EI-190
MARIA KRSTYEVA CURRAN
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 17, 1934
INTERVIEW DATE: 7/9/1992
RUNNING TIME: 1:08:00
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 7/1993
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 11/1993

YUGOSLAVIA (Macedonia), 1954
AGE 20

PORT: CHERBOURG
RESIDENCES: MACEDONIA: RESEN
US: BROOKLYN, NY

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Maria Krstyeva Curran, who came to the United States from Yugoslavia, Macedonia in 1954 when she was twenty years of age. Today is July 9, 1992 and we're here in the Ellis Island studios. I'm very happy to have a chance to talk with you today because you're one of the last of the people who came through Ellis Island, and it will be very interesting to hear your account of the experience.

CURRAN: What I can remember.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we start from the beginning with your birth date.

CURRAN: I was born March 17, 1934 in Resen. That's a very small town in Macedonia, and population about maybe seven, eight thousand people at the time that I was born, a very beautiful, lovely town.

LEVINE: And do you, what can you remember about the town? What do you think of when you think of that town?

CURRAN: I think mostly the closeness that people had at our time. I mean, most of the time, I remember going back after seventeen years, with my husband, who is an American, and every time we would go there is such a thing called Corsal, which people go back and forth. They promenade at night after they had their dinner. And I would be stopped every few minutes to be greeted by relatives. And my husband said, "I can't believe this. Why are these people stopping you all the time? I mean, is there really, all of them your relatives?" I said, "Yeah, in one way or the other we are all related." So I think the closeness of people and the simple life that we had there at that time. But then I have lots of memories of the war which are not very pleasant.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, this Corsal.

CURRAN: Corsal.

LEVINE: Corsal. Uh, was that something that was done when you were young, that you remember from before you came to the U.S.?

CURRAN: That is done all through Europe, and it's just not, I mean, something people at that time there was not, people didn't have television. And they would go to

work, a mostly agricultural town, and people would go to work, and after that they'll go home, and they'll have a dinner and spruce themselves up a little bit, and put their best dress or suits that they had, and this is where young people actually met their future husbands. They would go on this Corsal and they would kibitz with one another, and if they liked each other then a family or a person would step in and they would make arrangements for a married life. So this is still done, even now. Even the young people, who have all the comforts and the latest televisions and everything else that they have, they still do that. It's something done in all Europe, I think.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So that was really a social kind of activity.

CURRAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Were there other ways that you socialized back in Macedonia?

CURRAN: Yes. There were lots of, well, the country that I come from, it's mostly Greek Orthodox. We have some, a lot of Albanians and a few Catholics. But there are lots of the, the people that live, they have, we have an awful lot of monasteries in our town, in the villages. And each person, actually each family takes up a saint, and that saint becomes their saint. And once a year on the day of the saint they celebrate and they have relatives over for dinner, and it's a big feast. I mean, this is, no matter how poor you were at that day, you usually had the lamb and all kinds of goodies, baklava and all kind of good stuff to eat. So this is another way that they socialized. Because, as I said, they didn't have television, and there was only one movie theater, which we saw mostly American films at the time, because I don't think the industry any place else,

the movie industry was very successful. So most of the movies that came were from America.

CURRAN: Do you remember any particular American films?

LEVINE: Yes. I remember Red Skelton and Esther Williams very, very well. They did the, she did the, what was it, a ballet in the water? And we used, we usually, I was a student in Skopje, which is the capital of Macedonia. I studied pharmacy. And Saturdays we were allowed to go to town, otherwise we stayed at the school dormitory. We were not allowed to go outside the dormitory except on Saturdays. And we would pick up a movie and we would usually take one of the actors and pretend that they were our actors, and we would memorize their names and we would go and show how many American names we were able to memorize. So that was fun.

LEVINE: Do you think your idea of America was shaped very much by the movies you saw?

CURRAN: A lot, and then my dad. I mean, he was very good. After the war he was sending a lot of packages, and I had very, very lovely clothes. And he would write and tell us, and then he made another trip back to Yugoslavia, and he would tell us about America and how rich it was and how well people lived. And I was very impressed by the movies mostly, really, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you know what your expectations were when you finally were going to come here?

CURRAN: Uh, well, by the time I was ready to come here, my husband wouldn't like this, I had a boyfriend and I very much wanted to stay back there. And I was almost finished with school, and I was going back to college, and I didn't want to come. I wasn't very pleased of coming, but my mom was separated from my dad for so many years, and it was the right thing to do. My brother, who was married at the time and had two children, tried to come with us, and he was not allowed by the Communists because he was a male and don't ask me why, but they wanted the males to stay in the country, and they didn't care about the females if they left. And when we, when I came here I had reservations about being in this country, but I had to do it because of my mom and my dad. They wanted me with him.

LEVINE: I see. What more can you say? Is it Resen?

CURRAN: Resen.

LEVINE: Resen. What more can you say about that, was it an agricultural town?

CURRAN: Very, very. Very agricultural. We had absolutely no industry. It's in the valley, a very small town, and it's surrounded with mountains and even in the summertime you could see the tip of the mountains covered with snow, so lovely. And we have one of the largest lakes, Ohrid, which is pretty famous because a lot of people go there on vacation. It's . . .

LEVINE: Can you spell that name?

CURRAN: Ohrid.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CURRAN: O-H, Ohrid, Ohrid. -R-I-D, I think.

LEVINE: So you were in school for . . .

CURRAN: Uh, I was in school, I went to school in Skopje which is, as I said, the capital of Macedonia, and I was taking pharmacy for four years, and then after that you had to go two more years to college. But I came to this country and never finished.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, were you prepared to do . . .

CURRAN: I spoke no English whatsoever. We learned Russian in our town because we were associated with Russia until 1948, I think, and most students in high school or any other school, the language was Russian. They had to take the Russian language.

LEVINE: So you knew Yugoslavian.

CURRAN: Yugoslavian.

LEVINE: And Russian.

CURRAN: And little bit of Russian. I knew then, yes, I did, but not now.

LEVINE: Now, was the studying of pharmacy, was that in place of what we would have as high school, or that came after high school?

CURRAN: Yeah. No, it was, instead of the four years of high school you actually

took classes, high school subjects, plus you had to take the pharmaceutical subjects which, the way the place was located it was right in the hospital. So whatever we had to study we actually went to the hospital and we did a lot of practical things. So when you were out of the four years, after the four years you had to go and work for the government, because it was free. You had your education for free, but you had to give back at least two years, and if they needed you, then you had to give more than the two years, and then you were allowed to go to college to continue. But up to that point, and they usually send you into small villages because up to that point they really actually had no doctors or pharmacies. If they were sick they had to come to a town that was a little bit larger than their town, you know, than their village. So it was very primitive really, mostly agricultural. That's what it was.

LEVINE: And what about your father? What was his name?

CURRAN: My father's name was Lambo Krstyev. He was a shoemaker in Resen. And he came to this country in 1938 hoping that he would bring his whole family. I have two uncles, brothers of my mother that were here, I don't know really what time they came. I think 1920's, early 1920's. And they brought my dad here because things really, I mean, people were very poor, so he came to this country and he started as a, working in restaurants, because this is what my uncles did. One was a chef for Loews Theaters, the millionaire that had Loews Theaters. And my uncle worked for mostly Jewish catering. He used to, he specialized in Jewish food. And then Dad went and worked with him for a while. And what else.

LEVINE: Did he stay in that kind of work?

CURRAN: Yes, yes, yes. He worked as a chef with my uncle for a long time. And then when we came to this country he got a job at a nursing home in Brooklyn. We had a house in Brooklyn and worked there, and when we came my mom went and worked with him. I went to Columbia University and took American Language Center for a year and a half. I tried to continue with my education. But I wasn't too smart, I guess. In English I was having difficulty.

LEVINE: Well, let's get finished with your life in Macedonia, and then we'll take it forward to after you came here. Let's see. So your father left in . . .

CURRAN: 1938 he came to this country, yes.

LEVINE: And then what did your mother do after he left? Did she work?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. She worked, we had lots of properties, orchards that were apples, pears. And she worked at the orchards. Then the war started. Then things got very difficult because part of the property was in a village where her mom was born, my grandmother. And that part was occupied by the, the whole country Macedonia was occupied by Bulgarians. But the whole, Yugoslavia was occupied by the Germans. And the Germans had partitioned the country. Part of it was given to the Italians, and part of it was given to the Bulgarians. So our town was ruled by the Bulgarians. And I remember one thing that sticks in my mind. We had our cemetery, the Christian and the Turkish cemetery. And the part of the cemetery was under Bulgarian rule. Part of the cemetery was ruled by the Italians. And then there was part that was neutral because they had the borders, the Bulgarian borders and the Italian borders. And if somebody

died and it happens to be in the middle of this partition, you had to have a permission by the Italians and the Bulgarians to bury the person. So that was kind of funny, I think, at the time. And it was very hard, it was very hard for my mother. She had to raise two children, and we lived with my grandfather, who was a priest, and my grandmother, and I had three aunts. And, at the time, things were very, very, very difficult, they really were.

LEVINE: Well, now, did your mother, she owned the orchards, or your family owned the orchards?

CURRAN: My mother from her mother's and father's side. She own all of those orchards. And then when the Communists came, which was 1944, then they took over the properties and they put it into a collective farming, so all of the stuff was taken away from us. But in 19, I think, after we broke with Russia, then the small properties, people had very little property. It was given back to them, to work it by themselves. Only the people, the very wealthy people, that property was confiscated, and they were not allowed to give it back to them, but we got our property back.

LEVINE: I see. Now, did your mother employ people to work the orchards?

CURRAN: Uh, very few for certain jobs. They needed to be sprayed. She couldn't do that. Yes, she did have to employ people. But then during the war when the property that was under the Italian occupation, we couldn't work that. So she had to just give up on that stuff. And she had to go and work as a laborer for other people that had the property in our town. So it was very hard for her.

LEVINE: What do you remember about your grandmother and grandfather? Can you think . . .

CURRAN: Oh, my grandfather was a priest, and he was given three villages to officiate their weddings and their christenings and their dead people. There is lots of stories about my grandfather, rest his soul. He was a very loving man. I remember very little of him, but he was tall and I remember when he would leave the house early in the morning, it didn't matter if it was hot or cold, snow or rain. He had to go and bury the people. And he built himself a horse and a carriage. Like, he had a horse, and he built a carriage that had an awning all over it, and nobody had that in the town. And he would go to one village, and one would say, "Popeh." That's the Yugoslavian word for priest. "Have a drink." And he would have one in this house, and another one in a different house, and by the time he came home the poor man, he was really pretty gone. (they laugh) And people didn't have money to pay him for the services, so usually they paid with a loaf of bread or a scarf or a pair of stockings, I mean, socks. And we had so much bread, and there was a street in the town that was occupied by the gypsies, and they didn't believe in work. I mean, they thought that the only way they can live is to go and go from house to house and ask for handouts. So my grandfather, being the genius, dug up a big hole in our summer kitchen and put the basket of bread, so when they came they didn't even have to knock on our door. They just stuck their hand into the basket, and they got the bread that they wanted. But he was a very, very nice man. He really was. And my grandmother, she stayed home. She was not allowed to go out of the house too much or do any work, because she was considered the priest's wife, and they couldn't do much labor. Everything was done in the house.

LEVINE: Was that an esteemed position, to be married to a priest?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Very much, very much. Yes.

LEVINE: And what were their names?

CURRAN: Mihlo.

LEVINE: Maybe if you could spell them, also.

CURRAN: M-I-H-L-O, Mihlo. And her name was, I forgot. We used to call her Baba.

LEVINE: Now, they had your mother's maiden name. They were your mother's mother and father?

CURRAN: No. My mother was an orphan. She was left orphan at the age of six, I think. Both her parents. Her mother died of cholera. It was sweeping the European countries at that time. And the father, he died of hernia. He had a ruptured hernia, and he was coming with the horse from his property that he was working in. He just collapsed. So they were left four, five children, they were all left orphans.

LEVINE: But your mother's brothers and sisters were nearby when you were growing up?

CURRAN: My two uncles came to this country, and I, she has a sister that she was married in, and she was by. They were very close. She's still alive. They're all still alive.

LEVINE: And how about your father? What was his name?

CURRAN: Lambo, L-A-M-B-O.

LEVINE: And he, did he have brothers and sisters?

CURRAN: He had three sisters and no brothers. No, he had no brothers.

LEVINE: I see. So you had quite an extended family nearby growing up.

CURRAN: Oh, very, very. Very much. I mean, lots of cousins, lots of second cousins. And, as I said, even second cousins, they were like brothers and sisters, a very close family.

LEVINE: Do you remember any games or kinds of . . .

CURRAN: Hopscotch.

LEVINE: Hopscotch.

CURRAN: Yes. And climbing trees a lot. And the girls, we made our dolls from cloth, and we used to actually have big weddings. I mean, one girl will have a male doll, and another girl will have a female doll, and we would invite all the old ladies. They would bring us buttons and broken dishes and they would come to attend our weddings for the dolls. All the ladies were very, very lovely. We had company constantly. I mean, there was always somebody in the neighborhood that was old and was very nice to the children.

LEVINE: So would you say you had a happy childhood?

CURRAN: Very, very. I mean, except for during the war, and the things that happened that I remember now, that happened to my mom, I definitely had a very happy childhood. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What do you remember about the wartime? What are the memories?

CURRAN: Well, the town, we actually didn't have much. I think just one episode. There was, when the Germans were pulling out they had lost the war, some partisans. We had a lot of the partisans, because the mountains were the perfect spot for them to hide. He, as they were pulling out they decided to shoot the officer, and they killed the guy. Lucky for us they happened to bury him in the, one of the orchards and the villagers, they let their sheep go and graze and cover the ground and the tracks of the person that was killed because they turned around and they were going to blow the whole town. They really were going to kill us all, and nobody was going to stop them. But they didn't find the body, so they didn't know what happened to him, so they just continued it. That was the scariest part. But anything than that, I remember when they first came in with their motorcycles and their trucks and we used to go and give them eggs so they can give us the empty cans of Spam because there was no oil or any kind of grease to prepare the foods, so they would give us, you know, they would give us the empty cans. But anything else I don't really remember much.

LEVINE: And in your particular town of Resen, when did this begin? When did the

occupation . . .

CURRAN: 1939 or '40. 1940. 1940, and 1945 I think it ended, the war ended.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So . . .

CURRAN: It was a very strategic town because we were in the Balkans. So if they wanted to go to Albania or they wanted to go to Greece, they had to cross through our, pass through our town. It was, it's a very strategic little town. So they, it was quite busy, I mean, as far as trucks and people passing through. It was a lot.

LEVINE: And so that would have been when you were from six years old to eleven years old that this was happening.

CURRAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And how was the town after the war?

CURRAN: A very prosperous town nowadays. You can't even tell it's the same town.

LEVINE: I mean, like after the war, like in other words 1945 until you left for America.

CURRAN: Well, then we had the Communists that came, and they took our all, everything that rich people, rich was very few, really. Most of the people in the town were middle class. I mean, we didn't have that many rich people, but whatever few they were, they took their property and their houses. They made them poor like the rest of

us, I guess. And it was difficult in the beginning. The only good thing I could say about the Communists was that they took the children and they sent them to school. Because prior to that only wealthy people could go to colleges, and that's why I think they had shortages of doctors and skilled labor. The Communists did open the, they paved the road for the children to go to school. I mean, most of them now have not only a high school education, I mean, most of them are professional people. So that was one good thing. They did give people an education. But things were very tough because you, you know, you didn't have freedom. People couldn't go to churches. The churches were deserted, and you had no freedom of speech. I mean, you couldn't say, "I hate Tito" or anything like that, because you would end up in jail. But I really don't remember that much. I mean, I was young and I was interested in boys at that time, so.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember shortages of food?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. A lot, a lot.

LEVINE: During the Communist rule?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I mean, you had coupons that you went once a month and you got sugar and you got so much flour. But as I, as the time passed by, I guess, they became more industrious and they did have stuff brought in from other states, like from Serbia and Slovenia and all of those places, and things got a little bit better. But in the beginning yes, yes. And you had very uneducated people that were running. I mean, they were appointed because they were partisans, because they killed ten Germans. And when they came back to the villages, they were the ones. Not that they

had an education and they knew how to run the country. So until you had those people retired, things were all done in favors. If you were my favorite person, you had lots of stuff, but if you were not my favorite, you didn't have a job. If you were in the party you and your whole family would have the jobs. But if you didn't belong to the party, God help you, because you didn't have the jobs.

LEVINE: What would be roughly the proportion of people who belonged to the party and didn't?

CURRAN: Most of the ones that worked for the government, like the ones that worked in the banks or big, because mostly was run by the government. I mean, there was very few trades that were allowed to have a private business like a beautician or a shoemaker or someone like that. Now I think they're allowed more, but at that time, no. Everything was run by the government, and you had to work for the government. A big proportion, yes, people.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we take a pause here in order to turn over the tape, and we'll continue in a minute.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Okay. We're continuing now, having turned the tape. Let's see. So you were saying, well, let me ask you this. You began school, then, after the war. Had you started school before that?

CURRAN: First grade I was attending school while we were occupied by the Bulgarians. So I started in the language, because they put the Bulgarian language as an official language, so I started in first grade. Second and on, then, was during the Communist . . .

LEVINE: So in other words you started during the period . . .

CURRAN: Of the war.

LEVINE: Of the war. And you started towards the end of the war, then? Is that how it worked, or . . .

CURRAN: Well, I started school in 1941, I think, the first grade. Because you had to be, we had no kindergarten, so it was right to first grade. And they started kind of late, I think six years old. See, it had to be 1940, 1940, the first grade.

LEVINE: I see. And then what? Was school interrupted then, until . . .

CURRAN: Then once the Bulgarians pulled out and the Germans pulled out and the Communists came, and then we became a republic, and we were allowed to have our own language, Macedonia. Because there is a difference between Serbia and Slovenia and Croatian. There was a difference in languages, so then they started the Macedonian schools that we went to.

LEVINE: I see. And what was school like under the Communist regime?

CURRAN: Well, you were indoctrinated. I mean, first you belonged to the, I forgot

now. What was it? We had to belong to it, because the, we had to pay tuition, but I forgot what it was called, really. But as you got older, I mean, there was one group that you had to belong. It didn't make any difference, but then after that in order to belong to the Communist party you had to prove yourselves. I never did belong to it. In fact, in, when I was going to pharmaceutical school and we were almost kicked out, a group of us, from school because we jumped over the windows and we went to midnight mass for Christmas. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: Was your grandfather alive?

CURRAN: Oh, no. He died as soon as, he died in 1942. He died.

LEVINE: I see. Well, uh, let's see. So then at some point your father was able, you were unable to communicate with your father for some period of years during the war, right?

CURRAN: During the war. We didn't know that he was alive or dead. My mom tried to get in touch through Red Cross and I think she did get an answer that he was okay, that he was alive.

LEVINE: And where was your father in the United States?

CURRAN: He was in New York.

LEVINE: In New York.

CURRAN: In New York. He lived in Bronx with my uncle, and most of his life he,

when we came then he bought a house in Brooklyn and we lived in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did your father send you money for you and your mother to come?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I mean, we had no problems. As soon as the war was over and we had contacts with him he was not only sending money, but he was sending packages and foods every month. He was very good to us, yes.

LEVINE: So in that period from the time the war was over until you actually left to come here, you were in communication with him and he was sending . . .

CURRAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had plenty to eat and enough money to spend and everything. Yes, he was supplying us with all of that stuff. He was very good.

CURRAN: Now, why is it that you didn't come sooner? Was there a reason?

CURRAN: Because, yes. We had a passport and we were ready to come. And my dad sent a telegram to stay in Resen because they were, the ships that were coming, which was one of the last ones that we would have taken because we actually had tickets for it. They were having problems being sunk on the middle of the ocean, and he got scared. And another thing, I think he had, didn't have a steady job. Problems were having, I mean, he had problems in here, too, because he didn't speak the language, and it was hard for him to get a good job. He was doing menial jobs, and he wasn't sure that he would be able to support us. And he figured we were better off if we stayed

back in Yugoslavia because, since we had a house, and my grandfather was still alive at that time, and he stopped us. He really regretted it for a long, long time until he died that he did that. Because then my brother died. He never had a chance to come to this country.

LEVINE: Uh, I'm sorry.

CURRAN: In fact he was put in jail because he tried to escape through Trieste, my brother.

LEVINE: Oh, now, was your brother younger or older?

CURRAN: My brother was six years older than me. He was in Skopje in the same place he was going to college for electrical engineer, and him and three other guys were going to escape, and one of them reported him to the police and they got caught and they were put in jail.

LEVINE: In Macedonia?

CURRAN: In Macedonia. And he was in jail for almost a month. And he came out of it, and I think this is when he had high blood pressure and they didn't know how to treat it, and he died from high blood pressure at twenty-eight.

LEVINE: Hmm. So what year was that, roughly?

CURRAN: Uh, that was, it had to be 1952 or '53, just before we came here.

LEVINE: So he tried, he was, he wanted to come, but he was not allowed to come.

CURRAN: Oh, very much, very much.

LEVINE: And so he tried to escape, and . . .

CURRAN: Very much, yes.

LEVINE: And it was mines that had been set during the war that were sinking the ships that were coming?

CURRAN: I think so.

LEVINE: Which made it dangerous . . .

CURRAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: . . . for you to travel. Uh-huh.

CURRAN: But I think, mostly I think he was afraid that he might not be able to support us.

LEVINE: Whereas if he sent money to you in Macedonia a little bit went a long way.

CURRAN: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: As compared with what it would be here.

CURRAN: Definitely, definitely, yes.

LEVINE: I see. Well, let's see. So you received money and tell me about preparing to leave. What did you pack to take with you?

CURRAN: Actually very little. Being that I was the age to get married in Yugoslavia, they do, since the time the baby is born, if she is a girl, they prepare a hope chest, the parents. And I had all that. And I had to leave that. The only thing that I remember packing was two dresses and pairs of slacks, which nobody wore at that time then, but my dad had sent me from America. So I had that. The rest of it we left it all to my sister-in-law and my brother, since they were not allowed to come. And she had two little girls. Well, she had one at the time. The other one was born after we came to this country. And in the ship I was very, very embarrassed, because actually I didn't had too many clothes to change. It was five days we were travelling, and I had just these two dresses and the slacks, but I figured I was coming to a country where there was, and most of my clothes at that point were from America, because Dad was sending them. So I left them for my sister-in-law. And when I came here, my dad took me, I remember, to Macy's. We had to go to a wedding, and I was like Cinderella going through the store. (she laughs) It was lovely, really. I enjoyed.

LEVINE: Before you left, when you had clothes from America, where your clothes different from the friends that you had?

CURRAN: Definitely. Oh, yes.

LEVINE: What were the differences?

CURRAN: In, well, in Yugoslavia they're very well-dressed, but you had one dress that was Sunday dress, and the rest a few dresses that you wore every day. And they're very, very well-dressed when they went out, and they made sure of that, but I was able to, in fact, I used to talk about, maybe, because it was a small town. Because I would get dressed in the morning in one dress and then in the afternoon if I went out, if my mother sent me to the store, I would put another dress. But they all knew that I had my dad in this country, so I mean, everybody knows everybody there. So it was, it was very nice. I felt very good about it. I really did.

LEVINE: So you must have felt special or privileged.

CURRAN: Like a princess, yes. Yes, yes. After all, going through the war and not having things, I felt very good, I must admit that, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, and how about your mother? Did your mother bring anything that had been in the family, or with her when she packed?

CURRAN: Uh, not much, really. As I said, we just left. But I do have a few things since then that I had sent. I had a cousin that visited me, and I have a beautiful, my dining room table cloth, that belonged to my aunt, and the cloth itself, it's handmade. She made it herself when she was a young girl, and it's crocheted, and it's just beautiful. And there's a few things that I have, but no, most of the stuff we did leave back there because we had my brother and my sister-and-law, so we didn't want to take them. As I said, we were coming to a country that had all the beautiful things, and we didn't think that was beautiful. Now we appreciate it.

LEVINE: Now, tell me about leaving Resen. What was the circumstance, and what happened?

CURRAN: I was sad leaving my brother back, and I remember we had practically the whole town that came. And we had a neighbor who tried to be nice, he gave us a nice send-off. He had a band with a big drum that was, he brought them, and it was early in the morning, I remember. We took the bus, and there was a lot of people, and a lot of tears. But, it's just like, it's coming back to me now after thirty-something years. That's funny. (she laughs)

LEVINE: And so you took the bus from Resen to where?

CURRAN: To, uh, we took a bus to Skopje, and from Skopje to Belgrade we took a train. And then from Belgrade to France we took the Oriental Express, which was something now to talk about. Yeah. And we stayed over, we were met by an agent that my father had paid in France, and then he, we had another couple that was travelling with us. They were from Serbia. She was, her husband was in Chicago, and she had a boy and a girl. In fact, she was brought in here too with us because I think she didn't have something wrong with her papers. And . . .

LEVINE: So did you stay in Paris?

CURRAN: We stayed in Paris overnight, just one night. And then we took the train from Paris to Cherbourg, and then we boarded Queen Elizabeth from Cherbourg.

LEVINE: Do you remember being struck by anything, having left your little town and

Macedonia and . . .

CURRAN: Ah, yes. I cried a lot. I must admit, when I first walked, when first we came into New York, I looked at the buildings, I mean, from the boat, from the ship they looked beautiful, very majestic, very grandiose. But when I walked the streets, when we walked to my uncle's house and I looked at it, it reminded me of an asphalt jungle, really. It was very, very, I was raised in the small town that had lots of trees. But after we went back with my husband, he says, "Where is this little beautiful town that you always talked to me?" He thought that it was, it looked like a bomb had fallen down, and it had blown. Because what they did, all the little, we had houses with lots of yard that people planted flowers and trees, but then everybody else moved from the villages, and all these empty lots, they built houses, one next to the other. So it's not as beautiful as I remembered it when I was, and it was very sad to go back, really. It was. But, uh, I will never go back there, never.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the, getting on the boat. Did you have an examination, when you were in Cherbourg, before you boarded the . . .

CURRAN: No, no. All the examinations were done in Belgrade. When we went to get our visas from the American Embassy, they had doctors that were paid by the American Embassy to make sure that people didn't buy them off so that you can come to this country. Because a lot of, I mean, our town, ninety percent of the people, at one point or another, they were in America. A lot of them came back, but a lot of them stayed here. And we were examined prior to coming to America. It was like a month or so, to make sure that everything was in order, they sent us a message that everything

was okay, that we can come. So we were not, but I remember we were followed from Belgrade all the way to Trieste. We were followed by an agent. There was an agent in our compartment in the train, and I have no idea why. He stayed in our, with this couple, they were with us. So I don't know if it had anything to do with her, because, I mean, we were not involved in any politics or anything, but there was an agent. When it came to Trieste that he got off, and went back with the train, and we were transferred to a different train.

LEVINE: Hmm. This was along the Oriental Express.

CURRAN: Yeah. So he was allowed to come to just the Trieste. I don't know why. I have no idea.

LEVINE: So then you, as soon as you got to Cherbourg, you pretty much got on the ship?

CURRAN: On the ship, and there was, I mean, there was no problem. It was when we docked in New York the first class and the second class had left, and we were, I don't know if they had checked them too the way they did the tourist class, but then we were brought up in the second class compartment, or whatever they called it, the level. And then you had the immigration checking your papers, and they found out that whoever was looking at the x-rays, they saw the darkening and all that, so they wanted to make sure that I wasn't sick from tuberculosis, I guess. And they brought us here. I remember it was a lady cop. She was dressed in the uniform, and we boarded a little boat, and when we were brought in here I, they told my mom that she could leave

because my uncle, my dad couldn't come, he was working, and my uncle came to pick us up from the boat. And they said to my mother she could live with my uncle and I to bring me here by myself. And my mother says, "No. If I don't go with her, we're going back to Yugoslavia. I'm not leaving her alone." So she was brought, she didn't have to be here, and when I, when we came here I was very, very upset. I felt like a criminal. I didn't know what I did.

LEVINE: You didn't know why?

CURRAN: No. Well, I couldn't speak the language. I didn't speak the language. I mean, and I don't know, my uncle had told us afterwards, because they did come, they were allowed to come. And then my aunt came with her children and visited with us, and they said, "Don't worry about it, everything is going to be fine." And they took me to New York back with the boat by myself, and they took the x-rays. They checked me. And for three days we were, I don't know, maybe it wasn't even three days. I don't remember, really. They let us go.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the ship. What were your accommodations?

CURRAN: Oh, nice. We had bunk beds, my mom and I. And upstairs there was a very lovely dining room and lots of food, which was very, very unusual. I mean, let's face it, there was no way you could have that much food in a small country. It was English, a lot of unusual things that I had never seen before. I mean, they were serving lots and lots of food. It was very, very pleasant, very pleasant.

LEVINE: And was it you and your mother alone in the cabin?

CURRAN: Yes, just my mom and I. There was a guy that was travelling. He was from our village. He was coming back to America. He was in America for a very long time. So he was trying to teach me English, so by the time I came to New York I could say "fish, dish." (she laughs) They were the two words I was able to say.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you remember coming into the New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty?

CURRAN: Yes. It was, as I said, early in the morning we docked and it was very misty. And you couldn't see it that well, but we knew we were in New York, and a lot of excitement to see my dad and see them. I mean, mixed emotions. Very excited that I was going to be with my dad, and it was a new world and I'd heard so much, I saw so much in the movies. I mean, like they said, I read the little sign in there that people thought that America was the streets were paved with gold. Well, I didn't believe that. I knew that they weren't, but it was very exciting. But at the same time I felt very sad, too. Because I was twenty years old. It wasn't, if I had come in 1939 it would have been so much nicer for all of us. But there were a lot of conflicting emotions with me.

LEVINE: And how about Ellis Island? What do you remember about it?

CURRAN: Well, I was first introduced to the cafeteria food. That was very impressive, when I came. And I remember a cop opening one of the, there was a balcony on one side of the Great Hall there, and he would let us go outside, and, at a certain time. And when I went downstairs, outside into the yard, it was just that there were so many people below us, and I couldn't understand. And I was, then I was really

upset and very afraid, because I thought we were in prison for something because it was a lot of people in here. There were a few people upstairs that could speak our language that were here for quite a few months that they were not allowed. There was one guy, I remember. There was something mentally wrong with him and he was trying to fight it to be sent back. And he, I had asked him, I says, "Why are those people downstairs?" And he says, "Well, most of them are Communists, and they're in prison. They will not allow them to enter the country because they're going to start trouble." So then I felt bad because I figured I'm not Communist so they're not going to keep me here. (she laughs) That made me feel very good.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. But there were a lot of people here.

CURRAN: Quite a few, quite a few. Yes, yes. Not too much upstairs. It was not that many upstairs, but downstairs a lot. And evidently when we went to have our meals it was downstairs. I remember it, if I remember correctly it was downstairs, and we had to take the trays. There then was an awful lot of people, so they must have been allowed to come to the cafeteria, but upstairs there was not that many people.

LEVINE: So you were staying in the dormitory in the Great Hall.

CURRAN: Yes.

LEVINE: You didn't go to a hospital building, a separate . . .

CURRAN: No! No, no, no, no. They just took me, the next morning, we stayed overnight here, upstairs. I remember I was crying so much that I started running a fever

and Mother got scared. And I remember her going, she couldn't speak the language, so she went and grabbed one of the girls that was cleaning the halls to tell her, "Come here to see my daughter, because she's not feeling good. She's really crying a lot, and I think she's running a fever." And I think they sent somebody to look, check me, and I was okay. So the next morning I got dressed and they took me to New York some place, to probably a hospital. I really don't remember it. And they brought me back. And then that was all that they checked me. So then my aunt, and I think it was the second or the third day, my aunt came and she picked us up. No, we weren't sent to the hospital. No, we stayed right here in the Great Hall, second floor someplace, I think.

LEVINE: And, let's see. So what about the other, you said the people you travelled with, they were also detained here?

CURRAN: She had some, yes, she had some problem with the, I don't know what it was, if it was the same thing. Because, you see what happened, in Yugoslavia, tuberculosis was very, very much . . .

LEVINE: Rampant, uh-huh.

CURRAN: Feared and rampant. And our generation, I think, they were given, uh, shots against it, and that's what my doctor told me now, not too long ago. He says, because every time I have tests it would show positive, but there isn't, I mean, I'm not affected. I mean, I'm not affective to anybody else. And I said, "How come?" And he says that this is what they did. They gave the younger generation the inoculation, and now whenever you have the test for it you show positive, but you don't, you know, you

don't have the disease. And I think that's what happened to her. I'm not sure now if it was her or her children, but it had to be her. And she was quite frightened, too, I remember, yeah. But the kids were very young. Her children were young, and they had a ball running through the Hall back and forth. They were really excited about it. (she laughs)

LEVINE: So did you, were you able to stay with your mother?

CURRAN: Oh, yes, yes.

LEVINE: While you were here.

CURRAN: Oh, yes, yes.

LEVINE: And were you in a dormitory, or in a separate room?

CURRAN: No, in a dormitory. No, my mom and I, we were in the room by ourselves.

LEVINE: By yourselves.

CURRAN: Yes. It was in the room by ourselves, no dormitory. We weren't with lots of people.

LEVINE: I see. And was it standard procedure for you to have been x-rayed?

CURRAN: In Yugoslavia, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because, oh, yeah. We went through lots of it, for everything. X-rays and any kind of communicable diseases, blood tests, kidney tests, all of that. We were actually almost a week in Belgrade for all the

tests that we had. And when you couldn't have the tests in your town, you had to go in Belgrade. These doctors were paid by the American Embassy, so it was all done, whatever it was. But thank God there was nothing wrong.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So it was very expensive, then, the testing that was done. And was it, it was physical testing, mental testing?

CURRAN: Everything, yes. Yes, definitely.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, um, let's see. So is there anything else about your experience here at Ellis Island that you recall?

CURRAN: Uh, well, I recall there was a stand as you walked in and they sold fruit, bananas and oranges. Oranges I had seen, but bananas I had not seen in our town because it's not a tropical town, so you don't get the tropical foods. And I asked my mother if we had money, and she says yes, and I did go and buy. And I didn't like it too much, but I had to try it and see. That's one thing that I remember about it. Not much, really, because I was, I was scared, and my mom was very scared too.

LEVINE: Were you afraid you would be sent back?

CURRAN: Yes, yes. Because, I mean, she wanted so much. She was for thirteen years without my father, and she refused to come unless I came with her. And if they had sent me back, she would have came back, and that would have been sad. So we were kind of scared, both of us.

LEVINE: Yeah. So then your uncle came and visited you?

CURRAN: Oh, yes. And my aunt came and my dad came when he, uh, he came with my uncle one day, but he couldn't take days off because he was working. And when they picked us up it was my aunt that picked us up. She came here with her daughter. I remember she taught her how to say, in Yugoslavian, "Welcome to America."

LEVINE: And, let's see, then do you remember the day you left? How did that go?

CURRAN: Oh, I was happy to get out of here. I must admit, yes. It was pretty scary. And we stayed with my uncle for a couple of days until a house, my dad had bought a house but it was, no, he didn't buy a house then. He bought the house afterwards. The apartment, it was not painted, so we couldn't stay in the apartment. And we stayed with my uncle, and it was strange. Very difficult not being able to speak the language and understand. It was very, very difficult. But after a little while we got used to it.

LEVINE: And do you remember the meeting with your father?

CURRAN: Oh, yes, yes. But, see, my dad had left, he was visiting Yugoslavia. In 1951 he came the first time, and then he came in 1953 because in 1953 he came, and he said that he was going to definitely take his family. They wouldn't let us come here, that he was coming back. And somebody, a friend of ours said to my dad, "As long as you're here, they will not let your family go to America, so why don't you just leave." And he left, and three months later they did give my mom and me a visa from Yugoslavia. And so we saw him, like, it was only three months' separation that I saw

my dad. So it wasn't, I mean, the first time when he came to Yugoslavia I had been, you know, I didn't see my dad for thirteen years and it was kind of strange, or it was very difficult.

LEVINE: And how long did he stay that time when he came?

CURRAN: The first time he stayed a year, and the second time he stayed a year, a whole year, yes. He stayed a whole year.

LEVINE: I see. Well, why don't we pause here and we'll, oh, I guess this is, oh, okay. (she laughs) We just have a few minutes left, so I want to wrap this up. Could you say anything about your experience, then, coming to this country and then staying here?

CURRAN: Well, this is an experience coming now and visiting back after thirty-six years. It's very, uh, very emotional, really. I mean, I'm going back to, just having this interview, it's bringing me back to something that I've never thought about in really a very, very long time, and it's very emotional experience, I must admit.

LEVINE: Well, I want to thank you so much for talking with me, and I appreciate all your very detailed remembrances. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

CURRAN: . . . was in the house, and this German officer. He was the most scary thing I have ever, ever experienced at the time being that I was so young he was tall and his shoes, he had boots that were shiny. You could actually see your face on it. He walked into my house without asking anybody's permission. He just walked upstairs into our bedrooms, and he was looking for my dad. And I said, "Dad America, America. No Dad, no Dad." And he wanted to know if my dad or any of my family was a partisan, because what was happening was that most of the village men who were of age to fight, they were in the mountains, and they would open fire as the colonies of Germans would be going from our town to Albania, Tirana. And they would open fire and there were probably maybe six or seven of them, but the Germans thought that there were a whole army because as soon as they would finish, by the time the Germans were climbing up the mountains to reach to these people they would run and go further down, and as they came further down they would open fire again. So they were very, very afraid of this kind of a sniper, I think. So he came, and he really gave me a big scare. (she whispers) He really did.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's skip ahead now to when you came, and you came to the United States. Do you remember your initial few days here, what impressions you had about America when you actually did get here?

CURRAN: Yes. Uh, as I said, we stayed with my uncle, and my aunt, she really was very, very nice and she wanted to introduce me to some of the American life. They had invited some of their friends from different places. They have a bungalow in Long Island. We had gone there, and my uncle had a big party for my mom and me, and it

was very impressive. I liked the friendliness of the American people. I thought they were so kind. And it made me feel good just being in here.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we just really now only have a few minutes left, so let me just ask you your husband's name.

CURRAN: My husband's name is Robert Peter Curran, and he's an Irishman born in this country and very proud of it. We have three children.

LEVINE: And their names?

CURRAN: Our oldest is Robert, and the youngest one is Michael. And our daughter, Donna, she's getting married August 15th, and we are very excited about it. And Michael, the second son, has a little baby. Her name is Kelsey, and she is beautiful, she really is.

LEVINE: Well, in closing, can you say anything about your coming to America that . . .

CURRAN: I'm very, very glad, and very, very happy that my dad decided to come and stay in this country, and that he really fought for us to come and enjoy the freedom, really, and everything that this country can afford, and any American that has any problems about this country, they should go and visit some of the countries in Europe, and they really will appreciate this country very much, it's true.

LEVINE: On that note I think it's a good place to stop, and I want to thank you so

much for talking with me today.

CURRAN: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.