

EI-905

HILDA COHEN

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 25, 1909

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 3, 1997

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 88

RUNNING TIME: 46:20

INTERVIEWER: ROGER HERZ

RECORDING ENGINEER: PAUL SIGRIST, JR.

INTERVIEW LOCATION: NEW YORK CITY

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

POLAND, 1920

AGE: 10

SHIP: SUSQUEHANNA

PORT: HAMBURG

RESIDENCES:

HERZ: Good afternoon.

COHEN: Good after—

HERZ: This is Roger Herz for the National Park Service. Today is July 3rd, 1997. [clears throat] I'm at the home of Hilda Cohen, who came from Poland in 1920 when she was 10 years old. And there might be a little bit of street noise on the recording because there's a window open behind Mrs. Cohen.

COHEN: So close it up—

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, it'll be okay for now. We'll—if it gets bad, I'll shut it.

HERZ: And the engineer today is Paul Sigrist, Jr. for the National Park Service. Mrs. Cohen, why don't we begin by you giving me your full name and your date of birth?

COHEN: My name is Hilda Cohen and I was born on January 25th, 1909.

HERZ: Okay. And Cohen is C-O—

COHEN: H-E-N. My original name [chuckles] was K-O-H-N, but when you came to the register all they knew was Cohen so we changed to Cohen. [chuckles]

HERZ: And where were you born?

COHEN: In Klovawa.

HERZ: Can you s—

COHEN: Yeah.

HERZ: Can you spell—

COHEN: It's K-L-O-V-A-W-A.

HERZ: And that was—

COHEN: Poland.

HERZ: —in Poland.

COHEN: Yeah.

HERZ: Can you describe for me a little bit the town that you grew up in?

COHEN: It was a very small town and I was connected with my grandfather and grandmother and all my aunts, several aunts.

HERZ: You lived with your grandparents?

COHEN: Yeah, and that's right. Uh-huh. My father was in this country already because his brother, by the name of Nathan, brought him over. What year, I don't know exactly because when I came here I hardly re— recognized or knew my father. So—[chuckles] so it was quite obvious. And we came over, my mother and four children.

HERZ: So your mother was living with your grandparents also.

COHEN: Yes, yes. Uh-hmm.

HERZ: And you had brothers and sisters?

COHEN: I have—well, right now I'm down only to one sister and one brother. But I had one sister and one brother that passed away. That's right.

HERZ: Can you describe your mother for me a little bit?

COHEN: My brother?

HERZ: Your mother.

COHEN: My mother? Well, she was a very nice looking woman and all I could say, that she was very religious and she wore a wig in—in Europe. But the day that she was supposed to leave with the family, her own father told her, "Perrel, take off that wig." [laughs]

HERZ: Perrel was your mother's name.

COHEN: Yes.

HERZ: Could you spell that for us, please?

COHEN: We knew her on—Pearl but her Jewish name was Perrel. You know, P-E-R-R-E-L, you know. And she had to take off her wig [chuckles] because he was—just happened to be a very unusual person. He was very well educated. As a matter of fact, the rabbi in town used to use him as a consultant. Yes. And he was a very, very handsome man and with a long, white beard. And also, he had white cheeks and blue eyes. I remember. [chuckles]

HERZ: This was your mother's father—

COHEN: Yes.

HERZ: —who you lived with.

COHEN: Yeah.

HERZ: And what was his name?

COHEN: And his name was Wolf. Wolf. You know, that—that's all. They called him Wolf, you know, and just like in Jewish that—that I remember. Now, what else?

HERZ: Did your mother work?

COHEN: My mother taught children. Yes, she taught them Yiddish. Yes.

HERZ: In a regular school or—

COHEN: No, no. A—a private—in a private—

HERZ: L—like a—

COHEN: She rented a—a home, you know, a room.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

COHEN: And she taught children when her father was away.

HERZ: And was this the school that you went to or—

COHEN: No. I never went to school. My—all my aunts taught me. I knew [chuckles]—I knew Polish. I knew German and I knew Yiddish.

HERZ: All by the age of 10.

COHEN: All by the age of 10 because I corresponded when I found out my father, you know, wrote to us that he was here. I corresponded with him in all these languages [chuckles] that I knew.

HERZ: So you wrote back and forth to your father.

COHEN: Yes, because you know, the war—the when did the war stop? 1918—1919. And we came here two years because, you know, at that time wages were very, very low and my uncle helped my father to bring us over to this country.

HERZ: Let's go back to the little town a little bit.

COHEN: Yeah.

HERZ: Was—was there an industry in the town? How did most people get along?

COHEN: Mainly stores. Mainly that I remember are stores. I don't know of industry. I—I was too young to know about industry. But I do know that there were a lot of different types of stores all through the town.

HERZ: Did your grandparents have a store?

COHEN: What?

HERZ: Did your grandparents have a store?

COHEN: Yes, like a grocery store here, a general store, a general store.

HERZ: And were there farms around the town?

COHEN: There were farms but they came—the farmers came to town. I know.

HERZ: Were there mostly Jewish people in the town?

COHEN: No. In the town, yes, mostly Jewish people, but the surrounding towns, little towns were mainly Polacks. Yeah.

HERZ: And did you get along with each other? Did you—

COHEN: Very well. Very well. They were—very nicely. I do remember that because I know they used to come in and greet me, you know. [chuckles] Yeah, uh-hmm.

HERZ: Did you—do you remember some friends that you had?

COHEN: No, no. All I—all I remember is that one of the doctor's daughters came to me occasionally and that's about all. I don't—my same age. We were the same age. But outside of that, I didn't because I was surrounded constantly with my aunts.

HERZ: Hmm. Did you—did you play with other children or just—

COHEN: No.

HERZ: —those in the family?

COHEN: No, no. Not that I know of. I just played by myself, you know.

HERZ: Was it a very religious town? Was—I mean—

COHEN: Ah, well, kind of. You know, there were a couple of rabbis there, as small as the town was.

HERZ: And a shul?

COHEN: Oh, sure. Definitely. Definitely a shul.

HERZ: Was that the center of social activity?

COHEN: No, no activity that I know of. Not—not that I know of. I don't remember my aunts going anywheres, you know.

HERZ: When—when you first heard of the United States of America, how old do—do you think you were? And maybe you don't remember exactly.

COHEN: Well, oh, I knew when I was very little that my father was in this—in the United States. That I remember. Even—even when I was about three years old or so and I knew already my father was in the United States. So that was no pro—problem.

HERZ: W—what—do you remember how you imagined the United States?

COHEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was looking forward [chuckles] to—to—

HERZ: Were you?

COHEN: —to coming over here. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Very much so. And I always said, as a little girl, was hoping to, you know, meet—come and meet my father and my—also my uncle. And they also brought over one of their sisters, the youngest sister. When they migrated to the United States she cried. She only wanted to come to the United States so they brought her over.

HERZ: How soon after they came over do you re—

COHEN: About three years or so because they had to work in order to—to earn money in order to bring her over.

HERZ: What—when—when you said you wanted to come to the United States to see your father, what did you imagine the United States to be? Had you heard stories?

COHEN: No, no. There was nobody that—in town that was able to tell me anything that I know of.

HERZ: So nobody went and came back?

COHEN: All—all I did was have anything and everything in my own imagination. [chuckles] You know.

HERZ: What did your imagination tell you?

COHEN: Oh, [chuckles] I can't—I can't—I can't tell you what it was. It was something out of the ordinary, you know, just like the—to come to a big town, big state, you know, with different people, different language. You

know, and I—I figured all that out, you know, [chuckles] in my mind. I was hoping to—to be able to be one of us.

HERZ: Well, before you—we leave your little town, I wonder if you could describe a little bit the house that you grew up in.

COHEN: Well, I grew up very—with my aunts and my grandmother and grandfather. My mother, I saw very seldom. And also, I want to tell you that we were—the children, we were four of us but we were separated. Two of them were with my father's parents. Yeah. One of my brothers and when—my sister—sister lived over there. So we were two from—on this sort of side of the family, two of the other side of the family.

HERZ: But they were in the same town?

COHEN: No. They lived in Zychlin.

HERZ: Could you spell that, please?

COHEN: Z-Y-C-H-L-I-N.

HERZ: Was that far away?

COHEN: Well, it was a distance but that wasn't that far.

HERZ: Did you see—

COHEN: It was a distance but it wasn't too far.

HERZ: Did you get together with them?

COHEN: No. No, I did not see my sister or brother until a few days before we left Klovawa.

HERZ: Was that very difficult for you?

COHEN: Very difficult, very difficult. My mother had one of the—went there two times but she never took me along. I used to cry [chuckles] and—but she never took me.

HERZ: What was the inside of the house like? The kitchen, for instance?

COHEN: It was dark. The kitchen was dark and small. The rooms were regular size, like over here. You know?

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

COHEN: The—the same area or so on. That's—that was—there were different—differences, a matter of fact, that I remember from the ones that I lived in and when I came here.

HERZ: Who did most of the cooking?

COHEN: What do you mean? Cooking?

HERZ: In the house. Was it your mother or—

COHEN: No, my mother lived by herself. I told you, she lived, you know, in an apartment all by herself, and so all the—no, mostly my aunts did most of the cooking.

HERZ: Do you remember any special foods?

COHEN: No. [chuckles]

HERZ: No favorites?

COHEN: No favorites. [chuckles] No.

HERZ: When you started to get ready to come to America, was there a long time before the time that you knew you were coming and the time that you left?

COHEN: Oh, yes. It was two years when the war ended and I came in 1920. What—what month, I don't know. I don't—I have no idea of what month we arrived.

HERZ: And was there anything that—that made that particular time important or did you—was that when the tickets were sent?

COHEN: Well, I was over—I was on pins and needles, as we say, until I was able to come to the United States. That much I can say. [chuckles] Yeah.

HERZ: Was there a lot of political activity going on at that particular time?

COHEN: No, not—

HERZ: Not in your town.

COHEN: A—after the war, everything was quiet. Everything was quiet. Everything was quiet. Everything calmed down. It seemed like a new world, you know, or something like that.

HERZ: Do you remember at—at all—you were very young but do you remember at all what it was like during the war?

COHEN: Oh, yes. I—I know that I—I remember one incident very, very much so. We had over here what we call an attic, you know. And the Bolsheviks—we were told that the Bolsheviks were coming so that we had a secret door and stairway to go up to that attic and save ourselves. And I remember looking out that little window and the—with the—them hol—them holding sabers, you know, in their hands and running around the towns like crazy. We didn't know what was going to happen. And that was for hours. That was on a Friday night. That was on a Friday night.

HERZ: And everybody was in the attic?

COHEN: Well, the family.

HERZ: Right.

COHEN: And everybody was hiding in the street because the—you didn't see a soul in the street, because everybody ran away from them because they—they were out to kill. So I—that's one incident and I still remember. It's amazing.

HERZ: When the decision was made to come to America, did—did you pack up? Did you take anything special with you that you wanted to keep? A toy or something?

COHEN: No, no. There—there was nothing, just regular things that I—I would have to wear. That's about all.

HERZ: Can you tell us a little bit about what types of clothing you took with you?

COHEN: Just average. Just average, nothing outstanding. My aunts used to sew for me so I [chuckles] can't tell you what—what I had. The only thing is that when I—I only hoped that when I come to the United States that I would discard [chuckles] the clothing that I brought. That—that much I can say.

HERZ: And c—c—do you remember how it was to see your brother and sister who didn't live with you?

COHEN: Oh, oh, yes. Very much so. I was very, very excited about seeing my brother and sister.

HERZ: Can you tell us a little bit? Is there one special remembrance that you have of that time?

COHEN: Well, you see, there was on—there was only a difference of 15 months between myself and my sister. But somehow or other, she was a little backward. I was forwards always, somehow or other. [laughs] And it took me a little time to get together with her.

HERZ: You were older or younger?

COHEN: I—I—I was the oldest. Oh, I was the oldest.

HERZ: And what—what was your sister's name?

COHEN: Beatrice.

HERZ: And your brother?

COHEN: Joe.

HERZ: What—can—

COHEN: Joel. Yeah, Jael [PH]. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Joe.

HERZ: Can you tell us a little bit about your brother?

COHEN: Well, he went to Hebrew School and he studied and he became a genius in the study of the Talmud. That much I can tell you. Until the present day, he was a cantor in the United States. So—

HERZ: And what was it like seeing him? How old was he when you—when you saw him right before you left?

COHEN: Well, let's see. May have been about five years old, you know. Something like that.

HERZ: Was there a special dinner or a—a sendoff for you by the rest—

COHEN: No, no, no, no. [chuckles] No such thing in Europe as a, you know—no. The family did get together, you know, to say goodbye. That's about all, you know, but nothing special, nothing exciting. And when we started out—oh, by the way, the poet, Shalla Marsh [PH]—you heard of him? Yes. Well, he taught my—the—my grandfather's children. Yeah. He came and he taught them at home.

HERZ: The students of your grandfather.

COHEN: Uh-hmm.

HERZ: Did you meet him?

COHEN: I—yes. I had the occasion of meeting him at Tamarack and it was a very unusual [chuckles] meeting.

HERZ: Can you just spell Tamarack for us?

COHEN: T-A-M-A-R-A-C-K.

HERZ: T—

COHEN: That Tamarack Country Club in Pennsylvania.

HERZ: Tell us about the meeting.

COHEN: Well, I arrived and I had to go to the administration building, you know, to get my paraphernalia for the evening, you know, so I—while I was walking there were two couples walking. And when they saw me, both men started to whistle. I must have been wearing something very attractive, you know. And they said to me—they wanted me to join them and I wouldn't join them. So that's about—and I went towards the administration building. When I got there there was a gentleman standing in front of the building. I had no idea who he was. He was an elderly gentleman but he looked very distinguished looking, you know. So he calls me over. He says, "May I please know the reason why you didn't join these people?" Because he saw the incident, you know. So I said, "Well." I said, "I do not like to be the fifth wheel."

HERZ: [chuckles]

COHEN: So on. I said, "There were two couples," and I said, "I didn't think it would be fair for me to join them." Oh, he looked at me and he started to talk to me and he started to ask me questions. I had no idea who he was. He didn't introduce himself and I—why should I—[chuckles] you know, I had no interest in—in the man. Well, anyhow, when I came in for dinner, after dinner he called me over to his table. And he introduced me to his wife and the people that were with him. I said to myself, 'Who is he?' You know? So somebody at my table says, "Oh, you must know Mr. [unclear]." I said, "What?" [chuckles] I had no idea that it was him. Well, we spent a whole—I was there for a whole week. I used to play—what do you call it—golf. He—he invited me to play golf with him and so on. And—and everyday, he came over to my table to greet me and say hello to me, and his wife. And nobody ever found any reason that he

associated with strangers. He was there, had his own group, and he never bothered with an outsider. I was—[chuckles] I was the only outsider that he ever bothered. You know, and each—each day he came over and we spoke. And then—

HERZ: Did he—

COHEN: And he told me—I told him about my family. “Oh,” he says. “Yeah,” he said. “I used to teach your aunt and uncles,” you know, and so on [unclear]. [laughs] Small world.

HERZ: That’s a wonderful story.

COHEN: You know?

HERZ: Let’s go back a little bit to the time that you were leaving. Was it difficult to say goodbye to everybody?

COHEN: No. I was too excited to come to the United States to meet my father. [laughs] No, I didn’t feel like it. I wanted to get out of Klovawa, you know, just—just like that there.

HERZ: Tell us a little bit about the trip from your little town to the boat.

COHEN: Oh. Well, we came—we went to Germany in order to get the boat. All I can tell you is that I remember that we came to a place—I don’t know—it was on the outskirts of Danzig in Germany because—I know it was on the outskirts because I used to go and buy beer in town. [laughs] So I was able to walk into town. So I knew that it was Danzig. You see? That’s—that’s how I knew.

HERZ: And how—how did you—excuse me, but how did you get from your little town to that—

COHEN: How I traveled, I don’t even remember how that—that I can’t even tell you how. And when we came to that we were taken into a place where they had showers, and we had to be what they called deloused. There was a matron in the room with us, you know. And she examined us and when she found that—anyone that had lice on them, they removed their hair. There were a lot of—quite a few bald people. [laughs] Yes. [unclear] at one time and we had to wait about four or five days in that particular place. And everyday, we had to go in and be, you know, shower, take—take showers and be examined. And then we took the boat in Hamburg. And that’s where I wrote to all the particulars that you have on the paper.

HERZ: We'll talk about that in one minute but do you remember anything about getting from the little town to Hamburg?

COHEN: [sentence unclear]. I knew that there were an awful lot of people, you know, rushing. How we got there, I don't remember. [chuckles] I know we got in to Hamburg, you know. How—where, which way, whether by boat, whether by train, I have no idea.

HERZ: But your family was able to stay [unclear]?

COHEN: When we went to—yes. And we got on the big ship, Susquehanna. I didn't remember the name of the boat but I knew that my brother knew—knew the name. So I was at—what do you call that—a wedding a week ago or so and we were together, my brother and myself and so on, and he told me it was Susquehanna. That's when I filled in the information, [chuckles] when they gave me at the—

HERZ: Uh-hmm. And what was it like getting on the boat? Tell us—

COHEN: Terrible, just terrible. Thousands of people. Thousands of people. We—all four of us children were in hammocks. Besides that we were in hammocks, there were people on the floor still. And when I was supposed to sleep, I was worried that I [laughs] shouldn't fall on somebody else on the floor. You know that? And it was—and we just traveled for days and days and days. And there was no way to—I couldn't wait until—to get off that ship.

HERZ: Do you remember how many—

COHEN: It was dirty. It was dirty. It was filthy. I—we had to get up early in the morning when it was dark to stand in a line to get something to eat. That much I do remember.

HERZ: Was your mother with you?

COHEN: Sure.

HERZ: Also sleeping in the hammocks?

COHEN: No, she—she had some kind of a little cot or something like that. Yeah. But the four of us had hammocks. When—I had difficulty going up into the hammock [chuckles] and going out in the hammock, I remember. And all of us children, you know.

HERZ: Where did you go to eat?

COHEN: They had a, like, oh, special room, a special room—.

HERZ: Uh-hmm.

COHEN: —on the boat that they served food. Like I said, we had—I had to get up when it was dark in order to get something to eat.

HERZ: Do you remember what you ate for breakfast?

COHEN: Oh, who remembers?

HERZ: No special new foods or anything?

COHEN: No—no special food, no special food. They—they probably didn't have anything to give with so many thousands of people onboard ship. Don't forget, the—the ship was quite large. It had different—the first class, second class, third class, fourth class, fifth class, you know, and then was steerage. And I was in the steerage. So then there were a lot of people to feed.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

HERZ: What was it like being with all of those people? That must have been the first time.

COHEN: We got along with—very friendly. We all spoke to each other. You know, "Where do you come from? What do you do?" You know, just like that. It was—but—but it was a very rough what do you call—call it—coming over. You know, it was very, very rough. The sea was very rough. And I couldn't wait to get—get off that boat. [chuckles]

HERZ: So you finally got here. Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first—

COHEN: Oh! Yeah, we got—we got off during daylight. But by the time we got—my father was interviewed already—it was already evening and I remember coming out—outdoors, you know, and seeing that beautiful lady, you know. And I looked at it and—and it was at night and it was so beautiful, you know, that until today I always remember that sight, always remember that sight of the Statue of Liberty. It was a—just amazing, really amazing.

HERZ: You mentioned your father being interviewed?

COHEN: Well, he had to give us the name, you know, our names and, as a matter of fact, my—on my—on our citizenship papers my name is not Hilda. It's—my name is Hinda [chuckles] on the citizenship pa—you know, and my sister's name is Bena. You know, so—so he didn't know any English. He was—he was busy trying to make money. No, not to learn [chuckles]—go to school.

HERZ: So you came past the Statue of Liberty and then they took you to Ellis Island?

COHEN: No, we came right in through Ellis Island. We came right in through Ellis Island. We got off in Ellis Island.

HERZ: And can you describe to us a little bit what that was like, what Ellis Island was like?

COHEN: Ellis Island, where I came in, was just like a tunnel. You know, when I saw the picture with all the separations and the benches, there were no benches, no separation, were just one big, you know, from here to there. And people were abreast, waiting to be interviewed, you know, by—and they only had one man that wrote all the particulars, I remember. And there was one uniformed man standing, and he looked everybody over to see whether, you know, because God forbid if—if you looked sick or something like that, you know, they told you to go aside. And that's about all I know. And I remember it was very, very—we stood there for hours. Hours. We were exhausted by the time my father and my uncle came [laughs] to rescue us, as we say.

HERZ: So none of your brothers and sisters or you or your mother had any medical problems? Do you remember being examined?

COHEN: No, no, no, no. We came clean. Okay. We came clean.

HERZ: And you all—you didn't stay there overnight?

COHEN: No, no, no. We—we were taken off the boat, you know, from Ellis Island. My father and my uncle took us right to—first, they had to feed us. We were all starving to death, you know. [chuckles] So and—and then they took—

HERZ: Your fa—your father and uncle fed you or they fed you at Ellis Island?

COHEN: No, no. My uncle and my father took us into a restaurant once we came—got off the—what do you call it. First, we had to go from Ellis Island and my father had a place for us on the East Side. I remember where. The name is—was Goreck Street. [chuckles]

HERZ: Will you spell that, please?

COHEN: I think it's G-O-R-E-C-K. Goreck Street. And that's all I remember. That's where I had to register for school, I remember.

HERZ: Tell—what was your father doing? What type of work was he—

COHEN: Well, my father was—well, my father was a—an educated man in Europe. As I told you, even Shalla Marsh came to the family. And he took care in Europe of the richest man in that town, [unclear]. See? He was the secretary. He did all the correspondence for him. And he had land, an awful lot of land and mansion, you know, so on. He took care of that. When he came to the United States, not knowing, you know, the language and so on, my uncle had a friend. My—this friend was a baker. And he volunteered to teach my father to become a baker and that's what he did. That's what he remained, a baker.

HERZ: And what expectations did you have of the United States?

COHEN: Well, all I could tell you is that I wanted to study. I was very anxious studying, being that I knew Polish. And when I came to school, I was transferred from one grade to the second grade to the third grade. Finally, the third grade, I stopped. [laughs] You know? Because I was able—through my Polish, I was able to read. Don't ask me how but I did. And then that's how I went through school.

HERZ: Tell us a little bit—or after the third grade, about—a little bit about what it was to be growing up.

COHEN: Well, I went as far as Rapid Advance to 6A, 6B. See? And all of a sudden, I was supposed to be promoted to 6B, my teacher became sick. I didn't know. I was always—somehow or other, wherever I went to school, I—they chose me to be the president. You know, the big chief. So I went in front of the class and I said, "Kids, let's take out your textbooks. We'll go on with the English." It was the English study at the time. And—and the g—the children went along. You didn't hear a word out of them. Teachers passed by. They couldn't ima— found out that the teacher was sick. But they couldn't imagine that children are that well behaved. They peeked in but I was in the front and I didn't even bother with them. Finally, finally, I picked up my head and one of that girls said, "Hmm, hmm!" You know, "Look!" That was the principal standing. That was the principal standing at the—in the door. So already, I had to say hello to her, you know, just like she had acknowledged me. She says, "Go on. Go on." You know, just as if nothing happened. I went through the whole, you know, whatever it was,

a half hour or a hour, I don't remember. It's so long. And she was there. She sat down and watched me and so on. After class was dismissed for lunch, so I—she came over to me. She says, "I'd like to talk to you." I said, "All right." I said, "But if you—if you do," I said, "I have to go home and my mother is expecting me." I said, "I better run" to where my sister was in the next—you know, some class. She wasn't in the same class I me. I said, "And tell her that I'd be detained, that I'm not coming home for lun"—and the principal invited me for lunch, by the way, you know, that she was having a lunch with me. So—so the principal—we had lunch. And do you know what? She taught me the following day. There is, you know—yeah, that's right. I was a teacher for a whole week. Would you believe it? I—I was a teacher for a whole week. They—no substitute came in and all the teachers, everybody would—you know, came around to watch me. Well, all—all I could tell you is I said to my principal—I said, "It isn't fair because I was supposed to go"—you know, I was going to lose a half a year, you know, because I—my 6B; 6A, it's only 10 weeks and 10 weeks, you know. So she said, "I don't know what." I said, "I want to go—summer school and make it up, you know, instead of losing." Well, she got a hold of the big cheese ha-ha, you know, [chuckles] the real principal. And I—I went through for the whole class, you know, for half the term and I was transferred to 7A, 7B. [chuckles]

HERZ: And how much—how much eventually did—did you go to school? Which grades did you finish?

COHEN: I—I went part of high school only. My parents were poor and I had to go to work.

HERZ: And what was your first job?

COHEN: I had about six different jobs but I didn't—but I didn't care. I saw there was no advancement. And it just so happened that my father was in the bakery business, you know, and one of his associates a few blocks away, you know, his wife became sick. So he says—so he meant—had no children and nobody so it was just a matter of closing the store. So he came to me, you know, so he came in, one of the men that was the field man from the asso—Baker's Association. And he—and he asked my father that I should go and help out, you know, was during the summer anyhow, you know. So I did. One of the association's men came in to collect dues and he saw me. And he saw the way I handled the customers so he starts talking in Hebrew to the owner. I said, "Sir." I said, "I don't know you but please stop talking because I know what you're saying." [chuckles] So he says, "Oh." He says, "You know Hebrew?" I said, "Yes, I went to Hebrew school." I said, "That's how I know." So anyhow, he went—he said, "Do you know Yiddish? You

know, Jewish? There's a big difference between Hebrew and Jewish." I said, "Yes, there is. I do." He went back to the office and they needed a girl for arbitration. They had an impartial chairman and they needed a secretary. So I became a Jewish secretary. [laughs] And they had a Jewish typewriter. I sat down and I started, you know, the Jewish typewriter. I became—that was—and then they needed an office girl eventually because they had some fellow working, you know, something like that. But that took some time. In the meantime, I had other jobs, you know. But one day I was told that the job is open. So I [unclear]. And I remained and I became the manager of the association.

HERZ: And did you get married?

COHEN: Hmm?

HERZ: Did you get married?

COHEN: No.

HERZ: We only have about a few more minutes and I wonder if you could tell us, did America meet your expectations? Were you happy that you came here?

COHEN: Oh, very much so. Very, very, very much so. I have absolutely [chuckles] no complaints whatsoever. I—I have traveled through the United States twice because I wanted to learn something about the U.S. Before I made up my mind to do any traveling in Europe, I said, "I have to see the United States first." And I did. I went all through the United States, all through Canada. I was in Mexico. And then I went to Europe. And then I went to Europe. I traveled to most every place. Any place you mention, I was there.

HERZ: Did you go back to Poland to your little town?

COHEN: Oh, yes. I was in [unclear]. I was in [unclear].

HERZ: And your—to your little town?

COHEN: No. I couldn't get—get there. I couldn't get there. I couldn't get—I was with a group, you know, and you can't go. It's different when you go—but my mother and father, just before the war, they went to Europe with an aunt of mine. The one that came here as a little girl, you know, they took her and they went back to visit their—their parents. And it just so happened that there was already the threat of war and my aunt became sick. And they finally got her on the Normandy, the last trip back from Poland to—to the United States. But my parents came back a week

before but she couldn't go. Her back was hurting her and she couldn't— couldn't move, you know. But they said, "You have to get out; otherwise, you'll get stuck." And sure enough, that was the last boat.

HERZ: Well, you've told us some very interesting stories and we'd like to thank you very much—

COHEN: You're welcome.

HERZ: —for—for sitting with us and telling us about your experiences. This is Roger Herz. It's July 3rd, 1997 and we've been speaking with Hilda Cohen in New York City for the Ellis Island Oral History Project and the National Park Service. Thank you again, Mrs. Cohen.

COHEN: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]