

EI-400

AGNES KUHL KEPHART

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 8, 1922

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

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GERMANY, 1925

AGE 3

PASSAGE ON "THE STUTTGART"

RESIDENCES: VILLAGE NEAR BADEN-BADEN
RIDGEWOOD, QUEENS, NY

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Kephart is the sister of Elizabeth Wowk, Interview EI-401. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/2/1996.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.
I'm here in Whiting, New Jersey today at the home of
Mr. and Mrs. Kephart. Agnes Kuhl Kephart came from
Germany in 1925 when she was three years old.

KEPHART: And a half. Three and a half.

LEVINE: Three and a half years.

KEPHART: Same.

LEVINE: Okay. And today is October 23rd, 1993. And we're going to later interview Agnes' sister who came over, and was older at that time. But we, this will be very interesting to have your perspective as a very young child.

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay, why don't we start at the beginning. If you'd give your birth date for the tape.

KEPHART: I was born in 1922, February the 8th.

LEVINE: And where in Germany were you born?

KEPHART: Near Baden-Baden. That's a casi-, there's a casino there like, like here in Atlantic City. But I...

LEVINE: That, that was active at that time?

KEPHART: As far as I know, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: Before, as far as I know, yes. It's an old time

thing.

LEVINE: Yeah. And how about your father, what was his name?

KEPHART: Paul Kuhl. Also K-U-H-L.

LEVINE: And, and what did he do?

KEPHART: He was a bricklayer in Germany. I think he was born in Berlin or in that vicinity, but I'm not positive. Nine-, in 1881.

LEVINE: And your mother, what was her name?

KEPHART: Was born in, Anna Katarina Maiforth.

LEVINE: Maiforth...

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...was her maiden name?

KEPHART: Actually in, in Germany you say "Maih-fort," but that's kind of peculiar name to say in Ger-, in English. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So...

KEPHART: And she was born near Kassel, or Kassel, in Germany, in 1887, '86.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you, who were your brothers and sisters?

KEPHART: My older sister that'll be here in a few minutes is Elizabeth, and she was born 1910. And my brother who lives in Long Island right now, he, he was born 1915, also in, near Baden-Baden.

LEVINE: So you were the baby of the family?

KEPHART: I was the baby, yes.

LEVINE: And how about grandparents? Were there any of those around?

KEPHART: There was a grandmother. I think I saw her only once. That was when, when we came to the United States. She was born, she was, she lived in Berlin. And over there I remember putting earphones on me and listening

to a radio with a great, big battery. I'm not, I really remember that from three and a half years old.

LEVINE: And this was in Berlin?

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: And this was when you were begin-, beginning your journey...

KEPHART: Just...

LEVINE: ...to come to the United States?

KEPHART: Yeah. Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: Wow.

KEPHART: That, that was my only living grandparent.

LEVINE: Tell, do you remember anything of your home before you left for the United States? Do you remember any memories?

KEPHART: I have a memory of that Easter that one of our

neighbors, she hid an egg, a chocolate egg with a, with a hole in the center and you can look through it.

You see then around here once in a while. And I remember looking for it. And I did find it. (she chuckles)

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: And also I remember going on a train. And I had a little ribbon on my blond hair. And apparently the, the window was open and the window, the ribbon blew off. (they laugh)

LEVINE: And do you remember any, I guess anything about, well, you wouldn't have gone to school. Do you remember anything that you liked?

KEPHART: Not really.

LEVINE: Food or anything like that?

KEPHART: I think, at that time in Germany I'm, I was told that I ate everything, but as soon as I came to the United States I was very finicky. Didn't want to eat anything. And skinny.

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LEVINE: And do you remember anything else about the trip?

KEPHART: Well, I remember being on the boat. It was eleven days on the, on the boat.

LEVINE: And what was the name of the boat?

KEPHART: The Stuttgart. Probably S.S. or M.S., whatever, whatever it is. I don't remember. And, excuse me. (she coughs) You can erase that. (she chuckles) I remember somebody taking my sister and my brother down into the hold of the ship. And we saw all these here yellow canaries. Why they were there, if they were being imported or if they were there for, to, to check on the air, the, I don't really know. But like a stewardess, somebody, maybe my sister would know. She, she was fifteen, and I was only three and a half.

LEVINE: Wow. What were you accommodations on the ship?

KEPHART: We had a regular cabin.

LEVINE: Just for your family?

KEPHART: Just my, my mother and my sister, brother and myself.

The three of us. My, my father had come over the, the year before, and eh saved money as a bricklayer, and he had the rest of his family come over. Then we moved into Brooklyn, or Ridgewood as it is, as far as I know it's still, it's Queens, but it's Ridgewood. And the first impression that my mother had, she opened the closet doors, and she saw a whole lot of cockroaches. She had never seen that before in her whole life. And she was scared. She saw them all, running all over the place. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Do you remember coming into the New York Harbor at all?

KEPHART: I, I think I do. And even remembering now, it was all dark in front of me. It must have been the, the pilings. I, I remember going from a, the big ship into a smaller one.

LEVINE: Right.

KEPHART: And going, going into the, into a building.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that building, Ellis

Island, the main building?

KEPHART: I, I might have, I might remember, but I'm not positive. I, I remember standing like in front of a desk, and people were probably interviewing my sister and my mother and so on.

LEVINE: Now, did your father meet you at Ellis Island?

KEPHART: My, my sister's brother met us. He lived in Manhattan at the time. I don't, I think, I don't think my father could take off from work at that time.

LEVINE: I see.

KEPHART: That, that time of day or whatever it was. I don't remember what time it was.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why don't we pause here for a second while your sister comes in gets settled. (break in tape) Okay we're resuming now. Elizabeth, Agnes' sister has just come in and we're going to resume. Okay, so your father, I'm sorry, will you say that again. Your father, did he meet, he couldn't take off of work, so...

KEPHART: That's what I remember.

LEVINE: ...or somebody else met you.

KEPHART: My, my uncle. My mother's brother. I think he was working nights at the time, and I don't know what time, we, we probably arrived in day time. And so he met us.

LEVINE: And do you remember him coming to Ellis Island, or do you remember...

KEPHART: Yeah, coming to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: I think he had to meet us there.

LEVINE: And you didn't know him?

KEPHART: No, I had never seen him before.

LEVINE: No. And, and do you remember the reunion with your father when you...

KEPHART: No, I don't.

LEVINE: ...finally did get to see him?

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else that struck you as new or different in this new country?

KEPHART: Well, I remember sleeping that night. And it was two hard chairs that were pushed together. I was only three, three and a half years old, so I didn't take much room. And he lived in only like a two or three room apartment on Fourth Street or thereabouts in Manhattan. Kind of a poor section.

LEVINE: Downtown?

KEPHART: Downtown Fourth Street.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you had what, blankets and pillows on top of these chairs?

KEPHART: I don't, it was August.

LEVINE: Oh.

KEPHART: So I, I probably didn't need any.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else that, that, you know...

KEPHART: No.

LEVINE: ...your first little while there that was different
for you.

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm. No.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KEPHART: I, I probably, when we went to Ridgewood to see all
these other people, and these great, big houses three
stories high, I had never seen anything like that
before, except in, probably in Berlin, but I don't
remember the houses over there.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything your mother told you?

KEPHART: At that time?

LEVINE: At that time?

KEPHART: No.

LEVINE: About being here or anything like that.

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there any way that you think coming here as a very young child and living most of your life in this country, do you think that having been born in Germany and immigrating here made some kind of a difference or effected you or your life in any ways?

KEPHART: Well, the place where we were born, it was near Baden-Baden. It was just a small, little town, little bit of a, of a village. I don't think I would have any, the opportunities that I had here. Although it was just before the Depression, also, so my, my parents didn't have much money. They, as a bricklayer there was no work at all for him. And we almost lost our, oh, that was aft-, that was 1930's. When we came over here it was 1925. And I know my parents had a hard time of it, of getting even fifty dollars a month for

the mortgage payment. That now is just, you spend it a day for groceries. (she chuckles)

LEVINE: Yeah. So, then you, you started regular school here at five years old, and...

KEPHART: I, I started in, as far as I know it was P.S. 88 or 81 on Cyprus Street in Ridgewood. I was there only the, the kindergarten and the first grade. Then I came to Long Island.

LEVINE: Were you able to speak English?

KEPHART: No.

LEVINE: Did you speak German at home, I...

KEPHART: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: ...where you learned German.

KEPHART: Right. Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: So when you went to school, what was it like not being about to speak...

KEPHART: Well, it was difficult for me trying to read and, but I, I learned it eventually.

LEVINE: Yeah. Were there, was there a German community around where you...

KEPHART: Yes, in, Ridgewood at that time was all German.

LEVINE: Do you have any sense of your mother's feelings about coming here?

KEPHART: I really don't remember.

LEVINE: And how about your father? Was he happy that you were here, or not, or...

KEPHART: Oh, he was probably happy that his family was here.

LEVINE: Do, was there ever a plan that the family would go back?

KEPHART: Not that I know of.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KEPHART: No, we never talked about that. We never wanted to go back. There, there was, there was a Depression, you know, it was 1930's, so I don't think it would have been any better over there. And politically my parents didn't want anything to do with, with Hitler and so on and their regime. We were all glad to be in the United States.

LEVINE: So you went to Ellis Island? You visited there? That's how you came to get the form?

KEPHART: Yes, right.

LEVINE: And how did you feel going back, or seeing it now as an adult?

KEPHART: It didn't seem like Ellis Island. All the pictures that I saw on the walls, they were all women from like the 1900's, all with the long dresses and the babushkas on it, and that isn't, that isn't the way I, it was when I came over. I know we came on the second, second class. We, we didn't, we weren't first class, otherwise we wouldn't have been on Ellis Island I understand. But as far as I know we were all

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dressed differently than that. In 1925 every, as far as I know it was all the short dresses and so on. But I'd like to see those kind of, of pictures in, in Ellis Island. But I suppose they're not available.

LEVINE: Well, I, I think, you know, Ellis Island was open from 19-, from 1892, so some of those people came...

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...a considerable time earlier.

KEPHART: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, is there anything else that you would mention about your life? Are there things that you feel very proud of that, that you've...

KEPHART: You mean in later, later life and so on?

LEVINE: ...later life.

KEPHART: Well, I didn't get married until quite a long time. And I had a defense job in Grumman Aircraft, in, right during the second world war, doing, I was a Rosie the

Riveter. (she chuckles)

LEVINE: Really?

KEPHART: And I enjoyed working...

LEVINE: Did you actually do physical...

KEPHART: Yeah. Oh, I was working on the airplanes, on the, on the Wildcat and the Hellcat in Grumman Aircraft, and had to climb all over the place. Well, I was young, twenty, in my early twenties at the time. And it was a challenging job.

LEVINE: And how, that was, can you say anything about that time, during World War Two, when the women were, were going and taking jobs like that one, and...

KEPHART: Well, if it hadn't been for the women I don't think that we could have made all those airplanes and did all those things. I think we were just as good as the men except for that, except for muscles and so on. We had to learn. And afterwards I, I worked in Sperry. I did mostly men's work shall I say. Sperry Gyroscope. And later on I also worked back in Grumman again.

LEVINE: And again doing...

KEPHART: Physical labor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: And also on airplanes and putting things together, putting parts together. And a lot of it was physical work. And also some brains because I worked with the, on, with the engineers. And sometimes I had to tell them that I wasn't able to do, do the work the way they wanted to do, because they had it only in their heads, but we had to do it actually physically with our, with our hands.

LEVINE: Wow. So, so you were working on airplanes then, the second job?

KEPHART: In the second, in the second world war then we were all laid off at, at the Japanese, the, the Vie-, the, in August, 1945.

LEVINE: Oh, the...

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KEPHART: Everybody was laid off. And only the men were re-, returned to Grumman Aircraft, and the men that came back from the war.

LEVINE: I see.

KEPHART: I had no chance of going back again until the 1960's.

LEVINE: I see. So how did you feel about that, that, you know...

KEPHART: Well, at that time it was a little different than it is now in 1990. You had no choice. And it wasn't a union job, that was seniority and so on. I had no, I couldn't go back even if I wanted to.

LEVINE: I see.

KEPHART: But I worked in McCall Corporation as a pattern maker. And I enjoyed that.

LEVINE: So, so then, what, what gave you the chance to go back to Grumman?

KEPHART: Well, the Vietnam War, and different contracts. All

together I have a little over ten years in, in Grumman. And later on I worked also on the, on "the LEM," the Lunar Excursion Module. That was a little different, too.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, can you say anything about that, what...

KEPHART: Well, I worked on, on the L-, LEM Three. That's the one that didn't go to the moon. But I worked on the electrical lighting system in, in the, in the module. And I always say if those lights went out it would have been my fault. (they laugh) But they didn't go out. (she coughs)

LEVINE: Wow. What an interesting career you've had then. So...

KEPHART: And I did a lot of travelling.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: In, well, I was able to. I didn't have to ask anybody, except my, where I was working. 1968 I went down to South America with a group of amateur photographers. And in 1969 with the same group, or

similar group, I went around the world in, in about thirty days. And I saw all the hell holes in, like in, in the world, like in parts of Calcutta and, and so on. And in 1973 we, we went to Australia. I did go back to Germany three times before that, but I haven't been back, just for a visit, but I haven't been back now in, since 1963. Someday I hope to go back.

LEVINE: Do you have any sort of sides of you that you consider German? I mean, how do you, how do you...

KEPHART: I'm not ethnic. I don't...

LEVINE: You don't...

KEPHART: I don't think so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: No, I, I get along with anybody. That doesn't, that doesn't bother me.

LEVINE: And how do you feel about this phase in your life, now that your retired and...

KEPHART: Oh, I'm glad I'm, I don't have to get up at five or six o'clock in the morning anymore, work eight or twelve, eight or ten hours a day. And my husband and I, we, we do a lot of travelling now. We have a, a motor home. And since 1984 when we got this second hand motor home which had only, had less than six thousand miles in, we have over ninety thousand miles on it now. We've gone out west at least three times. And we go down to Florida in the wintertime. We're enjoying our retirement.

LEVINE: And what is your husband's name?

KEPHART: Howard Kephart. He was born in, near Altoona in, in Pennsylvania. Then he, when he graduated from high school he went to Jersey City and then later on to Wayne, New Jersey.

LEVINE: So do you, is photography something that you, you do on your trips, and in...

KEPHART: On, yes.

LEVINE: ...in general?

KEPHART: And in Long Island before I moved to New Jersey I did do some professional photography, like weddings and portraits and so on. And now with these, the slides that I take from, from the trips that I have done, we make slide shows to give to, to senior citizens and church groups and so on. I have one slide show that was two projectors and a dissolve unit. And that's about wild flowers from around here and Long Island where I used to work. We used to live (unintelligible). And then the second slide show is on oil tankers. I used to work in a Exxon oil tanker. Three different ones, oh, for about five months when I was, oh, 1981. And I have another slide show that I, it's a spoof...

LEVINE: What did you, what did you take

KEPHART: On...

LEVINE: ...you took pictures of the oil tankers...

KEPHART: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...and that's what...

KEPHART: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: Of the men and women working. At that time there was at least a half dozen women on some of the oil tankers. I worked on three of them. The, the Chester, the Houston, and the Boston. But then I stopped.

LEVINE: Was this kind of a maintenance kind of work that you were doing?

KEPHART: I was doing, I was cleaning the rooms, and also as a waitress.

LEVINE: Oh.

KEPHART: Like when I was a waitress I would be working like three times a day taking care of, of the food, the, waiting, serving the, the people. And we had a oil spill. And that was very interesting being on, being in dry dock. It was entirely different life than I've ever imagined. Believe me, it was. (she laughs) But

it was very interesting. I'm not sorry that I, that I went. But it was the only job that was available. I, when I moved from Long Island, well, my rent was raised seventy-five dollars a month, so I moved into a senior citizen place. I didn't like it in the beginning because I was a lot younger than all the other people, but it was cheaper to living here. But when I came here I couldn't find a job. There's al-, always part time, and the basic, basic wages.

LEVINE: So, I interrupted you, I'm sorry, about, you said after you did the slide show with the two projectors for the, for the oil tanker...

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm..

LEVINE: ...you did another one?

KEPHART: I did another one. Well, it's a spoof. I'm not sure if some people don't know what a spoof is. Do you know?

LEVINE: If you want to say, yeah, if you want to say.

KEPHART: Well, I'll show a picture, or I'll say this is where I

used to work. And I'll describe it as a beautiful building with a nice, nice, everything is modern and the landscape is beautiful and, and so on, and really up to the hilt. But the picture I'll show is an old dilapidated building all torn down, or I'll show outhouses. There's another one I have, there's about twenty pictures I have of things like that. I have a real fat old lady. She's on a three wheel bicycle and her husband's pushing the bicycle, and with just one little package in it, and I'll say, "This is our expeditor." Then I have another picture of our so called where we ate. Downtown Manhattan, I'm not sure if it's still there. It's, it's called Essex House. Oh, a small eating place. Not, not, not the hotel. And somebody showed me how to take this particular picture with a, with the telephone pole right in the middle of it, so it says, "Sex Deli." (she laughs) And different things like. It's cute. People enjoy it. It's a laugh.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. That's great.

KEPHART: I'm going to making more, more slide shows, but it takes time. And when you're, when you're a senior citizen you don't have time. Believe me, you don't.

You should see our calendar. It's, every day has something on it.

LEVINE: So you, so you'll take your slide shows around to senior citizen...

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...centers, and show them?

KEPHART: Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: And camera clubs, and churches and so on.

LEVINE: Well, I can see you're busy. Okay, well, is there anything else that you can think of that you would want to say?

KEPHART: I had our father's name put on for the hundred dollars...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KEPHART: ...put on to the...

LEVINE: Wall of Honor?

KEPHART: ...Wall of Honor. And I looked there, and I saw it, and took a pencil and went over it.

LEVINE: Okay, well, I want to thank, I mean, you were only three, three and a half when you came...

KEPHART: Hmm-hmm.

LEVINE: ...so, but it's amazing that you have as many memories as you do of such an early time. But you certainly had an interesting life. My goodness.

KEPHART: I think so. Pretty interesting.

LEVINE: Yeah.

KEPHART: I had to make it interesting, because I didn't get married for a long time, and that, that was my, my life.

LEVINE: Okay, well, I want to thank you very much.

KEPHART: You're welcome.

LEVINE: It's been a pleasure talking with you. I've been speaking with Agnes Kephart, and this is October 23rd, 1993, and we're here at the Kephart's home in Whiting, New Jersey. And this is Janet Levine signing off.