

NPS-161

MARGARET HOEPFNER

BIRTH DATE: 1897
INTERVIEW DATE: DECEMBER 30, 1987
RUNNING TIME: 25:30
INTERVIEWER: MARCY COHEN
RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN
INTERVIEW LOCATION: LIBERTY ISLAND, NY
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: LYDIA HANHARDT, 6/1995

GERMANY, 1926

AGE 29

SHIP: STUTTGART

PORT: BREMERHAVEN

RESIDENCE:

- **GERMANY:**
- **USA:**

COHEN: This is Marcy Cohen, and I'm speaking with Mrs. Margaret Hoepfner about her immigration experience from Germany in 1926. Mrs. Hoepfner, where were you born and what year?

HOEPFNER: I was born 1897.

COHEN: And in what country?

HOEPFNER: Germany.

COHEN: Okay. How old were you when you came to this country?

HOEPFNER: I was twenty-nine years old.

COHEN: Okay. Why did you choose to come to the United States?

HOEPFNER: Because a year before me my husband came over here, and when he was over here he liked very much, and then he sent for me.

COHEN: Did you come by yourself or with any other family members?

HOEPFNER: I came with my husband's sister with her two kids.

COHEN: And how did you arrange to come over? Did he send you any passage or passports?

HOEPFNER: Yeah. He sent me my passports, everything. Because he had two aunts living in Boston, and they fixed everything.

COHEN: Okay. What were some of the, what were some of the papers that you needed to come over here? Besides your passport, what else did you need?

HOEPFNER: My birth certificate. I think that was all.

COHEN: Okay. And when you left Germany, how did you come here? Did you leave from a port of Germany, or did you go to another country?

HOEPFNER: No, I left from Bremen, Germany, Bremerhaven.

COHEN: And what class did you travel?

HOEPFNER: Third class.

COHEN: And what was that like? What was it like on the boat?

HOEPFNER: Oh, it was nice, only I didn't go out much on the boat. I didn't even ate much. I was sick every day.

COHEN: Really.

HOEPFNER: I was seasick.

COHEN: How long was the trip? How many days?

HOEPFNER: I think it was about ten days.

COHEN: And how was the weather when you were coming over?

HOEPFNER: It was nice.

COHEN: And you didn't go out on the deck at all?

HOEPFNER: No. I couldn't, I couldn't stand up. I had to throw up all the time.

COHEN: Oh, really.

HOEPFNER: Yeah.

COHEN: When...

HOEPFNER: Then I had my little boy with me. He was two years old.

COHEN: And how did he make out?

HOEPFNER: And my sister-in-law took care of him on the boat.

COHEN: Uh-huh. Okay. What was the room like that you were in on the boat? What did it look like on the boat, your room?

HOEPFNER: It was nice. It was nice and clean. Everything was nice. And the steward came every day, and he brought me something to eat, only I couldn't eat much. The minute I ate it, I threw it up again. (she laughs)

COHEN: When you were in the room, how many people could be in that room at one time? Did you have beds in that room?

HOEPFNER: Yeah.

COHEN: And how were the beds set up?

HOEPFNER: Up and down.

COHEN: Like a bunk bed?

HOEPFNER: Yeah.

COHEN: And when you came over here, did you come through Ellis Island?

HOEPFNER: Yeah. We landed, the day before Labor Day we landed in New York, over. And then, when the ship stopped, we have to go with our papers and, in some room. And a man looked everything over. He read our papers and everything, and he asked us questions. And then when he was finished he says to me, "All right, go." So I went out again, and when I came out, my sister-in-law was in another room, and she came out from the other room, and she had on her dress a little sign on it. And I didn't have that, and she says to me, "Don't you have a little label like that, the man gave it to you, where you was now?" I says, "No." "Oh, my God, then you can't leave the ship," she says. "Let's ask an officer on the ship what they have to say." So an officer came, and he says, "What is it?" I start crying then, see. And I says to the officer, "My sister-in-law has that little paper so she can leave the ship, and I don't have any." He says, "Did you went out already in that room?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "What the man says to you?" "He only says to me, 'Go ahead, go.'" "That was all," I says, and, "I thought I was finished, and now I'm standing here, I can't even leave the ship," I says. And he says, "Wait a minute. When he's finished, when no more people go in, I go in with you and I have a talk with him, see what he have to say." So he went in with me, and he talked to him, and he said, "All what I can say, she have to stand here, she have to go to Ellis Island." And I start crying, and I went outside, and I says to my sister-in-law, "I don't, can't, oh, I have to go to Ellis Island." And the officer says, "Where is your sister-in-law going?" And I says, "She goes to Boston where my husband is." And he says, "Tell your sister-in-law, when she comes to Boston, to tell your husband to come down here right away and bring his papers along, what

he have when he came over. And he should come down here." He says, "And, anyway, tomorrow is Labor Day. You don't, can't go on the island tomorrow. You have to stand here, and the next day, Tuesday morning, your husband should be on the island." And I says, "All right." And I talked with my sister-in-law. And then that Sunday, yeah, Saturday she left and she came to Boston in the night, and Sunday my husband came down there in the afternoon, and he had his cousin with him, because he only was one year here, and she didn't know either where to go everywhere. So he cousin went with him, and his cousin came on the ship, and the officer came to me and said, "Mrs. Hoepfner, here is a letter. You read that letter, and you write answers. It's from your husband." And I looked, and I says, "Is he here?" And he said, "No, he is not here. Read that letter." And I looked that letter over, there was no stamp, nothing on it. I said, "That letter, he gave it to you with no stamp on it. He must be here." And then he started laughing a little bit, and he says, "All right. I tell you. He's downstairs with his cousin." He says, "Only (?) can't come on the ship. So you write the answers on the paper and I give it to him." "So," I says, "what should I write?" He said, "Write he have to be tomorrow morning on Ellis Island and over there get (?), too, then over there you see him," he says. So that's what I did. And then the next day they brought us with a boat over Ellis Island. And when I came near Ellis Island I looked it over and I says to myself, "Oh, my God, it looks we have to go to prison." (she laughs) I get kind of scared again. And then they opened the doors and they let us out, and they let us in there. And in there we had an order to sit down. And all at once one of the men came, and he had a list of all our names, and we had to, we had to say if we're here, see. He called out the names, and then when he, he was finished he said, "All right. I call the names again, and the first names I call, they go on the right side, and the other names, they go on the left side, and you all stand in line." So I had to go on the left side, and I stand in line with them. And they took the right

side first. And I said, "Can I go with them? I want to go out. I want to go out from here," I says. "Could I go with them?" He says, "No. If you go with them, maybe you'll be a couple of days here. Maybe even a week or so. Some people are here a couple of weeks," he says. "Oh, no, I want to go out a day," I says. "I think my husband is coming. I want to go out a day." He says, "All right, then stand where you are." So I stand where I was, and then they took us and brought us in another room, and from there we had to sit down, too, and then they are called names, one name after the other. And then my name was called. I had to go in a room there and there was a man sitting on the desk, and he asked me all kinds of questions. When my husband came over, on what kind of ship he came over, and when he came over. And I told him a year ago on the Columbus. And he said, "Now, tell me, was he a passenger or was he a sailor on the ship?" I says, "He was a passenger on the ship." He says, "All right. You have to go in another room now," he says. Room so-and-so, he gave me a number, and outside was a man standing there, and he says, "Where you have to go?" I says, "In room so-and-so. So he took me there. And there was another man on a desk sitting there, and the same thing I had to go through about two or three times. And then the last, when I went in, he says to me, "I don't know, lady, why they kept you here." And it was nice that he talked German to me, see. And I says, "I don't know myself why they kept me," I says. He says, "Was your husband a passenger on that ship?" I says, "Yeah." So it must be something, it had something to do with my husband. So, anyway, he looked my papers over, and then another man came in and he talked to him, and he said, "I can find nothing wrong with that lady's paper. Everything is all right. And her husband was a passenger on that and that ship last year, and it's all right. She can go in that room where they are getting released," he says. So he took me in another room. There were two benches standing there, and I sat down on a bench, and on the other bench was about two woman and a man sitting

there. And then I had my little boy on the lap, and he starts sleeping. And then he called names, he called some names from over there. And then he saw my boy was sleeping, and then he says, "What's your name?" I says, "Margaret Hoepfner." And he says, "I think we'll take you. Your little boy is sleeping." He says to the lady next, he says, "Will you hold that little boy on your lap? She has to come over here. I have to ask some questions." And I went over there, and he asked me some questions, the same as before. And he said, "I find nothing wrong with your papers. Everything is all right. I don't, can't make out why they keep you," he says. And there was a door there, and there was like a guard standing there, and he says to that guard, "Mr. Hoepfner." And he opened the door and he called out, "Mr. Hoepfner." And my husband came in, and he saw me standing there, and he wanted to go over to me. And he says, "No, no. To me first," he says. "You go to me first. I have to ask you some questions," he says. And then he asked him some questions, and I went over there and took my little boy on my lap again. And when he was finished, he says to my husband, "All right. Now everything is all right. You can take your wife and go to Boston where want to go," he says. And then we thanked him, and we walked about. And when I came outside was my husband's cousin there, and he introduced me to him. And then we went on the boat and came over to New York, and then we took the train to Boston.

COHEN: That is interesting.

HOEPFNER: Only on the island, I didn't like it there.

COHEN: What do you remember about the island? Do you remember what the rooms looked like, the rooms that you were in?

HOEPFNER: I think they was painted yellow, yeah. They was painted yellow. And then

it was about noontime, and they said we should go upstairs and eat in the dining room. And I went upstairs with my little boy, and there was all long, long, long tables there, and some benches on the side, and on each, each table was about two pitchers with water, and there was plates set up, and some people were sitting down already, and one woman says to me, "Come on, sit down with me." She talked German, too. And I looked, and I says to my little boy, "Can I give you that?" or "Can I give you that?" And he says, "I don't want anything. I don't want anything. I want my Daddy. I want my Daddy," he says. And then, I didn't eat anything either. I stood up again, and that lady says to me, "Why they kept you here?" And I told her. And she says, "Oh, you go out a day." She says, "Look at me. There's nothing wrong with me," she says. "Only on the ship my little girl got sick, and when I came over here they had to bring her to the hospital. Now I have to wait here on Ellis Island till she comes back from the hospital, and then I can go and see my husband," she says. So I walked around a little, and there was some, like little stores there, they sold something. And he wanted some chocolate, and I didn't know what to say, I couldn't speak a word English. So I went there, and a woman was there, and she said something to me, and I did like that, and then I pointed at a chocolate. And she reached me a chocolate bar, and I gave it to my boy, and then I fished for some money, and I didn't know how much it cost. I gave her a dollar. See, I knew it wasn't, a dollar. And she didn't give me any change. So I said, "Jesus, it's awful expensive. She didn't give me any change."

COHEN: When you were in the dining room, do you remember the food that they served?

HOEPFNER: No. I didn't eat anything.

COHEN: But do you remember what was on the table at all?

HOEPFNER: No, I didn't look.

COHEN: When you said that there were little stores, what were some of the things that they sold there, besides chocolate?

HOEPFNER: Some kind of things to play for the kids and some kind of, rememberings with names on it. You could buy little things like that.

COHEN: Were you allowed to walk wherever you wanted on the island?

HOEPFNER: Oh, you could walk around in that room where you was. You couldn't go any further. You had to stand there. You couldn't go from one room to another. No, you had to stand right there.

COHEN: What did the room look like that you spent most of your time in, the one that was painted yellow? What else was in there?

HOEPFNER: You could sit down, and there was books there to read and.

COHEN: Do you remember the guards, what kind of uniforms they wore?

HOEPFNER: No, no. I didn't remember.

COHEN: When you came into New York Harbor on the boat, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all?

HOEPFNER: No, no. I didn't.

COHEN: Okay. When all your paperwork was in order, and you met your husband,

did you ever find out why you were kept overnight?

HOEPFNER: They said, on that ship where he came, there was a sailor, and he had almost the same name than ours, and they think he jumped ship, he came illegally to the United States. And then they figured maybe that was my husband. (Ms. Cohen laughs) And it was not my husband. My husband was a passenger on the ship. (Ms. Cohen laughs) It was a big mistake, see.

COHEN: Uh-huh. Okay. After you and your husband left the island, you took a boat back to Manhattan? And then you went by train to?

HOEPFNER: By train to Boston.

COHEN: To Boston.

HOEPFNER: Yeah.

COHEN: And then what happened when you got to Boston?

HOEPFNER: My husband brought me to his aunt's house in Boston, in Jamaica [ph] Plain, and she had supper ready for us in the night, and she feed us, and then she says, "You want to sleep here tonight?" See, my husband had apartment already in Roslindale. He had another aunt living in Roslindale, and we had a, he had an apartment already there. And he says, "We are not sleeping here. Tell your son to bring us with a car to Roslindale. We'll go back to Roslindale where I have the apartment." So we went back to Roslindale, and I slept the first night in Roslindale in my own apartment.

COHEN: What did you think of the apartment?

HOEPFNER: It was nice. It was four rooms. It was a nice family. The landlord was living upstairs. They only had one little girl, and he had a plumber business. And on the first floor was that four rooms, and my husband had them rented for us.

COHEN: How was this house different from your house in Germany?

HOEPFNER: Oh, it was almost the same, yeah. It was almost the same. It was a parlor and two bedrooms, and a kitchen, and a pantry. It looked nice. It was nice. And my husband had the bedroom all ready, and he had a bed for my boy all ready in there, in the kitchen set he had there. Only the parlor set we had to buy later on when we had the money. (she laughs)

COHEN: What type of work did your husband do?

HOEPFNER: He was a laborer. He worked for a man, he was of German descent, too, in Jamaica [ph] Plain. And he made some tubes what they need in the hospitals for operations and things like that, and he worked there.

COHEN: Did you ever work?

HOEPFNER: No, no. When I was here, oh, then I couldn't speak German [sic]. I couldn't do any shopping, nothing. And next to the house where we was living was a little grocery store, and my husband went over there and bought us stuff all the time. Then that man over there who owned the store, he says to my husband, "I heard your wife came from Germany." And my husband says, "Yes." He says, "Send her over. Let her do shopping." He says, "She can't talk. She don't understand anything. So I have to do it." And that was a Jewish man, and he says to my husband, "Listen, you know, I'm Jewish."

My husband says, "Yeah, I know." And he says, "I understand German. Just send her over, and tell her she can talk German with me, and I give her what she wants." So I tried one day, and I went over, and I went in, and he says to me, "Oh, you'd be the woman next door who came from Germany." And I says, "Yeah." And he said, in German, if he can help me, see what I want. And I told him what I want, and he showed everything to me, if you want that. I says, "Yeah, that's what I mean." And he gave me everything, and it was nice. I was very glad that man spoke German with me. He was a very nice Jewish man, and he talked German with me. He says, "Any time you want something, you come over." He says, "I help you." He says, "And by and by you will learn the names, what it means in English," he said. And it was nice. And then me and my sister-in-law, we went shopping sometime in the meat stores, and we didn't know what to say. So we had to point with the fingers what we want, we want that or we want that. And some fellows start laughing. And one man, he must have told them not to laugh at us, and they gave us anyway what we wanted and we were scared. (she laughs) And then my husband says one day, "You know what you do? When the night school starts, you go to the night school," he says. So I went, my husband went to the night school too when he was here. So I went there, and it helped me a whole lot. It went to night school then, and it helped me a whole lot.

COHEN: How long did you go to night school?

HOEPFNER: One season, one year, yeah, I went to night school, and that helped me a whole lot. And the teacher, she was very nice to us, she explained everything so nice. She explained it in German, and then she explained it in English, and she wrote it on the blackboard. I like it then, and I liked the country later on. The people was nice to me, they start talking to me. And then I met some people, the section where we lived was a whole lot of

German people living there, too, and I met some of them, and they start talking with me, and I make friends with them. And I liked it here, and I still like it here. It's my country now. (she laughs)

COHEN: How long did it take you to feel comfortable in the United States?

HOEPFNER: Before I felt really comfortable? Oh, it took about a year, yeah. It took about a year.

COHEN: Do you have any families still over in Germany?

HOEPFNER: No. I have cousins over there. My father and mother, they died in the, my father died in the '30s, and my mother died later, and all my sisters and my brother's gone now.

COHEN: Have you ever...

HOEPFNER: My last sister, she was ninety-one years old. She died two years ago. It was my last sister.

COHEN: When you came here, did you ever go back to visit at any point?

HOEPFNER: Yeah. When my father died my mother wrote me, "Now, your daddy died, I want to see you." She says, "You come back and see me." And then I talked to my husband and he says, "You want to go?" And I says, "Yeah. It costs a whole lot of money." He says, "I know." He says, "If you go, if you want to go, go ahead, go." He says, "Your mother wants to see you. So I took my boy, the boy was ten years old then, and I went over there, and I stayed there for three months.

COHEN: What did your son speak?

HOEPFNER: German, too. He speak German and English.

COHEN: He does, okay.

HOEPFNER: Yeah, that's Christine's father.

COHEN: Okay.

HOEPFNER: Yeah.

COHEN: How did you feel when you went back? Did you miss it?

HOEPFNER: I missed?

COHEN: When you went back to Germany, did you miss it?

HOEPFNER: The United States?

COHEN: No, when you went to Germany.

HOEPFNER: Yeah?

COHEN: Did you like going back there?

HOEPFNER: I liked to go, I liked to go back there. And then I went, the second time I went over there it was in the '60s, 1967 or about that when I went back. I went by myself. I knew a woman, she lived near us, and she went to Germany, too. And my husband says, "My wife likes to go, too." She says,

"Why you don't, why she don't come with me, then? I go on the big ship on the Europa It don't take so long," he says. So I went with her, we both went. And then I was out there three months again, and then I came back. And then I was out the first time with my boy, where my mother lived, my brother, there was, further down a lake and kids went swimming there all the time. And one day I went down with my boy, and he want to go swimming, too. And that afternoon a teacher came with his class, with his people, and there was there, too. And then he start talking to me and I told him, "I am German," I says. "And I am here visiting." He says... "I live in America now." And he says, "And your boy talks only English now?" I says, "No, no. I talk to him in German. He talks everything in German. He understands me. He says, "Where is he?" I says, "In the water there." And then he says, "When he comes out, I want to talk to him." And then when he came out from the water, that German teacher talked to him, and he was very surprised he could talk so nice German. He said, "Gee, you teach him very nice German. It's very nice." He says, "You come down in my classroom some day and see me," he says. "See that school down there? That's where I teach," he says, "in that school down there." They was very nice to me, the people.

COHEN: Did your son like it when he went to Germany?

HOEPFNER: Yeah, he liked it there. Yeah.

COHEN: Did anybody in your family that was living in Germany come to visit you in the United States?

HOEPFNER: No, never. Only one year, how many years is it now? About five years ago, a friend of my, a friend of my sister-in-law out there, she, he, they came over here with his wife. They were on a tour, and they came to

Boston, and then he asked, in Germany, he asked him for my address, and he says if he have a chance he come see me. And one day we get a call from a hotel in Boston, and it was him. He was there with his wife, and he said his name. And my husband says, not my husband, my son, I was living with my son then, my husband was dead then. My son says, "You want to come out and see us?" He says, "Yeah, if I can." He says, "All right. I come with my car, I pick you up and bring you out there." And he brought him out there that afternoon, and then we made supper for them, and we talk. And then ten o'clock at night we brought them back to their hotel. And it was nice to see them. (she laughs) Yeah.

COHEN: How long were you here before you became a citizen?

HOEPFNER: Oh, I became a citizen when the war was going on, I think 19, 1940 or '42. '42, I think, I became a citizen, yeah.

COHEN: And did you go to a class to prepare for taking a test?

HOEPFNER: No. See, they asked us, they gave us. When you applied for citizen, they give you a book, and you had to read that book, and they ask you questions then. So I read that book for a day, and then when I went I got my citizen papers right away, yeah. And I am glad I am a citizen. (she laughs)

COHEN: This is the end of Side One with Mrs. Hoepfner, and today is December 30th.

END OF SIDE ONE
BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

COHEN: Mrs. Hoepfner, can you tell me a little bit about the physical examination that you had to go through in Germany?

HOEPFNER: Oh, you had a doctor. The doctor, he examined your heart, everything. He gave you a good examination.

COHEN: And where was this examination done?

HOEPFNER: Huh?

COHEN: Where was the examination done?

HOEPFNER: In a doctor's office.

COHEN: Okay. When you came to Ellis Island, did they examine you at all?

HOEPFNER: No, no. I don't think so. We had to show our papers, and in Germany even the kids had a doctor, and they had to walk, and he examined them good, and he wrote everything on a paper and he gave us that paper, and we had to show that paper when we came back.

COHEN: When you stayed in Ellis, what type of questions were they asking you, you know, to find out if your paperwork was in order? What was some of the stuff that they were trying to find out?

HOEPFNER: They asked me on what kind of ship my husband came, and where he went from there. And I told them he came as a passenger on the ship, and he had aunts and uncles in Boston, and they sent him the papers to come

over to America, and he went to them, and he boarded with one of his aunts. He was a boarder there. Yeah.

COHEN: All right. I'm not really sure what else to ask you?

HOEPFNER: I know there's not much to ask any more.

COHEN: Well, you've pretty much told me everything, and I'd like to thank you for the interview.

HOEPFNER: But that's all right. It's all right.

END OF THE INTERVIEW