

NPS-36

MARY SIVE

BIRTH DATE: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 29, 1973

RUNNING TIME: 31:20

INTERVIEWER: MARGO NASH

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: CHARLENE A. KEYLOR, 1/1979

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: CHICK LEMONICK, 3/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: STACEY MENAKER, 6/1995

AUSTRIA VIA SWEDEN, 1941

AGE 18

SHIP: "THE SANTA ROSA"

PORT: GOTEBOG, SWEDEN VIA BARRANQUILLA, COLUMBIA

RESIDENCES:

- **AUSTRIA: GRAZ**
- **US: PHILADELPHIA, PA; NEW YORK, NY**

NASH: I am speaking with Mrs. Mary Sive who came to this country at the age of eighteen in 1941. She grew up in Graz, Austria. Mrs. Sive, could you describe for us what Graz was like.

SIVE: Well, it is I guess the second largest city in Austria. As a matter of fact, my husband and I took a trip three or four years ago and visited there as well as other places in central Europe, and I was amazed really. The city has grown a good deal, but I was amazed at the ancientness of a lot of it. I remember learning as a child about it being

founded in the, I think 1100s, or in the Middle Ages anyway, and some of those buildings are still standing. We went to the building that I remembered having gone to school in for one year only, the last year I was there which was equal to the fifth grade, I guess. And the building was condemned now, but it was just incredibly, it was just in ruins, and to think that even, well, this would be thirty-five years ago, they had used it for a school, was just to our standards just unthinkable. I don't know really what else you want to know. I left Graz when I was, as I say, in 1934. I was eleven years old, and the reason for that was that my father was involved or active in the Social Democratic Party which, of course, now is in power there. But at the time, in 1934, there was a political upset and the Party I guess was outlawed and a number of people were executed and I think he felt that he would be one of those or he knew that he would be one of those, so he made his way to Czechoslovakia and my mother and I followed him. We subsequently lived, oh after, we lived in Czechoslovakia for four years and after the Anschluss which was in the spring of '38 when the Germans took over Austria, we moved to Sweden. I think my parents all that time had the idea that it was a temporary exile and they certainly, they were quite young then, as I see it now, and thought that they would go back home and take up their political and public and private lives that they had had. After the outbreak of the European War in '39, they kind of realized that the war was going to go on a long time and I think their views changed and I think it seemed, of course, the first year or so that Hitler was going to take over all of Europe.

NASH: Who were the people that took power when your father left Austria?

SIVE: Well, I guess they were called the Christian Social Party or some such thing. I know at the present time in Austria they have a coalition government between the Social Democrats and these Christian Social Democrats, whatever they are. As a matter of fact, the present chancellor of Austria, who was in the news recently with this closing of this Jewish camp and so on, was someone whom I knew very well when we were both refugees in Sweden. Considerably older than I am, but he was a young man and I was still a kid.

NASH: It seems hard to imagine that the Christian Democrats were killing the Social Democrats.

SIVE: No.

NASH: Oh, it's not hard to imagine.

SIVE: Why not? You know, they take their politics seriously there.

NASH: So you were in Sweden you said. You lived there for a while.

SIVE: Yes, and as I said, I think about that time my parents had the idea that they weren't going to, that they really wanted to think in terms of a better life and better opportunities for me. I was the only child and they realized they weren't going back to Austria very soon. And so then they had the idea of to go to Austria, coming to this

country and it took, I guess, a considerable length of time to arrange, all that sort of thing, with the usual immigration procedures as well as obtaining transportation because, of course, all of Europe was at war.

NASH: This was in what year?

SIVE: This was in '41. Sweden was neutral, and my father obtained transportation in June of '41 and I think it was just before Russia entered the war which was June 22, '41 as I seem to recall, and he and a group of other people travelled all the way through Russia and Trans Siberian Railway and so on and then by ship to Los Angeles.

NASH: So your father left first.

SIVE: Yes, and then he later came East and he was being sort of taken in hand by a Quaker group here through the Friends Service Committee.

NASH: How did he get a visa? Was it hard to come to the United States?

SIVE: Well, I think there were various organizations involved and it was arranged through, I can't say specifically what organizations, but I imagine they were various socialist groups that did this and various contacts whom they had here. I can't tell you specifically who signed our affidavits and that sort of thing. Did you have another question?

NASH: No. So later on, how long did it take before he sent for your family?

SIVE: Well, then somehow later on that fall of 1941, there was a chance for my mother and myself to get on a boat that was going to leave Sweden and travel to South America and receive passage through all the minefields, and so on, that were all through the Atlantic Ocean because, of course, it was in wartime. We left in the middle of November of 1941 and I really think the best way to describe that trip, if you would like, I could read this little essay that my mother wrote, I think, very shortly after arriving here. Well, considering she was very new to the English language, I think it is really...

NASH: How old was your mother at the time?

SIVE: She was younger than I am now, forty-seven. She died rather young, also. But I can just, should I do that? I can do that fairly quickly. I can try to maybe skip over some of it or improve some of the obvious errors. We left Sweden the 15th of November. It was the city on the western coast of Sweden, Goteborg or Goteborg, whatever they call it. We, I have to get my glasses out, we left from Goteburg and after three days, excuse me just a second, after three days we had our first stop in Kristiansand, Norway. There we had the German control. It took only a few hours, but we had to stay there the whole night during the blackout. Apparently, our captain, excuse me, gave the German officer a whole lot of scotch and they took a very cursory look at the ship, I am interpolating a little bit here, the captain was so pleased that afterwards he invited all the passengers to

share some champagne with him. He told the whole story and we had a very gay evening. The next day when we were crossing the North Sea the real danger began. For many hours we had to test the new complicated life dresses and for the next ten days we had to go to bed with our clothes on every night for three nights until we reached the Faroe Islands. I have some recollection of those. They are very bleak looking as I recall. Something like Iceland. They must be in that area. We had storms. In the Faroe Islands the English control came on board. The whole ship, the Swedish crew and the fifty passengers welcomed the English officers with great enthusiasm. After several hours we left this harbor. We were all very happy not to be forced to stay there the night because the German planes with their bombs were coming over nearly every night. We went on towards the Atlantic and now began a terrible storm which continued for ten days uninterrupted. Well, she doesn't go into details here, but in her diary, which is in German and which she kept almost everyday, she describes the storm in a great deal more detail, and I remember that it was just incredible. It was sort of a combination freight and passenger boat that we were on and it was really just a light little thing and it was just bouncing and the waves were way higher than the boat, and I spent most of the two weeks I guess laying flat on my back. And I recall on the tables they had kind of partitions all the way...

NASH: Oh, to hold the plates?

SIVE: Yes, and everything would keep sliding back and forth and it just seemed endless. The trip, I guess, did take three or four weeks and most of that time, two weeks

of that time was just miserable weather. I suppose it was wartime and everybody there was happy to be going to the United States, which to every person growing up in Europe, at least at that time, was the land of dreams and so on and away from the war.

NASH: What sort of people, I mean from what countries did they...

SIVE: You mean the other passengers? Well, there were some other Austrians that I recall and Germans. Several people were Jewish. You know, Jewish refugees. There was one, really the only other person who was near my age was an American boy actually who had been to visit relatives in Norway. He was of Norwegian parentage and was just coming home and, of course, also having no idea that by the time he got home we would be at war. But by and large, they were I guess refugees from central Europe. Either political or religious refugees.

NASH: Why did your mother keep the diary in German and also write something in English?

SIVE: Well, I think after she came here, I don't remember whether, I think she took English lessons with someone. I don't believe she had ever studied English in school. You know, French was the more common language, certainly in her time, and I suppose this was an exercise she did for, maybe her teacher told her to do it, I really don't know, but I am awfully glad I came across it. I'll just continue. There are just another few lines here. We were talking about the storm which continued uninterruptedly for ten days.

After the storm it became warmer and warmer. This was as we were going towards the Caribbean. We got a small swimming pool on deck and enjoyed it several times a day. Finally we saw land. It was Puerto Rico and through the field glasses we could see palms, fields, mountains, small houses, and camouflaged hangars. Soon American planes were coming and crossed closely over the ship. We traveled through the Caribbean Sea with a certain amount of fright, knowing of the famous hurricanes there, but this time we were lucky and during the four days until we reached Colombia, the sea was quiet and kind. It became so hot that most of the people spent the whole nights in deck chairs on the deck. I recall that. (she laughs) That was a lot of fun.

NASH: How was it that they saw Puerto Rico but they were going towards Colombia, South America?

SIVE: Yes, I don't know, I haven't got a map. I don't know, that must be the...

NASH: That doesn't seem like the most direct route to me.

SIVE: I am not really that up in the geography down there. With five days delay we finally reached the South American coast and one evening we went on shore in Barranquilla, Colombia. A week before our arrival at Barranquilla, the United States entered the war. Of course, and that was about two days before saw land, before we passed by Puerto Rico, of course, we listened to the radio night and day and were quite excited, chiefly about this enormous event but also about our own uncertain destiny. We

didn't know anything because the ship didn't receive any radio messages, but finally we were allowed to land at Barranquilla. During the voyage all the people, the crew and the passengers, made friends with each other and so the farewell was very hard. We arrived late in the evening and after several hours we could ride to the hotel which was situated a little outside the town. It was an incredible, the contrast, you know, after going through those minefields and this horrible storm and then winding up in this fantastic luxury hotel, I mean...

NASH: I may have been in that hotel. I have been to Barranquilla.

SIVE: Oh really?

NASH: Yes, what was the name of the hotel?

SIVE: I don't remember, but I have some snapshots at home and I recollect it. Really, it was just outside of town. Well, I don't know if it's really as elegant as I remember it, but, you know, it was a luxury type place. And...

NASH: How did the people receive you there? I mean the people who lived in the city or in the hotel?

SIVE: Oh, I don't think we had anything to do. It was just a place to stay until, because everybody on that boat was hoping to get to the United States. But then I guess things

had to be straightened out to get transportation and so on, and we were there about two or three days. And I remember, we thought well, you know, we might have to stay there until the war is over or something because...

NASH: Did you see anything else of the city?

SIVE: No, no. I just sort of remember walking around. Oh, I remember going to some nightclub or something one night, or a restaurant. But it was just so strange, it was just, well, I think, you know, it is very different anyway seeing it under normal circumstances would seem very sort of exotic. That is why we go to places like that, to see something that is different, but I think particularly with the stress that the whole group had been under. It was unreal. Well, she continues here about the, are you getting to the end of your tape or something, we drove through the streets with their southern voices, well, colored people. Sometimes we smelled a strong scent of exotic flowers, always so strange the difference between the land and the land we had left was so big that we believed we were dreaming. The hotel was a continuation of this dream. We bought a great many bananas and that was unreal because that was something we never saw in Europe.

NASH: I have heard that from a lot of people about bananas.

SIVE: Yes, that's another thing. I have told my children how when I was a little girl we would get one orange and split it three ways, my mother, my father, and myself, and that

was, you know, maybe once in a blue moon. Well, they can't imagine, it can't be so. We bought these bananas for almost nothing and I guess that was one of the amazing things. I remember also about pineapple. We had never even seen pineapple. That was something that came in a can or a jar. During the next days we inspected the town and had much trouble getting our papers in order. It was awfully hot although it was the coldest time in this country. Up to the last, our departure hour was uncertain. Nobody knew it and when the American boat, nobody knew if and when the American boat would come. Nobody knew if it would be allowed for us to set foot on it. We prepared ourselves to bear it if we were forced to remain sometime in Barranquilla. This was a horrible idea because I myself had enough of this heat and the whole southern life. One evening after three days we suddenly got the message that the ship had arrived and we should go on her in two hours. Happily we drove to the harbor and there lay beautiful white and big Santa Rosa. This was a Grace Line ship, ready to take in all these hunted human beings and to bring them to the land of freedom. I thought it was nice the way she ended it.

NASH: Do you have yourself other memories of the ship that you would like to talk about?

SIVE: Well, the ship that we took from Barranquilla to, well, it was blackout conditions and I believe we must have travelled third class or something because I don't believe I even saw the deck. I think we were just crammed in there, but it was only three or four days and we were so happy to be on our way and it was a much larger boat and it

wasn't as stormy so really compared to the other trip it was the most comfortable ride, although I don't know if it was steerage or what, but it was pretty primitive conditions and we were so tickled to arrive here. And then I remember getting up early in the morning the day we were supposed to arrive in New York Harbor because, you know, I didn't want to miss this fantastic experience and seeing the Statue of Liberty and all that, and, you know, you hardly see the Statue of Liberty when you arrive. I know I've had better views of it. From the ferry you can see it and when you are flying into New York sometimes you get really good views of it, but the pictures that you see in the, you know, in Europe that I had seen as a child was when it was first built before all the skyscrapers were there, so it was really quite disappointing. I thought, you know, it would dominate the skyline and instead, you know, you saw the skyline of the skyscrapers downtown here and everything, which also was so familiar, but it wasn't at all dominated by the Statue of Liberty. And then, well we docked, wherever the Grace Line ships dock, and this was on December 16, of 1941. We had left Barranquilla on the 13th. It was three days. And I remember, well, I suppose whatever formalities there were to go through with Customs and Immigration and then we were told we would have to be taken to Ellis Island. That was a tremendous blow and I remember being led off the boat and onto the pier and there was some kind of a fence and I could see my father on the other side of the fence. Then they took us over to Ellis Island, on I don't remember what kind of a boat. My recollections of Ellis Island are this huge hall, I don't know, two or three stories high with sort of wooden benches, and that was the dayroom or something. I have since read stories of mental hospitals and I guess they have dayrooms. I don't know, if they look something like that they are pretty miserable. And there were attendants going up and

down handing out needlework and various things to keep the people busy because there was nothing to do but to just sit around. This was in the days before TV, right. And then the evening meal was at some ridiculous hour like four o'clock in the afternoon, and after that you were taken up to your room which was sort of like a gallery around and off of that there were rooms with maybe six beds or something like that. Very, just very bare kind of rooms.

NASH: Who stayed in the room with you?

SIVE: Well, I know my mother and I. I imagine several other women. I really don't remember who exactly. You know how it is on a boat trip. Everybody says, oh, you know, we'll get together and so on, but I lost touch very quickly with everybody who had been on the trip and I certainly don't know any of them now. And then they locked the door on you at night.

NASH: In that room?

SIVE: Yes, yes.

NASH: At what point did they tell you why you were at Ellis Island?

SIVE: Well, I understood, I don't know when they told us. I imagine the Immigration people who were at the pier must have decided that my mother was a German, well, I

think we were both stateless. I know I was stateless. I had no valid passport except they had so-called stateless passports, and I imagine my mother had the same, but she had been, as far as the Immigration Service was concerned, I guess they felt she might be a German national and this was nine days after Pearl Harbor, so naturally they were going to take the safe course. And I had been born in Germany, as I told you earlier, although that was sort of accidental, and so that is why we were taken. At the time we were taken there we didn't know how long we were going to spend there, and it was basically a jail. I don't think there is any other place where they lock the door on you when you are put to bed.

NASH: What was your mother's reaction to all this?

SIVE: Well, how she stood it, I really don't know because I've often thought that she was really a very strong woman and when I have thought about her life, the kind of life that she had been brought up, and this goes back to before World War One when her, she grew up in a very middle-class well-to-do family in Vienna and she spent her summers on the Adriatic Sea and had a lot of fun. She was really brought up to a life of leisure and instead of as she got older her life becoming easier for her, it really just became harder and harder, but she had a tremendous amount of strength I guess and I suppose I was there and she felt, you know, she couldn't let me down and collapse in front of me and I think any mother or any parent would feel that way when you have a younger person that you are responsible for or your own child. But very fortunately, my father and some friends of his who were here and who sort of helped him out, got a lawyer busy on our

case and we were released the following day, and I have a feeling it was towards evening. so we must have been there just really a little over twenty-four hours. But I guess it is the only night I have ever spent in jail. (she laughs)

NASH: Were you able to go outside the next day while you were there? Did they permit you to go outside at all to get some fresh air?

SIVE: I don't recall anything about the outside there. Of course, it was December so the weather may have been very bad. I just remember lining up in some dreary halls for these meals that were all starch, you know, typical institutional meals. It was a real letdown because we had just thought well, this was going to be the end of all the travels and trials and then to have it end that way, it was just a downer. But I have no recollection of the outside or the launch or whatever they used to carry us back and forth, and I have always had the feeling that it was a very untypical experience I had, you know, having been at Ellis Island, because as I told you earlier before we started taping, Ellis Island had its heyday, I guess in the early 1900s. I don't know when it was phased out. Sometime in the '50s or so was it?

NASH: Yes, well, that's it, they closed it in '54 really.

SIVE: '54. And I don't know who they were, other people there. And there were people there, I guess, for long periods of time. I suppose people who couldn't be deported or whatever. I don't really know who they were. We and there were some

others from our boat who were put over there, but, you know, we just stayed a day or two and then were able to get out. Oh, I know, a few years ago there was a book published about Ellis Island and I looked at that and I didn't think it was very good really. I won't mention the author, but, what? No, I don't think that was it. But there was no indication of the type of experience I had that anything like that had ever taken place. On the other hand, I have been over to your museum at the Statue of Liberty. I took my little boy over there because he is willing to listen to me once in a while and I wanted to see the Museum of Immigration, and it describes, of course, the various procedures when people were checked for all kinds of diseases and so on. Well, they weren't doing that to us because for one reason, for one thing, I guess, when Ellis Island was in its fullest type of operation they were getting a lot of people from very poor circumstances in Europe and here they were dealing with a more middle-class kind of group, I guess. But I don't recall any of this medical exams and so on.

END SIDE ONE

BEGINNING SIDE TWO

NASH: What happened when you got to New York?

SIVE: You mean after...

NASH: New York City after you left Ellis?

SIVE: Oh, well, we got on a train for Philadelphia and, as I indicated earlier, my father was sort of under the wing of a Quaker group outside of Philadelphia, and we went down there and this was just before Christmas, and were able to stay. They had kind of a home or sanctuary kind of thing and it was a large group that they operated for. This sort of, what do they call this immigration, sort of intellectual type refugees, and we spent, I guess several weeks there, just through the holiday season and so on, and then got jobs and so on. And I started college in the fall of 1942 and eventually my parents moved to New York and that's where they remained until they both died in '53, so that's the end of the story.

NASH: Is there anything else that you would like to say about immigration or your experience?

SIVE: I don't know. I can't think of anything now. It's there something, you know, I think I have talked quite a lot.

NASH: Okay, thank you very much.

SIVE: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW