

EI-945

FREDERICK KROH

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RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, September 20th, 1997. I'm in Colonia, New Jersey with Mr. Frederick Kroh. Mr. Frederick Kroh was born in what was then Austria Hungary.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: He left to come to America in 1920. By that time, his town was then Yugoslavia. He was seven years old when his family came to this country. Mr. Kroh, thank you very much for letting me come out. I should say that, for the sake of the tape, we may hear some traffic, some street traffic and some clocks ticking in the other room. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

KROH: Well, I was born January 18th, 1913.

SIGRIST: And where were you born? What was the name of the town?

KROH: It was called Schidski Banovci but in German it was pronounced different. It was Neuhof [PH]. Newhof [PH]. It was a German section of Schidski Banovci—

SIGRIST: Can—

KROH: See, we had three sections. We had the German section. We called them Einwanders [PH] in the early 1800s. And then I think we Serbs and Croats. And they're all different. They all had their section of town. And this was part of a—southern Austria Hungary called Slavonia [PH]. And it's still there now.

SIGRIST: Slavonia was the name of the region.

KROH: The region, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

KROH: Was—that was the southern Austrian. The further—

SIGRIST: Say the name of the town in German again for me.

KROH: Schidski Banovci.

SIGRIST: No, in German.

KROH: Neubanhof [PH].

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

KROH: It's a new station. We had—we run a railroad.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

KROH: Yes, it's N-E-U-B-H—B-A-H-N—B-A-N-F—H—H-O-F. Bahnhof.

SIGRIST: [clears throat] And then in what language is the other name of the town?

KROH: Well, I'll tell you, I don't really know. It might have been Serbia and it might have but Croat. I really don't know. I was not familiar with the language at all.

SIGRIST: Say the other pronunciation.

KROH: Neubanhof.

SIGRIST: And the other way you—

KROH: And that's Schidski Banovci.

SIGRIST: And we should spell it. We have a book right here that has it spelled.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: It's S-C-H-I-D-S-K-I B-A-N-O-V-C-I.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: Those are two words, correct?

KROH: That's right, yes.

SIGRIST: Does this mean new station also?

KROH: That's—that's right.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Well, tell me what you remember about the town?

KROH: Well, that's—I'm pretty familiar with the—funny thing, I can remember almost everything about it.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what sticks out in your mind.

KROH: Well, we wen—went to school. I went to kindergarten and first grade. And when I left, the teacher must have been either Serbian or Croatian because, well, she spoke German in the class and we had a one—one-room schoolhouse. And for—from kindergarten all the way to—to sixth grade, I believe—top grade was sixth—all in one room. So we all—were all integrated. And what happened in the kindergarten area was—it was overheard in the—all the way up to the end of the—other end of the room where the sixth graders were. So it was like a family affair.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the building for me, the school building?

KROH: I really can't. I really can't describe the school building. It's—I remember going to and coming home from school, and the way, the route I used to take used to be, go past my grandmother's house. And she had a—a walnut tree there and it was hanging over the sidewalk, was no sidewalk but hanging over the walk—walking area. And there used to be nuts falling off the tree. And she used to come out and say—those kids—"Kids, those are my—my—my nuts you kids are picking up." But she was our grandmother.

SIGRIST: D—do you know anything—were you ever told a story by a member of the family about the day that you were born?

KROH: No, I don't. But I remember the house though and—and the backyard. We had a gra—grape arbor. We had a tremendous manure pile because we had—

SIGRIST: Manure pile.

KROH: Manure pile. It was a house—it was a—a—a cir—it was a—an L-shaped house. We had—on end we had—we had the animals, a cow and a pig, and the other end, we lived in. And the—the kitchen area was probably all brick. There was a brick oven, you know, and that was all included. And when you had a fire in—in the oven it warmed the whole—whole living area.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the house was made out of?

KROH: Oh, it was probably made out of stucco, stone and stucco. And the front—the front had a tall gate, enclosed the whole—the whole—the whole yard area because the street—you couldn't get in unless you went through—through the house or through—o—opened the gate, because every morning my—my parents used to open the gate and let the pigs out. And then a pig herder would come along down the street and pick up a group from every house, take 'em down to the swamp and let 'em wallow for all day and then bring 'em back. And funny thing is, the pigs knew where to get—to go, come back in their own yard.

SIGRIST: What else sticks out in your mind about having the animals?

KROH: Well, we had—we had a horse. It was an ex-racehorse. And if you had—if you were out in the—the street with a load of hay and another wagon came along and tried to pass you, there was no way they were going to let you pass, because our horse was a racehorse and he was trained to stay up front. This I remember. And I also remember that we used to thresh our hay, thresh our wheat every year, fall, and we had a tremendous hay pile. I slid down and I sprained my ankle and my mother then took me to the—to the doctor in a wheelbarrow and I was probably only four—four years old at that time. But it hurt. But it went away after a while. Of course, it's about all I can remember about that. Of course, my grandfather was alive still. When he died is when we—my mother decided we're going to come to this country.

SIGRIST: You said that your house was L-shaped.

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And that you were in one portion of that.

KROH: We lived it in.

SIGRIST: And the animals were in the other.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: Is—is that a—a typical configuration at that time?

KROH: That's the way they—that's the way they all did it. The animals and the humans lived together in the same—same building, same house.

SIGRIST: You—you said you had pigs and a horse.

KROH: We had a horse and we had a cow. And on top of that, we had a field in another area, several acres where we grew watermelon and corn and things, especially the corn for the animals. Even for us, we used to—us kids used to go up in the attic and had a—we had a—a piece of equipment that would shred the corn, take it off the cob. And that was a job. We all hated it because it was hard work. So—

SIGRIST: Were the animals ever—was there ever an occasion where the animals got into the—

KROH: House?

SIGRIST: —the living quarters of the house?

KROH: No, no. They—they knew their place.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

KROH: Animals knew their place. They were like part of the family after a while, you know.

SIGRIST: In—in your portion of the house where you lived, how many rooms were there?

KROH: Well, we had—it wasn't very large. It was pretty big kitchen and probably two place, two bedrooms. But we—we had a bed in the kitchen. Some of us slept in the kitchen.

SIGRIST: Any other piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind in that house?

KROH: Oh, we had a room where my grandfather—h—it was his bedroom and I remember when he was—it was k—came to be time for him to pass on. He was delirious. And there was a clothes rack sitting in the corner with some clothes hangers. And he asked me, “Who’s that standing there?” See, this is the last I remember of him. And he was quite a—quite a—quite a guy too because he told me one time about eating. He says, “When you feel full, just push yourself away from the table. You’ll stay healthy.” He said to me. Well, he—

SIGRIST: Whose father was he?

KROH: My mother’s.

SIGRIST: Your mother’s father.

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And—

KROH: Of course, my father had come earlier to this country. He came here in 1914, just before the First World War.

SIGRIST: The grandmother that you referred to earlier, is that the wife of this grandfather?

KROH: No, no. She was a—another relative, a—a cousin.

SIGRIST: [clears throat]

KROH: Her children were our cousins so she must have been—oh, we called her Aunt, see, but—or Grandmother. But of course, I—it eludes me right now as to how we were related.

SIGRIST: But that’s the woman you were referring to, going back and forth to school.

KROH: Past the school, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your father’s name was.

KROH: Philip.

SIGRIST: Philip. And was that his name in—in that language?

KROH: Yes, it was Philip Kroh.

SIGRIST: What was your name when you were born?

KROH: Andrew—Andres [PH].

SIGRIST: But, well, you had pronounced your name—

KROH: Fredrich.

SIGRIST: —diffy.

KROH: Fredrich, or Fred. That's—in German, it's Fredrich. And my—I was named after an uncle, my father's brother. He—he used—he stayed in Yugoslavia till he died. He never came—got out. But according to this book and—and all the stories I hear, that after the Second World War communists moved in and all that Germans in that whole German town had to move up to Austria. They had to get out. So right now, Yugoslavia has almost no Germans in it.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your father's family background?

KROH: Well, he had three brothers and the estate was the farm that they—they—it was split up amongst them and—and only one stayed there. That rest—my—I had an Uncle William that came to this country earlier. He moved to New York City. And they had the—they worked as superintendent in a big building on University Avenue in—in the Bronx.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever relate to your stories of his childhood and his growing up?

KROH: No. Funny thing is, no. We never, never—he—he told me though, he—when he came to this country in 1914, he was—actually, his trade was bricklaying. So he worked at his trade and in Perth Amboy—that's where he landed—until we—he sent for us to come.

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

KROH: Well, he was a typical father. He would—of course, those days a father was a father figure and he wasn't too much involved. But he is—he was a good father. He got us going in the schools and everything when we get here.

SIGRIST: How did he—

KROH: And later on, he—he had trouble working because his—where his work was seasonal, bricklayer.

SIGRIST: How did he learn to be a bricklayer?

KROH: It came automatically.

SIGRIST: Was he doing that in Europe?

KROH: He was doing—he—well, he ser—he served a apprenticeship. In Europe, they had to serve apprenticeship. He's—he used to tell me about how he has—he had to work, keep—keep the bricklayers supplied with mortar, because he was the, what they call a handla—handlanger [PH], see. He did the—he must have had three or four bricklayers and he had—the was the guy that had to keep the trough full with cement all the time and keep them supplied at the individual boxes so they could keep working. And he used to tell me how, in the heat of—some days it was just terrific. But that's how they got used to working under different—different conditions.

SIGRIST: Were there buildings in your town or in the neighboring area that you know of that your father had built [unclear]?

KROH: No, I don't. No. All I know is our neighbor was a—he was a carpenter shop. They made furniture and things. And I used to long to get in there and work with some of that nice plain wood. But they had a heavy—strong fence and a solid wall. I could never see what they were doing. I could sometimes look through the window. But, oh, oh. Oh, oh. What do you got there?

SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape—

KROH: [laughs]

SIGRIST: —we have a very pretty kitty, who just jumped up on the table.

KROH: She wanted to see what's happening. She does that to me all the time when I'm reading or something. She'll get right on my paper.

SIGRIST: And what's the kitty's name?

KROH: I just call her Pussycat.

SIGRIST: Pussycat.

KROH: Pussycat.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

KROH: There she goes. She's r—pulling on a rug.

SIGRIST: Of course, you really only know your father from growing up, right? You know, because you didn't know him in Europe.

KROH: No, I didn't know—no, I was—I was only a chi—a little baby when he left. And of course, I've got some other pictures around but I can't find them right now, which—about a year old. But—

SIGRIST: In your recollection, when you got to know your father later on as you were growing up, what—what kinds of things did your father like to do for his own pleasure, for his own enjoyment?

KROH: Well, he had no—nothing. He—his main pleasure was working and—whenever he could and working around the house whenever he could, keep the place in order. Because he—he worked when he could. Of course, it's—Depression came along and that was tough times.
[chuckles]

SIGRIST: Yeah. Well, we'll get to that when we—

KROH: Oh, I'll tell you. It was tough times.

SIGRIST: —get that—

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

KROH: Philipina.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

KROH: P-H-I-L-I-P-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

KROH: Her name was Reis. R-E-I-S.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about her family background and her growing up?

KROH: No too much, except that she had a sister and she came to this country before we came. And she kind of sponsored us, along with my father and we lived in her house until we got our own apartment in Perth Amboy, 527, to be exact.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you stories about—about her childhood and her life in Europe before she married your father?

KROH: No, I don't believe so. No. Not that I can remember.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

KROH: No, I don't. Of course, they lived in—in different towns. Of course, there was this—Yugoslavia, a series of towns, you see. And somehow, they—they got together. And it's a strange coincidence that her—his name'd be Philip and her name would be Philipina. See? [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about your mother when you were in Europe as a child. What things stick out in your mind about her life in Europe?

KROH: Well, she was living on a—she was taking care of the family, along with her father, who was my grandfather. She was the head of the household and she—she knitted. Of course, I had—in those days we had no rubbers. When—in wintertime, we had to have wooden shoes. So she needed little slippers that fitted over the foot and then you put into the wood shoe, kept—you know, made it comfortable. And all our clothes—she spun—spun wool, made—made all kinds of things, blankets and things. And she did all our sewing, made all our clothes.

SIGRIST: Where did the wool come from?

KROH: Probably sh—local sheep. I don't think we had any sheep but we had a big backyard during the—of course, our—the time I was there was—the war was going on, see?

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. Do you have memories of—of what life was like during the First World War? You would have been quite young.

KROH: Yeah. Oh, I don't know—there was activity in our—our—they—there was a group of soldiers [unclear] the back of our farm. We had a back—big back yard. See, the front had a tall gate. You couldn't get in from the front but the whole back was open. It is a regular back—back entry, like a farm. There was a—where we kept all our old lumber and stuff. It wasn't much different than here. You had—I remember my grandfather was—showed my brother how to pull nails out and save 'em and straighten 'em out and keep 'em separate, because we threw nothing away. We—we didn't buy any of it. All you had to do is you saved your old nails and straightened 'em out and used them again.

SIGRIST: You mentioned soldiers in the back yard. What do you remember specifically about that?

KROH: Well, [unclear]. Of course, this was very, very—this was in early—early part of my youth. So I really don't know. But I know that when the left, I left a lot of clothing. So my mother made a suit for me and it was very nice.

SIGRIST: And that was the suit that you—

KROH: In fact, I have the—

SIGRIST: —showed on your passport picture.

KROH: Yeah, I've got a picture. Yeah, the passport. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What about how the war might have affected your family specifically? For instance, food shortages or anything like that?

KROH: Well, we didn't because we were always—had—we had enough to eat because we always kept extra pigs or piglets that grew up, you know. And every fall we slaughtered one or two pigs.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that process?

KROH: No. But I know we did it when—when I came here, we did it when I lived in Linden.

SIGRIST: Linden, New Jersey.

KROH: They—they kept up the practice. That's—one or two pigs, slaughter 'em and made sausages and smoked the hams and all the—in fact, there was nothing left. Everything was made edible.

SIGRIST: Talk a little more about the types of food that you ate as a child in Europe.

KROH: Well, mostly pork, sausage and smoked—smoked ham and things like that. It was mostly sausages and—and smoked—smoked and a lot—a lot—a lot of bread too. My mother had a way of making things out of just bread and eggs with a little milk, made a whole meal.

SIGRIST: What would your mother prepare for a special occasion?

KROH: I really don't remember that. Only here when I—when we lived in Linden. My father built a house. And it was just a regular fare. Sunday

was chicken, boiled chicken, either that or—or a piece of shou—pork shoulder, smoked pork sho—pork shoulder with beans or something like that. It was—it was always—yeah, she made—she made out. She did well for us.

SIGRIST: But as you say, they did maintain some of their—their Old World customs. You talk about them slaughtering the pigs—

KROH: They kept—

SIGRIST: —here in New Jersey.

KROH: Yeah. See, when we first came over, we were—we lived in Perth Amboy for a year and a half. And then we got a—my father arranged to—with a landowner, a farm owner in Linden, the—matter of fact, there was a priest that owned a farm. And he—my father made arrangements for us to move on there and milk the cows and bottle the milk and deliver it in—in—in—by horse and wagon in Linden. Of course, he had an already-established route so my older brother was the—he was the developer—the deliverer.

SIGRIST: How many children were born in Europe?

KROH: There were four.

SIGRIST: Can you name everybody?

KROH: Us four, and we had one young brother was born here.

SIGRIST: Are you the youngest of the four?

KROH: No, I'm the next to the young—the young was—I was the youngest one born in Europe. But we had—of course, when we came here we had another—another son, William.

SIGRIST: Can you name everybody in order of birth?

KROH: Well, there was Catherine, was the oldest. She's now 90. Elizabeth is now—see, she's now 87, I believe. Yes, 87. And Phil—Phil was actually in between. I beg your pardon. I—because he—he passed away about five years ago or maybe more. And he was—he was right in the middle of that. He's about—he's about 88 or so. Then—then I came and I'm now 84 going on 85.

SIGRIST: And then what was the name of the child born in the United States?

KROH: William. We were all named after somebody in the—either—either in Germany or—or Russia. Because I was—I—Andrew. This is something else, but they had to—Philip again—I don't know where that came from. Because we were right in that area where we could have—we could have been ancestors of—of the—of course, we were in—in—we were in that—near the Brenner Pass where—where even the Crusaders passed in the—in 1200s, now, going down to Holy Land. Because, see, right there, and just east of Trieste and all that whole area, mountainous area there, there—all those—a lot of little town that—that must have been even—one time or another traversed by soldiers and Crusaders going to the men—to the Holy Land.

SIGRIST: Wh—where do your sisters, Catherine and Elizabeth, live now?

KROH: Right now, they live in Florida.

SIGRIST: I see.

KROH: Catherine is now in a nursing home in Florida and Elizabeth is—she's got her own place but she's starting to fail. She's starting to think about going to live with her son or else going to a home herself.

SIGRIST: I see. What religion were you in Europe?

KROH: We were Dutch Reformed.

SIGRIST: Dutch Reformed, Protestant.

KROH: Yeah, Protestant.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about practicing your religion in Europe?

KROH: Well, we—I know we went to church every Sunday and were—in Europe, this—everybody went to church. If you didn't ch—go to church you were an outcast. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Do you have any specific memories of the church or attending a service in the church?

KROH: No, I—I wouldn't remember that because I was starting—that young. I only know that, well, when I left—when I left I got an excellent report from my teacher. Every—everything was dobro [PH]. You know, that means excellent because so—I don't know if she—if she filled out your report card in German or whatever it was, Slavic. I don't know—I don't know the language. I don't have the slightest idea.

SIGRIST: What—how would you practice your religion at home?

KROH: Well, we—we didn't. We d—when we came here, we did—didn't go back to any—any church because we were—we didn't have that kind of money to—to—for one reason or another, we just didn't pick up with the church again in Perth Amboy. We were a strange—and we weren't that outgoing. You see, we—we were from another country and we pretty much stayed to ourselves.

SIGRIST: And the religion may have been a less important part in your family's—

KROH: Yes.

SIGRIST: —priority list.

KROH: It didn't have priority, no. We—we had—religion was not a priority for us. In fact, I never went—

SIGRIST: Do you—do you remember celebrating holidays in Europe, like Christmas?

KROH: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: How—how did you ce—

KROH: Absolutely. Same as any—here too.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Okay.

KROH: How Christmas at all—

SIGRIST: Can—well, describe it, what you remember, in Europe, how—what you did.

KROH: Well, there isn't—there isn't much to remember, except that Christmas was a—was a holiday and there was Easter, the same as here. But of course, we had only things that we could make ourselves or pass on from—because we had our Christmas balls and things too that stayed in the family, all hand—oh, well, might be nuts, you know, with strings on 'em and things like that.

SIGRIST: What about Easter? Was that an important holiday in Yugoslavia?

KROH: It was very important holiday. We had two day—Easter was two days and all week. And it was Sunday, Monday and then it went on all week.

SIGRIST: I'm—I'm looking at the decorated eggs in your cabinet here, which made me ask you—

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did—

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you decorate eggs—

KROH: Oh, sure.

SIGRIST: —in your—in—

KROH: That was—oh, same as—it's the same as here. We dyed—dyed eggs and decorated. Oh, yeah, we—we—my mother and the whole family. It was—it was—it was very much involved in the—in the church. And when we got here we were strangers and we just never picked up.

SIGRIST: You said your father came to America in 1914.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: What—what—when you were a child, how did you think of America before you got here? What—what ideas did you have about America?

KROH: Well, it was—

SIGRIST: Your father was here.

KROH: It was going to a place where—it was just going to another place because, me, that time I was just—just that age where it was a new experience. I didn't need to go anyplace to—to improve myself because I was happy the way I was.

SIGRIST: What were you like as a seven-year-old?

KROH: Well, I was pretty frail. I wasn't that strong. I remember when I was—in Perth Amboy, there were—my mother and a neighbor were talking. And they were comparing children and my mother referred to me as not being as strong as the other kids, you know. I was probably a little bit of a weakling. But I grew up pretty strong. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: What—what did you like to do for fun before you came to America? What was there for—for fun, as a seven-year-old child in America?

KROH: I don't think we had anything special, just—

SIGRIST: Toys and—

KROH: Kids—no. No toys. Well, we had our toys, whatever it was. I can't remember any. But we led a pretty—pretty normal life, same as here. There was no such thing as class or anything, except that we—the Serbs stayed to themselves and Croats stayed to themselves. Our town was all German.

SIGRIST: How did your family support itself while your father was in the United States?

KROH: The same way. We got our pigs and killed pigs and slaughtered pigs from—saved the meat, either salted away or else—of course, we made cabbage. We made sour cabbage. We had our urns and when you're on a farm you I—you learn to prepare for the winter, same as here. Funny thing is, I married a girl from the farm in Texas. And her—when I went there in '42, I had just started in business. I was making a little money. I went down there and would you believe they were still living like the frontier? They had no electric and they lived the same way as we did in the Old Country.

SIGRIST: Hmm.

KROH: They slaughtered pigs. Of course, they were Germans too. It's—part of Texas are all German.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your mother telling you, "We're going to America."

KROH: No, they—they—we were just going. We were going to get to where we were—we—one morning, we got the wagon and we took off in their—one of the neighbors, I guess, delivered us to the train—I remember staying at a train station overnight. And I woke up early and went out on a—outside and there were tall trees all around and the cuckoos—birds, and it was such a good sound.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your family had to do before they left for Slavia [PH]? What did you have to do to get ready to leave?

KROH: Well, they had to sell the house and there, all our possessions. Of course, I was not a well—aware of any—any of that. They did all that while I just played around, I suppose, and just got along one way or another, as kids do, you know. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Do you remember what was packed to take to America? What kinds of things did you bring with you, if anything?

KROH: Certain clothes and we—I remember we had a—a big wicker basket. And wickers baskets is something that every child will use because they're light and you could stuff 'em with a lot of stuff and easy—easy to handle. And we had one of those. My mother made—you know, those days, they made big loaves of bread this size. And then a s—a smoked ham. We had enough food till we got to wherever—I believe where the boat was. I don't know if—if I remember right, it was in Trieste where we boarded a boat. Of course, that was the port that—of course, that's in that area.

SIGRIST: You have your passport with a photograph on it. Do you remember being photographed for that passport?

KROH: No. No, I don't. No, this—

SIGRIST: [unclear] photograph.

KROH: Spec—specifically, I do not remember that, going—either going there or having a photograph.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to any family members before you left?

KROH: No, we left early in the morning and we just took off [chuckles] in the wagon. Yeah, the whole family of us. See—

SIGRIST: S—so it's your mother and all the children are going?

KROH: All of us went together.

SIGRIST: So that's two sisters—two girls and two boys.

KROH: That's right.

SIGRIST: Four kids.

KROH: We all went together and which—a couple of neighbors went along and—in the wagon. And when we got to where we were going, well, we had to board a train and we—we had to stay at—at a railroad station overnight. And it was so clean and the railroad was so—so clean looking and the forest was so fresh. And the sound of the cuckoo in—early in the morning was very, very beautiful. Of course, I have an affinity towards birds and animals and things.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: You think that you boarded the ship in Trieste.

KROH: I believe we did, yeah. We—we might have gone down the Med—Mediterranean. Either that or we went—I can't remember for sure. We went across France to La Havre and boarded a boat there to come to—of course, that boat—the name of the boat was the Argentina. Now, I don't—not s—because I know we were on a boat in Trieste. We were on a ship and I remember looking down and seeing bottles and garbage floating in the water and smelled even then already. [chuckles] Just stuck in my mind that just—just seeing that dirty water and smelling ocean—smelling a port. You had a dis—very distinctive odor when you're in a port when this—just like in New York harbor too at one time. I don't know if it's—how it is now but at that time, I used to like to walk down to the Hudson River and just stay by the—watch the boats go by. In fact, I spent a lot of time down at the Battery. I used to love to walk around town, the old neighborhoods.

SIGRIST: New York harbor smells in the summer. I can attest to that. [chuckles]

KROH: Yeah. Well, I haven't been there now in about—since 1980, I guess, when I left. Of course, I worked till I was 70. I traveled by the train here at Rahway, commuted for—

SIGRIST: Had—had you ever been on a ship before?

KROH: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that stuck out in your mind as a child about the ship itself.

KROH: Well, it was a huge ship. I remember we had—be traveling along. There were dol—school—school of dolphins ahead of the boat. I couldn't figure this out. But they were beautiful dolphins, just in and out. Whole school was—they were staying ahead of the boat. And I remember laying down and looking—looking down under the rail and looking down and watching the water go by as the boat traveled through the water. Some—some things just stuck in my mind.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept on the ship?

KROH: No, I don't remember that. I haven't the slightest idea. I know we had—for food, we had spaghetti, a lot of spaghetti and spaghetti sauce. And

I've never tasted spaghetti like I've—I've never had any here that tasted like what I had on that boat. So it's got a very distinctive taste to it. I don't remember if they had meatballs in it or not but a lot of spaghetti. [chuckles] So—

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you were fed on the ship? Where did you—

KROH: Where we were fed, no. I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Of course, you said your mother brought food with her too.

KROH: Yeah, I don't know how long that lasted because we had smoked ham, you know, and a pig, smoked ham is pretty big. But you got five people eating on it, you know, it—of course, it must have all been all gone—all gone because on the ship we were eating nothing but—it must have been Ital—it must have been Italian ship because the spaghetti—the spaghetti [unclear]. I didn't mind it. It didn't bother me. And I never got seasick.

SIGRIST: Did you—do you remember any of the other passengers or seeing unusual looking people or anything like that?

KROH: No, I—I know I developed friendship for a kid there that when I was down looking down at the water, he'd just give me a little shove on my behind. Oh, oh. [chuckles] Oh! That was scary. Then he—he ran away. He just did it to be playful.

SIGRIST: Did any of your family members get seasick?

KROH: Not that I remember. They never went on deck that I can remember. They—they were pretty much—stayed in a cabin or wherever they stayed.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it that you're traveling in—

KROH: It was in July—in June.

SIGRIST: In June, 1920.

KROH: Early June, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

KROH: I don't remember how long it took because we landed in—in Perth in 1920—I mean in—in June, was June 20th we got—got here. And so it must—I don't know how long a boat takes, seven or eight days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when you came into the New York harbor?

KROH: I didn't—I don't remember seeing—noticing anything like that. Seems to me the name Castle Garden comes to mind every so often. I can't remember how that fitted in. Castle Garden. They—they [unclear] there first and then take us to Ellis Island or what? Of course—

SIGRIST: Well, Castle Garden was a European name for Ellis Island.

KROH: Oh, I see. Oh, that's what it was.

SIGRIST: So it's probably all the same.

KROH: Okay.

SIGRIST: Castle Garden was actually the name of the immigration station that preceded Ellis Island.

KROH: I see. Yeah.

SIGRIST: But a lot of people still called Ellis Island Castle Garden.

KROH: Of course, I used to go down there every so often and it was a—it became an aquarium.

SIGRIST: That's right.

KROH: And they used the building. And I don't know if it's still an aquarium but it was—they had sharks and everything in there.

SIGRIST: That—that was an immigration station—

KROH: Before.

SIGRIST: —just prior to Ellis Island.

KROH: I see.

SIGRIST: They closed Castle Garden. They built Ellis Island. That opened in 1892.

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then sometime in the 1890s is when the converted Castle Garden into the New York Aquarium.

KROH: Uh-huh. I see.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about Castle Garden or Ellis Island [unclear]?

KROH: Well, Ellis Island is—all I can remember is was a big dark room and we were all huddled together on benches with a lot—there was a lot of other people all—all scared. They didn't know what was going to happen next. Because, you know, there was so much talk about, well, if you got a communicable disease you're going back. See? So we didn't—we went—we were lucky. We got—we all passed through all right.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having to be examined at all while you were there?

KROH: No, no. I don't remember anything like that. But we must have been examined because they found us to be in good health.

SIGRIST: Did someone meet you at Ellis Island?

KROH: I believe my father met—met us there, if I'm not mistaken, because I remember he—he—he brought us to Perth Amboy on a train. And we went through an area that was all wooded. At that time, that area was all wooded. Now, it's all built up, factories and things. And we got to Perth Amboy. Then we lived in a house across the street from my—my aunt's house. Her name was—name was Baney [PH]. She—she was—and my sister's—my mother's sister. She was very nice. She—she outlived my mother. My mother died of a cancer when she was 53. For some reason, I—I can't say. She just—just developed it and—first, she had stomach cancer and they—and they cleaned that. They got rid of that. For five years, she lived after that and developed cancer somewhere else. And then she passed on but she's buried in Linden. In fact, near my—my wife is b—buried near there too, by a coincidence.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first impressions were of your father, never having seen this man?

KROH: Well, I—in the Old Country, they—they used to tell me what a wonderful man he was, you know, because I'd never seen him, being a—just a baby. What a wonderful guy he was. He was a big guy and—well, he wasn't that big when I—when I got here. He was just a—but he was a powerful guy. Of course, being a bricklayer, he was strong. In fact, my older brother took after him. My ol—

SIGRIST: In Europe, did you have a photograph of your father that you can remember, or a picture of some sort?

KROH: No. No. Any pictures I saw of him was when I got here and he—he had taken with his brother, Bill—William. They took pictures together. So he—they sent them to us in—in the Old Country.

SIGRIST: You started talking about your father took you to Perth Amboy. That's where he was living.

KROH: That's where we lived. That's where we stayed. That's where—

SIGRIST: And you were staying with an aunt. Or did he have his own house?

KROH: No, they gave us an apartment across the street from where my aunt lived. We all—all our trunks went to the aunt's house first, see, and then—then we—we—they gave us an apartment across the street.

SIGRIST: Did you stay the first night with the aunt?

KROH: I can't remember that. I know—all I know is we had an apartment across the street and it was a place that had—it had an outhouse. It didn't have an in—inside—side. And of course, all those houses had outdoor toilets those days, outhouses. I don't know. By now, I guess they got—of course, the houses are still there and I guess they've got indoor toilets by now.

SIGRIST: What about lighting? How was that apartment lit?

KROH: Gas.

SIGRIST: Had a gaslight.

KROH: Yeah, they had gas—gas there.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about having to use the gas line?

KROH: No. No, I was just—I let all the others do all the thinking for me. I was just a kid. I was just there, behaving like a kid.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

KROH: [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Well, did they register you for school?

KROH: Oh, yes. My father did all that.

SIGRIST: Did—was that done—of course, you're coming in the summer. If this is June—

KROH: Yeah, we went in the fall. I—I started first grade in—in Perth Amboy—

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being put into school in New Jersey.

KROH: Well, I tell you, I don't know what we had to eat. Of course, I—I un—I think it was mostly sausage that we used to—that we had either bought or one of the relatives gave us, because one day my teacher says, "What did you have to eat for lunch?" [chuckles] Because it was strong garlic, you know. That I remember very clearly, says, "What did you have to eat for lunch?"

SIGRIST: Did you have difficulties because you were foreign born and being put into an American school?

KROH: No, I never—never then much about it. Of course, when we went to school I suppose I anticipated all this, see. And they—they—they made a—they made light of our not knowing the language. But we learned it pretty fast. Never—never knew—never conscious of not being able to communicate. We always were able to communicate somehow or another. Of course, I—I think the teachers were—they had a knowledge of our language, German. They could communicate with us.

SIGRIST: And you were speaking German at home?

KROH: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes.

KROH: Always, yes. My mother's—never did—she—she learned to speak English but she didn't. At home, we always spoke in German.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your mother and father and their—how they Americanized, if they Americanized, learning—

KROH: Well, they were—

SIGRIST: —English and—

KROH: There was only a few years that they were separated from—from '14 to '20. So six years they were separated. So it continued on. See, my father then went to—he was a bricklayer and that's how he worked.

SIGRIST: Had he attempted to learn English?

KROH: Well, he already spoke English.

SIGRIST: He did speak English.

KROH: He learned it. Matter of fact, I picked up a little book in one of his—in his leftover possessions by—and it had a name on the top of a man that's still—family is still alive in Perth Amboy. It was a book on tr—on plane geometry in German. So my father, I—I believe, must have been studying—keeping up his studies. I still have the little book around. Schneck [PH].

SIGRIST: But you said your mother didn't learn English.

KROH: She knew enough to communicate with—in business, you know, the stores and so. She barely—she never went out much. Of course, those days in—in Linden, it was—you never—very few people had telephones because you barely had enough to live on, let alone have a telephone. And when I—when I got old enough to work I—I worked in a—in a—matter of fact, I went—I had to quit school in high school. I didn't have to but the WPA offered the work to young guys or anybody was out of work. So most of the senior class [chuckles] put in their two weeks with the WPA and they—they went back to school. I didn't. I stayed—I stayed out. I didn't go back. I was in junior year. My German teacher, I remember, he—he asked me, "Why are you quitting school?" I couldn't—I just—I just looked at him and, well, I—I can't explain anything, you know. What can I say? Because my father wanted me to quit school and learn his—his trade. He wanted me to work with him in the worst way. But I never did because it—that kind of physical labor, I didn't—didn't care to do, make a living at.

SIGRIST: What about your—your older sisters and your one older brother? What—were they expected to go out and get jobs here too?

KROH: Well, a—a funny thing is, you know, my oldest sister went to work as a—a housekeeper almost immediately because she was about 17 or 18 that time. And the other sister went to school with—when I went to school, she went with me. We went to school together. But Phil then—he—I mean, he never went to school after that. He never went beyond probably fourth grade in the Old Country. And he never did get—get an education. But he went on to—he established a little ice route for himself and he did pretty well.

SIGRIST: Did your mother get a job in the United States?

KROH: No. She didn't need to. She was a house—she was a hou—
homemaker for us.

SIGRIST: Did your mother miss Europe?

KROH: They never said anything about it. We—we lived here and that's the way
we lived. It was our home.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about—I mean, did you miss—

KROH: Didn't make a bit of difference to me. Wherever I was, I was at home.
[chuckles]

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Did your father become a citizen?

KROH: Oh, sure. He became a citizen. As a matter of fact, that's how I became
a citizen, a naturalized citizen. He became a citizen and the two of us
became citizens automatically, but the others had to get their own
citizenship.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the process of your father becoming an
American citizen?

KROH: I don't remember. All I know is that—that he—he was a citizen. And I—I
don't remember whether he got it before we came here or whether he
got it after we came here. But we became naturalized citizens. I didn't
have to go get my own citizenship because I was automatically became
a citizen, me and my—my—my sister. And Phil and Catherine, they had
to get their own.

SIGRIST: What about your mother?

KROH: She—I don't—I don't—I don't think she ever did become a citizen. I
can't remember that she ever went—she may have. Or don't people
automatically become a citizen after being married to a citizen?

SIGRIST: [unclear].

KROH: So this is what I don't know. I—I never paid any attention and it's—now
that you mention it, I never thought about it.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Did—did your parents ever express any interest in going back
to Europe?

KROH: No.

SIGRIST: Did they ever—

KROH: Just my father.

SIGRIST: Yeah, what did he say?

KROH: Before the war, he wanted to go back and sell—sell whatever property because he still had the farm.

SIGRIST: You're talking about the Second World War.

KROH: Before the Second World War.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

KROH: He went back in '38 or '39, now, and he did sell all—all of his properties. And he lived there—in fact, he went back. He thought he was going to stay there the rest of his life. But then the war came along and—and then he—eventually, they—they—they brought him back. Of course—

SIGRIST: Who is “they?” You say they brought him back.

KROH: The government. The government—

SIGRIST: Oh, the government brought him back.

KROH: —brought—they brought back American citizens. Because he was a citizen. He was there and, for some reason, they—there was no point for him staying anymore because the war was over and it was such a shambles over there that—funny thing is, you know, he's a bricklayer and he was over 60. He had to go to work. He had to work. He became a—a workbook and they had to work for the Nazis and the Germans. Yeah, he's got—I still—I still got the book around that—his workbook.

SIGRIST: Was your—was your mother dead by that time?

KROH: Yes. Oh, yes. She had died in '37.

SIGRIST: 1937. She was 53, you said, when she died.

KROH: Yeah. Yeah, he—in '37, she died. And then from then on, he—he—matter of fact, he—he turned the house over to me that we lived in because it was about to be taken over by the mortgage company. And he—he told me, “Now, you pay the back taxes and whatever has to be taken.” So I did. Of course, my br—old—my br—my brother and the other kids didn't want it. They were married to—they had their own

homes and their husbands didn't have anyone—they didn't want it. This was an old house by that time and so I took it over and I rented it out to different people and, eventually, I sold it too for much less than it—today, it's—oh, my! [chuckles]

SIGRIST: You mentioned earlier that you endured hardship during the Depression. Could you talk a little bit about the Depression and your personal experience during that time?

KROH: Well, it was—it was—there was no work for my father, being a bricklayer. And the others had left the nest to get married. They all married and it was just me home. And I got a j—job as an errand boy in a jewelry store.

SIGRIST: Errand boy.

KROH: Errand boy.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

KROH: And I was—I started with \$11 a week. Matter of fact, this is what the family lived on, 11 bucks a week. Now, I—and then the minimum wage came into effect and I was raised to, I don't know, 14 or 15. And while I was in this job—of course, this was just a selling job. I would have eventually wound up as a clerk in a jewelry store. And then we had a watchmaker that worked in a—did our watch work. And he—he told me, he says, "Look, my brother's—does manufacturing and he's looking for a young German boy to train into the trade." And of course I grabbed the opportunity right away. I went up there and I was hired right away. Matter of fact, I think he was just hinting at me to take—go in and apply for the job. So I learned the jewelry trade and watch trade. That was my trade then. And we had connections with Sachs Fifth Avenue. I was the errand boy. I made deliveries everyday. I got familiar with all the people involved in the jewelry. So the war came along and my boss was a Dane. And he was strongly in favor of not getting into the war. And of course, Sachs Fifth Avenue had a lot of Jewish people there and he—he had a falling out. So matter of fact, I wanted a raise at that time and he wouldn't give it to me. And I wanted to get married and so I quit the job and they—they called me into Sachs. They gave me a spot. I worked in Sachs for 40 years after that. Forty years. 1981, I think is when I quit. I got to be 70 years old. I said, "No, no more." In fact, they wanted to give me a—a bigger responsibility because Sachs had just been sold to Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company. They had all new management and they didn't have anybody—hardly any jewelry—that knew—knew too much about it. And I was the only one that had a thorough background in jewelry and watches and everything. And

they—they just dumped me—the responsibility on me. I says, “No. No way.” I was getting tired too, commuting and so on.

SIGRIST: In the course of your life, did you ever experience any kind of prejudice because you were foreign born?

KROH: No, never.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Your mother or your father, did they ever—

KROH: No, they never—

SIGRIST: —have any incidents?

KROH: —never mentioned anything. They were just—they’re—they were going about their life best way they knew how. There was no—never any prejudice in my family.

SIGRIST: How long was your father back in the Old Country before, as you say, they brought him back to America? The government?

KROH: Well, he was there from '37 to '44 or '45, I guess.

SIGRIST: Oh, so a good chunk of time.

KROH: Yeah, when the war was over, they—they—they paid his passage, come over.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever talk about that—the time he was over there? His impressions—

KROH: No.

SIGRIST: —of how things had changed or—

KROH: No, he never—he never discussed any of that with me. In fact, I have some of his old records from working over there. But anything else, what happened to him over there, I don't know and nobody told me anything. I—I could probably find out if I wanted to because he—he lived with relatives, you know. After they all—they were dumped out of Yugoslavia. They had—they all—all my relatives are in Austria now, matter of fact. If I wanted to visit I'd have to go—have to go to Austria because there are no more left in—they—they took everything they had, just tell them overnight, “You got to get out.”

SIGRIST: Do you know how your father felt about having to come back to the United States?

KROH: No, he—he came back because they offered to take him. And there was nothing left for him there because he owned no more property and he just had relatives that, at his age anymore, you know, it's the old story. You know, you outlive your relatives and your—nobody wants you. [chuckles] He—he's got no place to go unless you've got a young fortune to take care of yourself. And I believe he spent most of his money while he was there from the land that he sold, probably didn't get much for it anyway.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

KROH: I got married in '42.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the woman that you married?

KROH: Her name was Rachel.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

KROH: Her name was—her—her maiden name was Leifeste.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

KROH: L-E-I-F-E-S-T-E. Leifeste.

SIGRIST: And did you have children?

KROH: Yes, we had a boy and two girls.

SIGRIST: Can you name them for me?

KROH: Sure, Carol, Helen and Fred.

SIGRIST: Have your children shown interest in your family history and your European background?

KROH: Yes, my daughter, Helen, has a very strong interest. Now, she's making a whole geneal—genealogy, a list of all our ancestors and our whole background, the Old Country and even here. Yeah, she's very interested and this—this is her book, as a matter of fact. It was given to her by one of our relatives that lives in this—lives here.

SIGRIST: Oh, okay. We'll look at that. We're almost done here.

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to Yugoslavia and see the town?

KROH: No, never went back.

SIGRIST: Do you want to?

KROH: Nah.

SIGRIST: Why not?

KROH: Well, I was—I was—I—I was so involved with my work. I had no thought of ever leaving because—

SIGRIST: But I mean even just for a visit, just to see it.

KROH: No, there's nothing to see there. There's nothing left because, after the war, the—they were all strangers in our old homestead. The communists took over everything. All the Germans had to get out. There's no more Germans left in that German town—German part of town was taken over by Serbs and Croatians. And—

SIGRIST: Were your parents born in—in Germany or were they born in that [unclear]?

KROH: They were born in that—that area.

SIGRIST: They were born in that area.

KROH: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed there?

KROH: Well, if I'd stayed I'd probably given—taken into the army. I might not even be here. I would—I don't know whose army I would have been in, either German or—or—or the local, the Serbian Army or whatever. I know my father, when he was a youth, he had to go in the army. Everybody had to serve [unclear] few years in the army when they were a certain age.

SIGRIST: What about your oldest—well, actually, your—your older brother wasn't that much older, was he, really? So he—

KROH: No, he wasn't that much older.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

KROH: The never showed an interest in going back. I had a cousin [clears throat], or an uncle that wanted to go back, just to spend the rest of his life there with the family. But when he got back they came right back because they saw that there's no point in staying there. Yeah, they—they all moved back, came right back. In fact, they asked me if I wanted to come along for a visit. I says, "No, I got a job. I'm supporting my family." I was getting my big \$11 a week. Train fare ate up one week's salary. Then I had three—three—three week's salary to give my mother.

SIGRIST: Mr. Kroh, what did you do in your life that makes you the most proud when you look back on it?

KROH: Well, I tell you, I learned my trade, something I wanted to do even more above every—anything else. I had to learn how to make my living because this is what—very important. You know, when you're a kid, you're growing up, you said, "Gee, I'm growing up now and it's going to be a time when I'm going to have a family. I'm going to have means of supporting 'em. And if I don't"—it scare—actually scared me to be—to be without—because my father was out of work for so long and we had nothing. It was—no, not enough to live on, hardly. And I think—I even think that—I think you've got some relief from welfare.

SIGRIST: During the Depression?

KROH: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Are you glad that your parents made the decision to come to the United States?

KROH: Oh, sure. Of course, I would have been nothing over there. I might have been cannon fodder for—of course, this is one thing I—I find troublesome. A lot of people moved to this—to this country from Europe just in the—that period. Ellis Island was so—so busy because they were tired of wars in that area. And they were using our people for cannon fodder, from Napoleon down because we were right situated there where the—the army was formed from—for Napoleon and also for the—there's another—another country up in Germany. They're always—always warring together. And—because I have pictures of cousins and uncles and so on in uniform. All they were doing, be soldiering. Well, the—you—if I have a—you ever get a history of—I read in the history of such and such a person, well, he fell in this and this war. He died in this and this war. Very few of them lived a full life. [chuckles] They're all died—

even this—this book here tells about relatives that fell in—in the Second World War—the First World War. The First World War and Second World War.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, that—that area of Europe where you came from, they're still at it. You know, and still—

KROH: Yeah, that's where they—that's where they got their soldiers from. And a lot of—a lot of their people were—that whole list of people that fell in the war, during the war, they—they say—that's the way they classified us. "He fell in war. He—he—such and such fell in the war." Or he was maimed or something. He came back maimed. So I tell you, the Old Country was no place anymore after the Second World War. The First World War was the biggest exodus, the First World War, because they were tired of being used as cannon fodder because every family had sons going into the army for any excuse. Look at—look at this, as happened in Sarajevo—jevo when the First World War started. That's where they go—got all their manpower from our area and in that whole surrounding area. That's where they got their manpower. So we just got—I guess they just decided they're not going to be cannon fodder anymore. They're going to get out and go to a country where they can live a peaceful life.

SIGRIST: Great. That's a good place for us to end, I think. Mr. Kroh, I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you—

KROH: Well—

SIGRIST: —these questions. You did a great job. You have a good memory.

KROH: Oh, I have an excellent memory. I have—I have things in my mind that I can remember like—like yesterday—it happened yesterday. Just spot—spots scenes.

SIGRIST: Well, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Frederick Kroh on Saturday, September 20th, 1997. [sentence unclear].

[END OF INTERVIEW]