

EI-1456
MARY COMPORT
BIRTH DATE MARCH 11TH 1917
INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 22ND 2007
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 90
RUNNING TIME: 50: 07
INTERVIEWER: DR. JANET LEVINE
RECORDING ENGINEER: DR. JANET LEVINE
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: AMANDA CARELLA
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: NOT YET REVIEWED

CROATIA [Then Yugoslavia] 1921
AGE: 4
SHIP: SATURNIA
PORT:
RESIDENCES:
CROATIA, SUSICA
CROATIA, RAVNA GORA

LEVINE: Okay, today is June 22nd, the year 2007, I'm here in Pittsburgh with Mary Comport, who came here as a three year old little girl with a great big bow in her hair (laughs)

COMPORT: 1921

LEVINE:: In 1921, right, and she came from what was Yugoslavia and is now Croatia, and she is Croatian.

COMPORT: 19—

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Parks Services.

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Now, um (clears throat) would you start by saying your birthdate and where in Croa—in Yugoslavia you were born?

COMPORT: All right (clears throat) You want my name too?

LEVINE: Why don't you say your name when you came?

COMPORT: Oh. (pause) M-my life began in March 11th, 1917. I was born to Frank and C-Catherine Renka, R-E-N-K-A. You want me to tell you anything else?

LEVINE: Well, do you want to go through what you've written or would you rather I ask questions and you answer them?

COMPORT: Which would you rather do?

LEVINE: Well, I'd rather do the questions, unless you feel

COMPORT: [interposed] Okay. Go ahead

LEVINE: Okay. All right, so umm, why don't you say again for the tape, what the name of the town was, in—in Yugoslavia, that you, um, came from? (shuffling papers) Or maybe it's easier for me to say it, 'cause I have it right here. It's Su—Susica [alternate: Susicza], am I saying it right?

COMPORT: No, *Su-sica*.

LEVINE: *Su-sica. Su-sica.* And did you live—so you were born in Susica, I got it, uh-huh

COMPORT: Yugoslavia

LEVINE: [continues] Yugoslavia. You were born there, and I take it you were there until you left.

COMPORT: Yes I was th—almost four when I got here

LEVINE: Mm-hmm. And your mother's name?

COMPORT: Katerina—her maiden name too?

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: [continues] Adlesic Renka. R-E-N-K-A.

LEVINE: Okay, now, um, how do you spell you mother's maiden name?

COMPORT: A-D-L-E-S-I-C-. Adlesic.

LEVINE: Okay

COMPORT: An—a—"h" on the end, if you wanna put it on.

LEVINE: Okay. And wh—how would you describe your mother? What was her temperament, her personality?

COMPORT: Oh she was wonderful. She was very outgoing, y'know, she wasn't shy or anything, made a lot of friends when she got here. In fact, she couldn't speak English. But she went to night school when she got here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: [continues] And she learned English and to write and read so she was ahead of her time, because a lot of women wouldn't do that.

LEVINE: Right, that's true. So—uh, so that was your mother. And how was she with you? As a mother?

COMPORT: Wonderful.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: That's all I can say, wonderful. She lived with me for 35 years, so we got along good (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs) That's good.

COMPORT: [continues] And I can never thank her enough for the sacrifice she made to marry a man she didn't know, you know, to bring us here.

LEVINE: Why don't you talk about that, about wh—how the circumstances under which you and your family came?

COMPORT: [interposed] That we came, okay. My mother married Frank Renka, she was very much in love with him. And they were only married seven and a half years when he died. From tuberculosis and pneumonia. Well when he died, there was no money over there and she had to work real hard, she had to wash people's cows in order to make enough—a little bit of money to feed us. It was very difficult.

So she had this woman live next door to her and she says that he brother Joseph Kesic wanted a woman from Croatia to marry. He don't care if she had children, as long as—you know she would marry him when she got here. So, no she didn't want to, she didn't want to, but her mother told her: 'You have to go. Your children are starving, your starving, you have nothing here. Give them a better life.' So that was my grandmother.

LEVINE: Do you have any memories of her? Your grandmother? You personally? Do you remember her?

COMPORT: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

COMPORT: No, I was too small.

LEVINE: [interposed] You were too young.

COMPORT: I don't remember. In fact, I don't remember much coming over on the boat. Well, anyway, my grandmother finally got her convinced to come. So, th-this stepfather of mine sent her eleven hundred dollars, at that time it was for me and for the three—my brother and sister and my mother. And we got on this ship (shuffles papers) I have it written down here (sniffs)

LEVINE: Saturnia

COMPORT: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay, and you left from Cherbourg, France.

COMPORT: And it took twenty-eight days on the boat—

LEVINE: [interposed] Wow!

COMPORT: [continues]—to come over here, she said. And she said she was sick the whole while I was, we were on the boat, but not me. I was roaming around the whole ship. (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs)

COMPORT: And, uh (knocks table)

LEVINE: And, uh, who were you close to? Close to either your brother or your sister?

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah. They're both gone now, but I was very close to them

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COMPORT: And then I had another brother—half-brother and sister. But we felt like they were my whole brother and sister. You know I never said my half-brother or anything like that.

LEVINE: [interposed] Yeah. Uh-huh. So your mother came here, she must have been filled with trepidation about wha—what kind of a man is this going to be?

COMPORT: [interposed] Sh-she didn't wanna get married again. She was so in love with my dad. He was such a handsome guy, good-looking soldier. And, uh, she said it was her only love.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COMPORT: Well anyway, she went for us. Not for herself

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

COMPORT: [continues] So when we reached Ellis Island, I don't remember anything at all about it, but she told me they first examined us to make sure we were healthy and then they took us upstairs—somewhere—and we got vaccinated then. And uh, then the—took us back down to see him, and he was there waiting (knocks table) so she says when she saw him she asked the interpreter—interpreter if she could not marry him but just stay in New York and work. And he said, no, you either marry him or go right back to Europe on the boat.

So then she stayed because she looked us, and I was already hugging his leg because I wanted a daddy so bad.

So anyway, they got married there in (taps table)—

LEVINE: In Ellis Island?

COMPORT: Right there!

LEVINE: Oh.

COMPORT: She had to marry him right away, or else go back. So then (pause) they got married and he brought us to Pittsburgh, is where we lived. For a long time.

LEVINE: And what did he do in Pittsburgh?

COMPORT: He was a carpenter.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

COMPORT: And (pause)

LEVINE: Had he been here for some time?

COMPORT: Yeah. Yeah he was a policeman in Yugoslavia. But when he came here, he was a carpenter. So uh, we were all grateful that he brought us over; I told him many times that I thanked him, you know, for bringing us here.

LEVINE: And how did the marriage fare? H-how—how did it work, or didn't—

COMPORT: Well my mother, after she learned English, and everything, she was the boss.(laughs). She didn't let him rule her, you know, she ruled him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COMPORT: And he listened! 'Cause he had a good wife: she cooked, cleaned. At that time she had to do laundry in lye. With her bare hands! There was not—no dishwash—er

LEVINE: Wash machine?

COMPORT: [continues] washer or dryer. Nothing like that. And you had to rinse the clothes in cold water, 'cause there was no hot water running out of the spigot. You he-had to heat it in that big c-copper k-kettle. I can remember that.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: So—

LEVINE: Now what was his name?

COMPORT: Joseph

LEVINE: And his last name?

COMPORT: K-E-S-I-C-H. (pause)

LEVINE: But you always kept the name of Renka? Until you married?

COMPORT: [interposed] O-oh yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Uh-huh.

COMPORT: Yeah, because that was my name.

LEVINE: Yeah. And-and—so, did you, well you weren't school-age when you got here—

COMPORT: I was almost four.

LEVINE: You were almost four, uh-huh, but did your brother and sister go to school?

COMPORT: After we were here a while, the people around told us that kids had to go to school. So then we all went to school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

COMPORT: And, uh (pause, knocks table), what else can I tell you?

LEVINE: Well, uh (clears throat) was your family religious?

COMPORT: (pauses) In—in his own church, he went to church once a year, once a year. And that was it. Easter, I guess. Their Easter. He-he was Serbian.

LEVINE: Oh he was Serbian?

COMPORT: [continues] My mother was Roman Catholic. And that's how she kept—

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: and he didn't care you know—

LEVINE: I see, so were you raised Catholic?

COMPORT: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm. Okay, and, uh how did your brother and sister, did—you and your brother and sister, did you take to your new father?

COMPORT: Well, we did the best we could, you know, we grew up thinking he was a stepfather, you know

LEVINE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Yeah, so it sounds like you didn't just—completely, totally, embrace him as a father, but you got along

COMPORT: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Okay, so then, let's see. Where did you—you came to Pittsburgh and you were living in an immigrant area, were you?

COMPORT: Yeah, well there were all different religions there

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: And one of my best friends was Jewish lady, I worked for her when I was sixteen

LEVINE: Oh

COMPORT: Did some housework for her and I just loved her. Baba and Zeda and I learned some Jewish words while I worked for her. And her son went to school to be a doctor; he was still going to school when I start working for him. He was so wonderful—my best friend of anything

LEVINE: Really?

COMPORT: He passed away when he was in his seventies, and his mother died before that, she had cancer in the stomach. And I remember her sittin'

at the window and saying: 'Well I'm the second one, no, not her,' she says 'Two died before me,' but she said, 'I'll be the third one.' She was.

LEVINE: Wow. What was it about them that you liked so much?

COMPORT: They were so nice to me, so good, very good. They had one daughter that was snooty—you know, she wasn't (pause) like—like the other

LEVINE: --like her brother and her mother and father?

COMPORT: [interposed] Yeah, yeah. Her dad was a tailor. And he was always nice to us. And mother was wonderful until she had to go to bed. And then she died. But Dr. Mars, he came to our house, Christmas time—he married a Catholic girl. In a Catholic church. And—he always came. They had a Christmas tree, you know—

LEVINE: Oh

COMPORT: [continues]—like the Catholics have. And he ate the meat, any kind of meat, it didn't bother him

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

COMPORT: But he came every year (raps table), every year they came to our house. We had fun together, very nice.

LEVINE: So in other words, your mother knew them too?

COMPORT: Well yeah, she got to know them through—

LEVINE: --through you?

COMPORT: —through me

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh. Well for—let's just back up a minute. When you first started school, could you speak English/

COMPORT: No—but see I can't remember, but I know I learnt in school.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: I learnt to sp—I can't remember when I learned! But I did!

LEVINE: (laughs) Somehow, you knew how to do it

COMPORT: [interposed] Y-yeah. It just came.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh

COMPORT: So I learned English when I went to school

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: When I was ready, you know, I was only, too young when I first came.

LEVINE: Yeah. And what about your brother and sister, did they—

COMPORT: Well they, they learnt too.

LEVINE: And when you first got here—well you were so young—but were your brother and sister uh, teased about being greenhorns or any of that kind of immigrant—

COMPORT: [interposed] Mm-mm, no

LEVINE: [continues]—No, because you were in an immigrant area

COMPORT: Y-yeah, right.

LEVINE: And what was it like in Pittsburgh, then?

COMPORT: Well, a lot different than today!

LEVINE: Yeah, what's some big difference?

COMPORT: The kids weren't as bad as they are today. They're really, I'm glad I don't live down there anymore. You know, I would never live there now.

LEVINE: What part of Pittsburgh did you go to?

COMPORT: [interposed] North—North side.

LEVINE: North side, uh-huh

COMPORT: [interposed] Yeah, and it's bad neighborhood, then—not then, now. (knocks table) But we had good friends from down there. And the kids played together. And we played that—that you don't even see that played anymore—ring-around-the-rosie. We were in a big circle, oh my gosh! We had a lot of fun, us kids.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm. Was your mother glad that she had come here?

COMPORT: Oh yeah. She joined the largest, you know—

LEVINE: Oh the—the—

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh she joined everything! Yeah she was a secretary for the one lodge, and something for the other, you know, and they did a lot of things.

LEVINE: Now, we're, we're some of the organizations Croatian people?

COMPORT: Oh yeah

LEVINE: [interposed] So wha—did she keep up her Croatian ways, even though she was here?

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah. Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: And what kinds of ways did she keep hold of that Croatian heritage? What did she do, was it cooking, was it—

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah, she made all the cooking. She was a good cook and a good baker, very good. I used to make some of the things she made, but I can't do it anymore, I'm too weak. You know. You're-- you're not as strong as you'd like to be.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

COMPORT: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Any other ways she kept up her Croatian roots?

COMPORT: (pause) W-well, that's about it. You know, she did, she fell right into living where we were living

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: Like the different people.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh, so—let's see. So stayed in school until you were sixteen?

COMPORT: (pause) Yeah. My mother—one day I come home from school, I was in the eleventh grade, and uh, she said: 'Mary, you're going to have to quit school,' and I said: 'Why?' And she said: 'Because'—we called him Pap—'Pap lost his job.' They laid off a lot of people at the National Casket Company. So I had to quit school

LEVINE: Did you like school?

COMPORT: Oh yeah, I liked going t'school. It was real nice. And uh—I got a—what did I do? I got a job that was in a sewing factory. And I walked downtown Pittsburgh, because I had no money for carfare—at that time they had streetcar—you know. I had no money to get a ride, so I walked back and forth and I only made six dollars a week.

Worked everyday, sewing these dresses, oh my gosh! Anyway, one day I made six dollars and fifty cents, and I only gave my mother six, 'cause I wanted

some for myself. Oh! She wasn't talking to me when I come home from sc—you know wherever I was at.

And I said: 'Whatsa matter?' She said: 'You took fifty cents from your pay. You didn't give it all to me'—'cause at that time we had to give it all to mother—I said: 'Well I wanted some money for myself.' Well my punishment was I was not allowed to go to the school picnic that I always looked forward to. Was not allowed.

LEVINE: So your mother must have been kind of strict.

COMPORT: She was until the youngest child was born, and then after that she wasn't strict anymore.

LEVINE: (laughs) So—so okay, so it was your brother you sister and you, and then your mother married this uh, Mr. Kesich. And then she—did—how many children did she have—

COMPORT: --two.

LEVINE: She had two. And when the youngest one—whaddya think, how do you explain that? That she got unstrict?

COMPORT: Oh she was a little tomboy! She was allowed to do whatever she wanted, you know, wasn't strict with her anymore. Or with me

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: Yeah.

LEVINE: And uh (clears throat). And did you mother have the attitude that she wanted you to become American?

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah!

LEVINE: Or that she wanted you to—to hang on to your roots

COMPORT: [interposed] No, oh no, she wanted and us kids once we learned English that's all we talked was English.

LEVINE: Did she—did she learn?

COMPORT: Oh yeah!

LEVINE: She—she could speak it too. She went to night school?

COMPORT: She went to school and she learned. Mm-hm.

LEVINE: And how about your stepfather? Did he, was he okay with English?

COMPORT: He didn't know much English

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And I know that Pittsburgh was a place where a lot of jobs were because of the mills, right?

COMPORT: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, could you talk anything about Pittsburgh and the mills? Did you have any contact with that at all?

COMPORT: The fellow that I finally married—he was my boyfriend—he worked there, in a mill for a while. Until he became a fireman, city fireman. And when the wartime came (pause) they didn't take him because he was working in a mill. And a fireman.

LEVINE: Oh because his services were needed is that why he didn't—

COMPORT: Yeah, uh-huh. That's why he didn't go.

LEVINE: Well you came here in '21, you were so little, but by the 30's, by the Depression you must have been become aware of the Depression and the—

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah!

LEVINE: What kind of effect did that have on you and your family?

COMPORT: (laughs) I—m-my mother started a little saving account for me in a bank—oh I didn't have much in there, maybe twelve dollars or something—and when that Depression came, I got five cents back from my twelve dollars. I still have the check! They sent me a check! But I kept it. I didn't cash it in.

LEVINE: Wow.

COMPORT: [continues] For a nickel! It cost them more money for them to send me that check than it did for them to gimme that nickel! (laughs)

LEVINE: So why, because your mother needed the other money? Is that why you needed the nickel?

COMPORT: No! They kept it, the bank kept it.

LEVINE: Oh the bank kept it! Oh they went bust, or whatever

COMPORT: [interposed] Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: Yeah

LEVINE: So, and then how was it on your family with—during that period of time when everybody was out of work, and—

COMPORT: Well, we did—I guess we did the best we could, I don't remember

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: She made food that didn't cost a lot, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: And then my brother—my older brother Jake, Jacob. He got a—he was working. Oh no, he was a gentleman, he used to—when he was young—he used to collect people’s stuff that they were throwing away and he’d sell ‘em. So he had money saved, and he gave it to my mother. And that helped us, a lot.

LEVINE: Hmm. Mm-hmm.

COMPORT: And we were in that big flood, too.

LEVINE: Oh, tell about that.

COMPORT: Oh, my gosh! Was it '36, I think, it was such a big flood, it went up to the second floor—

LEVINE: Whoa!

COMPORT: And my mother had start writing her life story (raps table)—

LEVINE: (gasps)

COMPORT: --and it got ruined.

LEVINE: Ohh!

COMPORT: [continues] But she never went back to it. It was too much, you know. By that time.

LEVINE: And what—could you talk about the

COMPORT: [simultaneously] the flood?

LEVINE: [continues]—yeah

COMPORT: Well we went upstairs because we thought, well it’s just gonna come maybe on the first floor a little bit, we’ll be all right. It went up to the

second floor and I was going with my boyfriend then, and he came with a boat, they lend them boats—a wide boat, you know, that you—

LEVINE: --row

COMPORT: --rowed. And—and he got us out. And I said to him: 'Take Pap first,' because he was heavy, you know, big and heavy. So we helped him get in the boat, and he took him to shore where he could go without water, and then he came back for my mother and for me.

LEVINE: Whoa

COMPORT: And my sister—at that time—she wasn't there, for some reason or another, and neither was my brother. Just me and my mother. Then he took us second.

LEVINE: Wow.

COMPORT: [interposed] Yeah. And a good friend of ours was rowing them a boat helping people, when I don't know what happened, but his boat (raps table) turned upside-down, and here he was caught –it was a ball-field down there with a wire fence, and his body –his clothes were caught on that fence and he drowned. It was terrible!

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: We felt so bad.

LEVINE: And what happened – how did – when the fl –can you say anything about the community? How it responded to—

COMPORT: Everybody cleaned their own houses, you know , just did the best they could.

LEVINE: And how long was the flood? How long was the water—there?

COMPORT: Well, I can't remember, roughly, but it was about a week anyhow.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: We stayed with some people that we knew, friends. They let us stay with them. That's how people belong, everybody took somebody, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, wow. And then what? Do you remember the build-up to World War II? Do you remember when—when there was talk that we might go to war, and –

COMPORT: Oh yeah!

LEVINE: Could you talk at all about that—what

COMPORT: My oldest son was in the Navy, but I don't think he was there when the war—he was born in '38. No, he wasn't there. Then. No, he went later.

LEVINE: [interposed] No. Well, wh—let me just back up a minute. Um, you, uh, you dropped out of school because your mother said you had to work—

COMPORT: Yeah

LEVINE: --and then, when did you meet your husband?

COMPORT: (sighs) I was coming home—I was almost, I was sixteen. I was coming home from school from wherever I was, before I quit school, you know. And—I was near the corner of the street when I lived, when I see these two fellas runnin' up toward me. I though 'Well, I wonder where they're going,' you know, I didn't know them. And my h-husband come up first. He said: 'I wanna ask you if you'll go to a party with me, New Year's Eve,' you know, and the other fella says: 'I want you to go with me.' I said: 'Well being he came first, I'll have to take him.' And that's how it happened. And from that time on, we were just—

LEVINE: Did you know him before he ran—he ran up the street?

COMPORT: Mm-mm

LEVINE: Wow.

COMPORT: And yet he was from the neighborhood, but I didn't know—well I wasn't goin' out much, you know. You know, I didn't know.

LEVINE: So what was his name?

COMPORT: Jim.

LEVINE: Jim-uh- Comport.

COMPORT: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: And what was his background? Had he been born—

COMPORT: [interposed] Italian. No, he was born here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: But his parents came from overseas.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah.

COMPORT: Mm-hmm.

LEVINE: And what was it you liked about him?

COMPORT: (pause) I—he was just nice (laughs)

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: He was a nice guy.

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: He just died last November.

LEVINE: Oh.

COMPORT: But he was almost ninety—he was ninety one, almost ninety two when he passed away.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: So, I still miss him terribly.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

COMPORT: Yeah,

LEVINE: Well, uh—and then did you have children?

COMPORT: Four.

LEVINE: Four

COMPORT: Three boys and a girl.

LEVINE: Oh—and the girl is Judy

COMPORT: [interposed] And the girl—yeah, she's the last one here. I finally had my girl! (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs) Good! And then—is Kelly Judy's daughter?

COMPORT: Yeah

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: Yeah she's going to school for PA, Physician Assistant.

LEVINE: How nice

COMPORT: So she's gonna graduate in August (taps microphone)

LEVINE: Yeah, don't--don't play with that, you're gonna—the wire. (laughs)

COMPORT: Oh, sorry!

LEVINE: Uh-huh? So, so I should say that Judy and Kelly are the ones who brought—

COMPORT: [interposed] Me

LEVINE: [continues]—Mrs. Comport here today. And um, so do you have other grandchildren too?

COMPORT: I have five grandchildren, and three step-grandchildren. My son married a woman that had a daughter. She married she had three kids. So—

LEVINE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

COMPORT: The five are my own.

LEVINE: Um, so you married—you met your husband. Did you continue to work after you married?

COMPORT: Oh yeah! I worked for thirty-seven years at Wolverine Toy Factory.

LEVINE: Wolverine? Uh-huh? Oh

COMPORT They made metal toys.

LEVINE: I see

COMPORT: And they're worth a lot of money today (laughs)

LEVINE: Oh yeah! And so, did you enjoy doing that?

COMPORT: Well, after a while I got tired of it, but I had t'help out.

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: You know, 'cause firemen, at that time didn't make much money. Only about four thousand something a year! Now they're making big money.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: After he left. (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs) Yeah

COMPORT: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: So, uh—do you think the fact that you came from someplace else to this country—even though you, yourself were so young—do you think that made a difference in like, your personality, or the way you see things?

COMPORT: [interposed] Mm-mm. Mm-mm.

LEVINE: No

COMPORT: Mm-mm.

LEVINE: And how do you feel about being, like Croatian and American? How do you, how do you put it together in your own way?

COMPORT: [interposed] Well I feel like I'm American now. I went for my citi-citi-citizenship paper

LEVINE: Oh you did? Uh-huh.

COMPORT: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: Did your mother ever become a citizen?

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah, she went with me!

LEVINE: Oh! Uh-huh. Great. So, was that a big day?

COMPORT: Oh yeah! The girl that sponsored, you know me, we went out for lunch. We had a nice day with you know, when that happened.

LEVINE: Did you—did you—you had to study, right? And take a test?

COMPORT: Yeah, you had to answer questions

LEVINE: [interposed] Answer questions

COMPORT: Yeah, which I knew.

LEVINE: Was that difficult?

COMPORT: Mm-mm

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

COMPORT No. I was so glad I did it.

LEVINE: Really? Uh-huh—

COMPORT: [interposed] Made my—I—I was a citizen of the United States and I was very proud of that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah, yeah. Uh, when you think back on your life, what has given you a great deal of satisfaction?

COMPORT: Well, the fact that (pause), that I was a good mother. Raised kids good, I had good children. No one was drinking or anything like that.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: [continues] And maybe I was a little strict—I don't know—but I didn't allow them to go out and roam around the streets. They were not allowed to do that. And I think that's what

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Do you think, can you think of any values or attitudes that your mother tried to instill in you—

COMPORT: Oh yeah, she, yeah she always (pause) showed me the right way to go—well I never went any other way—

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: And being that she lived with me for so many years, we just got along real good and she thought the world of my husband. She said: 'He treats me better than my own children.' That's how much she loved Jim.

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Wow, that's sayin' something huh?

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And how about, do you think you raised your children kind of the way your mother raised you?

COMPORT: Yeah, I think so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah, yeah. Uh. Let's see. And how about now? Now you're ninety years old and what brings you joy in a given day, what makes you feel happy?

COMPORT: (sighs) I guess because I'm still alive, I don't know (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs) Yeah, are you living at home and everything?

COMPORT: My own home? Yes, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh?

COMPORT: I don't know how long I'll be able to—I stay by myself—so I don't know how long I'll be able to do it. Because it gets more difficult every day. But the kids come, they bring me fixed lunches and dinners or whatever.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Are all of your children in this area?

COMPORT: One's in Ohio, the oldest boy. And the other's are in—not too, my daughter's the closest one.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm

COMPORT: But my one son he comes in and cuts my grass every week and whatever needs done he'll do. My other one, he works in a country club so he's at work most all the time

LEVINE: I see

COMPORT: [continues] but whatever he can do on Monday, he has off, so he takes me shopping on Monday.

LEVINE: The one from Ohio?

COMPORT: No—

LEVINE: No the one that's around here?

COMPORT: At the—the one that works at the country club, he has Monday's off—

LEVINE: I see

COMPORT: --[continues] and that's the day he takes me wherever I have to go.

LEVINE: Okay, well now I'm wondering if there's any—I know you've written things out—is there anything that we haven't touched on that you think would be—would—that you would like to include (shuffles papers) in

the story. I see you have a certificate for the hall of honor, that's great.
(Shuffles papers). Now, uh what—this one says 'Ravna Gora'?

COMPORT: Oh that—yeah, that's another town too. The other one is, is

LEVINE --is Su-su-su-sica

COMPORT: [interposed] Is here, but there too.

LEVINE: Mm-hmm.

COMPORT: It was like the house, the house was set on a hillside, I have a picture—
I should have brought it—

LEVINE: Oh

COMPORT: Of the homes, you know

LEVINE: Oh

COMPORT: And, um, the house where I—was born (papers shuffling) and my
mother said that at nighttime when the men came home from work, they
all had those concertinas and they would all play, and my older sister—
my older sister would dance. She said she was little and she had
chubby feet, and she'd dance around

LEVINE: (laughs)

COMPORT She said it was so nice at night. So they—they had fun even though
they were poor, you know

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: They had fun. Uh, anyway (shuffles papers) where's this? (pause) It
says [begins reading from prepared document] my life began on March
11th, 1917. I was born to Frank and Catherine—Katerina—Renka. My
mother was so very much in love with my dad, she had a very hard life

when she was just a little girl, eight or nine years old. She was sent to a wealthy Jewish family to work. There she learned to cook, bake and take care of children. They taught her all that, the Jewish—

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: [continues]—how nice. Uh (pause) when she was a young maiden, she was permitted to go to the village dance every other week, and only if one of her brothers es-escorted her. This one day mother and a girlfriend were at the well getting water, and he friend told her that a handsome young service man would be at the dance. And her girlfriend told her—mother—that she was going to hook him (laughs)

LEVINE: (laughs)

COMPORT: That he would be her boyfriend. My mom didn't really know Frank Renka, but she did hear about him. She told her friend: 'How can he be your boyfriend? I am going to catch him, he will be my boyfriend.' (laughs)

LEVINE: He—he was a policeman?

COMPORT: No, the stepfather was. No, he was a service man. He was very good-looking, I have pictures at home of him. (pause) Anyway, the night of the dance arrived and mother was there, happened (clears throat) happy as can be. She didn't go to go anywhere very often, so this was a treat for her. She twirled around the dance floor with some of the boys she knew. She told me that every time she passed my dad who was playing this concertina, with the band, their eyes would meet.

Finally he gave his instrument to another man, came over to mother and asked her for a dance. She told me that that was it. From that time on, it was a true love for both of them. Isn't that a nice story?

LEVINE: Yes.

COMPORT: They didn't get to see each other very much for about a half—one and a half to two years because he was in the service. My father gave mother a brooch for an engagement gift. When they were married she wore a purple dress and she always loved that color.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, was he in World War I, then? Your father?

COMPORT: [interposed] It had to be! Yeah, it had to be. And (pause)—my parents had three children; I was the youngest of the three. When my sister was a few years old, my mom told me that when the men came home from work in the small village, after dinner they would sit by their windows in the summer evenings and play their instruments. (pause) My sister would just love that because she would always dance to the music. They were the happy times, but more bad, mostly bad times. Her father-in-law was a very mean, nasty man. She said she would scrub the floor and—that was only wooden floors, you know—uh (pause) and he would spit tobacco juice on the floor.

LEVINE: Now, did she move in with—

COMPORT: [interposed] —they lived with him. When they—

LEVINE: With his family.

COMPORT: Yeah. Just with the father, it doesn't saying anything about the mother-in-law

LEVINE: [interposed] mother. Uh-huh.

COMPORT: She would clean the house, scrub that rough dirty wooden floor—on her knees!—and he would spit tobacco juice on it and so she would have to scrub it again. He made her life miserable. She had to put up with it because they lived with him. But one day when dad came home, mother was crying so hard he asked her what was wrong, and she told him how he had been treating her.

Dad got very angry and told her he would find them another place to live, which he did. And that's how finally she had it better. Although they were so poor. Another—mother had to work in the—fields to help out when I was about seventeen months old, my dad got very ill, he got TB and pneumonia. I took very ill. I was very ill. The women in the village were already making my clothes for burial. My dad asked my mom (shuffles papers)—

LEVINE: Did you have the same thing? Pneumonia, or TB, or? No.

COMPORT: I don't know what I had. [continues reading] --to bring me over to his bedside he looked at me, kissed me and said: 'She will get better, but not I.' And that day, the village doctor went down the road to our house to see a young girl. They were rich people, and the road was very narrow. Mother begged him to come in and look at my dad and to help him, but he said no. Because he knew that mom didn't—that mom didn't have the money to pay him. My mom then went in front of his horses, knelt on the ground and stretched out her arms, crying and begging him to please come and look at my dad. The doctor—the doctor's wife was with him and she said to her husband: 'Go go, and look at him and help him.' But when he came out of his, out of our house a neighbor-woman was standing outside and she asked him about my dad. The doctor said: 'He is going to die, I cannot help him.'

The do—the next day my mother was working out in the fields and an aunt was watching us children. My dad died before my mother got back home. My aunt lit a candle at my dad's feet and at—and my sister to hold one at my dad's feet and one at my dad's head. They had to stand holding the candle lit until my mother got home from the fields.

LEVINE: Was that a tradition of some kind?

COMPORT: No. When my mother saw that, that we were crying because we were standing there for such a long time! Mother came home, she was very angry at my aunt for doing that. It was bad enough that mother was grief-stricken, and heart-broken, but she had to comfort the children and help them.

In the next two years, mother was very poor. We didn't have much to eat. She had to work in the fields. Someone was supposed to uh (shuffles papers) take care of us. My older sister some-somehow started a fire in the house, and my mother came home just in time to put it out, before it's too much damage was done.

Before my mother was married, some girlfriends, some girlfriends and her went to a fortune teller and the woman told my mom that she would have two husbands: one for a short time and the second marriage she would travel across a big body of water.

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: My mother first—marry—my mother's first marriage lasted seven years. Second marriage went this way:

My stepfather's name was Joseph Kesich. He lived in Pittsburgh. He was a widower with two sons. He wanted to get married again, so he wrote to his sister who happened to live—I told you that—my mother in Yugoslavia and asked her if there was a woman or a widow there, even if she had children he would bring 'em to America. And she would marry him.

Of course when my mother was asked to go she refused and said she couldn't marry anyone else, ever. As my dad was her one and only love. But my grandmother—my mom's mother—told her to go. She told my mom: 'You have nothing here. You and your children haven't enough food or

clothes or anything.’ She said: ‘There’s nothing here for you and your children will have a better life in America.’

After much begging and pleading with mom, she finally said yes. That’s how she—

My stepfather sent eleven hundred dollars to my mother for the traveling expenses. My mother was only twenty-seven years old then.

LEVINE: Mm.

COMPORT: And he was fifty-two. It took twenty-eight days on a ship to get here to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: (shuffling papers) And my mother was sick every day of that twenty-eight days. And my brother and sister were too. Not me—I traveled all over that boat.

LEVINE: (laughs)

COMPORT: I went up to where the men, the, the captain--or whatever, they were—they were playing cards high up in the ship. And they saw me and they gave me apples or oranges, they always gave me something, and I would come home with it. Give it to my mom.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: I only remember one thing on the ship.

LEVINE: Oh, okay

COMPORT: It was a huge room, I guess that’s where they dance, it had to be that. I can’t think of anything else it would be. And I found a little fl—you know those little round th—well they’re big round things that have a wire around them, and have two wheels like—

LEVINE: Uh--?

COMPORT: Well they have a huge bunch of wire—they used to have them—well this was a little thing like that I found. So I'm playing with it and it rolled, and I'm running after it and some man grab me. Because at that time boats didn't have closed—

LEVINE: Ohhh! You would have fallen right over

COMPORT: [interposed] Yeah, they were open, I would have fell right over. And this man grabbed me and got me.

LEVINE: Huh

COMPORT: So that's all I can remember.

LEVINE: Wow. Wow.

COMPORT: But-but I don't believe that I can't remember anything entering Ellis Island—

LEVINE Well, you were so young, and the language and everything I guess it was just a big confusion probably. You probably took a train—

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah we took a train!

LEVINE: [continues]—I don't know if your stepfather met you at Ellis.

COMPORT: Yeah

LEVINE: Oh-well that got married at Ellis, so they had to

COMPORT: They had to, or she'd had to go back

LEVINE: Goo—yeah, right, 'cause she couldn't get off Ellis

COMPORT: Right, when she saw him he was so different from what her husband was.

LEVINE: And did he live very long? 'Cause he was so much older

COMPORT: Oh yeah, he lived 'til he was eighty-five.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. So, so she felt like she was a good wife, even though she didn't have the feeling for him?

COMPORT: Oh yeah. She was. She was a good wife.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well.

COMPORT: She said he took her to the movies once (laughs).

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: In all the time they were married! He just wasn't, you know that type of guy

LEVINE: He wasn't a social—

COMPORT: No

LEVINE: --type

COMPORT: Mm-mm

LEVINE: No. But it sounds like she got around, she-she went to organizations and did things—

COMPORT: [interposed] Oh yeah! She went everywhere.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: She had it nice. She went—she flew to Europe, twice

LEVINE: She went—did she go back to your town?

COMPORT: Yeah, to visit. And she couldn't find my father's grave. No one took care of them then. You know like they do here—

LEVINE: Yeah

COMPORT: --these days

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: And she used to say: 'I'll never go on one of those—an airplane' and by golly she went to Europe twice (Levine laughs) she went to St. Louis, she went to Chicago and she went to New York (laughs). She flew, and she wasn't afraid!

LEVINE: It sounds like she had a lot of spunk

COMPORT: She did!

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh yeah

COMPORT: Yeah, she was--Yeah, we had a nice life together

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it sounds like you had a nice marriage too. So, yeah

COMPORT: Yeah, yeah

LEVINE: All right well—

COMPORT: We were married seventy years!

LEVINE: Really?

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Wow

COMPORT: Seventy years. It would be seventy one this August if I—if he lived.

LEVINE: Wow, that's quite a, quite an accomplishment—it speaks well doesn't it

COMPORT: [interposed] Yes, mm-hmm

LEVINE: [continues]—of the marriage you had

COMPORT: Yeah, I miss him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you yourself ever go back?

COMPORT: Mm. I won't go on a plane.

LEVINE: Oh.

COMPORT: (laughs) I'm afraid to go on a plane!

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: I'm not as brave as my mother

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

COMPORT: And our kids have been on planes, but not me. And my son, my oldest son went to uh—(clears throat) when he was in the Navy—he was at, the other end of the world. What was that? What's over there?

LEVINE: China? Or—

COMPORT: No. That has all water and—

LEVINE: The South Pacific? No. Japan? No.

COMPORT: Antarctica?

LEVINE: Oh my gosh, wow!

COMPORT: He was there, for over a year.

LEVINE: So, uh, did your children marry Croatian people?

COMPORT: No

LEVINE: No

COMPORT: Oh, my oldest son, his second marriage is with a Croatian girl

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: And they get along real good

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: But he's like me we don't remember the language too well.

LEVINE: Right, right. But do you have any affiliation with any Croatian groups now?

COMPORT: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

COMPORT: I can't go anywhere, but I never did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

COMPORT: My mother always, she joined a lot of different groups.

LEVINE: But you--?

COMPORT: [continues] They would go on trips: Atlantic City and, wherever they took 'em.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But that's not your, your bag (laughs)

COMPORT: I went with to Atlantic City once, and we had a lot of fun. Oh, I went to Florida with the women one time too.

LEVINE: Uh-huh

COMPORT: And we had a good time.

LEVINE: Yeah, well good. Okay, well I think we've covered everything, unless there is something more you would like to say before we

COMPORT: [interposed] Mm-mm. No

LEVINE: [continues]—close. Yeah, well, I'm happy to get to talk with you, and that's—you've told a very interesting story

COMPORT: Yeah

LEVINE: --and, uh, now that will be at Ellis Island

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: And your great-great-great grandchildren can go and listen to you talk. We'll have the recording there and you'll have a recording for your family, too

COMPORT: Mm-hmm

LEVINE: Okay. Well I've been speaking with Mary Comport who came here when she was only three years old, and um, we have some wonderful pictures on file. And she is Croatian from what was Yugoslavia when she came—

END OF INTERVIEW