

Mathilda Marie Kempe

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The pages that follow constitute the transcript of an interview conducted as part of the Wilmette Public Library District's Oral History program, started in 1975 by a committee of the Friends of the Wilmette Public Library which has been chaired since its inception by Rhea Adler, a resident of the Village of Wilmette since 1932.

A copy of the tape on which this transcript is based is available for circulation, and may be obtained by checking with a Reference Librarian concerning circulation procedures.

This program would not have been possible without the cooperation of the many long-time residents of the Village interested in helping to preserve particulars of a fascinating past, and the patience, energy and effort of a small but dedicated group of interviewers, transcribers and typists who share the belief that the past is too important to be forgotten.

Richard E. Thompson
Director

ABSTRACT

Interviewee: Mathilda Marie Kempe

Interviewer: Brigs Maselli

Abstract by: Rhea S. Adler

Date of interview: November 4, 1979

Born on Ridge Road across the street

Father Otto L. Kempe came via New York, Niles to Wilmette · was a shoemaker from Saxony - came as a young man in 1881 with a group of young men - Mother was from Chicago

Started a shoe repair business on west side of Ridge Road · put in a stock of shoes for sale

Built a new building at 418 Ridge (on east side) and moved and incorporated the first building within it

Mathilda one of four children 2 boys and 2 girls - Mother died in 1923 - Father lost interest in store · sister and brothers not interested in operating it so Mathilda tried and continued operation (43 years) until 1933

Moving day from west to east side of Ridge Rd. - Lived upstairs - all children worked in store until old enough to go from there and take jobs with other people · boys became plumbers - schooling - dressmaking in Evanston with a Frenchwoman

Contents of store · shoes · all rubber footwear · men's and boys' clothing and headware · grocery goods. Father gardened and had fruit trees and sold fruits and vegetables · he had made shoes as well as repaired them

Gross Point School - eight grades - 1 through 4 on first floor in one room · 5 through 8 on second floor - east side of Ridge Rd. within Wilmette School District so Miss Kempe finished at Central School.

Home life while growing up - Mother canned fruits - made jams and jellies · knit woolen stockings - made sheets and pillowcases - girls' clothing - quilts made with neighbors' help - hot bricks and feather beds in winter

Elaborates on holiday celebration and father's shoemaking.

Mathilda Marie Kempe

BM: Miss Kempe, would you give me your full name and tell me where you live?

MMK: My full name is Mathilda Marie Kempe.

BM: Very good. And where do you live?

MMK: 418 Ridge Road, Wilmette, Illinois.

BM: Right. And how long have you lived here?

MMK: Uh, all my life.

BM: Really? Were you - you were born in this house?

MMK: I was born across the street and this building was moved over here when my father built this brick building.

BM: Which - which building?

MMK: Next door - that used to be our first store.

BM: What number is that - over there?

MMK: 416.

BM: 416. And that was moved across the street?

MMK: Yes, when my father built this building so that he would have the two buildings together.

BM: I see. Why did he want to move it across the street? Did he have a store over there?

MNK: He owned - he built the building....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . but he didn't own the ground.

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: And he couldn't buy the ground because a little orphan - it was a little orphan boy - it was willed to him and my

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father couldn't buy the piece of land until he was 21 years old.

BM: Oh, I see.

MNK: And so in between time, uh, well, we were over there about 15 - 20 years when he built this.

BM: I see. When you say 15 - 20 years, about what year was that? Do you remember?

MMK: 1881.

BM: 1881 to, uh, 15 years would be 1896 - when you were over in the other building you said you were over there about 15 years.

MMK: Yes.

BM: About what year was that when....

MMK: Well, he came here in 1881.

BM: What...

MMK: . . . from the old country.

BM: Oh. Okay. Uh, Miss Kempe, tell me your father's name, please, and where he was born.

MMK: He was born in Germany and his name was Otto.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Otto L.

BM: Otto L. Kempe?

MNK: Um hum.

BM: What part of Germany was he born in?

MMK: Near Saxony.

BM: Oh, I see. A lot of the people in this area came from

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the Trier area. Is that part of where he came from?

MMK: Yes, it was.

BM: And you said your mother was born in Chicago?

MMK: Yes.

BM: Where did they meet?

MMK: At a, uh, well, uh, on the north side of Chicago and, uh, it was in a dance hall....

BM: Um hum. I see.

MMK: and food, of course, you know.

BM: I'm sure there was food.

MMK: Restaurant and dancing and so forth.

BM: Um hum. And what year did your father come to the United States?

MMK: 1881.

BM: And he was 28 years old, you said, when he came here and, uh, did he come here alone?

MMK: No... he came with a group - all single fellows, you know.

BM: I see.

MMK: They all had come to the USA, you know, where all the money grew on the trees, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: *(Laughter)* So - but they all had a trade.

BM: I see. So your father was already in - a shoemaker when he came here. I see.

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MMK: And he traveled a good deal in France and, uh, throughout Europe, you know - until he was 28 years old.

BM: Um hum.

MMK:and he did it for the experience.

BM: I see.

MMK: You know, to see the country.

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: So when he came over here he landed in New York, of course, and his first job was hod carrier.

BM: Oh, that's hard work.

MMK: The church in Rogers Park - the Catholic church - they were building that church and he was carrying the hod in, you know.

BM: Yes.

MMK: Up the steps - down the steps - up the steps - down the steps - and all of that heavy mortar, you know. Bricks, stone.

BM: Yes, that's a very difficult job.

MMK: Oh, but he was strong and he was well - he was very well. I mean he had good health, you know.

BM: Well then, when did he come to Wilmette?

MMK: Wilmette? Oh, urn, after he left New York - why, Niles Center - he landed in Niles Center - the bunch. I don't know how many of them there were - maybe there was a dozen fellows, you know.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

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MMK: And, uh, so Wilmette - Gross Point - it was Gross Point

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: And he landed here and, uh, there was no shoemaker here. He investigated, you know, so he got a room and, uh, he did his repair work in the building, you know, shoe repairing.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And he had a room and he did his own housekeeping - all this was in the building, you know.

BM: Do you know where the building was?

MMK: Across the street.

BM: What number was that?

MMK: . . . but it's moved back. The front part is brick that was added on and the old part - it's over a hundred years old and that's in the rear of the building.

BM: Do you know the street - what number that is across the street? It must be 412.

MMK: 400 - uh, well, across the street is 435.

BM: 435. So it's around that.

MMK: And the numbers get larger as they go north.

BM: Okay.

MMK: So I imagine that was about 4, oh maybe, uh,...

BM: Maybe 440?

MMK: Does it - maybe 37 - maybe 441.

BM: Um hum. Was he living with his family then when he was

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living there?

MMK: No. No, it was vacant....

BM: Oh.

MMK: the place he rented.

BM: So he rented the building?

MMK: But he was by himself.

BM: Um hum. Do you know what some of the names of the other people were that he came with - some of the other young men?

MMK: No, i don't.

BM: Okay.

MMK: The day - like I say, they all had a trade.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So, plasterer and, uh, building....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Building trade, you know.

BM: I just wondered if any of that group stayed here in W ± ime t t e.

MMK: Oh, that I don't know.

BM: All right. So then, uh, your father started his business in the building across the street. When did he open up his own shop?

MMK: Well, from across the street, you know, in that building and, uh, so, uh, he built this place, uh, 435, you know.

BM: Oh, he did?

MMK: Number 435.

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BM: He built it himself or he had someone build it?

MMK: Oh, no, he had someone build it for him because - the front of it is a store.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: It's higher than the rear is.

BM: Oh.

MMK: The rear is living quarters - four rooms.

BM: Oh, I see. And he built that first and had.

MMK: No. No, he built the whole building.

BM: Oh. No, I mean he built the whole building over there first and had his shop in the front - his store?

MMK: Um hum. And then when he got enough money together and, uh, got settled,...

BK: Um hum.

MMK: .. .why. he put in a stock of shoes, you know, and sold them on - over the counter you'd say - I should say.

BM: Well, when - how did his family grow? You were working in the store at one time you said. Do you have other members - brothers and sisters?

M.MK: Yes. Well, when my mother died my father lost interest.

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: He, uh, then he was ready to retire really so, uh....

BK: About what year was that?

MKK: 23. 1923.

BK: Um hum.

MMK: So when he told - you see I had two brothers and a sister

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who - there was four of us kids and none of them wanted it.

BM: I see.

MMK: So, uh, I spoke up and said, %Well, let me try it.+

BM: Um hum.

MMK: See if I like it. I said, %let me try it for a whole year.+

BM: Okay. Can I ask you how old you were when you did that?

MMK: I was 30 - 32.

BM: Um hum. I see.

MMK: I said, %let me try it f or a whole year,+and the more time I put in, the better I liked it.

BM: Good.

MMK: So when the year was up, I took it over.

BM: I see.

MNK: And, uh, I was in the business, uh, with all added for 42 years and I had it till \$3. 75 years in....

BM: In the same area and in the same business.

NMK: Excepting I was 10 years old when, uh, this building was built.

EM: Um hum. Okay. Miss Kempe, you said you were 10 years old when you moved over here. Would you tell me about that?

MMK: Well, I remember moving day. We had a lot of help and it was a beautiful day.....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and we did this all by hand, you know. Carried boxes

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and sometimes they'd fall down, you know. (*Laughter*) And we ended picking up the shoes and the merchandise and all that would fall out of our hands and, uh, like I say, we had a lot of help, but everybody in the neighborhood kind of gave us a hand, you know.

BM: Yes,

MMK: and, uh....

BM: What time of year was it? Was it.

MMK: What year was that - born?

BM: No, go ahead.

MMK: I was born in '33.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And you were 10 years old.

BM: But I mean what month of the year was this when you were moving across the street?

MMK: Well, it was the spring time.

BM: Oh, Um hum.

MMK: Beautiful weather. Beautiful day outside.

BM: Um hum. So you and your brothers and sisters and your mother and father went over and would take some boxes and walk across the street with the boxes. How long did that take?

MMK: Well, of course, everything, uh - that first day, like I say, we had a lot of help and you couldn't do it all in one day so, uh, uh, we did it, uh, you know, uh, we finally finished the job, but, uh, it must have taken a

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week.

BM: I would think so.

MMK: At least.

BN: Sure. And then you moved up here over the store - the family?

MMK: Yes. Um hum. There were six rooms, but now my brother and I - we are alone. The rest of the family is gone. I divided the - the flat, so I have the rear part and the front part I rent.

BM: Oh. How nice. I see. So let's go back to the store. Did you help in the store after school, uh....

MMK: Oh, yes, we all had to help - my brothers, you know.

BN: Um hum.

MMK: . . .my two brothers and, uh, and if we were able to, you know, but when we got older and, uh, out of school, why then we took jobs.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: We went out and worked for other people - office work or my brothers - they learned a plumbing trade and the both of them (Indistinct). Both of them took to plumbing.

BM: And they were here in Wilmette?

MMK: Yes. And, uh, when they got married, you know, one lived in Glencoe and had a business up in Glencoe....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and the other one stayed here in the Village.....

BM: Um hum.

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and had a plumbing shop on Green Bay Road.

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Where did you go to school?

MMK: The American Legion hall - right....

BM: Oh. Over on Wilmnette Avenue

MMK: On Wilmette Avenue. Yes.

BM: Yes. What - was that the public school here?

MMK: Yes. It was a two room school.

BM: Oh. What was the name of the school? Did it have a name or.

MMK: It was Wilmette Public School.

BM: Oh, I see.

MNK: And then when Wilmette, uh, when Gross Point was annexed to Wilmette.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . you know, why, we couldn't go to the, uh, Gross Point School. We were out of the district so the last, uh, three or four years my brother and I, uh, we went way down to 10th and Central.

BM: Oh, yes. You went all the way over there?

MMK: My father couldn't afford to, uh, keep us over here because we were out of the district....

BM: I see.

MMK: . . . if we wanted to stay there.

BM: Oh, well, was Ridge the dividing line then?

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MMK: Yes, across the street was Gross Point and this was Wilmette.

BM: Okay. So you had to go to the - was that the Logan School?

MMK: Logan, uh.

BM: On 10th and Central then?

MMK: Um hum.

BM: What year was that when you had to change schools? Do you remember?

What grade were you in - when you had to change schools?

MMK: Oh, I say I was about, uh, six - sixth grade.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: My brother and I. My older brother was going to New Trier at that time..

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and my sister took a job.

BM: Um hum. Then did you go to New Trier after you graduated from, uh.

MMK: No.

BM: . . . Logan School?

MMK: No. The only one that went to New Trier was my brothers..

BM: Oh.

MMK: . . . because, uh, well, the breadwinners, you know....

BM: Um hum.

MNK: . . . thought they had to have an education....

BM: Right.

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MMK: . . . where we, uh, well, this was housekeeping (*Laughter*) That's all we did. (*Laughter*) The girls, you know.

BM: Yes.

MMK: Just be able to keep house and (*Laughter*) settle down.

BM: Yes. Um hum. Well then, when you finished school what did you do?

MMK: I took to dressmaking.

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: Um hum. And I sewed for a French woman.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Madame Masine in Evanston.

BM: Oh.

MMK: She had a shop.

BM: Oh.

MMK: She had a big shop....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and, uh, she, uh, had quite a shop. I mean, uh, there were quite a few, uh, girls and tailors....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and she sewed for very wealthy people....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . in Evanston.

BM: Okay.

MMK; You know there's a lot of wealthy people in the Evanston area. They could have their clothes made to order.

BM: Um hum.

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MMK: And then some of them can buy ready to wear clothes so they have to have them made to order....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ...you know.

BM: Okay. Would you tell me what your father had in his store. You said he had shoes.

MMK: Shoes and, uh, everything in rubber footwear, you know, rubber boots and overshoes and, uh.

BM: Work clothes you said?

MMK: ...work clothes.

BM: Men's work clothes?

MMK: Men's and boys' and sweaters and shirts and....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ...trousers.

BM: Yes.

MMK: ...and....

BM: Suits?

MMK: Oh, yes. Men's suits....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ...and hats, caps.

BM: Where did he buy the things for his store?

MMK: In Chicago.

BM: He went down to Chicago....

MMK: Urn hunt.

SM: ...and, uh, bought the things from a wholesaler.

MMK: Wholesale houses....

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BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and a salesman would come around, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK; . . . from the other wholesale houses and jobber - jobbers, you know.

BM: Um hum. So your father expanded his business from being just a shoe repair man into a whole store - a whole grocery store you said it was.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Urn, then you helped in the store after school you said?

MMK: After my mother died, like I say, my father didn't, uh, take any more interest. Well, anyway, his, uh, he liked farming. He was a farmer.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

NMK: . . .and we had an 18 foot frontage.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: So we had quite a garden....

BM: Yes.

MMK: . . .next door where that building is....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and that property is very deep - 200 feet deep.

BM: Oh.

MMK: So we had, uh, fruit trees....

BM: Oh.

MMK: ... and he would sell vegetables and sell different kinds of fruit.

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BM: Um hum.

MMK: He had fifty fruit trees....

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: . . . grapes, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, pears, apples and grapes.

BM: Oh.

MMK: He took to farming as he was raised on the farm, you know.

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: So that's how he passed his time.

BM: I see. And who - then you were running the store?

MMK: And I, uh, I took over the store and after a year.... (*Laughter*) (Indistinct)

BM: Yes.

MMK: And I paid him rent and I bought the stock.

BM: You bought the stock then?

MMK: Of course, I had to pay - I didn't have enough cash, but I, uh, when I got some money I made my payments....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and I finally got it paid off.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So then I owned it.

BM: So then you were the owner?

MMK: Um hum.

BM: So did you sell mostly to Gross Point people or did

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people come from Wilmette?

MMK: No, they came from Evanston and....

BM: Oh.

MMK:and Wheeling

BM: Oh.

MMK:and Winnetka....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . Highland Park. You see, my was the only shoemaker.

BM: Oh.

MMK: . . . in this territory.

BM: Oh.

MMK: So they had to come, uh, to him.

BM: Yes.

MMK: And there\$ others have tried to start shoe repairing, but they didnq stay.

For some reason or other, they, uh, didnq like it.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: .. . but my father took to the people.

BM: I see.

MMK: And he had a lot of patience.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: You know what I mean. He could put up with a lot.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And he never got angry.

BM: I see.

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MMK: You know, when the farmers would come in with their shoes all full of mud and dirt and sometimes that's the only pair they had so that they had to wait until the job was finished.

BM: Oh, I see. They would wear the shoes in and your father would repair them....

MMK: Yes.

BM: . . . while they were waiting.

MMK: Yes.

BM: I see.

MMK: And then, uh, new work, you know, for deformed feet.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: He did that at night where no one would bother him. He'd work until 2:00 o'clock in the morning.

BM: Oh, my goodness.

MMK: And like he used to say, %from the bench to the bed and from the bed to the bench+ you know.

BM: Yes.

MMK: That's the way it took his time.

BM: tim hum.

MMK: He didn't have any time to, uh, f or anything else. Just - he went to bed and had his meals, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Went to work.

BM: Yes.

MMK: Then he'd go to bed again, uh, 2:00 o'clock in the morning

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with a kerosene lamp.

BM: Oh. That's right. There wasn't any electricity here.

He had to have....

MMK: Kerosene.

BM: He had to work with a kerosene lamp.

MMK: Yes, kerosene.

BM: Um hum, I see. Then there must have been, urn, horses and wagons.

MMK: Yes.

BM: That was before the cars came in.

MMK: And then another drawing card - there was thirteen saloons.

BM: Thirteen - really?

MMK: .. . on Ridge Avenue.

BM: Oh.

MMK: From Central Street, Evanston to Kenilworth - thirteen saloons and that - and that was another drawing card, and why so many - that no matter where they came from, why, they had plenty to do because of the saloons.

BM: Yes. Do you remember any of the names of some of those saloons?

MMK: Oh, yes. Sesterhenn's, Zeutschel's, Meier's.

(Laughter) A

SM: What other businesses were right in this section here?

MMK: Well, we had groceries....

BM: Um hum.

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but, uh, and a feed store.

BM: Oh. Do you remember who ran the feed store?

MMK: Uh, Hoffman - Hoffman Brothers.

BM: Hoffman Brothers. Um hum.

MMK: The same people who have had the lumber business.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And we had a blacksmith shop. I remember two of them - one on Lake Avenue and one over here where Janae's Laundry is. That used to be a blacksmith shop.

BM: Oh. Do you remember who owned?

MMK: Hoth - Hoth.

BM: Um hum. I see. And who owned the grocery stores?

MMK: Hoffman Brothers and Bleser.

BM: Oh. Bleser.

MMK: and Buescher.

BM: Um hum. You had a very busy business section right here. You had your store and there were feed stores and, uh, blacksmith shops so that everything that the community needed pretty much was located right in this little - little area and, of course, the saloon.

MMK: Yes. And Lake Avenue was another, uh, Lake and Ridge was another business section.

BM: Lake and Ridge. Do you remember what kind of stores were up there?

MMK: Oh, a drugstore and, uh....

BM: Do you remember who owned the drugstore?

MMK: Uh, Cazel.

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BM: Cazel. How do you spell that?

MMK: Uh, Cazel.

BM: Okay. Um hum. And what other kind of businesses were up there?

MMK: Well, they had a restaurant and bakery.

BM: Oh. Oh, yes.

MMK: Ortegel.

BM: Bakery Ortegel. How do you spell that?

MMK: Ortegel bakery.

BM: Okay. Um, would you tell me about the schoolhouse, please.

MMK: Oh, yes. Well, it was two rooms - upstairs and downstairs and we had women for teachers

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and, uh, the first floor - there was four grades and the second floor was four grades....

BM: Um hum.

MMK:and, uh, I didn't graduate there. I graduated, uh, down on - the Central School....

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: because, like I say, we were out of the district.

BM: Yes.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: But you went to that school, the Gross Point, for the first six grades then?

MMK: Yes.

BM: Did you stay there or did you come home for lunch when you would go?

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MMK: Oh, yes. I, uh, well, of course, the whole neighborhood that wasn't Catholic - you know, the ones that went to the public school and, uh, most of my friends are dead. You see, I'm, uh, 85 years old and, uh, I'm losing my friends every year.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and, first thing you know, I'd be alone because I never married.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: I took too much interest in my business.

BM: I see.

MMK: I just loved my business and I like people....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and I like to be with them and talk to them and wait on them, you know. *(Laughter)* So as far as marriage, uh, I didn't go for it.

BM: Um hum. I see. Well, who were some of your friends when you went to school?

MMK: Oh, the Bloom girls and, uh, Gauche was another family and, uh, oh - let's see - Wolff across the street. They were in the merchandising business, too.

BM: Yes. What did they sell?

MMK: The same merchandise as my father and in the same area **A** we had Hoffman Brothers.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: My father had a lot of competition.

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BM: Um hum.

MMK: One on the corner, one across the street....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and this business.

BM: Oh, I see.

MMK: All three.

BM: But if they were the only shops that carried the right kind of merchandise and you said your father was very patient with people, then he probably had a lot of the business - people came here.

MMK: Yes, and as I say, uh, he never seemed to be tired. He could keep on going - keep on going. Never got out of patience or - or overtired.

BM: Yes. That's really very remarkable.

MMK: Um hum. Of course, my mother cooked good meals for him. He was a hearty eater.

BM: Oh. Um hum. What was his favorite meal?

MMK: Oh, stews....

BM: Oh.

MMK: . . . and soups....

BM: Oh.

MMK: . . . and chickens. We had chickens.

BM: Oh. You raised your own chickens?

MMK: Yes. And eggs, of course, and he - he would buy food in quantities like a barrel of apples and a hundred pound sack of flour.

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BM? Oh. All right, would you describe a typical day, please, when you were growing up?

MMK: Well, my mother would wake us up, you know, and.

BM: About what time would it be?

MMK: Oh, we'd have to be ready for school at 9:00 o'clock.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So maybe she'd wake us up at 7:30 - 8:00 o'clock and it was hurry, hurry, hurry - get ready and we took so much time eating. Just poking around, you know. She'd hurry us along.

BM: What did you have for your breakfast?

MMK: Oh, we had oatmeal - oatmeal. Every morning we had our oatmeal. She was raised on oatmeal and, uh, so we kids had oatmeal. Once in a while we'd have cream of wheat.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And then we'd have eggs....

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK:because we had chickens.

BM: Um hum. And you said your mother canned a lot so you had jam.

MME: Yes, my mother canned a lot so we had pears, applesauce or.

BM: Um hum.

MMK:plums or cherries.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK; ..and peaches. We had peach trees....

BM: Oh. Um hum.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 26

MMK: and we had berries, you know, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries.

BM: Oh.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Those you had picked say the day before and then when - did you have them for breakfast?

MNK: Um hum. And then during the summer my brothers would go out in the woods and shake down crabapples and my mother would....

BM:: Oh.

MMK: .. .and my mother would make jelly of them.

BM: Um hum. So you had jelly and toast with your oatmeal?

MMK: Um hum.

BM: And then you said you had long braids so that it would take a long time to brush your hair and

MMK: I had two braids.

BM: Yes.

MMK: My sister and I had two braids and then we had long underwear, you know, in the wintertime and all bundled up, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Sheø, uh, knit, uh, our stockings - wool stockings....

BM: Sheø knit your stockings, too?

MMK: because our winters were most severe than they are now.

BM: Um hum.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 27

MMK: And she made all our clothes.

BM: Oh, really? She made them - did she have a machine?

MNK: Yes, she had a machine.

BM: And she sewed your clothes for you?

MMK: Um hum and, uh, boys' blouses, you know.

BM: Oh, she did?

MMK: Um hum and I can remember her, uh, hemming sheets, pillowcases. She would buy the material by the yard.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: Things weren't so convenient where you could buy pillowcases ready made. Well, maybe you could but too expensive.

BM: I see.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: So she even did her own sheets and pillowcases, too?

MMK: Um hum.

BM: How about - did you have comforters or blankets?

MMK: Well, we had comforters. She had a quilting frame with her neighbors.

BM: Oh.

MMK: In the wintertime they'd get together, you know, and, uh, it would be patchwork, you know....

BM: Oh.

MMK:scraps sewn together, you know, and then we had a feather bed.

BM: Um hum.

MNK: . . . and we'd go to bed with our hot, uh, brick.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont, 28

BM: Um hum.

MMK: She~~d~~ have it in the oven, you know, and (Indistinct) to be heated....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: .. .and she~~d~~ take a towel or something and wrap it around it and we~~d~~ put it on our feet....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: because we only had that one coal stove for four rooms.

BM: Was that in the kitchen - the coal stove - where you~~d~~ cook?

MMK: Cook - cook stove. Um hum. Where you~~d~~ have your reservoir on the burner with hot water.

BM: Um hum. I see, but did you burn coal in it or wood or....

MMK: Wood and - and coal.

BM: Um hum. Oh. So that stayed during the night then and you would have to put some more coal in in the morning then to, uh, make sure it was still working. And then when you got to school, urn, you said there were just two classes only?

MMK: Two rooms.

BM: Oh, two rooms and, uh, what subjects did you learn over there?

MMK: Reading, writing, arithmetic....

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: . . .a little drawing....

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 29

BM: Um hum.

MMK: but, of course, in those days each, uh, room had one teacher and she couldn't teach everything, you know, like exercising and drawing and painting and, uh, it was mainly, uh, the three r's, you know, reading, writing, arithmetic.

BM: Um hum. Right. How about recess? What games did you play when you were....

MMK: Oh, tag and weep, uh, uh, throw the ball....

BM: Um hum.

MMK:you know, try to catch it and then hopscotch.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Did the girls and the boys play together or did you

MMK: Yes.

BM: . . .did the girls play their games and the boys play their games?

MMK: Oh, no. We played together.

BM: Um hum. Did you skip rope?

MMK: Yes.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: And played jacks.

BM: Oh, you did?

MMK: (*Laughter*) And, uh, when we came home we had our chores to do, you know, like peel potatoes and, uh, peel the apples and, uh, wash the dishes. One would wash and one would dry, you know....

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 30

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and the water - the well outdoors. We didn't have running water.

BM: Oh.

MMK: This was School days.

BM: Yes. Um hum

MMK: Um hum. Of course, after I got through eighth grade why then I took a job.

BM: Um hum. I know.

MMK: I wanted to do dressmaking--sewing

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So my mother took me to Evanston to learn it - to one of the high class dress shops....

BM: Yes

MMK: .where we made custom made....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: .. .uh, clothes and, uh, so - and I liked to sew, you know. It was quite a big shop....

BM: Yes.

MMK: and, uh, so I did that for sixteen years.

BM: Um hum. How did you get down to Evanston from here?

MMK: I would take the, uh, North Shore.

BM: Oh.

MMK: You know where the North Shore was running.

BM: Yes.

MMK: You know it's out of business now

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 31

BM: Yes. Where did you pick it up though? It didn't come out this far.

MMK: Well, we went to Central Street, Evanston.

BM: Um hum. I see. You walked to Central Street in Evanston?

MMK: Or either down at the, uh, Wilmette station.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Yes, we'd walk. We had no car.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: We had no horse and carriage or buggy.

BM: Yes. So you walked.

MMK: Um hum and my father was busy in the store, you know, repairing shoes

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and my mother - you see I was the third, uh, the two older ones that I
- that took care of me, you
know, as far as getting around.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: I didn't go alone, you know. There were three brothers with me.

BM: I see.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: So then your brothers, uh, when you came home from school in the
afternoon then your brothers helped around the
house, too, or did they help your father or.

NMK: Oh, yes. And then we had kindling to bring in .

-Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 32

kindling wood and the coal and the water. He helped pump the water from the well.

BM: Yes.

MMK: And then we had a coal shed · a wood shed · and then, uh, branches of trees or old trees where they^d have to slit them.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: So they had a lot of work to do after school?

MMK: Oh, yes. There was a lot of work to do....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and then they helped in the store, you know - to polish the shoes after my father ³ot through, you know, repairing them, you know. And first of all, uh, he^d put them in a pail of water, get all the mud and dirt off.

BM: They really washed them off · they washed the dirt off?

MNK: Um hum.

BM: And then they^d have to let them dry before they could polish them, I would think.

MMK: Well, my father uh - after they got a good scrubbing my father would work on them.

BM: Oh.

MMK: Put new soles on them....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . or heels or patch · patches...

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 33

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . sewing machine and sew on a patch, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Would you tell me about some of the special holidays that you remember?

MMK: Well, of course, we always looked forward to our birthday (Indistinct) My mother always had a birthday cake for us.

BM: Oh, really?

MMK: *(Laughter)*

BM: How nice.

MMK: *(Laughter)* And Easter....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . we~~d~~ get a new dress...

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and perhaps a new hat because we~~d~~ go to Sunday school.

BM: Um hum. Did you go to church?

MMK: Uh, when we were old enough to - you know, to understand the sermon.

BM: Oh. Where did you go? Which church did you go to?

NMK: St. John~~s~~.

BM: Oh, the Lutheran Church in. ...

MMK: Yes.

BM: ... in Wilmette.

MMK: It was on Prairie Avenue.

Mathilda Marie Kernpe, cont. 34

BM: Um hum.

MMK: It wasnd on Wilmette Avenue.

BM: No. No. It was over on Prairie Avenue.

MMK: Prairie Avenue.

BM: Yes.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: And then what else did you do on Easter? Did you color eggs or hide them or things like that?

MMK: Yes, my mother would color eggs with, uh, onion peels.

BM: Oh. How did she do that?

MNK: She~~o~~, uh, peel the onion and, uh, pour boiling water on the, uh, peelings....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and, uh, in that way she~~o~~, uh, uh, color her eggs.

BM: What color did they come out? Did they come out.

MMK: Oh, sort of brown - gold....

BM: Oh. I see.

MMK: .. .and the more eggs she~~o~~ color, the lighter the color would be because there was just so many onion shells, you know.

BM: Um hum. I see.

MMK: Yes.

BM: Well, and then, uh, did you hide them and look for them or did you....

MMX: No. No. She~~o~~, uh, ~on Easter morning when we~~o~~ get up, it would be at our plate.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 35

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: Um hum and then during the day she had a bowl of, uh, eggs, you know, on the table.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . so we finally got filled up on eggs.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: *(Laughter)* Like I say, we had chickens.

BM: Um hum. I see.

MMK: So we got our eggs that way.

BM: Yes. And how about Christmas? Does anybody - what did you do on Christmas?

MMK: My mother had a special, urn, recipe for Christmas coffeecake.

BM: Oh.

MMK: . . . and fruitcakes and mincemeat. She ~~o~~ make her own mincemeat.

BM: How did she make mincemeat?

MMK: Well, it was suet, I remember, and raisins and currants and, uh, citron. You know what citron is?

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: Um hum. And then, uh, flavor it with rum.

BM: Oh. Boy, that sounds good.

MMK: Um hum. Yes.

BM: So then there was a lot of preparation for Christmas in the baking - with the baking part of it?

MMK: Oh - and cookies, you know. We had - she had cookie cutters,

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 36

you know.

BM: Um hum. Did you all help make the Christmas cookies?

MMK: Oh, yes. And we frosted them....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: and sprinkled them with colored sugar.

BM: Oh. Um hum. Yes.

MMK: *(Laughter)*

SW: Now kids don't - that's something that's still done the same. Kids still make the Christmas cookies and frost them and sprinkle them with sugar. That hasn't changed much. Where did you get your Christmas tree?

MMK: We had a, uh, evergreen, uh, course....

BM: Oh.

MMK:not too far from here.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So the boys would cut down the tree and bring it home.

BM: Um hum. About when did they do that? About how....

MMK: Oh, Christmas Eve.

BM: Oh. They really waited until Christmas Eve and then you would.

MMK: Yes.

BM: bring it home and decorate it?

MMK: Yes

BM: What did you use to decorate the tree with?

MMK: Oh, we'd make homemade, um, decorations, you know, these rings - these papers

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 37

BM: Oh, cut chains.

MMK: . . . chains, you know....

BM: Yes.

MMK: . . . and popcorn.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and apples and cookies.

BM: Oh.

MIVIK: Not many ornaments.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Although we had candles.

BM: You put real candles on the tree?

MMK: Oh, yes and put them in the holder.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: You~~o~~ clip them on the branches.

BM: Um hum. You~~o~~ have to be very carefu]1 though, when the candles were lit.

MMK: Oh, there was many a fire. Yes.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: So we never, urn, lit the tree without my mother or father, you know....

BM: Yes.

MMK: ,.. watching it and then it would be up until, uh, you know, and then Christmas Eve my mother would decorate it, you know.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Put it up, you know.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 38

BM: Your mother would decorate it. Did you help when she decorated it?

MM: Yes, as far as the stringing of the popcorn....

BM: Oh, yes.

MMK: . . . and making this chain....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . from different colors of paper.

BM: Um hum. Yes. And what kind of presents did you get for Christmas?

MMK: Oh, I never got what I wanted.

BM: Oh, really? Never? (*Laughter*)

MMK: Never. Never. And, of course, we were poor - not very poor, but poor - but most of the, uh, uh, she waited until Christmas morning and called us, you know, and we'd get up at maybe 6:00 o'clock that morning, you know, all]. excited. So there was four plates and we had a - each one of us had an apple, an orange....

BM: Oh.

MNK:and some, uh, candy, nuts.

BM: Um hum. So that was your special treat then?

MMK: Yes, that was a special treat because we seldom, uh, had an orange.

BM: Uh hum.

MMK: You know, to buy them. Too expensive....

BM: Oh. Um hum

MNK:but on Christmas we had, uh, had an orange.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 39

BM: Did you hang up your stockings?

MMK: Well, not all of them.

BM: No.

MMK: No because all that would be in it would be, urn, maybe an extra apple, you know, but no toys.

BM: No toys.

MMK: We had no toys.

BM: You had no toys?

MMK: None. You got clothes.

BM: You got clothes. Did you have dolls? Did you play with dolls?

MMK: Yes, we had dolls, but I don't - I always wanted a baby buggy and a cradle

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . .but I never got it.

BM: You never got it? Oh, dear.

MMK: And I never would dress the dolls, make all the clothes.

BM: Oh. So the dolls had a new Christmas outfit, too, then?

M11K: Yes.

BM: They'd get new clothes.

MMK: Yes. Um hum.

BM: Um hum. And what did you have for Christmas dinner?

MMK: Uh, it would be a goose perhaps....

BM: Um hum.

MMK; .. . or a chicken.

BM: Um hum. Did you raise your geese yourselves?

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 40

MMK: What?

BM: Did you raise the geese yourselves?

MMK: Yes. Geese and ducks and chickens.

BM: Oh.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Where did you keep the geese. Were they all on your, uh..

MMK: Well, we have a yard, you know, fenced in.

BM: Oh. Um hum. About how large was the yard?

MMK: Oh, I say my father had about, urn, 100 feet frontage....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: ... and that building and the rest of it would be, uh, cone shaped in the rear, you know, and a chicken coop.

BM: Um hum. So you had room for geese and ducks....

MMK: Yes.

BM: . . . and chickens? And then you had the Christmas coffeecake?

MMK: Yes, we had a Christmas coffeecake. It was special.

BM: Um hum. What was it?

MMK: Raisins, currants, citron and orange peel....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and there was a certain, uh, seed, uh, oh, what was the name of that seed? To flavor it, you know.

BM: Oh. Anise, maybe?

MMK: Oh, yes. Something like that.

BM: Oh. Um hum.

MMK: Then, of course, it would be frosted.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 41

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Um hum and then she would braid it.

BM: Oh.

MMK: It would be a big one - a big coffee cake.

BM: Oh. So it was a yeast dough? Was it yeast dough?

MMK: Yes. Um hum. And she~~ø~~, uh, bake it in the roasting pan,...

BM: Oh.

MMK:where she roasted her chicken.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: or goose. So it was a pretty big size, you know.

BM: Yes. I~~øn~~ sure if it was baked in a roasting pan.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: Well, if there were four healthy children around, uh, I~~øn~~ sure that the cake went very quickly. (*Laughter*) You had good appetites then, I think.

MMK: ~~C~~ause we were always eating.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: Kids are always eating, you know, and when company would come - my aunts and uncles from Chicago, you know - they~~ø~~ always bring us candy.

BM: Um hum. Did you visit your aunts and uncles in Chicago?

MMK: Oh, not often.,...

BM: No?

MMK: because that took money.

BM: Oh.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 42

MMK: to go to Chicago - and time.

BM: And time.

MMK: And time and my father would be too tired.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: He~~d~~ be glad when Sunday came....

BM: Yes.

MMK: . . .because, like I say, he~~d~~ work till 2:00 o~~c~~lock in the morning.

BM: Yes. Um hum.

MMK: %From the bench to the bed+-

BM: Yes. That~~s~~ a tough life.

MMK: . . .you know. Long, long hours.

BM: Yes.

MMK: But he was strong and he was healthy....

BM: Yes.

MMK: .. .and to do the new work, he didn~~t~~ want to be disturbed when he was making shoes to go over the boots.

BM: Oh. Boots, too?

MMK: You see we had mud in the spring of the year....

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . .and deep snow in the winter really got - had boots....

BM: Oh.

NMK:up to the knees.

BM: Oh.

MMK: You know, and to turn those inside out, you know.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 43

BM: Oh. You had to make each one by hand and then turn it inside out.

MMK: Yes.

BM: Yes. That's a hard job.

MMK: Um hum and then my sisters would bring their, urn, repair work here.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: . . . and he would line the shoes, put in extra lining and cloth inside so they would last longer and wear longer,

BM: Oh. Perfect.

MMK: . . . and then some of the shoes would have to be turned inside out because they - the layers in them were too stiff.

BM: Um hum.

MMK: to walk.

BM: Oh. I see.

MNK: And they'd have to be sewed - the soles would have to be sewed on the inside to the upper.

BM: Oh. My goodness. (*Laughter*) That sounds difficult.

MMK: Well, that was part of the trade to....

BM: Yes.

MMK: But that's the way they, um, preserved...

BM: Um hum.

M14K: . . .you know, to get more wear out of the shoe.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 44

BM: Yes.

MMK: They had relining. You know there's a lining in the shoe and he put an extra lining inside so they'd have to have a larger size than ordinarily.

BM: That's right. Yes.

MMK: It was for, um - well, you'd get extra wear..

BM: Get more wear out of them because a pair of shoes was probably fairly expensive, uh, purchase and you needed to get as much wear as you could out of them. You couldn't buy a new pair of shoes every couple of weeks then.

MMK: And, uh, the handyman did the chores, you know. He'd bring in maybe in a day twenty-five pairs at a time.

BM: Oh, my. That kept your father very busy then.

MMK: Oh, yes. Yes. He was very busy and he had no, urn, help.

BM: No help? He couldn't find anyone?

MMK: There was no one that was - took to the trade.

BM: Oh. I see.

MMK: Um hum.

BM: And your brothers didn't want to go into the business either?

MMK: No, they didn't want to be tied down like on the inside. They wanted outdoor jobs to - going outdoors from house to house, you know. .

BM: Um hum. Yes.

Mathilda Marie Kempe, cont. 45

MMK:not in one place, you know. When you're a store keeper you're tied down.,

BM: Um hum. Yes,, that's true.

(End of tape)

I