

Interview with Helen Koser

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Interview # 1: August 2, 2011

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, August 2, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Dixon, Illinois, and I'm delighted to have a chance to talk to Helen Koser. Good afternoon, Helen.

Koser: Good afternoon.

DePue: Helen, I understand you're going to tell us about growing up in England, surviving the blitz during the Second World War, and becoming an American war bride in the process.

Koser: Yes, that was exciting (laughs).

DePue: Let's start at the very beginning, if you could. Tell us when and where you were born.

Koser: I was born in the hospital in Handsworth, Birmingham, England, on October 30, 1921. Handsworth was a thriving suburb of shops, parks, theaters of the community.

DePue: What do you know about your parents?



Helen Koser

Koser: My parents? Well, my father died when I was three. He was in the Army; he was an Army officer. My mother...

DePue: Do you know if your father was a World War I veteran? Did he fight in World War I?

Koser: Yes, I think so.

DePue: He was lucky to have survived that war. That was a brutal war.

Koser: Yeah, it was, yes.

DePue: Do you know how he died?

Koser: He died of pneumonia. That's all I know.

DePue: Since your father died when you were only three years old, I assume your mother had to work.

Koser: Yes, she did, um-hmm.

DePue: What did she do?

Koser: She worked at home (laughs). She made hairbrushes.

DePue: Hairbrushes?

Koser: Yes, um-hmm. And she got so much money for [each]. She'd have to do so many, like thirty or forty, and then she'd get paid by how many she did.

DePue: So she was doing piece work.

Koser: Yes, it was.

DePue: Birmingham at the time was known as an industrial city, wasn't it?

Koser: It was a very big industrial city, yes. They made everything from a pin to a motor car.

DePue: Was it unusual to have somebody like your mother doing that kind of work?

Koser: Not really. Not too many did, worked at home, but my mama managed to work at home.

DePue: I'm sure there was no shortage of war widows, either.

Koser: No, no.

DePue: I know from that reading the article that you wrote on your life that your mother also worked in the Shakespeare Hotel?

Koser: Oh, she did, yes. That was before I was born, though. She was a cashier in Shakespeare Hotel, and she saw...

DePue: Was there a specific affiliation with the works of William Shakespeare? Was that the reason that they named the hotel after him?

Koser: I think so, yes.

DePue: What adjectives would you use to describe your mother?

Koser: My mother?

DePue: Um-hmm.

Koser: You mean how she looked?

DePue: Well, her personality, her character...

Koser: She was always a happy person, it seemed like. She worked hard. She was a very... a good person, I would say.

DePue: I haven't done too many interviews with people from England, so you have to excuse me on this.

Koser: Of course.

DePue: I understand that England is much more of a class oriented society than the United States is.

Koser: Oh yes, yes, very much so.

DePue: How would you place your family in that class structure? Were they middle class?

Koser: Middle class, I would say.

DePue: Versus working class or...?

Koser: Yes, yeah.

DePue: But your mother...

Koser: My granddad lived with her.

DePue: Did that help with the finances then a little bit?

Koser: Yes, yes.

DePue: Did your mother ever remarry?

Koser: No, she didn't.

DePue: Were there any other brothers or sisters?

Koser: No, I was the only one.

DePue: Still, it had to be kind of a tight budget, I would think.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your grandfather. Was that your mother's father?

Koser: Yes. Yeah, he was.... Actually, he was Scottish. His wife had died, and so he came to live with my mother. He worked.

DePue: Was your grandmother English?

Koser: She died, yes. Yes, she was English too.

DePue: Do you know what brought your grandfather to England?

Koser: I think when he was a child they moved from Scotland down to England, to Birmingham.

DePue: I would suspect he was looking for a job, for work, at the time.

Koser: Yes, yes, he was an engineer, yeah.

DePue: Was there any other income that the family had?

Koser: No, just my grandfather and my mother's income.

DePue: Was he working at the time, then, when you were growing up?

Koser: Yes. Yes, he was.

DePue: Do you remember where he was working?

Koser: I don't remember the name of the place, no.

DePue: Where were you living? Was it a house, an apartment?

Koser: We lived in a house for a while. Then we moved from there, and we went to an apartment. That's where we lived.

DePue: I understand, though, that you had boarders at one time.
Koser: Oh, yes, when we had a house, we had boarders (laughs). It was interesting. Yeah, I loved it.

DePue: Why did you like the idea of having boarders?

Koser: I don't know, because they always made a fuss of me (both laugh). It's true!

DePue: So you got spoiled a little bit.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: What was it like, growing up in Birmingham, especially when you got older? In the United States, in the early thirties, this was the height of the Depression. Was it as severe in England?



Three year old Helen Laughler with her maternal aunt Rose in Birmingham around 1924.

Koser: But see, we didn't have it like that, like you had your Depression. It wasn't like that there.

DePue: Was it nearly as bad?

Koser: No, it wasn't, no. I think it was worse here.

DePue: Would you say you had a happy childhood, growing up?

Koser: Yes, uh-huh. Yes.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about the schools you attended.

Koser: The schools... I'm trying to think... I attended St. Augustine Primary School. The school was opened in 1908 by the Sisters of Charity of St. Paul. [It had] and room for 200 children. It was enlarged in 1928. The school stands to St. Augustine Church. During the war it was hit by a bomb.

DePue: Was this a Catholic school then?

Koser: Oh no, that was after the school.

DePue: But St. Augustine Primary School sounds like it was affiliated with the Catholic church.

Koser: Yes, it was.

DePue: Were you Catholic? Was your family Catholic?

Koser: No, but I was. My mother wasn't. She really wasn't religious.

DePue: Did you become a Catholic because you were going to the school?

Koser: Yes, uh-hmm, yeah.

DePue: Do you know if you were baptized at the school?

Koser: I believe I was. Yes, I really do, yes.

DePue: This was a school, though, your mother would've had to pay for, wasn't it?

Koser: Yes, but it wasn't real expensive, but she did. My grandfather paid it.

DePue: I know there are some differences in the English schools at the time from American schools. Was it more common, do you think, that people were attending these...? The terminology always causes me confusion. What we would consider a private school, you would consider a public school.

Koser: Yeah, really, yes.

DePue: Were public schools more common than state sponsored schools at the time?

Koser: I think so, yes, um-hmm.

DePue: How long did you attend St. Augustine?

Koser: I attended it until I was fourteen years old, from five to fourteen.

DePue: And what happened after that, for school?

Koser: I'm trying to think which school I went to, St. Augustine's. Then I went to another school for two years. It was like a high school, but our high schools were only two years, from fourteen to sixteen, and there were only two years for the high school.

DePue: At the time, was there any expectation that you wanted to go beyond that? I mean, finances, again, had to be awfully tight.

Koser: I took up nursing. I wanted to be a nurse.

DePue: You graduated?

Koser: Yeah, I graduated...

DePue: You completed school?

Koser: ...at sixteen, yeah.

DePue: At sixteen?

Koser: When I was sixteen, yes.

DePue: Did you go immediately into nursing school after that?

Koser: No, I waited a couple of years.

DePue: What did you do?

Koser: I went to work (laughs).

DePue: Where were you working?

Koser: Yes. I went to work in an office. I worked there, and then I went to school. I went to school in the evening, in this nursing school.

DePue: Where was the nursing school?

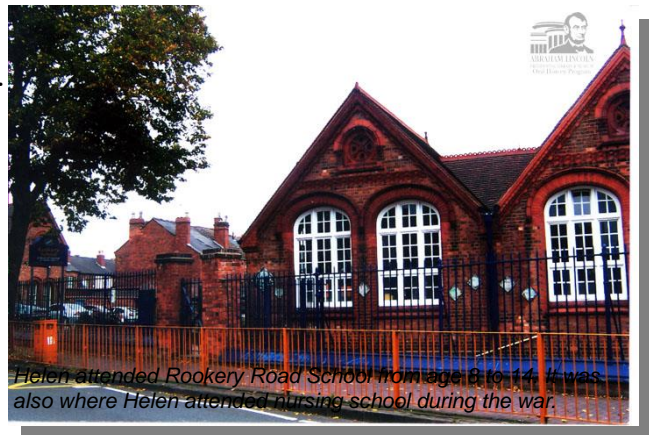
Koser: That was... It wasn't Birmingham. Yes, it was. I'm trying to think...

DePue: I'm asking all you these questions that were, what, sixty, seventy (laughs) years ago.

Koser: Yes, [I need] some time to think about it...

DePue: We've got a couple pictures here. I think these are pictures of the schools that you attended.

Koser: Yeah. I think this is... This is Rookery Road. That was the first school I attended.



DePue: That's where you attended?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: St. Augustine, is that what we're looking at?

Koser: Yes, that's right.

DePue: And this is the one with the big, white, framed windows here.

Koser: Yes, that's right, yeah. That was the Catholic school too. I attended for two years.

DePue: So that would've been where you were attending what we would consider high school?



Koser: Yes, um-hmm.

Helen attended St. Augustine grade school, a Catholic school run by nuns.

DePue: What kind of things were you learning there? Was it pretty similar to what we would have?

Koser: Just similar like what you have here, um-hmm.

DePue: I know one of the things you mentioned in this article that you wrote, remembering the fog.

Koser: Oh, the fog, (laughs) yes. We had much thicker fogs than you do, and when you open the door the fog would come right in because it was so dense. If you opened your door, the fog would come right in the house. That's how dense it was.

DePue: You had a lot more rain as well?

Koser: Yes, we did.

DePue: And a lot more overcast days?

Koser: Yes (laughs). Not as many nice, sunny days like you have here.

DePue: Do you miss that now?

Koser: No (DePue laughs). Not at all (laughs).

DePue: What was about nursing that appealed to you?

Koser: I just always wanted to be a nurse.

DePue: If I get my timeline right, 1934, 1935 would've been about the time you finished your high school.

Koser: That's right, yes.

DePue: When did you start nursing school, do you remember?

Koser: Thirty-five, '36, '37... Oh, that would be after that, because I didn't start nursing school until '38, I think it was. Yeah. I wish I could find my certificate, but I've been trying to find it, [showing] that where I graduated from, St. John's School of Nursing.

DePue: That was the one in the picture here we're looking at?

Koser: Oh, that's the school, the last school I went to, yeah.

DePue: That's the nursing school?

Koser: No. Oh, yes it was. They had classes in there for nursing, I remember.

DePue: It looks like a Catholic chapel, though, otherwise.

Koser: Yes. No, it's not. It's a school.

DePue: This is in a time, the late 1930s, when things started to happen in Europe, when Hitler came to power, and the Nazis came to power, and then 1938 when they occupied Austria early in the year.

Koser: That's right, yes, yes.

DePue: Do you remember that? Was that something that you or others were watching closely?

Koser: I can remember everybody talking about it. Yes, um-hmm.

DePue: Did you have an understanding of what the implications were at the time?

Koser: Not really, but you know, I was in my teens.

DePue: Helen, did you have some boyfriends during that time?

Koser: Yes, of course (both laugh). And the Americans came over and the free French, and we had Canadian soldiers everywhere. There were soldiers everywhere.

DePue: Well, that's a little bit ahead of our story, but let's go ahead and get there. September 1, 1939 is when...

Koser: Yes. The war broke out.



DePue: ...the Germans attacked Poland. Do you remember that?

Koser: Yes, I do, yes. I remember everybody talking about it, and everybody knew there was going to be a war.

- DePue: It was only two days later, apparently, that England declared war?
- Koser: Yeah, that's right.
- DePue: What were you thinking then?
- Koser: I was scared (laughs).
- DePue: You were eighteen at the time.
- Koser: Yes, and I was scared.
- DePue: Did you go to an all girls school, or was it a coed school?
- Koser: It was a coed.
- DePue: So all these young men you were going to school with would possibly be going to war, wouldn't they?
- Koser: Oh, definitely, yes. Um-hmm.
- DePue: Did you have a boyfriend at that time?
- Koser: (laughs) No, I didn't.
- DePue: But I'm sure it really comes home when you know that all these people you've known your entire life are heading off to war. (phone rings)
- Koser: That's right, yes.
- DePue: We're going to ignore that telephone call here.
- Koser: Yes, it's not ours.
- DePue: Do you remember Neville Chamberlain's agreement with Hitler at Munich in 1938?¹
- Koser: I remember them talking about it, yes.
- DePue: (sound of answering machine message) Hopefully we can't hear that too much in the background here. The following year, in May of 1940, is when Germany attacked the Low Countries and France.²
- Koser: Yes, that's right, yes. And then they bombed Birmingham. Birmingham was the second worst bombed city in England.
- DePue: Can you remember and tell us anything about that first day it was bombed?

1 Arthur Neville Chamberlain FRS was a British politician of the Conservative Party who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from May 1937 to May 1940.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neville_Chamberlain)

2 The term Low Countries, also known as the Low Lands and historically called the Netherlands, Flanders or Belgica, refers to a coastal lowland region in northwestern Europe forming the lower basin of the Rhine–Meuse–Scheldt delta and consisting of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Low_Countries)

Koser: Um-hmm, yes. I know we'd gone to bed, and we heard the sirens go about 11:30, and everybody just rushed out. They were in the nightgowns and their nightclothes because they didn't know what it was. The sirens went, to warn the people. We didn't realize until after we got out, and then we realized what was happening; we were having an air raid.

DePue: I'm sure you had instructions. Did you head to an air raid shelter?

Koser: They didn't have the air raid shelters. They had corrugated iron—what they call them—shelters that they gave to everybody. They were corrugated iron. You dug a hole in the yard and put them in the yard, and you could go into them. That was the shelter. It was a shelter.

DePue: So it probably looked like roofing material, didn't it?

Koser: Yes, yeah, corrugated iron. I remember that.

DePue: And that's where you went?

Koser: Um-hmm, yeah.

DePue: How big was that shelter?

Koser: They were quite big, oh yeah.

DePue: Could you fit a family there?

Koser: It would fit like about four or five people, um-hmm. They issued everybody those.

DePue: Was there any lighting inside?

Koser: No, you took flashlights.

DePue: I would imagine sometimes you might be in there for a while. Did you take reading material or magazines or...?

Koser: You took reading material, and you took food, because you couldn't get out to get food. You could store stuff in there.

DePue: Birmingham was an industrial city. Were you living in an apartment at the time?

Koser: Yes, we were.

DePue: But this apartment had a backyard?

Koser: Yes, it did. Yeah.

DePue: Being in the apartment, does that mean there would be several families in that?

Koser: It was four apartments in this building and a big yard, so yes.

DePue: So all four families would go to the same shelter?

Koser: Well, they each had issued their own shelters. They were issued to each family. So they dug a hole and put them in the yard. Or you could go to the public shelters. They had public shelters. And they (laughs) [were] not very safe.

DePue: You preferred to be in the backyard, under your own?

Koser: Yeah, because it was more underground. But the public shelters were not underground.

DePue: Oh, really?

Koser: Um-hmm. They could be hit very easily.

DePue: I know in London, with the subway system, that's what they used in London.

Koser: Yeah, they used the sub, yes.

DePue: Birmingham didn't have that?

Koser: We did have one, yes, but we wasn't living by one.

DePue: Let me ask you this; do you remember Winston Churchill and this speech he gave? This is at a time, after France falls.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Let me ask you this. Were you and others afraid that it was just a matter of time before the Germans would invade England?

Koser: We were scared, yes, um-hmm, definitely.

DePue: What did it mean, then, to hear Winston Churchill give that speech saying, "They aren't going to conquer us"?

Koser: It kind of helped, I think, for him to say that.

DePue: Yeah, I have that written someplace here. Where did I put that? This is a very famous speech, "Defend at the Beaches" speech. I can't find it now, wouldn't you know it? Anyway, what was the mood of the public then? You were concerned about being attacked, but was there resignation that eventually you would be conquered, or was there determination that you were going to fight?

Koser: I think we knew we were going to win. I really do. People were confident.

DePue: Was there a lot of solidarity among people?

Koser: A lot of what?

DePue: Solidarity, people getting together and cooperating?

Koser: I think everybody cooperated with each other, yeah. People were closer.

DePue: But there were certainly a lot of sacrifices.

Koser: Um-hmm, yeah.

DePue: Did you have rationing?

Koser: Yes, definitely (laughs). We had one egg a week per person. I remember my mother saying, half a pound of meat per week per person. And bacon (laughs), you had about a quarter of a pound for a week. But potatoes, they were rationed, but we had more. And bread was rationed; everything was rationed.

DePue: Did the family have a car?

Koser: No. We didn't need it; we lived in the city.

DePue: Gas or...

Koser: Well, you could get on the bus anywhere. It was very easy to get transportation.

DePue: How did they do the rationing? Did your mother get a coupon book?

Koser: We have a coupon book, yes. I've been trying to find it. I've got it somewhere, wish I could find it.

DePue: For everything then?

Koser: Yes, for everything.

DePue: How about coffee and tea?

Koser: Oh yes, um-hmm. We didn't have coffee over there.

DePue: You didn't grow up with coffee in the first place.

Koser: No, I didn't, tea (laughs).

DePue: But you did with tea, I'm sure.

Koser: Yes. Yes, we did.

DePue: Were you drinking tea by the time you were...?

Koser: Yes, yes (laughs).

DePue: What do you think was the hardest thing to deal with, rationing-wise, the shortage that you missed the most?

Koser: What we missed the most... You mean with food?

DePue: Yeah, food or essentials.

Koser: We didn't have much food; we missed that. And the clothing was very, very rationed (laughs). That was hard.

DePue: During these early years—I'm talking '40, '41, '42, '43—were you attending school at that time, or had you already graduated?

Koser: I already graduated. I went in an office. It was a war office, and I worked in that. Then at night I would go to school, to that nursing school, yeah.

DePue: When did you get your nursing degree? Do you remember?

Koser: I should look in my thing. Forty-three, I believe, 1943; '43 or '44.

DePue: Did you immediately start working as a nurse then?

Koser: Well, I should've pursued it. But then I met my husband, and I decided that I wasn't going to (both laugh).

DePue: What are the things you did to relax and kind of escape from the constant pressures of the war during those years?

Koser: Go flirting with the Americans (both laugh). We did!

DePue: Then tell me about seeing the Americans and all these other foreign nationals coming to England at the time.

Koser: I should tell you about... I'd come out of an air raid shelter, and I bumped into [the man] that was going to be my husband. I told him to look where he was going. It was real dark, and he said, "I want to see you in the light." (laughs) That's how we met. And there was just thousands of Americans everywhere.

DePue: All over the place.

Koser: Yes, (laughs) all over England...Birmingham, I would say.

DePue: Was he training there, or was he...?

Koser: He had been wounded in the leg, and he was recuperating.

DePue: You might not remember any of this, but do you know what unit he was assigned to?

Koser: No, I don't.

DePue: Do you know where he was wounded?

Koser: Yeah, in the legs.

DePue: But was he in France, or was he in Italy?

Koser: Oh, he was in France, in France.

DePue: That would put it past D-Day, then.

Koser: Yes. Oh, yes, yeah.

DePue: Tell me about D-Day. What's the reaction of the British people and you on June 6?

Koser: Oh yeah, I remembered something! During D-Day, I was with my cousin at Leicestershire. I always remember this awful noise. It was all the planes going over on D-Day, yeah. They were pulling those things back, something... What were those things?

DePue: They were pulling another aircraft?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: A glider aircraft?

Koser: Yes. Yeah, that's right. And I remember seeing that. It was quite a sight, terrible noise.

DePue: Those gliders were carrying paratroopers.

Koser: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, oh, and it was a terrible noise. I remember that.

DePue: But that had to feel good, I would think...

Koser: Um-hmm. We did.

DePue: ...to know that you're taking the war to Germany.

Koser: Yeah, it did feel good. Yeah, I forgot about that.

DePue: How often were you getting air raids in these years?

Koser: Oh, in Birmingham we had them night after night. We didn't get much until almost 1944, from 1939, um-hmm.

DePue: That it seemed you were being bombed almost every night?

Koser: Yes, um-hmm. It seemed like it. Sometimes they would go a few days, and then they'd come back. You never knew.

DePue: Were these always night attacks?

Koser: Yes, always night.

DePue: The ones that you remember, were they deliberately targeting population centers, or were they supposed to be going after the...?

Koser: They were supposed to be targeting the factories and all that, but they'd target the houses, killed a lot of people.

DePue: What was it like then? Did you have any neighbors or friends that you knew who had died in some of the bombing attacks?

Koser: Some of them, yeah.

DePue: What was the typical response? Was there a big wake or a funeral for those folks?

Koser: Oh, I've seen mass funerals in the streets, and lots of people would be there. Yeah, they'd have mass funerals for those people.

DePue: When you say mass, they'd have several people in the same funeral?

Koser: Yeah, they would bury a whole bunch of people.

DePue: Do you remember when the Germans started using V1 bombs?³ Those were the ones that had the wings, and they would putt, putt, putt in the sky and then...

Koser: They would blow up when they'd come down. Yeah, I remember those.

DePue: How about V2 bombs? Those were the bigger ones.

Koser: Yeah, those were the bigger ones, yeah.

DePue: Between the general air raids and the V1 and the V2, was there anything that especially was terrifying to you?

Koser: I think those bombs that went off. They would blow up, and they would light all the city up, and then they would drop the bombs, because they could see them, the Germans.

DePue: The illumination bombs that they would drop.

Koser: That's right, yeah.

DePue: Did you have any close calls yourself?

Koser: Um-hmm, yeah.

DePue: Helen, you've got to tell us about the close call.

Koser: My mother and I, we'd been to a friend's house, and we were walking back. The air raid sirens went, and then I don't know what it was, but it was shrapnel that just missed my head. It just fell, and we just run (laughs). It just missed my head, and I heard it fall, right at the back of me, so we just fled (laughs).

DePue: You weren't able to get to an air raid shelter quick enough for that.

Koser: No, that's right. I remember that.

DePue: This is jumping back a little bit, but the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Do you remember that and your reaction to that news?

Koser: I remember the news, but not too much about it. I remember some.

DePue: I would imagine, not too long after that, the Americans started to arrive as well.

Koser: Oh, yes.

DePue: You have a twinkle in your eye every time you think about the Americans (Koser laughs), but there were Canadians and Australians and...

Koser: Australians, we didn't look at them (laughs).

DePue: Why not?

3 V-weapons, known in original German as Vergeltungswaffen, were a particular set of long-range artillery weapons designed for strategic bombing during World War II, particularly Strategic bombing and/or aerial bombing of cities. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V-weapons>)

Koser: I don't know (laughs). We liked the Americans better.

DePue: Can you explain why? What was it about the Americans?

Koser: Something about them. They were always happy, and they were nice (both laugh). Yeah.

DePue: You said you met your husband coming out of an air raid shelter, and he was recuperating from a war wound at the time.

Koser: Yes he was, yes.

DePue: How long was it before he went back to the war?

Koser: I think it was about three months, maybe not that long. We went to France.

DePue: Was he seeing you quite often during that time?

Koser: Yes, um-hmm.

DePue: Every day?

Koser: Yeah. He said, "You're going to be my wife." (laughs)

DePue: While you were dating, huh?

Koser: Yeah, um-hmm.

DePue: How far into the relationship did he say that?

Koser: Oh... I think (laughs)... I'd only met him about two weeks.

DePue: Did he essentially proposed to you after two weeks?

Koser: Um-hmm.

DePue: And what was his name?

Koser: His name was John, John Hambly.

DePue: John Hambly. Now, what was it about John? Out of all these Americans that were there, what was it about John?

Koser: His eyes (laughs). He had big, brown eyes. He he had a nice personality.

DePue: What did your mother think?

Koser: She didn't mind. I was surprised really, but she didn't seem to mind.

DePue: How about your grandfather?

Koser: No, he died when I was fourteen.

DePue: So he wasn't alive.

Koser: Yeah, he wasn't alive then. But I told my mother, if I go to America I was going to

send for her, which I did a year later. And she lived with us until she died.

DePue: It sounds like sometime in 1944, he went back to the war in France.

Koser: Yes, yes.

DePue: Did he keep in touch with you after that?

Koser: Yeah, yeah. Then he said he was coming over to get married, but he got sent back to the States, so he couldn't come over.

DePue: How often were you getting letters from him?

Koser: Every day we wrote (laughs). That was a laugh, yeah, just a few lines we'd write to each other.

DePue: And you were writing him every day?

Koser: Yeah.

DePue: Do you know if he was in the Infantry or what was his position...?

Koser: He was in the Infantry, um-hmm.

DePue: Do you have any of the letters?

Koser: I don't think so, no. I'd have to look, but I don't think so.

DePue: So the classic line, did absence make the heart grow fonder?

Koser: Heart grow fonder? Yeah.

DePue: It did?

Koser: Yeah.

DePue: And for him as well?

Koser: Yes. And I was true to him too.

DePue: But there was no shortage of handsome young men walking around in England at the time.

Koser: Oh, no. No (laughs).

DePue: As the war concluded, do you remember May of 1945, when the war ended?

Koser: When the war ended, I remember that.

DePue: Was there a big celebration?

Koser: Yes, there was. There was thousands of people in the streets. They were all celebrating; they were so happy. I remember that.

DePue: Were you one of the people in the streets?

Koser: Yes (laughs). Yes.

DePue: Was everyone going to the pubs and having a drink?

Koser: Oh, yes. I didn't drink, but I would go to the pubs and just sit there and have pop. Yeah.

DePue: During that time, were music and movies two ways of escaping?

Koser: Yeah, you could go to the movies, but you went at your own risk because, if there was an air raid, you either stayed, or you left. You stayed at your own risk, because you could get bombed, see, so you'd try to get home (laughs).

DePue: Did you go to the movies occasionally?

Koser: Oh, yes.

DePue: What kind of movies did you enjoy the most?

Koser: Classical, just regular movies...

DePue: Did you like...

Koser: ...love stories.

DePue: Love stories?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Musicals?

Koser: Yes, um-hmm.

DePue: The music of the era, you can't help listening to music of the World War II period...

Koser: Oh, yes.

DePue: ...without knowing that the world was at war, can you?

Koser: That's right, yes.

DePue: When the war ended, did you think at that time John was coming back to England?

Koser: Yes, I did, yeah.

DePue: Why didn't he get sent back to England?

Koser: I don't know. He thought he would. He had been wounded, and he had asked for a leave to come back so we could get married. Instead, he got sent back to the States and discharged because of his leg.

DePue: Was that 1946 when he got sent back?

Koser: I think it was, yes.

DePue: Was there ever any thought that you'd go to find him in France or Germany or wherever he was?

Koser: Oh no, no, you couldn't go over there.

DePue: Because of government restrictions?

Koser: I think there were restrictions. I don't think you could go. No, no.

DePue: During this time, were you thinking, This might not happen?

Koser: No, I knew it would (both laugh). I did.

DePue: He was writing constantly at the time?

Koser: Constantly.

DePue: So how does a guy, who's sent back to the United States—and I assume he's sent back to Illinois—

Koser: Yes, he was.

DePue: How does he get his fiancée out of England at that time?

Koser: We had to have... Oh, it took a year for the papers to go through. I know I had to go to the American Embassy and get papers signed. I remember that.

DePue: Where was the American Embassy?

Koser: It was in Birmingham, yes.

DePue: Did they want to have some kind of a proof that you did, indeed, have a fiancée in the United States?

Koser: Yes, um-hmm.

DePue: What was the proof; do you remember?

Koser: I don't know what proof it was. Maybe I didn't have to have proof. I don't remember that.

DePue: But it took a year, huh?

Koser: But it took a year for me to get over there, yeah.

DePue: Did he send money for you to travel?

Koser: Yeah, his father had to sign for me, because I was coming to live with them. That's where I was going...until we were going to get married and then get a place of our own later. They had a farm. They were farmers.

DePue: Did you like the idea of moving to the United States and being a farmer's wife?

Koser: No, not farming, no (both laugh). But he didn't want to either. He didn't want to farm.

DePue: What was he telling you he wanted to do?

Koser: He didn't know. He said he wanted to go to Dixon and find a job. He didn't know what he was going to do.

DePue: Where was the town he was from?

Koser: Polo.

DePue: Polo, Illinois?

Koser: Yes, that's right.

DePue: How big was Polo?

Koser: (laughs) Small. Polo's small; it's smaller than Dixon.

DePue: Yeah, I imagine it's well less than 1,000 people at that time.

Koser: Oh, yes, about 1,000.

DePue: His family lived in the country?

Koser: Yes, they did, yes.

DePue: Your typical Illinois farmer at the time?

Koser: Yes, they were.

DePue: Hogs and cattle and chickens?

Koser: Yes, everything (laughs). Yeah.

DePue: When you're leaving England... This was when, 1947?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: January 1947?

Koser: January 19, 1947.

DePue: That's the date you left England.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: What were the emotions you were going through?

Koser: I was happy. You'd think I'd be kind of sad about leaving, but I wasn't. I don't know why.

DePue: So you were strictly looking ahead, huh?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Can you take us step by step, from Birmingham all the way to Polo, Illinois? What were the steps in there? How did you get here?

Koser: At the time, I was living in Windsor.

DePue: Windsor?

Koser: Yeah, that's right by London.

DePue: Isn't that where the Royals live?

Koser: (laughs) Yeah... Well, sometimes, yes. We went to a friend's. We were living in Birmingham, and my mother and I went to live with some friends in Windsor. We were still living there when I was coming over to America. Like what did you want me to...

DePue: Well, from Windsor then, did you go to London to fly?

Koser: Oh yeah. And then I got a ticket to come over to this country.

DePue: Were you coming by ship or by plane?

Koser: No, I was coming by plane. So, we had to go from Windsor to the airport.

DePue: Is that Heathrow Airport?

Koser: Heathrow, yes. I remember coming. And then, when I got to this country, I had to let my mother know that I'd arrived safe. I remember having somebody help me to get a phone, a public phone, and I called them.

DePue: Where did you land in the United States?

Koser: Where did I land? I forgot (laughs). Isn't that awful?

DePue: New York City, Boston...?

Koser: Yeah, yes.

DePue: New York?

Koser: Yeah.

DePue: I'm guessing this was your first airplane flight too.

Koser: Oh, yes, uh-huh.

DePue: What did you think about airplanes?

Koser: Eight hours. It was eight hours (DePue laughs). Well, I really didn't like flying too much. But it was exciting anyway because I knew I was coming over to get married.

DePue: Did anybody meet you in New York City?

Koser: No, no. They didn't meet me until I got to Chicago.

DePue: How did you get from New York to Chicago?

Koser: From New York to Chicago... I asked people to help me to get to the station, the Grand...

DePue: Grand Central Station?

Koser: Grand Central Station. I asked different people, and they were very helpful (laughs).

DePue: Well, an attractive young lady with an interesting accent...

Koser: I'd go and ask them (laughs).

DePue: I can't imagine why they wouldn't want to help you. So you took the train here?

Koser: Yes, I took the train, and everybody was real nice. I was there overnight, I remember. It was a long drive.

DePue: Were you on a Pullman or a sleeper car, or did you...?

Koser: Sleeper car.

DePue: Going from New York City to the middle of Illinois, that's a bit longer than any distances you'd ever traveled in England?

Koser: Oh, yes, yes.

DePue: What were your initial impressions of the United States?

Koser: I thought it was wonderful (laughs). I did, yes.

DePue: What in particular struck you about it?

Koser: The people, everything. I just thought it was nice.

DePue: Were you surprised?

Koser: Not really. I don't think so.

DePue: So they kind of matched the impression you had of all those American GIs in England?

Koser: Yes, yes.

DePue: And you found out it wasn't just the young men who were nice?

Koser: That's right, yes.

DePue: I would imagine it took practically a day or more to get to...?

Koser: Oh, yes, a day and a night. I slept on the train, um-hmm.

DePue: Were you thinking, This is a big country?

Koser: Um-hmm. It was.

DePue: Were you watching out the window most the time?

Koser: Yeah.

DePue: What was the reception you got once you got to Chicago?

Koser: When I got to Chicago, my husband's three brothers were with him. They were with him, and he recognized me. I didn't know if he would recognize me, which he should.

DePue: You had pictures of each other, right?

Koser: Yes, of course (laughs). And there they were, waiting for me. I remember them taking me to a restaurant. The food in England, it was very short in England, and I couldn't get over all the food and everything. It was just... It was overwhelming.

DePue: Even in 1947, were they still rationing in England?

Koser: Yes, they were still rationing. They rationed for fourteen years in England with food, because England was broke. England didn't grow their own food. They got it from overseas, and it was brought in by ship. England was broke. They couldn't even afford to buy the food, so we were short.

DePue: From Chicago, I would assume the Union Station is the train station in Chicago—I could be wrong on that—to Polo, Illinois; how'd you get there?

Koser: Let me see; my husband met me, and they had a car. We went by car.

DePue: Not having a car—and most people in England didn't have cars—was that impressive?

Koser: Yes, yes.

DePue: Do you remember what the car was?

Koser: No, I don't (laughs).

DePue: That's really putting you on the spot, Helen. How long did it take to get from Chicago to Polo, then?

Koser: About two hours.

DePue: So you did not stay overnight in Chicago?

Koser: No, we didn't, no. We did go to a restaurant, and I saw all the food. I thought I was hungry, but I wasn't; I couldn't eat nothing.

DePue: Maybe you were more excited than you were hungry.

Koser: I think I was, yes.

DePue: On the trip from Chicago to Polo, were you looking at the scenery, or were you looking at John the whole time?

Koser: John (laughs). Yes.

DePue: So the two of you were in the front seat, and the brothers were in the back?

Koser: That's right; that's right, yes.

DePue: What did you think of the brothers?

Koser: They were nice. They were handsome (laughs).

DePue: Handsome?

Koser: Yes, they were, tall and handsome.

DePue: I saw pictures of John. He was certainly a handsome man too.

Koser: Yeah, he was a good looking man. Here he is; there, that's him (laughs).

DePue: You're still not married, though, are you?

Koser: No.

DePue: Tell me how that happened.

Koser: Well, my husband died; we were married forty years, and he died.

DePue: But you've got to tell me, from the time he gets you to Polo and then getting married to John.

Koser: Oh, getting married to him. Oh, and I went to live with his parents. They had a farm, so I lived on the farm for four months, and we got married. We got married; I think it was two weeks after I'd arrived. Then we went to his parents' [house] and stayed with them.

DePue: Was it a big wedding?

Koser: It wasn't bad, yes, because all of his family... There were seventeen in his family.

DePue: Seventeen brothers and sisters?

Koser: Yes (laughs).

DePue: Wow. Well, they couldn't fit all the brothers in the car to come pick you up, could they?

Koser: No (laughs).

DePue: They probably drew lots to see who was lucky enough to roll with John to pick you up.

Koser: And when I got there, they were all waiting for me in a big ring, waiting outside. They had called them and said when we would arrive, and there they were, all these people. I'd never been with a big family. I was an only child (laughs).

DePue: Did you like that idea of marrying into a big family?

Koser: Yes, yes. It was nice. They were nice people.

DePue: Did you get a hug from all of them or just a handshake or what?

Koser: No, a hug (both laugh).

DePue: Do you remember how many people were at the wedding?

Koser: At the wedding? About 200. It was big.

DePue: Church wedding?

Koser: Um-hmm, yeah.

DePue: What was his religion?

Koser: His religion, he was Brethren.

DePue: Brethren?

Koser: Yes. Brethren.

DePue: And you're a Catholic at the time.

Koser: Yeah, Episcopalian. That's Catholic, English Catholic.

DePue: So when you were talking before about St. Augustine's, was that an Episcopalian church?

Koser: That was Catholic; that was the Roman Catholic Church.

DePue: What religion did you have? What church did you go to after you were married, then?

Koser: After I was married, St. Luke's Episcopal Church. That's all I've ever been since I've been here.

DePue: Was there a big reception after the wedding as well?

Koser: Yes, yes, it was nice.

DePue: And all the friends and neighbors came to check out this...?

Koser: Yeah, they were checking me out. My father-in-law would take me shopping with him because he'd want to introduce me to everybody, to his friends (laughs).

DePue: It sounds like they were proud to have you.

Koser: They were nice (laughs).

DePue: And you say you spent just a few months on the farm.

Koser: Yes, we did.

DePue: What did John do, then, after he moved? Did you move to the city?

Koser: Yeah, he moved to the city, and we started a business of building houses because he knew how to build houses, and roofing and siding. He started that business, and we

had a business.

DePue: What city did you move to?

Koser: Oh, Dixon.

DePue: The big city of Dixon. What, about 10,000 or 15,000 at the time?

Koser: Love Dixon. Yes, yes.

DePue: You say you love Dixon. What was it about Dixon that...?

Koser: I thought it was beautiful; I did. I liked it.

DePue: And the people were friendly.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: How much of an accent, Helen, did you have when you first got here?

Koser: Oh my goodness! Much more of an accent than I have now.

DePue: Did people give you a hard time, or did they find it delightful or funny?

Koser: I said many things that I shouldn't have said because it's different meanings over there to what it is here (laughs).

DePue: It sounds like there might be a story or two in there. Do you remember any of the things that you...?

Koser: I'm trying to think. I'm trying to remember. I think I wrote it. I know I said a lot of things I shouldn't have, but I can't remember right now. What was it? (laughs) Isn't that awful? It went from me?

Oh, I know what I said one time. You know, in England when you say anybody's homely, we don't mean it like you mean it here. We mean that they make you at home, but it doesn't mean it that here. I just put my foot in it all the time. That's one. I'd say, "Oh, she's so homely," and I didn't realize what I was doing (both laugh).

DePue: Somewhere along the line somebody told you, though.

Koser: Yes, they did.

Koser: I know you had one son.



Family portrait of Helen, her husband John Hambley, and their baby Terry in May 1948.

Koser: Yes, I do.

DePue: When was he born?

Koser: He was born March 6, 1948.

DePue: Was there anything that you found difficult or challenging in adjusting to life in the United States?

Koser: Challenging... I don't know. I seemed to adjust so easily. I don't think so.

DePue: How much did you miss England?

DePue: Not much (laughs). I think it was because I was so happy here. And then my mother came over a year later, and I think that made a difference.

DePue: When did she come over?

Koser: She came a year later.

DePue: Was it after Terry was born?

Koser: Oh, I was pregnant with my son when she came.

DePue: So it would've been early 1948.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Did she have any reservations about coming to the United States?

Koser: No, I think she liked it because she didn't have a husband, but she seemed happy.

DePue: Did she live with you and John?

Koser: Lived with us, yes, until she died.

DePue: How did she and John get along?

Koser: They seemed to get along good, yeah.

DePue: You know the traditions and the reputation of the...

Koser: Yeah, I know. Sometimes, about mother-in-laws... But they seemed to get along. She was very quiet. She read a lot, and she didn't bother nobody.

DePue: She was a built in babysitter too, I would guess.

Koser: Yes, she was (laughs).

DePue: Did she dote on her grandson a bit?

Koser: Yes, she did (laughs).

DePue: Were you working at this time?

Koser: No, I didn't work for a while, and then I did work. I went to Lawrence Brothers in Sterling, in the office.

DePue: Lance Brothers?

Koser: Lawrence Brothers, L-a-w-r-e-n-c-e.

DePue: How about nursing? Did you ever go back to nursing?

Koser: No, I didn't go back to it.

DePue: Any regrets in that respect?

Koser: I regret it. Of course, I should have, because I did, I graduated, but I don't know why I didn't [go back to it].

DePue: Was John the traditional American man at the time?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: "I'm going to take care of things, and you don't need to worry about that"?

Koser: Yes. Very good husband.

DePue: Do you remember anything else that especially surprised you about America during those early years, that you just hadn't expected?

Koser: I'm trying to think. (pause) I can't think at the time. I don't know.

DePue: What was your intention about becoming an American citizen?

Koser: Oh, I just wanted to become an American citizen. I waited five years. Then I became an American citizen.

DePue: Why were you so strong about becoming an American?

Koser: Because I love this country. I loved it (laughs), yeah.

DePue: Were you able to vote in England before you left?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: Were you voting in England?

Koser: No, I wasn't (laughs). I was young.

DePue: When did you become an American citizen? Was that the early '50s?

Koser: Let's see... Five years after the war, after I came here.

DePue: So you got here in '47, so it would've been '52 or '53.

Koser: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, that's right.

DePue: How about this one, then; did you consider yourself then...do you consider yourself now an American or English?

Koser: Yes, I do.

DePue: American?

Koser: American (laughs).

DePue: I know that life always has its ups and downs. You mentioned that you and John were married for forty years.

Koser: Yes, we were, yeah.

DePue: So was that 1987, '88 that he passed away?

Koser: He passed away in 1988.

DePue: Yeah. What was the cause of his death?

Koser: He had lung cancer?

DePue: Was he a smoker?

Koser: He had been, yes.

DePue: But not at the time he died?

Koser: But not at the time he died, no. Um-hmm.

DePue: I'm guessing you were never a smoker?

Koser: No, I wasn't.

DePue: This is jumping way back. During World War II, I imagine almost all of the American men that you encountered, practically everybody was smoking at the time?

Koser: They were. It seemed everywhere you went... You'd go into a movie, and it seemed like there was smoke everywhere. It was awful. But they were allowed to smoke, yeah. They could smoke in the movie.

DePue: Did you have a lot of English girlfriends who smoked as well?

Koser: Yes, some, but I never did.

DePue: It never appealed to you?

Koser: No.

DePue: What happened in your life after John passed



away?

Koser: After John passed away...

DePue: I know you got married again.

Koser: I think it was about a year later, I met my second husband. He was a teacher in Fulton, Illinois.

DePue: Fulton?

Koser: Yes.

DePue: At that time, were you still living in Dixon?

Koser: Yes. Yes, I was. We met, and he asked me to marry him. We got married, and we were married two years and three months, and he died. He died of a heart attack.

DePue: An unexpected heart attack?

Koser: Yes, he did. Then I met my third husband (laughs). I met my third husband, and we were married for ten years.

DePue: What was his name?

Koser: His name was... (laughs)

DePue: Irvin?

Koser: Irvin Koser, yes. Irvin Koser.

DePue: I don't think you called him Irvin, did you?

Koser: No. What **did** I call him?

DePue: He went by Steve?

Koser: Steve! I called him Steve, yeah.

DePue: How long did that marriage last then?

Koser: Ten years, and then he died, and here I am (laughs).

DePue: Are you all married out, or is there still opportunity out there?

Koser: Well, if I find somebody real nice, I would (laughs).

DePue: You strike me as still being very young for your age.

Koser: I'm eighty-nine!

DePue: Eighty-nine.

Koser: I'm old. I don't feel old. I don't.

DePue: Again, you don't look like you're eighty-nine by any means. Let's kind of wrap it up then and ask some general questions of you. Living in England at that time, and living during the war, and experiencing the bombings and the raids and jumping into air raid shelters, do you think that experience changed you somehow?

Koser: It might've some, yes. I think so.

DePue: Can you reflect on how you might have changed?

Koser: I think I appreciated things more.

DePue: Are you proud to be an American? Do you consider yourself an American today?

Koser: Oh yes, definitely. I love it here.

DePue: Have you been following some of the discussions about immigrants and immigrant policy that we're going through right now in the United States?

Koser: I've been listening to some of it, yes.

DePue: As an immigrant yourself, what do you think about all of this discussion about illegal immigrants coming here?

Koser: Yeah, that's not right, if they come illegally. To me it's not right anyway.

DePue: Apparently when you came, you had to follow the rigorous rules.

Koser: Oh, yes, yes, definitely.

DePue: Helen, you've got one son, and it sounds like you've got...

Koser: I have a lovely son (laughs).

DePue: Did you inherit some stepsons in the process too, or some stepchildren?

Koser: Really, yes. But we never really got that close because they lived away, so I didn't see much of them.

DePue: So they were already grown and had left at the time.

Koser: Yes, they were grown, yes.

DePue: Any grandchildren?

Koser: I've got ten, um-hmm.

DePue: All from Terry?

Koser: Um-hmm. He had two girls, and of course they had children. So that's how we got so many (laughs).

DePue: So you're blessed in that respect.

Koser: Yes.

DePue: If you were going to offer these grandkids that you've got some wisdom or some advice, what would you tell them today?

Koser: I've never thought about it; what would I tell them? That, I have to think about. I don't know. I never thought about it.

DePue: You seem to be a pretty cheerful and upbeat person.

Koser: Um-hmm.

DePue: Do you take advantage of the opportunities life presents you?

Koser: Yes. I enjoy life.

DePue: Any final comments for us?

Koser: I have to stop and think. I don't know (laughs). Let's see in here, if there's anything.

DePue: We're looking at your...

Koser: No, there's nothing here. I don't know. I know I really like it here, and I think it's a beautiful country to live in. I think we're lucky.

DePue: I think that's a good way to finish. Thank you very much, Helen.

Koser: You're welcome.

(end of transcript)