

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Niles, Ohio Project

Resident Experience

O. H. 639

ALEXANDER KISH

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

on

December 2, 1983

ALEXANDER KISH

Alexander Kish was born on May 5, 1918, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the son of Alexander and Susanna Kish. He attended school in Niles and graduated from Niles McKinley High School. He was in the United States Air Force from 1942-1945 and was stationed in England for some of that time. In England he met his wife Eileen and they were married in January, 1946. They had two children, Kathy who is thirty-one years old and Paul who is thirty.

Mr. Kish worked for Republic Steel and Ajax Magno Thermic from around 1950 to 1983 when he retired. He is a member of St. Stephen's Church. His hobbies are history and geography. The family has traveled a lot.

Beth M. Kantor

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INTERVIEWEE: ALEXANDER KISH
INTERVIEWER: Beth Kantor
SUBJECT: Hoffman's Department Store, unions, war years
DATE: December 2, 1983

KA: This is an interview with Mr. Alex Kish for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor, on December 2, 1983, at 2:00 p.m.

Where were you born and when?

KI: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1918.

KA: Why did you go back to Hungary?

KI: My father had a farm there; I went to the farm there. I didn't like it and I came back.

KA: When did you come back?

KI: When I was about six years old.

KA: Where did you come back to?

KI: Pennsylvania.

KA: When did you move from Pennsylvania to Niles?

KI: I started school in Niles when I was six years old. I started at Garfield School and couldn't speak any English. I went from Garfield to McKinley High School and graduated and went into the Air Force.

KA: What was grade school like? Was it frustrating not to be able to speak English?

KI: NO, I picked up English fast.

KA: Did your parents speak English at home?

KI: No, my parents spoke Hungarian.

KA: What did your father do for a living?

KI: Worked in the mill.

KA: Did your mother do anything?

KI: No, she was a housewife.

KA: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KI: I have two brothers and one sister.

KA: What was grade school like? What did you do for fun?

KI: No, it was just like today. I went home after school.

KA: What was high school like?

KI: Like today.

KA: What did you do for fun in high school?

KI: I went to football games.

KA: What kind of team did Niles have then?

KI: In those days they were pretty good. I graduated in 1937.
That was the Depression era and jobs were very scarce.

KA: Did the Depression affect your family a lot?

KI: Yes. My father didn't work too good.

KA: What made you decide to go into the Air Force?

KI: I was drafted.

KA: How did you feel about that?

KI: I was just being swept along with the rest of them. Those were hectic days.

KA: Where were you stationed at first?

KI: The first place I went to was Mississippi.

KA: Were you there for six weeks?

KI: I was there for about seven months. I went to school there.

From there I went to Seattle, Washington. From Seattle to Utah, to Texas, and then overseas.

KA: What year did you go overseas?

KI: June of 1943. I went to Great Yarmouth, England.

KA: How long were you stationed there?

KI: Two years.

KA: What did you do during that time?

KI: I was on ground maintenance. That was the 8th Air Force. I came back and resumed my job at Republic Steel. I had a forced retirement in September of this year.

KA: What was Niles like after you came back from the war?

KI: It was prosperous. Industry was all over, everywhere. Everybody was working.

KA: When did you get your first car?

KI: About 1935, 1936. It was a Hudson . . . No, I had a Model A before that in 1934.

KA: What had progress done to you? Has it made your life easier?

KI: My job closed down because of progress.

KA: Have the conveniences of life been better than they were?

KI: Oh yes!

KA: Do you remember the trolley cars through Niles?

KI: Yes. They were in the center of the road on Main Street and they went on the side of the road all the way to Mineral Ridge. They weren't there long before the buses came in. The streetcar barns were over by General Electric; the streetcars would go in there at night.

KA: Do you remember anything else about Niles?

KI: Niles was a prosperous city. Industry was everywhere.

KA: Were there a lot of stores in downtown Niles

KI: There were stores around the donut in Niles. There was the Ideal Department Store.

KA: How were prices back then?

KI: They were low, but people didn't have money. Bread would be a nickel. You could go to the theater on gang night, five persons for a quarter. At one time there were three theaters in Niles, and they are all gone. There was the Butler, McKinley, and Warner.

KA: What kinds of movies did you see?

KI: Anything. Ziegfield Follies, and cowboys. They would have news and cartoons before the movie too.

KA: Did you ever get prizes at the theater?

KI: They had prizes, yes, and they also had bank night. My friend won \$2,500 one night. If you would take potatoes or beans they would let you in the theater for that because they would give those to the poor.

I remember the soup kitchen too; it was in the basement of the church that my father was the janitor in. People came in off the streets like raggedy, old dogs coming in to eat. People around the neighborhood would come in with pails taking it home. Today it is like food stamps in a way.

We didn't have swimming pools then so we would swim in the creek or river. The B&O would be rolling by going east and from the engine to the caboose it would be lined up with hobos.

KA: Tell me about the unions.

KI: The memories I have are from Republic Steel. Soldiers came out because we had scabs. Airplanes were used to drop food in to the workers. The unions finally won. They recognized the CIO.

KA: Do you think it was good?

KI: They are going overboard. Ever since they got the cost of living clause into all these contracts that has ruined it. There shouldn't be a cost of living to anybody, just a general raise. The union is good though because I remember the era when they had no union. My father was working in the mill and maybe he had fifteen hours of work. They would call him out and work him the whole fifteen hours and then send him home, straight time. Then the government came out with the law though that you could only work eight hours. My father worked from 6:00 to 6:00. Other times he would work more than that though, fifteen hours maybe, and then that would be all for the week.