

Mara Vishniac Kohn & Walter Kohn

Mara Vishniac Kohn was born in Berlin in 1926. She reached the US with her family in January 1941. She worked with children and adolescents in both residential settings and in private special education. She arrived in Santa Barbara with her husband, Walter Kohn in the Fall of 1979. Here, she taught English as a second language and remedial writing. She brought to publication two books of her father's photographs dealing with Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the 1930s as well as a book called Roman Vishniac's Berlin. In 2003, she initiated the permanent exhibit of images of Santa Barbara residents who are survivors of the Holocaust at the Jewish Federation's Bronfman Center on Chapala Street. At present she continues her work with her father's legacy of photographs and manuscripts dealing with Jewish life as well as his significant contributions to the field of microphotography. Mara has two children, Naomi Schiff, a graphic designer in Oakland, CA and Benjamin Schiff, a Professor of International Relations in Oberlin, OH.

Walter Kohn was born in 1923 in Vienna, Austria. It was ironically due to the Nazis that Walter Kohn first discovered his interest in science. Cast out of public high school, he enrolled in a Jewish school where two excellent teachers inspired him in Mathematics and Physics. As war loomed in 1939, his parents sent him to Britain where he was soon after classified as an "enemy alien" and shipped to Canada. After almost two years of internment, he was enabled by helpful Canadians to enter the excellent Mathematics and Physics program at the University of Toronto while working on designs for electrical instruments for American bombers. Towards the end of World War II he served in the Canadian infantry.

After earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Toronto in 1946, Kohn received his Ph.D. in Nuclear Physics and a postdoctoral fellowship with Julian Schwinger at Harvard University in 1948. This was followed by postdoctoral work at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen. In the early 1950's, he worked at Bell Telephone Laboratories as an assistant to the group that developed the transistor.

He has taught at many universities and done collaborative research around the world. He has made major contributions to the physics of semiconductors, superconductivity, surface physics and catalysis. In 1979 he was chosen as the founding director of the Institute of Theoretical Physics at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Under his leadership, it quickly developed into one of the leading research centers in physics and has been widely copied. He has received numerous awards including the Niels Bohr/Unesco Gold Medal, the United States National Medal of Science and the Richard Prange Prize. His role in creating Density Functional Theory, the most widely used theory of the electronic structure of matter, earned him the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1998.

In recent years, he was an active member of the U.S. government's Basic Energy Science Advisory Committee and as a consultant with the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. In 2005 he produced a documentary on solar power entitled "The Power of the Sun" which has had worldwide distribution in multiple languages. Currently he is working on Macular Degeneration, renewable energies and global warming.