly. I was on salary. So I

couldn't lose any rainy days or cold days. A week's vacation. And did very good. So I retired ten years ago, and I'm glad of that, too.

RINKER: Okay. What, what had you heard about America or Ellis Island in Norway before you came, anything?

MYHRE: No, just, uh, come to America and there's gold all over the pavements, you pick them up in the basket.

RINKER: Is that what they had told you?

MYHRE: That's what they used to say. That's an old saying.

RINKER: Yeah. Anything else? As far as, like, what was America like? I mean, had your father written you and told you anything about what to expect?

MYHRE: He might have written to my mother, but I don't remember anything.

RINKER: You were so little, that's true.

MYHRE: Even, Ellis Island wasn't mentioned. See, my father, he landed on Washington Avenue in Philadelphia, when he came over. And I think your mother landed in Philadelphia.

MRS>: Right.

MYHRE: So there was no - no mention.

RINKER: Were you scared at all when you found out that you were going to have to come to Ellis or that you were here for a week?

MYHRE: No. I was tickled to death to begin with.

RINKER: Oh, great. Okay, yeah.

MYHRE: Yup. I thought it was a great place.

RINKER: Did you know of anybody who was sent back from, from, uh . . .

MYHRE: NO. Well. I don't know. But when we were out in the court where I said the PX was you could buy stuff,; well. up on the top floor was prison.

RINKER: It was a prison!

MYHRE: Oh, yes. With barred cells for, they kept, like, sailors who had run away from the ship. So there was a Norwegian up there, and he hollered down in Norwegian, you know. So then we knew. So he let a string down, and we'd send him cigarettes and stuff up. And then the next boat come over, he would be deported, naturally, because he -- he run away from the ship. So he wasn't a citizen. So I'm a citizen on my

father's papers. So is - so is my sister and two brothers. And my mother had to take her own.

RINKER: Oh, okay.

MYHRE: And my oldest brother had to take his own. So my older sister, she married an American.

MRS.: Do you have the time?

RINKER: Yeah, that's true. Well, it's one-thirty right now. We'll have like another five minutes.

MYHRE: All right. Ask me more.

RINKER: So you, actually you had citizenship papers on your father, then?

MYHRE: Well . . .

RINKER: I mean, as far as, like . . .

MYHRE: My father became a citizen.

RINKER: Right.

MYHRE: And my name is on it, and my sister's, and my two brothers' name is on it. So, uh . . .

RINKER: How old was your oldest brother? You said that he had to take his own, so he must have been at least a year or two . . .

MYHRE: At that time he was over twenty-one.

RINKER: He was over 21, he was definitely . . .

MYHRE: So he had to take it.

RINKER: Yeah.

MYHRE: And my other brother was, excuse me, nineteen, one's seventeen. And I was fifteen, I guess. In 1924, I think, my father became a citizen. So . . .

RINKER: And then your youngest sister is how old?

MYHRE: She's . . .

RINKER: I mean, when you . . .

MYHRE: She was ten, yeah.

RINKER: She was ten.

MYHRE: Yeah.

RINKER: Hmm. Okay. After your whole family, your immediate family came over, did any other relatives from Norway come in and join you?

MYHRE: Not to stay. As a visitor.

RINKER: When did they come? I mean, and who, were they -- aunts and uncles, or was it grandparents?

MYHRE: No, I had a cousin.

RINKER: Cousins.

MYHRE: She was born in Brooklyn, but raised in Norway.

RINKER: Raised in Norway, hmm.

MYHRE: So, uh, she come over and stayed - stayed with my sister.

Mrs.: : Several times.

MYHRE: Huh?

MRS. Several times.

MYHRE: Yeah. She was over a couple a couple of times. She's died since.

RINKER: Okay. And this is the last question, and this is how many children and/or grandchildren do you have?

MYHRE: I have two children, four grandchildren. Uh-huh.

RINKER: Do you want to say, those are all the questions that I have. Do you want to say anything else? I mean, that . . .

MYHRE: I don't know what else to say.

RINKER: I mean, any other stories that you'd like to relate or anything?

MYHRE: No. I could tell stories about Norway and stuff. But - I ca-- Ellis Island, I mean, my grandchildren loves to hear me.
(he laughs)

RINKER: Well, great, you know. And that's . . .

MYHRE: So I tell them, you know, a lot of stuff. I tell a few lies, too. (they laugh) Yes.

END INTERVIEW

NPS-137/MYHRE

