**Janet**: This is Janet Levine for the national park service. And I am here today at the home of Mr. Sigmund Kirschen in New York City. Mr. Kirschen came from Poland in 1927 when he was 16 years of age.

So that means you are today 84. Just turned 84 yesterday. Okay I would like to begin by asking you to say your birth date and the town in Poland where you were you born.

**Kirschen**: I was born in a village called Potszadof.

**Janet**: Could you spell that please?

**Kirschen**: PUTZANOW

**Janet**: And what date?

**Kirschen**: August 1st 1910.

**Janet**: And did you live in Putzanow until you-

**Kirschen**: No. we went to Vienna in 1914 when world war one broke out. And we stayed in Vienna until we came here.

**Janet**: I see so do you remember anything those first four years when you were in putzanow? That isn’t any memory that you have?

**Kirschen**: No.

**Janet**: Okay. Do you remember anything that your parents said about leaving there going to Vienna?

**Kirschen**: No we were war refugees in 1914. That’s how we came to Vienna.

**Janet**: So when you were in Vienna you were four years old do you remember the house you lived in for example?

**Kirschen**: Well we lived in an apartment. The same building where my grandparents lived.

**Janet**: I see whose parents where they, your mothers?

**Kirschen**: My mother's yes.

**Janet**: And what were they names Hamber HAMBER. I can’t remember off and my grandfather name.

**Janet**: Well you probably called him grandpa.

**Kirschen**: I probably did [laughter]

**Janet**: Your grandparents-that was the reason you went to Vienna I [unclear 00:02:33]

**Kirschen**: Yes right.

**Janet**: Now do you remember your grandfather or grandmother?

**Kirschen**: My grandmother. Because she lived much longer than he did.

**Janet**: And is they came to this country too or were there?

**Kirschen**: No they were in Poland. And they came to Vienna for the same reason we did.

**Janet**: So they came about the same time.

**Kirschen**: Right

**Janet**: And what experiences do you remember as a boy with your grandmother. What kind of a person was she? What kind of things did you do in relation to her? What memories do you have of her?

**Kirschen**: I was the oldest grandson and I played the role of the oldest grandson.

**Janet**: Tell me why that role was?

**Kirschen**: Well the role was to carry the [unclear 00:03:40] when I went with my grandmother. And I was sort of the errand bot.

**Janet**: Were there any privileges attached to being the oldest grandson?

**Kirschen**: I am sure they were. But it’s really too long ago for me to remember what the privileges were. I know my grandfather would supply me with sweets.

**Janet**: Do you remember what they were? What kind?

**Kirschen**: Oh they were hard candies. Which she always had with him.

**Janet**: And what about your grandmother did he ever tell you stories? Did she read to you? Did you help her do things?

**Kirschen**: She tells stories none of which I remember. But she also had another daughter and four sons. The sons were in the Austrian army. And two of the sons were physicians.

**Janet**: Now did your aunts and uncles also come to Vienna at that time? Roughly?

**Kirschen**: Yes.

**Janet**: So after an uncle’s came to Vienna they were [unclear 00:05:31] Austrian army?

**Kirschen**: yes

**Janet**: Was that something that family had strong feeling about the fact that they were in the Austrian army?

**Kirschen**: No I don’t think they had strong feeling. But they were stationed in northern Italy. So it wasn’t too far from Vienna.

**Janet**: Did you know them? Your uncles and aunts.

**Kirschen**: Yes

**Janet**: Are there any memories you have of them in particular when you think back [unclear 00:06:08]-

**Kirschen**: Well yes they always took me to the soccer games in Vienna. The professional soccer games. So I got to know soccer and the names of the players. That’s all I remember really.

**Janet**: What was your mother's name?

**Kirschen**: Her maiden name?

**Janet**: Her maiden name was Hamber. And her first name?

**Kirschen**: Rose.

**Janet**: And your father's name?

**Kirschen**: Philip

**Janet**: And so did you have sister and brothers when your still lived in Vienna?

**Kirschen**: I have a brother.

**Janet**: He was born in Vienna or was he born-

**Kirschen**: He was born in Vienna.

**Janet**: And what’s his name?

**Kirschen**: What’s his name is Morris. And he lives in California now.

**Janet**: And let’s see so was-do you remember the living conditions like were you comfortable in the apartment you were in?

**Kirschen**: Yes the apartments were very substantial. We lived above floor and my grandparents lived on a floor below. So we had really identical apartments.

**Janet**: Now at that time were there other people coming to Vienna for the same reasons?

**Kirschen**: Yes. Many a lot of people from Poland came to Vienna for the same reason that we came.

**Janet**: And did they live near you? In other words was there community of some sort?

**Kirschen**: There was a community. Which was right near our home?

**Janet**: Was there a section of Vienna that you would say that was-

**Kirschen**: Yes it was-there was 21 divisions. They were called patsaka which is a German word for Area. We lived in the 20tha which was a workers area.

**Janet**: Did you go to school there?

**Kirschen**: yes I went to school until I came to New York/

**Janet**: Can you describe anything about your school experience in Vienna?

**Kirschen**: Well I had at first language problems because-

**Janet**: When you came there you were speaking?

**Kirschen**: Polish.

**Janet**: Did they family speak Yiddish at all?

**Kirschen**: Yes.

**Janet**: In the home?

**Kirschen**: In the home

**Janet**: But I learned it from them. But I went to what is called [unclear 00:09:33] which is I would say junior college. I started I think I was 14-15. Something like that.

**Janet**: So that was actually a higher degree of education?

**Kirschen**: Well I t was the next level which I was eligible for. So I went there. It was a public school.

**Janet**: And what was your father doing for work while you were in Vienna?

**Kirschen**: He was in the Austrian army.

**Janet**: Oh so he was in the army too. So did you see him much?

**Kirschen**: Yes we did see him. He came home quite often.

**Janet**: And your mother did her work at all? Or was she strictly a house wife?

**Kirschen**: She no. she was a seller of butter and eggs. Out of the home.

**Janet**: So now where would she get the butter and eggs?

**Kirschen**: From farmers in the vicinity of Vienna.

**Janet**: So I see would she travel out?

**Kirschen**: No they would deliver it.

**Janet**: I see and then she would take the butter and eggs and-

**Kirschen**: Now people came in the house and bought it.

**Janet**: Did you ever help her with that at all?

**Kirschen**: I imagine I did. It’s a long time ago [laughter].

**Janet**: Do you have any fond memories of Vienna when you think back to your youth?

**Kirschen**: Fond memories no. not really. Because we were refugees.

**Janet**: Were you treated differently?

**Kirschen**: I imagine I was. By the native population. But I would go to the milk store to buy milk and bread. Which was just across the street from where we lived?

**Janet**: So you had to learn?

**Kirschen**: I learned German.

**Janet**: German. And did you learn it in school? Did they teach you speak German in school?

**Kirschen**: Well the language in the schools was German. So I learned there.

**Janet**: Did you get particular help with that from your teachers or you just had to-

**Kirschen**: I imagine I did.

**Janet**: Okay. How about religion was your family religious family?

**Kirschen**: My grandparents were religious. I went to a temple and contrast to a small religious school which was on the same block as the temple was.

**Janet**: So you went to a public school but you went to the temple?

**Kirschen**: I went to public schools all the time.

**Janet**: And were there any religious observances that stand out that your family-

**Kirschen**: Well all the Jewish religious holidays were observed in our home.

**Janet**: And how about your mother what kind of a person was she temperamentally and personality wise?

**Kirschen**: Well she was a very wise and hard working woman.

**Janet**: Can you remember any attitude she had or things that she wanted to instill I you?

**Kirschen**: Well the importance of school was always emphasized. And her brothers and sister were all university graduates. Students of graduates.

**Janet**: And how about your father what was he like as a personality?

**Kirschen**: He was a marching but he was in the army he was a-I don’t know how I can describe him he was father [laughter].

**Janet**: And how did he feel about being in the army?

**Kirschen**: Oh being in the Austrian army was not a very pleasant occupation. He was there because age wise he belonged there.

**Janet**: Did he ever talk to you about it? About his army experiences or?

**Kirschen**: No. there weren’t any really.

**Janet**: And where washed when he was in the army and he weren’t home?

**Kirschen**: In another area of the city.

**Janet**: Oh I see he was in the city?

**Kirschen**: We used to go to and see him.

**Janet**: Let’s see-how about food? Do you remember any food either polish or-

**Kirschen**: [unclear 00:16:10] polish foods.

**Janet**: Are there any kind of dishes, food that you remember from your childhood that you mother made or grandmother made?

**Kirschen**: There was what we call Schnitzels. It was a [unclear 00:16:30] but that’s all I remember about it.

**Janet**: Do you remember when the decision was made that you and your family would come to America?

**Kirschen**: Well my father came here first.

**Janet**: When did he come to this country?

**Kirschen**: 1922-23 something like that. And when he became a citizen we were able to come here.

**Janet**: Do you remember what you knew about America before you came what you expected?

**Kirschen**: I knew very little about America. Very little.

**Janet**: When you father came into this country after the First World War then?

**Kirschen**: Yes

**Janet**: Do you remember what his motivation was from coming here?

**Kirschen**: Well they didn’t want to go back to Poland and they didn’t want to remain in Vienna. And we had some relatives here who helped us come.

**Janet**: So when your father was here what was he doing this country?

**Kirschen**: He was a cashier at a center business at a bakery at the Six and the lance street.

**Janet**: So was he able to send money for you and your mother and your brother?

**Kirschen**: That’s where by-that’s how my mother was able to live that my father did support us.

**Janet**: And during the war years-no in the war years he was in the army right it was after-

**Kirschen**: He was in the army until he went to the United States. That was 22-23 I imagine.

**Janet**: And did he come to this country alone?

**Kirschen**: Yes

**Janet**: And he had relatives?

**Kirschen**: My mother had relatives and they helped him come. They gave him an affidavit and whatever else it took.

**Janet**: So then he must have to learn English

**Kirschen**: Yes in a way he did

**Janet**: And then became citizen and the plan was he would become a citizen and then you would come over?

**Kirschen**: Right

**Janet**: So do you remember packing up to leave to come to this country?

**Kirschen**: We took everything [laughter]

**Janet**: You did? You mean furnishings?

**Kirschen**: Whatever we had.

**Janet**: Did you carry with you? You shipped things?

**Kirschen**: It was shipped.

**Janet**: And do you remember goodbyes to you ember leaving?

**Kirschen**: I have memories of it yes. But to me it was another major move. Actually the first major move that I was aware of because I was almost 17 when we came here. We came here April first 1927.

**Janet**: Did your grandparents remain?

**Kirschen**: They lived here.

**Janet**: They were already here?

**Kirschen**: They arrived here before yes.

**Janet**: OH I see. So your grandparents lives here, your father lived here and you had-

**Kirschen**: Had my uncles and aunts were here.

**Janet**: Were this the same uncles that were in the Austrian army?

**Kirschen**: Yes. Well they-two of them went to medical school in Vienna so infect they lived in Vienna before we came. And before they parents came.

**Janet**: So let’s see-you left Vienna and where did you travel ad how did you travel to get to the ship to come to this country?

**Kirschen**: We went by train to Paris and we took a ship at a port that was very close to Paris.

**Janet**: [unclear 00:21:33] is where you-

**Kirschen**: [unclear 00:21:35] that’s right.

**Janet**: Do you remember anything about Paris that struck you?

**Kirschen**: No I was too young for that.

**Janet**: And were you examined do you remember any examinations prior to your-

**Kirschen**: Not prior but upon arrival.

**Janet**: Okay we will get to that part. So what was the name of the ship?

**Kirschen**: Defiance or something like that.

**Janet**: Here you mentioned majestic is that-

**Kirschen**: That’s right majestic. After French line.

**Janet**: Okay and so let’s see you boarded the majestic what was the voyage like for you and for your family?

**Kirschen**: My brother and I and my mother were the family at the time. And the voyage was a routine one.

**Janet**: Were you travelling steerage?

**Kirschen**: Third class which was the cheapest tickets we could get.

**Janet**: Was that-did you have a cabin or were you in a kind of dormitory?

**Kirschen**: No, no. we had room.

**Janet**: And do you remember the meal?

**Kirschen**: The meals were pretty good.

**Janet**: Were they a lot of people travelling on the majestic who were coming to this country were a lot of them from Austria Poland.

**Kirschen**: Right. That’s when the Jewish immigration to the United States became the motive for coming.

**Janet**: Do you remember when your ship came in into the New York harbor?

**Kirschen**: Yes I do

**Janet**: What do you remember about that?

**Kirschen**: I remember because my younger brother was examined very thoroughly by the physicians.

**Janet**: Why was that?

**Kirschen**: Well he was little. He was about 10 years younger than I am. And my mother knew all the information so she was helpful. She was bright woman.

**Janet**: Were your brother suspected of having some kind of medical condition?

**Kirschen**: No not suspected. He was smaller than I am. You know he was six or seven years old when he came here. So his development was kind of slow.

**Janet**: Do you remember what you or your mother felt about have been examined at Ellis Island.

**Kirschen**: Well I don’t remember anything. my mother was the source of information for the American officers who took care of us and brought us to the apartment that my dad had rented for us on the [unclear 00:26:00] and lance streets. I still remember the apartment.

**Janet**: Really?

**Kirschen**: yes.

**Janet**: Do you want to describe it?

**Kirschen**: Well it was an apartment on the first floor of a tenement building. And it was across the street from a public school to which my brother went. I went to Indie high school at the time. It was-it’s now known as suadpark high school. But I worked during the day and went to school at night.

**Janet**: Why was it that the American officers-they brought you from Ellis Island to your father's apartment?

**Kirschen**: No my father took a taxi cab. South ferry to the east side which was far. But I do remember we went up to the 3rd avenue elevator all the way to the lance street.

**Janet**: Wait how did that strike you and elevator train?

**Kirschen**: I don’t-I have no memories of it. I used it later on.

**Janet**: How do you mean?

**Kirschen**: I used it because I worked for my uncle who was actually-my mother's cousin's husband. And I got a job there.

**Janet**: What kind of work was his doing-?

**Kirschen**: Stationary store. A wholesale stationary store. And I was star clerk

**Janet**: And that was your first job?

**Kirschen**: That was my first job yes.

**Janet**: And then you were going to night school-

**Kirschen**: And while I worked there I went to night school. And I went to indie high school and learned English there.

**Janet**: Was the high school specifically to teach English or was teaching other subjects.

**Kirschen**: No, no. it was teaching other subjects. I was best in German.

**Janet**: How was it for you to learn yet again another language?

**Kirschen**: Well I don’t remember learning German originally. But it no problem it was just the language that we spoke at home.

**Janet**: German?

**Kirschen**: German.

**Janet**: Oh you did.

**Kirschen**: German and Yiddish.

**Janet**: Oh I see and you were also very young when you moved into Vienna so you learned it probably very easily. And then coming here as young man or teenager.

**Kirschen**: Well the store that I worked in the language was English but most of it was Yiddish. And I sort of learned more of it while I was there. It was good experience.

**Janet**: So how long did you stay in high school and then what did you do for your next job after you worked for your uncle?

**Kirschen**: That was the only job I had. Because from there I went to city college [unclear 00:30:19] and I learned German a little better.

**Janet**: At city college?

**Kirschen**: Of course yes. And I graduated from city college and I did not want to go back to work in the stationary store. -excuse me can I help you with anything piece of fruit?

**Janet**: Let me just stop-pause you here for second. Okay we are resuming now. Let’s see you were talking about you went to city college you didn’t want to go back to work in you uncle's stationary store.

**Kirschen**: Upon graduation I took some courses at the new school. In economics. And I-we had a friend who was in the professional section of the US employment service. And she referred me to Kings Point where I became a teacher and I was there for 35 years.

**Janet**: So that was your like work in the [unclear 00:32:00] teaching economics at kings point?

**Kirschen**: Economics, marine insurance and I learned the shipping business there too.

**Janet**: And just to go back a little bit when you first came to this country were there things that struck you were very different that you recall?

**Kirschen**: Well I learned everything here.

**Janet**: You mean what you did for your carrier in it-

**Kirschen**: That’s right. But I learned about business I learned there. It went a very well it wasn’t a formal education you see because this was a whole sale stationary and toy store that supplied candy stores at the time.

**Janet**: So you learned that doing it?

**Kirschen**: I learned that on the job yes.

**Janet**: And then your formal education [unclear 00:33:25]

**Kirschen**: My formal education helped.

**Janet**: Can you describe anything about the lower east side when you and your family first came to live here.

**Kirschen**: Well it was really very different than it is today?

**Kirschen**: How so?

**Kirschen**: Well at the time that we came here I only knew Jewish people. Jewish families. It’s different entirely different now. Your immigration of porturicans and Italians and various other groups came in and mixed with our group. And I never earned any Spanish [laughter] I wish I did.

**Janet**: When you were there it was mostly Jewish?

**Kirschen**: yes

**Janet**: Were there social clubs that you and your family-

**Kirschen**: I did me came to one. Benta hacoa

**Janet**: Could you spell it?

**Kirschen**: Hecoa-its a-it’s really a Hebrew word for the soccer team that was Jewish in Vienna. There was one Jewish team. And my uncle he used to take me to that because that was the team that we supported. And they supported. And therefore I supported it. But it was very interesting. They-my uncles moved to Israel in 1921-22 something like that.

**Janet**: From Vienna?

**Kirschen**: From Vienna. And two of them became physicians and the thirst one was an engineer and he became a farmer.

**Janet**: So the social club in the lower east side had the same name as the soccer team -

**Kirschen**: It was named for the soccer team

**Janet**: Did you’re interested in soccer carry over because this country is not so soccer oriented.

**Kirschen**: While I played. I played on the city college team which was kind of difficult for me because I hadn’t played in a long time. I am trying to think of interesting things.

**Janet**: You are doing wonderfully so whatever. But maybe something about that social club what was that like when you first came here.

**Kirschen**: It was mostly refugees or immigrants Jewish and on Sunday night we had on the [unclear 00:37:37] a place where we met. We talked about Vienna and about New York and things of that sort.

**Janet**: Where there any differences as you can recall about being a refugee in Vienna and being an immigrant in New York?

**Kirschen**: Oh I was much younger. Vienna. And here I was an adult I was a college graduate. One of the few at the club. What else can I tell you that were different? Well hacoa to me it’s actually-I pass by their frequently on the bus and I always look what’s doing. And in the basement at the street level there was a Jewish restaurant. And it was interesting.

**Janet**: I imagine there were a lot of Jewish restaurant and synagogues in the lower east side that are not there now.

**Kirschen**: Lower east side. Ohh yes. Because the lower east side where I lived I lived on the corner of Orchard and Rivington streets. And most of the people who lived there now are recent immigrants. Can I help you? With anything?

**Janet**: Well let’s stop for a moment now. We are resuming now. We were talking about the lower east side and the changes.

**Kirschen**: The changes are drastic. Most of the people in that area are Latin American immigrants. And there English is not good. We used to have push carts on Orchy Street. They are not there anymore.

**Janet**: When you came into this country and settled in lower east side how did you compare it in your mind to where you were in Vienna?

**Kirschen**: Well in Vienna I was a student. And here I worked and was a student you see so it was much different.

**Janet**: Did you prefer one to the other for any reason?

**Kirschen**: I prefer being in the United States because the opportunities look good. That was the only preference I am aware of during that period of time.

**Janet**: So did you marry at all?

**Kirschen**: Yes I lost my wife 4-5 years ago.

**Janet**: What was her name?

**Kirschen**: Her name was-let me show you a picture. Hold on oh I see now I will not go far. This is my family

**Janet**: We are going to pause here a minute. [Silence] Okay we are continuing now after looking at some picture of your lovely family. I was asking you your wife's name?

**Kirschen**: Its embarrassing [laughter]

**Janet**: That’s okay we are resuming now. You were saying your wife's maiden name was?

**Kirschen**: Niter peg

**Janet**: Could you spell it please?

**Kirschen**: NITENPERG

**Janet:** And her first name?

**Kirschen**: I bet it-let me look at the pictures

**Janet**: Well did you say it was Fugal?

**Kirschen**: Fagal was in Yiddish. The Yiddish name.

**Janet**: That’s good enough you wanted to-

**Kirschen**: I wanted to give you the English name.

**Janet**: Okay us going to stop for a moment. So fagal was the Yiddish name and her English name?

**Kirschen**: Florence.

**Janet**: Florence. And your children's names?

**Kirschen**: Michael is an attorney and my daughter is Nina. She is a social worker in [unclear 00:43:54] Michigan.

**Janet**: I see and you have grandchildren?

**Kirschen**: I have two and two. And they are good kids.

**Janet**: Let’s see were talking about-well looking back at your life what makes you feel very proud?

**Kirschen**: Well I became a professor. And I was a professor of economics and related subjects at the [unclear 00:44:30] academy for 35 years.

**Janet** And do you think having started your life in Europe first in Poland and then in Austria, do you think that affected or how do you think that affected the rest of your life being here in America?

**Kirschen**: Well I always have memories of my life in Vienna.

**Janet**: Do you think that cultured your life here in any way? The fact that you didn’t start out-

**Kirschen**: No. America offered me opportunities which I was smart enough to take advantage of. That’s all.

**Janet**: How about your mother and father how did they feel about coming here after they lived there a while?

**Kirschen**: Oh they were delighted to come here. My father was an expert on clover seeds. Clover seeds. Which he was able to tell if he had some in his hand.

**Janet**: Are you saying clover seeds?

**Kirschen**: Clover

**Janet**: Yeah. Because he became a farmer?

**Kirschen**: No, no. my father became a counter man in-

**Janet**: Oh he continued working- in a bakery.

**Kirschen**: He continued in a bakery. He was counter man. My mother went to indie high school with me. And she did better than I did.

**Janet**: Can you think of any dreams that you had as a young man that you realized or didn’t realize? Any dreams of your own in your life?

**Kirschen**: No. I have achieved what I hoped for in the United States. And it was good to me. I retired from the [unclear 00:46:59] academy where I wore a uniform and saluting and everything. For 35 years. And I have a pension on which I live now.

**Janet**: How is this period of your life for you?

**Kirschen**: This period?

**Janet**: This period of being retired and-

**Kirschen**: Well it’s kind of dull because I miss my wife. But she passed away as a result of some surgery which she had. And mu children were here and we let her go. Because we didn’t want her to be disabled. And anything that they would have been able to do would have left her partially disabled which we couldn’t see.

**Janet**: Do you think you had any heroes in your life either public figures or private individuals-

**Kirschen**: My heroes are my uncles who went to Israel. And helped to build Israel as it is today. And-

**Janet**: Is there anything else you would like to sit before we close? About coming to this country or living your life in this country?

**Kirschen**: Well coming to this country was an experience which I didn’t anticipate but it was all good. And with my mother help I was able to achieve to go to college and to university later on. New school. And I stayed at my job for 35 years. Where I had a very good reputation. And I think you ought to be aware. I am teaching English to Russian immigrants now. From [unclear 00:50:11]. My father in law was one of the founders of [unclear 00:50:28 workman circle] and I am active in it. I am involved in it.

**Janet**: What is your motivation for doing that work?

**Kirschen**: Well it’s a labor oriented organization which is what my interest are. I have been teaching labor and the preference of labor for a long time. As an economist at the [unclear 00:51:11] academy. Which was a very interesting experience of my life?

**Janet**: So now you have hands on experience kind of like?

**Kirschen**: I am a volunteer yes.

**Janet**: It’s kind of like when you worked for your uncle in the stationary store and learned about business first hand.

**Kirschen**: Well my students now are recently arrived Russians. Who are learning English with my help? And I have been doing this full time.

**Janet**: Well I think that’s a beautiful place to stop. I want to thank you Mr. Kirschen-

**Kirschen**: Look, there is a tape of mine in Ellis Island which I made several years ago. Which you may want to cross.

**Janet**: Well I certainly will look for that. Okay well thank you very much.

**Kirschen**: You are welcome it was good experience.

**Janet**: Great I am glad you enjoyed it. I have been speaking with Sigmund Kirschen who came in 1927 from-first he was born in Poland but came from Vienna Austria when he was 16 years old. I want to thank you very much and this is Janet Levine signing off.

**Kirschen**: It was a good experience.

**Janet**: Great.