

EI-350

MARTIN KOSTER

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GERMANY (FRISIAN ISLANDS), 1922

AGE 17

PASSAGE ON "THE MOUNT CARROLL"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: HAMBURG

RESIDENCES NORDDORF, ISLAND OF AMRUM (NORTH FRIESLAND)
BRONX, NEW YORK

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service,
and I'm here today in New City, New York with Mr.
Martin Wilhelm Koster, who came from Germany in 1922
when he was seventeen years old. Now, I know you came
from the North Frisian island of Amrum.

KOSTER: Right.

LEVINE: We'll talk about that. Tell me where you were born
and the date of your birth.

KOSTER: I was born on June 13, 1905 in the town of Norddorf,
Amrum.

LEVINE: And did you live in the same town up until the time you left for the United States?

KOSTER: Until I, yes. We lived there until I got to Hamburg and, on the boat, to the new country.

LEVINE: Tell me what Amrum was like.

KOSTER: Well, Amrum is about twelve miles long, maybe four or five miles wide. And when I was a child it had approximately six hundred and fifty people in five villages.

LEVINE: And were the people German living there?

KOSTER: Well, they were mostly, most all were native Amrumers, I mean, they're born on the island, except one village that had some foreigners, not foreigners, but they came from the mainland. And you knew every family on the island. You knew who they were, the children and the grandchildren and the whatnot. Everybody knows each other.

LEVINE: Who was in your family there? Did you have grandparents there?

KOSTER: My grandmother, on my mother's side my grandmother

lived in the same town. On my father's side my grandfather lived in a town that was called Süddorf, South, in other words, the South village.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

KOSTER: S-U, with the two dots on top, D, D-D-O-R-F.

LEVINE: What was your grandfather's name?

KOSTER: Martin, same as mine.

LEVINE: Do you remember him?

KOSTER: Oh, yes. Yeah, he lived until, he lived until 1933. When we were home in 1932 we visited him.

LEVINE: And do you remember any experiences with your grandfather, things you maybe did together when you were a little boy?

KOSTER: Not my grandfather, because he lived two towns away from us, but my grandmother on my mother's side.

LEVINE: And what was her name?

KOSTER: Wehn, W-E-H-N.

LEVINE: And her first name?

KOSTER: That was her first name.

LEVINE: Oh, that was her first name. What was . . .

KOSTER: Matcen, M-A-T-C-E-N.

LEVINE: And what do you remember about her?

KOSTER: Well, she was, in other words, if we had to do farm work, you know, cutting something, and so on, my father would send us down and say, "Go down to Ohmie Wehn and find out what the weather's going to be." And she would go outside and look at the sky and tell us if it was going to rain or not. There were many good things about her. She was really a terrific woman.

LEVINE: Was she accurate about the weather?

KOSTER: Mostly.

LEVINE: What other kinds of things did she do?

KOSTER: Well, she had one apple tree in her yard, I remember, that had these big, green apples on it. And she had them, would take them off and take them upstairs, and they had them laying on tables that had cork, ground cork, and each one was placed so they wouldn't touch

each other. And they would be ripe some time late in the, very late in the fall, some of them as late as Christmas.

LEVINE: And were they for the family?

KOSTER: Well, mostly for her family, but if you were real good you got a half of one. You never got a whole one.

LEVINE: What kind of chores did you have to do when you were a boy?

KOSTER: Chores? Anything that you can think of that's being done on a farm. And, clean the stables, feed the animals, pump water, everything.

LEVINE: Your father was a farmer?

KOSTER: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was his name?

KOSTER: George.

LEVINE: And what did he have on the farm? Did he grow things as well as have animals?

KOSTER: Well, we could grow a little bit of everything, so we had something for ourselves. I don't think they sold

much. Mostly what they sold from the farm was during the summer months, the milk. But as far as, and potatoes, we sold. I remember that. But I don't think they sold any grain. But we used to take the grain to the mill and had it ground, you know.

LEVINE: Do you remember that?

KOSTER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Can you tell about that?

KOSTER: Well, during the war years, during the First World War, you know, they, you were only allowed so much for yourself so we used to do a little bit funny work on the side and took it to the fellow and he would run it through a mill so nobody would know about it.

LEVINE: Do you remember the house you lived in?

KOSTER: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Could you describe it?

KOSTER: Could I describe it? It had, let's say, downstairs the front part had four rooms, upstairs were three rooms. And the back part there was a kitchen and a pump room, and then the stables, and then there was a

side building attached to it where all the machinery was in.

LEVINE: And was it, what was it made out of?

KOSTER: Red brick.

LEVINE: And what kind of a stove did your mother use?

KOSTER: She had a regular stove and only used wooden, and what we called Briketten [briquettes], some kind of a pressed coal, I think.

LEVINE: Do you, what was your mother's name?

KOSTER: Pauline.

LEVINE: And did you have brothers and sisters living at home?

KOSTER: I had four brothers and three sisters.

LEVINE: And where did you fall in the line of children?

KOSTER: Well, I was number four from the, I had two brothers that were older and one sister who was older. In other words, they had a child, my mother had a child every year from 1902. 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1907 and 1909. So there were a lot of children.

LEVINE: Were, was your family a religious family?

KOSTER: They went to church twice a year. (he laughs)

LEVINE: When was that?

KOSTER: What they call Thanksgiving over there, and for Christmas.

LEVINE: And what church?

KOSTER: There was only one on the island, only, what is that, Lutheran.

LEVINE: And how about school? What . . .

KOSTER: Well, we all went to the same school. Here's the picture of it. Show the girl the picture, Danielle.

LEVINE: We can look at it maybe afterwards when we're not, when we don't have the tape on. What age were you when you started?

KOSTER: Six. A little over six, in fact.

LEVINE: And what was school like?

KOSTER: Well, you had, the new ones sat in the front, then there was the middle group and then what we called the

big group. And the girls sat on one side of the aisle, and the boys on the other side, and there were benches. Each had four, four children on one bench sitting next to each other. One teacher, fifty some-odd children.

LEVINE: All in the same room.

KOSTER: All in the same room, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you, do you remember, like, was the teacher strict, or how . . .

KOSTER: Well, he had two sticks on his desk, both about that long. (he gestures) And there were rules and regulations, and if you didn't obey you got it.

LEVINE: (she laughs) Were you a good student, or were you a naughty boy or . . .

KOSTER: Well, I don't know if I was good or naughty, but somehow the teacher didn't like us too much, I know that.

LEVINE: How do you know?

KOSTER: Well, we had a singing class one time, and only my two brothers and I got a shellacking, and we don't know to

this day as for what. But you couldn't go home and tell the parents, because if you got punished in school you got another one at home. So, it was different than here.

LEVINE: Did you learn a lot in the school there?

KOSTER: We missed a lot of days during the war. During the war years we had one teacher who had two schools. In other words, he had to teach in one, in the next town, and in our town, so we missed a lot.

LEVINE: What do you remember of the war years?

KOSTER: Well, I remember the day that, when they came to the island and formed a company, when all the men were drafted, and when they came, they had a place, what would you call it, where they stationed the men.

LEVINE: A barracks?

KOSTER: Yeah, a barrack on the other end of the island that came, they all came home. There was about fourteen out of our town that were drafted. That's all I remember of the war.

LEVINE: This was World War One?

KOSTER: Yeah.

LEVINE: So they were drafted, and then they, what . . .

KOSTER: There was one company stationed on the island, and a lot of them were drafted and sent to the front, and a lot of them died. A good many young men died.

LEVINE: What else do you remember about your mother?

KOSTER: My mother? My mother was always in a hurry. All day long she was cooking and cleaning and whatever, you know. She was really a remarkable woman. When I think about it, I don't know how, how the devil she got done with all of the work that she did, and how she did it, taking care of the kids. It was a terrific job, I think.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of the foods that she cooked?

KOSTER: A lot of potatoes and turnips, and milk soups, and stuff like that.

LEVINE: And were the families mostly all farmers?

KOSTER: Well, the majority were either farmers or they had boats and did some fishing and some rented out rooms to tourists. But that's a . . .

KOSTER: Was it a resort area?

LEVINE: They started the resort business in the beginning of 1900, but it was very slow to develop. It, they were, there was one outfit that came from Westphalia in Germany. They had three or four houses that they built, and they had their employees come there for vacation. And then there was one hotel in town, and a lot of, the other, the natives, they rented out rooms, the hotel had more people than what they could handle. They would take rooms in in the village, you know.

LEVINE: Did you do that? Did your family . . .

KOSTER: We had two rooms. We were shifted from our bedrooms to the hayloft and during the summer, and they rented out two rooms.

LEVINE: What did you do for fun?

KOSTER: For fun? There wasn't much time for fun. When we were, of course, we went to the beach a lot. But otherwise there really wasn't, they mostly had to work on the farm.

LEVINE: Did people get together and have, like, dances or

music?

KOSTER: Well, they had the, from the fire department they had the dances and, but otherwise I think it happened maybe once or twice a year from those departments, but as children we weren't allowed there.

LEVINE: Did you have toys of any kind?

KOSTER: (he laughs) None to speak of.

LEVINE: What kind of a child were you? How would you describe yourself as a young boy?

KOSTER: Well, at that time we had a lot of fun playing around when we had time. And how can you describe it, I mean, we were happy.

LEVINE: Were you a happy-go-lucky . . .

KOSTER: Yeah, I think so. (there is a disturbance with the microphone)

LEVINE: (referring to the problem with the microphone) I'm sorry. Okay. Well . . .

KOSTER: We did a lot of scrapping between each other. On the other hand, the young years were good.

LEVINE: What member of the family would you say you were the closest to?

KOSTER: They were all close.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else about Amrum that you would mention, anything else that you think about when you think about that place?

KOSTER: Well, we had really a lot of freedom. If you didn't have your, I mean, if your chores were done, you could do whatever you liked, right? So we had a lot of freedom. We had, we did, in the spring of the year we did some fishing, and in the fall of the year we went hunting, even though we were kids. And when we got out of school around, I mean, after public school, we went dancing every Saturday night. Not that we could dance, but we made believe anyway.

LEVINE: What was the dancing like?

KOSTER: It was a lot of fun.

LEVINE: Was it like square dancing, or was it . . .

KOSTER: No, they danced waltzes and, although I never learned how to dance waltz over there. I learned it here.

You can do the movements, you know, like you see through the hall, from one end to the other. The girls would sit along the wall, you know, and the boys would come over and pick one up and dance with them,.

And if she refused to dance with you she couldn't dance, she had to wait until the next dance.

LEVINE: So did you have girlfriends before you . . .

KOSTER: Yeah, I had a girlfriend.

LEVINE: And what would you do? Would you go on dates?

KOSTER: No, not really. The, like I said, the most fun was going to these dances. It happened to be every Saturday. And the people from the whole island, from the five villages, they all came to the same place, so you met a lot of new people.

LEVINE: Well, how was it decided that you would come to America?

KOSTER: To come here?

LEVINE: Yeah.

KOSTER: When the war was over, everybody was broke. There were four years when they had practically no income

other than what they made out of the land or whatever, whatever they could earn in Amrum. But there was very little. There was no building or nothing going on. And then this, I don't know how that really started, but in 1919 or 1920 some married men left the island and came to the country here. And one after the other, they had two brothers who were older. They left in 1921. And then all of a sudden this, the, then I don't know how many good many young people came here.

LEVINE: So how did you save up enough money to come here?

KOSTER: I didn't. I had an uncle who had come here in between 1895 and 1900, and he lived in the Bronx in New York, and he sent me the ticket.

LEVINE: Do you remember getting ready to go?

KOSTER: There was not much ready, getting ready. I remember I had a little bit of a satchel, not much of anything, and twenty-five dollars in cash money you had to produce when you landed here. And that's about all I have.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought about the United

States before you came here, what you expected?

KOSTER: Well, we expected to make a lot of money and get rich quick.

LEVINE: And go back? Was that your idea?

KOSTER: Oh, yeah. That's the only, everybody came with the same idea. They wanted to go back.

LEVINE: So do you remember saying goodbye to everyone?

KOSTER: No, that I don't. I know my father took me, he took me six o'clock in the morning to the boat. It takes two hours on the ferry to go and get to the mainland.

LEVINE: Had you been to the mainland?

KOSTER: Oh, I had been to the mainland once or twice before. But not for any length of time, you know.

LEVINE: Why did you go there in the past before that?

KOSTER: I went once to the mainland, to Hamburg, with my father. I don't know what he had to do there. The second time I had to go to the consul. But now I don't know was it the American consul or German consul in Hamburg, to get the papers in order.

LEVINE: So your father took you to the ferry.

KOSTER: He took me to the ferry at six o'clock in the morning, went to Hamburg, stayed overnight, and the next evening, that was on the twelfth on December, we went on the, onto the boat that took us here.

LEVINE: Now, were you, let's see, who were you traveling with?

KOSTER: There was one woman from the same town who came here to, her husband already was here. She had two children. And the rest were all strangers.

LEVINE: So your father didn't take you to the boat.

KOSTER: No, no, no, no.

LEVINE: He took you to the ferry.

KOSTER: He just took me to the ferry, and that was that.

LEVINE: Do you remember how you felt about coming here?

KOSTER: Full of hope, full of hope. That I know.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the ship?

KOSTER: Mount Carroll. It was a British ship. The fare cost a hundred and sixty-eight dollars. I remember my

uncle, that's what I paid him back.

LEVINE: And did you get an examination there?

KOSTER: We got examined before we got on to the boat. We got examined before we left the boat here in the harbor. We got examined at Ellis Island. And the last thing I know that the doctor that examined me, he pulled my eyelids up and said to me, "What's your name?" But he said it in English, and I couldn't answer him. So finally he said it in German, you know. And he said, "Okay, go ahead." What impressed me most was that big room that we entered into. It was this great, big wide room with a stairway in the middle going up and a balcony all around it, you know. And somewhere around the middle of there we got sandwiches. I remember that was white bread with store cheese on it. Those were the things that you always remember.

LEVINE: You never had that before?

KOSTER: Never had it before. And then he said, "Go through." And I says, "Where to?" And he said, "Just follow the arrow." So I got to the end of, the arrow was pointing this way and there was nothing there but a whole lot of people were on a, and I didn't know they

were on a ferry boat. They were on the back of a ferry, so the guy that closed the gate, he grabbed me by the arm and pushed me onto the ferry boat and closed the gate, and off we went to New York.

LEVINE: Was there anything else about Ellis Island that you remember?

KOSTER: Not too much, really. I understand there were a lot of people walking around with tags hanging over their back and front where they were supposed to go to, and some of them that came didn't get off the same day either. For some reason they kept them there. I don't know why.

LEVINE: There were lots of people there?

KOSTER: Oh, there were lots of people there.

LEVINE: So you, you mentioned before, your ship came in the night before.

KOSTER: It came in in the evening, late, I remember. And we got, woke up very early, and then we had to be examined on the ship before they let you off the ship. But I don't know how I got from the boat to Ellis Island. That's one thing that's gone. I don't know

if there was a pier on Ellis Island. I don't think so. That the boat docked.

LEVINE: A ferry, a ferry would have . . .

KOSTER: A ferry would have taken us.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember anything about the examination, like did you have to read something?

KOSTER: I don't, that I don't remember any more. I don't think so. They were mostly interested in if you were healthy. It was very embarrassing, I know that.

LEVINE: And was, when you were aboard the ship, were you sick?

KOSTER: I was seasick the third day out until I came on the water here. And we had a terrible storm. We were supposed to only travel two weeks, you know, and we were three days over. We had an awful storm. I tell you, frankly, I was so sick that I wouldn't have moved out of bed if the boat went down. I would have just went down with it, and most people were the same way. They had, around the tables they had these slats up, you know, so the dishes wouldn't slide off it. I remember Christmas Eve they had a dinner, a Christmas dinner. There were three people on the table, and I

only ran in, put my pants on, grabbed something from the table, and ran back to the cabin and ate it there.

Sick. I swore I'd never go on another boat in my life.

LEVINE: Did you?

KOSTER: Yeah. (he laughs) Yeah, I did.

LEVINE: So when you arrived no one met you. You showed your twenty-five dollars, and you were able . . .

KOSTER: That you had to show on Ellis Island. You had to show that you had twenty-five dollars, and I don't know, there was nobody there on Ellis Island to pick me up, but my brother, who had come before me, sent me a letter, and he wrote on there, he made a little drawing of a taxi, that I should look for that kind of a car, not to go with anybody else. And my mother had instructed me, "You don't have to worry about men, but be careful of women, so don't go with any women."
(he laughs) And when I got on, I don't know if I should say this, when I got onto the ferry there were about twenty-five black people there, black men. I had never seen a black man in all my life. At age seventeen I was scared stiff, I tell you. So I

moseyed through the crowd towards the other end of the boat, you know. And when we got off and looked for a taxi, and I was ready to go into the taxi when a woman came over and took me by the sleeve of the arm and she says to me in English, "What's your name?" And I didn't know what she was talking about. Then she said it in German. So she says, "Well, then, I'm your aunt," she says. I wouldn't have gone with her if she couldn't have told me who she was, you know, because I got instructions home.

LEVINE: And what was your aunt's name?

KOSTER: Marie. They lived on 154th Street in the Bronx.

LEVINE: So was that where you went the first time?

KOSTER: Yeah, but I couldn't stay there. They didn't have room for me. And I was put in with a cousin of mine, which I had never seen before either. And that wasn't practical, because they really didn't have the room either. They, the whole family walked through, you know, it was a railroad flat. The room in the front, and the kitchen in the back. If you wanted to get to the front you, and, anyway, I was put in a room where everybody marched through, coming or going, so I

didn't stay there too long.

LEVINE: So what did you do?

KOSTER: Well, I got a job, and I got a room for two-fifty a week, and then went out to eat.

LEVINE: So you had a lot of different jobs right away?

KOSTER: I worked two weeks in my first job. I got, it was for Grau Brothers on East Tremont Avenue in the butcher shop. Ten dollars a week, and you worked six days. And the second week I had no money left, because I, for ten dollars you couldn't do anything. It was gone before you know it, you know. So I said to him, "I can't come back unless I get more money next week." And he gave me a good bawling out and told me that he had come to the country and made three dollars a month. So, anyway, I didn't go back, and then I got a job, I made sixteen dollars a week.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: What did you do at that job?

KOSTER: That was a fellow who, he had a provision route. He

served lots of restaurants in the middle of New York area. He drove a provision route for the Bronx Provision Company, and I was his helper on a truck.

LEVINE: Was this meat, or was this . . .

KOSTER: Meat and provisions and stuff like that, you know. And then I heard of an opening in a restaurant on 129th Street that was paying twenty-one dollars a week. So I worked there until I got fired.

LEVINE: And why did you get fired?

KOSTER: I got fired because the, I was supposed to be a baker's helper. I was there maybe three or four months, something like that, got twenty-one dollars and free coffee and a sandwich once in a while. Well, the fellow who ran the shop, the bake shop, said to me I should clean his shoes, and I cleaned them, and I put them up on the top lid of the open oven, and somebody must have closed it and pushed them in. So when I came to work in the evening at eleven o'clock he came for me like this (he gestures) with his hands waving, you know. "Don't even get undressed," he says, and he showed me his shoes. They were standing there like two canoes, you know. They were

together from the heat. But it wasn't my fault. But actually it was good, because then I got a, after that, that same day I got a job down with Horton's Ice Cream on 24th Street. Somebody on the lunch counter saw this commotion and he said to me, he says, "They're looking for men to work. Go down there." And I went down there, and I got a job that paid thirty-three dollars a week. So I was on easy street.

LEVINE: What were you doing at that job?

KOSTER: I, there was a, they had these teams of horses where they would distribute ice cream all over the stores, bring it to the different stores. And the fellow that I worked with was an Italian, Angelo DeCicci. Angelo couldn't talk German, and I couldn't talk English, so we got along pretty good. He was really very good to me.

LEVINE: Now, where were you living at that point?

KOSTER: On 14th Street.

LEVINE: And this was a room in somebody's house, or . . .

KOSTER: Yeah, they're a rooming house, yeah. But the job

ended, some of us over, then, of course, the job was over, too.

LEVINE: And what did you do?

KOSTER: Then I got a job on a milk delivery. First I worked inside on a platform in special deliveries, and then later on, I got a route where you go from store to store and deliver. It was good.

LEVINE: And did you stay with that?

KOSTER: I stayed with that for a long while, almost five years, I think. 1927, 1927, until 1928.

LEVINE: And when did you meet your wife?

KOSTER: Two years after I came here.

LEVINE: And how did you meet?

KOSTER: That was another thing. All the immigrants used to go dancing down on Anderson's Hall on 16th Street and Third Avenue. They would come from all parts of Germany.

LEVINE: So it was like a dance hall?

KOSTER: Yeah, it was a dance hall.

LEVINE: And that's where you met her?

KOSTER: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what was your wife's name?

KOSTER: Margaret.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

KOSTER: Peterson.

LEVINE: So was she also from Germany?

KOSTER: She had, yeah. She came from the same, she came from the next island up there.

LEVINE: Did you know her before?

KOSTER: No. No, I didn't know her.

LEVINE: What was it about her that you liked?

KOSTER: What was it? I don't know. Just, you meet somebody in a dance hall. You either like them or you don't like them, but I . . .

LEVINE: So did you get married soon, or . . .

KOSTER: We got married soon. She was ready to go home. She

was homesick, and I was homesick. We were both homesick. So instead of going home, we got married.

LEVINE: So then how many children did you have?

KOSTER: Two.

LEVINE: And their names?

KOSTER: Anneliese [?] and Eleanor. Anneliese [?] is still living. Eleanor died, when, two years ago, three years ago, suddenly. But I got a lot of grandchildren.

LEVINE: How many?

KOSTER: How many are we?

: Seven.

KOSTER: Seven. And how many, eight grand, eight great-grandchildren, right? Peter has three, Karen has two, Suzy has two, yeah, eight.

LEVINE: So what did you spend most of your working life doing?

KOSTER: Working on the milk truck was a twelve hour a day job, sometimes thirteen hour a day, and we were off every other Sunday. I worked for Mays Dairy in Washington

Street, downtown New York. Every other Sunday you had off.

LEVINE: (?)

KOSTER: Delivering milk. Most of them, mostly restaurants, all wholesale. That didn't leave you much time to go anywhere or do anything, so all you can do is save the pennies that you made. And then all of a sudden we got the bug. We wanted to go home, in 1928, and we took a trip back home. We stayed eleven months, and came back here and bought a store at 406 Ocean Avenue in Jersey City in the Greenboro section, a delicatessen store. Neither one of us knew anything about it.

LEVINE: How did you happen to do that?

KOSTER: Well, I was going to go back out on the milk job. But a friend of mine had a store on the same avenue. And he says, "Oh, no." He says, "You're wasting your time. You've got to have a store." And he went out with us looking for stores. Somebody want to sell them. That's how we got into it. And I'll tell you, frankly, neither one of us liked it. We had it for, we had it for thirteen months and sold it again, and

bummed around for three months. And finally wound up with another store in Ridgewood, New York.

LEVINE: Another delicatessen?

KOSTER: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you went back to Amron, were you expecting to stay?

KOSTER: We really didn't know what we wanted to do. I know the second time we had that store in Ridgewood, we had that for two years, and then we went back again. Then we wanted to stay. But we had both applied for citizenship papers, and when we went back there we stayed six months and then Hitler got into power, or he wasn't quite there, but my father said if he gets that job in five years we have war, and you're going to have to serve as a soldier. So we came back in January 1933, and became citizens a month later. And then we didn't go home for, what, eighteen years, seventeen years. But then we went like, in 1950 we went home, the first time by airplane. '56 we went home, '62 we went home, and '72 we went home, and '83. But you have to be here a certain time in order to realize that there's a big difference between that

country and this country.

LEVINE: What is the difference?

KOSTER: Everything seemed so much easier here. If you wanted to work, you had an opportunity to make money whether you. And I think when we were young kids it was easier than it is now. I think so, if you really wanted to work. But, of course, you had to work long hours. The daily hours were long. I mean, they were twelve, thirteen hours a day, you know, sommer times even more.

LEVINE: Do you consider yourself, I mean, when you think about yourself starting out in Germany and coming here, do you think that it made a big difference in your life?

KOSTER: Well, like I said before, when we, before we came here we wanted to come to America because the money was lying on the street, that's what we were told anyway. So everybody came here that wanted to get rich. When you found out it wasn't that way, you had to work in order to accomplish something, right? But it, I, it's hard to explain, because when you were, when we were here you wanted to have, you were homesick, you wanted to go back to the island. When you were on the island

you were homesick for this country.

LEVINE: Did you and your wife keep up any of the customs that you had back . . .

KOSTER: Well, we belonged to a group of, there was a sick benefit club that they had here. We belonged to that, and we used to go to their picnics and meetings and so on. They had a meeting once a month. We kept that up. And as a group we, from the island, a lot of islands stuck together, you know. It was really good.

LEVINE: And did you speak Frisian with these people from the island?

KOSTER: (he laughs) Yeah. We only speak Frisian when we meet. My wife couldn't speak Frisian. She didn't, she came from, the next island has seventeen villages, you know, and one city, and she came from the city part. So she was a little higher up than we low farmers were, you know. But she learned it very fast. And you learn English very fast, because many of our, our words back home are English.

LEVINE: Oh.

KOSTER: Or they sound like English, so you didn't have any

problems learning that.

LEVINE: Were you happy to give up being a farmer?

KOSTER: Glad to get rid of it, believe me. That's, I don't know if you ever know what farm work is like. There's no end to it.

LEVINE: What is this? (referring to a photograph)

KOSTER: That's what we used to make sandwiches on back home. Everybody gets a board like that, instead of getting a plate. And, well, that's a habit, you know. You get into, and here too (?), sometimes like this girl, she never got one like, but when she got here she got one handed like that, and she didn't know what to do with it.

LEVINE: So you still, you still use it instead of a plate?

KOSTER: I still use it, yeah, every day.

LEVINE: Are there any other ways that you have that come from your home town?

KOSTER: I really don't know. The stubbornness stuck, I know that. That's what they say, anyway. You could say that. But, and you think a lot of the island. I

mean, I think a lot of the island. I think it's one of the most beautiful places. And when we go back, you know, you have a good time. But there is something that's hard to explain when you're here five years. After you're here five years it's, it's very hard to go back for good. But people, I know that when I came back the first time after five years they called you a foreigner, an Amrumer, you know, and things like that. It was, I think it was more or less jealousy. We got ahead of the game a little bit.

LEVINE: What are you proudest of that you've accomplished in your life?

KOSTER: What am I . . .

LEVINE: What are you most proud of?

KOSTER: Most proud of? That I was able to make a real estate license and become a real estate broker.

LEVINE: Did you do that after the delicatessen?

KOSTER: After I sold, I got sick. I had a delicatessen out in Fresh Pond Road I sold in 1930, and then had another one from '33 to '38 out in the Jamaica area, and another one in Kew Gardens from thirty . . . 1938

until 1946 when I sold it. Then I became, started real estate brokerage, and I became a real estate broker. I had a notary public thing. I couldn't, I tried for the insurance brokerage also, but I couldn't, I never went to school. That was the mistake we made, you know. I could not explain in writing. If you could have taken the exam talking I could have passed it, but in writing I couldn't. But, and then after I gave that up I went back and when, what that was, 1952 or '53. I did nothing for about two years and then my son-in-law says, he said to me, "You've got to do something. You can't hang around doing nothing all the time." I started to work for the Insurance Company of North America. I became a safety inspector for the Insurance Company of North America for thirteen years. That was the most beautiful job I ever had in my life.

LEVINE: What did you do?

KOSTER: Well, they would send you out to check various factories, manufacturing, roadwork, demolition jobs. And you had a list of instructions as to what to look for as far as safety was concerned. For instance, a demolition job, they had to provide certain safety for

the streets so nobody would get hurt. And we went and checked him out and told him, "You've got to do this," and, "You've got to do that," and so on. It was beautiful work. Every day some (?).

LEVINE: And that's what you retired from?

KOSTER: Yeah. I was with them for thirteen years. They said I could work until seventy, and then afterwards they changed it to sixty-five, which was too bad. I could have easily worked until seventy.

LEVINE: How about this phase of your life? What do you do now?

KOSTER: What do I do now? Nothing. I take care of the house. I bought this house in 1959. It was an old dump. I worked on it for two years and changed everything. And what else did I do? Gardening, but I still didn't get that (?).

LEVINE: Stained glass?

KOSTER: Oh, yes, that hobby I started. Those were the two first lamps I made, that one and that one.

LEVINE: So you, are you making lamps now?

KOSTER: Yeah. I made that one. I made that ornament hanging in the window there. That one there, there's another one.

LEVINE: Wow. So you had an artist's side to you.

KOSTER: Well, I started that because I wanted to have some time, you know, you sit and look at that garbage there all the time, you go nuts with yourself. I started to, just to . . .

LEVINE: Oh, boy. Gee, you're really very talented.

KOSTER: Well, it takes a while to learn it. I never took any lessons or anything. I just looked at, from book work and so on. But the girl down, that sells the glass in the glass store, she says that, "You make the best lamps because of each one is exactly the way it should be."

LEVINE: So do you sell your lamps at all?

KOSTER: I haven't sold any lately. I did, for a couple of years I sold some down in Nyack. Maybe I sold ten or twenty. I don't know. Most of them that I make I gave the grandchildren, all have the house full of them. And . . .

LEVINE: So you've been productive.

KOSTER: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: You've turned out quite a few of them.

KOSTER: I figured I made at least between ninety and hundred. And all kinds of ornamental things, you know, like that little Christmas tree there. I made that, I see one thing has broke off, I made that.

LEVINE: The windmill?

KOSTER: Yeah, out of a wine bottle. I made that other thing out of a wine bottle. And smaller ornaments, and smaller lamps, only about that high. And a lot of them are just, somebody came, they liked it, take it along. There's a cracker bowl there that I made.

LEVINE: So do you work on this, like, in a given week do you do some work with your . . .

KOSTER: I have a room upstairs that it's a mess, but whenever I feel like it I go up a couple of hours and sit there and work. It keeps you going. Or, as they say, it keeps you out of trouble.

LEVINE: So is there anything that, looking back on your life, is there anything that you would say as sort of advice or . . .

KOSTER: Well, advice, what can you give, advice? I mean, all I know is that if you hadn't worked the hours that we put in in our work, we wouldn't have made it. And anybody that comes here, even today, with all these immigrants that come here and go on welfare, if they were willing to work you don't have to go on welfare. In this country you can make a living no matter what happens to you. There's no such thing as you can't get a job. If you can't get a job for ten dollars an hour, then take one for five, right? I switched work for two or three or four dollars a week, if somebody will offer me a couple of bucks more, I'd quit. I'd ask him, "Are you going to pay me the same, or I'll leave." But you can't go out and demand that you want so much money per hour. Today the country is, well, maybe I shouldn't say this either. The immigrants that we get today are unproductive.

LEVINE: What do you think the difference is?

KOSTER: Discipline.

LEVINE: So you learned discipline early in your life?

KOSTER: You learn discipline in school. Here if a kid complains in school, he goes home to Mommy and Mommy goes and bawls out the teacher, right? That didn't happen by us. If you came home complaining something happened in school to us, we got a shellacking, because whether we were wrong or right it didn't make any difference. There has to be some sort of, something has to be that the children don't have the last word. And a lot of immigrants, the same way. I mean, even, well, in Germany it's much different today, too. They are about the same as we are here today. Another thing that amazed me here is that the cities are so dirty. You go to Europe, you don't, I have never seen a city as dirty as New York. I've been in Spain, and Madrid was clean, Frankfurt was clean, and Frankfurt is a busy town, it was clean. Hamburg is, you don't find anything. Everything is spic and span. Here they throw everything out. I mean, I see it here. They throw everything out, out of cars onto the parkway. But I don't know if it will ever change. I doubt it. We were in San Francisco. San Francisco was pretty clean until they took us up

to, until they took us up on top of a mountain that you could overlook the whole city. With a bus they took us up there. And I says, "There must be a lot of people from out of town that come here." So the fellow says, "Why?" I says, "Look at it." I says, "Everything is dirty around here, and in San Francisco itself it's pretty clean." But they're, nobody comes over any more. They're all doing well over there now, you know. But I'm not sorry that I came. I mean, I would have never had the opportunities to do what I, the way I get together what I have. This country was the only one that offered that. Back home we, you could never accomplish that. The island is small, and usually one of the family stays home or takes over after the parents go, and there's just enough there to support that one, the rest of the children, they have to go someplace else.

LEVINE: So you, did most of your brothers and sisters come here as well?

KOSTER: My two brothers came here, and my two sisters came here. The youngest two brothers were killed in the Hitler war, but one sister came here and died early. She was only I think thirty-nine, and I have a sister

living in Forest Hills who is going to be ninety. And they're all, I mean, she and I are the only ones left.

The rest have all died. No, the country has been good to us, that's for sure.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

KOSTER: What can I say?

LEVINE: Do you, in the beginning, did you experience any prejudice against you for being an immigrant?

KOSTER: They called us heinies and greenhorns and so on. You took it as a joke and laughed it off, you know.

LEVINE: I mean, now people like you are being honored. I mean, that's why I'm here, because, you know . . .

KOSTER: We laughed it off because it meant nothing to us. We used to go out together, never alone, that I know of. Like, you didn't go out much, but on weekends, on Saturday nights, we usually meet together, three or four fellows, and go out, you know. And then sometimes people would pass a wisecrack and say something, but you look at them and you laugh at them because what does it mean? I mean, it's being done

all the same, right? No, it's really good. With all the hardships, with all the hardships that I had in the beginning it's really been good. And look what I have? (a voice is heard laughing off mike)

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you very much.

KOSTER: You're welcome.

LEVINE: This has been a very interesting story and, you know, it's people like you that Ellis Island Museum is there for, is to honor you and the people like you who came to this country. So, I want to thank you very much. This is Janet Levine. I've been talking with Martin Koster, and today is July 18, 1993, and I'm signing off. (break in tape) Thank you.