

**EI-1445**

**LOUISE BURSIC**

**BIRTHDATE:**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE PhD**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: HELEN HENWOOD**

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**RESIDENCES:**

- **CROATIA:**
- **UNITED STATES: BUFFALO, NY; PITTSBURGH, PA**

LEVINE: I'm here today in the Ellis Island Oral History studio with Louise Bursic, who came here when she was seven years old, in 1929, and she is today eighty four years old. She has written a book about her life and she has been generous in donating it to our library. It's called 'My Song of Thanksgiving' and we will have that in our library collection. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and today is May 17<sup>th</sup>, the year 2007. If we could start by your saying your name that you had when you came through Ellis Island.

BURSIC: Yes, my name was Alojzija A-L-O-J-Z-I-J-A Alojzija Grasha G-R-A-S-H-A.

LEVINE: Great. And – you – when you came through Ellis Island, who were you with?

BURSIC: With my mother, Catherine Mageljan and my brother, Mishcko [ph] who is now Michael. And we were coming here to meet my father who left when I was only three months old, to come to America.

LEVINE: Just before we go ahead, would you spell your mother's maiden name?

BURSIC: M-A-G-E-L-J-A-N

LEVINE: Okay. And so your father had come some six years earlier or so –

BURSIC: Or so – yeah – he came on – well, just, he left on Christmas 1922 and got here New Years Day with – his brother brought him over. Because his older brother was here earlier and he brought him over and also his brother – his younger brother Joseph. And -- didn't bring—bring his wife – the wives at all, he just brought the brothers and the wo—the women stayed at home.

LEVINE: Now what were the brothers doing for work in this country?

BURSIC: Well, they were working – he brought them to Rankin [ph] Pennsylvania and he got them a job in the steelmill which was usual for immigrants because they were begging for workers at that time and there was no work over in Europe. It was devastated from the war. And everybody, unless they lived on a farm, or they could find food, they went out elsewhere to find help. And my father and his brother would send home money for us for what meager things we could buy.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well now, why don't we just talk about your father first. His name?

BURSIC; His name was Dragujin [ph]

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

BURSIC: D-R-A-J-U – Oh --I'm sorry I have to write it down. D-R-A-J- Oh my!

LEVINE; It's OK. Take your time.

BURSIC: I can't think on my – D-R-A-J-U-T-I-N – which is Charles.

LEVINE: Oh. And his last name?

BURSIC: Well, it's -- [unclear]

LEVINE: And, describe your father. What can -- do you remember as a little girl?

BURSIC: I don't remember anything, because I was only three months old, but I couldn't wait to get here because I heard so much about him. A very handsome man. He was having a good time in America with – you know—but my mother really wanted to come here so badly and I'm so glad she did. I --I can describe him later on when I first met him. He was so – I didn't know him. It was hard to talk to him. But I couldn't talk English, of course and he laughed at my accent. And he -- he evidently wasn't used to having kids around and it was kind of hard and so we kind of clung to our mother because we didn't know him. The first chance I had to see him was In Buffalo when we got to the train station and my mother was worried about our belongings being taken by a porter. She chased my brother after them and left me standing there and there's this guy coming at me and I'm running after my mother because I didn't know him. But it was a wonderful thing to see him there and to – you know – to think that he did bring us over –I'm eternally grateful. And it was some — some doing on my mothers part to take the journey because we really – you know – it was hard to – it took us two weeks to get here from our homeland to Buffalo. And –

LEVINE: Well now, I thought you said Rankin, Pennsylvania? But you went to Buffalo first?

BURSIC: Yes, my father came to Rankin and then he went to Garry with his brother Joe. I don't know why they went to Garry, Indiana, but before we came to America he moved to – to Buffalo, and that's where he brought us to, Buffalo. And er –

LEVINE: Was he a steel worker, in Buffalo?

BURSIC: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Ah. So he went where the jobs were, probably.

BURSIC: Everybody was a steel worker. They – that's all they could do, is work in the mill, you know, and er—

LEVINE: Yeah. So -- so your father, (clears throat) he – you mentioned something earlier about the First World War. Why don't you just say a little bit about his background? As far as the First World War is concerned.

BURSIC: Oh. His background was the same – my mother and he were students in school. And there were only five classes. She was a year older than he was, and they met in school of course and then he was already an orphan at the age of sixteen. And then the war came along and they took him into the war. And I don't know anything more about what happened, except that when he came back he decided to marr-- ask my mother to marry him. And then she went to live in his home, which is the custom over there. If you don't get married, you don't have anything to – you can't f– you have to go to work or something, you know. So Joe also brought his wife to the house. In this one room house, the two women were left while the two men went to America, and er—

LEVINE: Now Joe was his brother?

BURSIC: Yes. And er—we had one bed in that room and they had the other bed and in the middle was a table where we ate and there were no floor in the house and they had such a rough time, because two sisters-in-law, fighting for supremacy, you know. And er—

LEVINE: Can you remember that? As a little girl?

BURSIC: Oh, I do, I do. They had a battle once over some loaves of bread which my aunt had made, you know. And my mother was younger and she thought we should have an equal amount and my aunt thought “no”. And they got into fistscuts [sic] – on the floor they were. My mother’s nose was bleeding all over her face and the kids were screaming. And it was so different. I’d – I’d love to tell you some about what we did there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: Um –we -- as kids had a wonderful life. We had straw beds – we didn’t have any mattresses. And – and -- you know, you’d fill ‘em up with straw and they were wonderful when they was fresh and at the end of the month it was flat again. (They laugh.) And in the summer we – we – the neighbors got together. They peeled feathers – have you ever seen feathers peeled?

LEVINE: No. No I haven’t. Describe it – that’d be great.

BURSIC: Well, you know, you have a lot of chickens. And they just -- you take the feather off the stem. And then you make these wonderful pillows and you know -- the comforters there, and the neighbors would get together, get out the wine and the bread and slivovitz, which is brandy. And everybody get a

little (unclear) you know, but it was a fun thing and there was really nothing to do in the village except neighbors getting together and working together, you know. But er—

LEVINE: Well now, were most of the men gone?

BURSIC: Yes, there were too --too many of them gone. A lot of them went to Argentina because there's Adriatic near there. A lot of them were fishermen, you know, so they went down to Argentina or they went to America. My brother married a Canadian woman who he went to school with in Europe. And when our family came to America, their family came to Canada. And somehow or other, at a – at a – at a shower for a friend of his, he met his -- his former school mate there and he married her. And that's my brother and sister-in-law. She just passed away about five years ago. But he's still living wonderful. We have a great time.

LEVINE: This is Mike?

BURSIC: Yes, Mike, yes. OK, you asked me about my father and I'm rambling about this ---

LEVINE: It's OK. Let's see, so the women would get together and they would take the feathers off of like the stem of them?

BURSIC: Yes, and then you throw the stem out and you, you know, peel fea—we do that in America even. My father had us doing instead of playing out in the street in the summertime – we peeled feathers. So.

LEVINE: Wow. Uh-huh – what --can you think of anything else about those seven years – things that you did, or –

BURSIC: Yes. Kids played simple things. We used to take cows out to pasture. I had an old c—I was five years old and I remember I had a cow named Rumaca[ph]. She was er—had only three hips – one -- one hip was missing so she was big enough for me to handle. And we went to pasture and we -- we had a lot of fun doing that. We would – you know -- pick strawberries and that. We took a bottle of wine and a l-- some wine -- for some wine and some bread and that was our lunch.

LEVINE: Wow. So even children drank wine? With adults. At home.

BURSIC: Oh yes, yes. Even in a – we drank that slivovitz which is whisky. Really, really strong. I think it's a hundred and eighty proof?

LEVINE: Oh my gosh!

BURSIC: And you take apples and dunk them for breakfast. It was very good. So, and – but we – I didn't go to school. My brother went to school for three years over there because he was three years – almost three years older than I am. And but – he went to school – to –th – to --er -- like I said with his future wife. And – I don't know where I was going with that.

LEVINE: (unclear) Let's see. You said you didn't go to school. How about religion? Was your family religious over there?

BURSIC: Yes, yes, they were Catholics. We had a lot of – we walked – naturally there's no cars – no -- we used ox and carts. We had an ox and we had – they would – you know—we would ride on all –all the – we would take flax to -- to the—to the water to soak it so that we could make stuff out of it, you know. And we washed our clothes on the rocks – beat it on the rocks. And I thought it was pretty nice when you got a scrubbing board over here. We didn't have to go out to the river any more and beat our clothes on the rocks. (laughs) And we

carried water from our little stream that we had. We never had running water. To this day, my cousin, who lives in that same house, doesn't have indoor plumbing, doesn't have water. I brought her here – my brother and I brought her here in 1990 to see America. I don't know if it was a good thing or not for her because she loved it here (they laugh) and I felt bad that I got the chance to come here and she didn't. But -- I think it was nice for her. But they didn't – I don't know – I feel sorry for them that they weren't -- you know. But we didn't have indoor plumbing or anything, you know? Um – it –

LEVINE: How about your mother? What was she like?

BURSIC: My mother was very much a worrywart [ph] because she had a trouble – you know, she had to raise us by herself and work the farm there and it was hard because – you know -- working with just a relative like that it was hard. You – she had a mother who saw us off – she was nearly blind. And I can remember the day we left my grandmother wa—gave me a bath in the tub – in one of those little scrubbing tubs – yes – and watched me go down the hill. My uncle was taking us to the train station to go to America. And she knew she'd never see us again. And it was very hard for her to see us off like that. But—

LEVINE: How did you get to the train station?

BURSIC: The ox cart my uncle had. And he went to my mother's house to get what little belongings she had. Now there was a cedar chest that one of the – I'd have guessed -- grandmothers left – and both the women in the family said it was theirs. And my mother was younger and the morning we left it was pouring down with rain. I write this in my book. It was pouring down with rain. The villagers were there to see us off and to see what we had to give them left, you know.

LEVINE: You were going to give them what you weren't taking.

BURSIC: Yes, yes. And there my --my uncle's waiting to take this cedar chest out and my mother's pulling it out the door and my aunt's pulling it back in. (Laughs)  
And my mother was younger and she won the toss. So he took that up to her -- her mother, which is a shame I think in a way because you know, it was hard.  
But um—

LEVINE: Well now, did Joe -- did your brother -- your father's brother Joseph's wife come here too?

BURSIC: No, never—

LEVINE: That's the one who stayed, I guess.

BURSIC: Yes. Joe came back once and I'm sorry, he came just long enough to conceive a son, and he came back over here and that son was killed during the Second World War in front of the house. So my cousin is still living in that house with her family. And, yeah, and er—it's -- it's not -- I don't know, I feel sorry for her because she never got a chance. Although my brother tells me that her mother really wasn't too anxious to come because she and her children didn't get along too well. So she never did --

LEVINE: Oh. Oh, well that would be a reason not to—

BURSIC: Yes. But my mother really, really wanted to come here. Yes.

LEVINE: Well she wanted to see her husband for one thing, though.

BURSIC: I don't know about that. (Laughs)

LEVINE: Well she wanted to be in America, probably.

BURSIC: Yes, she wanted to b – it was hard living over there with us, you know. Where were we going to go, you know? And er—so anyway, when we got here –

LEVINE: Well first, let's talk about you took the ox cart, you got to the train, and then you took a train—

BURSIC: Yes, yes. We took a train through – I remember going past a S – in Switzerland p--past the train on there – past the b-- waters from somewhere. We went up into Paris and Paris we went to Cherbourg, France to wait for the boat. The boat was the Majestic, the White Star Line, Majestic.

LEVINE: Do you remember -- remember anything about that trip? Leaving your little village or town and then the trip to Cherbourg?

BURSIC: Yes. Yes we do. We had our first shower there. We screamed because water came from nowhere. We weren't used to – you know? We used to go get the pollywogs out of the ones that we took out of the – out of the stream, you know. And when we were – we never had fruit like we got there, you know. I saw my first orange, my first banana. We tried to eat bananas without peeling them, you know.

LEVINE: Did you get the idea, yourselves? (Laughs) What did you do, did you eat the skins?

BURSIC: We tried to eat the skin – I can still feel the – did you ever try to eat the skin off of a banana? (Laughs) Yeah. And then in Cherbourg, we had to wait for three days for the boat. And some lady bought my brother a ball. And we didn't know it bounced or anything, and first thing I did was pitch it into the ocean, you know. But I didn't know. And er—

LEVINE: Did you have toys at all, at home?

BURSIC: Did we have what?

LEVINE: Toys?

BURSIC: You know what, we used to play? We would take um—a pick – like a pick— and then somebody would give us some beans. And then we'd plant -- plant beans with the – you know. We didn't have any kind of toys. There's no kind of toys. It is just unbelievably different from here, you know?

LEVINE: So what would you do? You'd plant little seeds and watch them grow?

BURSIC: Yeah. (Laughs) No, just plant them and see what else, you know. Um, I can't even think about it. We --we took cows to pasture. We had to help with the farm. You had to go you know, there was a lot of -- during harvest time – there was a lot of wheat –

LEVINE: What kind of farm? What was being grown on the farm?

BURSIC: Everything you ate, like lettuce and – you know, you didn't have just a garden by your house. The whole village there had – like, if this was a good place to plant co – ah, potatoes, everybody planted them there. And then you had a little plot here, a little plot of lettuce. Grapes were wonderful because they -- you had to have grapes to make wine. We hardly ate grapes at all because that had to be for wine, because that sustained you through winter and you know. And so, you really never had to buy anything outside of say, salt, or sugar. But er – and you never had a meal at the table. You had a big bowl of potatoes. That was dinner tonight. Or you had corn, or you had, you know – once

LEVINE: One thing.

BURSIC: Once in a while you'd have – you'd butcher a --a pig and then that would take a while to use up. Of course there's no refrigeration. To this day, they don't have refrigeration in a village. I was there in 1983 and 88 and they still are amazed that we didn't have to light a fire and make a cup of coffee, you know, because, there's a – it's just so different.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: And so – that's -- I don't know what else I can tell you but –

LEVINE: Lets' see. You mentioned that you got to Cherbourg. How about the voyage itself?

BURSIC: The voyage. I can remember the night we left. It was dark, you know, very dark and we saw this big huge thing coming in there, you know, and we got on the gangplank and we walked for miles. Of course I have to tell you we were in third class and that's as far down as you can go. And we -- we were there on that boat for a week across Atlantic at that time. And we never saw ---we weren't allowed up on the second and third decks so you never saw the sky for a week, you know. And so the boat we—we ate with other people, you know, always in the same place, and we were surprised this one couple from us, (unclear) and they would get these rolls and dig out the soft part and throw the crusts away and we loved the crusts. (laughs) And we – of course my mother was afraid to do anything outside of what everybody else was doing because she might be turned back, you know, so whatever they did, we did, you know. But it was a long trip. We had one storm. Of course we couldn't see it, we could just feel it, you know and er—

LEVINE: Because you were down below.

Bursic: Oh, we were down below. All I can remember in that state room was a double deck bed here and one across – just in a little like, sink, you know. And that was about all you had in this little – you know.

LEVINE: It was like a little cabin? Like a little—

BURSIC: Yeah. You didn't see anything, naturally. It was just for sleeping really.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So then the boat came into – the ship came into the New York Harbor and—

BURSIC: The day it came in, I can --I—I can remember that. We went – we were allowed up on the deck and I could see this, you know -- today I cry (tearful) – I can see this statue.. And of course I didn't know what it was, but later on I talk about it in my book. But I could see the harb – harbor – the people were moving around and moving stuff all over the place. I saw a black person. I never saw a black person before. And it was, you know, I don't know what. Anyway, after a while, they let us off. And we were – we entered from the boat. We went into a smaller boat and we got to -- into Ellis Island. Ellis Island, when I saw it today, it was huge, it was really huge. And we just walked around. We had big badges on us and nobody could speak our language, except one lady that was on board with us. And somebody would come along, look at your badge and they would just take you and pull you and put you in this line. And you went wherever anybody pulled you, you know. And this lady that we were friends with, she was left behind, because she had lice in her hair and that was a big thing at that time. They checked me, because I had long hair at the time. And my mother. And luckily we passed. I understand a lot of people were kept back for bad eyes. I guess that was important at the time. And so—

LEVINE: Did you ever hear from that woman again?

BURSIC: No, no. We just – I don't know where sh – you know – she was from—  
Yugoslavia or somewhere, but I don't know where. And—

LEVINE: So, did your father come to Ellis Island?

BURSIC: No. My father met us in the station in Buffalo.

LEVINE: Oh, that's right.

BURSIC: So my mother and -- we got on, somehow or other, I don't remember how, but we got into New York enough to get to the train. And there she bought a package of Unieda [sic] crackers. (laughs) Saltless Unieda crackers, because the lady in front of her bought some, so she had to buy something, get on board, you know. And it was – it was really funny because – you know, we did everything somebody else did, you know. So—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you got on board and – did it take a long time then, to get off?

BURSIC: No, no. We got – it seems to me that we got in early the next morning, somehow. I don't remember, except it was morning when we were in the station and I often thought about how people who were in the station at the time thought of us. Of this parade that was going up. There was a black porter pulling this old country suitcase – suitcase. And my brother was chasing him, because we didn't know where he was taking that. My mother would –d-- got scared and she didn't know where he was going with it. And there's my father chasing me and I'm running after my mother because I didn't know who he was. (laughs)

LEVINE: Wow.

BURSIC: So he – we eventually got together and I don't remember how we got from the train station to the house where he was boarding at the time. But—

LEVINE: Now, were there other boarders there too?

BURSIC: Evidently, but I don't remember them. And she was kind of a relative of my father's. And first thing he did was hurry up and sent across the street for some ice cream. There was a g-- grocery store and we couldn't stand the taste of ice cream. It was too sweet. We never ate anything like that. And my girlfriends are to this day, the friends of that store down there. The one girl I traveled with, the other one just died at Christmas time. So we're still friends, you know.

LEVINE: Ah. Isn't that great, yeah.

BURSIC: But it was a wonderful thing.

LEVINE: Can you think of some things that struck you as new, or different, those first few days?

BURSIC: Oh my, yes, it was. It was strange to have a man around all the time. We were at this lady's house just for a couple of days and my father got a little house he rented right near her. And it was funny to see kids around, you know. We were odd. We had to -- we couldn't speak English, you know. And we just walked around – use – I had learned a word “vot?” [sic] “vot, vot, vot?” (laughs) And then we came on July 14<sup>th</sup> and in September school started. And this lady took me to All Saints' School in Buffalo and put me in a seat and left. And there I am sitting there with the “vot?—what am I doing here?” (laughs). And the nun walks in and she start talking to me and I'm gibbering in Croatian and luckily this girl from across the street, her parents were Croatian. She

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understood a little bit. So for that year, she was like translating for me, you know, with the nun and the kids. But you know at the end of that year, I got a picture of St Teresa for being a reading prompter. So it shows you how fast kids learn when they're young.

LEVINE: OK. We're going to pause here and turn the tape over, then we'll continue on the other side.

END OF SIDE A  
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: OK. We're continuing here with Louise Bursic. Let's see. We were talking about your first few days, and going to school, and how you became a reading prompter within one year.

BURSIC: Yes.

LEVINE: So, as life went on, did you – how did your life change in those – in those early years, from what it had been?

BURSIC: Well, one thing, in October – was the 26<sup>th</sup>, 1929? That same year, the depression evidently struck. And we were told that it was horrible. People took the bridge, everything, for they had lost a fortune. And we here--we had all this white bread to eat, and we had had black bread and b—you know, at home. And we had meat on the table everyday. It was just so strange and we had rooms –we only had one room in Yugoslavia for the whole family, you know. We slept on one bed, they slept on a – one across the floor there. And it was so wonderful -- how could people say that we was -- you know, that it was the Depression? Couldn't be. Couldn't be. Somebody even once found me a pair of skates and they taught -- showed me how to go sliding down the

street (unclear) What fun this was, you know? It was just wonderful. I don't know why people, you know. The only thing that was strange was having a man around the house that you couldn't – you could hardly find anything to talk to him about. That was hard. And it was hard for him because he wasn't used to kids. You know. And so I don't know, it was – the first few years are just kind of a jumble of getting together and sorting out what was different from here -- from the Cro—Yugoslavia.

LEVINE: Was your father able to keep working during the depression?

BURSIC: No, my father lost his job. That was – was bad, you know. And—but luckily, my mother got a job. Some relative of hers worked for a radio pr— manufacturer. (unclear) radio it was at the time. And he got her a job. So she went to work and my father stayed at with – home with us for a long time. And instead of him—you know, you don't let kids go out and play, because you don't -- kids don't play here, you know that. Let kids play. So we went down the stairs and peeled feathers, just like we did in the old country (laughs) and you know, you had to s-- learn to sew, you had to do, you know, everything. And, but then eventually he—she – we went on welfare, which was terribly-- horrible for them, because we weren't used to being on welfare. And we were so glad when he eventually got another job in the steel mill then. And—

LEVINE: Do you remember what year that was? That he g— was able to –

BURSIC: My mother went to work – she was yeah, thirty- three. We came here in '29. She went to work in '33. My father got a job about two years later, so '35, yeah. And—

LEVINE: It must have been demoralizing for him too, to not work?

BURSIC: Yes, yes. Because here he thought he was going to be the breadwinner and everything and as soon as we came here, everything he had, you know, was gone. So – and people don't like charity, you know. And so we used his little – and it was funny, because Mike and I cont -- we went and did every— anything we could to make a quarter or two cents for bringing groceries for the neighbors, you know. It was great to get a quarter, we gave it to him, you know? And –so – incidentally, when we started school, Mike was put in third grade. He'd already finished three years over there. You only go to school for five years over there. And so he – they put him back in third, because he didn't understand the language. So then when he got to sixth grade, well, he was far in advance of every – you know, his studies, so they moved him up to seventh. Well, I – I was in my proper grade, then one day my father—when I was in sixth grade – my father said “What grade are you in?” And I says “I'm in sixth grade.” He said “What are you doing there? Your brother didn't go to sixth grade.” He says “you tell the sister you want to go to seventh grade.” I was kind of scared to do that, you know? So the next day he says to me “Did you tell sister?” And I said “No.” He says “You don't tell sister tomorrow, you don't come home.” Guess what, Monday morning, I'm sitting in sixth grade— seventh grade. (Laughs) And it was funny, because he always tell people that if it wasn't for him, I'd still be in school.

LEVINE: You'd still be in sixth grade. (Laughs)

BURSIC: 'Cause he told me I should go to seventh. Because you know, the st—my studies were pretty good – cause you didn't dare get a B with my father. You didn't dare.

LEVINE: So he was very strict.

BURSIC: Oh, he was very strict, yes, yeah.

LEVINE: And what was your mother's temperament, her personality?

BURSIC: My -- my mother -- I don't know. I think my parents were not meant for each other, or something was wrong which we never could figure out. And they lived to be sixty five years old tog—they lived together about sixty five. I doubt --it's sad -- that they spoke for five of those years. And we lived in a house that nobody ever spoke, except Mike and I. And we did. And it was just so -- you know, I think it's a shame, because Mike and I were used to my mother being around, and maybe he felt pushed out. You know, he started drinking and it just -- you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Why did -- if you could put all that together, like with the immigrant experience, the fact that they had uprooted and come to this country -- do you think the immigration experience had anything to do with why they stuck together?

BURSIC: Oh yes.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk about it?

BURSIC: I think it's -- it's just -- the word divorce is not in the Bursic -- Grasha[ph] family. You know, you don't -- thank God, none of us have ever had, you know. I married a man who held me on a pedestal. I was just so lucky. And so, I don't know why it was. I think over there, naturally. It isn't a question of I don't think of -- oh -- she was so beautiful, and he loved her and all. He didn't have anything, her family was a little bit more better off and -- as a matter of fact he borrowed his shoes to get married in. And so -- he went to marry her -- for what reason, I don't know. Were they -- you know—were they compatible from the very beginning? I don't know. Did he -- when he left so soon -- Mike was only three when he left -- did they know each other? You know, even though they went to school for five years, what's that? So, I don't know, I think it's sad

because they were apart for so long. And I can remember, somebody brought this lady over to our house one time, later years here. And they said "Oh, I want to meet -- see your parents, because oh, when your father lived with us as a boarder, our house was full of song and you know, happiness, and he was such a wonderful man. And I looked at her and I said "You and I don't know the same man, and it's a pity, you know."

LEVINE: So you never saw that song – singing –er (unclear)

BURSIC: No. My father and I became daughter and son [sic] the month before he died. Yes. And er--

LEVINE: Ah. You made your peace with him right before he died.

BURSIC: Yeah. Well, I always did, but he never realised it, you know? He was always, you know, instead of giving you a compliment he was, oh, you know. When I applied for a job in Pittsburgh, I left him in Buffalo, applied for a job in a newspaper that I eventually worked for and I said to them, "well you know, I just applied for this paper, that we were a member of the organization," you know, and my father said " Oh, yeah, they just vaiting [sic] for you?" Well, they were. I never got a compliment.

LEVINE: I see, he didn't encourage you?

BURSIC: I never got a compliment, no.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: I – I grew up with the feeling of I never could do anything right, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: Pretty much with my mother too, I'm sorry to say, but – you know, you just couldn't, you had to be – I don't know what they thought.

LEVINE: Well, she wanted to do everything right because she was afraid not to.

BURSIC: I didn't get married until I was thirty two. I met a wonderful man and he just – we were wonderful –f—my--wonderful family. They knew how – there's so much love there and they taught me to love. Not – I didn't teach them – he taught me and they taught me. And it's a shame, because my parents didn't have that.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you didn't make that mistake, anyway – you got past that.

BURSIC: No, I didn't make that mistake. It's just a shame that he died so young. He died twenty years ago this week – past week. Two weeks ago.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Uh-huh. So, do you think your mother and father were happy they came here?

BURSIC: No. No. No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh. Well, but you're happy, and Mike is happy.

BURSIC: Oh yes, yes, Mike was very happy. He married a girl he really loved. He really did. But he went to school with her there, and when somebody asked him to go to Canada – we only lived across the Peace Bridge from this family, in Buffalo?

LEVINE: Oh, I see. In Buffalo?

BURSIC: Yeah. And -- so he was -- you know, they even know her parents. My parents knew her parents from Europe. So it was an -- yeah. But they -- so Mike's wife died -- five -- four -- five years ago, five years, yeah.

LEVINE; Well, what does your Croatian heritage mean to you?

BURSIC: It means I love this -- music. I just li—I saw downstairs the (unclear) I love that. I have no -- my brother is very interested in their politics, you know. I couldn't care less. I met the President -- I took Mike-- Mike to meet the President, 'cause I knew he would be interested, you know, and I took the -- put his picture in my book.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: It's at the very end, I think, of the pictures. And er—but -- the music I love. I --I translated -- I like to write and this is what I did for a living. And I translated from Croatian into English for this, you know. I went back to Croatia I-- twice now, in '83 and '88.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BURSIC: And I don't have any interest in going back any more. And er—my

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Why did you not -- why did you lose your interest in going back now?

BURSIC: Because I love this country so much. I'm the biggest wag—flag waver any body ever saw. When I was seventeen, I won a national contest -- essay contest. And the subject was What America Means to Me.

LEVINE: Is that in here?

BURSIC: No, it's – it's where I used to work, I sa--I found it in a book they had, yeah.  
And so it really doesn't. But you know what? In Pittsburgh, we have so – so many Croatians, you probably found out –

LEVINE: Yes, I did.

BURSIC: And so we kind of gathered together and it's funny, cause I'm – I'm involved in Ladies charity and everything that the church does, but my -- my friends there, who weren't born over there, say "well us, you know, he's one of ours." I don't say that about Croatia. I don't care if you're Croatian or Polish or anything here. You're not one of us. But they – they feel so much more for -- I don't know.

LEVINE: You don't have that feeling?

BURSIC: I don't have that feeling. No. I was so happy to be here. So happy.

LEVINE: Well, now is the church Croatian, that you go to?

BURSIC: There's – no, our church isn't, but right – right down about fifteen minutes from us is the first Croatian church in America, St. Nicholas. (Unclear) and there's -- a mile down the road there's another one which they just closed – it's another St. Nicholas. A year later they got into an argument and they built two.  
(laughs)

LEVINE: I wanted to ask you –did your mother and father belong to any Croatian organizations – or --

BURSIC: No, my brother and I – well, they both belonged as members of an insurance organisation, you know, Fraternal insurance. But you know they weren't involved in –in

LEVINE; They didn't socialise that much.

BURSIC: No, no they didn't. Mike – Mike and I were in the Croatian Fraternal union – that's how he got a job in the National – the one in -- it's in Pittsburgh – and I got a job there and we both ended up with our families. Mike moved his family there after I moved and then we moved my parents after they retired because I got tired of phone calls. I (unclear) "come home, come home." Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah. So they ended up there too. So, it sounds like you and your brother are very close?

BURSIC: Yes, we're very good friends. Yes.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. OK, so, what impact do you think it had on you as a seven year old little girl, to pick up and start fresh again? Do you think your personality somehow got formed around that experience? Or do you think it had a lot to do with the way you see things, or?

BURSIC: Well, I think it made my life. I don't know what in the world I would have been over there, because I have no interest – when I go over there, I just feel so sorry for everybody. I have no interest in it. I can't picture raising a family there, you know. I'm so – my song of thanksgiving. I'm so grateful for everything I found in America. How can I – I couldn't possibly – possibly have stayed there. Of course I wouldn't have known any differently then--

LEVINE: Yeah, right.

BURSIC: But, yeah, I'm so grateful. And—

LEVINE: What gives you a lot of satisfaction? That you've done in your life?

BURSIC: Oh, my family, oh my family's – I've a wonderful family. Um, I think I made a few people happier, maybe, with what I did. I became a lady of charity about twenty years ago, when my husband died. I didn't want to be a burden on the kids very much.

LEVINE: What does a lady of charity do? What do you do, (unclear)?

BURSIC: Er-- it's a catholic – catholic our—from our church and then I became a -- well --we help the poor, the sick, anything we can do, you take people to doctors, to anything that, you know – we can—er. Ours started in our church -- especially I think its wonderful. We need a place to have a funeral -- after the funeral luncheon -- after a funeral -- because people need to get together, you know. And I have had the use of that for my mother, and for my husband. And so we make the meal and everything, the church does.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.

BURSIC: And I like to feed the – feed the world. I just—so I – I became a national -- the national vice president of the mid-Atlantic region. And I – I'm – I had -- make conventions and spoke at conventions and things like that.

LEVINE: As a lady of charity?

BURSIC: Yes, as a lady of charity. You don't get any money for it – it costs you, 'cause you have to fly where you're going, yeah, yeah, do all the writing and stuff –

LEVINE: That's the charity part, doing the writing – (laughs)

BURSIC: Yeah, that's the charity part, yeah.

EI-1445 BURSIC

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BURSIC: So I think that's what I really claim to fame -- the family --

LEVINE: Yeah, how wonderful, good for you.

BURSIC: The family, the family, the church, I -- as a matter of fact I was a soloist at the --  
er-- when our new --our church was dedicated --was made.

LEVINE: Oh, nice.

BURSIC: Yeah, about twenty years ago, really.

LEVINE: Well, you know I wonder --

BURSIC: Twenty one.

LEVINE: Do you remember any Croatian songs?

BURSIC: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Do you think you could sing one on the tape?

BURSIC: Oh, I can't -- ( laughs)

LEVINE: I would love that. It would be really nice to have it on tape, if you could --

BURSIC: Would it?

LEVINE: Yeah.

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BURSIC: Which one would I sing? I can't even think about it.

LEVINE: Do you have a favorite?

BURSIC: (Sings a song in Croatian –“O, Mariana.”)

LEVINE: Oh, I can see why you like the music – the way you sing it, it's very moving.

BURSIC: This isn't the –this isn't the b—my voice changed with this new thing that I  
have in my –

LEVINE: With – yeah, uh-huh—

BURSIC: I have (unclear)

LEVINE: No, it's beautiful. Well, now what did that say? What did that song say that  
you just sang?

BURSIC: O Mariana – dear Mariana –a girl – I will wait for you until you come –then –  
you know -- OK.

LEVINE: Now was that a song associated with people like immigrating and waiting for  
the spouse or (unclear) this is something else?

BURSIC: No, no this is purely somebody loves you, and you know—

LEVINE: And they're waiting for you. Uh-huh.

BURSIC: Yeah. So—

LEVINE: It was beautiful. Yeah, you have a lot of feeling when you sing.

BURSIC: I can't think of any other ones right now.

LEVINE: Yeah, OK.

BURSIC: But I – and then I was in a choir and my husband was very active. The kids have folk – did a folk mass for our church for about -- oh, at least – kids probably know – maybe twelve, fourteen years. They played the instruments for the masses and they kept them from ever me having to worry about them on drugs or their friends –

LEVINE: The instruments. You mean playing the instruments –

BURSIC: The guitars for the church. And they did it for other occasions and they got together all the time in our basement. My husband made a -- incidentally, when you come to Pittsburgh, I'd love to have you come to a picnic with our family.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness. Can't wait.

BURSIC: I told you my house is open to you. But anyway, yeah. It—they -- they enjoyed the church music -- to this day they do, you know. And my son and his wife, and his kids are active in their church by playing and singing, you know, during a mass.

LEVINE: So now, you have your three daughters with you and—

BURSIC: I have a son Frank –

LEVINE: You have a son Frank and you have grandchildren.

BURSIC: Ah, he has three girls and Denise has two girls. I have no grandsons.

LEVINE: OK. Well, let me ask you a funny question. When you --assuming you have great- grandchildren one of these days –

BURSIC: I won't see them, I'm sorry—(laughs)

LEVINE: Well, is there anything you would want them to know about you and about your life and your life story?

BURSIC: I think that's why they wrote – book was written. Every one of the kids has a book. All my grandchildren have. And I want them to read it and see I'm sorry for so many of the things that -- I'm sorry that both Frank's parents and my parents didn't really have a good life, because his parents came from Europe, from Yugoslavia, and mine did too, and never really and – had -- had the fun and the enjoyment that we had had. Like, my mother lived to be ninety-two years old. Died while she was waiting for a glass of wine to cool on the windowsill. Fifteen minutes, somebody looked, she was dead. What a wonderful way to go.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURSIC: My father lived eighty years, being chronically ill. (chuckles) But they never en-- enjoyed life and his – Frank's parents. His father died when he was only thirty-six. The mother, was seventy-two and she kept boarders and there was no -- no joy in their lives. And I feel bad. And I talk about them in the book because I feel so bad, because I think they didn't know how to treat their children because they weren't treated any better. So I want the kids to know, that as much as I tell you what they – you know, how hard it was. My father made me learn the Our Father kneeling on salt. He thought that would be faster. You know, they -- they thought – they thought, if you're having fun,

stop it. It's no good for you, you know? And that's the sad part. And I want them to know that -- how wonderful it is that we had a different life. My husband and I on our honeymoon said if we have a family, if we have kids, our lives are not going to be like that and we kept -- made sure that we didn't do. He was a wonderful man and --and I -- I don't regret -- a day of my life with him.

LEVINE: Wow. That's nice.

BURSIC: And his last words, as he laid on the floor, was "I love you, Louise, honey." You know. So I want them to know that I will hope for them, the same as we had, that I had. And don't -- don't, you know, because I talk about my parents and Franks' parents about that -- I don't want them to think that they're bad people. I want them to pray for them and to know that they didn't have a -- any better of a life themselves, than we had with them. Right.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, you know it's often said that the people who immigrated here did it not so much for themselves, but for their children.

BURSIC: Yeah.

LEVINE: I've heard that many times. And I wonder if, you know, the immigration didn't bear fruit for them, but it did for their children.

BURSIC: Probably. Probably. Because, certainly my mother gave me a better life. I mean, not herself giving it to me, but gave me a chance at a better life than she ever had. And certainly my father, too. And I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful that -- that we ca -- you know, it must have been hard for her to leave her mother. You know, at that age, knowing we're never going to see her and to come here and it was hard traveling, certainly, because she's scared to death

we're going to get lost or fall in the ri—ocean or something. But she did it. And I hope that it was because of us, as much as for her own welfare, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BURSIC: And, I don't know what else to say, because –

LEVINE: Did she – do you think you have taken on any of the qualities of your mother or father?

BURSIC: Oh good lord! (They laugh) I hope not, Janet. I hope not.

LEVINE: Well, maybe there were some good things mixed in on the flip side, then.

BURSIC: Yeah, yeah. I think as far as my mother is concerned, I worry constantly and she did too. She worried all the time. And I – I—my kids are now in their –the youngest is forty-six, the oldest is fifty-two, and -- four of them –and I still w--

LEVINE: Still worry a little.

BURSIC: And the grandchildren there. And I can't relax about that. But I hope that – I'm—I'm sure that there's a lot of qualities that both of us -- Frank and I -- adopted because we didn't want the same kind of life for them, as -- as they were forced to give us, I guess, you know. Thinking that that was the best thing for us, you know.

LEVINE: Right. Yeah. They were trying to do the right thing for you, but it didn't work.

BURSIC: Right, right. They certainly weren't doing it because they didn't want to – you know – but –

LEVINE: Yeah. Ok, well we're practically at the end of the tape. Is there something that we haven't touched on? Anything that you'd like to say in closing?

BURSIC: Oh, what, what? I think I've said --I've s—I really don't know. I wish more people had a chance to do what they want to do and not be forced to live the life that they are, you know. When Mike and I brought my two cousins over, from Europe in 1990, just because we wanted them to see what we have and not -- not -- not, you know—

LEVINE: Not to (unclear) Yeah, right.

BURSIC: But after, you know, but this thing that we had an opportunity to develop this, you know. When they saw that we -- they could go to The White House here. And they couldn't do that in Croatia. And to see the houses that we live in compared to what they do. We just hope that they -- other people get this chance. And not have to force -- think of the people in Africa. Yeah -- in everywhere -- Iraq, everywhere. The torture, the awful places. And we have what we have here. It's just unbelievable that anybody would be forced to do—live like that. And it's -- it's -- I'm just so grateful. That's why I named my book My Song of Thanksgiving.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. OK, well we're going to close now. And I thank you so much.

BURSIC: Thank you Janet.

LEVINE: I'm speaking with Louise Bursic who has written a wonderful book, I can't wait to read. And we have been -- we have been talking about her immigration experience at the age of seven in 1929, when she came from what was then Austria or Hungary and is now Croatia. OK, this is Janet Levine from the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

BURSIC: Thank you Janet.

LEVINE: No, thank you.