

EI-169

SISTER MARY HILARINE TESAR

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AUSTRIA, 1914

AGE 10

PASSAGE ON "THE GEORGE WASHINGTON" PORT: HAMBURG

RESIDENCES: AUSTRIA: VIENNA: US: NYC-EAST 61ST STREET

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 11, 1992. I am here in Wilton, Connecticut with Sister Mary Hilarine Tesar, who came from Austria with her parents in 1914 when she was 10 years old. Sister Mary, could you please give me your full name, when you were born, your birthname, and your date of birth.

TESAR: I was born December 7th, 1903 in Vienna, Austria. My father and mother studied in Vienna, and Mother wanted to be a professional cook and Father a cabinetmaker.

SIGRIST: Okay, we're going to pause just for a moment. (break in tape) We are now resuming with Sister Mary Hilarine Tesar. Sister Mary, could you tell me what your birthname was.

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TESAR: Birthname?

SIGRIST: Yes. What was the name you were given when you born?

TESAR: Mary Francis. Mary Francis Pecka. P-E-C-K-A.

SIGRIST: And is that, Pecka is your mother's...

TESAR: Is a Czech, is my father's name. (correcting herself) My mother's name.

SIGRIST: I see. And then your last name, your father's name was...

TESAR: Tesar. T-E-S-A-R.

SIGRIST: I see.

TESAR: Caspar Tesar.

SIGRIST: His name was Caspar Tesar? Let's talk a little bit about your dad. What did he do for a living?

TESAR: My father was really a cabinetmaker. And when they were

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studying in Austria, in Vienna, they finally moved to the village where they received a home from their grandparents.

And my father set up a shop there to work with his cabinets. And my mother took care of the children. In the meantime my little brother was born, Tony, and another baby who died. She was not well, so she was confined to bed. And therefore we could not really be with her much, just wave through the window to her.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like. Can you describe him?

TESAR: My father was rather tall. He had blond, he had hair like yours, brown hair, and he had a little mustache. He was very happy-looking. He loved to work. Every Sunday he would gather all the children of the village and let them use the see-saw and the swings, and Mother would prepare some cookies and drinks for the children of the village.

SIGRIST: What was your father's temperament like?

TESAR: He was very kind and lovable. He never got angry, but he was firm with us that we do the right thing.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember any instances where you did the wrong thing, where he got upset with you?

TESAR: (she sighs) Well, I did get upset one time when my father told me I was making too much noise. (she laughs) That's all I remember. But also he was very strict with regard with to our studies later on. We had to keep quiet during our period assigned to us at home, and we had to do our job and our schoolwork.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

TESAR: My mother's name was Francis Pecka. P-E-C-K-A.

SIGRIST: And again let me ask you, what did your mother look like?

TESAR: My mother looked very lovely, fair, nice, not blond, brown hair, and very sweet looking. But she had on her features the sign that she was suffering, yeah. Very kind person, loving, very religious. She used to sing songs, did the housework as long as she could until she was confined to bed for good.

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SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

TESAR: My father and mother met in the village. My mother's village in Cejkovice. C-E-J-K-O-V-I-C-E.

SIGRIST: Is that in Austria or in...

TESAR: That's in, already in Moravia.

SIGRIST: Moravia.

TESAR: Where we, after, because they lived, they lived in Austria, Vienna only while they were studying. After they got their diplomas they returned to the parents village.

SIGRIST: And do you know the circumstances under which they met?

TESAR: They just met be going to dances, like dances here and there. And really, actually, they met in the church. My father was a Franciscan. Not a religious priest, but a Franciscan. And my mother a Franciscan, also. They belonged to that organization, but they weren't like sisters and brothers, you know. So they belonged to the lay

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people's religious organization. And they met there really for the first time in church.

SIGRIST: I see.

TESAR: And that went on.

SIGRIST: So what town were you actually born in?

TESAR: Vienna.

SIGRIST: You were born in Vienna. So they had gone...

TESAR: But my parents were born in Cejkovice, yeah. And my father was in Uherske-Hradisti, but that was in Moravia. That whole thing was Moravia, yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about what your father did for a living in Europe. I know he was a cabinetmaker, but talk a little more specifically about what he did, or what you remember him doing.

TESAR: He had his big shop, and there he made his furniture. He

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made beautiful engravings on the furniture. And then when they were finished, they were shipped to a city Hodonin,

H-O-D-O-N-I-N. And there they were for sale. And now and then my father would go and buy wood so he could continue his work. He also had two or three students who were taking up the trade.

SIGRIST: Like apprentices?

TESAR: Apprentices, yes. And, we had a garden in the front and we had a garden in the back. We also had a little grocery store just for the needs of the neighboring people. But my father also made things for the people in the village, say chairs, tables, things like that. And off and on he went to the priest's house, and if they needed anything to be done my father would help, which was a great help afterwards to us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you father made the furniture? Did he have a shop?

TESAR: My father had a big shop.

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SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me, what do you remember about that?

TESAR: The home that we had was from my grandparents, because they were - he was - one was dead and the other one was very ill, so they gave us the home. And that home had plenty of ground, so my father built a shop there. And next to the shop there was the bedrooms and then came the little store, and next to the store were the sleeping quarters. And under there were rooms for the apprentices who were learning. Then we also had a nice grapevine in front of the hose, and next to the shop there was a place for rabbits and other animals. And many, we had a garden in front, but there was no nice passage way. When it rained it was muddy and was hard to travel.

SIGRIST: Who tended the garden?

TESAR: My mother and my father, mostly. But my mother didn't do much, only in the front of the house. In the back of the house my father, and he had help. He had friends, too. My father had a few friends and they used to meet on Sundays in Church and work together. So,...

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SIGRIST: Tell me about the kinds of things you grew in the garden.
What - were they flowers, vegetables?

TESAR: In the garden we had trees, nut trees, apples and pears. In the front we had a little pond where there were frogs and other little fish. And in the back there was an outhouse there, yes. And we had (she pauses) many small things, vegetables. Potatoes and things like that growing. Potatoes and mushrooms, we had mushrooms, too. Also carrots, beans and bushes with all kinds of (she pauses) - can't think of it - cranberries and things like that. Small, small things growing.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help tend the garden at all?

TESAR: I was too young I used to help my mother with the baby, my brother Tony, you know. We played together. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kind of chores as a little girl were you given?

TESAR: Oh yes, I had chores. The chores I had were, there was a very sick, very blind man up the hill. He used to be a

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forester. And this man needed some food now and then. So my mother would pack a basket of food for him, and i used to walk up the hill and go at the edge of the forest and deliver him, deliver it to him. He was really only I guess about sixty years old and lost his eyesight. Somebody shot him there. (she gestures) So I used to go up there and bring him the food. And he was very grateful. And I also used to go down the other way, there was a little brook. And on the brook, in the brook we used to wade and used to have fun, made little boats out of paper, let them run down. (she chuckles) And once in a while a big balloon would come, and it was an attraction, and all the children ran to see the balloon. And there was a very sick girl there. TB she had. And my, her parents had to go to work. So she was really alone almost all day until the parents would come home. My mother would pack me a little package to, (phone rings in background) she put in there some soup and cookies that she made and I used to bring it to her every day. Across the street from us was a family. They had three children. The father lost the wife, mother died. And these three children were like orphans. He had to work, work very hard in the fields. And so my mother would make a big pot of soup and bread, and I used to carry the read and she

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carried the pot of soup to them to keep them alive. That's when she was able yet before she really got very sick.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the kinds of food your mother made. What sorts of things did you eat? And did she make something that was your favorite...

TESAR: She made...

SIGRIST: In Europe?

TESAR: She made (she pauses) well, vegetables, as usual. We didn't have too much of a, of a chance in vegetables. We didn't. We just had what we grew in the garden in the back. So we really had like potatoes, carrots, beans, string beans most of the time. But she seasoned it in a way that would be very palatable.

SIGRIST: What about meat?

TESAR: Meat, we had chicken, because we a few chickens, too. We had chickens and geese, not many. And once in a while we would buy food. We went to town. This was because that was

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a village so we had somewhere else to buy. Some people had animals like pigs but we didn't have any of those. But if they killed at certain seasons, neighbors were very kind. They would come and bring you some of those of those things to eat, and we shared with them what we had. So...

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever make yo any pastry or anything like that?

TESAR: Oh yes. My mother made very nice sugar candy, she made. She made cookies, all kinds, yeah. Chocolate, not chocolate. There were like whites, something white, sugar. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you every help her do any cooking when you were a girl?

TESAR: Yeah. When I was a little girl I did, but I had to take care, not much. Because she was confined to bed too early.

SIGRIST: Talk about your mother's illness. She was confined in Europe?

TESAR: She and TB. Yeah, she had it all - see, three, two sisters

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of hers died of TB when they were young. One was twelve, one as sixteen. And now my mother was thirty-two - about thirty. And she contracted that disease, too, but she used to take fish oil in order to help her out with the disease, but didn't work out. Her brother, our reverend mother, brother, he also started with it, but he began to take fish oil very early and Never contracted the disease. Yes.

SIGRIST: Was tuberculosis a big problem at that time?

TESAR: Yes it was, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know other people who succumbed?

TESAR: Other people in the neighborhood also. And they died young, yes. But really it wasn't on the whole because our village was not very large. There were not that many. In our neighborhood we were maybe about three hundred people.

SIGRIST: And this is actually outside of Vienna?

TESAR: This in the village that's outside Vienna, Vienna nothing. Only my father and mother there, and I was born there.

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SIGRIST: The they went, you went back to the village?

TESAR: Yeah. In fact, when I was a little girl, yet my mother was sort of sick in Vienna, so she brought me to the village and my grandmother took care of me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandmother?

TESAR: Yes I do, Alouise.

SIGRIST: Can you talk...

TESAR: Alouise. She was very kind and gentle. Her husband had been in the army, and he came home. He lost his leg, and he was talking all kinds of things while he, while he was in bed, he saw the fight going. He used to scream at the soldiers and, "Now they're going to get me," and, "Please close the window. I'm afraid." He was very hysterical, like, you know. And she was very kind to him until he died, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he die before you were born, or do you remember him?

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TESAR: No. he died later I made my first visit. He was very long with his illness. But my grandmother was to take care of my mother when she was ill. and then took care of us, too.

SIGRIST: When you think about your grandmother, what memories come to mind?

TESAR: She was a woman who and a big family - many children - kind, gentle, loveable. Cared not only for her family but for other people. In fact, the people in that village were one heart and one soul. They helped one another.

SIGRIST: Was your grandmother you mother's mother or your father's mother?

TESAR: My mother's mother.

SIGRIST: Did your father get on with her well?

TESAR: My father and mother got very well.

SIGRIST: But did you father and grandmother get on well?

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TESAR: My, yes, they did, because my father had nobody also to work for him when she was ill. And all we did is wave our hand to her through the window. We were not allowed to enter until she died. When she was dying, then we entered the room she gave us a blessing, blessed us on our foreheads and said, "Always be good."

SIGRIST: How old were you when she died?

TESAR: I was eight years old, and my brother was five.

SIGRIST: What is your strongest memory of that period when she died, like the funeral or something like that?

TESAR: Yes. When my mother died I knew that two ladies came with white sheets and I knew that was the end. My father made coffins for the village, too. And so then there was a funeral. Before the funeral there were many people who came and paid their respects. In fact, the whole village came. And they prayed and the body was not taken to church. It was taken immediately and put on the big wagon and taken to the cemetery. And the cemetery, I remember we were all

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standing there. grandparents and other relatives. And I remember my little brother and I, we were crying, Momma was going down into the hole. And they gave us a shovel of dirt to throw it in, and it was a very sad scene and made a very bad impression on us. But we knew that Mother was in heaven.

SIGRIST: How did your father react to your mother's death?

TESAR: He was very sad. This is what happened. After the burial of my mother my father had some business to do in that city of Hodonin, H-O-D-I-N-I-N, where he had his furniture in storage that he used to sell to people. He bought his wood there and transported it to his place.

SIGRIST: When you say he bought his wood, what kind? Is it a special wood that he bought?

TESAR: Special wood for furniture, because he made, he inlaid, inlaid things like his picture frames or inlaid different kinds of designs in the wood. So, when he got there he found out that his former fiance, Mathilde, was married. And she had two little children and her husband had died

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suddenly of appendicitis. So he proposed, and afterwards she immediately accepted, and so they were married. Well, they were married in the morning. But in the afternoon my grandmother put us into a big wagon pulled by a farmer, and she brought us, the farmer took us to the village and we met our mother in the afternoon. And my father said when he, first my father stepped and said, "Now look. You're going to see our new mother. And be sure you say 'mother.'" That was hard for me. My brother didn't care, he was too young.

But I was old - a little older. She came out, very beautiful. She was a lovely lady, beautiful brown and brown hair. And she smiled. And she handed a beautiful dress and said, "This is for you," and gave me a kiss. Oh, that big, big heaviness from my heart went because in that village, there was a woman who adopted a child, and she afterwards threw it into the - it was the stepmother - she threw it into the ravine. And from then on the ravine had the name of that mother. Machosa they called it, M-A-C-H-O-S-A. And so I always thought if it's going to be a stepmother, that it's going to be just like that. My little brother didn't care yet. But then she came gave him - then she gave him a gift, too. And she says, "Now, come on," kissed us, "and see your little brother and sister." So we went in to the

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garden of the house where we was living, and there in the cradle was the little boy, Joey, for the first time we met him. And the little girl was two years old, Mathilda. And now we were so happy we had a bigger family. It was the joy of our life.

SIGRIST: So these were kids from her first marriage?

TESAR: First marriage, yeah.

SIGRIST: How long after your mother had died did your father marry?

TESAR: It was about only two, not quite two years.

SIGRIST: So it was shortly, actually, before you came to America.

TESAR: Shortly, shortly, yeah. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little about, when you think back to Austria, think about, you really, give me a couple of really happy memories, something fun that really happened that you remember.

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TESAR: Oh yeah. Something happy that happened was really getting together with our families sometimes. And they would have the accordions and we would play and dance, the kids and the children, you know. And then we also had all kinds of celebrations for birthdays and other occasions, and we got together in their homes and enjoyed our life there. And the church. The church was our principle place where we used to go, and play, dress up...

SIGRIST: Let's talk about the church, actually. Describe the church for me.

TESAR: The church was St. Cuningundis.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

TESAR: Cuningundis. C-U-N-I-N-G-U-N-D-I-S. St. Cuningundis was a queen, and she was very kind to the poor. And there was a big picture of her at the altar. And there the people used to attend mass on Sundays and weekdays. Old people who couldn't work in the farms anymore, as this was also a farm area. So, they used to work with pigs and cattle and things like that. So they used to go to church there on Sundays,

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but the old people used to go every day to church. And we'd go, too. And whenever Grandmother took us we went also. And on Sundays when there was a big crowd, we never went into the benches. Children had to stand during the service. Only the older people, uh, would occupy the benches. The pastor was very nice and he had some enjoyable picnic places, picnic times for us, too. Then we...

SIGRIST: Talk about Christmas.

TESAR: Oh, Christmas was loveable. Christmas was, I remember my mother's last Christmas. In fact, I guess it was the first Christmas when we moved to this village. Christmas was wonderful. We believed not in Santa Claus, but we believed that the Christ Child would come in and bring in the tree. And the angel would carry a candle. Then he would ring a little bell. And the parents would come, open the door, and we peeked only through a peek hole, and we saw the Christ Child going into the room and place the tree on the table and the little gifts around it. Then the little Child went, and we were allowed to go in, and we saw what he brought in. Of course, many of the things that were there were given by our parents. So that was one big thing. And then we had

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all kinds of little dances, even the little children. We danced, dressed up. We dressed up in costumes. In fact, in those days the costumes were the, were really worn by the people. Like weekdays they were just ordinary costumes. On Sunday they dressed up in wonderful costumes.

SIGRIST: Are you talking about colorful peasant costumes, or...

TESAR: Peasants. Peasantry.

SIGRIST: Can you describe one of those costumes for me?

TESAR: Well, first of all, a skirt, we were very flowery. It had even pleats and that. And then there was a shirt that they wore with big sleeves and like accordion - it looked like an accordion. And then a vest. And the girls had a beautiful, like a veil over their head. And it was also decorated with lace and ribbons, things like that. And the men also, the dressed up.

SIGRIST: What kind outfits did they wear?

TESAR: They had a whit shirt usually with some embroidery around

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the cuffs and the neck, and also a vest, a nice vest. And the vest was also decorated with embroidery and other stitchings. They were very nice. And on their head they wore, it was like a little hat with ribbons, steamers hanging down. And they met at times for different festivals, different occasions, weddings, even baptisms. When children were baptized sometimes we had a big celebration, too.

SIGRIST: What kinds of gifts would you get at Christmas? What would your parents give you?

TESAR: At Christmas maybe a doll, my, I got a nice doll. My brother got a little toy horse. And we would get cookies, things like that, but not much. No.

SIGRIST: Was there a formal dinner of some sort that part of the celebration?

TESAR: My mother would make a nice dinner, but Christmas was different. We used to go to Midnight Mass, what you call Midnight Service. And just to, to remind us of the birth of Jesus at midnight on the 25th. And there we were. We saw

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the Christmas tree and we, and the choir sang, and we sang, and there was a procession to the altar. Someone carried the Christ, the Infant Savior, and put it into the stable, little stable there. And Mary and Joseph sometimes were dressed up. Children were dressed up sometimes and sometimes the grown-ups. They even do it here in America in those churches. And that was very beautiful. Then after mass people would meet, and they would give out cookies to the children, and we went sometimes to different homes to celebrate with them. And after that we went to bed. And then the next day was Christmas Day. You went visiting.

SIGRIST: So people would come in and...

TESAR: Yes. Yes. And there was a Christmas tree in the home. And also Christmas trees in the church on each side of the big stable.

SIGRIST: Would you say that in this village, would you say that Christmas was an important social occasion as well as a religious occasion?

TESAR: Religious and social, too. Yes. Easter was that way, too.

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SIGRIST: Was there something that sticks out in y our mind about your Easter celebration at that time?

TESAR: Easter celebration was sort of sad, because of the, you know, Christ. However, we had a Holy Week, just like we have here in the United States. And we had the, people would come in and pray, you know, and there was also some singing in the church. And three o'clock Friday afternoon when Christ died, then people would come and they would pray. It was like a, not a celebration but prayer service you would say here today. And in the back they had a grave where our Lord's body was laid. And there that was covered until the Friday when he really died. And we went up to the front of the church where the crucifix was laid and we would kiss the wounds of our Savior. And for Easter there was a big celebration. We also had celebrations in the village outside to commemorate a saint or someone special. There was a pond there. And in the pond was a statue of St. John of Palmascene. And during the month of May all of us in the village, grandparents and children, would gather and we'd pray, because St. John of Palmascene was a great patron of Czechoslovakia. That was wonderful. See, it wasn't

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Czechoslovakia then. It was still our village Cejkovice.

SIGRIST: It was still Austria?

TESAR: Austria, right.

SIGRIST: Is that also an occasion that you would put on the gaily colored clothes and...

TESAR: At Easter.

SIGRIST: Easter.

TESAR: On Easter. At Christmas, no, because the weather wasn't suitable for that, but Christmas, yes. And also Maytime, May Day.

SIGRIST: Oh, was that a big celebration?

TESAR: Oh, yes, Maytime.

SIGRIST: So talk a little bit about that.

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TESAR: Maytime. People would dress up. They'd go into the village. There was a big, big building there, and dance, play. We were all excited. And sometimes speeches were made by the - we didn't have mayors or anything like that, but important people would speak to the people how things were going on with the cattle maybe, or with everybody else, or who died, who was born and so on. And then they went to, they had the drum, and they had accordions and different musical instruments and they played. We had us a glorious time. There were little things to, to buy. They had a table set up of cookies and maybe nuts and things like that.

SIGRIST: So it was a fun time.

TESAR: Fun time. Yeah.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

END OF SIDE A (TAPE ONE)

BEGINNING OF SIDE B (TAPE ONE)

SIGRIST:ask you about school, too. Did you attend school?

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TESAR: Oh, yes, We attended the school.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you started school?

TESAR: I started school when I was eight, seven.

SIGRIST: Seven.

TESAR: Seven.

SIGRIST: Talk about what school was like at that time.

TESAR: Well, in those days, we just had benches across like this (she gestures), and there was a table like in front of us. One long, one, and, the seat was one long, just a board, like. And there we sat. And they were, we had men teachers. And they had sticks, if you didn't obey you got one across your back. Sometimes the boys would pull our hair. (she laughs) The boys were behind us that pulled our hair. But we learned. And we also had this, women teachers, but they taught us needlework. And that needlework we did in school after, like, say, three o'clock.

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And that needlework was at the end of the school year exhibited near the school hall. The boys did other things - made things out of wood, for example little birds or little animals. And also our compositions, our, we didn't have spelling because in that country, the way you said the word that's the way it was spelled. But our work that we did in school, embroidery and the like, was hung up in the, near the school hall there. And prizes were given to students who excelled in certain things. It was very, very nice. School master was very strict. And if we did something we had to stand in the corner.

SIGRIST: Did you ever win a prize for anything?

TESAR: Yes, I did. I mad a pair of stockings when I was in the second grade. Socks.

SIGRIST: What did you get for a prize?

TESAR: The little medal, they gave a little, with ribbons, you know. Some of those, some of them was just paper like we have here today.

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SIGRIST: What kind of subjects did you learn? What did they teach you?

TESAR: Reading, writing, arithmetic. religion was not taught in school by the teachers. It was taught by the priest. The priest used to come in, say every other day, and teach in that school, you know, religion, and then prepared us for our special things that through life, like, say, First Communion, things like that, Confession, yes. It was very nice. We also got prizes or the you had, at the end of the year there wa a questionnaire. The priest would come in an ask questions. And the ones who answered very well, their names were put down., and they were put down as excellent in religion because they knew everything that was taught perhaps that. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was this one building the school? Was it just a single building?

TESAR: Was a single building.

SIGRIST: And this is a one room school house kind of situation?

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TESAR: One room school house. And so then you had, like, say, doors between, and you go, panels, just panels between the next class and so one, yes. The older children went to a different building. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you like school?

TESAR: I don't remember much about school because I was in just one year I think in school before we went away, one or two years. And...

SIGRIST: What were you like as a schoolgirl...

TESAR: And nice people, nice children, we had nice pupils. I still remember the one who used to pull my hair, but he went to God now. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What were you like as a little girl, do you think?

TESAR: I was happy. I loved my grandmother. My father I did, too. My father loved me. My father really enjoyed life with us. He was very kind to us. And then the people of the village used to bring their children as I said on Sundays, and we

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had a regular good time - my mother making all those goodies for them. And in another way in school, during school, noontime we had to go home to eat. There was one hour between twelve and one, and we had to go home to eat. And I do remember one day I was coming back from my house to school. And on the road there were horses, and this one horse was a pony. And he followed me. I turned around, he followed me. He followed me all the way to school. And I was late for class. And the teacher opened the door and said, "Where were you so long? You're going to get punished." I said, "Well, look what's here behind me." He was chasing around me. I couldn't get away from him. So he had to push the pony away, and finally I got to class. I was late.

SIGRIST: Whose pony was it? Did you every find out?

TESAR: It was one of the farmers.

SIGRIST: Now you said you had chickens and geese and ducks...

TESAR: Yes.

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SIGRIST: ...and rabbits.

TESAR: Rabbits, yeah.

SIGRIST: And did you have any other animals?

TESAR: No, we had a dog. We had a goat. One goat.

SIGRIST: Did any of your animals have names?

TESAR: Not really. I don't remember any names. We just was able, and the we and a big cat. And she got lost for a year, came back (she laughs), yeah. And another interesting thing was, there was, in that country, people would come around, these men who'd fix kettles, and different kinds of dishes, you know. And he came around, too. He yelled, "Here we are, here we are to mend your pots and pans." So you gave it to him, he'd fix it up and gave him some money, and he'd walk away. So one night he was pretty late and my father said, "Look, I think you'd better stay here sleep with us." So, he slept, but he couldn't sleep in the regular room, because that was my mother's and father's there. And so we had like a couch in the hallway. So he slept, and our big cat came

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along. And he had a big, big beard, you know. And as he was snoring the beard was moving like this. (she gestures)

And so the cat jumped and put his claws into the beard, and the man screamed. My father came in and bounced the cat (she laughs) and that's, from that time on the cat never showed up for a long time.

SIGRIST: What was the color of the cat, do you remember?

TESAR: Grey and white.

SIGRIST: It didn't have a name?

TESAR: Macek. M-A-C-E-K. Macek. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: It's funny what you remember after all those years.

TESAR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you as a little girl, what did you know about America? What did America mean to you as a little girl in Austria?

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TESAR: Really and truly we thought the Americans were very rich people. And it was hard to get there, and we wished that someday we could go. But that was out of the question, we knew. And then war was brewing, and everybody was sort of restless.

SIGRIST: Did you have relatives in America?

TESAR: My uncle was in Brooklyn, New York, and he had a, with his wife. They went earlier before any trouble was. I think in the early 1900's already.

SIGRIST: Who was, is he your father's brother or...

TESAR: My father's brother. Yes.

SIGRIST: And so he was in Brooklyn. What was he doing in Brooklyn?

TESAR: He also was a cabinetmaker, just like my father. Yes. And he had a large family. Seven children at that time.

SIGRIST: Were they...

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TESAR: In a home of there own.

SIGRIST: Were they writing to your father?

TESAR: Yes. My father and he, they corresponded. In fact, it was a blessing that we had him there because he helped us out later on.

SIGRIST: Once you got here.

TESAR: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about, you said that trouble was brewing in Europe. Obviously World War II, or World War I rather...

TESAR: Well, 1914 - 1914 was a very bad time, because people were afraid to buy anything. My father's furniture was there. Nobody would buy. They knew that the men had to go into the war. That it was the end. And so my father's furniture was in fact even damaged in the storehouse, because some of the men, some of the soldiers were already acting up. So it was a bad time. And my father knew that his business was going down, down, down. And one day the police came and brought

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signs, and told my father, "You must pay for the wood that you had bought." My father said, "I don't have it, because there are no sales on what I had in the storage in Hodonin." And so they said, "All right. If by tomorrow morning the money is not here, you will be put into jail." And my father didn't really have. That was already when we had our stepmother. And we stood there watching these police. My father had a few bags of flour and sugar in the little place there. And they put their bayonets in. The flour flew all over. They put signs on our property, "For Sale." And there we stood, my mother holding one child, my father the other, and we were all crying. We didn't know what was going to happen. They said they would return by morning, and if the money isn't there, that would be the end. So my father, being a good churchman and helping the priest out, he went to the rectory and told the priest what had happened. And he said, "Don't worry, Mr. Tesar. You were a good helper to me in my church. I shall give you enough money to escape." And my father said, "Don't worry. I will return every penny after I get in my betters," you know. So...

SIGRIST: So this is what started the whole process, the...

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TESAR: Yes. Yes.

SIGRIST: Before we get too far I want to also ask you, were you personally ever affected by any of this turmoil that's going on. I mean, obviously you affected second hand by what's happening to your dad. But did you ever personally witness any kind of trouble, or soldiers coming into the town, anything like that?

TESAR: No. We heard about soldiers going around already in the big city, especially around Vienna, and so. And even when we escaped that time, people thought we escaped to, we went to Vienna instead of going to America. Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, tell me what it was like having to leave the village. Do you remember packing...

TESAR: Yes. When, after the, after my father came home with money, that evening my mother took a bed sheet and put in the clothes that she had for us. And my father took his tool chest. And he asked a farmer if he would please take us to my father's village. So we all packed, we packed up, and we

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were covered with hay in the wagon. Nobody saw us because in that area there were very few homes. They didn't even see what was happening. It was in the evening, so nobody would really see what was going on. And we came to our village, my father's village. There we stayed over night.

SIGRIST: When you say your father's village, you mean the village...

TESAR: My, my father, where my father lived before he got married.

SIGRIST: I see.

TESAR: And there we stayed overnight. And early in the morning before dawn we already made our way to, on the way, we made our way to get away. People were looking for us. Later on my grandmother told me that they were looking for us in Vienna, because they thought my father had been there. But no one knew where we went. No one knew us, knew where we went. So...

SIGRIST: Did you already have passage to America at this point?

TESAR: No. We had no...

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SIGRIST: So you were just trying to get out of this town.

TESAR: Yes. The only passage we had was a recommendation by the priest that he gave us. That who we were, who we were and my uncle was my brother's, my father's brother. That's all we had.

SIGRIST: How did you feel as a little girl?

TESAR: Terrible. We felt terrible. We did. Leave our nice home, the swings and all the joys that we had there, and the children that used to come and play with us. It was very, very difficult. And then, I don't remember how we got to the boat. But we left Hamburg, Germany.

SIGRIST: How long of a span of time is there from the time that you initially left the village to the time that got to Hamburg.

TESAR: Must have been about maybe a week. Not too long. Because the George Washington was already waiting for us to go across.

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SIGRIST: And where were you staying through this process?

TESAR: We were staying in a hotel, and my father got his tickets to go.

SIGRIST: How did he get the tickets?

TESAR: We had the money. My father got the money and he had my, the priest's recommendation. And then my father's, my father's brother's address and all that.

SIGRIST: Did you take something that you remember, something that was yours that you...

TESAR: Nothing. Only what was in the, whatever my mother put into the, it was such a hurry. We had no time. There was no time. We had to just go quickly, or else we'd be in trouble.

SIGRIST: It's you, your father, your stepmother...

TESAR: And...

SIGRIST: Your brother...

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TESAR: And two other children...

SIGRIST: And two other children.

TESAR: Yes.

SIGRIST: So this is quite a group of people.

TESAR: Yes. Six of us.

SIGRIST: What do you think your stepmother is thinking trying to keep all these kids together?

TESAR: She cried and cried and cried! She said, "I thought this would never happen to us." And she put arms around my father. And the two, I remember the two of them just cried on each other's shoulder. It was a sad occasion.

SIGRIST: How much younger is your brother?

TESAR: Three years.

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SIGRIST: So he's...

TESAR: He's...

SIGRIST: This is all sort of a game to him.

TESAR: Yes. And what happened to us at the boat was this. My brother had to take care of the little brother, and I had to, no. He had to, my brother had to take of the little sister, and I had to take care of the baby while my father was making all these, answering the questions and getting his tickets. And she ran away from my brother. And we couldn't find her. The boat was already blowing away, said, "We should leave." And the kid wasn't nowhere. Finally somebody brought her to the captain, said, "We found this child over there." She was I guess excited about something and stood there watching it, and didn't, couldn't be found. So I remember my father was quite with my brother that he let her go. But he was small, too. So...

SIGRIST: You're both saddling a lot of responsibility...

TESAR: Oh, yes, we did...

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SIGRIST: For young kids.

TESAR: Yes, we did. Especially when my mother was sick. I remember. I had to take care of my little brother. Yes.

SIGRIST: And, of course, you were that much younger...

TESAR: But we, we were one heart and one soul, my brother. We still are. We still are. If it weren't for my brother, I don't think I would ever hear as much as I do, you know, in letters and things like that.

SIGRIST: And his name is Antony.

TESAR: Anthony.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about Hamburg. How long were you there?

TESAR: In Hamburg, Germany? We, all I remember is we had got on the boat right away. As soon...

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SIGRIST: Before you got on the boat, did you have to undergo any kind of examinations?

TESAR: No, not in, not there. Only when we got to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: I see.

TESAR: Nothing.

SIGRIST: So you came on the George Washington...

TESAR: See, my father did have all the papers, like for our health certificates and things like that, about my mother, and everything. So that was just shown and that's it. There were no, no other troubles. I don't remember, I, the only trouble I remember is when we were standing there and the child was lost, my sister. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Which must have been a very scary moment I imagine...

TESAR: Terrible. I cry, and that little boy cried. I'm sure. We were excited.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember what month you left in 1914?

TESAR: No, I don't remember the month.

SIGRIST: Was it springtime, or...

TESAR: It was summer. It was summer. Yes.

SIGRIST: All right, well let's talk about the George Washington. Let's talk about the boat. What are you thinking as a little girl from a village in Austria seeing a boat?

TESAR: The first thing I said, "Oh, Papa! We're going on that boat?" And he said, "Yes. We're going to America." "Oh", I said, "you said we were going to Vienna, because you promised me a dancing doll, and I'll never get it." (she laughs) I remember that as clear as day. And then, and then we got on the boat. Yes. Of course, excitement over the lost child. But it was okay. Then on the boat, that was very terrible. The voyage was very bad. At first it started fine. We were third class because we had no money. Second was better. First class was tops. There was plenty of food to eat. But as we were going to America, a big

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storm came. And instead of going away from us, it was heading us all the time. The captain on the boat yelled out, "All passengers from three, two up on the deck. And keep the boat, because the, moving straight." Because it was going from left to right. And so we had to keep in balanced. And that was very, very, hardly anybody touched the food in the cabin, in the restaurant room. Nobody. They were all sick, lying down all over the deck. And in the third class, those windows that are in the boat, the water was pouring in all over. We were just wading in the water. Everybody was excited. It was a very, very dangerous trip of eleven days.

SIGRIST: Now were you all sleeping in one big room, or did you have individual...

TESAR: No, we had bunks, like, you know. For each of my father and mother, and then we four children in one, my mother and father in the next room.

SIGRIST: Do you get sick personally?

TESAR: Yes. All of us were sick. Very sick. Vomiting and the

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like. Couldn't eat.

SIGRIST: And you said the trip lasted eleven days?

TESAR: Eleven days.

SIGRIST: Do you have any good memories of the boat? Was there something about it that you liked?

TESAR: The good memories of the boat were when we're standing on the deck before storm came, and we could see the waves, and that. That was beautiful. And meeting people. And people would ask who you were, and what you're doing here, and where are you going, from where did you come. That was interesting. And we met other children whose, who had, parents were there, too. For us that was interesting. And my father and mother spoke to people traveling that they had never seen before - got acquainted.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of immigrants on the boat?

TESAR: Yes. Many.

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SIGRIST: Were there a lot of different kinds of people on the boat?
A lot of different kinds of immigrants. Or were they all
mostly German-speaking?

TESAR: There were German and Czech. We could say Czech, Austrians.
Austrians.

SIGRIST: Now this is 1914, and Europe is on the threshold of war...

TESAR: May, 1914.

SIGRIST: May of '14. Did you have to, for instance, undergo safety
drills on the boat, that you remember? Or any kind of
preparations or special, all I think of are the safety
drills that, in case you ran into enemy fire?

TESAR: What we heard the captain say, which way to go up when the
storm came, and which way to go down, which side to go, or
things like that. Otherwise, no.

SIGRIST: I'm just curious, was your brother sick on the boat?

TESAR: The baby was screaming his head off. He had very hard

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trouble with ears. And he screamed every time there was a whistle on the boat. (she gasps) He yelled unmercifully. That was trouble all his life. He had trouble with his ears.

SIGRIST: How about your brother?

TESAR: No, my brother didn't. I don't even remember because he was in the other bunk. My brother was okay. He wasn't hanging on to me. He was hanging on to my little sister, and I had the little boy that me and my, was with my mother.

SIGRIST: What do you think is going through your father's mind?

TESAR: During that time?

SIGRIST: During that time.

TESAR: My father was just looking what the future might be. Leaving all his business there, wonderful people, nice church, a group of nice men. We even had movies on Sundays there at times, and that was all gone. And looking to the future. Where will we live? Where is the furniture?

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Where, where shall we find a home? Will we find our uncle?

We had the address, but there were no telephones.

SIGRIST: How did your stepmother feel about coming to America? How, did she...

TESAR: She clung to my father. She, they were talking, whispering to each other. I, tears, tears were in both, she cried very much. And she loved us. And she put arms around us, and, "Don't worry. Don't worry. God will take care of us."

SIGRIST: So you're on the boat for eleven days.

TESAR: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the end of the voyage? Do you remember coming into New York Harbor?

TESAR: The end of the voyage was when we heard, "America! America!" Now I told you that when I heard 'America', I said, "Papa, I thought we were going to Vienna. Where was my dancing doll?" (she laughs)

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SIGRIST: Now do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

TESAR: Yes. The Statue of Liberty greeted us, yes. But it was all very strange to us. And all these people gathering their luggage in bags and boxes and suitcases, going out. We had to line up going off the board into Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's talk about Ellis Island. What were impressions of Ellis Island?

TESAR: Ellis Island was at least someplace where we found a place to stay. But when we got there, it was just long benches along the walls. We sat on those. People put their bags and different things they had on the floor. Children sat on the floor. There was nowhere, there were only two bathrooms. That's all. And there was no drinks to get. Nothing at that time. But people who were prepared to travel, they would come and give out what they had, like an apple or a pear, or a piece of bread, or cookies or candy, whatever to eat. Anything like that. They were very kind. Especially I remember one man. He stopped by us and he saw husband and wife and four children. He felt so sorry. So he asked my father what happened, and my father said, "Would

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you please do me a favor? Try to get in touch with my brother." And he did. Then we had to wait quite a long time before that happened. Then my uncle came, and he had to go to the desk and say that we were, that he was his brother and these were the children. And he, my uncle I don't think even knew much about the second marriage at that time. Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the inside where you were sitting for me more specifically. For instance, was it crowded, was it noisy...

TESAR: Very crowded, very noisy. People were talking. And third class had to go down to a special room where there was a, were doctors and nurses. You had to strip all your clothing. You were examined from head to toe. Second class didn't have to go through that that much. And first class not at all. Just if you had pink eyes or something of the kind. And if they discovered anything, they send you back.

SIGRIST: What do you remember personally about the examinations? What did they do to you? Were...

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TESAR: Examined our ears, looked at us, you know. But we were little. And then my father and mother, they put them into a separate room. Examined everything. Your whole body. If you were carrying any diseases, especially your eyes and ears, and that. It was, it was a very strict examination. Third class had it very hard.

SIGRIST: You may not know the answer to this, actually, but let me ask it anyway. Because your mother died of tuberculosis, your real mother...

TESAR: Yes.

SIGRIST: On any of your documentation, was that listed? Would the examiners looking at your papers and your dad papers know that your real mother had died of TB?

TESAR: That I could not answer because my father brought all his papers to the desk. And then the nurse came, brought him to the room, and he was examined there. But I know it was, we were in a, the children were in another room. The parents were in another room, examination room.

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SIGRIST: So how long were you at Ellis?

TESAR: Probably a week or two until my uncle came to get us.

SIGRIST: So you stayed overnight at Ellis?

TESAR: Oh yes, we did.

SIGRIST: Oh, okay.

TESAR: We had nowhere to go.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what the sleeping arrangements were like at Ellis Island.

TESAR: We slept on our bundles. We slept on the chairs, on the benches. Like that, and the children on my mother's lap, my father's lap. And that's the way everybody else was. There were no accommodations. It was early in that time.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people there?

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TESAR: Lots of people. Lots of people. But nice people. People who were kind to one another. Didn't push when they went out of the boat. Push, push, everybody outside. They made room like, it was, they, they considered that you were a husband and wife, two children, and you were considered if there was an older person or someone, they were very considerate.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating at Ellis Island?

TESAR: Yeah. We ate what we had. We didn't, couldn't get anything else. There was nothing to buy. No.

SIGRIST: Was there a dining room or anything like that you can think of?

TESAR: No. Nothing at all. No. Nothing. I remember my father saying we couldn't buy anything. But the kind people were there. They used to pass out food. And they had drinks, too. They had big bottles they brought with them from the country they came, Germany, I guess, and Czechoslovakia. I mean Austria. So, I only remember how kind they were walking around and helping one another.

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SIGRIST: So it took a long time for them to find your uncle.

TESAR: Yes. He had to come all the way from Brooklyn. In those days you didn't have very swift transportation. But when he came, I remember my father took him to that place at the desk, and things weren't right. He had to look at a lot of papers. And then he says, "Come. Now let's go," kissed all of us, and we were ready. We got, I don't know how we got transportation but I think we went by, there were no automobiles, we went by trolley most likely, because at that time there were trolleys.

SIGRIST: What was your impression of New York City?

TESAR: Well, first Brooklyn. When we got to Brooklyn I - it was very sad - we didn't know the language. And we were sent to school in May. It was the May, we still had to go school - I had to go school - my little brothers and sister didn't have to go school. But I cried all day because I did not know the English. And I was in a Catholic school. And the sister came to me and asked me why I was crying. And I said I was sick, but I wasn't. I was really, I was really very

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sad because I was really homesick. So then she told me to go home. But the next day my father said, "Oh, you go back to school. You'll be all right. Don't worry." So I went back to school, and that sister took an extra, you know, she was kinder to me. And so then I finished until June. Then by August my uncle went to New York City, Manhattan, and he found three rooms opposite this church. And that's where we got out home.

SIGRIST: What was the address?

TESAR: 322 East 61st Street.

SIGRIST: And what was the church?

TESAR: Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

SIGRIST: So you stayed with your uncle until August.

TESAR: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then you all moved up to 61st Street.

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TESAR: Moved to 61st Street. Yes. And on the other side of the church was the school. And there we went to school.

END OF SIDE B (TAPE ONE)

BEGINNING OF SIDE A (TAPE TWO)

SIGRIST: Tell me about when you first came to America, what was the hardest thing to get used to?

TESAR: The hardest thing to get used to was the language. Didn't have anything in the house. No tables, no chairs, no anything. And so we were just like people, children sitting on the floor. And my father going through the streets to see if he finally could something. My uncle in Brooklyn did help us somewhat. My father went down where the rich people were, and he found four chairs, straw tops. And they were torn. He brought them home, I remember. He tore the straw away and made tops out of wood. He also found a bed. The legs were broken. He dragged that through the streets, and brought it to the house. Then there were kind people in the street. He came and helped us out with some furniture. And one day my father was passing through a, that rich section.

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He found a mirror, I remember. And it had no frame. Big mirror that would be like between two windows. And he brought it home. He said, "What do you think? I found a nice mirror." And my mother said, "That mirror, why, it has sharp edges." My father said, "I'll put a frame to it." And he did. He made a frame. He put right in the, the rooms were very small. There were, the front room had two beds in there, my brothers, my sister and I. And my father in the back. And the middle room there were two washtubs, a big stove and a little kitchen, no, no sink. Just the washtubs. And that's where we took baths until my father bought one of those aluminum bath tubs, so he and his wife could bathe on Saturdays once a week. Everybody in the same water. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about...

TESAR: And, and gas gadgets.

SIGRIST: How did that work. How did the gas light work? Do you remember?

TESAR: Yes. You had to turn it on and then gas would burn.

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SIGRIST: Was that dangerous?

TESAR: It was. The children would food around. My brother once threw something up and the thing caught on fire. We called the firemen. Firemen were around. Police were around, but not that much.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about what the neighborhood was like. Who lived in his neighborhood?

TESAR: The neighborhood consisted of German-speaking people, but principally Czech, Aus, Czech people because they were that language. It was, Austria was really part of it, West Czechoslovakia, what it is today.

SIGRIST: You're talking about the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

TESAR: Yeah. And so these people were Polish, Czech, Slovak, Italian and a couple Jews. And they were all very nice to one another. They lived in the same kind of environment as we did. A man would come along with a big wagon. He had apples on there, selling them. Penny an apple. And the

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boats used to come in the East River. And on these boats were fruits of all kinds, vegetables. And you could go down with pennies, nickels and dimes, whatever it was that time.

And you would get a big bushel basket of apples, say, for twenty-five cents. Because my mother worked in a cigar factory, and she received dollar a day. My father worked on planes in New Jersey. And he came home once a week only. And...

SIGRIST: Planes like airplanes?

TESAR: Airplanes. Planes. And once, all he brought home was maybe \$1.50 a day. But in those days food was cheap. You got sixteen cents a pound for meat. I used to have to cook the, prepare the dinner, supper until my parents would come home, and take care of the children. And so I used to buy the soup meat for sixteen cents. Maybe two potatoes for five cents, and carrots and something like that, and prepare the way my mother told me, put it into the pot, and put salt and whatever ingredients were needed. And then when she came she finished it off. I did that every day. Took care of the children. Washed them in the morning, because parents went to work maybe before six. They had to be at six work.

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And then I brought them to school. My little brother had to stay with an old lady next to us. And he was a run around all the time. He had to be tied to the table with a rope. I felt sorry for him. (she laughs) So when I came from school that's the first thing I did. Took him off, so he would be with me. But we played in the street. Children played. We all made our own games.

SIGRIST: What were some of those games. Do you remember?

TESAR: Like Potsy. You would mark with a chalk, you know, squares. And you'd jump on one to be, you'd push the piece of slate with your foot, one, two, three numbers were there, you know, until you got out. It was very nice. And another game we had rope, playing rope. And jumping. And hiding. One person would hide behind one of the doors of the house and the others would, no, all, one person, they would all hide. And the one person would count a hundred. And when he finished a hundred, then he was allowed to go and look for them. To look for all those who were hiding behind the doors. That's when my brother got the terrible accident when he was twelve years old.

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SIGRIST: Oh, what happened.

TESAR: A truck with corn passed by. And a chain was loose, and it grabbed a hold of his shirt. And his arm was almost severed. Even to this day. He was in the hospital a year and three months, In City Hospital. We weren't fortunate to get him to a better hospital. Yes, he suffered much. He's the one that's living. He had a very good job. He is a very smart man.

SIGRIST: Let me talk about your dad for a little while. Tell me about how your father adjusted to America, And what he liked about and what he didn't like about it.

TESAR: At first when we arrived on 61st Street, the first thing my father did was collect newspapers. People threw out papers, and he knew that for a big bundle he could get ten cents. And he did that every day. He also helped the lady who had the charge of the home. They used to throw things out and, you know, boxes and things like that. He would collect. If there was a box from (?), maybe some fruit, he would collect that and he would try to fix it up so that he could use the wood. And then he also went to the church. They needed

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some benches to be fixed. And he did that. And if some people needed something to fixed, he would do that. He looked around, walked around to see who would need something. They knew that he had been a cabinetmaker, so he helped in that way. And he helped during the war with the frames, frames for the planes.

SIGRIST: Tell me a how he got that job, and tell me a little bit about what it was he did specifically.

TESAR: He heard from a neighbor that was working in Jersey. So he advised him to come with him. So he got the job there. And I remember when he came home weekends, he told me one day that he happened to make two frames, for those little, like, planes, you know, a day. And there were other men on the place there, too. And they came by him and they say, "You're stupid. Why are you making two frames a day? We only make one. We have time to smoke and we have time to drink." My father thought it terrible to do such a thing, but he kept on to his work. Then finally he got a job elsewhere. And my stepmother's mother came from Czechoslovakia then. I have to say Czechoslovakia because there was Czechs. And she had a big piece of land.

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SIGRIST: She came to America, you're saying.

TESAR: To America. To Michigan.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year it was?

TESAR: I don't know.

SIGRIST: Was she here before you got here...

TESAR: She came after. My, we were already living in 61st Street. She came over with her two sons and settled in Michigan. And she had a lawyer who took care of her property there in Czechoslovakia. And they were quite, quite rich. Her husband died. So she came with the two sons to America. And the lawyer would take care of her money. And I remember one time she sent us a barrel of eggs. Some of them were smashed, but we got them for my mother. Then I was already in the convent. I found out that she had died. And my mother went to the funeral in Michigan. But she went twice, twice, made two trips. Her one son was kicked by a horse and died. The other one settled somewhere in New York. We

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have never heard of him. We don't know what happened to him. So...

SIGRIST: But tell me about...

TESAR: ...then she got the money for, from her mother in Czechoslovakia, the lawyer, through the lawyer. And we bought a house in Astoria. And we began life as normal.

SIGRIST: So that must have been a great relief in a way.

TESAR: Yes. It was a nice house. Yes. Three story.

SIGRIST: Talk to be about your step-mother, because you said she got a job in a cigar factory. Tell me about why she decided she needed to go to work.

TESAR: She, because we had no, my mother had, we had no money. And my father did borrow money from my uncle so we could pay the rent. The rent was twenty-five dollars a month. But that wasn't enough. We needed shoes, we needed clothing. We didn't have all that. And this was America, not another country. So my father, where was I, my father decided

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that, yeah, he would get that kind of a job. And when we bought the house in Astoria he was able to do everything to fix up things. He knew how to separate one room from the other. He made posts, you know, and he helped the people in the house. And in that way he was able to get some money, too.

SIGRIST: Where...

TESAR: Right from the people.

SIGRIST: When your step-mother went to work for the cigar factory...

TESAR: Oh...

SIGRIST: Where was that cigar factory, and how did she that job?

TESAR: The cigar factory was right in New York, downtown. And she had to roll cigars, you know. And then finally her fingers ripped open, so she had to stop. Then she went to work for a very rich lady. And this rich lady was very kind to her. She gave her toys for us and she was very nice. She got a nice little salary.

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SIGRIST: What was she doing for the woman?

TESAR: Cooking. Was an expert cook, too.

SIGRIST: I see.

TESAR: She did cooking, and she helped clean the house and things like that.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about how your father learned how to speak English, if he did indeed learn how.

TESAR: My father learned how to speak English from me. In school we had, it was a bilingual school from grades one to six. We learned Czech and English one hour each day, Czech to English, English to Czech. So and we had sisters who knew the language. Up to grades seven, seven and eight, no. And so that was very wonderful, because then I could learn. I used to carry a dictionary under my arm. And when I heard a word pronou, a word used, and I didn't know what it was, I looked it up. And I learned a lot. So then at home my father wanted to get his citizenship papers. So he had a

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book, too. He had to answer certain questions, as today, you have to study your citizenship book. So he would say, "Mary, what's this? Please show me. What's this? What is that?" (she gestures) So I had to learn how to use a dictionary and helped him out in English. And he did his first papers. Yes. The second papers he got went I was in the convent already. And that time was dangerous, because they said if you didn't have your second papers you would have to be sent back to the, to the country you came from. So I wrote to my father for his, for, just before my birthday, it was. And I said, "Please Papa, get your citizenship papers." And he did. He was already working on it. And on my birthday he got his citizenship papers. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he like America when he first got here.

TESAR: No. It was very different. Losing all the little land, the home, the shop and everything else. It was too, it was very hard. Very hard. But then he had friends. My uncle. And there was two Jewish friends used to come to our house on Sundays in the morning. They talked together. We children went outside. We played. We played in the street. There

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were small sidewalks. But in the street we played. Yes. And on Sundays we used to go, the car fare was five, trolley cars, five cents a ride. So my father would take us for a ride. We'd go down from 61st up to 91st, 90th street somewhere down, uptown for five cents. And we stayed on the train until we turned around and come back on the same five cents. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: What else did you do for fun, for entertainment. Did you go to the movies at all?

TESAR: We used to sit, we used to sit on the steps. We used to call them stoops. And there we told stories. I was a big story teller. I had a lot of kids around me, and told them stories. The little children liked funnies. They never saw funnies in Czechoslovakia. Ho-ho. They were happy to see funnies. My little brother, he would sit there, eat his eyes out. And then stories we'd sing, and all kinds of things like that.

SIGRIST: Was this a bustling neighborhood?

TESAR: Bustling.

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SIGRIST: A lot of people?

TESAR: A lot of people. One, two, three, four stories, buildings next to each other. Yeah. And many children, all nationalities. Yes.

SIGRIST: Talk about your family's relationship to the church across the street.

TESAR: We became members at once. The tuition was fifty cents a month.

SIGRIST: So you started there in what would have been September of 1914?

TESAR: September, 1914 we started school. My little sister, my brother and I. But not the baby. The baby had to stay home with the lady tied up to the table. There wasn't much room to move. (she laughs) There was a, the rooms were very small. About one half of this (she gestures) was all the rooms.

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SIGRIST: So what was different about going to school here as compared to in Austria.

TESAR: Oh, much better. We had tables, I mean we had desks, and chairs. And the children were nice. They behaved. The sister in the kindergarten had seventy-two children. In my class in the lower grades there were about fifty, sixty. And one even more. I remember fifth grade we had seventy children. They behaved. They learned. We learned the English, we learned the, from the Czech to the English translation. It was very wonderful. When we...

SIGRIST: Does that mean there were a lot of Czechoslovakians in the neighborhood?

TESAR: Yes. That, Slovaks and Czechs.

SIGRIST: And so was the church geared towards that particular ethnic group?

TESAR: Yes. Yes. Yes. We were, because the Italians had there own church up the street. Yes. And, but they didn't have a school, so some of them came to our school, too.

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SIGRIST: And were sisters teachers at the school?

TESAR: Sisters teachers. All sisters from kindergarten up. When we reached the seventh and eighth, then we had smaller classes, because children at that age, sixth grade, went to work and had to earn money for the family. We were all poor people.

SIGRIST: Were you in that situation also? Did you have to go to work?

TESAR: No. I stayed in school, because my uncle, we got that money from, you know...

SIGRIST: Right.

TESAR: Yeah. And my uncle helped us. My father borrowed money from him. So. No, we stayed in school.

SIGRIST: Who was your favorite teacher at that school?

TESAR: My favorite teacher was my fifth grade teacher. Sister

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Stanislaus. She was very, very kind. She had a motherly, yeah, you know, she was a motherly person. She understood that we were all immigrants, and that it was hard. So, they sort of like mothered us up. But I was not attached to being a religious, never. (she chuckles) I didn't want to be. It was only a certain priest who had really thought I should be one because I used to help in the church. I used to sing in the choir. And do all kinds of odds and ends to help the brother in the church and the rectory. So, I guess the priest used to see me go to church so often, he thought I would make a good nun, I suppose.

SIGRIST: So it was a priest at this particular church on 61st street.

TESAR: Yes. 61st street.

SIGRIST: Do you remember his name?

TESAR: Father Kissner. Kissner.

SIGRIST: And...

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TESAR: It was at graduation time. See I graduated from that school. We were still living in 61st street when I graduated. And...

SIGRIST: Do you know what year that was?

TESAR: 1918. 1919, yeah. And the priest had asked me when we were going to the studio to have our pictures taken if I would like to be a nun, and I said, "No, not I." (she chuckles) Then he followed me again, and I said, "But you would make a good sister." "Not I, Father." And so he went on, and I didn't think about it anymore until just before he died. He was in the vestibule of the church at Christmas. And he was putting up posters. And I went to church to make a visit. And as I went up the stairs I saw him put up a sign. And he had thumbtacks in one hand and the paper in other. And I said, "Father, could I hold it for you?" He said, "Sure." So then when he stepped down and was finished he said to me, "Sister, I mean, Mary, did you ever think about what I asked you when you were taking your pictures at graduation?" I said, "Father, no, really." And that's all I ended. Then shortly after Christmas he died. And we were invited to the funeral. We three were belonging to a singing group, and we

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sang a beautiful song, "I Yearn for Yonder Starry Dome."
And that hit me so hard. I said, "Gee, I refused him three times. Maybe I am destined to be a nun." So then I told my father. And I stayed home a year, because my mother cried so. She didn't, she felt so bad I was leaving. You know, people would think that because she's a stepmother, maybe that's why I'm leaving. That wasn't the case. So I stayed home a year and went to sewing department. And then the following year I entered (?)

SIGRIST: So how did your father accept the fact that you decided...

TESAR: Oh, yes. He said - my - I - one Saturday my father took me to a store to buy some cheese. And as we were walking I told him, and he said, "Well, you know, your mother, your first mother always wanted you to be a nun." And I said, "Well, maybe that's what God wants me to be." So I said, "Papa, could I see Sister Principal and tell her about it?" And he said yes, but he got there ahead of me and told her. So when I went to see her, she said, "Your father was here and was willing to let you go." So I went. I was only sixteen.

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SIGRIST: And what year was that?

TESAR: 1920.

SIGRIST: Would you like to sort of in a nutshell kind of talk about your teaching career and your life in the sisterhood?

TESAR: When I entered, we were sent to Baltimore. At that period a formation was called candidature. We were candidates. But at that time candidates that were taken in were also sent out to have their experience in teaching. I was sent to Pittsburgh. I had a class of fifty children in grade two. And they were lovely children. They were Croatian children. And very lovely. Well trained. At the end of the year - I loved school. And they were well behaved. I don't...

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a question about that. How did you feel as an immigrant teaching immigrant kids? What was that like for you?

TESAR: Most, maybe some of them were immigrants also. Yes. Because their parents came originally from some country. I do not know. They were Croatians and they had, they were

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farmers. Yes. So there I taught. After a year we were asked to come to the mother house in Baltimore, and we studied a whole year. It was high school, because then we had no high school. Many of us didn't have it. And after a year we were received as novices, new sisters. We received a white veil. And that was also our period of finding out whether we wanted to be nuns or not. And then the next, the second year of formation as novices we were sent out again to teach. But during the time while we, I taught the fifth grade then. I had seventy-two, I remember. I know one of the boys in the back would draw a big circle on the desk. I had to scold him. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How did you punish children if they did something wrong?

TESAR: None. I never touched them. Just tell them to write something, or...

SIGRIST: "I will not draw a circle on the desk in class."

TESAR: Yeah. Yeah. Something, something like that. Yeah. (she laughs) That was really the only two punishment two areas. But they were nice children. They would also be of Czech

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origin in St. Wenceslaus, Baltimore. Very nice children. We had a nice superior, too. Very nice. So we finished the second year. And while I was second year novice already I was teaching, so. Then I took sick, and I had to stop teaching. And I had a big operation. But then again I went back to school, in that same school, St. Wenceslaus, Baltimore, sixteen years. And I had grades five, six and it was very nice. People were most kind. They were very good to the sisters. They knew that we had it hard. Our salary for the month was thirty dollars. In the house outside of, you know, what people would give you, because money, of course in those days you could get more for a dollar than you would get today.

SIGRIST: Just for the record could you please tell me what the order was that you joined.

TESAR: School Sisters of Notre Dame, too. Baltimore, mother house on Aisquith Street. Yes. And that's where we had our formation. Then later on, they built the college in, college in Baltimore, too. It's on Charles Street. And today it is a home for the sisters, too, like we have here. And that's, we all spent our summers on the grounds

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studying our high school to get our credits.

SIGRIST: So how many years did you teach?

TESAR: Sixty-seven.

SIGRIST: Sixty-seven years. That's...

TESAR: Well, fifteen of those were in the library, but that was teaching, too.

SIGRIST: Sure.

TESAR: Yes. I loved the library, because I had the whole school in the library from the kindergarten up. And we had stories and pictures and film strips and all of that. A good time.

SIGRIST: I also for the record would like you to talk about your trip to Czechoslovakia in 1972.

TESAR: Oh, the trip to Czechoslovakia in 1972 was very wonderful. I was...

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SIGRIST: Why did you go?

TESAR: I went because I wanted to see my family. It was my jubilee year. See, we celebrate. When we're nuns twenty-five years we celebrate the silver. When we're fifty the golden, and when we're sixty the diamond. And my next one is coming up when I will be seventy. That will be in 1994. And so, anyway, when we got we were permitted to go on the trip. That was our jubilee trip. Just because we got a lot of money, naturally, from relatives and friends, and we could make the trip. So when I came to Czechoslovakia, the first time I lived with my cousin Annie. Her husband had been in concentration camp for thirteen years. And she, at that time he was already freed, you know. And so, there I visited her. Then I found about other people of the family who lived in various villages and various cities, and then I visited them.

SIGRIST: Were these relations to your father and to your...

TESAR: And mother.

SIGRIST: ...original mother?

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TESAR: Both father and mother. Where I lived in Cejkovice there it was my mother's village. My father lived in Uherske Hradisti.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that for me?

TESAR: Uherske - U-H-E-R-S-K-E H-R-A-D-I-S-T-I. That's where he lived. And that's, I visited, even today those people keep in touch with me. So my writing is very, very, not limited, but too much.

SIGRIST: Did you go back and visit...

TESAR: Two more times.

SIGRIST: ...your old house.

TESAR: My old house, yes. No, not my old house. My old house was no longer there. It was destroyed. A bomb hit it. Only a part of it, and there one family bought that part where the, and not even the bedrooms. It was all gone.

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SIGRIST: What did that feel like to go back?

TESAR: You sit and wonder, "Was that my home? No." It was just simply the one part, one section where there was a little bedroom there for the boys who studied the trade, and then they added on to it. That's all. But in their villages, too many, very bad. There was a monastery across from my other cousin in Uherske Hradisti was a big monastery. And in that monastery were many priests and young boys, students studying for the priesthood. And one night the big trucks came. That was under the Russians. And they made them, gave them a half hour to pack what they had and go into the trucks, and took them out. And one little brother, he was very short, he would still be packing up. He went downstairs and got himself all the little sausages and pieces of bread, and put them into his bag. And the first, that first night they were tied in the stable, and the next were driven to Siberia, never heard of them. But he, somehow or other they didn't think he was a priest. They let him come back. Nobody noticed him. And he came back and told the tale. And he said how he gave out the sausages while they were lying tied up in that stable. (she pauses) So that's there. And then when Communism started, the

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Communists first of all got of many of their, they didn't want. And then they began to give out to certain people, and made everybody equal. And the sisters could not live together in the convents. They had to be living in various places, like taking care of the sick, the mentally retarded children and like that. And they did wear, they were allowed to where a sort of a habit, too. Because it was a, it was said that they would never be allowed to wear it. But they said, "All right, if we are working for the government, we expect to be dressed like nuns, not in rags as we were in concentration camps." And they got through. And my cousin also told me that in Uherske Hradisti where the monastery was, there was a big chapel, and people used to go to church there. Now they had no church because it was taken over by the army. And so in order to make up for that, the people were the farmers and they had to work, taking care of animals and things like that. And they said, "If we have to work for you, we have to have a church." They built them a beautiful church.

SIGRIST: So they kind of bargained.

TESAR: And you should see the beautiful school they made. There's

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no school here in America, there in that Czechoslovakia where I lived, Cejkovice. Beautiful. Everything. High school. Everything. Business. Everything. Beautiful. I saw it. Grounds, gorgeous. The best school in all of Czechoslovakia. In gratitude to the people that they had been good. They had to take care of cows. They had to take care of every kind of animal. The mothers had to leave early morning at six, wash the cows. Dinner time they had to go feed the to cows. Evening they had see that their stalls were clean again and feed them again. Take care of the little lambs and everything. There was no animal in any house, only maybe one pig, what could you do with one pig, kill him? And you were allowed to have chickens, and maybe ducks and that kind, that's all. So all animals were taken over by the people.

END OF SIDE A (TAPE TWO)

BEGINNING OF SIDE B (TAPE ONE)

SIGRIST: When you went back in 1972, and you went and visited these places that you had some connection with emotionally, you know, you had grown up there. How did that make you feel?

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How did you feel inside when you went and visited these places?

TESAR: Well, it looked to me as if the people were really tied down by Communism under force. They couldn't have a regular living, house, home. Mothers had to work all day. The last time they, the first time early morning they left and worked between the day and then eight o'clock or nine o'clock they came. The fathers again had to work on the fields for the Communists. They had a, my uncle had a big kiln where they made bricks. That was all destroyed. Oh, a lot of destruction.

SIGRIST: It was almost like going to a different place. It wasn't almost like what you remember.

TESAR: Different place. A different place. You didn't see the same place. No. No.

SIGRIST: So was it hard, actually? Was it...

TESAR: Hard for the people. And many men...

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SIGRIST: For you? For you to see this?

TESAR: Yeah. Many men were killed, you know - relatives. And we went to a funeral one time. One sister died. She was ninety-two years old. And there we saw a big, big field of red roses. And I asked my cousin, "What is that?" She said, "Those were all boys, sixteen, seventeen years old who were killed by the Russians."

SIGRIST: So this trip to Czechoslovakia you had a lot of mixed feelings about?

TESAR: Mixed feelings. But also nice feelings that I found some people that my parents spoke about, and I saw as a little girl. And then we visited different shrines, and I was allowed to go to, also to Uherske Hradisti, because I couldn't go there when I was little girl. So now I found them. It was just like homecoming. And I went three times. And each time I came it was a little better. But now they're not having it easy, either, because the economy is very bad. But there's peace. And it's going to take a long time.

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SIGRIST: Yes. For the record I would also like you to talk a little bit about where you live now, if you could say the name of this facility, and when you came here, and a little bit about it.

TESAR: I worked sixty-seven years. Six years ago I had an accident in my house. I stepped out of bed and the three disks in the spine went. So I was, I'm incapacitated now. And I find it very hard to walk. I had several surgeries on it, but it's, it helps somewhat. At least I can get around. And so I was in the hospital in New York for about six weeks and then was brought here to our sick center here, and...

SIGRIST: What is the name of this facility?

TESAR: This facility?

SIGRIST: On tape, what is the name?

TESAR: We call it Lourdes. But it's our sick home. That was built a few after this was constructed, as an annex, like, you know.

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SIGRIST: And this is for the teaching sisters of Notre Dame?

TESAR: For the teaching sisters of Notre Dame, no matter where we are stationed, belonging to this province, yes. And so there I stayed six months, and then they discovered I had a heart condition. So I fainted a few times, and so now I am here. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You've been six years, you say?

TESAR: This is my fifth, five years here, but six years altogether.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, let me ask you a couple final questions here, and we'll wrap the interview. One final question is, when you look back on your life, and you've had a very full, very interesting, very varied life, you've had a lot of different kinds of experiences...

TESAR: Yes. I love my life. There were problems, too, you know.

SIGRIST: Sure. But when you look back on your life, what really sticks out in your mind? What was the most important moment for you in your life?

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TESAR: My most important moment in my life was working with children, especially when I had the library. There I really found great joy, because I had children of all ages and sizes. And I just saw how they grew up, how they progressed from kindergarten up.

SIGRIST: And that gave you the most satisfaction...

TESAR: Yes. Most satisfaction in that. I did find a great deal of satisfaction in teaching, especially in my early years. The children were so very behaved. And we had classes of seventy-two and eighty, and really you wouldn't know that we had that many children in class. But my greatest satisfaction was library.

SIGRIST: What values did you learn from your dad, and from his old world growing up that have sustained you throughout your life?

TESAR: My father was a great example to me. He carried all those burdens that came upon him very wonderfully. He believed in God. He kept up our faith. He always kept in touch, and

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when he became ill, he would always, always say, "I wish I could give a little longer life to my children."

SIGRIST: What year did he die?

TESAR: He died in 1979.

SIGRIST: So he lived a long life?

TESAR: Uh-huh. My mother in '77. Stepmother.

SIGRIST: What...

TESAR: They're buried in New York.

SIGRIST: What do you think is still Austrian about you?

TESAR: (she pauses) Austrian? The only thing I remember, really treasure Austria about is my mother and my father, and coming. I didn't see them very often until they moved into the village. But I love stories about Austria. And every time I see The Sound of Music, it just reminds me of what we went through.

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SIGRIST: Do you have a personality trait that you can think of that is old world, that just shows that you have old world blood in you? Your way of looking at the world somehow?

TESAR: My way of looking at the world is that I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to live in Austria and Austrian people, because their life was entirely different that what we had. Their views, too. And they were wonderful views. Clear cut, say, you know. They weren't affected by any other people. And, of course, the Czech element was really Austrian element. So we had that to our name.

SIGRIST: My final question is are you glad that you came to America.

TESAR: Oh, yes. I'm very happy that I came to America. Oh, no. There was no living in Czechoslovakia. No way. Even now. No, no. No. America means a great deal to me. Yes. It gave us everything. Our home, our bringing up, our parents. Everything. No. America means everything.

SIGRIST: Well, Sister Mary...

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TESAR: I don't think that tape is going to very good.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much for...

TESAR: Because I stopped in between. I don't think...

SIGRIST: No, you were great. You were great. And I want to thank you for letting me come to Wilton.

TESAR: And do you know - I'll give you these notes. You can take them with you.

SIGRIST: Sure, we can talk about that in a second. This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service with Sister Mary Hilarine Tesar. Today is June 11th, and I'm at the School Sisters of Notre Dame facility in Wilton, Connecticut.