

**EI-345**

**FRANCES MESSER KOHN**

**BIRTH DATE: JANUARY 22, 1907**

**INTERVIEW DATE: 7/6/1993**

**RUNNING TIME: 59:38**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 8/1994**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 4/2009**

**AUSTRIA, 1913**

**AGE 6**

**PASSAGE ON "THE GEORGE WASHINGTON"**

**PORT OF EMBARCATION: BREMERHAVEN**

**RESIDENCES: VIENNA; VILLAGE IN GALICIA**

**NEW YORK CITY (STANTON ST.); MCKEESPORT, PA**

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service.  
Today is Tuesday, July 6, 1993. I'm in Albany, New York at the home of Frances Kohn. Mrs. Kohn came from Austria in 1913. She was six, almost seven. In another month she would have been seven years old. Anyway, thank you for having me come out.

KOHN: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: And, Mrs. Kohn, can we begin by you giving me your birth date.

KOHN: I was born on January the 22nd, 1907.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

KOHN: In Vienna, Austria.

SIGRIST: Do you, did your mother ever talk about any stories about your birth?

KOHN: Yes, the naming was one of the stories she mentioned. She was going to name me Fannie, but the registrar insisted that she name me Frances, in honor of Franz Josef, who was the emperor of Austria-Hungary at the time.

SIGRIST: So that's how you ended up being Frances.

KOHN: Uh-huh. Correct.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what your parents were doing in Vienna?

KOHN: Well, Dad had a grocery store, and in those days, of course, women were housekeepers. And I suppose Dad was not a businessman. ( she laughs ) He, if the weight was an ounce over, it was okay. He didn't charge for it. ( she laughs ) So I guess he didn't last too long in business, and then decided to leave for America.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

KOHN: Nathan.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me a little bit about his background?

KOHN: Frankly, I don't know too much about Dad's background.

I never met his parents. I understand he came from a very small town, and I guess in those days marriages were arranged. But that's about all I know.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what your Dad's personality was like, as you remember it.

KOHN: Whose personality?

SIGRIST: Your father's personality.

KOHN: He was easygoing, kind. He loved his children, did little chores for them, like polish their shoes every night. It was one of the musts in those days, to have shiny shoes. And he was a help. And, but never a good provider.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl in Austria, can you remember a story about your father, or something that sticks out in your mind, maybe something he did with you or for you.

KOHN: Uh, no. I don't remember. Because he was always at

hand, a helping hand. I mean, if we needed anything, of course, if Mother was busy Dad would do it to help out. But I don't remember Dad too well before he left for America.

SIGRIST: How old were you when he came to America?

KOHN: I really don't know. Time is, seems to run together.

SIGRIST: I suppose, after a while. ( he laughs )

KOHN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, were you, was it soon before you came, or had he been here for a while?

KOHN: Oh, he had been here for a few years.

SIGRIST: I see.

KOHN: And when he left Mother went back to her parents in, I guess it was Austria, but in those days I guess it's still, now it's Poland, but in those days I think it was Austria, a section, I think it's in the northeast, known as Galicia, and they lived there. My grandfather was a veterinarian, and my grandmother was an herbalist.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

KOHN: Yes. And what I remember the grounds was, there was, as we came into the yard in this huge building to the left that was never in. I think it may have been a barn or something, but it wasn't used at the time I was there. It had a thatched roof. Storks would nest on top of the roof. The house in which my grandparents lived had a central entrance, and as you walked in there was these, what do you call those wooden things that you carry water in?

SIGRIST: A yoke?

KOHN: Not a yoke, but there were containers.

SIGRIST: Buckets?

KOHN: Well, high, high buckets.

SIGRIST: Like a cistern, like a water cistern? ( he laughs )

KOHN: Well . . .

SIGRIST: A well? ( they laugh )

KOHN: I don't know. Well, anyway, there were always a couple of them, because that's, we'd have to bring the

water in. There was no such thing, naturally, as running water. And toward the back there was a little room that was for supplies. To the right of the hall was the family room. It had the earthen oven, you know, the kind you see in bakery shops. And it kept the house quite warm in the wintertime. You could even, there was sort of a ledge you could sleep on. And we used that for living purposes, eating purposes.

And there were two sort of cots. One for my grandfather and one for my grandmother. To the left of the main hall was another room with a couple of beds where my mother and I and my brother and sister stayed while we were with my grandparents. Towards the back of the house was an orchard, and I used to climb trees, or try to.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandfather being a veterinarian?

KOHN: Well, the thing that I remember was every year they'd have maneuvers, the army of, the Emperor had maneuvers. And one year they, the horses came down with hoof and mouth disease. Well, they went to veterinarian after veterinarian in the big towns, but they couldn't find the proper medication for them.

And there was a man there, he says, "Oh, I know a man living in this small town. He's pretty good. Just try him." So they called in my grandfather, and he examined the horses. My grandmother made the medication, and he cured them. Well, of course, he had my grandfather up for commendation, and they wanted to give him a commission, they wanted him to come into the army. But my grandfather was very religious, and he declined and said, "The only thing I want is a statement to the effect that I did what I did." Which he got, and that was the end of the story. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What an interesting partnership between your grandmother and your grandfather.

KOHN: Yes. That was . . .

SIGRIST: Like a hand in a glove.

KOHN: That's correct.

SIGRIST: What was your grandfather's name?

KOHN: Uh, Nachman.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

KOHN: N-A-C-H-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: And that would be your mother's maiden name?

KOHN: Oh, his last name was Merkur, M-E-R-K-U-R.

SIGRIST: Nachman . . .

KOHN: Merkur.

SIGRIST: . . . was his name.

KOHN: Correct.

SIGRIST: And your grandmother's name?

KOHN: My grandmother's name was Tova. I know, the fact is that my children and grandchildren, some of them have those names, and have not been changed either. So her name was Tova.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

KOHN: I think Weiss. I'm not sure.

SIGRIST: How would you spell that, because there's a number of ways.

KOHN: Well, I think it would be W-E-I-S-S, but I am not sure.

SIGRIST: And your mother's name, I didn't even ask you this.  
Your mother's first name . . .

KOHN: Was Tema, T-E-M-A.

SIGRIST: And then her married name . . .

KOHN: Her married name . . .

SIGRIST: Would be your maiden name.

SIGRIST: Yes, Messer, M-E-S-S-E-R.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have a good relationship with her  
mother and father?

KOHN: Oh, yes, very good.

SIGRIST: So when you moved into their household, it was an easy  
thing to do.

KOHN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. And, of course, as children, you'd  
always run to grandma, not to Mama.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your grandmother? Can you  
describe her for me?

KOHN: I can't describe her face, but all I can visualize is  
this slender, tall, slender woman and, you know, who

wear those shawls tied, you know, over their heads and tied behind their backs. And that's all I remember, except one time she was chopping vegetables, and I was a child then, you know, trying to grab the vegetables as she was cutting, and she accidentally cut my finger. That's all I can really remember, except she was, we always went to her when we needed something.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you may remember about how she used herbs, or some of the things she made with the herbs?

KOHN: I wouldn't, I couldn't.

SIGRIST: Did she have her own separate room to do that in?

KOHN: Well, I don't remember too much about that. All I know she had that little storage room that she kept as a child. I was too busy running around playing.  
( she laughs ) I didn't.

SIGRIST: Now, is your mother working at this time?

KOHN: No, no. They, Mother didn't do any work in Europe.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your mother's personality for me?

KOHN: Well, Mother, yes, I could describe that very well.

She was very bright. She was, in fact, she was a brilliant woman. She was honest. She said what she had to say to your face. She would never say anything back at you, you know, or behind your back, and people respected her. Everyone that knew her respected her, because they knew where they stood and if they wanted any advice they could come to her. And, you know, and she would be open and honest with them.

SIGRIST: When you think back to being on your grandparents' area with your mother, what sticks out in your mind? Is there a story about your mother, or an incident that happened between you and your mother that really sticks out in your mind?

KOHN: Not so much between Mother and me. Mother was never a well person. She had I guess a problem with, I wouldn't know, an internal problem. And she was always under the weather, so to speak. But I do remember one incident. There was the man that brought an officer to the place. Why, I don't know what he wanted to show him, I don't know. But the officer said something very derogatory and anti-Semitic, and Mother overheard it. And, of course, he, the office spoke in German, and, of course, the official language

in the area where we were staying was, I think, Polish. When Mother heard it she went over to him and she told him off in German. ( she laughs ) Afterwards Mother said she felt sorry for him because he was dumbfounded. But he deserved it.

SIGRIST: Well, and as you say your mother was a woman who spoke her mind.

KOHN: That's right.

SIGRIST: And said what she thought.

KOHN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Was she corresponding with your dad in America?

KOHN: Yes, of course they were. But at that age children don't know too much.

SIGRIST: You had your . . .

KOHN: Oh, yes. I had a bunch of cousins not too far from where we were staying, my mother's brother's family. And they were more or less my age, my age and my sister's, and my brother's. Don't forget, there were three children there.

SIGRIST: I didn't ask you, what were the names of your brother and your sister?

KOHN: My brother's name was Ira.

SIGRIST: I-R-A?

KOHN: Yes. And my sister's name was Nettie, N-E-T-T-I-E.

SIGRIST: And how do you fall, chronologically? Who was the oldest?

KOHN: Uh, Ira was the oldest. We had a child between Ira and myself, but the child died shortly after it was born. And I was the third child, but the second to the last. And, the fact is, this picture here, is Mother, my brother Ira, my sister Nettie and myself, that was taken to send to my father in America.

SIGRIST: To see how you'd all grown up.

KOHN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a little bit before, and before I forget I want to ask you. You said your grandfather was very religious. What sticks out in your mind about his being so religious? Perhaps, how did you practice religion at home, maybe?

KOHN: Well, we, of course, my grandfather would get up early in the morning and then say his prayers. You know, he observed all the rituals that were supposed to be observed. And he would teach us to say the morning prayer and the evening prayer, as children, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the prayer, how one would say the morning prayer or the evening prayer? Do could remember it?

KOHN: I remember part of the morning prayer, yes.

SIGRIST: Could you do it for us on tape?

KOHN: Well, I may not say it perfectly. It's (Hebrew). I don't really remember. Then there's the (Hebrew). I'm not sure I'm giving it in the proper sequence, but that's . . .

SIGRIST: That's Hebrew that you're speaking? It wasn't Yiddish.

KOHN: No, that was Hebrew, and so on.

SIGRIST: And this was just part of his daily ritual.

KOHN: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember celebrating any of the holidays in Austria? Maybe . . .

KOHN: No, I really don't, I really don't.

SIGRIST: Was there a synagogue nearby?

KOHN: I don't, I don't know.

SIGRIST: This was more sort of your grandfather's world.

KOHN: Yes, yes, yes. And I guess the population, or the residents in the little village, would gather together and celebrate the holidays, but I wouldn't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the food that you ate in Austria? Does any type of food stick out in your mind?

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: Something that somebody made that you liked?

KOHN: No, no, no. The only thing I would remember in Mother's house was the fact that I've always been a very fussy individual. Everything had to be just so. I still am, to an extent. But as you grow older you slacken up a little bit. And when she, one day in Vienna, I had this lovely little dress on with lace

and so forth, and I got a little chocolate on it.

Well, I was brokenhearted. Mother had to calm and tell me she'll take care of it. She didn't scold me!

You know, she was trying to make me feel better about it. Well, anyway, when we came to my grandparents, of course, they didn't have the niceties that we had in Vienna. So if the food was put, the beginning was put in front of me, I wouldn't start eating. And when I was asked why not, I said, "Well, it wasn't set properly." It didn't have this and it didn't have that. ( she laughs ) That's all I can remember.

SIGRIST: Do you have vivid memories of Vienna before you went to your grandparents?

KOHN: No. The only memory I have is being in the Prater. It's a park. And evidently someone took me on a boat going, on a little, I don't know if it was water, or what. But I know that it was dark, and it was lighted, and there were little elves with hammers, you know, hammering away. That's the only thing I remember.

SIGRIST: It's interesting how it would stick out in your mind.

KOHN: That's right, because it did make an impression.

SIGRIST: Hmm. I wonder if that's still there.

KOHN: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about, did you go to school at all before you came to America?

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: What about your brother? Did he attend school?

KOHN: I wouldn't know whether he attended school or whether my grandfather taught him. I don't remember a school. Evidently there were schools, but first of all, being a girl, I don't think the girls had the advantages that the boys did. I don't recall.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the games that you played as a child?

KOHN: Oh, yes. ( she laughs ) We, we climbed, we swam. I know one time the wagon was going, and I tried to get on the wheel while it was going. ( she laughs ) And, you know, children, we played, and I played with boys, so I tried to do what the boys did.

SIGRIST: How would you characterize yourself as a little girl

at that time?

KOHN: A tomboy.

SIGRIST: Did you get along well with your brother and sister?

KOHN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I don't know anyone having a deeper and closer relationship, any siblings, than I had with my brother and sister.

SIGRIST: Do you remember in Austria ever doing anything that you were punished for, getting into trouble?

KOHN: Not that I recall, not that I recall. I, now, I know once I was caught in a big lie. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Tell us about that.

KOHN: I was going to visit an uncle of mine that lived a distance away, and he, we had to cross a bridge in order to get to his house. And I started out, and I got deathly afraid of crossing the bridge alone, so I turned around and went home. And when I was questioned about it I made up some story.  
( she laughs ) I don't remember what the story was, but I know it wasn't the truth.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you were punished for that,

or . . .

KOHN: No, I wasn't punished. I punished myself. I was quite, you know, I felt badly that I didn't want to do it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having any toys? Do any toys stick out in your mind from that time?

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you told the story about your grandfather and the horses. Do you remember any other animals from his practice?

KOHN: No, I don't remember. This was the story that I had heard, you know, but I don't. I think by the time we were there he did very little practicing, you know. He was more or less retired.

SIGRIST: They were older.

KOHN: Well, you know something, people that were forty or fifty years old were old people, were considered old people by youngsters. Now, I recall that my mother mentioned something about, I was almost a teenager at the time. She said, "Oh, so-and-so," I forget the

name, "died. He was such a young man. Only in his thirties." And I said to her, I thought to myself, "Thirty? That's an old man." ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Well, what did you know about America when you were a little girl in Austria? You knew you had a father there.

KOHN: I knew absolutely nothing.

SIGRIST: Did you have any clear recollection of your dad?

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: Were there photographs? Did you know what the person looked like?

KOHN: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did you want to know what this person looked like? I mean, how did you, how did you think about your father when he was gone all that time?

KOHN: Well, I wondered about him, but I was too busy. I was too busy. You know, as a child you don't, I guess you, your mind is on what you're doing at the present. I don't think you think of the past or the future.

SIGRIST: Well . . . ( a telephone rings ) We're going to be pausing the interview just for a moment. ( break in tape ) We're now resuming with Frances Kohn. Can you tell me a little bit, Mrs. Kohn, about the process of getting ready to leave, what you remember about that?

KOHN: Well, I remember Mother and Grandmother cooking and preserving things, baking things and so forth, for the trip. And that's about all. I guess they packed, and so forth, but I wasn't interested in that.

SIGRIST: So you probably weren't conscious of the process of getting papers or anything like that.

KOHN: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did your grandparents give you a little special dinner or a party before you left?

KOHN: No. ( she laughs ) Don't forget, we were almost isolated there, and it was, you lived more or less segregated, and there are no houses nearby, so your life is within that complex.

SIGRIST: Very self-contained.

KOHN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Did your father send you the steamship tickets?

KOHN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. He sent it over.

SIGRIST: What was he doing in America? I never did ask you.

KOHN: He worked in the, in a factory or a shop, or whatever you call it.

SIGRIST: Where was he?

KOHN: In New York City.

SIGRIST: And that's as specific as you know.

KOHN: That's right.

SIGRIST: (?)

KOHN: That's what it is.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed, or what, did you take something that was . . .

KOHN: No. I don't remember a thing about that, no. Mother did the packing, and the only thing I remember is that the food was lost. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: That was on the boat. Do you remember saying goodbye to your grandparents?

KOHN: Oh, yes!

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me?

KOHN: It was before sunrise. It was dark outside, and there was this large wagon. And, that was going to take us to the station. I don't know just where. And my grandparents were old. Naturally there was a sandess, because I guess mother realized that she would never see her folks again, and they realized they would not see their daughter again, because she was the only daughter they had. They had boys, but it seemed every time a girl was born, it didn't survive. Mother was the only surviving female. So it was a little on the sad side.

SIGRIST: This is December, correct, when you left?

KOHN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was there snow on the ground at the time?

KOHN: I don't recall.

SIGRIST: Where did you actually leave from? What port did you leave from?

KOHN: From, I know we took, we were on a train quite a while. I don't know how many days, but we left from Bremen, Germany.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the boat?

KOHN: George Washington.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you thought when you saw a boat for the first time?

KOHN: Ah, I don't know if I was surprised or not. I may have seen pictures of boats before. All I, I know I, I remember being awed and looking around, but I guess I didn't know what to think.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay for a period of time in Bremen before you got on the boat?

KOHN: I think we stayed overnight or something, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of physical examinations in Bremen before you got on the boat?

KOHN: Not, no, I don't recall. The only thing I was

impressed by was the streets, that they had the cobblestones. And to this day I could see that house on the left in the cobblestones, and we went to eat in a little restaurant. And I remember we had either ices or something like that, you know. It was a change in the diet.

SIGRIST: Well, and of course, Bremen is a city, too.

KOHN: That's right.

SIGRIST: You hadn't been in the city in a long time.

KOHN: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Your, so your grandparents didn't go with you to Bremen. They said goodbye . . .

KOHN: Oh. That was quite a distance for them, quite a distance. No, we said our goodbyes. And then we, when we got out, I don't recall too much about it. All I recall is the fact that the next thing I know we were going to board the boat.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what you remember about the boat and being on the boat?

KOHN: Uh, it's peculiar. I don't remember so much about

being on the boat as going towards the boat. I remember walking on, I don't know what you call it, a trestle or something, and looking over the water, into the water, and mother giving instructions to the porters about our luggage and so forth. And we, until we got on the boat.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people getting on the boat? Was it, I mean, do you remember crowds?

KOHN: I don't remember crowds, no. It's as if I was suspended and away from everything. Just, almost, like, by myself.

SIGRIST: Right. You're the only one getting on the boat.

KOHN: That's right, that's right. It might sound peculiar, but I guess I'm, I was just numb with amazement, or whatever.

SIGRIST: Describe where you slept on the boat.

KOHN: We had, we had bunks. We had a stateroom and bunks, and that's where we slept.

SIGRIST: So it was you and your sister and your brother?

KOHN: Oh, yeah. Now, usually my sister and I would sleep

together. My brother, naturally, would sleep by himself, and mother slept by herself.

SIGRIST: Do you know what class you traveled?

KOHN: No, I don't know what class. All I, I don't remember anything about the boat except when mother and the steward or the porter or whatever the name is went hunting for the basket of food that got into storage instead of into our stateroom. And they went down to the storage hold, and they couldn't find it. So we had no food. ( she laughs ) But I don't remember being hungry. I guess we ate the black bread with salt. We had water to drink, and I suppose the stewards would always maybe bring us a little something. Mother was seasick the entire time on the trip.

SIGRIST: Had she ever been on a large boat before?

KOHN: I doubt it. I don't think so. She had, there was no occasion for her to be.

SIGRIST: What about your brother? Because he's, you know, just a little bit older and . . .

KOHN: I don't remember, I don't remember too much about

that. I don't know too much about it. I guess he had his friends, I had my friends. We . . .

SIGRIST: Were there other people that you could mingle with? Do you remember?

KOHN: I don't. I'm sorry, but that's, but that's a blank in my mind.

SIGRIST: It's interesting. I mean, there must be a reason, you know, why you don't remember that part of the trip. What, do you remember a storm or any kind of bad weather?

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: No.

KOHN: No.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the ship took to get to New York?

KOHN: I have no idea.

SIGRIST: But you know you arrived in New York and it was still December of 1913.

KOHN: Oh, yes. But December the 13th. Not December the 13th, yes, December the 13th.

SIGRIST: It was December the 13th.

KOHN: Oh, no. It was December 1913. ( they laugh )

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what happens when you get to New York Harbor. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

KOHN: No. When we got, when we debarked it was very awesome to me. It, there seemed to be glass all over, you know, the structures, and then heard water trickling. And Mother said, put me, had me stand in a certain place, and watch the luggage, and she took my brother and sister with her. I don't know where they went, but I assume she went to make arrangements. But here I was standing there and listening to the drips of the water, feeling deserted. ( she laughs ) (?) come back for me. ( she laughs ) It was, it was quite a feeling. Well, finally they did come back, and we went, I think, upstairs, or wherever we went. And we, Dad was there already, no problem.

SIGRIST: Was this at Ellis Island that you . . .

KOHN: Yeah. No problem. We went to, I remember going into a room and meeting Dad.

SIGRIST: What was that like? What was it like to see this man that you've never remembered seeing? . . .

KOHN: Well, I was, I looked at him and, you know, I realized it was my father. And, but in a way he was almost like a stranger, and from there we went and boarded the boat. But I, evidently he was on my mind a lot, and maybe I was looking at him a lot, because as the boat went towards land, I missed a lot. I didn't study the Statue of Liberty or anything like that. It was more or less engrossed with the, with Dad and mother and so forth.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of how your mother greeted your father?

KOHN: No, I don't recall. You know, they, I don't know. There's a crowd around. You don't know whether they embraced or what. I really don't know.

SIGRIST: And you remember that as being a crowded . . .

KOHN: Yeah, people around, yeah.

SIGRIST: So you weren't at Ellis Island very long, right? You were . . .

KOHN: No. We didn't. We passed right through, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing when you got off the boat at Ellis Island?

KOHN: No. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Sometimes people do. It's something that sticks out in their minds.

KOHN: No. I didn't, I didn't. I don't remember, and I don't remember my clothes either, except a little dress.

SIGRIST: That you spilled the chocolate on.

KOHN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me where your father took you again.

KOHN: Well, when we left the boat we . . .

SIGRIST: You're talking about the ferry that brought you back to Ellis Island.

KOHN: Yeah, yeah. And then we went up a flight of stairs, and there was a door open and there was lights inside, and we walked right in. All of a sudden the doors closed, and what I thought was a room took off. It

turned out we were on the elevated, and it was a train that happened to be in the station when we got there.

Well, I was quite amazed with that. ( she laughs ) That had me stunned for a while. And then when we got off I guess we walked from there to where we were to stay. We, Dad took us to remember the address. It was 229 Stanton Street, opposite a park near Pitt Street. And we lived, we went up the top floor. I don't know whether it was four or five flights of stairs. And it was peculiar, strange surroundings for me, because I wasn't accustomed to that. And I recall that the lights were gas and they had, I think they called it a mantle or something. And you had to put a quarter in every time you wanted a light.

( she laughs ) And another amazing thing was going around on Stanton Street, going around making the corner onto Pitt Street. The trolley was drawn by horses, and that's something I hadn't seen before or since. ( she laughs ) And in hot weather we used to sleep, go up on the roof. Of course, going to the bathroom was something else again. They had lavatories downstairs, you know, a whole line of them.

There weren't any on the floors, or in the apartments, apartments or rooms. We had two rooms, if

you can call them two. One was an all-purpose room where I slept and my sister slept in a bed. My, we ate there. There was a nice bunk there, and times were bad, so we even had a folding cot, and we had a roomer, and on top of that. So you can imagine ( she laughs ) how crowded that room was. And right off that room was I'd say an alcove instead of a room. It had no window. It had nothing. And mother and dad slept there, and I think my brother slept there. No, I don't remember whether Ira slept there or whether he slept on a cot in the other room.

SIGRIST: Was there a kitchen, or . . .

KOHN: The kitchen was part, in that room there was, it was fridge, an icebox. But there was, and there was a top, it wouldn't be a stove, I think it was a plate or something. I don't know. And . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me how your mother felt about all this. You know, coming from this rather rural surroundings, going to the Lower East Side.

KOHN: Well, yes, well, it was hard on Mother. It was very hard. She'd never, she didn't complain. She, as I said, she was an unusual woman. What she did is she

sewed, she made us dresses. Nobody knew the financial conditions we were in. We always looked neat or well-kept. One thing we had, if we didn't have bread, we were kept clean and neat. And, don't laugh. Sometimes we couldn't buy bread that was two days old, we didn't eat. And many a day a banana and bread was our meal.

SIGRIST: Am I to understand that your father, who had not been a great provider in Austria, continued along those lines.

KOHN: You know, in those days, working in factories or shops. Today you worked, tomorrow, tomorrow you don't. The pay was negligible. So it was tough going, it was tough going.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever work outside of the house, or take work in?

KOHN: Yes, there for a while, which he did, was bring in, I guess, shirts or whatever. I think it was (?).

SIGRIST: So this is, this is a whole different ballgame for her and for you.

KOHN: Sure, it was.

SIGRIST: Tell me about, tell me about going to school, and what that was like for you at first.

KOHN: Well, it was, it was hard. I went to the Attorney Street School. I don't know if you're familiar with that section.

SIGRIST: Attorney, like lawyer, attorney?

KOHN: The street was called Attorney. We lived down in the, you know, near Stanton, Pitt, Rivington, you know, that area. And there was a school on Attorney Street. I was sent there. My brother went to, I think, School Number 4, I'm not sure. That was in another part of town. So I had to walk alone to school, you know. And I guess it was difficult for me not being able to understand the language and so forth and so on. But I guess, as children, you pick things up and you learn fast. And I'll never forget the impression on me was, I guess it was just before Christmas and so forth. And the cousins lived close by, and they picked me up and we went out in the evening. The bright lights, you know, on the pushcarts, you know. I was just fascinated. It was like being in fairyland for me. That made quite an impression on me.

SIGRIST: Was this, did you like this new kind of world, or did you miss the old more pastoral life.

KOHN: Well, I suppose I . . . ( a telephone rings )

SIGRIST: Do you want to get it? Shall I pause it? It's okay.

KOHN: Well, we can let it ring, or it'll interfere.

SIGRIST: It's on the recording, so I'm going to pause the interview just for a . . . ( break in tape ) We're now resuming with Frances Kohn. I just asked you what kind of effect this new urban environment had on you as opposed to your more pastoral life with your grandparents.

KOHN: Uh-huh. Well, in a way I'm very fortunate that I adapt to situations. I suppose I never look back. Even as a child, I accept what comes along. I guess that's a blessing, because I'm not unhappy. I just, whatever comes I accept it and make the most of it. So I can't say I was unhappy or happy or what. Of course, I'm happier in certain situations, and maybe not too pleased in others, but I accept it. I don't brood about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember celebrating your seventh birthday right after you got here?

KOHN: No. We didn't celebrate. We were lucky if we had anything to eat. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Did your parents learn English?

KOHN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about maybe your mother trying to learn English? I assume your father probably already knew some.

KOHN: Oh, mother, I don't know. I guess she picked it up. The fact is, as we grew older the only language we spoke was English. Because I used to, as a child, spoke Russian, I spoke German, I spoke Yiddish. And when, as we grew up as children we only spoke English and I completely forgot the other languages that I had known. So . . .

SIGRIST: Did your mother go to night classes or anything like that?

KOHN: No. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: She just sort of came . . .

KOHN: She was bright. I think at the start I said she was an unusually bright person.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your parents felt about World War One? Because, of course, it's all happening right there sort of . . .

KOHN: Oh, I remember my mother, of course, she had her parents and brothers and nieces and so forth. And she was concerned. She was very wondering what happened to them, you know. They were elderly. And she did worry. She was very unhappy about it.

SIGRIST: Did she ever send things to your grandparents from America?

KOHN: Oh, after the war, yes. Or before, but if she, after the war, especially. Because, we came in in December and the war broke out in April, so before, you know, we just about got settled when the war broke out, so there wasn't any opportunities to send anything before.

SIGRIST: And there was no mail communication.

KOHN: No, no, no. Not to my knowledge. Maybe Mother wrote,

I wouldn't know. I wouldn't know. But if she, but I know until the war was over she didn't hear from anyone.

SIGRIST: Had she ever hoped that your grandparents would come to America?

KOHN: No, I don't think she hoped for that, because she knew they wouldn't. My grandmother, I think, died right after the war. And my grandfather was quite advanced. So I guess there was no logic for them to come.

SIGRIST: Do you remember writing a letter to your grandparents, or any kind of interaction yourself with them?

KOHN: No, no, no. Because by the time I was able to they were no longer with them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you were beginning to learn English and speak English, do you ever remember making a mistake? There was something that sticks out in your mind, a story about trying to say something incorrectly, maybe in school?

KOHN: I honestly don't remember.

SIGRIST: You were young enough where you probably just sort of

picked it right up.

KOHN: I suppose so, yes. And I had a lot of friends, children, plenty of children. And I remember, one of the things I remember was that we go to this place. I don't know whose home it was, or who owned the business. I don't know. We spent time in the cellar, because it was nice and cool there. And we played in the cellar. There was no cement on the ground, just earth. And we, a lot of my time was spent there playing and singing and whatever.

SIGRIST: So you were an active child once you got there, too?

KOHN: Yes, oh, yes. We, sometimes we'd go, we weren't far from the East River. Sometimes we'd go over there. There was a wharf. We would play there. Of course, we'd play in the park. We found things to do.  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what the first job that you ever got?

KOHN: Well, I didn't live in New York very, we didn't live in New York too long. A cousin from McKeesport, Pennsylvania, came down to visit us. And he insisted that we come up to McKeesport, and we did. We moved

to McKeesport.

SIGRIST: How long had you been in New York?

KOHN: Maybe about two years.

SIGRIST: Oh, so not long.

KOHN: Two-and-a-half, yeah. So, really, my childhood and my growing up was in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. So when you asked me my first job, well, my first job was, happened to be in that tenement in New York, and that was one of the tenants asked me, I think for a penny, I dusted the furniture in her house. ( she laughs ) So that was my first job.

SIGRIST: What was your first real job?

KOHN: Well, as a student in high school, I went into McKees. . , to Pittsburgh. Of course, I had to get working papers as well, and got myself a job in Frank and Cedars as a sales clerk.

SIGRIST: How old were you at that time?

KOHN: How old was I? It was high school. Fourteen, fifteen. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you got paid?

KOHN: Oh, no. I wouldn't remember. ( she laughs ) But I knew that I had to go by train, and that took over an hour to go from McKeesport to Pittsburgh by train. It was a drag.

SIGRIST: What did your father do in Pennsylvania? What work did he get?

KOHN: My father tried different things. He tried to be, sell things from a cart. He tried different things. But then . . .

SIGRIST: It just wasn't his thing.

KOHN: That's right. He couldn't. He finally wound up being a sexton in the synagogue.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a couple of final questions here. Speaking of your dad, was he happy that he came to America?

KOHN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. He was happy. Because his family was a peculiar family. He had a brother living in a street next to us, I think on Pitt Street, down a couple of blocks. I never saw him. They lived, and

he had brothers in Argentina and so forth. They were, I don't know. My father was the only good one, I think, in the whole colony there. ( she laughs ) Because I know that when the war ended we sent money to the family, to his family, to dad's family, for his father, you know. And you couldn't send them that. Of course, we didn't have that much, but we sent what we had and what we could. But that wasn't, they weren't satisfied with anything, and they threatened. They said, "If you don't send us more, we'll throw your father out." It wasn't their father, you know. So, but that will give you an idea what kind of people they were.

SIGRIST: So it was just, it was best for him to just come and get away from it . . .

KOHN: That's right. Because Dad wasn't like that. Dad would give you the shirt off his back.

SIGRIST: What about you? Are you glad that your parents made the decision to come to this country?

KOHN: Well, yes, because but for the grace of God I might have wound up in one of those death camps. Plenty of our family went there.

SIGRIST: Your mother's family, and . . .

KOHN: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So your life could have been much different.

KOHN: Of course, of course. And, of course, on the other hand, I'm a fatalist. I feel what's to be will be. Maybe that's why I adapt to situations as they come around, along.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Kohn, I want to thank you very much. We've been chatting for an hour now.

KOHN: Oh, really! ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Yeah, about your immigration experience. It's just, it was wonderful. I want to thank you very much.

KOHN: Oh, thank you.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Frances Kohn on July 6, 1993 on a Tuesday in Albany, New York.