

EI-875

MARGARET KUSSEM

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 9th, 1997. I'm at the Recording Studio at the Ellis Island Museum and I'm here with Margaret Kussem. Mrs. Kussem came from Germany in 1923. She arrived at age seventeen and turned eighteen just a few days after that.

KUSSEM: That's right. That's right.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Kussem, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

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KUSSEM Oh, 1905. June 19, 1905.

SIGRIST: June 19th, 1905.

KUSSEM: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

KUSSEM: Frankenbach, which is long.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

KUSSEM: F-R-A-N-K-E-N-B-A-C-H.

SIGRIST: Great.

KUSSEM: Frankenbach.

SIGRIST: Frankenbach. Can you tell me where in Germany you were born?

KUSSEM: In Hamburg.

SIGRIST: You were born right in the city of Hamburg?

KUSSEM: Hamburg. Right in the city of Hamburg.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your birth? The day you were born, do you have any story about that?

KUSSEM: No. No, I don't. I can remember, maybe five years old I can remember.

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SIGRIST: Did your mother or father ever tell you about the day you were born?

KUSSEM: No, not really. [Laughs] Not really because there were two, three others, you know, ahead of me.

SIGRIST: Do you know if you were born at home or in a hospital?

KUSSEM: Oh, no, at home.

SIGRIST: You were born at home.

KUSSEM: They all, everybody was born at home, yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. Tell me what your mother's name was.

KUSSEM Her name was Henrietta.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

KUSSEM: Seeman. Seeman. S-E-E-M-A-N, Seeman.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mother's family background?

KUSSEM: Yeah. I don't really know very much, but I know that she—I don't know what he was, but I know he drowned, you know, in a canal. You know, we had a lot of canals in Hamburg.

SIGRIST: Who drowned in the canal?

KUSSEM: My grandfather.

SIGRIST: Your mother's father.

KUSSEM: My mother's father.

SIGRIST: Oh. Uh-huh.

KUSSEM: She was only eighteen years old.

SIGRIST: What did she ever tell you about that experience?

KUSSEM: Well, she was very reluctant to talk about it, but she said that they were out having a good time and I imagine they had something to drink, and then something happened. He just disappeared. I think he had a little too much schnapps, you know. [Chuckles]

SIGRIST: Did she ever talk about how that changed her life or her family's life?

KUSSEM: Oh, well, she had—I mean we had a very nice life until the war came. Everything was fine, until the war came.

SIGRIST: I was wondering how, when your grandfather died, how did that change your mother's life? She was eighteen years old. Did that have an effect on her?

KUSSEM: Oh, well, I imagine it did, but she was, they were still—how should I say? Not too well off, you know what I mean? They had to struggle. She got a job. She worked.

SIGRIST: Do you know what she worked at?

KUSSEM: Well, she worked in a—they made—what did they make? Something for, with wine? You know, they make corks and they make something else. All was made like the big hostel ...hotels of Hamburg; they had their own wine cellars. See, and they, everything was made for them, and somehow that's where they make—and that's where she met my father. See, he was working—he was—wine. They were importing all this wine, even from Russia. They get not...big barrels that they walked into it, the size of them. Everything was big. That was their thing. My father said to me, the biggest day he had was when the Kailer...Kaiser came and there was so much excitement. Everything was done on the roof of the hotel to be safe. He said they had everything that they had for the party, everything had to be carried upstairs.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. The party for the Kaiser was on the roof of the hotel?

KUSSEM: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and everything was so—so careful, you know.

SIGRIST: That's a big—that's a big event.

KUSSEM: Yeah, it's a big thing, that's right.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your mother's personality.

KUSSEM: Well, my mother was great. She was very—how should I say? Very—taking care very, you know, of her family.

SIGRIST: Taking care of the family was very important to her.

KUSSEM: Yes, it was very important and especially when I think of when the war came and we didn't have enough to eat.

SIGRIST: This is World War I?

KUSSEM: This is World War I, and I was nineteen when the war started.

SIGRIST: You were nine when the war started.

KUSSEM: Yeah, I think it was nine.

SIGRIST: Nine, yeah. If you were born in 1905, and the war started in 1914.

KUSSEM: Yeah, '14, that's right.

SIGRIST: So you were nine, yeah.

KUSSEM: And it was very—I mean, we were a city of city people, who did not have any relatives in a ...on a farm or in the country where they could go and help to find more food. So we never had any, any really—you know, some of the people, they, they “Oh, we’ll go to the relatives,” and the parents, anybody, to get help. To get more food.

SIGRIST: Were people who lived in the country in a different kind of situation during the war?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. I mean, some—we, they took... were outside of the people. We had to work, but we were not old enough. Like I was nine years old and my sister was eleven years old.

SIGRIST: How did you get food during the First World War?

KUSSEM: We had a little bit of what you call here—oh, what do they call these small gardens?

SIGRIST: A little plot.

KUSSEM: Yeah, a little plot outside the city, and we had to work it. We had to water it good. We had to plant, you know, rake it up and that helped a little.

SIGRIST: What did you grow in the plot?

KUSSEM: Oh, we had potatoes mostly, and we had beans, and we had peas, and we had berry bushes. Oh, we just, you know, take care of them.

SIGRIST: What about, where did other kinds of food come from during the war that you couldn't grow?

KUSSEM: Oh, well, they had—you could buy it. Blas Markes.

SIGRIST: Black Market.

KUSSEM: On Black Market and, you know, on the end of the war we found out what we ate. What we—sausage we had, with cats and dogs. That was terrible that war, yes.

SIGRIST: This was sausage that they sold to you during the war?

KUSSEM: They never sold it as—yeah, as sausage. Never as meat, but horsemeat we could buy, but it was so expensive. It was maybe three times as much as meat we could get on our marks, on our vouchers, you know.

SIGRIST: Like a ration card?

KUSSEM: Ration card, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did the ration cards work? Can you explain how that—

KUSSEM: Well, they worked pretty good. Like you get one mark—no one pound. Well, each fam.... it depends. Like sugar, you get half a pound a month. You would get flours, maybe one month a pound, and then we, we, they well, what did they do? We made most of it out of potatoes, out of turnips. That was the staple that we had. They made everything out of that.

SIGRIST: What would your mother do with the turnips? How would she prepare—I should say, who did the cooking?

KUSSEM: Yeah, my mother. Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did she prepare the turnips?

KUSSEM: She make it cooked. That's the only way we could eat it. We would get it raw for a sand—for to go to school. You'd get a turnip and wrapped in a little paper and that's what we had. You could not—there was nothing else.

SIGRIST: When you went to get sugar, tell me what the process was. Where did you go to get the sugar?

KUSSEM: Oh, at the—you know, we had little *kramer*—like a grocery store where they just sell fine things. Not greens. You know, no—we had one store where you get your vegetables and meat. No, not meat. I mean—

SIGRIST: Baked goods.

KUSSEM: Baked goods.

SIGRIST: Bread?

KUSSEM: Was in a bakery. Oh, yeah, that's very important. That's where we got, so like we would get one loaf of bread a week, and that wasn't enough. So we used to have always vegetable, lots of vegetable. Oh.

SIGRIST: How else did the war affect your family? You have food shortages.

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: How else were you affected by the war?

KUSSEM: Well, even with school. We couldn't go to school. You see, I had—

SIGRIST: Why?

KUSSEM: I had a nice school, but within maybe a radius of a mile, we had the hospital and they—the newer... the hospital would use that to help the people, that all the soldiers that came in. The ones that were not so badly hurt came to the hospital. So I had to go two schools into one and then in the second and third year where it was so bad, we didn't have any heat [sic]. No coal.

SIGRIST: No heat.

KUSSEM: No heat, and they made three schools went to one building because they only had heat for one. So some had to go in the morning, some a little later, some in the afternoon. So, you know, that way. We still, we passed. They made exams and we always thought, "Will we get to the next? We get to the next?" But—

SIGRIST: What was your favorite subject when you were in school?

KUSSEM: Oh, I think I wanted to be a secretary because I took shorthand and thing, but of course when I—the thing what happened, when I, my aunt came over to visit us, that was my father's sister came over. That was in '22.

SIGRIST: In 1922.

KUSSEM: '22, and when she saw I was working in a store where they—I was just a cash ..cashier—

SIGRIST: Cashier.

KUSSEM: Cashier. Cashier, and they were s..., we were so bad that the..they—what is it?

SIGRIST: Are you going to talk about the inflation?

KUSSEM: Inflation! We had to go every noon and every at the end to the bank because it wasn't worth any more from one day to the next.

SIGRIST: We should say for the sake of the tape that Germany right after the First World War, suffered terrible inflation.

KUSSEM: Terrible, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about the money and how you used the money at that time.

KUSSEM: Oh, it was changed very often. You know, one day it would be and the next day it would be more. Of course, we had to go—

SIGRIST: Like one mark—

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: Would be how much?

KUSSEM: Well, you know, that I—in '26 [sic] my aunt came over and she said to me, "Well, how much money do you get?" and I said, "Sixty thousand marks." "Well, which one, how much is it in dollar?" She says, "One dollar." That's what I got. For six months, one dollar.

SIGRIST: Is that when you were working as the cashier?

KUSSEM: Yes, and then I—my aunt said to me, "Well, if I can take it, if you want to come, I'll send you the ticket, your boat ticket," and I said, "Oh, yes." So by—this, she was in—she left in S - eptember,...September or October and she sent me the ticket and by June, next day, I, you know, came over.

SIGRIST: So she left in 1922.

KUSSEM: Yeah. She went back

SIGRIST: And then you came in 1923.

KUSSEM: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Let me backtrack a little bit because I'm very interested in all of this information.

KUSSEM: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: But I want to talk about your father a little bit.

KUSSEM: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

KUSSEM: Oh, he was Anton. A-N-T-O-N. Anton Frankenbach, you know.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and what do you know about his family background?

KUSSEM: Yeah, well, his—he was from *Im* Frankfurt, not too far from Frankfurt.

SIGRIST: Frankfurt, the city of Frankfurt.

KUSSEM: Yes, Frankfurt. Well, you see, he came. He was—he learned a trade, but his cousin was in the biggest hotel in Hamburg and he was the—oh, what do they call these people that take care of all the hotel people for entertainment and eating?

SIGRIST: They sort of organized everything.

KUSSEM: Organized things, and he was a good job, and he gave him a job, and that's how he—see, he came, went into the army when he was twenty.

SIGRIST: Your father did?

KUSSEM: My father did. And he was from, from a—from a Germ...German from the southern, southern part of Germany. From near outside of Frankfurt, and he liked it there and he stayed.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned earlier that your mother and your father met while they were in this factory.

KUSSEM: Yeah, she was working for this shop, you know, where they make all kind of things that they use in a hotel.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year your parents got married?

KUSSEM: Yeah, 1903.

SIGRIST: They married in 1903.

KUSSEM: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And where did they go to live when they got married?

KUSSEM: Well, I think they lived in Hamburg. In Hamburg. You know, small apartment.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your father's personality was like.

KUSSEM: Well, he was very ambitious. You know, working hard all the time and of course, when we had—when we had a garden, vegetable, he was very strict. We had to go after school, we had to go out in the garden, water, pull the weed, weed and do things, you know, like that. But he really got—he..I think he worked until almost when war start. He was, was —had to work at the ammunition factory, and that's how he got out of all of this from working, from this hotel business. He was drafted, and I think he was fifty years old then. He was drafted and he had to go. He didn't have to go to war, but the forty-nine years old was still drafted.

SIGRIST: So he was drafted and then went to work in the ammunition factory.

KUSSEM: Ammunition work, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he ever tell you about any of his experiences making ammunition at that time for Germany?

KUSSEM: No, he didn't. He didn't. He never told us about it, but I know that he—his boss was very nice and he had a little villa and a nice garden, and he was like that. So they—he would really, instead of being out, he was in the garden. Make thing for them, you know. See that all their vegetables came in and whatever it was.

SIGRIST: Your father was very lucky.

KUSSEM: Yeah, he was lucky that way. He did get a little he.. eat, but he couldn't bring anything home to us. There was not that much, I guess.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, what kinds of things did you enjoy doing with your father?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Was there something that he did with his family that sticks out in your mind?

KUSSEM: Oh, he would like to go to a museum. He would like to go to the animal—to the zoological. The bona.—b... plants, you know.

SIGRIST: Oh, the botanical garden.

KUSSEM: Botanical garden. We had beautiful in Hamburg. Beautiful garden. Did you ever hear of the zoo, *Holden...Hagenbecks*? They get all the animals

that the other cities, all countries have all over, you know. They were—they trade. They trade them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to the zoo with your father?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember something that happened when you were at the zoo one time?

KUSSEM: One time a little, little —oh, you know, we have a lot of little canals and the little—

SIGRIST: Little rivers?

KUSSEM: Water part, yes, and one time my sister, she had I think was *Ko*. we used to say crust of *Korn....bread*

SIGRIST: Bread. Bread crust.

KUSSEM: Bread crumbs, and we wanted to give it to him, and all of a sudden she grabbed and she pulled it in. So you know, they were so afraid that they want the bread and—

SIGRIST: What kind of animal was it?

KUSSEM: Little ducks.

SIGRIST: Oh, ducks.

KUSSEM: Ducks. Well, she was about maybe four, five, six I think. Six years old, and so my father, he was strict, but when the war came, he didn't... he always had to work. Like, going to this ammunition factory, he had to leave—the train went at five in the morning and he would start at seven. Then he worked seven hours, from seven at night, and then came home about eight o'clock. So it was—the life was terrible, you know.

SIGRIST: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

KUSSEM: I had one brother and two sisters.

SIGRIST: And what are their names?

KUSSEM: George. My brother George and my older sister was Antonia, after Anton, I guess, and my younger sister is Alma.

SIGRIST: And do you remember when like one of your younger sisters was born?

KUSSEM: My youngest one, Alma, I remember.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

KUSSEM: She was—she was 1912, she was born.

SIGRIST: And what sticks out in your mind about that experience?

KUSSEM: Yes, yes. Oh, we were glad. We could go out and had to watch the carriage. You see, we live in a high, oh, four or five story high apartment building. Small building, and my mother would take her down and put the carriage out and she'd have to do something, anything, you...we had to watch. And I can remember one time my sister and I were trying to push it

around and each one thought they were going to do it better and all of a sudden, pumpi!, she was down. So we got her back in, and, sure, my mother really was mad. She didn't like that.

SIGRIST: I bet. (laughs)

KUSSEM: She was—yeah, she thought we were—you can take care of it, you know, but you didn't. Well, you know how it is with—she thought she was the older one, you know, and she wanted to be the boss, and I wouldn't let her. I was trying to get around.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

KUSSEM: We were Lutheran.

SIGRIST: You were Lutheran.

KUSSEM: Lutheran, yeah.

SIGRIST: And how did you practice your religion at home?

KUSSEM: Well, we went to Sunday school and I know my mother used to go to ..to the—they had a mission group that she would go to and I know when the war—the third year in the war, I said to my mother one time, “Well, you're going to the ...to the mission tonight.” “Yes,” she says, “because we're going to get something to eat.” You know, they got—I don't know if you know green cheese? It's a cheese that they make out of herbs and it's grated and you have a piece of little bread and you grate it on, and that, it reached for so many.

SIGRIST: And the mission would distribute.

KUSSEM: Yeah, and they would do—and that was there, you know, instead of here, when they think what they get here. They would get a cup of tea and a piece of bread, but that—my mother said that was worth more.

SIGRIST: What about did you learn any prayers in German when you were a child?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes, we had to go through.

SIGRIST: Do you remember now any of the prayers in German?

KUSSEM: Oh, in German.

SIGRIST: Like the Lord's Prayer in German maybe?

KUSSEM: Yeah. Well, that's what we would say.

SIGRIST: Can you still say it in German?

KUSSEM: No, no, I don't think I can anymore. No.

SIGRIST: All right.

KUSSEM: But they had this, you know (pause) yeah, what is it now? I can't remember. I used to know it.

SIGRIST: Or a little—or a prayer before you ate maybe?

KUSSEM: Yes. Oh, yes, we always did. Well, you know, after I went—was..had to leave school when I was fourteen and you could do it if you had a job.

SIGRIST: You could leave school?

KUSSEM: Yeah. So I worked for the minister in the afternoon and when he said, "Well, you can stay home, you don't have to go," because they had—they did not let anyone out unless you had a job. And so I thought, "Well, I can do that for a while." And they had three children and a grandmother was there and so I said, "Gee, washing a lot of dishes and doing that." But I did have—

SIGRIST: What did you do with the money that you earned from the minister? Do you remember?

KUSSEM: Yeah. Not very much. I think I put it into saving a pair of shoes. Took me six months to save money for a pair of shoes, and then they weren't—you know, they weren't what we could get. We had to take what we could get.

SIGRIST: This was during the war or just after the war?

KUSSEM: This is during the war, or right after the war. You know, for 1918 it stopped. Well, 1920-21, it was still bad. You couldn't get anything.

SIGRIST: Those are the years of the inflation, yes?

KUSSEM: Yes, yes, and the ...no—no, what I mean. You can't buy anything. You could say, well, this is it and that's all. There was no choice. There was no, no—I don't know.

SIGRIST: During World War I, did you see any soldiers or any—

KUSSEM: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Any fighting or artillery or anything like that?

KUSSEM: I didn't see artillery, but you know where we were living, right at the end of our street was a church that had just been—you know, outside it was finished, inside was nothing, and though that stood was nothing, you know. But right next to it was a great big laundry, big laundry and they brought all the army's uniforms and they were, you know, re-disinfect or whatever they did, they did them. They worked there. So when we—we were at the end of our line, they, you...those soldiers had to come every day at noon and they walked through the store and around the corner on the end was a restaurant where they would eat. Where they, you know, had food for them, and I thought, "Oh, if I only had it," and then a friend of ours, a neighbor's children said, "Well, we can go there and stand there and watch. You have a pail, you have a little dish, if we stand in line and see if there's anything left over," and I used to go and stand in line and they would give you a little. You know, like the soup kitchen. Everything was soup. You don't know what they put in, but they had vegetables.

SIGRIST: But it was food.

KUSSEM: But it was food, yes.

SIGRIST: It seems to me your strongest memories of World War I revolve around food and getting food.

KUSSEM: It is. It was, and standing and getting in line because several neighbors would give me something to eat, if I'd just stand there for her so she could be doing something. Then she'll get up, be her turn to get next. Those, everything was—what do they call it? A clique? Or a—these things that for everything you had to stand in line.

SIGRIST: Oh, a queue.

KUSSEM: Queue.

SIGRIST: Queue, standing in line.

KUSSEM: Yeah, that's right. There was—I'd be in a queue and for that she would pay me. You know, pay me; give me an apple or a piece or bread or something, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when the war ended?

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me, was there some kind of an event or a celebration? What do you remember about the end of the war?

KUSSEM: No, they were not—there was no—it was the soldiers came home and there was a ryant—riot.

SIGRIST: Riots.

KUSSEM: Riots. Oh, they were going—the men that came home were so mad when they found out that they were put using cats and that they didn't have enough to eat.

SIGRIST: Using cats in the food, you mean?

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes, and that he didn't have enough to eat. So he would go around and go into bakeries, and wherever they were standing, I would stand in line and see. And one of the soldiers, well, they didn't like—they had more

nerve. They'd open the door, "Come on, let's get 'em." So everybody got one, take a loaf of bread and run home, and I had it over my coat. And my mother always was very scar...scared about it. She said, "Don't do that," but I just had it in me, "I have to do it so to get something to bring home," you know. So that's what we did. Oh, but they had such a line. You know, when you talk about you get sugar very little. We get milk. You know what they did, milk? If you're one year old, you get milk and from two to three, they get skim milk because I think they used it all for the soldiers. I don't know where it went. But so we got maybe once a week we got half a pound, half a quart of milk.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE B, TAPE 1

SIGRIST: Well, let's leave World War I behind for a while. (laughs)

KUSSEM: Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: What did you—when you were growing up in Germany, what did you know about America? How did you think about America?

KUSSEM: I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything until my aunt came in 1923. I mean, we heard about it. We got a letter.

SIGRIST: Your aunt had come to America before?

KUSSEM: Yeah, she came in 1880.

SIGRIST: She came in 1880. Oh, so she'd been here a long time.

KUSSEM: Yes! She came over. My father's sister, and she—

SIGRIST: What was her name?

KUSSEM: Margaret.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

KUSSEM: Margaret Henke.

SIGRIST: Henke, how do you spell Henke?

KUSSEM: H-E-N-K-E.

SIGRIST: So Aunt Margaret came to America in 1880.

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: She came back.

KUSSEM: She was came in 1911, she also was. I can remember I was five years old or six when she came over with her husband.

SIGRIST: Did she look different to you because she had been in America some how or—

KUSSEM: Well, you know, it was a time. It was from 1910 till 19—when did she come over? '22, so that's almost twenty years old. But she, her husband was a tailor. He was a very—

SIGRIST: Did Aunt Margaret tell you anything about America?

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KUSSEM: Oh, she said, "It's certainly better than here." She said, you know, and she said, "My goodness, you didn't have this, and you didn't have that. Now, I'll send you the ticket and you can come over."

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come?

KUSSEM: Oh, well, to get away from it. To get away from it because the food—we were still rationed. We still had to have marks for bread. The only thing we could buy is potatoes, I think, without rationing.

SIGRIST: So as late as 1923 there was still foods that were being rationed?

KUSSEM: There was still food, oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What did you think you would do when you got here?

KUSSEM: Well, I was glad that I could get a job. You know what I mean? That my aunt—I wanted to be. She was good to me, but I was afraid of taking any. I want to pay off my debt. I want to get away from it, and so I—and I was just, as it happened, I worked for—I don't know if you know, you know the Genesee Brewery?

SIGRIST: Genesee, sure, brewery.

KUSSEM: Well, Mr. Wehle, when he started out, I was working for them.

SIGRIST: This is in America?

KUSSEM: This is in America, in Buffalo.

SIGRIST: Well, let's wait until we get you to America.

KUSSEM: Yeah. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Then we'll talk about it. How did your mother and father feel about your desire to come to the United States?

KUSSEM: Oh, she was—he was very happy because we knew that there was just seemed to be no hope of having good. Like, all the money that they had saved for our college education went to the—what do you call it? Liberty, you know.

SIGRIST: Like bonds?

KUSSEM: Bonds, yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, the Germans sold bonds, also, during the war.

KUSSEM: Like here, yeah. That's what they were doing.

SIGRIST: How they financed the war.

KUSSEM: My father put everything. He was very—how do I say? He was very--

SIGRIST: Saved a lot of money?

KUSSEM: Yeah, yeah, and he put it all in the war bond.

SIGRIST: And then lost it.

KUSSEM: And everything they lost. Everything. You know that I, we had a savings account as children, where we would always put it in and then every year

for your schooling. It was all gone, and after I left in 1923, I think it was '24 or '25 my mother said they would get five percent. All the savings banks gave back, you know, for what they had put in. So I said, "Use it. Buy something with it." [Laughs] I just didn't feel—

SIGRIST: What did you have to do to get ready to leave Germany?

KUSSEM: Well, I gave myemployer about two months no two mo.....

SIGRIST: Two weeks?

KUSSEM: six months. No, six weeks, I think. I knew them.

SIGRIST: That was the job where you were the cashier.

KUSSEM: Yes, yes, yes. They said, fine. Everybody was so glad that you went.

SIGRIST: What else did you have to do before you could leave?

KUSSEM: Well, I had to go to—of course, my aunt sent me over the tickets and I had to go to—it's not like...it's something like Ellis Island. We have it in Hamburg, not far from there. Fair—it was just on the other side of the harbor. I'm doing that.

SIGRIST: That's okay.

KUSSEM: I shouldn't.

SIGRIST: [unclear]

KUSSEM: And I had to go there first for physicals and examinations and what do you call that?

SIGRIST: Vaccinations.

KUSSEM: Vaccinations.

SIGRIST: You're pointing to your arm.

KUSSEM: Yes, that's it. Vaccinations.

SIGRIST: So there was a whole—it was like a processing center for immigrants.

KUSSEM: I had to go. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: When you were examined, what were they examining? What did you have to do during the medical exam?

KUSSEM: Yes. They looked for TB, you know, and lice in hair and then the things—

SIGRIST: Had you ever had tuberculosis growing up?

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: Or anyone in your family?

KUSSEM: No. No, nothing and it seemed I went through very much with everything. They never—eyes, you know, they examined.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about having to be examined?

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KUSSEM: Yes, yes. It was awful. It was really, but there were so many that you don't mind. You know, they had girls together, and so it was not—and it was very a new installations for the *Ab*...what is that? The Hamburg American Line.

SIGRIST: The Hamburg American Line, yes, the ocean liner.

KUSSEM: You know, and just outside of Hamburg they had this nice thing there, and everything was I didn't mind, you know. Didn't think and of course I got so excited and my mother said to me, "Oh, I hope you don't get re.... reca... how you say?"

SIGRIST: Rejected?

KUSSEM: Rejected, you know, or something happen. I said, "No, nothing's going to happen. I'm going to make it." And I did.

SIGRIST: Did you have to stay overnight at this facility?

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: No.

KUSSEM: No, no. This was just outside, like I could go ten minute—no. You know, take the colley(sic). . City.

SIGRIST: That's right, because you lived nearby.

KUSSEM: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

KUSSEM: Oh, yeah. No, it was maybe an hour.

SIGRIST: Did your family—no, actually, let me ask you, what did you pack to take with you?

KUSSEM: Oh, I had one suitcase, one little suitcase.

SIGRIST: You're pointing, it's what? About a foot and a half two feet long.

KUSSEM: Yes, and about this high.

SIGRIST: And a foot high.

KUSSEM: And this wide. I had to carry it. They told you, you don't take more than what you can carry.

SIGRIST: And what did you put—what did you put in the suitcase?

KUSSEM: Yeah, one pair shoes. [Laughs] Shoes, and it was so funny. My father had worked—he always used to fix our shoes, so when I got a new pair of shoes, he put another sole on to make it last longer. And after I got here, my cousin—I have two cousins here. One was married, she had a little girl, six year old and one one year—five year and two and a half year old, and little Alice said to me, "What are you going to do with these German shoes?" German shoes, because she thought my shoes looked funny. But we had t-strap shoe and here was more like pumps. You know, it was a different idea.

SIGRIST: Well, that's a funny story.

KUSSEM: So she kept always, she said, "Your German shoes." I tell her that to this day, she remembers.

SIGRIST: Did you bring any other objects like, you know, something to remember Germany by or did anyone give you a gift to take?

KUSSEM: Oh, I don't think there was much.

SIGRIST: Or a book or a photograph?

KUSSEM: Yes. Oh, yes, I had a little photograph. I also had a little bag, little handbag. You know, beaded bags, they were in the style. So that's what my mother bought me, you know, to take over. And from my aunt as a gift, I had a piece of cut glass. Cut grass [sic], isn't it?

SIGRIST: Cut glass.

KUSSEM: Cut grass.

SIGRIST: Cut glass.

KUSSEM: Yeah, a nice vase and a little bowl or something. Anyway, something that she thought she should appreciate, and she liked it. And also I had a little underwear that I had had given. These were all gifts that I got just because—in Hamburg you wouldn't do it, but for a gift, you know, that I could give somebody. So should they had think—they had a little. I think I had a couple little lunch cloth that, you know, because they go much for coffee. They like—

SIGRIST: So you actually had quite a lot of stuff with you in your little suitcase.
(laughs)

KUSSEM: Well, it's—yeah, but I had to carry that around.

SIGRIST: Did your family—did your family give you some kind of a goodbye gathering before you left?

KUSSEM: No. No. We didn't have anything. We could not have a meal, never. I think—I can't remember. It was seven, eight years that we ever had anybody come in because we didn't have nothing.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about having to leave your parents and your brothers and sisters?

KUSSEM: Yeah, my mother. I felt very bad. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to her?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, she came to the boat.

SIGRIST: She came to the boat, which was close.

KUSSEM: Because my father was working. So she came and my younger sister. They were, yes, and I remember—

SIGRIST: What do you remember about how you said goodbye to them?

KUSSEM: Yeah, well, you know that...that Hamburg had—they had music right on the dock and everybody got on the boat and then all the people that didn't go on had to get off, you know. So they stood over on the other side and would wave, and then finally the band would play. When that was over, then the boat would—I guess they had to go out with the tide. You see, it

was high, and they had to go out. It was really—it wasn't the great big boat. It was the ferry boat took us to Cuxhaven. See, they used to leave from Hamburg, but on the big ones, they were so big they had to go out further and they would take the—you know, over to the boat.

SIGRIST: Like a ferry going over.

KUSSEM: The ferry, yes.

SIGRIST: Yeah, and so the big boat was in Cuxhaven?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I think—

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the big boat?

KUSSEM: Yes, Hansa.

SIGRIST: Oh, you got on the Hansa.

KUSSEM: Hansa, yes, and I think they—

SIGRIST: That is a big boat.

KUSSEM: They talked about ten thousand ton.

SIGRIST: Could be.

KUSSEM: Well, I know, you know, in '29 I went over again.

SIGRIST: Back to Germany.

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KUSSEM: Home, and that was the Hamburg and the New York, two big boats, but they were twice as big. They had twenty thousand ton, and I think these were ten thousand.

SIGRIST: When—you said to me earlier that you traveled alone.

KUSSEM: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: But were there any other friends or anything who were going to America at the same time?

KUSSEM: Not that I know of.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about getting on that ship alone?

KUSSEM: Well, I right away had cabin for six women. There were two women that were a little older, and there were two that was young and we sort of stayed together. It was very nice, and there was a little couple from Bremerhaven and, you know, the northern Germans always stick together more.
[Chuckles] So that I liked.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you did while you were on the ship?

KUSSEM: Oh, oh.

SIGRIST: What was there to do while you were on the ship?

KUSSEM: They had—it's. it's not, it's the same as today, but they had books to read. We had magazines, you know, and they had entertainment. They had afternoon musical and once or twice they had a dance, and they had games

we could play. You know, I mean they weren't (laughs)—like what do you call them here? Like all these churches have.

SIGRIST: Like Bingo.

KUSSEM: Bingo, yeah. Something like that, that type that they would have to get people together, and then in afternoon they had the little shuffleboard. I was surprised. See, we were in, what is it? Tourist class, I guess you call it, you know, but everybody had something to do. It was always written on what it was, you know.

SIGRIST: Like a schedule.

KUSSEM: A schedule. They had a very good schedule and very nice stewards. No, I couldn't complain and I didn't get seasick and I thought, oh, that was wonderful.

SIGRIST: And this is in June, right?

KUSSEM: This is in June, yeah.

SIGRIST: It's in June. You said that your Aunt Margaret had sent you the tickets.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much the tickets cost?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I don't remember now. I think seventy-five dollars.

SIGRIST: Now, that's a one-way ticket.

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KUSSEM: That's a one-way ticket, and I needed five—twenty-five dollars to carry, you know. She sent me that.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get to New York?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I know I can't—you know, I should know. I can't remember but I know that we get there on a ninetee... on a Saturday morning and then it's Saturday night, Sunday and Monday morning they went to Ellis Island, and by then it was—let me see, what was it? Nineteen—no.

SIGRIST: It was just a couple days before your birthday, which was June 19th.

KUSSEM: Yes, yes. See, that was nineteen and New York. Yeah, Saturday the boat docked and we were on San...Sa...Saturday, Sunday. Monday morning we went to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: So you stayed on the boat for Saturday night and Sunday night.

KUSSEM: We could not get off.

SIGRIST: I see.

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: And the boat is—where is the boat when you had to stay on it?

KUSSEM: Out in the water.

SIGRIST: Oh, it wasn't at the pier?

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: It was out in the harbor.

KUSSEM: It wasn't in the pier. They weren't allowed to. After Ellis Island, we went back on those—on the little boat, anyway, and I got to Lehigh Valley. That's the—New York, way down.

SIGRIST: That's after you were released?

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: When the Hansa came into New York, what do you remember seeing? When the ship first came into the harbor, what could you see?

KUSSEM: We saw the statue.

SIGRIST: What did you think about that?

KUSSEM: Yeah, we were nice and we all had to go and the fellow said, "Now, don't go all over this side. Stay over this side," because eventually the boat had stopped around more, but everybody wanted to look, you know.

SIGRIST: And they didn't want to tip the boat over, I guess. (laughs)

KUSSEM: Yeah, yeah. He said. That's what he said, we don't go all too far, you know. But I was glad. I did not was seasick.

SIGRIST: What about when you saw New York from the deck of the ship, what did you think of that?

KUSSEM: I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it because my aunt said, you know, that you'll see all big boat. Well, we're understand it. See, we had—

SIGRIST: Big buildings, you mean.

KUSSEM: Yeah, we had three stories. Four was high. That was too high, so we stayed anywhere in apartment, two, three story. That was fine.

SIGRIST: And here you see these—

KUSSEM: Oh, that was outrageous. My cousin was kidding me. I had these two cousins and her Edmond, the youngest one, and he came out to Germany to see us, and he was kidding me, and he said—well, I said, "How big is it? I can't believe that anybody had that big," and he said, "Well, if the moon comes out, he will go around it," he said. [Chuckles] So he said that was big. That's how big the New York apartments were.

SIGRIST: When you had to stay overnight on the ship, what happened? I mean, what could you do while you were on the ship those two nights?

KUSSEM: I don't think that we did much except.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to do anything different than—

KUSSEM: No, no. They just said we keep..... the books were there and read and keep—and get your suitcase. Get all packed and ready, and they were very nice, and I was amazed how much food they had compared to we didn't have anything to eat. We couldn't get over it.

SIGRIST: How did you—how did you get from the ship to Ellis Island? Actually, you said.

KUSSEM: We got on a—

SIGRIST: On a little ferry.

KUSSEM: Little ferry to get to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: And then—so that was Monday morning.

KUSSEM: That was Monday morning and we stayed until maybe four o'clock in the afternoon. We were there at eight o'clock.

SIGRIST: What happened all day while you were there?

KUSSEM: All day we had to stand in line and had to watch your suitcase, carry your coat, because it was warm.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing when you were here?

KUSSEM: Oh, I don't know. No, I don't remember. I think I had a dress. A skirt, you know, spou...skirt and blouse.

SIGRIST: Did you buy any new clothes before you came to America?

KUSSEM: I didn't have any! You couldn't buy anything. That was all, you know—no.

SIGRIST: Just your German shoes. [Laughs]

KUSSEM: Yeah, and I had like a little coat, like you call a trench—

SIGRIST: Trench coat.

KUSSEM: Trench coat. Could wear it for—that was you could wear it for good or you could wear it for rain.

SIGRIST: Did you have a hat?

KUSSEM: Yeah, also—

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it—

KUSSEM: Just a hat with—that was, you know, wouldn't hurt if it got rained on.

SIGRIST: And how did you wear your hair when you were eighteen years old?

KUSSEM: Yeah, look at. Here I'll show you.

SIGRIST: Well, no, no, no. No, we'll look at that after.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Just describe for me in words.

KUSSEM: Yeah, well, I had just short hair. They were long—no, I didn't wear short hair. Long hair, and I just tied them back, but I can't really tell you how.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what color? What color was your hair back then?

KUSSEM: It was more brown.

SIGRIST: It's very white now.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, you're going to look at a photograph.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, we can do that after we're done with the interview.

KUSSEM: Yeah, but I do with it.

SIGRIST: Well, that's all right. We'll look at that when we're done.

KUSSEM: All right.

SIGRIST: Okay? So tell me what happened? You were here from eight o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. You had to wait in line. What were you waiting in line for?

KUSSEM: Yes. There was four people across, I think and we would just walk ahead. You know, I couldn't tell you that there were any big portals or something on top because I could never see it. I was small and the people all ahead of you, you had maybe two feet or so and you'd walk up, put your suitcase down, you walk up, put your suitcase down. And they always said, "Now, you're going to watch." There's somebody, we got to look this way, you got to look that way and there were people who watched us here, and they looking at eyes or something. And only once I heard somebody said that this person had to go over, out of the line, but otherwise just luck that nobody ever was, you know, moved. But I had from that line on you had to go over this way and you go in line. Then next way you had to go over this way. They saw... all those things like you don't see them now. They had those big things that you walk in, and then you go out another way.

SIGRIST: Like dividers that you walk through.

KUSSEM: Yes, everything divided, yeah.

SIGRIST: And do you—did you know that you were going to have to go to a place like this when you got to America?

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about being here?

KUSSEM: Yeah, well, they just told us that's what you have to. I didn't know until the day before. While we were on the boat they told us, "You got to go to Ellis Island."

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were they looking for? Like were you examined medically?

KUSSEM: Yes, I think medically.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

KUSSEM: Your eyes. Your—you had to breath, you know. It must have been tuberculosis, and somebody looked. They kept looking at your hands at your—like if there were—how should I say? Scars?

SIGRIST: Like where you had your—

KUSSEM: Yeah. Your vaccination.

SIGRIST: Your vaccination.

KUSSEM: That's what I meant.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, you're pointing to your arm.

KUSSEM: They checked that.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ask you any questions?

KUSSEM: I think once or twice someone asked, you know. What was it now? For what? Yeah, what was it? Oh, someone asked me, "Did you have TB?" or "Did you have diphtheria." I said, "No," and my mother, my it's so funny. My younger sister once had diphtheria. My brother had scarlet fever, but there were four of us and none of the others had it. So isn't that funny that they got it. So that was—

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating here for any reason? While you were at Ellis Island, did you eat anything?

KUSSEM: Oh, well, they had, they..it's good food. Mostly—yeah, it taste good no matter what it was because we had.. I had never seen chicken or ham. So, you know, I never had any of that, and we just didn't—we couldn't get over it, that you could help yourself into things. They'd have, you know, platters of things on the thing and I know that the cooking was good because they had good soup. You know, they'd serve soup and it would take away—they have that. Then my aunt told me, too, she said, "Now, remember your steward." You know, you've got to—remember some money that she gave me besides that I didn't have. But she says, your steward and your *speinzer*{ph}. That means your—oh, what—

SIGRIST: Remember them meaning to tip them?

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: To tip them, I see. But you still had your twenty-five dollars.

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ever ask to see that twenty-five dollars?

KUSSEM: Yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, they had to—when we get through when they show you your—from vaccination and all that, then we went into another cubicle foot where they examined papers. Everything, and then that you had to lay out. Oh, yes. And there were some people were very upset. Some didn't have it. Now, I didn't know. I didn't think they would let you get on the boat without that they had it.

SIGRIST: And that was in American money? Was it twenty-five dollars in US--

KUSSEM: In US, oh, yes. My aunt sent me that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out in your mind about being at Ellis Island for that one day? That, that, you know, or something that you saw that was very unusual that stuck out in your mind or maybe a type of person you had never seen?

KUSSEM: Oh, they were very nice. Person, I think that we saw that there were—oh, what were they? We used to see them in—gypsies. They looked that like, you know, to me, very dark, but then somebody said, "They're not gypsies. They are"—oh, not Italian. Whatever there is near—

SIGRIST: Greek?

KUSSEM: But very light. Very—I mean very—they had to—oh, I don't know what they were.

SIGRIST: But they were unusual looking people to you?

KUSSEM: Yes, they were unusual. They were very brown and very black hair and that we thought, oh, that—because we didn't see that. See, I had been.. had never been out of the country to Hamburg, so everything, you know. I thought, "My goodness." You know what happened? When I ..now is this ...when I got to the boat, when we finally got finished and we had to leave, then by that time it was five o'clock, I think. We went to Lehigh Valley, I think.

SIGRIST: Did someone come to Ellis Island and meet you?

KUSSEM: No.

SIGRIST: No.

KUSSEM: No, you always with the—on your—the people from the *Haba*.. from the American line, I think.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see, like a representative from the liner.

KUSSEM: Yes, and they said, "You will go at such and such a time, and we'll be standing here in all these." And there were maybe twenty, thirty people all went together to Buffalo.

SIGRIST: I see. How did you get to Buffalo?

KUSSEM: Yeah. With the Lehigh Valley, but you know, our, our, our —

SIGRIST: But what brought you to Buffalo? How did you get there?

KUSSEM: Because my aunt lived there.

SIGRIST: But I mean how did you actually get there?

KUSSEM: Yeah. Well, from, from the—from the line we went to Lehigh Valley and the train didn't leave until ten o'clock.

SIGRIST: The train. Yeah, okay.

KUSSEM: So we just walked and someone, I don't know who it was, had sandwiches or something, you know, and a *brausa*, you know, a little soft drink because it was hot. This was in June. And then it was so that I was the last one to start to get on. They said, "Get on." Your suitcase, what to do with it? They said, "You got to put it down here." So I put it down and walked in. So all the other people had to put their suitcase on top. So next morning my aunt said—I think I was getting there at seven o'clock in the morning - and the aunt, my aunt started to walk out. She said, "Well, you didn't get here." I said, "I couldn't get there till I get my suitcase and everybody else, I was the last one on and the last one off, so I had to wait till I get." I couldn't go without my suitcase. That was awful and I was really—and my feet were swollen. Oh, because we were all sitting in the car, sitting up all night.

SIGRIST: In the train car?

KUSSEM: In the train, yeah, and then oh, I had—

SIGRIST: Were you all Germans who were going there?

KUSSEM: No. No, there were all nationality. I don't think there was one German I talked to. You know, different languages, but we tried—

SIGRIST: How did you feel? How did you feel in that kind of a situation where you can't really talk to anybody?

KUSSEM: Yes. No.

SIGRIST: You're in a strange country.

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: How did that make you feel inside?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I know. I was nervous, very nervous and very looking at my feet and I said, "Oh, my goodness. Get my shoes on again." I was foolish. See, I didn't know that. I didn't know that you take your shoe off, and that way they got worse, see. And then, when in the morning, when I tried, I couldn't get them in. I couldn't get on. I said, "Well, I have to." Between that and the suitcase and my shoes. Well, I got them, my aunt. She said, "Well, it's all right. We'll have to get you." I went to a cousin and she said that this is it. Oh, I liked it. I mean, I liked

SIGRIST: Whose house did you stay in?

KUSSEM: Well, I stayed at my cousin's house.

SIGRIST: The very first night was at your cousin's?

KUSSEM: The very first night because my aunt was living with a cousin who had the two little children. She had a six year—a six and a half and a six months old baby. So she said, “Mathilda can’t have it. You go to Margot” She had one little girl. So we went there, and I stayed there I think two or three days. She would put an ad in the paper and the very first one was Mrs. Wehle{ph} and within two days or three days, I was there.

SIGRIST: The very first night that you stayed over in America, what sticks out about ...in your mind about that first night when you got to Buffalo?

KUSSEM: Well, I think I was very tile [sic].

SIGRIST: Very tired.

KUSSEM: But I was also very glad because at home I had to sleep with two, with my sister, and I thought, “Oh, how nice to have a bed of your own.” That was nice, and it was good. And my cousin told me, he says, “You slept. You must have been exhausted.” Well, you see, we had gotten up at five in the morning. By six o’clock, we were off the boat sher...ferry to get to Ellis Island, and then all day, and then all night on the train, you know. And so I was just—I guess. I don’t know. But anyway, after two days it didn’t seem to bother me too much.

SIGRIST: Margaret, we’re going to stop just for a minute so that Kevin can put another tape in and I have just a few more questions I want to ask you.

KUSSEM: All right.

SIGRIST: And then we’ll be done.

KUSSEM: Okay.

SIGRIST: But you're doing great. You have a great memory and this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Tape 1 with Margaret Kussem on Thursday, May 9th, 1997.

KUSSEM: Okay.

END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE A, TAPE 2

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning Tape 2 with Margaret Kussem, who came from Germany in 1923. Today is Thursday, May 9th, 1997. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service, and we're at the Recording Studio at Ellis Island. Mrs. Kussem, you've just told us all about finally getting to Buffalo after this very long whole series of events, and getting to your cousin's house. You said that you stayed over night. Did they feed you that first night?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What did they feed you?

KUSSEM: Well, I think they gave me ham, chicken, and I said I had never seen it. I had never had it.

SIGRIST: And did you—I mean, did you eat it?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, anything. Anything was great. Everything was great, and fruit, you know, we were—well, they were very nice and we sat down, you know, and had there talking about anything. And they said, "Well, didn't you have turnips?" I said, "Oh, I don't want to see 'em." I don't even

want to see them anymore. And even now I don't mind, but for a long time, for about thirty years I didn't. I couldn't stand them.

SIGRIST: Sure. Well, look what they represent to you.

KUSSEM: Yes, that's right. It was—

SIGRIST: You started telling me, before the last tape ended, about how you got your first job.

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: So tell me again about getting that first job.

KUSSEM: Yes. Oh, I think my cousin advertised and—

SIGRIST: And what did she advertise?

KUSSEM: She advertised people—a woman with children to care—no, to take care of children and light housework.

SIGRIST: And she's writing an advertisement about you.

KUSSEM: Yes. Yes, that's right.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see.

KUSSEM: And you know, my, several people came and they were German, and my cousin said, "No, you're going go with English. No German," and Mrs. Wehle came along and she was so nice. She had two little boys.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Wehle.

KUSSEM: I think it's W-E-H-L [sic], Wehle.

SIGRIST: Wehle.

KUSSEM: There the ones that, Louis Wehle, they started the—

SIGRIST: Genesee.

KUSSEM: Genesee Brewery.

SIGRIST: I'll look it up to get the spelling.

KUSSEM: Wehle.

SIGRIST: So Mrs. Wehle came. She answered the ad.

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

KUSSEM: Oh, yes, she said, "And we'll find out. We'll"—you know, and she said, well, I have to do a little housework and two little boys, Jack and—Jackie and Jack. Bobby and Jack. Yeah, two little boys, three and six year old, and they were very nice. And Mrs. Wehle did the cooking, but I cleaned up and—

SIGRIST: Do you remember your first day of work for her?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I think—you know, they wanted to—I thought I had to clean everything and we—we—how should I say? With water and soap, you know, do everything. No, this was with the dusting. I should do dusting, you know, and I had to learn. She had to show me what dusting was.

SIGRIST: What were some of the other things that Mrs. Wehle had to teach you to do?

KUSSEM: Oh, what I, what she liked the most was my darning.

SIGRIST: Darning?

KUSSEM: I could darn. She had big baskets that she didn't like to do, so I did all that, whenever I wanted. You know, she said if there was anything, just do that.

SIGRIST: A family with a lot of holes in their socks.

KUSSEM: Yeah, but they, she did love that, and so all—no, I did it just a year.

SIGRIST: Did you live with them?

KUSSEM: I lived with them one year.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me where in the house was—where was your room? Where did you stay in the house?

KUSSEM: Oh, I had a upstairs on the third floor. Very nice room, yes, but she—you see, when they left, some very good friends that they knew went to them and I went to them. That was Judge Harris. He was a Supreme Court Judge in New York State.

SIGRIST: Judge Harris.

KUSSEM: Judge Harris, and she was—I stayed there five years.

SIGRIST: Well, before we get to Judge Harris.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I want to talk a little more about working for the Wehles. How did they—how did she teach you? You didn't speak English and she didn't speak German.

KUSSEM: She have dictionary. I have little dicti...pock...pocket dictionary. She would show me and I look at it and I look at it, but within three months, I knew a little bit.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first things that you learned in English? When you first started to understand, what were some of the things you were understanding?

KUSSEM: It was mostly about the, like here, how to—you know, she would help me a little bit and say "I'll do this and do that, and now you do it." So she was very good, and I do, and mostly take care of the children. I keep them happy, you know, and I did the darning and things. And I think I ironed. I did a little ironing. And she did the big, the washer. They had a washer where you turned it yet and do all that, you know.

SIGRIST: When you took care of the two little boys, did you try to teach them any German?

KUSSEM: No, no. No.

SIGRIST: Did they try to teach you any English?

KUSSEM: Yes. Well, they, he just hold them—you know, within a year I could go out shopping by myself because, you see, I knew Plat Deutsch, low German and that is a mixture of English and German, and with that it helped a lot. I'm.... much easier than I noticed my husband was. His mother was Austrian and it was very hard for them to learn, but the German, I don't know. It seems I got it, I could say a year because I went to school.

SIGRIST: Oh, what kind of a school?

KUSSEM: Very first year, when Mrs. Wehle. A public school for adult education and I learned the first year. I got—I don't know. English, you know, and I really did get all my thing. When I had my—get my what do you call it? Citizenship, I had to sign, make the—get out with that pretty good.

SIGRIST: What year did you become a citizen?

KUSSEM: '86. No! '87. One, two, three, four years.

SIGRIST: Four years. 1927.

KUSSEM: I went in. One, two, three, four. '29, I think.

SIGRIST: In '29.

KUSSEM: In '29 I got it, yeah. '23 I got in, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—when you were learning English, do you remember an occasion where you made a mistake?

KUSSEM: Oh! Well, you know what was the hardest thing for me was the A-T. That.

SIGRIST: T-H.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Th.

KUSSEM: Yeah, T-H. That was hard.

SIGRIST: How did you pronounce it?

KUSSEM: Well—

SIGRIST: Like the word that.

KUSSEM: Yeah, this, that, and what they say, the, without.

SIGRIST: Without.

KUSSEM: Without. Well, how.... I....that didn't make sense to me.

SIGRIST: How would you have pronounced it in German? Or how did it come out when you tried to pronounce it?

KUSSEM: Well, I thought it would say that—so, you know, it is so. It is so, but it can't. It's got to be. It goes back again and back and forth. Well, that's the same with thou. You know, in German you don't say I, you say *du*. You say *sie*, you know, T-I. T-I-H, yes, and they don't do that. You have to be a relative or then it's ..you.

SIGRIST: Like a difference between formal—

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Formal and—and—uh, ah. [Laughs] I know what you mean, though.

KUSSEM: Yeah, like the English, thou. They say thou.

SIGRIST: Right, that's right. The familiar form against the word—

KUSSEM: German unfamiliar.

SIGRIST: That's right.

KUSSEM: See, your relative is a *du*, but your f.... anyone that you don't know—

SIGRIST: Business associate is—

KUSSEM: It's *die* (sic), and not you and that was hard. That was hard getting it, changing to somebody that's so, you know.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that you saw in America that were new to you? Like around the house, what did the Wehles have in their house that you didn't have in Hamburg?

KUSSEM: Oh, everything. Oh, my goodness. We had, we had—yes. You know, we had hot water in welfr...welfare homes, you know, I mean. Nice homes. You know, the Wehles had a very nice home and hot water. That didn't—oh. You see, we only had bath when we go to the bathhouse.

SIGRIST: You mean like a public bathhouse in Hamburg?

KUSSEM: Yeah, but otherwise—yeah, but you pay. You got, you know, like every week and during the war when we didn't have any, half the time you couldn't go because they absolutely closed them. So, yeah, that we had, and then, well, there were—how should I say? There were ease, ease the way. The easy to do things in the kitchen. It's just wonderful, and even the home and all the things they have, how to do it, and help.

SIGRIST: It was just a lot easier.

KUSSEM: Easier. A lot easier. Oh, this, where I can't believe it that we live this way, you know, and we could live so hard there. Oh, that was—

SIGRIST: So hard in Hamburg, in Germany.

KUSSEM: Yes. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me then, when you went to work for Judge Harris, let's see—you were with the Wehle's for a year, right, and then you went to work for Judge Harris?

KUSSEM: Judge Harris, yeah.

SIGRIST: How was life different in the Harris household?

KUSSEM: Well, they were—they had no children. They were elderly people. She was—he was the judge and I don't know. He was very nice. They were very nice to me. I stayed there three years. No, five years.

SIGRIST: Five years you said.

KUSSEM: Oh, yes, until I was married and after I had my children, these two girls were my children. I had them. She would give me every year for Christmas a gift and, you know, they were very nice. Yeah, they were really—she had said I was their family. I lived to them.

SIGRIST: What were your responsibilities in the Harris household?

KUSSEM: Well, I took care, after awhile for everything, but at first I learned and she had me the book. She gave me the cookbook and I learned because I didn't have anything to make things, no matter. So I learned and I make, you know. I did the cooking and I did everything.

SIGRIST: Are you a person who enjoys learning?

KUSSEM: Oh, yeah, and I like make it looks pretty.

SIGRIST: Pretty.

KUSSEM: You know, looks nice, yeah. Oh, we was—it was so drab, so dreary in the war.

SIGRIST: In Hamburg.

KUSSEM: That, that...yeah, that you can't. You can't. You know, we had also the ail—what do you call it? The airplanes come down. We didn't—we had no air...we had no lights. We were not allowed to have any light on because the bombs were falling, you know, and the what do you call it? The big lights, the big lights would come out.

SIGRIST: Search lights.

KUSSEM: Search lights, that's right, and we had to take blanket and put it over the window, you know, that we could have a light so we could do homework. We got to the time, we had no kerosene. That's what we burned, kerosene, and we had no light, nothing. We couldn't do homework.

SIGRIST: So things really were a lot different here in the United States?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. Oh, that's just—

SIGRIST: Did you maintain contact with your family in Germany?

KUSSEM: Oh, I did. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How?

KUSSEM: Well, just writing. Writing letters and writing and as soon as I had money, I pay—in one year I paid my aunt back and then I had made packages. So for everyone they got packages.

SIGRIST: What would you put in the packages to send to Germany?

KUSSEM: Well, just what I need—some clothing and sometimes my, my cousins and that gave me things that they thought they want to pass to them. You know, that I could use, and I.. what I put in mostly is milk, powdered milk, coffee, tea. That's what they want. Soap. Soap was very expensive. Oh, my goodness. We didn't have any soap, so that's awful.

SIGRIST: So even as late as the middle 1920's, people in Germany are still in a bad way?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes. Very, very.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were you telling them about America?

KUSSEM: Oh, how wonderful. How wonderful it is. Oh, I can't, couldn't believe it and I said I certainly and my brother and sister, who I thought they should come over, but at that time, two years later, she got a job and so she didn't want to leave it. So I never, and my brother was the same way. He went to in the country, you know, Mecklenburg, that's in the so... *Ost..Ost..Im Osten* (the East) —and she.. he got a wonderful job in a farm running the farm and he got used to it. He loved horses, and so he did that.

SIGRIST: He didn't want to come.

KUSSEM: So, no, didn't want to come.

SIGRIST: What about mom and dad?

KUSSEM: Well, they wouldn't. No. Oh, no.

SIGRIST: They didn't want—even to visit, did they want to?

KUSSEM: No, no. No, but my mother came over. Oh, yes, my mother came over when Betty was, oh, about nine months...weeks old.

SIGRIST: Betty is your daughter?

KUSSEM: My older one. She came over in 1933, when Hitler came in.

SIGRIST: What did your mother think of America?

KUSSEM: Oh, he thou....wonderful, wonderful. She said, "Now, he's happy." She is glad that I was settled. She saw my little home and little girl and she was—you know, she was so afraid of the Nazis. I said to her, "What are going to happen?" She said, "I don't dare go out, especially when they come around with lights at night." They had, go into the streets and she said, you know that Hamburg is a big—I don't know if you know, very big cemetery. It's famous because it's like a big park. So she said, "We used to go," and even everybody, her friends, they would meet. Take a little train, you know. Not train, streetcar. You could go out and see it, and she said they said the children, mostly the boys in the streetcar would say, "Vegetable." Oh, what did they call that? Cemetery vegetable in English? In German? That's what they talk to the old people. Like we don't want you.

SIGRIST: I see what you're saying. It's like an insult.

KUSSEM: Hitler knew. Hitler's young, what do they call it? Leibersaien{ph}.

SIGRIST: The Youth Movement.

KUSSEM: The Movement, that's right.

SIGRIST: And they were insulting the elderly people.

KUSSEM: Oh, yes, and how.

SIGRIST: I see what you're saying. Yes.

KUSSEM: It was terrible.

SIGRIST: Calling them cemetery vegetables, I get it.

KUSSEM: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: That is terrible. Well, how did your mother feel about having to return to Germany?

KUSSEM: Oh, yes, well, she has to. My father had to sign, you see. He allowed him to come for eight months.

SIGRIST: He allowed your mother to come?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I didn't know that they were doing it. Sometimes I wished he could have stayed. Oh, she loved it. She said it was the best time she ever had.

SIGRIST: She was here for eight months?

KUSSEM: That was her—yeah, she was here eight months.

SIGRIST: Well, we have just a couple minutes left.

KUSSEM: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And I want to talk about your wedding. Tell me the name of the man that you married.

KUSSEM: Oh, Carl. Carl Kussem.

SIGRIST: Carl Kussem.

KUSSEM: Yes.

SIGRIST: We know his mother came from Austria, but was he born in the United States?

KUSSEM: And his dad. No, he was ten years old.

SIGRIST: Oh, and he came with them.

KUSSEM: And his sister was a year older. The two of them came over with them, the dad, with his father. His father was a coppersmith.

SIGRIST: Coppersmith.

KUSSEM: Coppersmith and he had a good job in Buffalo and worked there. And one year and he died.

SIGRIST: Oh, they were only here one year?

KUSSEM: He was only here one year. From '11 to '12, one year, and his mother wanted to go back.

SIGRIST: From 1911 to 1912, is what you just said.

KUSSEM: Yeah, but he and his sister were so determined, "We want to stay here," and so they stayed. He made it.

SIGRIST: How did you meet Carl?

KUSSEM: Yeah, I meet him in a German dance. [Laughs] German, what do you call it? Lodge.

SIGRIST: You mean like a dance hall?

KUSSEM: Organization. Where they have a concert. They had, their usual, every year they have harniv..... and harvest—

SIGRIST: Harvest festival?

KUSSEM: Harvest festival or something like that. Then in Easter time or in May, then they had a dance. They would get things, but my aunt got me into that. I never—in Germany we never had it, but she says, “That’s here. That’s what you do.” The Germans were organized and have things, and then they have always, you know, kuchen and coffee. They go for that.

SIGRIST: Kuchen is like a pastry, right?

KUSSEM: Yeah, yeah, sure. That they do a lot, yeah.

SIGRIST: What...when you met Carl, what did you like about Carl?

KUSSEM: Well, I don’t know. I really don’t know, but he was very nice. He was very nice, and you see, his sister was alon..with him, and his mother. They were very close family. But he was working very hard and he owned a home. I mean he and his sister paid for it, so my moth...so his mother could have a home, and I thought, if that, anybody can do that, then he’s good with me because I could have never, you know, wanted it better. He was very good for us.

SIGRIST: He loved his mother.

KUSSEM: He was a good father. He loved his mother. He loved his father and he said he had wanted to go to college, and well, with that that he died, everything just, you know, things didn’t just go.

SIGRIST: When the father died, yeah.

KUSSEM: And then the war came, you know? He had two—it was—

SIGRIST: What was the date of your wedding?

KUSSEM: *Mai* first.

SIGRIST: May first.

KUSSEM: May 1st, 1929.

SIGRIST: 1929.

KUSSEM: '29, yeah.

SIGRIST: And name your children for me.

KUSSEM: Yeah, Betty Jane. She was in '32 and Marion Doris; she was in '34. Two year apart.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Let me just ask you a couple questions. When you think of—when you think of your own nationality, do you think of yourself—how do you think of yourself, as German, as American? How do you think of yourself?

KUSSEM: Yes, American. American because it's so long. I mean I only lived eight years in Germany, but I'm seventy years here, so how can I know? No, this is.... there is no comparison. It's good in Germany, today.

SIGRIST: But as you said, you only lived there for eighteen years and you were here for a lot longer.

KUSSEM: Yes, and those five years were terrible.

SIGRIST: The war years.

KUSSEM: Even then, yeah, and starvation. Oh, when I think of it, we used to go out to the farmers and ask them. You know, we paid for it, but then the gendarmes came and took them away.

SIGRIST: The gendarmes?

KUSSEM: Oh, yeah. Oh, my God.

SIGRIST: So they were taking the food.

KUSSEM: Yes, they took it away.

SIGRIST: Tell me, when you became a citizen in 1929, how did you feel about becoming a citizen?

KUSSEM: Oh, very nice. Very good, and Judge Harris was very proud of me. You know, I went to—and my cousin came with me, you know, and we had a celebration. We had lunch.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the questions they asked you when you went to become a citizen?

KUSSEM: Well, listen, you know how it was? People all, you know, put their arm up. I know them, but nobody ever asked me, but everybody around me, you

know. There were about thirty-five or so or forty people there that day, you know. But Judge Harris came home and he said, "You made it." [Laughs]

SIGRIST: When you look back on your life, what did you do that makes you the most proud now? What part of your life are you the most proud of?

KUSSEM: My children. My children. My country. That I wish—I could never change it and I could never make it any better.

SIGRIST: Great. Mrs. Kussem, I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions. We've been going for quite some time now.

KUSSEM: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: But you've a great mind, a great memory and you've done a great job. Thank you very much.

KUSSEM: Thank you very much.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Margaret Kussem on Thursday, May 9th, 1997 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum Recording Studio. Thank you.

KUSSEM: Yeah, when I think of my—

END OF INTERVIEW

EI-875/KUSSEM