



LEVINE: When did you father come to the United States?

BASIC: My father came here first time 1923, then he came to Croatia in 1927. I was born there in '28 and he went back, right after the Christmas holidays 1928.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your father's name?

BASIC: Steven.

LEVINE: And . . .

BASIC: Stjepan. S-T-J-E-P-A-N. That's the Croatian name for Steven.

LEVINE: Steven, right. And how about your mother? What was her name?

BASIC: Her name was Anna Manda Obučina. O-B-U-C-U-I-N-A. She married my father on January 1, 1919. They had four children, my sister Catherine, who was the oldest, she died a year and a half ago. Her maiden, mai-, her married name was Pocrnic. P-O-C-R-N-I-C. My brother, Joe, who was killed in the Second World War, he k-k-, he wasn't killed in the war, the war was over. He came home to his family, wife and two kids, taken away. We, to this day, we do not know where he was killed, where he was buried, and he is, one of t-the stories that I really touches me very much every time I talk about it. I also have a brother Michael, who served four years in the, U-United States Army in the Pacific. He now lives in California, with he's widowed, he has three children there. And then there of course, that's me, I'm married to a Croatian, a girl born in the United States of Croatian background. Her mother and father, father comes from the island of Hvar, H-V-A-R, her mother comes from a little town near, near Mostar, where the in, in Herzegovina called Opuzen, 0-P-U-Z-E-N. And we got married in 1959, ten-four over and out. That's what I used to say to you. October 4, 1959. We have three wonderful children, my daughter Emily, she's the oldest. She'll be forty years old this Oct-October. She's an attorney by . . . choice, I guess. My son Steven, he's

about thirty-seven now, he's, works at home with us, he works at whatever he feels like doing. He, as long as I'm, (laughs) he's got a place to stay, you know what I'm saying? I'm from the old school, you don't kick 'em out.

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: You always keep close to them. My youngest daughter just became a mother, and July 18 she gave birth to a little girl, Mikaela Rose and she's married to a gentlemen by the name of Michael Clancy, who is not a true Irishman, half Irish, half Polish, and God knows what else.

LEVINE: (laughs)

BASIC: That's the story of my family.

LEVINE: OK. Wonderful. Wha-, did your grandparents, did you ever know your grandparents?

BASIC: I never knew my grandfa—paternal grandparents. My grandfather, Joe Obučina, who came to the United States, I guess in the early . . . 1900s. He worked in various parts of the United States, especially in Chicago, and last, but not least, was Minnesota, up in the Iron Range Basin of Minnesota. He was a foreman on two jobs, and after the Second World War was, First World War was over, he was preparing to come home to his wife and family, and he was murdered up there in a little town near, near Grand Rapids, Minnesota. And I had the distinction, or, or my duty I guess, to go locate this grave and I did find it.

LEVINE: Do you know anything about . . .

BASIC: We . . .

LEVINE: . . . surrounding the murder?

BASIC: Well, what I did is I went to the library in Grand Rapids and pulled out the newspapers from 1919. Front page had the whole story—how much money he had, how much they stole, there was well over \$5000.

LEVINE: Oh, it was a robbery . . .

BASIC: Oh, it was a killing and a murder. Murder, yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: It was about, what they figured, it was about seven guys who attacked him, probably people that he worked with 'em, or probably people from the same area in the old country. And they, he took out three guys with 'im. He knocked them out, my fat—grandfather. He was a tall man, six foot six, very heavy, but they clubbed him to death and he died three days later in the hospital. I believe, somehow they, the police never told, found out what happened and the case was just left unopened. But when I found the grave, I went one day where the cemetery was and I had to look for the grave. There was nobody at the grave to tell me where the graves were. I started nine in the morning until five at night and I couldn't find it. I kept going across the field. If there's some graves in the ground, you couldn't see the names, but I says to myself, that time they use crosses, Croatians would use crosses because they were Catholic and I couldn't find it. So I drove out of the car, I changed maybe ten times from the sweating of the heat, it was one of the hottest days of the year. I drove the car out, I went down to the other side—there was a dead end. I, I, came back like somebody pulled my arm to go back in. So there was a little plot there on the very end, which I didn't go to. I start going there, I see all the names from my home town, like Štimic, Rukavina, Hečimović, Morgić, Dasović, Pavolić, all kinds of names from my hometown and v-, the very last grave by the fence, Joseph Josip Obučina. O-B-U-C-I-N-A. I cried out, "Bog, Bog". "God, God, thank you." "God," I cried. I, I, and then I saw some flowers on there. I had no family there. I

say, "Who puts the flowers?" So going down south I had a gentleman who knew about, who was born in the area, he was born in the United States, a Croatian . . . mother and father. He was a principal in the high school in South Saint Paul, Minnesota. "Oh," he says, "That's your cousin Hečimović." I say, "I don't have any cousins Hečimović." Well, I called him and found out what happened was, when the Hečimović came from the old country, he couldn't get a passport in his own name, so he borrowed his cousin's passport, came to the United States, that's what he stayed, instead of being an Obu-Obučina, he stayed a Hečimović for the rest of his life. And they still have children up there that were living.

LEVINE: Oh . . .

BASIC: Go ahead.

LEVINE: How do you spell Hečimović?

BASIC: H, H, H-E-C-I-M-O-V-I-C. Hečimović. Now, the, my, my father's father was Mila Bašić. Mike Basic. And he worked for a company called Walsh Construction Company. He died in nineteen twenty . . .three, when, two, ten days before my father came to the United States. So he didn't get a chance to see his father alive. And my brother Mike, when he got out of the service in '45, he went to Walsh Construction Company, he said, "I'd like a job." He says, "What's your last name?" He says, "Michael Basic." So the guy who was interviewing, says, "Wait a minute." He goes in the back file and comes out with a file, he brings out the file on my grandfather, Mila Bašić, and he says to him, "Are you related by any chance to Mila Bašić?" And he says, "Yes, that's my grandfather." "You got a job any place you want in the United States." My grandfather was a foreman and he, all the Croatians that came from the old country, were hard working people, because they worked the farms, they continued doing so. And they, he had such a wonderful record with these, with this

company, that anybody, and he hired, all the guys that were younger than him that came there became foremen like my fa-father's first cousin Joseph. He got a free house up in, Syracuse, because of the work he did. That's the way they used to work it.

LEVINE: What . . .

BASIC: And . . .Go ahead.

LEVINE: They were foremen in what? In what kind of work?

BASIC: Construction road. Working railroad ties, all this stuff, all the hard work that was done. I mean all the roads going from New York to Albany, west, were done by our Croatian people. You, up to the Hudson Valley, you can stop into Peekskill, that's where my grandfather's buried. You go up a little further, Beacon, you'll find Croatian names in every grave.

LEVINE: You want to give me your name in Croatian?

BASIC: St-Stipe, S-T-I-P-E. Bašić. B-A, to pronounce it in English you'd have to spell it B-A-S-H-I-C-H. But I left it "Basic," because that's the way we pronounce it. See if I became "Bashich," the anglicized, it would be a completely different name.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: And I didn't want to change it.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: Go ahead.

LEVINE: Now, were your par-, were your grandparents on each side, do-were they from Croatia . . .

BASIC: All, all from . . .

LEVINE: . . . going back?

BASIC: Oh, yeah, why I, I, I'm doing my family history now, and I will, got to the point where I've gone back to the fifteenth century, where the Croatian priest by the name of Mesić, M-E-S-I-C, stood up and against the Turks, to get 'em out of our country, and it mentions the name Stjepan Bašić, which is me. From my home, from my same village where I'm from. When I saw that also, and I'm, that's why I asked you, will you help me with the, when they, when they come in with the records. So I can know when, I can give you the names of people, and I know when they came over approximately. Get their, get their records so I can put it together.

LEVINE: Um-hmm, Um-hmm.

BASIC: And I got started with this . . . give you an example. When I moved to California, I, I was, I wasn't feeling too well, so I went out to California. I was salesman by trade, I could tell you my whole history, how I got to be there.

LEVINE: OK.

BASIC: But anyway, I'm in California selling draperies and bedspreads to furniture stores, specialty shops, department stores. I'm in San Diego. I had a habit of always looking in the phone book to see if I find a Bašić, Basic. So I found a name, B-A-S-I-C-H. Wha-, I don't use the H at the end, he does. So I look in the phone book. It says, "George E." I say, "Wait a minute, George . . . It's gotta ring a bell." So I pick up the phone, call up the guy, I says, "I, is this George Basic?" He says, "Yes." "Could you any chance be from Columbus,

Ohio?” He says, “Yes.” “Hold the phone, get the šljivovica ready, I’ll be down in five minutes.” Šljivovica, of course, is a plum brandy. Croatian.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: So I get down there, he opens the door, I look at him, he looks at me, he says, “Your Steve Basic’s son from New York.” I say, “Your Uncle George, my Great-Uncle George’s son from Columbus.” So we started on the family tree, that’s how he got me started. And his grandfather, I mean his father, my great-uncle, was in the Boxer Revolution in 1900 in China, in the Austria-Hungary Navy. And as they were going back through these states, instead of going through India, or Indian Ocean, they went across the Pacific into New York. When he got to New York he jumped ship and he got off, and he found a beautiful young Tyrolese girl, from Tyrol, part near the Austria, Switzerland.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: They got married and they, they must have moved I would say maybe fifty times in their lifetime. They had fifteen children. They only had one left and I had the privilege of going to see her last fall with my wife. And I’ll tell you something, we never knew each other at all. We, she, received me like my own mother would. Can I describe it any better?

LEVINE: Umm, beautiful.

BASIC: Yeah.

LEVINE: Beautiful. OK, tell me about growing up.

BASIC: Ah, growing up.

LEVINE: Growing up.

BASIC: OK.

LEVINE: Ah, the first ten years, nine years of your life . . .

BASIC: Well, growing up in the old country, I'll give you an example. First of all, we went to school in the morning one day. In the afternoon the other day because we were farmers, so we had to tend the flock, like the sheep and the h-horse, c-cows, and the goats, and things of that. That was given to children like five years old. Like me.

LEVINE: Really.

BASIC: And we would go to our fields, we had a lot a land, we still have a lot of land. As a matter of fact, my land could feed the wh-, entire county of Bergen county, with the food that we could raise, on that land. So my, a deal was to take care of the sheep.

LEVINE: What did you do exactly?

BASIC: What did I do exactly? We would carry, what I would always carry, w-would be an umbrella, a match, and a knife. The umbrella be-in case of a, a storm, and, what do you call it, they, that hits the trees, the cy-cyclone?

LEVINE: Lightning?

BASIC: Lightning. So we didn't stay under the trees, we stood under umbrella. The match was to start a fire in case a bear or a wolf came by.

LEVINE: (laughing) You just gave yourself one?

BASIC: Oh, yeah, and then of course we had a knife so we could go to the neighbor's, far-farmland, get their, what do you call, the, lettuce, and get the core outta

there, so we'd have some lunch. So that's the way. And, and one time I, I, I don't know what happened, my mother had left some dinars, that's what the old re-revenue at that time when I was there. So it was about thirty dinars, I took it, and my cousin had seen me, so she told my mother, so she ran after me and I threw it in, in the bushes. She picked it up, took it back to my mother, so what do I do? At night I come home. I'm afraid she's going to kill me, so I says, "Mom, one of your sheep is missing." And this is already at nine o'clock at night, so she says, "Get out and find it. Don't come back 'til you do." Now can you imagine a five-year-old boy going out in darkness, looking for a sheep? Well, I had found it. When I found it, she said to me, "You ever do what you did, I am going to physically murder you." Getting back to my day of birth. My mother gave birth to me on September 19, 1928. She gave birth to me, laid me in a blanket by the field there, she went back to work the ground. That's the style. My mother was a great lady. She . . .

LEVINE: Tell me about her.

BASIC: If she, if she, if she knew how to read and write, she could've been the greatest politician. Like, what was her name from Brit-, Israel? First lady.

LEVINE: Oh, Golda Meir? [Golda Meir 1898-1978; Prime Minister of Israel, 1969-1974.]

BASIC: Go-go-Gold-, the, the old mom. The mother type. My mother knew, knew so many people. She, she worked, she cleaned an office. When my father died in 1948 of so-called cancer, he got hurt on the job, and the doctors pronounced that he died of cancer, which I suspect very highly, but anyway, my mother started to clean an office and she got a job at 2 Park Avenue, where the United Nations was, and what's his name, [U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., 1947-1953, Warren R.] Austin was there with the Democrats, then came, what's his name, [U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., 1953-1960, Henry] Cabot Lodge. Cabot Lodge was a personal friend of my mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: She got to be, she didn't know how speak or write English, but he did, he, he was, he's the reason that my sister was able to get out of so-called, quote unquote, that dirty word that I never use, it begins with a J.

LEVINE: She was able to get out of . . .

BASIC: The country that I don't use the word of, I never use it. It's it, I, I . . .

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. OK.

BASIC: You know who I'm talking about.

LEVINE: Yeah. Um-hmm.

BASIC: So, he, he helped. And when, and my mother used to crochet, my mother was, was, she could look at you and her hands were going like this and she would crochet a cross, for the book marker and all kinds of things for the table and she was in, give this to Cabot Lodge for his Christmas, and, he was, b-b-, Episcopalian by birth. I mean his, religion, his wife Emily was born in Italy and she was also an Episcopalian, so when Cabot Lodge died, she said—I sent a mass card. She sent a, back a letter, she says, "Steve, the, the cross that your mother crocheted is in the casket with Cabot and when I die, mine will be with me as well. Now these are people that are multi-multi-millionaires. I was, what do you call it, a peon from the farm. This was one of the greatest experiences of my mother and my life. And when I got here in 1938, the first thing I started selling was shopping bags.

LEVINE: Well, first, before we get to . . .

BASIC: Go ahead.

LEVINE: . . . coming here, just be-, let's, let's . . .

BASIC: Oh yeah, getting . . .

LEVINE: . . . finish your life in Croatia. Just to finish it.

BASIC: . . . getting, OK, getting back. Alright so, I would, I would take care of their sheep, and the animals and I would take my books in the afternoon. S-sit under a tree and learn my lesson for the next day.

LEVINE: (?)

BASIC: And I never played hooky, at, like they do in this country. And I, they had a system of grading a child at the end of season, what marks you get, 1-2-3-4-5. 1 was the lowest, 2-3, 5 is the highest. The three and a half years I spent in school there before I left for the United States, I got a 5 in every one of 'em. I loved going to school, I have good friends, we used to kid around, play with each other. As a matter of fact, two years ago, when I'm back, went back to that road where I walked, used to walk to school, still the same. Hasn't changed in sixty years.

LEVINE: Wow.

BASIC: Still . . .

LEVINE: What did you play?

BASIC: Oh, you name it. To picking up a, piece of rock and see who could throw it furthest, what do you call it, we, we played s-sort of soccer. Games trying to, hide and seek, with our form of doing it. But we always respected each another. We always knew where someone was because, there were dangers there, even though you were, had a farm, you had, still had wild horses running, come out of nowhere. You also had, bears, that one time,

wintertime, we must have been hungry, came knocking at the door. My mother opened the door, she took, my God there was a bear, so she went to the fireplace, took the fire, and scared the hell out of him . . . that way. And then of course I went to school, until I went to the United States. My sister got married, St. Steven's Day, which is the day after Christmas. I celebrate, hey, I've been in this country for sixty-two years. I've yet to work on that day. That's my holiday. That's my name day. And I respect it and I continue doing it.

LEVINE: Now in Croatia you use name days . . .

BASIC: Ra-ra . . .

LEVINE: . . . rather than birthdays?

BASIC: More, more so than birthdays.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: St. Steven's day, part of Bas—, Steven. My father was Steven. I'm Steven. I got a son, Steven. My brother Joe—Mike has a son, Steven. My sister has a son, Steven. My brother Joe has a son, Steven, also. As the family . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: . . . goes on and on, and they continue to keep name. And how they recognize it, like they would say, "Steven Basic, son of Steven."

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: Not the full mother, but the father. Because that's the way it's written on the tax records or . . .

LEVINE: Right. . .

BASIC: . . . town records, that type of thing.

LEVINE: How about attitudes or ideas that your mother or father had about how you should live, what you should be like . . .

BASIC: Well . . .

LEVINE: . . . what you should do?

BASIC: My, my mother and father taught me one thing. The thing that they taught me is to always be honest. If you're going to do something in life, do it the way, g-good Lord meant for you to do it. If you're going to buy something in the store, you're having a hankering to buy it, don't put it in the house until you can pay for it completely at the time of purchase. And I followed that through all my lifetime. I've never bought, I've, anytime I bought a car, if I couldn't pay cash for it I would not buy it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: If I couldn't buy a fixture in the house the same way, refrigerator or things like this, if I couldn't afford then a vac-vacation, I wouldn't go on it.

LEVINE: Do you think that comes from the fact of, like being an immigrant? That you know . . .

BASIC: I think it comes from, because this was the custom of, of most European countries. That you do, that you don't go into something, I would think the majority of peo-, I don't say all of 'em, but I would think, they felt that way. Now I, I started the, I met a young fella by name of Johnny Salesha[sic]. He looks like Phil Rizzuto [New York Yankees ballplayer and broadcaster]. Here I started working for him, he was a young man in the curtain-drapery

business. And he said to me one day at lunch, he says, "Steve, how-how, how do you pay your bills?" So I tell him, "Pay the telephone, pay this, pay this." He says, "No, no, no, no, no. This way you gotta pay your bills. First you pay yourself first." I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "Take at least ten percent of your salary. Pay yourself, put it in, invest it." Invest it. And I did that. And thank the good Lord. I'm now seventy-one years old, by doing that I've been able to thank myself that I have a nice retirement.

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: And of course, one other thing, I lost my pension in 1980, my company went chapter 11. And what they did, they stole our pension trying to build up, business back up. And it was at the time, the, 1980 they, you can't do that anymore. They passed a law. But, this what happened in '76 and it, and, but that's yesterdays news.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: Hey, it wasn't meant to be.

LEVINE: Can't cry over spilled milk.

BASIC: S-see, she's on, what could you, what could you, what could you do about it? It's over and done. And if I have to go to work again, I's, I told you I started shining shoes, selling shopping bags. I wouldn't be ashamed to go right now on 261 Fifth Avenue, where I was known as one of the top salesmen in the drapery industry, and stand right outside and shine shoes to the guys coming out. 'Cause I'm not p-, I am not that proud that I'm gonna, and I refuse, I was sick in California for six and a half months. I did not go on wel-, what do you call that check that you? Unemployment. I refused to do it. Cause I do not want anything for nothing. Anything that I have in my life, including my house. I bought a house for my wife before I married her. She had a house to walk into.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: You understand what I'm saying? That's the way I am. Now, I don't say that everybody's like that. Paul is, is a little different than I am. We are, but we're so much alike in so many things, that we . . . you know what I'm saying?

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm. Tell me the part that your religion played when you were growing up in Croatia.

BASIC: Well, religion in Croatia was, we would go to mass every Sunday. I remember we used to have to go to Holy Communion and we used to get a, what do you call the sugar in the . . .

LEVINE: Wafer?

BASIC: Hard. Hard. The little . . . li-, li-, hard sugar, you hold it—it would melt in your hand if you carried it, so used to tie it in a handkerchief.

LEVINE: Oh, mint?

BASIC: Mint-like.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: So I would go to Holy Communion. We'd stay, all the kids would be, put, on the altar. We'd sit on there, go to communion, we'd come out and we'd have our . . . commu-, sugar, because you're not supposed, God forbid you spit out, you're spitting out the holy Eucharist. So that's the way we did, and God forbid you should miss mass. (pause) You'd get it not just from the priest, you'd get it from your mother, your fr-, and your friends. I mean this was the, and the event was, had some got out of mass, church, all the young

people, the teenagers and up, would start the di-dif-different kolo groups. Like the hora in Jewish. You know, the round dances.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And the Croatian Tamborica would start playing, the kids would start. It was the most f- . . . fantastic thing that I remember. That joy that we had, of people meeting people and, and the girls and boys walking, away or, you know, the growing up of life.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: It was there, you could see it. As far as seeing various things, we had animals, so we were not even told what to do when we were teenagers. We learned naturally . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: From seeing what was going on. I don't know if that's a good way of explaining, but that's, that's, that's really what happened.

LEVINE: I understand. So, were you then, was everybody you knew, in, in Croatia, Catholic?

BASIC: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: Ninety-nine percen—at the time I was there it was ninety-nine percent Catholic. Today it may be ninety.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: OK. And ten percent because a lot of new faiths, like, Seventh Day Adventists and the, they tried to come to my house. I'll give you an example. I went to do my family tree, with the Mormon Church. Up in Oradell. I walked in there, you, you's known me for a couple of days. You know I like to kid around.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: The first thing I said, I walked in, the lady in charge, I said, "Lady . . . I wanna tell you something before we go any further. First of all, I'm a Roman Catholic and I intend to stay that way. My mother and father were Roman Catholics. My grandfather was Roman Catholic, all the way back to the fifteenth century we were Roman Catholic, don't try to change me. Now let's get to busy work." Comes Christmas time, there were other kinds of people there, that were, I mean that came continuously. I'm the only one who brought a bottle of whi- of, of, what do you call it, whiskey?

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And . . . box of chocolates and cookies. And you know what the lady in charge said to me. She says, "Steve, I think I'll become a Catholic."

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: You understand what I'm saying? But that's the way I am.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: This is what I learned from, I wh-when, people who were in Europe under communism, I, the kind of family that I had. Mom and I, we weren't rich. She was making \$20-30 a month, at that time . . . cleaning an office. I was making thirty-five bucks in, in, in the drapery business as a clerk. But we never sent a letter to the old country without at least a dollar in it.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BASIC: So they would be able to buy something t-, or either in emergencies, to just to have it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: You know what I'm saying.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell some experience with your mother in Croatia, b-, where, between the time y-, up till you were nine.

BASIC: Well, I'll give you an example . . .

LEVINE: It gives it a . . .

BASIC: I'll . . .

LEVINE: . . . flavor of what . . .

BASIC: Yeah, I'll give you an example. I was in school and my mother went to Grospić, which was the main, next town over which is big, twice as big as where, the little village, the town that we live in. Now we didn't live in town, we lived on the farm outside of th-the city. So, I decided I'm going to wait at the bakery store where she would always stop where she got off the train from Grospić. Now this is a, I get outta school at four o'clock, it's already eight o'clock at night. No mom. So I says, "Boy I don't know if she's coming or not, I better start going." So I, this is my first trip at night by myself. It's wintertime.

LEVINE: How old are you here?

BASIC: I'm maybe eight. In the wintertime, and I'm going, across this field, the bridge that always, the gypsies u-used to steal the wood because every time we put the bridge, they had, they didn't want to go cut the wood, so they'd steal the wo-wood from the bridge. They had one left so, they make sure you didn't fall into the water. So as I'm walking in this wintertime, Mom is still up in Grospić, I'm going and going and I'm shaking. I'm scared. All of a sudden, my little dog shows up. I felt like a million bucks. So he and I are walking on the road home, and I look across the field there and I see a, a scarecrow. I says, "This is wintertime. What the hell is there?" In the summertime you have it because of the birds, right? I walk over, there's my brother, Mike. Frozen, it was so cold, he froze, he couldn't move. So I ran home, and, by that time I didn't realize my mother had gone the other way. She was home already. So she came back, and we got him into the house and we took out the, šljivovica, and started rubbing it all over him because it's got, it's made out of. . . plum brandy. Plums.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: So we put that on him and he came, and Mike survived everything. I mean he was in the Second World War. He was in charge of 105 howitzer gun. He's sitting there, five guys around him. They, bomb, drops there, all the five guys are killed, he's the only one alive. He didn't have a scratch on him, all the entire war. He was so blessed.

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: And he came home, I went to see him after my mother died, I went to go, sit in the car with him and go to Vancouver to see some cousins, relations, friends, that we knew. All over Canada, Boise, Idaho, places like that. He falls down, he's, he had a seven-acre f-f-, place. He had two horses in the back, got stuff in the morning to feed 'em, and they were so wet, he slid down, he broke his leg, (pause) or ankle, whatever it was. So he goes to the

hospital, first time in his life he was in the hospital. He's seventy (laughs) years old. And the doctor says, "Who set this?" He set his own leg in the car.

LEVINE: Oh, my gosh.

BASIC: I mean this is (laughs), and he, he just put a little thing tape on there to keep it going, in a couple of w-weeks he was brand new. So it's, now I mean, that's the way it was.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now did you say that your father came here before the rest of the family?

BASIC: Yes, my father came here twice. First . . .

LEVINE: When, when did he come first?

BASIC: 1923. He was coming here to see *his* father who was here already, and he, missed him by about ten days to two weeks.

LEVINE: Now, is his father, is your grandfather that you were talking about . . .

BASIC: Mike, yeah, Mike, Michael. The one who was the foreman . . .

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC . . . for Walsh Construction. Yes.

LEVINE: Ok, so your father came in '23 . . .

BASIC: Right.

LEVINE: . . . and what did he do while he was here?

BASIC: Worked hard, like-, construction work.

LEVINE: Under his own father.

BASIC: No.

LEVINE: No.

BASIC: No. His father had died, so when he came he got, there were Croatian people here from the same village, so he went to them, and that's how he got a job. My father worked for, w-when I came from Cro-, 1938, he was one of the workers who built the Lincoln Tunnel. He dug out the Lincoln Tunnel. They were called groundhogs. [Note: Correct term is "sandhogs."] He would get up at six in the morning and come home six at night, black as an ace of spades when he came home. For twenty dollars a week.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: And when we came here, we came to a two and a half room cold water flat. We had no hot water.

LEVINE: Well. When your father was here in 1923, he stayed how long?

BASIC: Five years.

LEVINE: And then he went back . . .

BASIC: And . . .

LEVINE: . . . and then you were born.

BASIC: Around 1928. Right.

LEVINE: And then he came again . . .

BASIC: No. That was it.

LEVINE: Oh, then he . . .

BASIC: He died here in this country. He's buried in Long Island.

LEVINE: Did he come back to this country with you?

BASIC: No, no, no, no. He was here when we came.

LEVINE: OK, so after you were born . . .

BASIC: Right.

LEVINE: . . . he came back?

BASIC: He-he, went back, v- . . .

LEVINE: Before you were born.

BASIC: He-he-he came back, there in '27 for Christmas. And after New Year, '28, he went back.

LEVINE: I see. And then he was here when you . . .

BASIC: He was here when I came, and when I saw him, he was tall, dark, and, and, I said, "My God, who's that ugly man." First time I ever seen my . . . my mother says, "That's your father." So, (laughs) what can I tell you.

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: And mom was kept on the island here for five days be--

LEVINE: OK, well, first just tell me how come you, when you came here, who did you come here with?

BASIC: My mother.

LEVINE: Just your mother. OK. Were you an only child?

BASIC: No, I was the youngest.

LEVINE: You were the youngest of how many?

BASIC: My si—Four. My sister got married, my brother Joe, he wound up coming, but my mother wanted him to stay on the land, and my brother Mike was, an apprentice, you know when you send away to the different family to learn the trade.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: Well that's what he was doing at the time, when . . .

LEVINE: Where did, what did he do, what did he . . .

BASIC: Well, he was tins-, he was learning to be a tinsmith, in Slavonia, which is, a north . . . eastern part of Croatia, which could feed all of Europe with the land that it's got.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: It's got the most fertile, gr-, wonderful Reisling grapes to make wine.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

- BASIC: And, my gran-, my father's sister still lives there . . . in that area.
- LEVINE: Just before we leave, talking about Croatia, what about gypsies? Do you have . . .
- BASIC: What, Cigani?
- LEVINE: . . . any experiences?
- BASIC: We called 'em Cigani. C-
- LEVINE: How do you spell that?
- BASIC: C-I-G-A-N-I. The way it's pronounced, Cigani, that's the way it's, most Croatian words, like if you wanna hear a word, Beba. How would you spell that, if I gave it to you word? B. Beba. B-E-B-A. That's the way.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- BASIC: It's so easy to learn . . .
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.
- BASIC: . . . the Croatian language. We had gypsies on our land. My mother allowed them to, they built a shack and they stayed on the land. My mother was godmother to some of their children, so, they wouldn't steal from us. She did that because, you see she was a, what they called an American widow. The husband was in America and she was alone by herself. And my mother always got to the point that the neighbors were getting to be pain in the rump. She went and got a gun, and if anyone would come close she, couple a times they, they steer clear. But my mother was a politician.
- LEVINE: Did she have to work when your father was here?

BASIC: Oh, sure, who do you think who c-ca, ho-how do you think we liv-lived? We had to plant corn, we had potatoes, the, she planted the plum trees for the šljivovica, for, to make the brandy. She slowly slaughter, what do you call, pig for the, and we dried the food in a, in a house with heat. What do you call those? Where you dry . . .

LEVINE: Smoke house?

BASIC: Smoke house. We had one of those and by the way I'll tell you a little story. I'm a little baby sittin' in a tree, by the tree, one or two years old, you know how kids are, right? And I fall asleep there, by the tree, and a snake came around, and around and wrapped herself on my neck, around my neck. And I had this cat, who I fed, like I, like I did with myself. She came over and grabbed her by the head and pulled it off me. Well, you know how you boil the milk, you know the cream comes, rises to the top? I used to give that to the cat. That cat was, do you know where, if I could walk into your house if you had a cat, that cat will come to me, cause they smell me, they know (tapping the table) that I love cats.

LEVINE: Yes, uh-huh.

BASIC: My, daughter's in-laws, they had a cat for twenty years, she wouldn't go to anybody. Christmastime, came into the house, she jumped right on my lap. The guy says, "I don't believe this. I don't believe it." I said, "Cats like me. Dogs don't."

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: So that's, that's another thing.

LEVINE: Yeah, so, so why did your mother and you and your mother, come here. . .

BASIC: Because . . .

LEVINE: . . . when you did.

BASIC: Because it got to the point that, the kids couldn't go to school wa-, like my brother Joe, was stuck with the public school, that was it. My brother Mike, he was, it cost a lot of money to send him to scho-, to this trade school, to learn the tinsmith. My sister got married, rather young, seventeen, when she shouldn't have. She wanted to see the life a little more. By the way, she saved her life, where Paul lives down in the city of Senj, S-E-N-J, that area, 1937. A group of Croatian young men, it was a holiday, they decided to go down to Senj, in, in a horse and wagon, I think there was about ten horse and wagons. And they decide to go down to Senj to, and then to celebrate as, on their way home, the Yugoslav gendarmes open up fire, killed seven of 'em. Two of my cousins were killed, my sister was supposed to be on that, trip, she missed it by half an hour because she didn't get there on time. And when I saw that funeral in 1937, and what they did, they, they cut the, the t-temple of a girl with, from by machine gun fire. The only crime they did was to sing a Croatian song. That was the only crime that they committed. This is 1937.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: And people say to me, "Why are you such a Croatian all these years?" I mean, I've been here, I was nine and a half when I left it, right? "Why are you so much for Croatia?" Well I remember an old man that I met from my area. He was put in jail in 1940 because, Croatians were on the side of the Fascists, Hitler.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And they declared war, s-, on the United States. So he was in charge of one of our Croatian clubs. He was put in jail. So he comes up before the judge and speaks broken English. So he says, "Anthony, why are you so much for

your Croatia?” So he says, “Judge, I’m going to say it, maybe you understand it, maybe you don’t, but I think you will.” He says, “Croatia is my mother. America is my wife. I can always change my wife, but I can never change my mother.” Nicely said, without hurting anybody. You understand what I’m saying? I mean, I have been fighting for Croatia, to the point, that I, I could have gone back to Croatia in ’45 because I speak English fairly well I would think.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: I could get away with it. But when I saw, if I saw that, thing that killed twenty of my family in that war, I’d go bananas. So I didn’t go. And I waited until the, (tapping the table) Croatia became on the map, the world map, Croatia . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: That’s when I went back, two years ago. And I went back to the places where I went to school, as I said to you, privately before, I couldn’t see all my land because the Serbs had left all the land mines on my property. Not, all of the people in that area, but the people that they knew were Croatian. One hundred. They knew, they knew everything. They had everything in lists-, and then recently a friend of mine, a cousin, distant cousin, went to, my hometown. He’s reading a book, he comes upon a list. And it’s a list by village, by village of that area where we come from, Perušić. Who got killed and when and where. I look at my village, the third name on the list is my brother Joe. You should see, I-I mean, you should see, I-I, I feel, I didn’t feel . . . like . . . I, I was sick. I mean, I didn’t know. Even after all these years, it’s sick. But I still don’t know where his grave is. You know what I’m saying?

LEVINE: Hmmm. Hmmm. Why do you think, can you say what it is about the Serbs and the Croatians that . . .

BASIC: The Serbs want. . .

LEVINE: . . . kee-keep it . . .

BASIC: The Serbs are a people, if they, I met a lot of Serbs, I know a lot of Serbs. The Serb that lives in Serbia, I give 'em one thousand percent credit. I have nothing against them. But the Serb that comes to my country, Croatia, and takes over, all the police in Perušić, where I was born, 1938, were not Croatian. They were Serbs.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: OK. They come over, if they bought a property, you live in Manhattan, lower eas-, downtown.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: South Street. What's the next street over, give me a, or, if they, if they move next door to you. South Street is Manhattan, New York City, good old USA, correct. If they moved in, it would be South Street, Belgrade, Serbia. In other words, they seem to want to take things that don't belong to 'em. Perfect example, you've heard of Nikola Tesla, have you not?

LEVINE: Um, hmm.

BASIC: Tesla was a genius, in, Edison, he created the electric generator so electricity could flow. He was born in the, village of Smiljan. S-M-I-L-J-A-N. Seven kilometers from my hometown. Elizabeth, Bentley, Elizabeth Dailies Bentley [Reference to: Helen Delich Bentley, b.1923], who was a congresswoman [1985-1995] from (tapping on the table) from Baltimore, Maryland, brought out a statement about Tesla that he was born in Smiljan, Cr-Serbia. In the United States Congress. Now what do you do about this? Who do you see?

I mean, why should we have, I mean, today even the Croatian language, the Croatian language is written as Serbo-Croatian. Not Croatian. There's no such thing as Serbo-Croatian. Do you, if I wrote to you right now, Steve in Serbian, and I write it in Croatian, yo-you tell me the truth if it's the same thing. (Long pause as he writes.) Take a look. Now you tell me if it's the same language.

LEVINE: Hmmm, no.

BASIC: I mean what are we trying to prove.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And we seem to be like the scapegoats. They forgave Hitler and Germans for what they did in the war. With o-open trade and all this. But we were the last people in the Europe to get, and when we did get our, you know what President, President Bush said when, when this war started?

LEVINE: Uh-uh.

BASIC: He said, "We are interested in keeping the borders of Yugoslavia the way they are." That was his answer to the, to the war that broke out in, in '91. I mean, you go down the line, I-I really don't know what to say anymore. I mean, I-I, it's given me a different perspective on a lot of things.

LEVINE: How do you mean?

BASIC: Well, I mean I, did I've learned, I used to trust people. I used to take 'em at their word. I did a deal with a, who was a Congressman at the time, now Sena-Senator [Robert] Torricelli from New Jersey. [U.S. Representative 1983-1997, U.S. Senator 1997-2003] I went to a meeting, w-w- all of us Croatians when the war started, what we could do to help.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: That was the point of the thing. You all help me, whatever you want I, but he forgot one thing, you see I went there with a tape recorder and I recorded everything he said. And he said in three weeks w-we'll, we'll get together and we'll do it. It took three and a half months to get it t-together. And when we did get back together three weeks later, he said something completely different, what he said that time. So I got up, I said, "Senator," or "Congressman" at the time, I said, "Congressman Torricelli, would you like to hear what you said." He walked out of the room. OK.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: So I learned, you know, if you don't do it yourself, basically it doesn't get done. I've learned also that a lot of people don't really care about what your problem is. Just like lot of people don't care about the Jewish problem. I understand it fully, because I lived that kind of life, in the s-old country. Because there are people out there that just are takers, takers completely. I'm a giver. You need anything, God forbid you should, hey, you got my home address, give me a call, if I can help you, I'm there. You, even when you, we got together the other day, what, you didn't believe I was going to call you back, did you? But I did call you. And you know what I said to you, I said, "I will call you." I, I could not go back on my word because it would be a slap in my face. You understand what I'm saying?

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: I don't know if that's a good way of explaining it or not.

LEVINE: Yes, that's a good way.

BASIC: But just to get back, I just want to tell you one thing.

LEVINE: Yes.

BASIC: When I started work in this country, I came nine and a half years old, they put me next to a girl who was half Croatian, half Slovenia—Slovak. And she, Mary . . . Brajaca. B-R-A, B-R-A-J-A-C-A. Father was Croatian, mother was Slovak. And I learned through her, I picked up the language. When, this was '38, Ma-May of '38. In January of '43, I graduated public school. I got the top honors of any kid in that class. There was five of us. There was a Japane-Jap—Chinese boy, a Greek boy, Italian boy, and myself, four. George Bailous[sic] was the Greek, Ben Chin[sic] was the Chinaman, Hidalo[sic] Blondie[sic] was Italian, and Steve Basic was Croatian. We got all the medals in that class. Not one American-born had over 80 average. We all had 99.9. And we all came from Europe.

LEVINE: What do you, what do you think, yeah, what do you think it is about? You think it's the . . .

BASIC: It's the drive, it's the drive to become better than you are because you have lived so damn long, that you wanna build, yourself up. It's the human nature driving, it should be in everybody. It should be in anybody, any race, I mean. You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And then we went to h-high school, I went to Straubenmuller Textile High [School, New York City]. I took up buying and selling, I didn't know what else to take because, that's what I took. And then I got sick. I-I had, what do you call these glands in the throat here.

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: And I was out of school for almost five months. Came back, I picked, I asked the teacher to, I says, "I'd like all the lessons that I missed." And I had it up

to here. One month I came back, I-I had, I was one of the top students when we graduated. It took me a month to do it because I set my mind to it. And also to help my mother and father, I went to, to, to the doctor, told him I didn't feel too good and, this was kidding around. It wasn't true, basically. I was, was fit as a fiddle. But I made him say that I, cause of the glands I couldn't work. So I got out of school at tw-, I'd go in at eight o'clock in the morning, I'd get out at twelve o'clock. Then I'd go work as a part-timer in a book bindery, as a delivery, part time, making sixty bucks a week after high school in 1943, when the war was on. I used to make, I made more money than my father did. But you know something, I never went to school, that I didn't stay at night and finish my homework. Not once. If I, was three o'clock in the morning, I was still there and I had this buddy, who is still my buddy to this day, Tannonberg[sic], by name of Nello Orlandy [sic]. Nello and I went to public school together, went to the same school together, high school. And his idea, he would go out and play ball, and next morning Steve Basic would bring in the homework and he'd take it and copy it. So one morning, I guess a couple of times, I didn't feel so good, I said, "I'm not giving it to you." You know he quit school the next day. And he went to work for Marcato Elevator Company, he's got a better (laughs) pension than I do today. (laughing) So you tell me, what's the truth?

LEVINE: Yeah. (laughing)

BASIC: You know what I'm saying. (laughing)

LEVINE: OK, all right. Let's go back to coming here.

BASIC: Yeah.

LEVINE: You and your mother.

BASIC: Right

LEVINE: Right. Remember leaving Croatia . . .

BASIC: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . what was it like?

BASIC: It was . . .

LEVINE: . . . saying goodbye and . . .

BASIC: To me, I was, happiest kid in the world because I was going to America, c-cause I heard so many stories.

LEVINE: What did you hear? What did you, think you were gonna . . .

BASIC: I heard it's a, it was like Hollywood, it was like, *Alice in Wonderland*, it was, it was a musical like, *Rose Marie* with Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy. Happy. And I was going to see my father for the first time also, that was another thing. And the sadness was, when my brother Joe, who got, the one that we don't know about, he, he was holding onto the train, and he was cursing my mother out, he says, "I'll never see you again as long as I," no truer words were said.

LEVINE: Hmmm.

BASIC: And we got here and, and th-, it was a joy of something new. And then we got to Paris, France, this is beautiful. We get there, we're supposed to take the French Line, they, I don't know if I told you they had three boats. They had the *Lafayette*, which was on fire. Burned, couldn't go. *Champlain* was on strike, and they had the *Paris*, which was the smallest ship in the French line. It took fifteen days to cross.

LEVINE: Wait, I thought you went on the *Normandie*?

BASIC: Well, let me tell you.

LEVINE: Oh, oh. Sorry.

BASIC: *Paris* which was, so they said, “Do you want to go on the *Paris* or wait here a week and take the, *Normandie* and be there in five days?” We said, we’d stay in Le Havre for five days, for a week to ten days and, and we’ll take the *Normandie*. So the lady that was working for the French Line in the kitchen, fell in love with me, she wanted to buy me from my mother, and she took me all over Le-, . . . area to show me various things. And my mother got scared one day, but she brought me back.

LEVINE: You mean literally she wanted to buy you?

BASIC: She wanted to buy me. She could . . .

LEVINE: She wanted to give your mother money?

BASIC: My mother, she wanted to give my mother money to buy me.

LEVINE: Wow.

BASIC: So took me on to Loire, where the famous wine is made by the priests, the B& B, Benedictine, things like that and we, and I re-, and what I remember as a child, the beautiful sce-countryside, the buses going very fast, you know how buses go.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And there’s a guy on a bicycle passing him. By ru-, I mean, I could just see those two bicyclists going past us. I said, “What kind of bicycles do they have?” And the thing that surprised me the most is, when I got here to the

United States, I went to the movies. First time in my life, I had never been to a movie. And what I saw was a western. And the guy is shooting like this, and I'm ducking.

LEVINE: (laughs)

BASIC: And I got to be a movie buff to the point that today, you wanna know anything about American westerns, I could tell you the history of practically everyone of 'em.

LEVINE: Do you think those, movies that you saw when you first came here and you were so impressionable, and liked them so much, do you thin-, do you think they have had an effect on you and the way you see . . .

BASIC: Oh, yes, very much so.

LEVINE: In what way?

BASIC: Very much so, as a matter of fact, I would look and see that the, the old western, the guy with the white hat was a good guy, and the guy with the black hat was a bad guy. And, there was always some problem that was ironed out, not by murder, but by resolve. You understand what I'm saying. I mean, Mom and I, and my brother Mike, one time in '41 I guess, it was wintertime like crazy. Snow's ten feet, inches in Manhattan, in Hell's Kitchen. So we lived on 50<sup>th</sup> Street, so the movie was on where the Port Authority is, o-, the old Arena was, the Arena was the name of the theater. And we walked down there, we went to see a movie with George Houston [1896-1944], born in Flemington [Note: actually Hampton] New Jersey, baritone singer, who was The Lone Rider of the plains. And we went to see this because of George Houston. And we both, we came out of the movie happy and it's snowing like crazy, we didn't mind it a bit because the three of us went out and had a good time.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: For lousy thirty cents, that was, entrance to the movie at the time. Ten cents each.

LEVINE: Wow. OK, so, after you were in Le Havre and you finally got . . .

BASIC: On the boat.

LEVINE: . . . ship, the . . .

BASIC: The one thing I really, the one thing I really remember about the *Normandie* ship, was we were in the middle of the ocean, and I, because I was young that the impression was so, but the waves, when we were in the middle of the ocean, the waves I said, "Oh, my God," I says, "If we blow over, we've, we had it." And the waves came up to the third deck.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And I remember running from one side to the other and one thing that I did also, was u-use the elevator. I had never used an elevator in my life. I would go up and down in the elevator.

LEVINE: On the ship?

BASIC: On the ship. And one time, I'll never remember , I remember seeing a white man with a black woman. I had never seen a black woman in my life. Never, I didn't even know that they existed. And I saw, I said, I went back to my mother, I said, "How did she get so black? Did she stay in the sun all day or what?" I didn't, that was the answer, (laughing) and my mother didn't know either because she never read, didn't know how to read or write. She'd never knew about them either. I mean who's going to talk about Africa in, you know, on a farm in, in the old country.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

BASIC: I remember those two things vividly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Do you remember when the *Normandie* came into the New York Harbor?

BASIC: I remember docking, I remember coming, seeing the, when they said, "There's the land." I ran to the top deck, I saw the Statue of Liberty, I saw the h-, New York Harbor.

LEVINE: Did you know what the Statue of Liberty was?

BASIC: Yes. I's, as a matter of fact speaking about that, when I got here, I met a girl by the name of Helen. And I said to Helen, she was Croatian. I said to her, "Helen," born here though, I says, "What's the capital of Montana?" She says, "Wyoming." I says, "You idiot, it's Helena, like your first name." We knew in Europe, we knew the capital of every state in the United States before we came here.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: We took on foreign, pro-projects. Where here . . .

LEVINE: Whereas here, the people wouldn't know them . . .

BASIC: They didn't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So, so you saw the Statue of Liberty and you knew what it was.

BASIC: Oh yeah, I knew what it was. I knew because we heard about it in the old country. Because they had, especially on America, they would feature certain things, certain parts of history we would learn in the old country about the United States. Because America was number one on the list for everyone in, in that part of the country. Because we could not, we were our own, we were born Croatians, but we could not exercise our rights to be printers, grocery store owners, writers. We had to leave the country because that was the only way we could survive—and the women that were left, single girls, if they didn't marry, by the age of eighteen, nineteen, they married a Serb, if they didn't have a Croatian. Inter-married. That's what they were trying to do. By marriages.

LEVINE: Why, why would they not marry Croatian after . . .

BASIC: There wasn't anymore, because a majority of the young men left the country.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: Like they went to America or Canada. Argentina was a big country that they went to. South America, a lot of the g-, like my wife's two uncles, they, they went down to South America. I'll give you an example, I got a friend up in Albany, New York. A little town called Selkirk. Her name is Župan. Župan. She came here when she was sixteen years-years old, married a guy that was fifteen years older than her, Nick Župan. She had two brothers that she had never seen. They had gone to America before she was born. They lived in Granite City, Illinois. In all the years, that she's been here, now she's ninety years old, they both died, she never saw 'em. And I asked her, I just happen to be up there a couple months ago, and I said, "Teta Anka," which is aunt, I says, "How come you..." She says, "It got to the point that I was too busy r-raising a family here, my husband got hurt, which he did on the job, broke his arm, and he started a new business, he had to do this, he had to do this, and we never, never got to it and, and every time you want to do it, something else came up." So can you imagine, having two brothers, a- , that you never

even saw. And this is, this is typical. I mean, like my two gr-grandparents, I never saw 'em. My two grandmothers, I don't remember because my first, my father's mother died early, my mother's mother died when I was about two years old. I don't remember, if I say, I'm sure she saw me. And, I just saw my aunt, my brother's, my father's sister. She left my town when she, when I was a year old. So when she saw me, Oh, God, it was like, it was like my mother came from the grave.

LEVINE: Aww, aw.

BASIC: You know what she said to my brother Mike? And Mike is taller than I am. So, she says, Mike, in Croatian, she says, "Mike," she says, "you're not doing any, why don't you get the stepladder, climb that tree and get some of those fresh cherries for, for little Stevie here."

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: (laughing) And Mike kept saying, "But I'm Mike, I'm Mike." "Yeah," she says, "But your big, Mike." Joking around, this is it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: And we had a th-, saying, we had a mem-, family member, from another part of the family who moved to Boise, Idaho. And when he was in the old country, they would call him, Iv-, his name is John, Ivan. And they would call him Ičina. That was a nickname. Ičina, w-what'd you have for breakfast? Krizaka, which is a . . . crossed, muffin-like. Made in . . .

LEVINE: Hot cross buns? No.

BASIC: Buns. Like buns with a c-cross. "What'd ya have for lunch?" For, for breakfast he had Krizaka. "What'd ya have for lunch?" Krizak-Krika-Kriklj-

kaza-. He added a couple syllables to it. Then he says, “What’d you have for supper?” “Isti vragovi.” Same devil. In Croatian, it’s funny.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

BASIC: Yeah, jus-reason I said this, see, to show you how translations can sometimes lose what they were intended to say.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh.

BASIC: You know what I mean?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: Like, I, w-, the cousin that just died in Cleveland, b-by marriage. When his father-mother came to Staten Island, I mean to Ellis Island, their name was Malon, M-A-L-O-N, which is Russian. It’s a Russian name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: When they got to, off the banana boat, (laughing) off the island, it was Maloni.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

BASIC: And he died as a Maloni. He never changed it, because majority of people, they thought when, when they got their official documents, Ma-Maloni, they have to go, they would be in trouble if they used any other name.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So tell me about you, coming to Ellis Island. What was your impression . . .

BASIC: Oh, they treated me like a million bucks. They had an agent here who spoke Croatian beautifully. They took my mother away because she didn't feel well for five days, and I stayed for two.

LEVINE: Did you, did you, know where your mother was going? Was it . . .

BASIC: Well, he told me, I didn't know till they, till, till the agent told me, he says, came over to me and says, "Steve, don't worry about it. Your mother is going to see the doctor. She's going to be sleeping there for a couple of days. They're going to take tests and you'll be here." And besides," he says, "your father will be here tomorrow. He'll take you home."

LEVINE: Now what was wrong with your mother?

BASIC: Well, mom was, just on the side of cancer.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: And they checked her out and she, they, it wasn't that far gone, but she, thank God she found a fantastic Jewish doctor. Doctor . . . Schwartzfop[sic]. He took her, and he, on the operating table in 1938 and she came home and caught it in time. And she was, she was forever grateful, what she did for Lodge, she did for Dr. Schwartzfop[sic] up until the day he died. She was like family, we were like family. He was up on Nelson Avenue, up in the Bronx, and I used to take her up there. And when I had these glands, the, getting back to my thing, I went to Dr. Schwartzkfp[sic] an-and he says, "Steve, I'll take care of you," he says, "What you gotta do is come and see me every day for twenty-one days. Now I'm gonna give you a new, medicine that they just brought out in the government. It was penicillin." And he treated me that way and it cleared up, because I was ashamed to go, within, young crowd(?). You know how you are, fourteen years old, you're trying to make an impression, and somebody in you, got the glands and you're outta whack, things like that. And that's, he's the one who helped me.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: And Mom kept in touch with him until the day he died.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: My mother.

LEVINE: Hmm. Hmm.

BASIC: She was, you would have loved my mother.

LEVINE: Yeah. She sounds (laughs), she sounds good.

BASIC: Cause . . .

LEVINE: Wait, wa, now if you were Croatian at the time of World War II . . .

BASIC: Oh yeah, I'll tell . . .

LEVINE: . . . you were really, allied with Germany.

BASIC: Exactly.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: The reason we did this . . .

LEVINE: Were you anti-Semitic?

BASIC: No. None, whatsoever. As a matter of fact . . .

LEVINE: How did that, how could that be though?

BASIC: Very easily. I'll tell you why. We would have gone with the devil just to get away from the Serb. That was it, you gotta understand that.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: So we took the easy way out with the Germany. We were a free nation amongst the so-called Fascist states. We did what we, the Croatian army never left their borders. They protected their homeland. They never went across the border into Serbia. OK. To understand why, Croatians were not anti-Semitic, just one little story. Ante Pavilić, Dr. Ante Pavilić who was the Croatian leader, was married to a Croatian Jew.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: From Zagreb. They had three children, two girls and a boy. Now if he was married to a Jew, does it make any sense that he would be anti-Semitic, that he would kill people? You see, if you want to know something about Croatia, just go to Washington and listen to the tape recording that the old administration from Belgrade is still issuing out. Of lies, how, when the lies are, that the Croatians killed millions of gypsies, Serbs, and Jews.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: That's the, same since 1945. Continuously. And what, I, w-, I'm in this country, when I became twenty years old-, twenty-one years old, I became an American citizen. I went out for the papers. And they would, they denied me my right to put my nationality, on my paper. So I told the judge who gave me the paper, and I said, "I'm taking this under duress. I am not accepting this as a true American." To this day, it's that way. So when they, Croatia became free, they had put originally Yugoslavia and I went back to that guy, I says,

“Get that dirty name off my paper or I going to rip it, burn it right here.” On my passport, it says Croatia. One thousand percent.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: Now you might say, “Why do I feel like this?” Cause I’ve seen the sufferings of people that came here. Paul came here without a dime. It was me, guy like, not there were not many guys like me who took guys into their house, I went out and got him a job.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BASIC: I went look-, I had this Polish friend that we grew up together. When he got outta high school, he-he had a bad operation when he was a kid, so he was a little backward. He was afraid to go and look for a job. I went on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, right on, where the, you get out of the Lincoln Tunnel, there was building there, with, I went from the top floor down to the bottom. There was five floors, on the third floor I found him a job, as a delivery boy. That’s the way we were.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: We, I mean we were go-getters. I mean, if I didn’t, if I didn’t have a buck for the movie, j-, wha-, Henry had it. And if Henry didn’t have it, Aldo had it, or Nello, or Frankie. I mean this, we were like brothers. And to this day, we’re still like brothers.

LEVINE: Now, you’re not talking simply of, of Croatians.

BASIC: No, no. I have, I have a friends, all kinds of, I, I gotta friend Harry Bergen. Calls me for every Christmas, “Merry Christmas to you.” I mean I got, I got a friend of mine, that I used to sell, when I was in the drapery business. I traveled the entire southeast. There is a tremendous amount of Jewish bus-

business owners throughout the entire southeast. Tremendous amount, in this, in the Shmatta rag business, textiles. I get to be friends, I, I lost one, give you an example, Clinton, South Carolina. It's a, it's a Saturday night, I'm, I'm going to the carnival and the p-(?) game. In a half an hour I lost a thousand dollars. That's all the money I had. And if I call my mother, she's, gonna to kill me. So I call up Izzy Bernstein[sic]. His, his real name Israel, they called him Izzy. I tell him, I said, "I got robbed." I didn't want to tell him what, what happened. "Steve, how much you need?" I said, "A thousand dollars." He, he sends it by Western Union, I get the check, I call, I tell him, I says, "When I get back, I'll t-." So I get back there. After two months traveling throughout the South, I come back to Norfolk, and I tell him what happened. He says to me, "Steve, you do this one more time, don't ever come into my place again," he says. And this is my biggest account I had in the Southeast. Best one. "You don't do that again." He cured me of it. OK.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: And to this day, hey, when we see each other, like long lost brothers. I mean, I have all kinds of friends. I had a guy by name of Her-, Herman S. Dansik. We c-, we called him Hi. Everyone thought he was a nut. Everybody thought he was nut. He was a nervous wreck. He was working, Oh-, Cleveland, Ohio-Indiana territory, so they transferred him to my territory. So he comes over, comes over and says, "Hi, I'm Dansik." "Oh, yeah, I know who you are, I'm Steve". He was, basically, feeling me out if I would help him. So I says, "You know, I'm . . ." He says, "When you going south?" I says, "I'm going June 6<sup>th</sup>." He says, "We'll meet here and here, we'll, just follow me. We'll get to town, we'll spend the night together in the hotel." Then I would talk to him. I say, "Look, Hi. This is what I sell." I gave him a list of every one, account I had. "You walk in there and you tell him that you're my friend." He got orders in everyone, in every place I went. And the guys came to me, when I came through later myself, they say, "Thank you for sending us customer, he's got some fanta-, I, why did I send him?" I send him, to help him out number one, but also he had a good product.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: And I knew that he wouldn't hurt the people that I was selling.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: Like, the, like the Millan Shops. I don't know if you've ever heard of the Millan Shops? It's a chain of families[sic] that started in New Haven, Connecticut. They have managers all over the United States. When these guys would come into New York, they wouldn't come and ask for the, their salesmen, who majority of them were Jewish. They'd ask for Steve Basic, the Croatian guy. Why? Because they knew that Steve Basic would give them (tapping the table) the patterns that they would sell.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And that's the reason for that business, is basically, is you don't want to sell them something that's not gonna turn over.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: You wanna make sure th-,that, the that, material that you sold 'em, will turn over four-, four, five, six, seven, eight times.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And when you do that, you make mo-, you make a profit. And that was the name of the business. Hey, how to make a buck.

LEVINE: (laughing) Right.

BASIC: Exactly.

LEVINE: OK, we're going to pause here, I want to change the tape.

END OF TAPE ONE.

LEVINE: OK, we're continuing here with tape two, and I'm speaking with Steve Basic. OK. Let's, let's just, follow through here. Is there anything else about Ellis Island, Steve, that you can remember . . .

BASIC: The food was good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: The sleeping quarters were clean. The people were nice, they made you feel at home.

LEVINE: Wha-, how many pe-, was it very crowded? Was . . .

BASIC: Yes.

LEVINE: And, and, what other, did you see people who were either detained here or . . .

BASIC: Well I didn't know, if, what if, what detainment meant. I really didn't know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: But I did see people that I saw on the boat. Now, I, g-, don't understand my father bought us a ticket that had a private room. We didn't share it with anybody.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: How we got to Ellis Island, I don't know. Maybe it was the, the, class we were in, because they started with the top deck all the way down. We were almost down with sea level, in the room that we had.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: So I, when I would look out the window, I could see the water, and when the wave would come, you couldn't, make sure it was closed.

LEVINE: Yeah. And, tell me about meeting your father.

BASIC: Well, we got to first time I saw him was when we got up to the, what do you call, the 49<sup>th</sup> Street French Line dock on 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And my mother was standing there. We didn't get to Ellis Island yet. We were . . . we docked in.  
..

LEVINE: Oh, before Ellis Island.

BASIC: They didn't take us out yet till we got to the dock. So my mother is looking around and says, "There's your father." I look and there's a man with a b-, hat on. And my father was a distinguished looking, as a matter of fact I brought a picture, I wanted to show you what he looked like.

LEVINE: Oh, um-hmm.

BASIC: My father was a good-looking man, but he was strange to me because I had grown up with one parent. It was hard for me to acclimate myself to him and I think the same thing for him to take on a child that he never saw. And of course, he had different ideas, he hated movies. He would rather go visit his cousin John, cousin Martin, or cousin Joe. That was more important to him than to go to a movie. As a matter of fact, we took him to a movie one time in the old Capital Theater on 50<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway, and he says in mi-,

five minutes into the movie, he says, "I gotta go to the bathroom." We're sitting there, hours pass by, he's gone, he's home. (laughing) He didn't say goodbye or nothing.

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: So that's the, but we got to know each other pretty well, as a matter of fact when my father had this, he got hurt on the job, they were expanding the subway system in New York . . .

LEVINE: So he worked building the Lincoln Tunnel, but that was before.

BASIC: He was, right.

LEVINE: And the-, when you came, what was he doing?

BASIC: He, well wh-, he was working for, construct-construction work. And then the war broke out, he went to work in a Brooklyn Navy Yard.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: He worked on, on the, what was it, the *Ari-*, what was the big, *Arizona* was it, the big battleship? He did that, and then he started, after the war, working the subway, doing the, same union. Same work. And, the rocks fell on him. He, they were expanding here. And he was sitting for coffee and the rocks came tumbling down, he jumped and pushed three black men to safety. As a result, he got, broke his hip . . . and his stomach went this high.

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: Blew up completely. But he was sick, after that. And then he went to operation, and he died on the operating table and I had to, I went to the hospital, up on 50<sup>th</sup> Street and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, I forget the name of it. Polyclinic,

I think. So I walked in and they, I said, “Wh-where’s my father?” And the doctor says, “He’s deceased.” And I didn’t know what the word meant.

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: I really didn’t know. So I says, “What does that mean?” And when I said that to him, he-, he was sort a, uneasily said, “Well, he’s dead.” And it was a very cold, eerie feeling went through me. So he was fifty-two years old. I called my mother up and she came down, and that. Hey, what can I tell you.

LEVINE: Wh-, how old were you then?

BASIC: Nineteen . . . forty-eight, I was, going in my twenty-eighth[sic] year.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And because of that I was gonna go to college, but when he got hurt, I felt it was my responsibility to join in to support the family.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: So when he died, I made a vow on his deathbed, that as long as I’m alive, his wife, my mother, would never be in need of anything as long as I’m alive.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And I kept that promise, till the last minute of her life.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm.

BASIC: Yeah. And many people would say, “How can you have two women in the house?” Wife and a mother. Not her mother, but yours. It wasn’t easy. I came one time from a, trip up to Buffalo, in New York. I hit a snowstorm, it

took me thirty-six hours to get home, from Buffalo to my house. Got in the house, the two of 'em were at each other's throat, my mother and my wife. And I walk in, I'm tired, I'm, I need a shower, I need sleep, I need a good shot of šljivovica (laughs) to fall asleep. And the two of 'em are arguing, so I didn't say nothing, I just took out the keys to the house and the car. I said, "Girls, you want to argue, here's the keys to the house, I'm leaving. Bye-bye." When I said that, that was the end of that. If they ever argued afterwards (laughs), I never, I never saw it.

LEVINE: Never heard.

BASIC: Never saw it.

LEVINE: Ah, ha.

BASIC: So that's the way I handled that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

BASIC: I don't know if it was proper or not, but that's the . . .

LEVINE: It worked.

BASIC: It worked.

LEVINE: (laughing) Right. Right.

BASIC: That's the important thing.

LEVINE: Ok, so, now let's, let's see. So, where did you go, when you . . . went from Ellis Island?

BASIC: We went to, my father had a two and a half room, cold water flat at 602 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan. No heat, no nothing. And, it was a basically a liv-, a bedroom. You walked in, was a s-, kitchen. You walked, next room was, there was no doors. Like a railroad thing. Bedroom of my mother and father, and there was, like a living room, which they had a couch and I slept on the couch, they slept in the bed. If you wanted to go to the bathroom up, pardon me for being, you had to go out in the hallway, you shared it with the next neighbor, who you didn't even know. But we, it was still better life in a sense, than any place else. And, we were happy.

LEVINE: Do you remember any things in this country, in New York that struck you early on, that was so n-new and different. . .

BASIC: Well, the, the, the amount of streetcars, the amount of r-, they had streetcars in those days, they had overhead elevated trains. I learned ice hockey. And we played roller hockey as children, and I got to be such a fanatic at it that to this day, I am still a Ranger fan, and I lost, keep telling people when they say, "Where, where'd you lose your hair?" When the Rangers won the cup in '40, (laughing) and all these years in between. The sporting events I, enjoyed. I enjoyed the food, the ice cream, which I didn't have. Slado led[sic], we used to call ice cream. Well, maybe once a year, I could buy it every day. And, and I remember going shining shoes, selling shopping bags, whatever, I would go out, after school. Shine shoes in a bar, and I used to have a Croatian cap on, with a Croatian Coat of Arms, and, there was about seven or eight Croatian-owned bars on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Hell's Kitchen. They would keep all the other kids of different nationalities out, till I showed up. And I was shining shoes, and then the shine was a nickel and the majority of the guys gave me a dime. Do you think I spent one of those nickels? I gave every one to my mother. Every one I ever made. And I, th-this is the way we were raised. And Mom knew what to do with it. She started saving for me, for a rainy day.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: And she did.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: She was a woman of her word, and then, of course I started school, I met friends, I met these b-boys that I grew up with, and we started playing hockey, and when it came, what do you call, Thanksgiving Day, we'd get up at six in the morning until six at night. We wouldn't leave the s-street. We played roller hockey. It was . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: This is, this is our en-entertainment.

LEVINE: Could you just describe Hell's Kitchen . . .

BASIC: Hell's Kitchen was . . .

LEVINE: . . . and the different ethnic groups that were there?

BASIC: Hell's Kitchen, Hell's Kitchen, they had an Irish cop, I forget his name, who was drunk nine times out of, ten. When he walked that street, you got out of his way. Otherwise you'd feel the shillelagh. And, it shows, that we-, we, even with all of this, we did not grow up hating cops. We, to me, I wouldn't do their job for a million bucks and I respect them, what they do. That's number one. The people that I met, I met the Italians, I met, blacks, I had a very close friend, I'll tell you a story about him as well, Robert Wilmer. I, met Serbs, who were born in Croatia, because they worked together in the job, and that's how they got to know my father. And they came from the same area. So, it was like a, friendly-unfriendliness, would you call it that way? In other words . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, how was that?

BASIC: Cause he was a . . .

LEVINE: That must have been odd.

BASIC: He was a fake friendship.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: I don't know what else to say. I-, when they would get together, if you put a, if they came to your house, they saw a picture of a Croatian leader, "How can you have that fascist up there?" But they had King Alexander, who killed all the peo-, Croatian people, that's OK. They can. (laughing) You know what I'm saying. The same old thing, going back.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: You know. And I remember . . . movie I'd go every Saturday. I'd make sure, by the way, you know how we used to get into movies, there was one Royal Theater on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, 46<sup>th</sup> Street. There was a big fat lady who was the, selling the tickets, and she was standing there, and then she wore those black shoes, like a school teacher. And I'd get my shoe shining box, shine the shoes, leave my shoe shine box there, she says, "Go in for nothing". And I'd go in the movie (laughing) and I'd come back out, I didn't make two dollars, and two bucks in '38 was a lot of money. I mean, it was like twenty bucks. And then give it to my mother, says "How's it going?" And we always do some work, my brother Mike would do the, when he came nine months later. He . . .

LEVINE: But why didn't he come?

BASIC: Because he was in trade school.

LEVINE: Oh, trade school. Tin, tin-tinsmith. Right?

BASIC: Tinsmithing, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

BASIC: So . . .

LEVINE: And then he came . . .

BASIC: He came in January the following year, and the two of us got together, it was much easier because we understood. And my brother Mike is a, very quiet, completely different than I am. . . . quiet individual. Take a hell of a lot to get him mad . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: But once he get mad, just look at his eyes. Stay the hell away from him. I, we had the old stove, you know when you pick up the thing . . .

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: . . . to put the wood in. I don't know what you would call it. Grate.

LEVINE: Yeah, I know. It was, they were those iron stoves . . .

BASIC: Right, iron, iron. So, I don't know, I'm sit-sitting in the corner and I got mad at my brother and I flung that thing at him. I coulda killed him.

LEVINE: Ummm.

BASIC: My brother Mike didn't do nothing. He just picked me up like this by the hair. He said, "One more time, you're, you're dead." Nothing else. And I, kept saying to my, I said, "I didn't mean it, I, you know," I didn't really mean it. It was in, just a, moment. But I said to one, "My God, I could of killed him."

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And the-, another story comes. I'm in the old Madison Square Garden, comes in King Clancy, who's one of the greatest hockey players of Toronto Maple Leafs. Happen to be a referee. He did something against the Rangers, so I took a, paper, and some other stuff, and it was like hard, and I flung it, I missed, I missed his head by inches. I coulda killed the man. From the height.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: From the height that I threw it. And for years, I had this guilty feeling about this. And about twenty-five years ago, my son and I, in the, in New York, the new Garden, going to a hockey game and who's walking by, by, K-kling, King Clancy. So I walk over to him and I said, "Mr. Clancy, can I talk to you for a moment?" "Sure son, what for, what can . . ." Little short guy. Not even 5'10". 5'5", something like that. I says, "I did this, I did this." He says, "You didn't kill me, did you?" He says, "No, I forgive you."

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: (laughing) I felt so, like, relieved, like a million bucks.

LEVINE: So do you throw things at people any more? (laughing)

BASIC: No. Come on, it was the heat of the hockey game.

LEVINE: Right. (laughing)

BASIC: I stopped going to games, for the simple reason of the abusive language. There's women sitting there, and the guys are talking dirty. I, I don't need this. I'm sorry.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: I'm a man, too. I mean, I went to games. When a lady walked in, I st-, I got up and gave her my seat for god's sakes.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: That's respect. And that's the one thing that's missing with the youth of this country. They don't have any respect for anybody. I mean go around sub-, when I go in the subway even today, if I see a women, I don't care if she's five years old, I'll get up, I'll give her a seat, even though I'm seventy-one. I'll give her the seat.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

BASIC: That's the way I was raised. Respect.

LEVINE: Um-hmm. Um-hmm..

BASIC: (taping the table) You gotta respect women. It's the future of-of, of the world. Yeah.

LEVINE: So, getting back to Hell's Kitchen. . .

BASIC: We lived there for . . .

LEVINE: Did you, did you mix, in other words, like your mother . . .

BASIC: Well, the church was . . .

LEVINE: Did your mother mix with the Irish, with the . . .

BASIC: No.

LEVINE: No.

BASIC: No, they didn't. Because their language barrier.

LEVINE: I see.

BASIC: The language barrier, we basically, we, the center of our li-, life, was the church and the Croatian church was up on 50<sup>th</sup> Street and, and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue. So we'd walk from 10<sup>th</sup> avenue, 44<sup>th</sup> Street to church every Sunday. And I was an altar boy in the church, then I became a choir singer. I sang in the choir. I was an altar boy until I got taller than the priest, so he kicked me off. He w-, wanted to be, and you know where they have, swinging the incense?

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: I, I'm swinging one time, he just put a new carpet in, and f-f-fire fell out.  
(laughing)

LEVINE: Oh, no.

BASIC: And there he is stomping out and he says, (laughing) in middle of mass he says, "Steve, I'll kill you."

LEVINE: (laughing)

BASIC: I said, "No, you won't, I'll run, run away." And, the nun that was the Sister Anne, from the old country, they had the holy Eucharist, you know, that they drink out the cup the, with Christ, supposed to be the body of Christ. And I touched it by like this, she ran and whacked me across the face you wouldn't believe. I mean that was the law at the time. Nobody could touch it, not even the nun.

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: You had to have a cloth to hold it, and I didn't. And I touched it b-by mistake. I didn't do it on purpose, but I got such a whack. To make a long story short, she died about two or three years ago, out in Akron, Ohio, and whenever I was out there, I always took a bottle of booze with me and make sure, I (laughs), she and used to say, "Moy Stipe. My, my Steve, he's the only one that remembers."

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: But we were friends for, till life. This is basically, most of my, like Paul, I'm sure told you the same thing, that we . . .

LEVINE: Yeah

BASIC: Once you get a friendship, you don't give it up.

LEVINE: Right. Now did you have, Croatian societies of any kind, or was it mainly the church?

BASIC: Well, the church was main thing, we had the Holy Name Society, we had the (?), we had the Rosary, for the girls and women, so, Holy Name for the men, and we, had a church group, that ran the church w-with the priest. Political thing we didn't go into, because the war showed up.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: We . . .

LEVINE: How did the war affect you and your family?

BASIC: Well, it affected me i-, in this re-, my, my mother and father had borrowed some money from a friend of mine, Radelić, Miro, who was a longshoreman, and a friend of my father's. He loaned him five hundred dollars at that time to be able to bring my brother-in-law and my sister from the old country. And they were already, on April 6, 1941, in Italy. Next day was Pearl Harbor. Right? [Note: Pearl Harbor was attacked December 7, 1941.]

LEVINE: Oh, right.

BASIC: So they had to go back and spend the entire war in Croatia. And then my sister, was when the bombs started dropping, she's in . . . c-, the next city where Mom was shopping that night that I told you, Grospić, she's walking through there and she, the bombs had blown up a building, there's photograph studio. And there's a picture of my mother on the, ground. She turns back to pick up the picture, if she had gone up, she would've been dead. The bomb dropped where, where she turned.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: Oh, yeah. And then she got into Zagreb during the war and she became a black marketeer. That's the only way you could survive. To buy things, but of course without help. Mom and I, and my father, and my, and my family, we not only helped my fam-, my sister, we helped anybody we knew who wrote to us, from a camp.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

BASIC: Displaced persons from all over . . . Europe. We, I gotta letter at home, the history of wh-, my home town, that this man wrote, that I'm going to donate to the Croatian Society, so it'll be for history. I mean, it's, it's fantastic, what, what went on. The Serbs would get dressed in their, in, in the Croatian uniforms and kill their own people and blame the Croats. They did this in this war, right now. They dressed up as Muslims, killing Muslims.

LEVINE: Hmmm.

BASIC: And they did the same thing with the Croats. They got to dressed up as Croats, killing Serbians. Kill, they killed their own people just to create a problem. These are sick people. By the way, Karl Malden is a Serb, so you'll know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BASIC: He's a, his real name is Mladen Stojanović. That's how he got the Malden, M-A-L-D, from Mladen.

LEVINE: Right.

BASIC: Yeah.

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: Go ahead.

LEVINE: Let's, let's see. Let's well, why don't you just give me a thumbnail sketch of the rest of your life, in other words . . . .

BASIC: OK . . .

LEVINE: . . . you started out in Hell's Kitchen . . .

BASIC: . . . let me tell you. Let me tell you . . .

LEVINE: . . . and then . . .

BASIC: When we started in Hell's Kitchen, we lived there, then we moved up to 40-, 50<sup>th</sup> Street, 406 W. 50<sup>th</sup> Street. From there we went to 529 W. 159<sup>th</sup> Street, then we came down to 457 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and how we got to 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue was this. My mother didn't like 159<sup>th</sup> Street, because it, she didn't know anybody there. So she wanted to move back where C-Croatian community was, so a friend was moving to Cleveland so she says, "I'm the janitor here, you become a janitor." So Mom be-, and I became janitor. Pop went to work, at work he found out that he's moving. (laughing) She didn't tell him. She was all ready, and I was the instigator who did all this, make the phone calls, all that. So we moved to 457 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. My father went to work, got hurt, died. We lived there, Mom would go to work, clean the office for Cabot Lodge, and she would leave my plate in the dinner, what I should do for dinner, and underneath was a dollar always, so I could go to a movie if I wanted. I took care of the f-fire, to heat the water, took care of the house myself. Mom would work and we worked it out together.

LEVINE: Did you, excuse me, b-because you knew English . . .

BASIC: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . better than your mother . . .

BASIC: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: . . . what, did you have to do . . . kind of a different jobs, for your mother, as sort of an intermediary to . . .

BASIC: Well, Mom was able, Mom, whatever she needed to be done, I did. Whether she knew how to do it or didn't know how to do it. . .

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: . . . because she re-relied on me completely.

LEVINE: I see.

BASIC: I mean I would go to the Franklin Savings Bank, which is now on, on, used to be on 42<sup>nd</sup> and, 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And guys knew me. I mean, they wa-, "Hi Steve." And they knew I was there to have, do my mother's business. I'll give you another story, the post office, the main post office on 40-, 34<sup>th</sup> Street. 33<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. We ship-, we're taking packages to the old country, care packages. My mother's carrying two in her arm and on top of her head she's carrying, and I'm carrying two, and my brother's carrying two. We get down to the basement where all the business people shipping out parcels, I mean there's a line out to the street. The guy sees me and he says, "Hold it, the Basic family is here." We get to the line, they took our packages and everything and we go home. Now, why was he so nice to us? The first time we came there, we, my brother and I brought the packages. We gave them twenty dollars to, for the postage. At that time, that's what it was. He gave us, gives us back a fifty-dollar bill in change plus what he thought was a five dollar bill.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: He gave us fifty. We get home, Mike and I look at it, this man made a mistake. We both got back, walked to the store, walked up to him and said, "Here's your money back." That man never forgot, Jewish fellow.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: He never forgot it, while he was there, and we brought packages, he treated us like family. So you see, one hand washes the other, be honest pays in the long run.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: Now when I, when I first came here, just to give you an idea of what type of, jobs I had, I worked as a, selling shopping bags. I'd buy a bag for a penny and sell it for two cents. I started shining shoes, I worked in a photo studio, developing pictures in the afternoon, Sunday afternoon after mass. And I did these things. I don't know if you ever saw this.

LEVINE: Oh.

BASIC: This is my, this is my brother and me. That's when I graduated public school. My brother Mike.

LEVINE: Wow.

BASIC: While I'm on to pictures, let me show you, here's another, that's Mike when he graduated high school, that's me when I graduated public school. (pause) This is my . . .

LEVINE: Now are these color, are these . . .

BASIC: These are photographs that he put on, by . . .

LEVINE: Umm.

BASIC: . . . some kind of, application.

LEVINE: Umm. Wow. They're wonderful.

BASIC: This is Mom and Dad. (long pause) This is me when I came from the Old Country, '38.

LEVINE: Umm. Gee, at some point, maybe I can copy these and put them in your . . .

BASIC: Oh, I got pictures home, if you want 'em, I can get 'em for you.

LEVINE: Really.

BASIC: Sure.

LEVINE: Cause we keep a file with the extra things. Photos and materials.

BASIC: This is me and my wife.

LEVINE: Who's this?

BASIC: That's my . . . sister and her husband.

LEVINE: Oh, um-hmm.

BASIC: My, my wife and I, and myself.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

BASIC: This is me as an alter boy. (long pause) And last but not least, this is that Ante Pavelić. This is a Croatian leader. I, I, he had a fight with a general, my mother and I got 'em together again. We never met him in person, never in our lives, but we got 'em together.

LEVINE: Really. How'd you do that?

BASIC: Very simple. By . . . getting on the phone and say, "It's wrong what you're doing." Nothing else. We're one people. We have to stick together. No matter what it is, you have to eat it. Whatever it is, get over it. And I did. Oh, I've done so many things, you wouldn't believe.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Hmm.

BASIC: I used . . . yeah.

LEVINE: OK, well let's . . .

BASIC: So then, I-I-I, so I'm there taking pictures, then I get in as a delivery boy for Coty. Remember Coty, the f-fragrance company?

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

BASIC: I, I was delivery boy. So I, they used to give me a ten cents for every delivery, for the bus or the subway. So I take six deliveries with me, sixty cents. So instead of taking the train, I would walk it. I did all the deliveries by walking. Come back, I, I found a pickle jar, started putting nickels in there. All the buffalo heads. I, and I became a coin collector, and my father finds it. So instead of asking me about it, he goes to the bank and gives them the money and opens up a savings account. And I blew my stack, I said, "What did you do that for? There were some nickels in there that were worth money." But I, if I had 'em today I'd really be, like the 1909-S VDB Penny, if you ever get one, don't ever give it up, it's worth . . . if it's good condition, couple a thousand dollars.

LEVINE: Ooh.

BASIC: (?) So I did this, I became a busboy in, in a restaurant. I was, I worked in a book bindery during the war. I was a steward in a dining car. I had six jobs after I finished high school, I was gonna go to college, like I told you, but P-

Pop got sick, died. So I, gave that up and then . . . showr-, oh, I got a job as a typist. Orders. The women that did, that, that did it, couldn't do it as fast as I did. Took 'em two weeks to do it, I did it in one day.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BASIC: Then I became a showroom assistant, a salesman, and then I told you about when the, when this Jewish salesman, Harry Ballen, did I mention it to you? He said to me, "Stevela, I'm gonna send you down south to be my salesman," he says to me. I said, "I don't even know how to speak English." He said, "Don't worry, neither do they." First trip out, I open up a hundred new accounts, and I was a salesman after that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Tell me what your greatest satisfactions have been.

BASIC: My greatest satisfaction is-, has, been to be able to be part of my, family. To be able to be . . . there when they needed me. To, when Croatia became free and independent, I was the happiest person, although it's not the type of Croatia I want.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: It's still my country, my origin, where I came from. And anyone that's ashamed of his origin, to me is not a man, I don't care, where you come from. I respect all peoples. I don't care whether they're black, yellow, blue. If I look at a person with my eyes, if they look at me nice, the way I look at them, I have no problem with anybody.

LEVINE: Um-hmm.

BASIC: And, I'll tell you a last story, my mother she worked for the Cabot Lodge, there was a black man from Aruba, by name of Aska[sic]. Alderman Aska [sic], God rest his soul, he was a Catholic, like myself. Came to my mother

in 1943, says, "I gotta problem. I need three hundred dollars." My mother says, "Mo-," this is Friday, "Monday, I'll bring it to you." She goes with me to the bank, p-p-, takes out three hundred dollars, takes it, gives it to him. When she gives it, he says to her, "Where's the paper?" She says, "What paper?" He says, "The paper to sign to say I took the money." My mother goes, "Puhh." (rubbing hands together).

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: And till the d-day he died, he would come to my house on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue all the time. When I got married and moved to Jersey, he never showed up. You know what, I asked him, called him one time, he says, "Steve," he says, "you're living amongst white people and if I come to your house, I don't want you to have any problem." Think about that. And when he died, I was the only white man there.

LEVINE: Aww.

BASIC: So, I respect, I love people, I'm glad I had a chance to be in the greatest country in the world. No, there's no, I just went back to my home country. As much as I, was for it, this is still the greatest country in the world. I'm an American from Croatia. I don't know how else to describe it.

LEVINE: Perfect. I'm going to end on that note.

BASIC: OK.

LEVINE: This, I've been speaking with Steve Basic, and he came from Croatia in 1938. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.