

**Erwin Konrad**

**Interviewed August 22, 2007  
By Holli Connell  
Midway Village Museum**

Holli Connell: Okay your first and last name please.

Erwin Konrad: My first name is Erwin Conrad.

HC: Okay and what year were you born in?

EK: I was born in Stettin, East Germany which is now Polish or I should say belongs to Poland. And we fled from East Germany in 1945 to West Germany and my dad he was in the Army and then he was captured in the eastern part and he was in a Russian prison camp for six months.

HC: Okay, but we will start from the beginning that was just a little test to make sure I got you okay.

HC: Okay, could you start by stating your first and last name please.

EK: Okay my first and last name is Erwin Konrad. Okay. I was born in Stettin, East Germany October 8, 1940.

HC: What was your life like when you lived in Germany?

EK: Are you talking about when I grew up in Germany?

HC: Yes.

EK: The early part or the later part? Well I was five years old when the war ended so I don't remember hardly any of that. And I think I've mentally blocked it out because there were terrible things while we were fleeing from East Germany that my mind just doesn't want to recall or I blocked it out or whatever.

HC: What about later then after the war?

EK: After the war? Well we fled to West Germany and my dad was in a Russian prison camp and my sisters and my brother, he led the wagon to West Germany, a horse and wagon like you see in the old West. And we fled to West Germany where my mom's sister was living. So then when my dad came to East Germany and asked where the family was the people told them that we had fled to West Germany. So then he put two and two together and figured we were at my mom's sister and so he met up with after.

HC: How many brothers and sisters do you have again?

EK: I have five sisters and one brother. One of my sisters is deceased.

HC: When did you come to the United States?

EK: I came to the United States February 7, 1957.

HC: And how old were you then?

EK: I was 16 years old.

HC: Why did you decide to come to the United States?

EK: Well we had relatives in South America and Brazil, and I had an uncle here in Illinois. By Harvard Illinois. And they had a farm there. And my cousin who was a registered nurse came to Germany in 1953. She wanted to look up her dad's relatives which is the Konrad family and she talked my brother into coming to the United States and he was a cabinetmaker and I went into cabinetmaking at age 14 1/2. And then my brother brought me over here.

HC: And how did you travel to get to the United States?

EK: I came over here on a big ship the MS Berlin. Out of Bremenhafen(sp?), Germany. My brother picked me up in New York.

HC: So your brother was already here in the United States then?

EK: He came here in 1954 and I came in 1957.

HC: What was the process for you to come to the United States?

EK: Well first of all you have to have a sponsor you know so my brother worked in a cabinet shop and he was a foreman, and he worked for a fellow who sponsored me. And it took about nine months for all of the paperwork to go through and then I had to go to the consulate in Frankfurt, Germany and once I was checked out and approved I got the clearance to come over to the United States.

H: And that then allowed you to go and get a ticket to travel then? Like with clearance papers or did they say here's now how you are going to travel?

EK: No my brother paid for the ticket and then as long as I had the papers that I could go the U.S. then it was okay.

HC: So you came over here and you have to correct me again in 1957?

EG: Mhhmm. (indicates yes)

HC: And where was the first place you stepped out onto, was it New York?

EK: New York, yeah. Then my brother took me to the Empire State building and me having lived up in the country I was hardly ever in a big city when I was a kid and so this was a big step and a big trip and New York was so impressive you got to go up in the Empire State building and see the whole city you know it was just awesome.

HC: Did you stay the night there in New York and then travel the next day?

EK: Let's see now, I believe we went there in the morning, my brother picked me up in the morning and then we went to the Empire State building so I got to see the city of New York from way up there and then we went to the airport and flew to Chicago from New York.

HC: And then your final destination was it Harvard?

EK: No, my brother lived here in Rockford so we came to Chicago and then we flew in a smaller airplane from Chicago to Rockford and then a friend of my brother's picked us up at the Rockford Airport. So I have been in Rockford ever since.

HC: Really? Yes. Wow! Okay, well that's interesting.

EK: When you came to Rockford what was your first job?

EK: Well my brother was a foreman in a cabinet shop and since I had two years experience in cabinetmaking experience in Germany I started working at Highland Lumber and Fuel on Charles Street, they are no longer in business. That's where I started working. And at that time it was a matter of me either going back to school which would've been high school not knowing the language so I would have had to go to school and try to learn stuff or get a job. So Highland Lumber and Fuel had to get a special permit for me to work in a cabinet shop at age 16.

HC: Really?

EK: Oh yeah.

HC: Because of the labor laws?

EK: Exactly.

HC: Now in Germany what was your educational background before you came over?

EK: I had eight years of public school and after that you either go on to high school for people that want to be educated or get government jobs like working for the railroad system or the post office or office workers or you take up a trade. So I took up my trade as a cabinetmaker at age 14 1/2. So I've heard since then that they go to school until they are 16 which I think is a lot better. Because you're just a kid going out and trying to get a job in the world at age 14 1/2.

HC: So when you came here you felt like I have two years under my belt being a cabinetmaker so you were able to go right into that kind of job? But the language was a barrier?

EK: Oh yes.

HC: But your brother you could communicate with?

EK: Right. And I went to night school for three years learning English. The Board of Education and the YWCA, I started out at the YWCA and they stopped teaching English for foreigners and the Board of Education had classes so I went there.

HC: When you were at work did the language barrier either work for you or work against you? Were you only able to communicate with your brother or was there anybody else that you could communicate with including your native language?

EK: We had a Swedish fellow there, he was from Sweden and we had my sponsor there who was American and then my brother was foreman and I worked there so I had to slowly start picking up the language because we had one American and one Swede well they were not talking German so I had to learn the language and then I took like I said night classes for English for three years.

HC: When you came here to Rockford where did you stay?

EK: I lived with my brother until he got married.

HC: Where was that what neighborhood did you live in?

EK: Let's see that is near Broadway and 12th Ave I believe.

EK: Was there anybody else in your neighborhood that you either knew from your country or even the town you lived in Germany?

EK: No.

HC: Did you know anybody in town beside your brother who was maybe German or maybe from your home?

EK: My brother had a couple of friends that were from Germany actually they both were from East Germany. And so he would visit them and I would go a long. So I still talked quite a bit of German the first few years.

HC: Once you sort of adapted and have been through your classes and maybe even your environment of learning English, did you communicate with your brother in German even though you could speak in English?

HC: Yes, I always kept talking German with my brother, you know. And he is still amazed to this day that I can still speak German pretty good, you know because he more or less dropped it which I couldn't understand. But he did and I told him I was not going to do that. So I speak with my sisters once in a while. You know every three or four weeks I talk with them on the phone.

HC: Do you have any other family members that live in the United States?

EK: Well except for my cousin that's still living, she lives a half a block from my house. ]

HC: Everyone else still lives in Germany?

EK: Yeah, I have four sisters over there and lots of nieces and nephews.

HC: When you came here and started working at as a cabinetmaker at age 16 did you ever find or did you have any issues with saying I am German? Were you comfortable with it or were you not comfortable with it.

EK: You always try to leave a good image because of the bad past, you know, because people say, "Oh yeah he's German", you know, so you always try to, you know, be polite. So that's all that I can say to that.

EK: Once you got here, when did you become a citizen?

EK: I became a citizen, my wife and I got married on February 12, 1966, and I became a citizen in November of 1966.

HC: How did you meet your wife?

EK: Skiing.

HC: In Illinois?

EK: No, we went on a bus trip up to Wisconsin. We met on the bus.

H: Were you both from Rockford?

EK: She lived in Rockford. Of course, she was born and educated in Wisconsin. She lived in Rockford, so.

EK: No, when he got married.

HC: And then did, did you move to another neighborhood?

EG: Yes, I've always lived on the east side.

HC: And then, when did you first learn to drive?

EK: Well, I took my drivers license, I think when I was 17, it took me three times to pass it. But I finally did, I think it was the language barrier problem.

HC: So you were still working on that, it was about a year?

EK: Well, see, they were going to change the law, at one time there was rumor it was going to be 18 and so my brother and his friend said to me, “you better take your license this year yet and so I was working on it but I think it took me a few months till I finally passed it the third time.

HC: What was your first car?

EK: I had a small Volkswagen beetle.

HC: What color?

EK: Blue.

HC: Those are nice. My husband actually had a van and a [inaudible].

HC: How different was climate here compared to where you grew up?

EK: It's a lot warmer here in the United States. See Frankfurt only gets to be 72, 75, if they have an extreme hot day it might get to be 88, 90, but they don't have air conditioning over there so that is an extremely hot day for them. So for older people it's very hard because no air-conditioning. But you don't get those kind of hot days very often, but it can happen. Now my sister told me that for the past few years they sometimes have had hot days several days in a row close to 90 degrees and she says all the fans are bought up in the stores and people just ain't used to that, you know, they don't have air conditioning.

HC: So here where we have a lot more warmer days it's not typically warmer for them at all?

EK: Right. And over there you get a lot of fog and rain and rainy days, too, you know and stuff. It's not as clear weather as it is here for the most part, you know, we get real nice hot and warm weather. You might get a few nice days and then it could get rainy and damp and cool, foggy. But they say it's starting to get a little bit more warm. I don't know if this is happening through the global warming or not. Even in the wintertime when it gets extremely cold here, you get a cold but not to that extreme you know.

HC: Before you came here at 16, what was your life like there, like how was your life, living with your family in your environment and your trade, what was your life like?

EK: When I was still living over there? Well, I would say I had a very fun kind of youth because played soccer in the summer and the ski hill was about a hundred, 150 yards from my parent's house so in the wintertime I was always on the ski slope so I had a lot of fun growing up. And I wasn't that interested in school for which I had to pay a price later on because I ended up going to night school trying to catch up and to learn a lot of things and I would say that I have learned and developed by doing this a lot more than if I would have just stuck in one trade and not done this but what I did went to the United States.

HC: What did you think of the United States before you came over here?

EK: I was always fascinated by it, I had this wild imagination about Indians, you know. So when I came to the Rockford I asked my brother where are the Indians here. You know, I saw cowboy movies and Indian movies and stuff and I had this way out the imagination being just 16 years old that there were still sections where the Wild West was and all the Indians and all this kind of stuff.

HC: That's funny. So how did your perception of American change when you got here?

EK: I like the freedom in the United States and I also like the opportunities that are given to you. You can go to night school and better yourself if you want to do all this, you know. The opportunities are there. You can go out there and do it and I think the freedom of this kind of stuff to develop yourself and learn what you want to learn, you know. Over there, while I was in the cabinet making trade I probably would have either stayed in there and I would have been about the way you go down to life, and here I have a lot of different kind of opportunities, including when traveling and stuff and I saw a lot of different things of the world and I got to go back and forth between Germany and the US and, so I got a lot of opportunities in the United States.

HC: That was going to be my next question, have you gone back to your native home and what was it like?

EK: I went back 13 times. I would go every three years as long as my folks were still living. Once they passed on then it wasn't quite so important, even so I am very close to my sisters, but it wasn't as important to me as when my parents were still living.

HC: When you got a visa to come here what kind of visa was it? Was it a student visa?

EK: No, it was immigration papers is what it is. What they were. No it was only a little green card I had to report to Washington once a year where I was living.

HC: Really, so you had to report every year until you became a citizen?

EG: That's why I don't understand how all this stuff got so liberal out there; they had a lot stricter rules back in those days. Every January you had to fill out a card and you got it at the post office where you lived and you had to fill it out blah, blah, blah, send it in to Washington so they could keep track of every foreigner that was in this country, now they are just walking in here and they can do everything and they have got such have chaos there they don't know even how to handle it anymore, so somewhere along the line something got way out of whack here. I even tell that to other foreigners, that's just the way I feel about it. You know they come in here and they want all their rights and they want and march around and all that. Years ago if you did not have papers you just did not come into the United States. That's the way the law was, you know.

HC: I do have to read up on the law now; ha it changed? That's a big question mark I have, has the law changed?



EK: I would say that the law has changed because people are coming in here illegal and hiding and they still get jobs, no one seems to be getting on them, you would think that immigration would be getting on them and say hey, you don't belong here you get deported, you know. Back in those days the US let only so many people in from Europe, so many from Sweden, that's a quota, that's right, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, whatever. Asia has the smallest percentage I remember that when I came here back in the 50s and 60s. That's what they talked about; Asia was a small percentage of the part that could immigrate to the United States. Well, Europeans probably had the most percentage of being able to come into the US. But, I think it's changed quite a bit. Now Washington doesn't even know how to handle this stuff anymore. So far out of control. You had to have a job and a sponsor. Well they would ask you like they asked me in Frankfurt what would you do if you got laid off and my brother said if they ask you that question just tell them that you will wash dishes. They had to know that you were going to take care of yourself and that you are willing to work. Basically what it boils down to.

HC: Well, your sponsor is liable for you, right?

EG: Well he was supposed to be but I was living with my brother so it was just a formality for him to sign the papers, that's what that was all about.

HC: What was of that process of citizenship like? Why did you decide to do it and what did you do?

EK: Bonnie and I got married in 1966; see back in those days even foreigners had to serve in the armed forces, that's another part of my life that I have to get into here. So when you're in the Army you had to write down the foreign registration number that they had in DC because you are not a citizen, okay. So the number I had from Washington is the number I put in when I applied to the armed forces and they would've either drafted me or I had to volunteer to serve in the reserves, which I did for six years. So I get my Army duty out of the way and I switch from cabinet making over to tool and die, so I wanted to pick up a new trade and also take care of my obligation to serve in the United States. So I was six years in the Army reserve.

HC: Still when you joined them is that when you became a citizen?

EK: So I put my immigration number in there when I applied to be in the reserves or you had to be a citizen. So when you apply for citizenship it gets very easy because you or to get some duty for serving this country, so when I Bonnie and I got married, I thought it was best to become a citizen. So nine months later I decided to take my citizenship.

HC: So did you have to take a test?

EK: Well I had to go down to the courthouse and I had to have two witnesses and they had to testify about my character and then a lawyer from US immigration asked me a bunch of questions and then I had to write one sentence, they wanted to see if I could write, and then I was approved.

HC: Was that a diploma that you get your high school diploma?

EK: Yes it's a GED, that's what I took the Constitution test. Because I was in the Army and so I already knew a lot of stuff you're supposed to know about the flag and the different stuff and I passed the test first time. I took the test and the teacher says to me I can't believe this. He said students going to high school can't hardly pass this test, he says and you've passed it the first time. I don't know, I had 21 out of 24 or something like that.

HC: So now when you took classes you said you get your GED? Did you do that right away he or how old were you?

EK: 50 when I took my GED. But you see I went to tool and die school for four years so I did a lot of things from my 20s all the way to my 30s.

HC: So you got here when you were 16 you became a citizen 10 years later you were 26 you had joined the reserves as well, were you already in the reserves or did you join the reserves when you got married?

EK: I went into the reserves in 1964, it was October 1963 and I got out in 1969.

HC: And then you were in tool and die?

EK: I was in tool and die from 64 to 68/69.

HC: Once you were married and you are out of the reserves you said you worked in tool and die?

EK: I was seven years in cabinet making and I've been 45 years in tool and die.

HC: Do you work for a company locally?

EK: Yeah, I'm still working.

HC: Where do you work?

EK: At Rockford Tool Craft.

HC: What kind of stuff do you do there?

EK: We build the dies in the stamping department or the stamp out parts and I'm in the die repair shop, so I help maintain them, repair dies. I used to work at a stamping place to put in the part and then jump back before the stamp came down it was a summer job. Yeah, a lot of people use to lose their fingers before they had more of the safety equipment on that stuff.

HC: You work on the big machines and stuff like that than?

EK: See, we maintain the dies that go in these presses, you know. My boss he has all over 40 presses up to 1000 tons, so these are big presses that we put guys in there from here up to 18 /20,000 pounds of steel and those. So it's quite a complicated trade, you know.

HC: So you went to night school to get your GED and you said, “ Hey I'm just going to do this?”

EK: Yeah. Yeah, I thought I might not need it anymore but it's nice to know I went through with and did it in five months, so it wasn't too bad.

HC: What kind of stuff do you do for fun?

EK: What kind of stuff? We still ski my wife and I. Sometimes in the summertime we still play a little tennis and I play my accordion. When I was a kid I used to play soccer. Also play table tennis. I used to play for Rockford Table Tennis Club years ago. Five or six years or something. Then we had kids and stuff and other things became priorities.

HC: How many children do you have? Three boys. They all went to Rockford College. My brother's son he is a neurosurgeon. Down in Nashville, Tennessee that's where my brother moved to after he left Rockford. How many years now, eight? Seven years? He had only that one son so he wanted to be near him.

HC: You know, I really don't have any more questions I think we got them all answered this I don't know if you have anything you want to add at all, your experience of coming over here.

EK: I just want to say I like this country, love this country, I am happy to be here, you know. I like Rockford and it's been a good town for us. I love my family, our kids have all done well, you know they all got good jobs, they all went to Rockford, College, so Rockford's been my home.

HC: Thank you, I appreciate it.

EK: Is that it?

HC: That's it.