**Kathy**: Good afternoon. This is Kathy Norton for the National Park Service. I'm a student intern and Bachelor’s degree candidate from New York University School of Continuing Education.

Today is Monday, August 8th, 1994 and I'm in the recording studio of the Ellis Island Oral History Project with Erich Meyerhoff who is the archivist emeritus of the Frederick L. Airman Medical Library of New York University Medical Center and the retired director of the Cornell University medical college library.

Mister Meyerhoff came to America from Germany in 1935 when he was 15 years old. Welcome Mr. Meyerhoff. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth please?

**Erich**: It’s Erich E. R. I. C. H Meyerhoff that’s M-E- Y- E- R- H- O. double F. And I was born on November 24th, 1919 in Braunschweig, Germany.

**Kathy**: What size town was Braunschweig?

**Erich:** Braunschweig was at that time a town of about 30,000 inhabitants. It had a somewhat unusual history. It was not one of the Hansa cities but it was for a long time an independent city and therefore was not part under the Prussian Administration.

**Kathy**: You say it has an unusual history. I'm curious about that. What do you mean by the word unusual?

**Erich**: Well, It was governed for a long time by Henry the lion and he was actually buried there in the church. It was the one of the first cities after World War One that had a totally communist government. It was also one of the first cities that had a completely Nazi government and I think that was in 1928 or 1929.

If it were not for Braunschweig, Hitler would not have been able to participate in the elections of 1933 because he was not a German citizen, he was an Austrian citizen and he received a state position through the governor of Braunschweig. There was he got his German citizenship and therefore was able to run in the elections of 1933.

**Kathy**: Can you describe the town? What did it look like?

**Erich**: The town is a typical mediaeval German town. It is surrounded by a river actually totally surrounded by river, the Oka. That made a natural fortification. The town had typical mediaeval a buildings. Streets were very small, they were narrow and you could hardly see the sky because the houses were built in such a way that they would come forward into the trees from one story to the next.

Outside of the river was then the new development of the town and it had the some significant industries. Among them was a very large factory making trucks, Bussing and that later on became the Hermann Gorring works. It also was known for its agricultural products which came from the immediate neighborhood and so there were quite a number of canning factories in town or in the immediate facility.

All sorts of vegetable and fruits were canned there especially white asparagus that was known around the country really around the world. It was also known for the fact that Till Eulenspiegel spent a certain amount of time in the city and he was a baker's apprentice. As you know he was a jolly fellow and he tried to make fun of everything and during his apprenticeship, he made the monkeys instead of bread.

There is and still is today a fountain where he sits in the middle and is surrounded by these monkeys. It also of course is known for its cold cuts especially Liverwurst which is known as Braunschweiger to this day. Finally for a non-alcoholic drink that was made of malt mostly called the Mumme, M- U- M- M- E. and I don't know whether that's still being made or not. It was a very thick and sort of sweet drink. A little bit like the dark malt that that you get from Mexico and other places.

**Kathy**: Tell me about your home.

**Erich**: Well, my father was initially in a joint business and wholesale fruit and vegetables with his father and his brother and his sister.

**Kathy**: What was your father's name?

**Erich**: My father's name with Karl, K-R and he was born in the small city where my grandfather lived outside of Hildesheim. The place was called Bockenheim and he went to school there, basically through elementary school and partly through a kind of high school that they had there. But then they all moved to the largest city, which was Braunschweig and they had this business together.

Eventually from the time on that I can remember they had all split up. My grandfather continued the business on his own with his daughter and my father and his brother Theodore. They all established their own businesses in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business.

Around 1927, my father went into a partnership with a man named Heine, H- E- I-N- E. and third they started the canning factory. That was known as Heine and company. My uncle, my father's brother continued in the wholesale business and my father tried to get my mother to continue the wholesale business as well. She was very unhappy in that.

Anyway, there were 3 boys. I was the oldest. I was born in 1919 in that November. My brother Alfred was also born in Braunschweig in 1920 on December the 10th and my third brother, Hans Peter was born on September 20th 1925.

So, it was my father, my mother, my brothers and various aides as was not uncommon in those days that constituted the household.

**Kathy**: Can you describe your father's personality for me?

**Erich**: Well, my father was a very busy man. Although he would come home regularly for lunch every day, he would take the walk from the factory which was a good20 minutes’ walk away. He would have lunch, he would go to sleep for an hour and then usually he would meet with his brother, Theodore somewhere else and they would walk back because Theodore's apartment and his business was not too far away from where my father had the factory.

He was very interested in that we should succeed in school. I think you're collectively all of our remembrance of him initially was that the he was a pretty stern fellow. I don't know that we had a very warm kind of relationship with my father and my mother was an extremely kind person and although she occasionally had flare ups of temper they subsided very quickly and we all remember her very fondly.

I didn't really make a real peace with my father and I didn't recognize his real accomplishments until he himself had come to the United States. It was really shortly before I myself was the drafted into the army that we had some reconciliation. I don't know that that ever happened with either one of my brothers. We still talk about this process.

**Kathy**: You say that it was a period of time before you made peace. What was the difference between yourself and your father? Did it have to do with your father's attitude towards his work?

**Erich**: We all spend some time working in the factory, all of us. I don't know about Peter, whether he did. But certainly my brother Alfred and I were there and we spend part of our vacation somehow working in some capacity in the factory.

Of course my father was one of the bosses and there was a good deal of respect for him. I think he was as I said he was very interested in how we were doing with our education. That was all part of the problem of being Jewish in this town. Among other things I would say that Anti-Semitism was almost endemic in Braunschweig.

So that we very very early on saw the Brown Shirts, the Nazis, march in mass numbers through the town and they're yelling and so on and I myself during the time that I went to school I was beaten up a couple of times. I was rescued by somebody a man that was driving a wagon with horses by and he brought me home but so the emphasis was that you had to do more than just drift along.

His classic statement was that in our class especially later on in high school, we were seated according to our grades. So that those that had the best grades were all the way away from the teacher and those that had the worse grades were right in front of the class.

My father used to say well you don't have to be the first but you got to be among the first ten. Eventually before I immigrated I did achieve that and that was the best shot that I had at it. He would try also to help us for example with Math. This was later on when I was in high school.

I remember that it was an utterly frustrating experience because my father was not necessarily a patient man and he would expect you to be able to follow his pedagogy and if you didn’t he gave up and there was a feeling of some defeat about some of these exercises. So it wasn't that he wasn't involved with us.

He would take us out on walks and we would go on bicycle trips with him. It was later that I felt that mostly when I was already here in the United States and perhaps even earlier that we had very sharp political differences.

People had very divided attitudes about many, many things. You couldn't escape. There was no way of escaping being Jewish and my father identified very closely with the Jewish congregation in the town. On the other hand he was also a leading member of the Jewish war veterans and the war experience for him was also a very significant one.

My mother who came from the south basically came from an environment where the people were very sympathetic to the socialists and during the 70s, 80s and 90s, particularly during the time of Bismarck the socialists on the smallest excuse were jailed for whatever because they were basically for a democratic Germany because Germany was a monarchy at that time. You would have some conflict there.

I must say that already in the early days certainly in the 30s my own political leanings were definitely to the left. Now as I say and perhaps implied also through my mother's influence, we went to an elementary school both my brother and I that was an experimental school. We were not asked to learn by rote as was the case in the regular schools.

By and large we had very fine teachers and connected with that. That was also very unusual. That was a sort of a summer camp. It was actually on a farm and the classes would go there for 2 weeks. We were out there on the farm and they were instruction in Botany and we learned something about the surroundings there that was a territory where there were still some old castles and the Robber Barons had been around there.

That was all very progressive and that was not something that was really available in other schools. So that my father I agreed for us to go there, that was as sort of a progressive side of him. You wouldn't have expected that.

**Kathy**: I want to take you back for a moment to something that you mentioned. I want to ask you what it was like for you growing up as a boy in Braunschweig. You mentioned the other boys the Brown shirts, I think was the term that you mentioned. There was a lot of are certainly a lot of diversity there and how did how did that feel as a boy growing up in the midst of it.

**Erich**: It was always a frightening experience you had to, you were on your guard. You were prepared in some ways to be confronted with anger, sometimes with the hatred. That might vary from time to time. It wasn't as though I didn't have other kids my age that we would meet with regularly.

Initially for example we lived in an apartment that was right next to an automobile repair station and the son of the owner, our gardens, I mean the gardens of that repair station and the one for our house were right next to one another. I mean they were just separated by a fence. It was with the son of this fellow that we used to play fairly regularly. There were things to do. You could climb trees.

There was another fellow in the neighborhood that we were friends with. His father was a waiter and there I think either the mother had died or she was divorced. They were divorced. That was another fellow that we played with. In fact, about a year or so ago when my brother Peter went over there he had contact with them and then he started to write to me.

He lived in the very first house we lived with his mother. His father had died. He also was a fellow that that I used to meet with and played with. In the house where we lived there was another family, I don't remember the name but they had a girl, Lisa. She was sort of close to us because my mother and her mother would to come together.

As a matter of fact I think my brother Alfred, they get bathed together. Getting into a bath was a big deal because in the beginning we still had bathtubs where you had to boil water and put that in and then mix it with cold water.

Well, Alfred was in the tub with Lisa and Lisa and noticed that there was some anatomical differences between the both of them. She asked about that and my brother who was basically a very kind hearted person I think so. He said don't worry it’s still going to grow with you. And we carried on I don't know how they got in. We heard about it and we still remember this.

Let's see, in the people that were in my class actually, I don't remember that there was anybody that we were very close with. It wasn't really until I got to high school, high school started when I was 10 years old by the way, that I got to the point where I didn't care anymore and there was one fellow in particular who used to really harass me, I've forgotten his name and finally I broke up and I started a fight with him.

He, in the cause of this, whatever he called me I don't remember what it was but it was definitely an anti-Semitic kind of thing. I managed to land a blow to his ear and he developed a hematoma. So my father was called into the director's office and there were all kinds of complications but basically my father wasn’t unhappy about the cause of events there.

It was within the year or so that I left the school then anyway. I came to the United States. So it was when I was 12 or 13 that this happened.

**Kathy**: Tell me about your mother?

**Erich**: My mother came from the South of Germany. She was born in Offenburg, in Baden. Her father was the cantor of the Jewish community which was of- it was a very small town Offenburg.

She was the last of 5 siblings. She was born almost 10 or 12 years after her last sibling was born. My grandmother was already in her forties and that was considered very unusual in a way to have children that late. It isn't so unusual now but she was the mainly at home alone really.

My grandfather whom I never knew on my mother's side, besides being the cantor was also the teacher. He had what you would call Sunday school that they were regular classes in Hebrew and he was also the ritual butcher in that town. So he had quite a few things to do.

Well, from what I know it was almost the same sort of situation. He was a person that had an irascible temper. Not that that was always the case but it was there. They still kept two kitchens for a kosher household. The whole culture of the southern Germans and the northern Germans are very very different.

The southerners are more like the Italians both in terms of the food that is eaten which is mostly farinaceous kind of food and that also the tempo. There's a different dialect. When my brother and I once visited Munich when we were already I guess we were 13 years old then. We couldn't understand what people were saying, I mean the dialect was so different.

My father and mother met when my father was wounded in the first war and he was hospitalized in a hospital near Offenburg. My mother sang in the choir of the synagogue and he heard her voice that was the story. Anyway he heard her voice, he wanted to get to know her and before long he had courted her and I think they were married. My father went back...

**Kathy**: Mr. Meyerhoff, I'm going to interrupt you for a moment so we can pause while Peter turns the tape okay. This is Kathy Norton and I am with Erich Meyerhoff and Mr. Meyerhoff you were telling me how your father and your mother became acquainted.

**Erich**: Right. They were married and I think it was 1917. I'll have to look it up. But anyway I have the dates some place but then to live my mother had to come North to Braunschweig and the apparently was a really traumatic experience.

As I said my father was very much involved in his business, he tried to make good and he tied to do well. He tried to provide well for his family. All of my mother’s siblings lived in Southern Germany. One of them became a very successful, she really had a dressmaking establishment where dresses were made to order with a fairly sizeable number of employees something like 10 or 15 and she had moved to Mannheim.

Another sister was married to a very successful restaurant owner and chef in Munich. My grandmother was still alive and she then lived with one of her daughters, the one at the restaurant, in Munich. My impression was that the initial years for my mother were very difficult.

I remember particularly a time. It must have been around 1929. We were very small. We lived in the second apartment we were in. My mother was then in a state of what I think was sort of hysterical blindness. She was in bed, she thought she couldn't see us, we came in to her room but she recovered from that.

Basically, she run the household anybody who knew her always remarked what a giving person she was and she was very warm. She was accomplished in the piano, she sang well and she played the guitar. I think early her thought had been that she really would have liked to go to the university and study. Instead however the university was in Freiburg.

My grandfather insisted that she learn a trade. In fact she learned the same trade that her sister who got into this business. She became a seamstress and I still have her diploma I think it's still around and you went through a regular routine, you were an apprentice and then you came to the next level and you finally may have ended up as a master in this. This was the old guild system that you went through. She would fix our clothes and she ran a sewing machine. She was a very kind and basically progressive understanding kind of person.

**Kathy**: Did your mother work while she was raising her family? Did she work with your father in his business?

**Erich**: My father thought that she could do what my aunt who was my uncle’s wife did. That she would be able to continue to run the wholesale business from our apartment and that he would give her somebody to work with her. Well, my mother was everything but she was not a business woman. It was a more than a difficult task for her. It was virtually impossible.

Nevertheless, she tried very much to make this thing go. The result was that the business lost money and that eventually my father saw the light and he gave it up. She is simply was not one that was able to see, as you had to and rather quickly about what the advantages would be In a market situation where basically you are buying wholesale from farmers and you would then sell to some of the year factories basically that produced various fruits canned various fruits and vegetables.

It was in a way a very Anxiety provoking business because between the Buying and Selling that was all you had really and that's where you would manage to make money if you could and yes. She continued for a couple of years. As a matter of fact when my youngest brother was born in 1925 she was still trying to run that business.

**Kathy**: Mr. Meyerhoff who made the decision to come to America?

**Erich**: Well to a large extent it was me and to a very large extent it was a Decision which seemed to be imperative. The reason was that in 1933 after Hitler came to power, as I said my father was part and was a leading member of these Jewish war veterans. It was his idea partly running I think in some ways parallels to all the paramilitary kind of things that went on with the Nazis that if Jews were going to protect themselves they would have to learn how to do that.

That this they would have to learn how to fight with their hands and possibly even with weapons. Although how they thought that was going to come about is still a great puzzle to me. There was a group of young men, I was the very youngest among them basically they were in their 18th, 19th maybe some were 17.

My cousin who was my uncle's son and who also immigrated to the United States Hans was in that group and we would meet regularly we would go out and they March with us and we would run and in general try to improve our physical Status.

We would meet in various places among them a local Vertshuset where people would eat and drink. We had a room there and we would meet and discuss various things. As it happened, the S- A the Nazis got wind of all of this and by sheer miracle my cousin and I were absent the night that they came. This was in 33’ in the fall of 33’.

This was not the police this were the Brown Shirts. They took everybody to the place that they had already occupied with what’s the Socialist newspaper, the Fox Point. They beat them up and one of them had died there. They then took them to another place that they had occupied which was the buildings of the local health insurance Place. They were there and we actually had to bring them food. I remember going there with a couple of metal containers like you would in the army, and they would be brought up to these kids and then when they got through they came back.

In the meantime the Jewish community went to court to try to free these kids. At that time there was still the remnants of some kind of a legal System in Germany as you know that completely disappeared. The judiciary became completely subservient to the Nazis.

Within a few weeks and they even paid some bribes- that is the community paid some bribes to the Brown Shirts there. These kids were released. At that point it was clear that they had to get out of the country because there was no assurance whatsoever that they wouldn't be arrested again. I also saw some of them when they came up to our apartment and we had moved by that time into the last place where we were.

As has become you know fairly common to see these days these people were just totally shaken. They were white. They were fearful they could hardly control tremors that they had. They did succeed in getting all of those that survived out either to Sweden some of them to France.

Basically into various European countries- Sweden and Denmark. Since I was the youngest I was still 14 going on 15 then. There was at that time at the beginning Of an American intervention. It was called the German Jewish children's aid and you have to apply. You had to get the consent of the parents. It wasn't that at that time I was so afraid actually but I thought coming to America would be a real gas to go.

It would be getting out of the house and into a different environment although there was nobody here, I had no relatives here, nothing. It was a long protracted affair. It took nearly a year to get all of the papers finished. I think it was finally in December when I was just past 14 that I got my visa to come to the United States and then at the end of January beginning of February I got out.

When I got here, it was the German Jewish children aid that had responsibility for me. The thing that made it all possible was that the State department Agreed to what was known as Collective visas. That is the visas could be given by what was really a corporate entity which it didn't have to be a situation where visas were given simply on a one on one basis by one person for one person going out.

Since the German Jewish children's aid took complete responsibility for our economic thing, they agreed and this finally came through and that’s how some people got out. In my town some youngsters of my age, there was one person who did come out the same way. He was the son of a local painter, an artist. His name is Earl Langer and he painted rural scenes. He came up with me shortly after and I think he had relatives here in this country that he went to.

**Kathy**: How did you feel about leaving your family behind?

**Erich**: Well, when I first went, I didn't feel that and diminished. The first year here I was home sick a lot. I went around and in those days, Correspondence was really the only way in which you could communicate with anybody. A lot of that went on. I remember being pretty troubled during that first year.

**Kathy**: What did you packed to take with you?

**Erich**: What did I pack...?

**Kathy**: Was there anything special that had had a very special memory for you that you took with you.

**Erich**: I headed with some books. This is the list of the things that went along with me.

**Kathy**: Would you read that for me?

**Erich**: A lot of it is in German and I don't know it might take a lot. There was a box that basically contained shoes. There were 4 brushes in there and there were 5 brushes in there. One of them was a dirt brush and the other were brushes for black and brown shoes.

There was some polishing, three cloths to polish with. There were 3 tins of shoe polish, there was a brush for my clothes that were two mirrors, there was a pair of sneakers. There was one piece of soap and there was something to brush with for the bath.

There was in English dictionary. There were some books among them was a small Jewish encyclopedia called Philo. There was a book on [unclear 00:50:55], there was a book on Art history, there was a book on geometry, and there was a book on algebra.

There was a book on correct spelling. There was a textbook in Latin. There was something for geometry, a little circle. There were pens. There was a sack in which you carried your sandwiches.

**Kathy**: Did you bring any food with you?

**Erich**: Did I Bring food.

**Kathy**: Did your mother make anything special for you to take with you?

**Erich**: No, I think you couldn't do that. There was some medicaments like Aspirin and so on. There was stuff to shave with, a small knife. My skiing outfit came along as with everything, with the Ski shoes. Twenty one socks. [Laughter] Oh well, then shirts and a trench coat and my grandfather's Violin. No, no food.

**Kathy**: Do you play the violin?

**Erich**: I still have the violin. No I don't play. I played the piano for a while.

**Kathy**: From what port did you depart?

**Erich**: I departed from Hamburg and then went over to England to Southampton and from there to the United States, to New York.

**Kathy**: Is there anything that you can tell me about your journey getting to the port? Did anyone from your family see you off?

**Erich**: They must have although I don't remember it. I don't remember seeing somebody seeing me off in Hamburg but I'm sure somebody was there.

**Kathy**: What class did you travel?

**Erich**: There was no steerage anymore but there was third class. That’s how we came and it was a whole group of us. Young kids that came together. We still stayed together for a brief period when we arrived here. I remember that I think the Food that was cooked for us was kosher food. We didn't have a kosher household at home and my recollection is that the Chef had a boat that was the SS Washington.

His name was Guerbet which is the Jewish word for various, salt pepper and so on. I can't think of the word right now. It took us about ten days to make the crossing.

**Kathy**: Can you tell me about your trip? Describe your accommodation. What did you hear, Smell?

**Erich**: Well about that trip is First of all, I'm not that good sailor. While I didn't have to throw up I was really pretty woozy a lot of the time, I felt uncomfortable and remember we crossed the Atlantic in January, Early February which is the worst time of the year you can go.

It's pretty stormy around that time and I remember that. I don't think we saw the sun during the entire 10 days. We were about up at the deck. If it didn't rain it was wet anyhow because the water came over. It also was my first acquaintance with the Americans. There was an American family there with 2 boys and I remember on the ship's list these boys were listed as master. Master so and so. I can't remember the name anymore. The setting of where we ate and so on, that was like a hotel.

There was service and Mr. Geurbets would come out from time to time and ask us how we liked the food and it was also my first acquaintance with Coca Cola which I just found awful I thought they tasted like medicine and I didn't like it.

All of us were busy with the various kind of Self-Learning systems. Something like a Berlitz to try to study the English. The language that I had in high school was really French and Latin. I started off with Latin and French and I would have gotten into English I think the next year. So I tried to get some English under my belt. I didn't get much though.

**Kathy**: And how did you feel when you saw land for the first time?

**Erich**: Well you know my recollection is that we were in quarantine here on Ellis Island. The boat stopped and people from Customs came aboard. There must have been some physicians that checked us out. I have my passport but for some reason there is no indication that we stopped off the last thing.

In other words at later times the immigration service would always stamp my passport when I came back but this time the only thing I have is the immigration Visa number from the consulate in Hamburg.

That was on the 10th of January 1935. The person in charge was Lloyd Yates and he must have been around for quite a while because when I tried to get my parents and my brothers, it seems to me that he was still there in 1939.

**Kathy**: Did anyone tell you why the ship was placed in quarantine?

**Erich**: Yes. I mean they told us that they were concerned about checking out anybody that they might have a disease. I think they might have mentioned tuberculosis or some other communicable disease.

So we will here overnight as I recall it and we saw the lights of the city that night and then the next day we were coming into the harbor in New York and of course I mean in those days as it is now, that was an absolutely fantastic sight.

To see these buildings and to see, I remember looking at the Woolworth building. I think that was the most prominent Building that I saw when we came in and then of course we were leaving the boat and there were people that to receive us.

My recollection was that the Pier, this was the United States line. The Pier was not in the fifties I think. The Pier was down in the twenties I think so in those days. That’s where we got off. And they are not there anymore now. But each line had a pier that was dedicated specifically to that line.

**Kathy**: Okay Mr. Meyerhoff, we’re going to pause for a moment while Peter changes and puts in a new tape. This Kathy Norton for the National Park Service And I'm here in the recording studio of the Ellis Island oral history project with Erich Meyerhoff as we begin tape 2 of our interview on Monday August 8th. 1994.

Mr. Meyerhoff when we left off we were discussing your impressions of Ellis Island when you arrived in America.

**Erich**: Well, my impression was that everything was very bleak. I can't remember whether we were briefly taken off the boat and went on again. I remember these inspectors coming on. Somehow in my recollection is that if we went off and we may have, I don't know what the procedure was then.

That things were extremely bleak here. There were wooden benches somewhere around. They were worn and everything was gray of course it was at night anyway and there were things in there. The impressions, the whole set of up was not exactly inviting as I remember it. We were glad to get back aboard and get into the city the next day.

**Kathy**: Were you frightened? What was your reaction when......?

**Erich**: It wasn't fright. Perhaps the best I could say was it was a disappointment because you come with perhaps totally unrealistic expectations but I think you do, the expectations of what you would see you and so on was they were sort of a friendly welcoming kind.

I think seeing the Statue of Liberty that is impressive. Good, bad, I couldn't read what was written there anyway but it's sort of a massive figure. The big things were really the lights, the lights of the city when you come in. That’s a gorgeous sight.

**Kathy**: You mentioned the mood of being bleak when you got to Ellis Island. How were you treated by the officials at Ellis Island here?

**Erich**: Neither badly nor particularly- I must say they were really matter of fact about it whenever they had to say don’t forget we had an escort. That Person spoke English perfectly, so individually we had very little contact with if any of the Authorities here.

**Kathy**: Did you have to go through any examinations?

**Erich**: Did I go through any examination? You mean that whether we had a physical exam?

**Kathy**: Yes.

**Erich**: I don’t believe so, I don't believe we did. We were examined thoroughly at the consulate in Germany. This was all part of it I just don't know but I don't think that we had a physical exam.

**Kathy**: Were there doctors that came on board the Washington, the ship when you docked at the pier because you had mentioned that the ship had been quarantined. Did the doctors actually go to visit the ship?

**Erich**: I believe they did. Yes

**Kathy**: I see, okay. And what were some of the reactions of your shipmates around you when they saw the lights of the city and when saw the Statue of Liberty.

**Erich**: I think it was a pretty happy, right. They were excited. There was a lot of talking about what was going to happen, where we were going to go and so on but as I said we had an escort with us. A young woman who also spoke German.

**Kathy**: What was the range in age of the persons, or the children? You mentioned it was the German Jewish children aid.

**Erich**: All about the same age. We were 14, 15. I think that’s what it was 14, 15 maybe somebody was 16 but I don't recall that. We were all very much alike in age.

**Kathy**: Where you detained at Ellis Island for any period of time while you came here?

**Erich**: No.

**Kathy**: Okay, when you left Ellis Island is there anything that you can recall outside of the lights of the city? Any experiences that you had where you came into contact with something brand new? You mentioned your experience on the boat with Coca Cola.

**Erich**: I think we had a good breakfast the next day in the morning.

**Kathy**: And where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

**Erich**: That was another thing by the way. It that was very unusual for us was an American breakfast with eggs and things of that sort that. Our typical breakfast consisted of usually some bread with maybe some marmalade on it and then we drank milk. The kids drank milk. My parents might've had Coffee or something in the morning but there wasn't anything elaborate at all.

I mean this this was very unusual to eat that much in the morning. Because you know basically our main meal was really lunch time. That was to hot meal- my father came home and there was very little at Breakfast. Nothing Anyway.

**Kathy**: Where did you go when you left Ellis Island?

**Erich**: We were taken to the, what was then the Clara de Hirsch home. And I arrived there on February 7th 1935. That was on 225 East 63rd Street in New York City and it's now occupied by the Manhattan eye, ear, nose hospital.

It was basically for young Jewish women who were working here, they had. . There was a floor for us. I think it was one floor that they made available for immigrating boys but otherwise it was totally occupied by young women.

We were to be there only for a very short time until we were sent out to foster homes out in the country. Unfortunately I had quite a throat infection already on the boat and when I came off shortly after I developed a fairly substantial temperature and there was a nurse there and her major treatment was to paint my tonsils with iodine.

As a result I developed an iodine burn. The infection got worse and I ended up at Mount Sinai hospital. So that was my very brief stay at the Clara de Hirsch home and I then got into Mount Sinai hospital in the city on 100 streets and I was placed on a ward.

My English was really nonexistent then. However, next to me there was a Turk. A Young, Middle aged Turkish man who spoke French. So it went from me to him, to the doctors and nurses and that’s how we managed to communicate and there were a couple of things that were totally new to me. The last time I'd been in the hospital had been in Berlin in Germany and they had done a mastoidectomy in my ear and it was a Catholic hospital and the sisters wore caps.

The story was that their heads were shaved and that's why they had the caps. I was 4 years and I was dying to get these caps off to see whether they were really shaved. Now at Mount Sinai the nurses by and enlarge where young and they were attractive they looked very well and the guys that were in the ward, they would, there was a banter going on always with and the doctors made rounds. That was another thing.

So there were Maybe 6, 7, 8 interns around Besides the Chief. They would open my mouth. They would feel my belly and so on. Well, it was a time there were no antibiotics and what you did was basically was supportive therapy you got fed well.

They are would watch carefully the infection. They would very, very carefully do something in order to keep that areas more or less free of germs if you could do that. I think I was in there for 4 weeks, gradually getting better.

**Kathy**: And where did you go when you left Mount Sinai hospital?

**Erich**: Then they sent me to recover to a family in Stepney, Connecticut. Stepney is not far from the capital of there. What's the capital in Connecticut?

**Kathy**: I'm afraid you've got me.

**Erich**: Got you too.

**Kathy**: Yeah. It’ll come to me. Actually the family, the man worked in the city.

**Kathy**: Okay

**Erich**: And he came in and he worked for an advertising firm. His name was Bernard and the wife was taking care of the farm. They had a chicken farm. Again for me this was altogether new. She was a blonde woman, very good looking, Jewish.

She took care of the farm and specifically of these chickens. The eggs had to be collected every morning and I remember that I was absolutely terrified that they had to go in there and of course the hens would pick at you because they weren't particularly interested in your taking the eggs out.

So we took the eggs in, they're picking I've being absolutely frightened of the whole process and besides that as you are I couldn't really stand the smell of the place. It was farmland and especially the chicken smell, okay.

Then in the evening we would sit and count the eggs to make sure that they weren't hatching and so on. Then she would bring them into town- Hartford, into Hartford and that they didn't have children themselves. I think that's how this whole thing came about.

I was there for about maybe 10 days. During that time they also took me to a movie and I don't remember what I saw of that then but that was another big experience. I had seen movies but by and large in Germany, kids were just not admitted to movies, period.

You have to be 17 or 18 I think before they let you in except for certain Special occasions. After that I came back to the city and they were trying to make up their minds about Where to place me. That was basically it.

**Kathy**: How did you come to learn English?

**Erich**: I tell you the quickest. The biggest the advance I made is during that summer of 1935 I went to a camp, in the Thetford center, Vermont. It was called Camp Kokatosi and the director of that camp was a teacher named Rothenberg. So there I was with these other kids and I couldn't speak, it wasn’t possible to get anything done speaking German. So I learned English very quickly.

I also liked one of my counselor and a man named Bronstein. He taught us geology and he helped me and believe it or not by the end of that camp period in end of August- there were these color plays.

The camp was divided up into blues and grays and there was competition between the blues and grays and there was also a dramatic presentation for both sides. I wrote the play for our side.

Wrote the play that is by the time the actors get on the stage, they were still handed scripts to read from actually but I had gotten so far that I've felt that I could do this, I could write a play and I did it.

It's the only play that I ever wrote and I've been looking for that it. I've lost it but I remember what it was about. Anyhow that's how I learned English and by the time I got out of camp, My English at least was serviceable.

**Kathy**: Okay. So you stayed with the family in Hartford for a summer while you were convalescing.

**Erich**: No. I convalesced, I got out of the hospital, and I stayed with them for about 10 days. I briefly was with the family in- no, I then went to Brooklyn and I stayed with a family, Michael Rosen in Fifth Street in Brooklyn. That was on March the 20th and from there I went to camp that summer of '35.

**Kathy**: What was your religious life like in America?

**Erich**: Well, I wasn't very religious. Although when I was in Braunschweig, I really at my father's behest, I attended the synagogue and so on. By the time I got here I was really out of that.

The family that I stayed with in Brooklyn for example, they belonged to an ethical culture group. They were Jews but that they also moved into and another direction instead of becoming either orthodox.

They weren't orthodox, they weren’t Rabbi Wei’s free things, they went into ethical culture which basically has no direct connection with Judaism whatsoever. The founder was a Jew but the services. Everything about it has nothing to do with Jewish protocol.

**Kathy**: Did you experience any bigotry or persecution in America?

**Erich**: Not then, no. I was you know already grown, that was much later.

**Kathy**: Did the rest of your family eventually join you in America?

**Erich**: Oh yes.

**Kathy**: Can you tell me a little bit about that process and how you were reunited?

**Erich**: Well as I mentioned to you my father visited me here in the '38 in the summer and went back. He did not think that he was going to move at that time. In December, he was put into a concentration camp and at that point he wouldn't have gotten out unless he had a visa to come to the United States.

From that point on I started to work, I really worked in order to get a visa for my father and for my mother and my brothers. At that time the requirement made for a visa to get to the United States was that you had to have a cautionary fund set aside of $5,000 in order to guarantee in some ways that the people would not become public charges.

I remember there was a young woman, a girl from my town who happened to end up briefly with a family and the name was also Earl Langer as far as I know. The man was some kind of an officer In BVD underwear company. They lived on 63rd street between the Madison Park and a town house.

So I went there and actually under the pretext of visit her and she wasn't there anymore and that I tried to get $5,000 from him. I didn't really need quite that much because I had saved up something like $500, $600, remember this was 1935.

Well I didn't get anywhere with him. He said I can't respond to individual cases. That's why I give money to the United Jewish appeal whatever, out of the country. I still remember getting into that house. I of course got into the wrong entrance and I got in through the kitchen where you know it was like upstairs, downstairs. They were polishing silver there. Then you took me up to the library.

Well, make a long story short, eventually the amount of money required to was reduced to $2000 and this is how it came together. There was a physician in my from my hometown who Give me $500. There was a relative who had come over from Germany. He give me $500. I worked for RKO at that time. They gave me $500 I had $500 that was the $2000 and then the console did give finally in that it was in May of that year.

My father came out of concentration camp in March towards April. He was totally out of his head when he got out for fright. My brothers came In June of that year and my parents made it just in August just maybe a week before war broke out.

They took a flight to Holland and from Holland they took a boat over. Then we found an apartment on 84th street near Broadway and I remember it was a walk up and we all live there together. My brothers and was me and my parents. In the beginning I was the only one that had a job.

**Erich**: As an archivist you're responsible for preserving information. What are your thoughts about the loss of literary and artistic treasures during the war?

**Erich**: Well, that was an incredible tragedy and for whatever motives the archives of the city of Braunschweig, started to put together a series of documents and a kind of a history of the Jews in Germany and particularly for that period during the Nazi regime.

The documents were simply destroyed. The synagogue in Braunschweig was totally destroyed and was burned down. The possessions of individual families were also largely destroyed during that November attack on all of these homes.

I think what needs to be remembered this that there was a kind of, I would almost call it class segregation in the Jewish community in Braunschweig. There was the level of those that were well to do merchants that had often department stores for example.

There were the lawyers and physicians and surgeons. There were the factory owners then, some are very successful. Among them I guess my father. There were merchants, the middle class. Then there were People that still lived in the old town really in a kind of the ghetto.

They were also merchants. Some of them were horse traders which was a common... Of course among those that were either the middle of the upper class, there were gifted people. There was a woman painter, Shaia, who had some national renown actually. They bought art.

In general there was a kind of a tendency I would say if your father was a Jewish banker, he wanted to be sure the son somehow got into an academic professional or say came became a writer, something in the free arts.

**Kathy**: Excuse me Mr. Meyerhoff. We’re going to pause for one moment as our recording engineer flips the tape.

**Kathy**: This is Kathy Norton for the National Park Service and I'm here with Erich Meyerhoff and we were discussing the loss of some of the literary and artistic treasures during the war. Are there any more thoughts that you have on that subject Mr. Meyerhoff?

**Erich**: No, not right now.

**Kathy**: Okay. Are you happy that you came to America?

**Erich**: Oh yes, I mean I wouldn't have survived otherwise. Not only that my family wouldn't have survived and of course there are Members of my extended family that didn't survive. So that there is certainly very good thing, yes.

**Kathy**: Is there anything else about your life in America that you'd like to share with us? Any other thoughts that you might have at this time?

**Erich**: Well, there were many opportunities that I got that I might never have gotten otherwise. For example it was possible for me to get a college education by going to City College and being admitted that. It was possible for me to continue my education because I was in on the GI bill of rights.

Soon it was a traditional way of getting into a better kind of life through education. All of my brothers did well. They all got an education here. They all went to City College and some later that to private universities and they all did extremely well.

**Kathy**: Well Mr. Meyerhoff on that note I suppose this is a good place for us to end this interview. On behalf of the National Park Service and the Ellis Island oral history project, I would like to thank you for taking the time to share the story of your immigrant experience in America. This is Kathy Norton signing off with Erich Meyerhoff on Monday August 8th 1994 for the Ellis Island oral history project.