

EI-798

HERBERT KRETSCHMAR

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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GERMANY, 1913

AGE 4

SHIP: THE PRESIDENT GRANT

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, September 7th, 1996. I'm in Agawam, Massachusetts and I'm here with Herbert Kretschmar. Mr. Kretschmar came from Germany in 1913. They arrived in October 1913. He was four years old at that time. Present at the interview is his son and his daughter-in-law and the microphone may pick up some extraneous noise out in the hallway. Mr. Kretschmar, thank you for letting me come out. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

KRETSCHMAR: I was born July 17th, 1909.

SIGRIST: What was the name that you were born with in Germany?

KRETSCHMAR: I was born as Herbert Hans Kretschmar. But in Germany they are—your call name was always listed on your birth certificate next to your surname. So I went by the name of Hans until I met

my wife here in the United States, and then Hans was not a very good name to make an acquaintance with a—try to make an impression on a young girl, so I changed to Herbert. [Laughs]

SIGIRST: Can you also explain to me, as we did a little bit before we started the interview, the difference in the spelling of the last name? Spell Kretschmar as it is in America and please spell it for me as it was in Germany.

KRETSCHMAR: Well, as—as it is in America, it's K-R-E-T-S-C-H-M-A-R. In Germany we had a Z in it. K-R-E-T-Z, but that made the pronunciation for our American friends very, very difficult. So it wasn't too long after we arrived when we had started to drop the Z, so as not to confuse our friends.

SIGIRST: In—in Germany when you spell it with a Z, do you include the CH after it?

KRETSCHMAR: Ah—eh—

SIGIRST: Spell it as you spelled it in Germany.

KRETSCHMAR: In Germany it was K-R-E-T-Z-S-C-H-M-A-R. So actually we only dropped the Z.

SIGIRST: I see. Well, that's interesting. Do you know anything about when your father changed the name or any of the circumstances surrounding that?

KRETSCHMAR: Actually, my father did not change the name. His boys, in the United States here that—as they—as they grew up, they changed the name. In fact, my next oldest brother, Wolfgang, he still keeps the Z. He's the only one in the whole family that still carries the Z.

SIGIRST: I see. So you were already here in the United States for a while before that happened.

KRETSCHMAR: Yes. Yeah. Oh, yes.

SIGIRST: What do you know about your birth? What do you know about the circumstances surrounding your birth?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, I—I remember my mother used to talk to us kids and she gave us background on that. She met my father—well, actually, she and her sisters were on vacation in the North Sea at the

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seashore and my father was working as a waiter up there in one of the restaurants and he met my mother, and he became enamored with her and before long afterwards, he showed up in my mother's hometown, which was Glauchau, in Germany.

SIGIRST: Can you spell it?

KRETSCHMAR: Spell it? Let's see, it's G-L-A-U-C-H-A-U. Glauchau. Glauchau, Germany. And he courted her and before long, that's how they became acquainted. And then they got married and he went to work in a machine shop in Dohna, Germany. In Dohna, Germany where they lived after—

SIGIRST: Spell that, too, please?

KRETSCHMAR: D-O-H-N-A. Dohna.

SIGIRST: Thank you.

KRETSCHMAR: And then after the children began to be born, my older brother and his—and my next brother Wolfgang were born in Dohna, and then they had a chance to buy a small tobacco shop in Dresden, which is not far from Dohna. That's all in that general area and that's where I was born, in Dresden, Germany. Now there were three boys. It was 1913. The—there was already starting to be unrest in Germany, the coming of the—of the First World War, and they had—were friends with a family, Oscar and Clara Seidel, and they had—

SIGIRST: Spell Seidel, please.

KRETSCHMAR: Seidel, S-E-I-D-E-L.

SIGIRST: Thank you.

KRETSCHMAR: S-E-I-D-E-L. And they were very good friends and so Oscar Seidel had been to the United States here and he says—he told my father that "There's a Germany factory in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Robert Bosch Magneto Corporation, that hire Germany people and if we went over there, we'd get away from all this unrest and probably make a better life for ourselves over there." So they talked very long during the night, my—my mother told us there were a lot of long night conversations and finally it was decided Oscar and my father would come to the United States, get a job, save money and then send for the families. So my dad came over early in 1913 on a small ship. It wasn't like the

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President Grant, and after a long story voyage, he landed at Ellis Island in early—February or March of 1913, and he did get the job in the American—the Robert Bosch Magneto Corporation.

SIGIRST: Can you spell that please for me.

KRETSCHMAR: The Bosch—

SIGIRST: The name of the company.

KRETSCHMAR: Robert Bosch, B-O-S-C-H. Robert Bosch Magneto Corporation. In fact—

SIGIRST: Magneto?

KRETSCHMAR: Magneto, like a—automobiles in the old days didn't have distributors. They had magnetos to start the car. You used to crank the car and the magneto would make the spark to start—fire the engine on it. And so then they saved up the money and—and early in September they had enough money saved to bring the family over here. In fact, while—my mother said while he was over here, that he got a job where—in a millenary factory, a home job where they would send a collection of straw hats to my mother, and while she was at home with her three kids, she would sew the trim on the flowers and the lace and the trim on the ladies' straw hats, and all that money she said was saved towards the passage.

SIGIRST: Great. Well, we'll talk more about that when we get you to the time to leave.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: Going back to your birth—

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: Do you—did your mother ever tell you a story about her delivery of you?

KRETSCHMAR: No. No. No, she didn't. No. She just—I apparently just arrived magically. [Laughs]

SIGIRST: Tell me what you remember, if anything, about your—your four years in Dresden. What—what stands out in your house? Do

you remember the house? In your mind, rather? Do you remember the house or any of that kind of—

KRETSCHMAR: Actually, I do not remember that. I—in fact, I do not remember either set of grandparents that I had. I do not remember. My first recollections, as far as I can go back, was the ship. The ship, you know. On the ship. The water. The wind, and the stairs and the bunks. The ship is what I remember.

SIGIRST: What was your mother's name?

KRETSCHMAR: My mother's name was Elsa Valeska, and her maiden name was Joachim.

SIGIRST: All right, can you spell all of that for us? Elsa we can probably do.

KRETSCHMAR: Elsa, E-L-S-A, yeah.

SIGIRST: Right.

KRETSCHMAR: Valeska, was V-A-L-E-S-K-A and then her maiden name was Joachim, J-O-A-C-H-I-M.

SIGIRST: The—the Valaska—

KRETSCHMAR: Vales—Valeska.

SIGIRST: Valeska. What—was she named after someone? Was that a middle name of some sort?

KRETSCHMAR: I—I don't know because in Germany apparently she was called Valeska. She went by the name, call name of Valeska, but like when she got over here her birth certificate said Elsa Valeska Kretschmar, see. So she became Elsa when she arrived at Ellis Island.

SIGIRST: What—what do you know about your mother's family background and maybe her growing up?

KRETSCHMAR: Well—well, now, my—my mother said her father was a neighborhood grocery, had a neighborhood grocery store, and my mother said that her mother died when she was five years old. And so her father married again and she and her—she was the youngest. Three girls. There were—he had three girls, so had to marry soon so have someone take care of the kids. And that she was brought up by a very strict stepmother.

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SIGIRST: Did your mother ever talk about the death of her real mother at all? Do you know any of her recollections of that?

KRETSCHMAR: No, I—I think she was really too young to remember—to remember it, too. Yeah, she never mentioned that.

SIGIRST: So, she was brought up by—by a stepmother. Were there any stories that she liked to tell about her own childhood?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, she—one—one that she told—told us was that one time her stepmother was missing ten cents. Missing cents, so she accused the three girls, one of the girls who took the ten cents, and—and so no—of course nobody—they all denied it. They all denied it, and so she said she going to give them a spanking, you know, right—until she find out which one. So they all three got a good spanking and then afterwards, her stepmother found the ten cents, and she says, “Oh, well. You probably deserved it anyway.” [Laughs]

SIGIRST: Nice little character sketch of the stepmother.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: In that story. Tell me what your mother’s personality was like?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, she had a wonderful personality. Wonderful personality. Outgoing, friendly, where my dad was just the opposite. See, he was reserved, the old—old country stern parent, see. But my mother was marvelous.

SIGIRST: When you were growing up here in this country—

KRETSCHMAR: Yes.

SIGIRST: And your mother had some time to spend on herself, to do something that she enjoyed doing for herself, what would she do?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, I think her—her—her joys were her children. Were her children. She—and the neighbors and she was very—very outgoing, but—

SIGIRST: Was there a hobby or a craft that she would do or—

KRETSCHMAR: Well, not—not really.

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SIGIRST: No?

KRETSCHMAR: I don't—I don't seem to remember anything. Just we'd go to visit, you know, and she was always there. Always—a good cook, you know, the old Germany style cooking and then it was shortly after I was born—shortly after we got to America she became sick with what now they would call it polymyalgia rheumatica, but at that time they didn't even know what it was. And that—that's what I remember from that part.

SIGIRST: Did she recover from that?

KRETSCHMAR: Not really. She went into remission after remission after that, but it was after—after we—after we got to America, yeah.

SIGIRST: What was your father's name?

KRETSCHMAR: It was Friedrich Richard Kretschmar.

SIGIRST: And since there are several different spellings of Friedrich, could you spell the one he was?

KRETSCHMAR: I think he was F-R-I—Friedrich. F-R-I-E-D-R-I-C-H. Friedrich.

SIGIRST: And what do you know about your dad's family background and his growing up?

KRETSCHMAR: He—he—he was—he grew up on a farm in—let's see, where was that? The farm was—was in Gröeden Bei Elste Werde.

SIGIRST: Can you spell all that, please?

KRETSCHMAR: Gröeden, G-R-O-E-D-E-N, with the two little dots over the O. I don't know why they put them there. Then Bei, B-E-I. That's Gröeden near Elste Werde. Elste, E-L-S-T-E, Elste. Werde, W-E-R-D-E.

SIGIRST: Thank you. [Chuckles]

KRETSCHMAR: They—they were on a farm and he also lost his mother before he was—before he was ten years old, I guess, and his father married again and he told us that he had a half brother in Germany, but we—we never met the half brother. Although my—my sister—my—the youngest one of our children, she had written to the cousins in German there. She got—got hold the addresses

somehow and got a picture of my father's half brother and his wife and two little kids. Yeah.

SIGIRST: Were there stories that your father would tell about his growing up and his childhood?

KRETSCHMAR: He—he was not a very communicative—the things that we learned about my father's growing up was from my mother. That he had told my mother and my mother told us kids. He never told us nothing. [Laughs]

SIGIRST: So he was much more reserved about—

KRETSCHMAR: Very reserved, yeah.

SIGIRST: You mentioned that he had a mother that died. Do you know anything about his father?

KRETSCHMAR: His father quite—quite an elderly age. Yeah. that must be where we got our genes from, from his father and my father. My father lived to eighty and my brother was ninety when he died and I—I've got a brother eighty-nine, eighty-seven and seventy-nine and seventy-seven. We got good genes from my Grandpa Kretschmar.

SIGIRST: You've mentioned that your father was a more reserved person. Talk a little bit more about his personality.

KRETSCHMAR: Personality. He was a hard worker. Very honest. No curse words in—in front of my father or you heard about it. [Laughs] And—and just good to my mother and my—oh, how he took care of my mother when she was sick there. Marvelous person.

SIGIRST: What did he look like, in words?

KRETSCHMAR: Words? Ah, a handsome man, yeah. Let's see, I was going to say something like my son Richard, but no, Richard looks more like Grandpa Joachim, I think, on my mother's side. But a good looking man. Dark curly hair. In fact, he had—eight years old and he still had all his hair, where my Grandpa Joachim was like me. Like me and like my son, David, and Dick—Dick's forehead is getting kind of high.

SIGIRST: We should say, since this an audio tape, that you're referring to perhaps that you have a little less hair.

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KRETSCHMAR: Yeah. [Laughs] Right.

SIGIRST: Okay. When your father had time to himself, what would he do for his own enjoyment?

KRETSCHMAR: Gardening. He was an avid gardener.

SIGIRST: What were his favorite things to grow?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, asparagus. Yeah, he had the most fabulous asparagus bed on the—in his garden there in Wilbraham. That was when he was living in Wilbraham, Massachusetts. When he had moved from Springfield to Wilbraham just, oh, not too long before he retired. Yeah.

SIGIRST: Is there a story that you can tell us that talks about your father's gardening somehow? Maybe something that happened once or that involves the gardening?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, like my mother used to say—see, pa was very reserved, but when my son Richard was born, my wife and I used to take Dick out to visit grandpa and grandma and my father would be out in the garden with the little cultivator walking up and down the aisles and my mother would say, "Hey, come here. Look out the window. Look at your father," and there was little Richard hanging on—onto the little cultivator and grandpa behind him and he was helping grandpa do the rows, without being told anything. So that shows that he had his soft side, too.

SIGIRST: Yes, true.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: You say that your memory comes in about the ship.

KRETSCHMAR: The ship, yeah.

SIGIRST: At that point. What do you know, perhaps through your mother about the time spent—you said your mother took in hat trimming house—

KRETSCHMAR: Right.

SIGIRST: What else do you know about the period when your father was gone? Prior to your leaving?

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KRETSCHMAR: That's—that's—they did—it was all just save up money. Save the money. Get the passage together. The quicker we could leave, the better, see.

SIGIRST: Do you know what they packed to take with them to the United States?

KRETSCHMAR: I know it was pillows and blankets and clothes and that's about all. No suitcase. We had no suitcases or trunk. It was just bedroll. Rolls, you know. Bedrolls like. Yeah.

SIGIRST: Do you remember or did your mother ever tell you anything about saying goodbye to any family members there?

KRETSCHMAR: No. That—that must have been hard. Now, I don't remember that because she left two sisters there when she left. She left two sisters in Germany.

SIGIRST: And it was—going to America was your mother and the three boys, right?

KRETSCHMAR: Right.

SIGIRST: And what were the boys' names? I mean, we know your name.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: And the other—

KRETSCHMAR: The other one was Gerhard Richard. G-E-R-H-A-R-D, which he changed—had legally changed to Gary later on.

SIGIRST: And that was the oldest of the three.

KRETSCHMAR: That was the oldest one. Then the other one was Wolfgang Helmut. Wolfgang is W-O-L-F-G-A-N-G. Helmut is H_E-L-M-U-T.

SIGIRST: Did he change that when he got to the United States?

KRETSCHMAR: Wolfgang was the only one that never changed a thing. [Laughs]

SIGIRST: And he's the brother that to this day retains the Z in the—

KRETSCHMAR: He retained the Z and he's still living in Florida, now. Yeah.

SIGIRST: What was the name on the ship that you came on?

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KRETSCHMAR: Well, we came on the US President Grant.

SIGIRST: And where did you go to get on the ship?

KRETSCHMAR: To Kuckshaven, [PH] Germany.

SIGIRST: Did your mother ever relate any information about going to Dresden Kuckshaven?

KRETSCHMAR: No, it seems that by magic all of a sudden I was on the ship.
[Laughs]

SIGIRST: You just appeared on the ship. Oh, good. Well, let's—let's pick up your life there on the ship then.

KRETSCHMAR: Okay.

SIGIRST: Tell me what you remember about being on the ship. What stuck out in your mind all these years about that experience?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, I think the--the first thing that struck me was that we got on the ship and then we were taken downstairs. Stairs, downstairs and more stairs and then entered in the hold of ship and there was a big room with tiers of cots on either side of the room with draw curtains. And we were assigned to two of those cots. Wolfgang and Gerhard slept in the upper bunk and mom and I slept in the lower bunk. So that was our home while we were on the ship. And then I remember that every day for a certain period of time, probably two hours or so, we were allowed to go up on the deck for fresh air and we could walk along the deck. And, oh, I remember one thing. My mother had bought for the—for the ship—the voyage she had bought us new clothes and also sailor hats. Sailor hats and we got up on deck and she realized that she had forgotten the sailor hats. So she said, "Gerhard, go downstairs. Get the sailor hats." So he went down to the bunk, got them, and he come bounding up the stairs with all three hats in a tier on top of his head. And he come running, a gust of wind snatched them off his head and into the ocean and we looked and there goes our hats. [Laughs] That's stuck into my mind there. I can see it right now. Most amazing, you know. We had plenty to eat on the ship, seemed like.

SIGIRST: Do you know where you were fed on the ship or any of the specifics of that?

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KRETSCHMAR: Where what?

SIGIRST: Where you fed on the ship?

KRETSCHMAR: In the—in the—like in a—in a dining hall. In a dining hall. We went by groups, you know. So many—so many people can go now, okay, and then the next group. Their done and the next group go and then the next group go. It was rotation like, you know.

SIGIRST: Do you have any recollections of the staff on the ship?

KRETSCHMAR: They were—they were friendly. The staff was friendly. Yeah, very friendly.

SIGIRST: Do you know how long the ship took to get to the United States?

KRETSCHMAR: Yes. I—I—I—it seemed a lot sooner, but when I got the—the manifest—the page of the manifest, I found out that we left Germany on September the 20th, 1913 and arrived at Ellis Island on October 1st, 1913. So that was ten days. Not what I thought was six or seven.

SIGIRST: Do you have any recollections of the ship coming into New York Harbor?

KRETSCHMAR: Not—

SIGIRST: When the trip—where does your memory kick in next?

KRETSCHMAR: In—in—on Ellis Island. My memory—

SIGIRST: What do you remember about that?

KRETSCHMAR: The first thing, you know, being—being led in and standing—standing in line while they were registered, you know. Like who is—who—who you were and so forth, see. And then after we were registered, standing in line, the staircase. The first—no, the second—no, the first thing was after we were registered, we were allowed to—my mother was allowed to give us a shower and clean us up, you know, and after that I think that they were called by—by name, you know, to stand in line for the examination. You know, the health examination, and I remember the—the staircase. It was like divided in tiers in the long line. You got into this long line and then gradually wound your way up this great big staircase

and there were people standing at the desk up—up at the top and one check—checking off the name and then the doctor would give you the examination, you know. He'd look—look through your hair for mites or anything like that, you know, or scabs or growths or anything like. And then open your mouth, you know, and then he put a stick on your tongue and said, "Ahhh," you know. Say, "Ahhh." Cough, cough, you know. Thump on your back. Listen to your heart and then that's it, "You're okay." [Laughs] And luckily we all passed, but I remember a couple that was ahead of us that had a couple children and something must have been the matter with one of the children because there was shaking of heads and they—then they marked an "X" on their back and they were held back. But luckily we got through and it was such a—such a relief.

SIGIRST: Did someone meet you at Ellis Island?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, then it was either the next morning—we stayed over night one night. One—one night. We slept back in the bunk there for one—in Ellis Island, you know. It was—they also had bunk beds in rooms there, and we stayed overnight, and the next morning we went to the big waiting room down there and there was my father, see. [Laughs] And—and there was a big tearful reunion, you know, and then we got on the ferry over to the mainland and I remember the subway ride. I'd never ridden on a subway, you know, but we go down—down some stairs and get on a subway train to Grand Central Station and then at Grand Central Station, we got on the train for Springfield, Massachusetts.

SIGIRST: Did your father look different to you in any way when you saw him?

KRETSCHMAR: Seems—seems to me that I had to see, "Which one is Pa?" see. [Laughs] I really didn't—didn't even remember what he looked like from just six months away. Isn't that amazing? Yeah. Yeah.

SIGIRST: All right. So you—you took a subway to Grand Central.

KRETSCHMAR: Grand Central.

SIGIRST: And then you went to Springfield.

KRETSCHMAR: To Springfield.

SIGIRST: Do you remember the train ride at all or anything stick out in your mind about the train ride?

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KRETSCHMAR: I think I slept most of the time. I was tired. I was a young kid yet, you know.

SIGIRST: When you were on the ship or at Ellis Island or on that train ride, did you see anything that you had never seen before? See anything for the first time?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, I'm sure I did, yeah. Like, oh, the—

SIGIRST: [unclear]

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, the subway.

SIGIRST: Yeah, right.

KRETSCHMAR: The subway, that was—I don't remember—I don't remember the Statue of Liberty. Isn't that funny? I don't—I was too young for that, yeah.

SIGIRST: Well, tell me, when you arrived in Springfield what happened?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, we got off of the train in Springfield and on the Union Station on Lyman Street in Springfield.

SIGIRST: How do you spell Lyman?

KRETSCHMAR: L-Y-M-A-N.

SIGIRST: Thank you.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah, and then we come out of—got our rolls of baggage and out—and we boarded an electric trolley car. The electric trolley car. Electric trolley car went down Main Street and up State Street and it—it went up State Street Hill and out to Berkshire Avenue, where Boston Road and Berkshire Avenue divided. Went out to Berkshire and it continued on Berkshire Avenue to Harvey Street, which was the end of the line. When we got to the end of the line, everybody got off the trolley. Now, I remember that and my—my—then we started through a dirt road down Harvey Street, across Boston Road and another dirt road. And now, my dad picked me up and he carried the heaviest roll of blanket and my mother divided the rest between Gerhard, Wolfgang and herself and we walked along this dirt road and then all of a sudden it was—it was dark and my father set me down on the ground and we all stopped and he pointed, and he said,

“There is your new home in America.” And I looked, there was a tall two and a half story house and it was bright moonlight, bright moonlight with clouds, you know. Just the picture’s still—still vivid in my mind and my mother said, “How many people do we share the house with?” and my father said, “Oh, no other people. It’s just us,” and my mother said to him, “Are you crazy? We can’t afford a whole house for ourself,” and he said, “The rent is only eight dollars a month and I already earn twelve dollars a week at the factory.” I remember that, and we got—we got into the house and I remember my mother made hot—hot chocolate and we got some hot chocolate and some, I think they were graham crackers and they put us to bed upstairs and I—I can remember hearing their voices, the murmur of their voices downstairs and we’d been conked out to sleep. Next thing—next morning when we woke up, my father was already gone. He’d already gone back to work early.

[END OF SIDE A]
[BEGIN SIDE B]

SIGIRST: Can you describe some of the details of the house itself? This is on Harvey Street you said.

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, the—wait, the house itself was on Fargo Street, which—

SIGIRST: Fargo Street.

KRETSCHMAR: Which runs off of—on the corner of Gilbert Avenue and Fargo Street. It was all dirt roads then. There was the outskirts of the city. It was on the outskirts of the city.

SIGIRST: And—and describe the house. You said it was a two and a half story.

KRETSCHMAR: Two and a half story with the—it didn’t have a porch at that time. The porch I noticed was built on the—that house is still standing, you know. I’ve gone back and taken a picture of it, you know, just for kicks’ sake.

SIGIRST: How many rooms did it have?

KRETSCHMAR: Let’s see, it must have been three rooms downstairs. A kitchen and a living room and I think a bedroom downstairs and two—two bedrooms upstairs. And—

SIGIRST: How was the house lit?

KRETSCHMAR: Kerosene lamps. [Laughs] Kerosene lamps, yeah.

SIGIRST: Do you have any stories associated with having to light the house with lamps, something that happened with the lamps maybe?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, not—not there. I was too young there, but when—after—after my mother had gotten sick. Oh, that's—but that's—well, that's another story, though. That's later. Later on and when we moved to Alabama and we lived in a farm house in Alabama and had all just kerosene lamps. And that was one of my brother's chores. That wasn't one of my chores.

SIGIRST: You moved to the state Alabama?

KRETSCHMAR: The state of Alabama.

SIGIRST: The state, and that was after your mother was sick?

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGIRST: Okay. Well, tell me more—how long did you stay in the house on Fargo Street in Springfield?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, let's see. Well, the next—the next morning after—after we got up, my father had gone to work so we kids went out to play. And in fact, my father had explained to my mother that this card in the window is for the ice man and he will bring—he will see how much ice you want and he will bring the ice and put it in your refrigerator for you. So we were out in the yard looking around and exploring, when this horse and wagon came down the street loaded with ice. The man with the leather apron in front, and he got off and he chopped a square of ice for our ice box and brought it in, put it in our ice box and he went out to the wagon and then we followed him out to the wagon. He chopped a little chip of ice for all three of us boys there, you know. So we all said "dunka chen." [PH][Laughs] And so that's thank you in German, you know, and that afternoon we noticed the kids coming home. It was a school day, so there were no kids around, but in the afternoon here comes three boys just about our size, down the street and they took a look—look at us, as they walked by, walked back home and a short while later they were back up, you know. And now, they were talking to us in English and we would talk to them to German, you know, and nobody knew what anybody was saying, but we laughed a lot and we had a lot of fun. [Laughs] And then the next day Mrs. Meade—we found out that their

names were Harold, Arthur and Ralph. Harold, Arthur and Ralph. See, I still remember them, and the next day Mrs. Meade—they must have told them—told their mother that family moved into the empty house. Funny looking kids that talk funny. [Laughs] And so Mrs. Meade came to the house bringing a cake she had baked to welcome my mother into the neighborhood. And so my mother made coffee and so we each had a little piece of cake and then my mother sent us out to play and she and Mrs. Meade sort of by sign language got acquainted. And that afternoon, Mrs. Meade came back with Mrs. Soland, a German speaking Swiss woman who lived nearby and Mrs. Soland, as interpreter got—got everybody acquainted there and my mother and Mrs. Meade and Mrs. Soland became like long friends.

SIGIRST: How do you spell Soland?

KRETSCHMAR: S-O-L-A-N-D.

SIGIRST: And they lived on Boston Road right across from Breckwood Boulevard is now. At that time there was no street through there at all. It was all just woods and pasture and a nice big house and a barn and Mr. Soland had a blacksmith shop in the—in the barn that he used to shoe horses there. And the Solands had beautiful pond in there—back above their land there, which froze over—over in the winter and us kids used to go skating on Soland's pond. It was marvelous, you know.

SIGIRST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's initial adaptation to the United States. Now—now Mrs. Soland is a godsend to her.

KRETSCHMAR: Yes.

SIGIRST: A woman who can speak English—ah, speak German.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGIRST: Talk a little bit about your mother's—when she first got to America, did she attempt to learn English?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, yes, but Mrs. Soland took my mother and us three to Boston Road School to—to get us enrolled in the school and—now, see I lost my train of thought. To get us enrolled in the school.

SIGIRST: Learning English.

KRETSCHMAR: To learn English and I remember we could—we couldn't understand a word of English and now I was young. My God, not even five, but I suppose at that time they didn't care how old you were. They stuck me in the room with these—all these other little kids and I didn't know a word and my mother, in German, told me, "Don't worry," you know. "When school is over, Gerhard will come to the room here and he'll pick you up and he'll bring you home," you know. And I sat in that room, didn't know a soul. Didn't understand a word that anybody was saying, you know, and I felt so alone. Never so—I never felt as alone again as I felt at that time there, and oh, God, I wanted to cry, but I was too scared to cry. [Laughs] It was shortly after that when we started to learn German words, you know. Picking up German words, and one day the teacher had made an announcement. The teacher said that at recess "don't go down the hall and drink water out of the fountain because the plumber has disconnected the drain and don't use it," see. So I says, "Recess. I know what recess is," you know. "Water? Water? I know what water is." I knew water. "Drink. Drink water. Recess we're supposed to drink water!" What a marvelous break through in communication, see. I sat on the edge of my seat waiting for the bell to ring. When the bell rang, out of seat, first one out the door down the hallway to the drinking fountain, merrily drinking away there, not noticing the river of water running down the hall, when somebody grabbed me by the back of my neck and pulled me away. "You bad boy! Right after you were told not to do it," you know. "No recess for you." Back to my room, plunked me in the seat. I said, "My God, what happened?" And so we brought our books home from school, brought our reading books home from school. My mother says, "Okay, now you sit down. You teach me to read," you know, and then she'd read the story. "Tom lives in the house with the red roof," you know. So my mother would read, "Tom-lives-in-the-house-wit-the-red-roof." "No, mom. With. With, not wit." "Yeah, oh. Yeah, yeah, okay. Tom-lives-in-the-house-wit-the-red-roof." "No, ma, with. With." "Damn it, I am saying wit." [Laughs] So we gave it up. Then we gave it up and she learned to read very good, learned to write English and I don't know how my father learned how to. We never—I never remember him reading with us, but my mother would read with us and it was marvelous. She became acclimated.

SIGIRST: Can you talk a little bit about how your mother maybe socialized? You talked a little bit about the neighbor that—that she—

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: Who sort of befriended her, but I'm wondering if your mother and father made attempts to connect with the German community in Springfield if there was one?

KRETSCHMAR: Only the Seidel family, which came over on the boat. You know, Clara Seidel and Oscar and Clara Seidel and their five kids. They, Sundays, you know, they'd come over to our place on Sundays and sometime we'd go over to their—their—their house on Sundays, but as far as, I don't remember them—she made friends with the—with the neighbors around there, you know. With the neighbors around. We had American friends. [Laughs]

SIGIRST: Talk a little bit—of course, this is—you know, World War I is just beginning at this time.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

SIGIRST: Did your family feel or did you experience any kind of prejudice, being Germans in America during the First World War?

KRETSCHMAR: See, when we went—when we went to school—when we went to school, the first—the first day that we went to school, when we kids came out—came out of school for recess there, you know, all the kids—we stood off to the side and all the kids, they stood around us, you know, laughing at us because we had the German style clothes on. The white sailor type midi blouse with the big square sailor type thing, short sleeves, shorts cut off just above the knees, you know. Little shorts and socks and shoes, you know, and that—so the kids made fun of us, you know. Oh, laughing at us, and kids at that time, all the boys wore knickerbockers, you know. They wouldn't be caught dead in anything but knickerbockers and white shirts with long sleeves, you know. And so when we got home from school that day, my mother said to—to us, “[German].” “Well, how was it in school?” you know, and we told her, “We are never, but never going back to that American school again.” Then she get it out, the kids all laughed at us, the clothes we wore. They were so—the pants. It was the pants especially and so then when my father came home from work, she told my father, “We got to buy the boys new pants,” and my father says, “What? What new pants? Those are new pants. Those pants are good enough,” you know. So my mother says, “Our boys, they have their handicap of not understanding the language. They got to learn a new language. They don't need the extra handicap of having the wrong kind of pants.” So she got Mrs. Soland took my mother and us kids down to Poole's Department Store on the trolley car, which was on the

corner of Court Square and Main Street in Springfield way back then, and bought us knickerbockers pants and white shirts. Oh, God, how we loved mom for understanding about those pants.
[Laughs]

And then—okay, so the next year was 1914 and now already the unrest in Germany had started and all of a sudden the kids that were our friends in school before now would say, “Ah, you darn old Huns,” you know. “How you like the Kaiser, German?” or “How do you like the Kaiser?” I said to my brother Gary, I says, “Gerhard, what’s the Kaiser?” I didn’t know what a Kaiser was, you know, and why they were tormenting us. And they, “Go back to Germany,” you know. “We don’t want you here.” Imagine kids? Oh, kids can be so cruel.

SIGIRST: And the—and the—the—the insult they were using was to call you a Hun, H-U-N?

KRETSCHMAR: Hun, yeah. H-U-N, right.

SIGIRST: Were there any other insults that you remember that they [unclear]?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, and then just that, you know, “Go back. Go back where you came from,” see. “Go back home. Go back.”

SIGIRST: Were you conscious in your early years of school of—of how many other immigrant children there were in the class?

KRETSCHMAR: No!

SIGIRST: If any?

KRETSCHMAR: No. I don’t know if there were any. To me they were all the same. They—they seemed to be all the same. They all spoke—we were the only ones that had an accent at the time. We were the only ones with a German accent. Yeah.

SIGIRST: Did either your father or your mother, that you know of, have any trouble during World War I?

KRETSCHMAR: If they did, they kept it from us kids, see. If they did, they kept it from us kids, figuring that we had enough problems, see. Had enough problems. In fact, when the kids started to get physically belligerent, one—one morning my older brother, Gary, he lit into them. Yeah, when they—I remember somebody stuck their foot out and tripped me, you know, so I fell down on the ground and

Gary lit into the kid and then there was punches and bloody noses and cracked lips, and then they all ran, see. And I remember Gary yelling after them, "If you bother my brothers or me again, you'll get more of the same," you know, and after that they never bothered us and first thing you know, we were all friends again.
[Laughs]

SIGIRST: Talk to me about whatever religious life your family had when to this United—to the United States.

KRETSCHMAR: I don't—I do not remember them going to church here, no.

SIGIRST: What religion were they?

KRETSCHMAR: Lutheran. German Lutheran, yeah.

SIGIRST: Lutherans, uh-huh.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah, I was baptized in the Lutheran church, I guess.

SIGIRST: But that—but that was not part of—

KRETSCHMAR: Not part of—

SIGIRST: Life here, as you remember.

KRETSCHMAR: No, not part of life here. No.

SIGIRST: Of course, that might have been another way to socialize with more Germans at that time.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah. No, they—they didn't. So then my father, he bought a lot on Glenwood Boulevard, which was near—halfway between our house there on Fargo Street and Five Mile Pond, which is off of Boston Road now, and he had the cellar hole, a horse and shovel plow came and dug out the cellar hole. And then my father and my two older brothers with cement blocks, laid the cement blocks around the foundation and squared it off and built up the foundation. And then my father hired carpenters to frame the house and put up the frame and then he did everything else himself. He built the house from scratch, all by himself. As soon as the outside of the house was framed, we moved in out of the house on Fargo Street and Gilbert Avenue, into our own house there on Glenwood Boulevard. Of course, it was drafty, not finished and I think that's where my mother started to get sick, see.

SIGIRST: What year did you move into that house?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, let's see. I was—I was seven, I think. Seven, yeah. Seven, eight because then when we—we lived in the house for two years or so and my mother really got sick. And then my father again through a friend in the German—German—Germans in what Robert Bosch Magneto it was at that time, heard of a—the doctor had told my father that “Your—your wife needs a warmer climate. You know, she—she would be better if she was in a warmer climate,” and so these friends in Bosch Magneto Factory there, said, “There's a—a German speaking farming community in Alberta, Alabama,” which is about fifteen miles from the Gulf of Mexico where it never snows there. The weather's warm all year round, and so then they talked it over and wrote, got information, you know, and so my father decided that we'd move—move down there. He'd sell the house and we'd move down there.

In between time, while we were living on Fargo Street there, one time when Gary, Wolf and I had gone to Five Mile Pond swimming, we came home from swimming and my God, there was a baby brother in the house. My brother Alfred was born, see. Well, “Where'd he come from?” you know, I said. So they told us that the doctor brought him in his bag because mom had been sick to make her feel better, see. [Laughs] About two years later, Frank, brother Frank arrived just as magically. So now there was—there was us three older boys, six years difference between me and Alfred and then another not quite two years between Alfred and Frank. So my mother had five boys. She got on the train in Springfield, Massachusetts with five boys. Left my father up here, still working at the Bosch until he could sell the house and three days—or two days and three nights, I guess, coach, sitting up on the train from Springfield, Massachusetts to Foley, Alabama, which is on the—the last rail stop before you hit the water, before you hit the gulf. Then on a pickup, a little Model T pickup truck. The hotel man from Alberta came to meet the train and meet us kids. Ma and Frankie sat in the front seat and the rest of us sat on the—the baggage in the back and about five or six miles, dirt roads, winding dirt roads to Alberta, Alabama to the hotel in the little one-horse town. The hotel manager was also the real estate man of Alberta. So—so he took my mom and us kids around looking at available farms, you know. And there was one, the Paul Dagey [PH] place was empty. It was a forty acre farm with a five room house and a barn and a corn crib and a—a hothouse to stack the plants in, and chicken—chicken attached. All fenced in and the little—little shack with the crescent cut in the door, good—good ways off from the house there with a—one big

hole and one little hole. Well, we had a two-holer and a Sears Roebuck catalogue in it. [Laughs]

So she rented that for fifty dollars a year with option to buy, and it—while we were down there, she bought furniture. My mother bought furniture and we moved into the farm house with a pump in the—a cast iron sink in the kitchen with a pump and another pump in the yard out there. Cast iron woodstove to cook. Oil lamps. No electricity.

SIGIRST: Had your father built the house on Glenwood with electricity and running water?

KRETSCHMAR: Well, by the time we had moved to Florida [sic], it had not been electrified yet.

SIGIRST: Still hadn't.

KRETSCHMAR: It still had the—the lamps in, see.

SIGIRST: Was your mother sick when you were at the Glenwood residence? Is that the period where she was sick?

KRETSCHMAR: That's when she started, see. She'd have days. She'd have days that she was like that. Probably three or four days and then she'd be okay again, see.

SIGIRST: So she was still sick when you got to Alabama?

KRETSCHMAR: When we got to Alabama, miracle of miracles, all of a sudden—we got there in November and all—November all the way through to the next spring, there was nothing the matter with her. Nothing the matter with her. Then one time—and there's another thing. One time my—Wolf and I were sleeping—sleeping when all of a sudden one night, the middle of the night, Gerhard woke us up, "Get up! Get up!" "What's the matter? What's the matter?" "We gotta go up to Stralee's [PH] to call the doctor for mom. Mom's very sick," you know, and he had a lantern lit. And so us three boys high tailed it up to Stralee's, which was half a mile or so, the nearest house and they had a telephone. And so we get up there and Gary knocks at the door of the house. It's like four o'clock in the morning and the dog started barking, you know, and then somebody lit a lamp, you know, and they come to the door and open the door and Mrs. Stralee and she's, "Ah, children, what are you doing here?" you know. Then he says, "Mrs. Stralee, my—my mother wants to know would you please call Dr. Armstrong in Foley and tell him to come." My mother's very sick, you know,

and she said to tell Dr. Foley—Dr. Armstrong to hurry because there's not much time. And so I remember Mrs. Stralee says, "What's the matter with her?" and Gerhard says, "She's going to have a baby." Well—and Mrs. Stralee says, "You children stay right here. I'm going to get dressed. I'll go back with you," you know, and she closed the door and we says to Gerhard, "Whatever would you tell her anything like that for?" He said, "Ma told me to," you know. So on the way home, you know, we're following Mrs. Stralee home, you know, and I says—I knew something about birds and bees by now, you know, and—but I also knew that my mother had not even seen my father since last November, see. It was then that my older brother informed me that there was also a nine month episode mixed in with this, see. In other words, it didn't happen right away. [Laughs]

And so the baby was born. Mr. Stralee—Mrs. Stralee, she gave us—made breakfast for us kids and had us sit under the picnic table under the tree out in the backyard and then Mr. Stralee came. After he got his chores done, he came down and Dr. Armstrong arrived from Foley in his little Model T coup and Mr. Stralee says to us kids, "Okay, boys, get the wheelbarrow and we're going to go out in the woods and we're going to pick--pick up dry wood for your mother." Well, we protested, you know. "We got plenty of wood, Mr. Stralee." "Never mind, you never can have too much wood." So took us out into the woods and he kept us out there, seemed like two or three hours, you know, and finally he hears Mrs. Stralee calling and he said, "I guess we can go back now, boys." So we went back and Mrs. Stralee says, "Well, boys, you got a new baby sister." Can you imagine? And there's my father still up north. [Laughs] This was April 29th my sister was born and my mother was sick for—well, she was quite sick, and oh, God, I don't know what we would have done. The neighbors were a lot different then than they are now. Why, Mrs. Stralee, Mrs. Shane, Mrs. Persky [PH], Mrs.—even the southern—southern—long time southerners, the McDonalds. Mrs. McDonald, they all came over and took turns taking care of us kids and the baby and my mother until—

SIGIRST: What was your baby—what was the baby's name?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh, that's another thing. So—

SIGIRST: We only have a couple minute left, so—

KRETSCHMAR: Oh. So we—they—my mother picked out a name, Gretchen Leonora. G-R-E-T-C-H-E-N, L-E-O-N-O-R-A. Nora, Leonora. And so the doctor wrote all that down and when we got the birth

certificate in the mail from Foley, where the courthouse was, you can't read—nobody can read doctor's handwriting, so the clerk that made out the slip, he had down that Gertrude Leonora was born on April 29th in Alberta, Baldwin County, Alabama, and so we says, "Oh, well, what the heck. We'll call her Gerty." That's how she—she became that.

SIGIRST: We have just a couple minutes and there are a couple questions that I wanted to ask.

KRETSCHMAR: Yes.

SIGIRST: One is did your parents—that I want to ask you. Did your parents ever want to go back to Germany for any reason?

KRETSCHMAR: My—well, we asked Pa when he retired. My mother died in 19—she was fifty-six, and he got married again and we says, "Hey, Pa, why don't you and Lena take a trip back? Wouldn't you want to go back to Germany?" and he says, "Why should I go back to Germany? I never had it good there." He says, "Here I had it good. This is my country."

SIGIRST: Did you become a citizen?

KRETSCHMAR: I became a citizen with my father, when he—he became a citizen and my—Wolfgang and I became citizens with him, but Gerhard—Gary was already older and he had to get his citizen certificate. So my father became a citizen. My mother never did because she was too sick to go through it.

SIGIRST: Do you remember what year that was or how old you were?

KRETSCHMAR: Oh—ah. Oh, I think I was seventeen. Seventeen at the time.

SIGIRST: A young man.

KRETSCHMAR: A young man, yeah.

SIGIRST: Did you go to the ceremony with your father or did it just sort of happen on paper?

KRETSCHMAR: It just sort of happened on paper.

SIGIRST: I see.

KRETSCHMAR: Yeah, it just sort of happened.

- SIGIRST: Do you have any recollection of—of your father getting ready to become a citizen or any of that process?
- KRETSCHMAR: Ah, we—I remember him studying. You know, he would study in the history books and stuff like that, yeah. Yeah.
- SIGIRST: When you think of yourself in terms of nationality, do you think of yourself as being an American, as being a German? How do you think of yourself in terms of—of who you are as a nationality?
- KRETSCHMAR: As a nationality I think of myself as American of German extraction. Yeah.
- SIGIRST: Have you ever been to Germany?
- KRETSCHMAR: Yes, after I retired, my—his brother was stationed in Germany.
- SIGIRST: Who's brother? You're pointing, but remember it's not on the tape.
- KRETSCHMAR: Oh, my—my number one son. His—his brother was a career man in the army and he was stationed in Germany as a major at the time, and he said, "Dad, you and mom come on over for a month. I got plenty of room. I got a four-bedroom apartment." So in 19—1978 Dot and I went over to Germany and we—he took us all around through Bavaria and had bus trips to Amsterdam, to Switzerland.
- SIGIRST: Did you go to Dresden?
- KRETSCHMAR: I could not go to Dresden because we couldn't get—it was such a hassle to get through the East Germany Wall, which was still up at that time. So we didn't get to Dresden, although we drove right up to the wall and saw the wall itself, but never got through. It was a fabulous time.
- SIGIRST: Mr. Kretschmar, we need to end.
- KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.
- SIGIRST: But I thank you very much. This has been a great interview, especially about your family's adaptation to the United States.
- KRETSCHMAR: Yeah.

EI-798/KRETSCHMAR

SIGIRST: Particularly good about that. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Herbert Kretschmar on Saturday, September 7th, 1996 in Agawam, Massachusetts. Thank you very much, sir.

KRETSCHMAR: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]