

EI-1454

MIKE GRASHA

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- **YUGOSLAVIA (CROATIA): POLICE**
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LEVINE: Okay. So today is June the 21th the year 2007. I'm here in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and I'm here with Mike Grash

GRASHA: Grasha.

LEVINE: Grasha, who came from -- well Yugoslavia but --

GRASHA: At that time it was Yugoslavia now it's Croatia.

LEVINE: Croatia.

GRASHA: And I am a Croatian.

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LEVINE: He's a Croatian man. Right and um -- and he came here when he was 9 years old --

GRASHA: Right.

LEVINE: -- and that was 1929.

GRASHA: Right.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If you would say for the tape again please your birth date.

GRASHA: It's November the 2nd, 19 -- 9 -- 1919.

LEVINE: Okay and where were you born?

GRASHA: In Croatia.

LEVINE: What's the name of the town?

GRASHA: Well it was a a a village.

LEVINE: Village.

GRASHA: A [not understood] there's a exact name of it is Polica -- write down Police.

LEVINE: But you say it Polica.

GRASHA: Polica yeah.

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LEVINE: Polica. Okay. And um and I want to say for this tape that ah Mike's sister has been interviewed for the collection as well.

GRASHA: Yes.

LEVINE: And she wrote a book which a tells about coming to this country. Um and that is in the Ellis Island Library. Okay ah what was the name you were born with?

GRASHA: (laughs) Ah nothing (laughs). Shortly after -- birth.

LEVINE: Okay what name were you given after you were born?

GRASHA: Mijo -- Mike which is the equivalent -- equivalent of Michael.

LEVINE: Okay.

GRASHA: M-I-J-O.

LEVINE: Mijo.

GRASHA: Or Mihail M-I-H-A-I-L.

LEVINE: Oh. That's like Michael.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Um hum. Okay and ah (clear throat) let's see -- well first lets talk about ah -- why don't you give your mother's name and your father's name.

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GRASHA: My mother's name was Cata -- Catarine -- Ca -- Catharine --
Catharina.

LEVINE: Catharina.

GRASHA: Ah and her ah maiden name was -- I can't tell.

LEVINE: Okay well when you -- if you don't remember something we're gonna
go to Louise's ah interview where she says your mother's name and
so we'll have it.

GRASHA: Cat -- it was Catharina.

LEVINE: Catharina and how about your father.

GRASHA: Ah my father's name was Dragutin -- Charles.

LEVINE: Oh. Why don't you spell Dragutin?

GRASHA: D-R-A -- Draotia -- D-R-A --

LEVINE: Here I see it here G-U-T-I-N. Yeah Dragutin. Okay now ah let's talk
about your first nine years before you came here.

GRASHA: Oh (laughs).

LEVINE: Okay. In your little town of Policha -- Polica.

GRASHA: It was a village.

LEVINE: Village.

GRASHA: Police.

LEVINE: Police. Why don't you talk about Police? What was that like?

GRASHA: (laughs) Well it was chil -- in in at that time I was a child and ah what I ah had -- I still had to ah -- we we had -- I think we had a cow and a -- did we have -- and a couple of horses -- not horses -- oxen. And ah -- ah at my age or I guess after (laughs) -- I was big enough to run after animals ah I -- that was one of my as -- jobs.

LEVINE: You taking the animal out to pasture?

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha. And did you like doing it?

GRASHA: (laughs) Yes and No.

LEVINE: (laughs) What did you like and what didn't you like?

GRASHA: Well I -- it was an assignment ah and ah I I don't think that a child that likes anything that has -- any assignments.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Ah ha. But you were a child and you did it, right?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Okay and and what do you remember about ah -- anything else that you did. What did you do for fun?

GRASHA: There wasn't that much honestly. It -- poor people and ah --

LEVINE: What did your father --

GRASHA: And I was -- I was in the village I was -- how should I say -- ah I was lucky because I had my -- a father in America and my father was very go -- good man. He remembered us and my mother all -- was always loaning money to some of the people and ah because my father was wonderful. Some even forget -- you know one day you leave but not my father -- he he was a gentleman and an angel.

LEVINE: Awh. What was his personality like?

GRASHA: Well he (laughs) he was -- he too was in in the First World War -- see and ah they they ah that was at that time an Austro-Hungarian Empire.

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: So there were quite a few ah other nationalities in there and that first Otto -- that empi -- that ah ro ah -- war kind of broke up that Empire and there after smaller unit was made up call Yugoslavia. Which means ah Yugo mean ah -- South -- South Slav -- Yugoslavia.

LEVINE: Oh. Ah ha.

GRASHA: Ah.

LEVINE: I see. Some um were you a religious family?

GRASHA: Yes. Well we all the Croatians are Catholics.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And ah ah -- so we we were --

LEVINE: You practiced your religion.

GRASHA: Yeah. Yes.

LEVINE: Ah ha. And how about your mother -- what was she like? What -- how would you describe her temperament, her personality?

GRASHA: My mother -- well (laughs) she was a a a -- I suppose (laughs) every child remembers some (laughs) some ah thing that are not delicacies you know my -- some discipline was applied but (laughs).

LEVINE: Your mother was strict?

GRASHA: Ah to an extent yes. She --

LEVINE: What would she be strict with you about? What would she punish you for?

GRASHA: Ah well -- lang -- language (laughs).

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: That was the (laughs) [not understood]. And ah I -- she was strict on everything you know. And ah -- fir -- and as I said also she was well known in the village beca -- why -- because we live -- I would have to say that we lived better than most of the villagers there because of the fact that we had a father in America and he was very attentive also --

that my mother always had some dollars and actually to loan to those people there.

LEVINE: Um hum. Um hum. And um (clears throat) did did you ah -- did you go to school?

GRASHA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: I went to school and ah --

LEVINE: It was just you -- your mother, you, and Louise, your sister.

GRASHA: But we lived in ah in a (laughs) -- It wasn't the palace. There were thr -- at one time I guess there were three -- three ca --n families they dwindled down to two that that that I remember. And ah -- ah both -- there were three ja -- three ah men. Well they all ended up in America. The oldest one came to ah -- where the heck was it in -- ah Rankin Penns -- Rankin, Pennsylvania. And he got himself a job and ah he became a ah leader there too. And he helped -- god he was -- he who ah -- brought his ah younger brothers to to America. After the First World War there were two more brothers there -- my father and another one. [not understood] He also had a family but ah he ah he forgot. He went to America but totally forgot his family.

LEVINE: Ahhhh.

GRASHA: That was totally different then.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRASHA: And ah --

LEVINE: Ah Mike I'm going to pause a second. Okay so we're gonna -- were gonna continue now. Um (clears throat) So the two -- the the three families that were there the men all came to this country.

GRASHA: Yes.

LEVINE: And som -- this particular one forgot about his family and didn't send money.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Ah and then did the family go to America or they never came here?

GRASHA: Ah they ah -- well I don't know about the oldest one there were -- fist one that ah brought the other two . He was the oldest and ah there a very -- ah living in America too. But the other one -- he didn't -- his wife didn't even want to come to America. [not understood]

LEVINE: So but but -- how did you feel about coming?

GRASHA: Oh I -- I wanted to come.

LEVINE: We -- how long before you came did your father come? When did your after come to this country?

GRASHA: Oh I remember that's right why I -- I remember his -- him leaving.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: It was ah -- in ah so -- what was my exact age I don't know but I I distinctly remembers that he was leaving and ah -- and ah -- well he was happy and we happy. That -- we knew that it was going to be much better for us too.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: So so he left. Now I can't tell the exact date -- he was in -- in that First World War.

LEVINE: Right.

GRASHA: And right after that that's when ah his older brother brought him to the states.

LEVINE: And um (clears throat) where did he go when he came to the states?

GRASHA: He went to ah -- I --

LEVINE: Well I noticed on this paper that you brought that -- oh he went to Gary, Indiana.

GRASHA: That's right. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then he moved to Buffalo.

GRASHA: Buffalo.

LEVINE: And what did he do for work?

GRASHA: He would -- [not understood] Steel mills.

LEVINE: Oh. Ah ha. So so um -- when you -- when -- how long was he here before you came? Just roughly.

GRASHA: Well we ca -- so when did the world -- world of -- First World War end? I don't -- I forgot -- didn't get that.

LEVINE: Well he probably came here in the -- around 1920 and --

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Was he here around nine -- well but you remember him leaving so he must a --

GRASHA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: -- you must have been ah at least five or six.

GRASHA: Yeah yeah. Like that.

LEVINE: Yeah so he probably came about three years before you did.

GRASHA: Oh yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah and then he sent the money back. Right?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: And then ah ha.

GRASHA: He was very good to to his wife and his children.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Ah ha. Yeah. So um did you have anything special because your father was sending money? Did -- were -- as a little boy?

GRASHA: Ah yes. (laughs) I and my sister always had ah better clothing -- it was obvious. You know. And ah and dr -- and food and everything you know.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Yeah. DO you have any fond memories of life in Policia.

GRASHA: Police.

LEVINE: Police.

GRASHA: Yeah -- well as youngster and I engaging in ah -- well of course whatever -- when there were jobs or or or assignments you know that you ah have to -- had to do. Ah we had some cattle -- not not much -- very little. We ah -- and very -- often we didn't our cow we -- there was no milk for the children or or anybody. I still remember that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRASHA: Ah.

LEVINE: And um and how did you like school? Did you like going to school?

GRASHA: I always liked going to school. Yes.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And ah I ah I always had ah good marks. All my (laughs) -- that's ones thing that my parents were strict about. They they followed that. Ah no fooling around. And ah I I I thanked them for it.

LEVINE: Um hum. Wha -- could you describe what -- what school was like over there in Police?

GRASHA: Well it was -- the the -- I would think that I'll think that this -- medicine -- the the the -- what's the -- I'm beginning to loose my -- my language (laughs).

LEVINE: Oh well what ever um -- well like when you were in school was it a little school with a lot of classes and one teacher? Or --

GRASHA: That too it seems that it it at one point that we had ah very strict teacher.

LEVINE: So you had a strict mother and a strict teacher. You had a strict mother and a strict teacher.

GRASHA: Well he -- Yeah. (both laugh) She was a little -- little lady but ah she -- I commend her for for her -- ah

LEVINE: Yeah was she religious, your mother?

GRASHA: Oh yes. Yes.

LEVINE: And ah is there anything else about Police that you remember? When you think back about that period, that nine years when you were there? Is there anything else you remember that sticks in your mind?

GRASHA: Yeah -- I remember our departure.

LEVINE: Oh good tell me about that.

GRASHA: (laughs) Well I was happy we're going to America. Coming to America.

LEVINE: Ahhhhh. Ah ha. This is --

GRASHA: No that's -- I had

LEVINE: You just wrote that from this

GRASHA: -- I had that

LEVINE: Ah ha. Coming to America. So you were happy and did did you bring anything in particular with you?

GRASHA: (laughs) No not that I -- not that I recall.

LEVINE: Oh yeah. And and so what happened? You left your little village. How did you leave? What kind of transportation?

GRASHA: Oh yeah -- ah we had -- my mother had a brother in another village who had been out in the world you know and at that time he he came there to help us. You know depart there an so he ah -- he was there to help us.

LEVINE: And he -- and so what did you go on? What -- how did he take you?

GRASHA: Oh -- it must -- he might of -- he might of -- he probably -- I'm not sure but ah we didn't have an automobile or --

LEVINE: No.

GRASHA: And it was probably a team of ah oxen or or horse with a wagon.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And we had some you know clothing and stuff like that. To to ah -- the first -- first city would be Carlovitz [ph] and from there ah we went across the continent up to ah Cherbourg, France. And--

LEVINE: Would -- that must have been exciting for a nine year old boy.

GRASHA: Oh yeah yeah yes. We oh (laughs) we ah -- we were -- came to Fr -- France Cherbourg which is the seapor -- port. It waits for the big ships. Usually it comes from England to that and ah well we were there about two or three days and ah I remember (laughs) we were assigned to be with -- at one table there was my mother and the two of us and ah the table was a little larger and there was an Italian fa -- ah family (laughs). And I still remember that (laughs). We had -- well we had very -- we didn't have much ba -- bread in Croatia but ah -- ah here we were much better feed in Cher -- Cherbourg there. And here (laughs) I notice that ah the ah little Italian children -- ah they had opened up that that ah -- what do you call that -- you know it been --

LEVINE: The bread.

GRASHA: Bread. Baked [not understood].

LEVINE: Yeah it it's a long --

GRASHA: No no just little. It's ra -- round.

LEVINE: A roll.

GRASHA: Roll or something like that.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Ah ha.

GRASHA: Oh and they were just (laughs) opening up and throw -- and pull out the soft stuff and throw it away. Or the -- vice versa I'm not sure. Ah that ah I somehow even though we didn't understand each other but we came to an agreement that ah we would -- ah he -- they would turn -- give us what they didn't like and I can't say that we didn't like any but I had to counterweight this debt. Give them some of that (laughs).

LEVINE: Ah ha. So you mean you both had rolls and you'd give them what you -- they'd give you what they wouldn't eat and vice versa.

GRASHA: That's right. Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha. And um (clears throat) so how -- now did you remember the ship?

GRASHA: Yes. Yes. Oh the -- read that.

LEVINE: Yeah what was it's name?

GRASHA: Yeah. Last year Pittsburgh announce that they were -- they bought a new ship is going to be -- it's being built.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRASHA: And so they wanted to do some fun -- some -- that they want us to guess what's the name of the ship and my sister said well come on lets lets say we we travelled on the ah --

LEVINE: On ah the Majestic.

GRASHA: Majestic. That's right. That was the ship -- largest ship in the world at that time. And ah (laughs) it took what ah at least seven days to cross and ah Louise says, oh lets lets join this contest. I said, ah that's a lot of bologna then. Oh I could still kick myself [not understood] they did have a big -- sizable you know ah sum for for that.

LEVINE: If you guessed the name?

GRASHA: She she she -- my sister had suggested that we say the majestic but oh no no (laughs).

LEVINE: Awh now you better listen to your sister. Ah ha. Wow. Now what was it like on the Majestic when you were nine years old and you were coming here.

GRASHA: Oh oh it wonderful wonderful. There ah -- a little boy from a little, old, antique, old place. Even even bigger people are impressed when -- in a big ship. Oh and I remember running up and down the stairs you

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know. And once I found ah was it a nickel or a dime in the -- on the stairway.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And I spied it and oh was I happy. Ten cents! Ten cents or five cents I don't know but I was rich you know with that.

LEVINE: Wow. Wow. And um so did you get sea sick?

GRASHA: Ah I may -- I really don't remember you know but probably. Ah ah -- I would say that mostly ah the adults were ah -- sea sick then than the youngsters -- you know nothing bothers them.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember when the Majestic came into the New York Harbor?

GRASHA: Yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: What did you think when you sa -- saw New York or --

GRASHA: Yeah yeah that's -- the they assigned us to ah some fellow and he was -- we were in his charge for a while.

LEVINE: Do you remember Ellis Island? Ellis Island --

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: -- do you remember it?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: What do you remember about it?

GRASHA: Ah you know I (laughs) come to think of it -- ah -- ah I -- see that?

LEVINE: Oh you're a charter member.

GRASHA: And that.

LEVINE: Oh -- the memorial for those who helped win World War Two. Ah ha. Well lets talk first about when you first came to the country. We'll come to this part later. Do you remember any first impressions you had? Like when you first came to -- you got off the ship, you were in New York -- do you remember anything about what struck you?

GRASHA: Ah [not understood] (laughs) we were in (laugh) in heaven you know. Especially youngster -- and my mother was I suppose the more concerned I think making sure that she didn't loose us or something like that. And and I I seem to remember that ah that we were assigned ah some people there -- from there you know some people there whose job was to ah -- pool us -- to ah how should I say to take us to different places.

LEVINE: You mean at Ellis Island or after you left?

GRASHA: Ellis Island also.

LEVINE: Ellis Island. Do you remember lines and you had -- and there were questions and --

GRASHA: Yeah I think there was some of that.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then you got off di -- where did you meet your father?

GRASHA: In Buffalo.

LEVINE: Oh okay so so somebody helped you get to the train?

GRASHA: To the train. It was a long dr -- a long ride form New York to Buffalo.
Yeah and and he was waiting for us. And ah there was this huge ah
ah animal you know Buffalo -- that why they --

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: -- that's were it's got its name or (laughs).

LEVINE: There was a huge Buffalo in the platform?

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: (laughs) Ah ha. So so it was good to see your father huh?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. And then where did he take you?

GRASHA: Well he ah he took us to a -- to -- a town near near -- it's called
Riverside -- near near ah you know that's near the border -- Canada

and the U.S. And ah riverside -- well there's a rivers -- so many rivers and and ah there's a lot of waterways there.

LEVINE: And that's where you lived?

GRASHA: And oh he had been boarding at ah ah Croatian family ah after he had -- he had initially gone to a a a -- to ah Indiana where his fa -- his ah brother was. But then over -- I don't know how many years elapsed when he ah came to Buffalo there's a friend let him know that ah where as he was having difficulty maintaining -- keeping a job that this fellow said they they need people here in Buffalo why you don't come here. And so when we came he was boarding with these people. Ah I don't know maybe ah what period of time it was but af -- after two or three of our arrival he managed to -- you know -- to ah rent a place for us from there on.

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: And ah so he -- we stayed in the -- in Buffalo there near near yeah that's near the water -- near Canada.

LEVINE: Um hum. And then um (clears throat) did did you go to school there?

GRASHA: Oh yes. Yes. Ah lets see -- I was -- I had completed I think three grades over there and ah so in Buffalo I wa wa -- I went -- we went to a parochial school. You know Catholic ah stuff.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: And ah ah they put me back because of the langue barrier but ah I was only one year -- back. The - at the end of the year they ah they forgot that just -- we just forgot.

LEVINE: They skipped you.

GRASHA: And I skipped it to ah from then on I was at the head of the class usually.

LEVINE: Ah ha. And how was school compared -- how was the school in in Buffalo in comparison with the school in um -- in your little village of Polica.

GRASHA: Well I --

LEVINE: Police.

GRASHA: Police. Well they I -- we always think and say that ah the parochial schools are all -- are stick ah --

LEVINE: Strict and --

GRASHA: Strict yes. Yes.

LEVINE: -- and and -- yeah more difficult.

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And ah I I agree with that and then I ah I'm that I had had it.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: No fooling around. I I remember a a teacher in the in this parochial school (laughs) and there was one one (laughs) fellow always in trouble always (laughs). And you know -- ah he did something whatever it was -- she she -- the nun was kind of a (laughs) -- a discussion with him. She grabbed (laughs) grabbed his back and (laughs) he pulled away and there was only half sh -- half of -- of shirt left (laughs).

LEVINE: Wow (laughs). Yeah so you never got bad treatment cause you were a good student, Right?

GRASHA: Yes right righ I think so.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Um (clears throat) so ah so you stayed in school. How long did you stay in school?

GRASHA: well I've -- I stayed tehre in the paroc -- in the parochial school for -- till what was that eight grades.

LEVINE: [superimposed] Eighth grade. Ah ha.

GRASHA: And then I went on to high school in Kenmore, New York. But that -- after what the four day -- four day -- four years of that you know. And find a job -- I I didn't -- I didn't plan on it (laughs) because there just wasn't that [not understood] so.

LEVINE: Yeah you could use the money yeah.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what happened? What kind of job did you find?

GRASHA: Well oh -- well my father was in ste -- in a steel mill (laughs). He got a job for me there and ah I I worked there for ah -- well maybe a year. That's all but ah I ah as aspired for something higher and I ah got ah -
-

LEVINE: Well maybe if you could describe -- what was it like working in the steel mill?

GRASHA: Well (laughs) it was hot and (laughs) hot and heavy.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Hot and heavy yeah.

GRASHA: Andd I think it does good it it did me good you know to impact at ah ah -- experience ah and to me for the rest of my life. But I ah --

LEVINE: Why was it a good experience? Why -- what did you get out of it?

GRASHA: Well (laughs) making -- making a buck you know.

LEVINE: But you probably realized that that you really needed to do something else.

GRASHA: [superimposed] Yeah yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

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GRASHA: And ah I started – or something else – oh you know eh eh – no I got – I went to a night school – took up ah in New York – state they have ah a licensing of opticians.

LEVINE: Oh

GRASHA: In Pennsylvania to this day they don't have optician – I mean ah op ah ah licensing.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: That's why I went in New York and got a license and when we moved back to Pittsburgh I I had no trouble finding a job when I told them I had a New York license.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: So ah I –

LEVINE: So you went to night school.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: You got your license.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then did you work as an optician in – in Buffalo first?

GRASHA: In – I believe so and then I got a job in ah in in Pittsburgh.

LEVINE: [superimposed] Pittsburgh.

GRASHA: Pittsburgh.

LEVINE: Well why did the family move to Pittsburgh?

GRASHA: Ah – You know honestly I don't –

LEVINE: Maybe because you're father could get a better job?

GRASHA: The the that's that's defiantly so yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Well then did he work in the steel mills here in Pittsburgh?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah that ah –

LEVINE: I see.

GRASHA: Yeah and that's right he had ah he had an older brother here in Rankin, Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: Ah yeah. Ah ha. So so he came where his older brother was and where –

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: -- he could work in the steel mill and yeah. And you and you got a job as an optician.

GRASHA: Yeah.

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LEVINE: Great. So um well ah wait a minute now when did you meet your wife?

GRASHA: Oh yeah. Yeah um ra ah –

LEVINE: And and when did you go in the army?

GRASHA: Army in nine – nineteen forty – two. Oh I – this was in Buffalo. I and a couple of boy – you know buddies were at – in a movie house this one night and after the movie they shut down and then on again – told us that please wait they have an announcement – important announcement to make.

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: And what was the important announcement the sh – the bombing of of ah –

LEVINE: Pearl Harbor.

GRASHA: Pearl Harbor that's right. The very next day we all went to sign up and they told us well don't well ah – you go home – they asked us us our ages you know – you get you (laughs) You'll be notified. And we were in a couple of days we were notified and ah we went to see Uncle Sam.

LEVINE: Well now um what were you thinking or feeling about signing up? You went to the movies and you saw that Pearl Harbor was bombed and then you went with your friends and you signed up. Why did you sign up?

GRASHA: We wanted to get into the army and ah we we were – we were – how should I say I mean I'm bragging but we want to ah be – to defend America.

LEVINE: Um hum. An –

GRASHA: And we did as I said I I spent ah almost five years in in the army and I remember the first half it was ah through being sent through different parts of the of the country (laughs) and ah – where thw heck was it – in ah –

LEVINE: Where you – where you went to ca – boot camp you mean?

GRASHA: Ah – no I was assigned I I got into the camp and ah – strict ah – in ha intra ah – you know I – it was pretty strict ah – what's the word?

LEVINE: Well you had to do basic training and that was pretty strenuous I imagine.

GRASHA: Yeah yeah. Yes it was.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GRASHA: And ah I didn't (laughs) I didn't cry or (laughs) there was sometimes some you hears some boys (laughs) some some language that ah I didn't like but ah – no we ah – I I was I ah I attained ah – a fi – ah – was ah – I became a sergeant – staff sergeant in the army. And ah – you know I – in Buffalo, New York there was – is a friend of mine who had a girl friend in Welland, Ontario.

LEVINE: Ah ha. See if you could talk just a little louder.

GRASHA: Oh.

LEVINE: Okay.

GRASHA: Yeah so -- in in Welland, Ontario this fellow -- a friend of mine had a girlfriend in Welland, Ontario they're getting married and he needs transportation. I had a car. He didn't. He asked me for a ride so I took him there and was a huge place this ah wedding you know and ah -- ceremonies and and lot of food and everything. And I looked my eyes dropped on on a beauty ah that that [not understood], talking and here I found out of course her name and that they -- she and I had been born -- were born in neighboring villages in Croatia.

LEVINE: Wow.

GRASHA: Well about the same time that we came to Uncle Sam -- to ah --

LEVINE: Buffalo.

GRASHA: Buffalo. Ah they went to ah Welland, Ontario. She's just across the border there. And you know we ah -- that we we meet each other, we talked and from then on we -- it was correspondence and ah not only that ah -- there was ah -- I came home on furlough but -- about two and half or three years I was in the army ah and I got a furlough and went -- got married. Ah (laughs).

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: You know. Ha how the heck --

LEVINE: Well where were you stationed when you were in the army? Before you got the furlough where were you?

GRASHA: You know I I was – I travelled ah a lot of the – saw a lot of Uncle Sam's Territory all the way across the -- almost the continent. But at this one time I remember being sent down to to ah Texas and Louisiana and (laughs) and ah captain told me to teach them how to read and write English (both laugh). I'm a [not understood]. But ah these boys – ah they were Americans you know but ah didn't go to school. You know and I I taught them how to read and write. But – so anyway how did we – this courtship between me and my –

LEVINE: What's her name?

GRASHA: Lillian [not understood] in Croatian.

LEVINE: Could you spell the last name?

GRASHA: Ah yes. Ah Culig C-U-L-I-G. And ah – she – she died.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: Um was ah 2001. We had – we got anyway we got – yeah we got married with correspondence and then we said a sa – set a date and we got married. I got a ten day furlough. Pretty sh – pretty long.

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: And ah Captain understood and we got married. And –

LEVINE: So you went on furlough and you had a honeymoon?

GRASHA: Honeymoon yes.

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: And ah – oh then she after that – after being married – I remember when they go and they – to go and get married. So I I – I'm sorry.

LEVINE: Oh please don't apologize. So you got married and you were still in the service then.

GRASHA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: So did she go back to here town?

GRASHA: She she – no she went and stayed with my pa – my family in Buffalo.

LEVINE: I see.

GRASHA: Until – ah yeah you know I had I had applied for OCS training and wouldn't you believe – wouldn't know the day I was going to get married (laughs) I got no – this notice and I for – the heck with the (laughs) –

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: -- military life after that. We got married and –

LEVINE: Ah ha.

GRASHA: [not understood] She died in 2001.

LEVINE: 2001 she died.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah ah ha.

GRASHA: And we had – we raised three – three beautiful females and one handsome male.

LEVINE: Well good for you. Okay so – so she – so you decided you were married now. You weren't gonna go on in the military. Did you ever see any action during World War Two?

GRASHA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: Wa – what kind of action did you see?

GRASHA: I was sa – ah (laughs) I – oh shucks I should – I was stationed on the – on the this Japanese Island that was finally – I was assigned and we – I was going to – into battle in ah actually and ended up – I was lucky that I'm still here you know. But but we lost um hundreds if not thousands of men on on various islands. Especially on Okinawa. And I was stationed there after that for almost a year.

LEVINE: Whoa.

GRASHA: And then Uncle Sam damn fool he to – give ah it turns that island back to the Japanese (laugh). Isn't that something? And how many ta – how many men –

LEVINE: Died to defend it and ah –

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: -- and to and to – yeah. Not to defend it. But you were you were fighting the Japanese –

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: -- there and then ah ha. Okay so um how do you think about you're your army experience now with all these year in between?

GRASHA: I think it was worthwhile. I think that maybe everybody should be ah – should get a little bit of training. Not – not necessarily the going to combat but military training.

LEVINE: Why do you think military training is a good thing?

GRASHA: Well because it helps (laughs) – it's ah how should I say – say it saves America. Wa – what it's – America with it's background -- what it has – what it is. Ah I think and I know that there are very a lot of eyes looking at it (laughs) that want to. And so America has to have um well trained military ah establishment.

LEVINE: Um hum. Um hum. So so you're you're wife lived with your mother while you were still in the service.

GRASHA: That's that's right.

LEVINE: And then when you got out what happened?

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GRASHA: Well we ah – we rented a pa –place there and we settled –
housekeeping.

LEVINE: In Buffalo?

GRASHA: In Buffalo, yes.

LEVINE: Now when did you – when did your family move to Pittsburgh?

GRASHA: Ah –

LEVINE: Do you – when you set up housekeeping were you being an
optometrist then?

GRASHA: Optician.

LEVINE: Optician.

GRASHA: Optician. Yeah. Ah probably was – yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Um – Okay well – ah you just said that you have three boys and a girl
and um –

GRASHA: I ah – I have – I'm willing to give you.

LEVINE: Oh.

GRASHA: I've ah – I've made – I wrote two such books one was slightly
different.

LEVINE: Oh my goodness isn't this wonderful. It's called a native sons ode to resurrected Croatia, by Michael Grasha. And it's ah a book that was written. Why don't you say what what made you write it? Why did you write this book?

GRASHA: Well im still – I am – ah fateful [microphone interference] American citizen but I'm still very much interested in in the the Cortina – Croatians. And this is ah [not understood] and ah –

LEVINE: A case for a resurrected sovereign Croatia.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Um hum.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So do you think of yourself as Croatian and America, both of those things?

GRASHA: Well I – I say I'm an American but I cannot forget the land of my birth and ah had knowing – know – having read its background I think it's a wonderful place. Sometime I I'm more critical of the current leadership that ah somebody – ah somebody that lived over there but ah I I can't ah I could not wipe it off my –

LEVINE: Hum.

GRASHA: And it doesn't make me less of an American.

LEVINE: I see. Ah ha. Yeah. Well um when did you write this?

GRASHA: Oh –

LEVINE: Did you write it after you retired? Or you wrote it before?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha I see. I see. So um well thank you. We'll put this book in our library at Ellis Island. That's wonderful. We'll now we have a book by you and a book by your sister.

GRASHA: Yeah that right.

LEVINE: The Grashas are very well represented at Ellis Island with two interviews. Um okay so so say now um you came to Pittsburgh. You settled here – um and optician – you were being an optician.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: And ah what would you say you're most proud of that you've done? What gives you satisfaction when you think of it?

GRASHA: Ah raise the family in America.

LEVINE: Yeah ah ha.

GRASHA: And ah – I'm so sorry – that she died.

LEVINE: Yeah well that's tough. Well you must have had a very nice marriage.

GRASHA: Oh yes.

LEVINE: You did ha. Yeah. Yeah. Well um –do you think the fact that you came here as a as a – a little nine year old boy – do you think that made a big difference in you as a person? The fact that you started out in this little village, you came to America and you started again. What difference do you think that made to – in your personality or the way you look at things or –

GRASHA: Well – that I can compare – say my father [not understood] when you come to America ah and have grown up man or female you you have to ah adjust to – adapt and adjust and that a lot more difficult and [not understood].

LEVINE: Put this back on you.

GRASHA: Oh I'm sorry.

LEVINE: That's okay. Okay you were saying that as a – when you come as an older person it's harder to adjust than if you come as a child.

GRASHA: That's right. Yeah.

LEVINE: Um hum. So so you um you adjusted very well because you were so young.

GRASHA: Yeah. That's right.

LEVINE: but do think it – do you think the fact that you weren't born here but you came here and had to start over again. Do you think that made a difference in you and the way you look at things?

GRASHA: Oh yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: What kind of difference?

GRASHA: Well (laughs) ta – in America you do travel, you see, you do and have a lot more – ah opportunities and ah and and there's lot more to ah aspire to.

LEVINE: Hum. Um hum. Um – is there anything else about coming here or being here or the life that you made here that you would want to say? Is there anything else you would want to say about – being in this country?

GRASHA: Ah it's wonderful. It's the best country in the world and ah this is it and ah – it think most people even those that mean – may or negate it and say no I don't feel that way. But I think they do. If they had a chance to come and they didn't.

LEVINE: Ah ha. You mean people in other countries –

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: -- who might – that if they could come here they would.

GRASHA: Yeah.

LEVINE: Ah ha. Yeah. Okay well I think we covered everything unless you wa – have something else you want to bring up?

GRASHA: Ah nuts (laughs) you can have all of this stuff.

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LEVINE: Oh really. You gonna – you how bout this?

GRASHA: Oh ah.

LEVINE: That I think maybe you want don't you?

GRASHA: Yeah yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah you'll keep that. That's um – let me just say this for the tape though that – this is a copy of you derivative –

GRASHA: Citizenship.

LEVINE: -- a citizenship which you got through your father. And um it's a it's a it's a wonderful document in a in a leather case and a nice picture of you.

GRASHA: Thank you.

LEVINE: Yeah (laughs). Okay well I've been speaking with Mike Gras –

GRASHA: Grasha.

LEVINE: Grasha. Who came here in 1929 when he was just nine years old. And he ah established a family here and um is a proud American.

GRASHA: Right.

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

