

NPS-39/ALBERT BETTEX

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NASH: It is January the 15th, 1974 and I am at the Katherine Ingels Center on West 73rd Street in New York City. The Katherine Ingels Center is a place where senior citizens come and learn and spend the day and I am speaking today with a member, Mr. Albert Bettex. Mr. Bettex came to this country in 1920 at the age of thirty. He came from Vevey, Switzerland. And Mr. Bettex is going to tell us how it happened that he came to the United States. Mr. Bettex, tell me something about Vevey.

BETTEX: Vevey is a city at Lac Lemman, Lake of Geneva and yes, it was born for the factory in Nestle, a big chocalatier and is very known. The climate is very good. It is not so cold. Everything is (?) and a very nice place. I make my school, my schooling in Vevey at age seven, eight. I lose my father and that will, that send me to Germany to learn German. I went in

institute in Germany when I learn German for one year. I was very strict, very German, like German training, military training and I was fix up. After I came back here I came back to Zurich, when I learn mechanic, apprentice as mechanic in a big factory near (?), Zurich. That after (?) I went to (?). I was working about two, three years when after which I fired, we decided to come back to United States. I had two choices, I could get a big job in the mountain for railroad, but I spoke with the company that told me to go to United State. You can learn something and come back to us because we take you every times. I decided to come back. I take my tickets. We drove to Rotterdam and I sail was in September, boat to New York.

NASH: What do you remember about the trip?

BETTEX: The trip was very laborious and we make, I don't know exactly, but this time was very sick, very... We have a group of immigrant on the boat and I get some pictures. We have a very nice time and everything was very nice. And we get seasick. We were singing, I felt happy. I came here in New York, but accidentally when I come here in New York, we landed, the boat come in Hoboken. We go out of station, we couldn't speak English, nothings, but we go out of station and we look for a taxi. We said we want New York, New York. Just said no, there is no New York here and we were surprised. They take us, the taxi to ferry boat and we landed, we had the address to go and see at 53rd Street. The old French YMCA. From here we stayed in New York, we are visiting, we have money to stay because we both

got a hundred dollars with us...

NASH: You had a hundred dollars with you?

BETTEX: Yes, hundred dollars. But this time was very big money. And we are looking for job, but was impossible to get a job near.

NASH: Why was it impossible?

BETTEX: Because we couldn't speak English, we just came. And one time they said that they give the address to go to a restaurant. A restaurant Broadway to wash the dishes. And we came in and the manager take a look at us and speak a little bit us and invite me at the table and offered me a lunch, a (?). But he said, "You are no man for a dishwasher." They give me an address, a mechanic, work as mechanic in a factory and my friend as draftsman in an office. We could keep going, as it was just to keep going. We stay two, three years in the YMCA and learn English and slowly we know New York a little better.

NASH: At what time did you decide that you wanted to stay here permanently?

BETTEX: Down in New York, I didn't want to stay in New York. We wanted to go California or some place else. And slowly I get with the Swiss Company, Swiss Society. We have a club and I meet a lady younger, younger

and Swiss when I meet my wife. When I get married it was the start I stay in New York.

NASH: When you were here you joined a Swiss Society in New York?

BETTEX: Yes, it was a Swiss Benevolent Society. We help the old people, it was the young people? Sixty, sixty five Street, Sixty Six Street.

NASH: West?

BETTEX: No. The house is for Swiss girls, that take care, the Swiss girl got taken care. It is a Swiss home. It still exists here.

NASH: East or West?

BETTEX: West, west, yes. And after I get, I met a friend, I was in school with him in Switzerland when he introduced me with Brooklyn Edison.

NASH: With what? I'm sorry.

BETTEX: With Brooklyn Edison. And I start as draftsman and I stay on it until I get acquainted with the system from here and I learn a lot of the power plant business. And meet some engineer, when after they invite me to go back to New York. They gave me a higher job in New York, a little better

job as engineer and designing. I start my profession here in New York. I get, I learn, I went to school, technical school, (?) electric engineer when I took all the course in engineer society. When I learn (?) because there was not a power plant. It was something special. I learn very quickly and afterwards I go job to job in New York all the time because when we have power plant, it's all the job is only for two, three years. So the power plant is finished. But, I keep the time, I was all the time busy. I get job all the time. I could get every kind job. And afterwards, there come the depression, very bad in October, 19, was it, 30. Everybody was out downtown there was crash. Everybody loose money. It was so bad that I could stay out of a job now. I saw the situation very bad, but I decided to go back to Switzerland. I back with my family. I liquidated everything I had here. I had a relation in Staten Island who took care of a little of my stuff. And I went to Switzerland and stayed. I had permission to stay two years with my passport.

NASH: Who gave you the permission? The United States?

BETTEX: Yes. The passport is only, I could stay two years in Switzerland.

NASH: So, by this time you were an American citizen?

BETTEX: Yes, I was American citizen at this time.

NASH: What did the people in Switzerland, your friends and family think when you came back? How did they react?

BETTEX: They was glad I came back because I come back with my children already. It wasn't a very good place I live in. I liked education that was very good, so. That was very good. When I came to Switzerland I was all time Swiss in Switzerland because Switzerland do not recognize American. We are, in Switzerland we cannot get protection from American Consulate (?). I was three weeks in Switzerland when by surprise I get all my uniform, military uniform because I was soldier before. I was at underground border. I get everything, gun ammunition, everything.

NASH: What year was this? The year?

BETTEX: The year was (?) can't imagine what it was. I stay because Switzerland, American, Swiss American, can stay, but they are not allowed to purchase uniform and I was, after one year I was to get inspection to wear uniform, but I didn't wear it because I would lose my citizenship. I stay like that...

BETTEX: So you didn't go into the army?

BETTEX: No, no, I didn't put the uniform on. I would now have to vote.

I had to be very careful because if I use the Swiss, then I will lose my citizenship. They are very strict. I want to get to consulate, (?) American consulate, to come back to the United States. I keep hear they are in communication with Washington that I could get, I need information from Washington. Or the Consulate says, American Consulate, say it is best to go back on the next boat when they took the payment.

NASH: This was how long? Did you stay in Switzerland the second time?

BETTEX: I stay three years, three, four, three years.

NASH: And what made you decide to go back to the United States? Why did you decide to go back?

BETTEX: Because I would lose my citizenship. I have to protect my children. My children was born here too. My wife was citizen too. And I came back here and I have no difficulty to get a job. I get a job very quickly because I was known and everything went alright. I still going to school, so, then after I worked in Philadelphia. I was worked Philadelphia, everything. I (?) engineer cause concern. I work at the Brooklyn Edison, (?) station on East River station, steam corporation, when I was lucky because after they call me back again to finish the station.

NASH: You mentioned before that many Swiss people stay in Switzerland...

BETTEX: Swiss lads, we are very patriotic. We love our country and are very sad that we go out. It's only very like myself see the country as (?), you are not lad and so and so. The French Swiss, I am a French Swiss because I was in Lucerne, the French part of Switzerland. Here in New York we are maybe about forty, fifty thousand Swiss, German Swiss. But French Swiss, very few, only a few other. I rarely meet a French Swiss because French Swiss is like the French, Frenchmen. They love their country and the Frenchmen never stay here in the United States. They go all the time back. Just the (?) with their thin business, want to stay here. We are the same, we love our country and we come back again. But I love New York. I like New York, I love the business in New York. When I left Switzerland I came alone and here I was a little lonesome so because I get not so much money to spend. I enjoy my skating, ice skating. When I show up at the ice, the auto club, skating club in Brooklyn or Manhattan club here and I concentrate on my skating, my free time was only in skating. Sometimes I went before the job. Six o'clock to practice my skating.

NASH: Did you skate a lot in Switzerland?

BETTEX: No, I skate like everybody because Switzerland, it is all the English people, American people, never see so many Swiss people at this time. They are all skiing. They are all skiing. I learn my skating. I pass my test and I learn all the dancing on the ice and everything so I could make all the dancing, but I get trouble with my foot and I should stop a little bit. But I keep on and keep going.

NASH: Do you still skate?

BETTEX: I just don't skate, my age. I go sometimes, when before I come here I cross the park where they are skating in the park. And they skate artificial skating rink.

NASH: Tell me, do you think of yourself as Swiss and also American?

BETTEX: We have two country. It is the same like, yes. The trouble, you see, now in Switzerland my family was stay in Switzerland. One year I get trouble because I couldn't get communication. It was about three or four years, out of my family here alone. And I get the permission to send only hundred dollar. They allow me a hundred dollar and they are very strict. They check my correspondence, everything during the war.

NASH: Which war? The Second World War?

BETTEX: The Second War. Very strict for us. And when I sent a telegram to my boy, happy birthday, they call me in immigration. They check me, is that good. They check everything that recognize was correct, the birth certificate, the telegram. That was all. But they check everything.

NASH: Did they call you to Ellis Island? Did you have to go to Ellis Island?

BETTEX: No, I go downtown, was special office for the check.

NASH: Did you have any other kinds of trouble like that?

BETTEX: No, my boy was still in Switzerland and like Swiss, you have to go into the army, the Swiss Army. I want to come back, but it was impossible because France, (?) I get to consulate which got to everything they could make. But, he went to the Swiss Army. Lucky he was with the Swiss which had a ski club, the ski troop in Switzerland and it wasn't so bad because he go out on the mountain with the ski and it wasn't so bad. But he (?), when I get permission to bring my family here I get trouble with my boy and I get a law that they could do nothing. He had to come back to the United States as immigrant. He come here because he was an immigrant. They want to keep him in Ellis Island, but

when I came on the boat, a very old Rotterdam boat, Hoboken, at that time, Hoboken, my daughter came to me with a copy as American citizen, my wife too, but my boy had to check as immigrant.

NASH: Did he have to stay at Ellis?

BETTEX: (?), but after the law, he wasn't (?) when he get his citizenship back again.

NASH: Oh, he did?

BETTEX: Yes, but that is (?). It's born.

NASH: So, now he is considered a naturalized citizen?

BETTEX: Yes, I think so. He is a natural. He is born American.
(?) I didn't get trouble. I think everything was all alright.
And one time I was skating in Central Park when the ladies came to me who said, because during my time here I show at the Visual Art School for Sculpture or for painting, and she told me, "I heard you are a sculptor. You made some sculpture." I said, "Yes, but I cannot work at home because of two-family house, but I can't do work. Make too much noise." Then she told me here,

in the Katherine, in this building. And I stay, I pass, I get interview, you know, who it is, would you like me to come to (?), but the last question I interview was religion and I said to the ladies, "I am sorry, I don't think I pass here because I am no Jude, I am a Christian." They said, "No, we will welcome you, you are good, we will like it if we think everybody like it, you can stay." I already two or three years here, but of I have a lot of (?) everyday here I work on my sculpture and I make about twenty piece of sculpture now. I get on exhibition here and the trouble, I cannot liquidate my stuff, I get so mad, but my wife, "Why don't you want to do with all the stuff?" But, I keep going. Sometimes I have to finish or sometimes I get a chance to sell my stuff, yes. Because some are very good.

NASH: Have you sold some?

BETTEX: No, but Miss Barber, the instructor here said I could sell that piece at the next exhibition here I get a few pieces more (?) dollars I could get more if I want.

NASH: Oh, wonderful. Well, best of luck Mr. Bettex. Thank you very much for the interview.

BETTEX: Yes.

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END OF INTERVIEW