EI-215
PAULINE STEVENS (STEFAN) CURTIS
BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 23, 1926
INTERVIEW DATE: 9/18/1992
RUNNING TIME: 48:25
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION: BROCKTON, MA
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 6/1994
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 6/1994

ALBANIA, 1930 **RESIDENCES:**
AGE 5 **ALBANIA: KORCA**
PASSAGE ON "THE VULCANIA" **US: ROCKLAND, ME**
PORT: BARI

Oral Historian's Note: Mrs. Curtis is the sister of Georgia Tasho, EI-216. Both sisters are present during the recording of this interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 6/23/1994.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here in Brockton, Massachusetts with Pauline Curtis, at the home of her sister Georgia Tasho. And Mrs. Curtis came through Ellis Island in 1930 when she was five years old from Albania. Well, I'm very happy that I happen to get to talk with you, and we'll start by my asking you where in Albania you were born.

CURTIS: I was born in Korce. My sister and I were both born in Korce, Albania, spelled K-O-R-C-E. Americans during World War II called it Kowitza.

LEVINE: And did you live in Korce as long as you lived in Albania?

CURTIS: Yes, oh, yes.

LEVINE: And what is your birth date?

CURTIS: September 23, 1926.

LEVINE: And tell me when you remember anything of those first five years in Korce, what you recall.

CURTIS: Well, mostly I remember my own grandmother who I loved dearly and who had us over every day for lunch, which I remember with my own cousins, that she used to teach me that my cousins were my brothers, and the only girl cousin we had, she was our sister. And I do remember that very vividly because I could never call them my cousins. They were always my sisters and my brothers, and we broke bread together.

LEVINE: And what was your grandmother's name?

CURTIS: My grandmother's name was Anastasia, Anastasia.

LEVINE: And she was your mother or father's mother?

CURTIS: She was my mother's mother. My father's mother had died, and I had never seen my other grandmother.

LEVINE: Did you know your grandfathers at all?

CURTIS: No, both of those had died. I only know of them and the stories that they told us about them.

LEVINE: I see. Are there any stories that you remember that you were told about your grandfather?

CURTIS: Well, I was told that one of my grandfathers worked, I don't, worked in the lumber yards of Albania. Actually, he lived in a village where it was a lumbering village. And he worked there, and then his children, which was my father, also worked in that same lumbering. I don't know who owned it, or if it was a community thing, or what it entailed, but that's what he told me they started, and they worked very hard, and it was from there that my father left to go, I think first he went to Bulgaria, then to the Ukraine, and back to Albania, then to the United States.

LEVINE: When he went to Bulgaria and the Ukraine what was he . . .

CURTIS: He was looking for better, a better life, More work and a better life, and he left as a young boy. And my other grandfather was quite well-to-do because he

owned walnuts, groves of walnuts which he shipped out all over Europe. And also, let's see, now, what they call those, hazelnuts, I think. He raised hazelnuts and walnuts.

LEVINE: And was he from Korce?

CURTIS: No. He was, he lived in Korce, but he was born and raised in Dishnitz, and he owned most of the land in Dishnitz, where the groves were.

LEVINE: I see. Could you spell Dishnitz?

CURTIS: Well, they spell it D-I-S-H-N-I-T-Z, I believe.

LEVINE: And . . .

CURTIS: Or very similar to it. That's how my uncle spelled his name here in the United States, my mother's brother, because they always used that town where they came from, too, so you'd know their name and where they came from.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, the town, did that come last, or did that come before . . .

CURTIS: Last, last.

LEVINE: Well, now, your father went to Russia and he returned because he couldn't find . . .

CURTIS: No, he worked, and then finally I guess he came back because he always came to see his mother. His father had died, and he always helped his mother, you know, sending her money to raise the younger children. So that's what he did. (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming now. Mrs. Tasho has just come in, and we'll continue. So you were saying your grandfather, oh, the name of the town was the last part of a person's name.

CURTIS: Yeah. I believe that's correct.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember religion in your family while you were in Albania?

CURTIS: Absolutely. We were, we were Eastern Orthodox, which is very similar, like Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox. That is our religion.

TASHO: By the way, is that cake done?

CURTIS: Uh, is it quarter of? Eastern Orthodox by birth, and we were raised Eastern Orthodox. We are Orthodox.

Some people call us Greeks, but we're not Greeks. I respect the Greeks, but I'm just saying we're Albanians. We were conquered by the Greeks to be sure, and we lived under Greek rule. I didn't, but my father and mother did, as children. So they had to learn to speak, read and write Greek.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CURTIS: See, it was Greece when they were small. They were conquered.

LEVINE: So it was a free country, a free Albania.

CURTIS: Yes. But we've been conquered by the Italians, the young people over there today speak Italian because during World War Two Mussolini took us over, and then the schools became Italian for a while, and most children had to learn to speak Italian.

LEVINE: Well, what do you remember about the practice of the . . .

CURTIS: Religion?

LEVINE: The Eastern Orthodox religion?

CURTIS: Oh, we still practice it. We are full of tradition

and we are full of family values that they tell about today. What they're telling about we have known all our lives. Our families are very tight, and, in fact, even our extended families are tight.

LEVINE: Any specifics that you can tell about the family values or the religious values or observances?

CURTIS: Well, of course, our high holy days, probably the highest is our Easter, and that to me is the most beautiful time of the year because that time of the year, springtime, and we clean our houses from top to bottom, we bring out the very best we have in the home, whether it be the best china, the best of silver, the best of glass, the best of carpets that sometimes we don't have, only during those specific times. We also have the best of food, and the best of pastries. (to her sister entering the room) I was telling about Easter where it is the high holy days. Of course, we fast, too, you know, during the week, before we come to all this celebration.

LEVINE: The week before Easter.

CURTIS: The week before Easter. And then we, and we deny ourselves a certain amount. We don't do everything

that we want to do, but we do most everything we choose to do. It's a little bit more liberal now than it used to be.

TASHO: Well, it's Orthodox, like the Greek Orthodox. (break in tape)

LEVINE: We're resuming now with a fan on us on this hot day. So, let's see. You were saying that you fast the week before Easter.

CURTIS: To make our communion.

LEVINE: And you don't do things that you might ordinarily do.

CURTIS: That's right. Not so much socially.

LEVINE: Socially, uh-huh.

CURTIS: Because the social is going to come right afterwards, after the, after we make our communion, which is Saturday night usually at midnight. Sometimes we might make it Saturday morning if we, you know, then we can eat after Saturday morning. If not, we wait until midnight. We can't eat until after midnight. And that is how we do it. We have to make the communion. Then we come home and we have a big feast,

and usually it's roast legs of lamb, because that is our meat. We might have something else, too, but basically lamb is the predominant meat that we have. Then we have the baklava, the koutabea and all the beautiful sweets that they make, that they have during that period. They have them now, but weddings and our name days and so forth, but not, we don't have them every day.

LEVINE: Now, the name day, is that when someone names a child, what goes into choosing the particular name?

CURTIS: Usually the names are given by the godparents, but as a rule I think they name them after the person, after a member of your family has died, they name them after that person. If your mother or your grandmother or your great-grandfather. This was what they always did, so they always, those names repeated themselves from one generation to the next. However, now they have a trend that they might take a book like a lot of people do and pick out this name or that name, and it has no significance, or it doesn't have anything Christian in it. You know, like the Bible has Christian names, and they use those Christian names, but they use, they're repeats, because, as I say, as

the grandparents or the mother or the father or a brother, if somebody dies, then that house is opened again on that name day.

LEVINE: That house is open?

CURTIS: The home. Like, because they celebrate the name days, like you would a big birthday party, but they usually would celebrate them, they try now to hold it to one day. Years ago it would be for a whole week. You might come and visit with your family, the next person come and visit with their family, and the house was already cleaned and prepared and the food was prepared, and they cooked constantly, even through the week, because they had to replace what they had already served. See, because other people would be coming. And this would go from Sunday to Sunday.

LEVINE: What particular dishes do you recall as being very much Albanian?

CURTIS: Well, we have a very nice lemon soup that's made from chicken. We have lamb that's stewed and it's made with cabbage and string beans, tomato sauce, oregano. They're sort of simple dishes. You have, like, your rattatouille, some of what we would call peasant food

you people call gourmet. (Dr. Levine laughs, background kitchen noise) Because these are the foods that we have and were grown in the country, like parmesan, peppers, tomatoes, you know, all the veggies.

LEVINE: Now, was it a farming community?

CURTIS: They have a lot of agriculture in Albania, but they also have a lot of mines. They probably haven't developed them as well. They have a lot of copper, nickel, iron ore. They are wealthy. They have the petroleum. They are wealthy in their minerals. What they need is technology.

LEVINE: But in Korce, was that a farming, agriculture . . .

CURTIS: No, no. That was, that's a city of about eighty thousand people.

LEVINE: Now?

CURTIS: Now. But I think it was always a pretty good-sized city. It was probably one of the largest cities I was. It's Tirana, Durres, Korce, Shkoder, Gjirokaster. I think those are probably your largest cities in Albania.

LEVINE: I see. So was there any industry or, what do you remember, I mean, what did people do for an occupation in Korce when you were growing up?

CURTIS: I really don't remember exactly what most people, my uncle ran a store. My mother's brothers had stores. The other one had a candy manufacturing plant, I would say. He made candy, shipped that out. So it's in the area, too. I don't know what most people did, unless my sister remembers. Georgie, do you remember what the people of Korce earned most of their money? If it was agriculture, or did they have, they had factories there, they made beautiful rugs. (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming now. And we were talking about Easter, I think.

CURTIS: That was our highest holy day.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, was there anything else of the traditions that you had in Albania that your mother or your, anyone else in your family, carried on?

CURTIS: We carried everything on because when we came into our home it was strictly Albanian. When we walked out the door, we were in the United States of America. And we

lived outside just like any other American, but when we came in we spoke Albanian, we lived Albanian inside the home, and we kept our traditions. (to her sister) Wouldn't you say that would be a correct statement?

LEVINE: Now, your father left for the United States before he was married to your mother?

CURTIS: Yes, he did.

LEVINE: Okay. When did he leave?

CURTIS: I think he first came here in eighteen something, 1898, somewhere around there, 1896, '98, through that period. And then I think he went back two or three times from then to 1920's, he used to go back and forth. And then he was, somewhere around the 1920's, I don't remember where, that's when he married Mother, wasn't it?

TASHO: He married our mother in the 1920's because I was born in 1925. So it was about 1924. But I think, they made several trips back and forth here, and he left Albania when he was fourteen years old, and a man, a friend, who was not very much older than he, pretended he was his father and was bringing his son to America.

But his friend probably was like nineteen, had a moustache, and, you know, husky looking, so he said, "This is my son," and he brought my father along with him. Actually, he came here to seek a better life and fortune. While they were here they were very kind and sent all the money back home to the family.

LEVINE: Let me just try something. (break in tape) Okay, now we're resuming again. So your father came earlier, and he sent the money back.

CURTIS: To his family, to his own mother, and that helped her support his brothers and sisters, who were younger than he was. And they were always helping each other, and they also would help each other, if they made some money, to pay the passage for someone else to come over here within their family. If they're the cousin or another brother or whoever, that is how they brought them, they bring each other. But they would pay their way, the one who had made the money in the United States.

LEVINE: Well, now, did your father return expressively to marry? Was that . . .

CURTIS: I would say yes.

LEVINE: And did he know your mother from before?

TASHO: He was a widower. He had been married before. He was a widower. And he had three children, and the children were in Albania. And then, when he returned to see his family, he had left with his brother and his sister-in-law, then he, it was a matched marriage, an arranged marriage. But it was a very important, very permanent and very, you know, secure marriage. So he married my mother at that time, and we were, stayed there for a couple of years, we were born, and then he returned back to the United States to work. And at that time things were very affluent here, so he thought he would make some more money and bring his family, then we would return, all, to Albania again. But he made the money and brought us over here, and the Depression started coming, so we remained here. My mother lived only six years and she died, so she brought us up.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, wait. You know, I'm . . . (break in tape) We're going to resume now, and simply have Pauline Curtis do the speaking on this tape. Okay. Now . . .

CURTIS: Do you want me to start with the quota system?

LEVINE: Yeah. I'd like you to say, just briefly, how long your father was here, and then when he tried to bring the rest of the family what happened.

CURTIS: Well, after my sister was born, and after I was born. I guess it would be after I was born, he returned to the United States. And at that time the United States had the quota system, and the quota system just divided families up. So Dad was over here in the United States, Mother and my sister and I were in Europe. I believe my mother's number was called first, and six months later yours (referring to her sister), and then after that it was about four or five years, at least four years, before my number was called. So therefore my father stayed in the United States about five years, and we were five years in Europe separated before we could become a family once again. And, of course, as I told you before, I don't like the quota system. I just feel it's wrong to divide families up and leave one behind or two behind and, in order to survive here in this country. I think if Congress can do one thing they can just open the door up to the whole family, because to me they're

talking about family values, they should have the family together.

LEVINE: Okay. So when you finally did leave Albania, who was traveling with you when you came?

CURTIS: My sister, my mother and I.

LEVINE: Okay. And what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

CURTIS: My mother was Iftalia Dishnitz.

LEVINE: And your brother?

CURTIS: My brother was Michael Guri, but they were, Engouri had already died here in the United States. He did not die in Albania. He had died in 1912. He died before I was ever born.

LEVINE: So your father had brought them over . . .

CURTIS: As a young child. Those three children were all here in the United States, and their mother, too, died here. And every ten or twelve or fifteen years later, somewhere around there, between ten and fifteen years later, my dad married our mother. He was a widow for quite a number of years.

LEVINE: And so was your sister with you?

CURTIS: My sister was with me, my mother and I, we three.

LEVINE: And your sister's name . . .

CURTIS: Is Georgia.

LEVINE: Okay. So then do you remember leaving? Was there a farewell?

CURTIS: Yes. I think our uncle Nicholas took us to Italy and he put us on the boat. We came on the Vulcania.

LEVINE: And from what port, do you remember?

CURTIS: Bari, Italy.

LEVINE: And were you examined, do you remember?

CURTIS: Oh, yes, we were. And we had the chicken pox, and we were laid over, I believe it was in Marseilles, France. We stayed about a week or so there.

TASHO: In Ellis Island.

CURTIS: In Ellis Island.

TASHO: Ellis Island. We had not chicken pox, measles.

CURTIS: Measles.

LEVINE: Measles. Okay, so you had, you didn't know you had the measles until you got to Ellis Island?

CURTIS: We must have caught them from somebody on that ship.

LEVINE: Was it a rough voyage? What do you remember of the boat?

CURTIS: I remember it was a rough voyage. And one day this black man was on there, and he was nice, a nice gentleman. But what he did, he gave my sister and I a Hershey bar, and we opened that bar and it was chocolate, and we thought the man gave us a chocolate bar and he was chocolate. (she laughs)

LEVINE: You thought he was chocolate.

CURTIS: Chocolate, and that's why the candy bar was chocolate. And . . .

LEVINE: Was that the first time you had ever seen a black person?

CURTIS: That's the first time I saw a black person, that's the first time I ever saw a chocolate bar. And finally I remember keeping that chocolate bar for seven years

afterwards. It was wrapped up in, like, tin foil. And when we opened it up it was totally white. But we didn't eat it because we, you know, we just related to the black man who gave it to us, and he gave it to us to be nice to us, but we didn't know the difference. We just thought the candy was black and so was the man black.

LEVINE: So then you got, do you remember coming into the New York Harbor?

CURTIS: Not too well, except going through probably where they were taking, checking us for any diseases that we might have. That's the only part I remembered. And my sister may remember a little more.

LEVINE: Okay. But you did stay at Ellis Island then. Were you in quarantine?

TASHO: We were in quarantine.

CURTIS: Yes, we were. We were.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember leaving Ellis Island?

CURTIS: We went from Ellis Island, we went to Buffalo, New York, I believe, to visit my mother's brother before

we came to Maine, and then we came home after that visit.

LEVINE: Was it a matter of days, or did you live there for any length of time?

CURTIS: Oh, no. We stayed there probably a week or two, then we came back right to Maine. And we've been living, I've lived in Maine ever since, and my sisters moved on to Massachusetts.

LEVINE: Do you remember any initial experiences in America that you had that, you know, struck you as very different from anything?

CURTIS: We were very different, because Albania at that time was not really that poor a country, and we came here when this country was very, very poor. And it, and just the way we dressed from the way the other children dressed, there was quite a difference. But also our mother was a beautiful seamstress, and she knit beautifully and embroidered beautifully, so she made a lot of our clothes and they were, they were, I would say they were outstanding, and they showed up even in the classroom.

LEVINE: Did you dress the way you would have dressed in Albania?

CURTIS: More or less. Yes, we did. That's right, we did. And that's why we were different.

LEVINE: Can you be any, be specific at all about . . .

CURTIS: Well, we used to wear the gold earrings (she laughs), and the American children, they thought, I guess, we had horns on our heads, and they couldn't quite understand us. And we didn't, we couldn't speak, so we would go to school, and they'd take our ears and they'd twist them, and they'd twist those gold earrings till our ears bled, and they'd rip them off our ears. I remember that distinctly, because my ears got bled and hurt many times, and also they would hurt us physically.

LEVINE: Like fist fights?

CURTIS: No, they'd beat on us. And, of course, I wasn't, I was a very thin, scrawny child. My sister was a little bit stronger than I was, and we just had a, a lot of people hitting us because they didn't understand us. But I didn't hit them back. But one

day my sister did. She got all, we took all that we could take, and she told them, should I tell about the tree? So my sister said to me, "There's a big old tree over here." We didn't know it was oak, but we know it's oak today. And she says, "I am going to stand behind it, and you start walking down the street to go to school." And she said, "When those kids come out and beat you and knock you down," she said, "I'm coming behind them, behind you, and I'm going to take them today." And we were the two, so I go first, and sure enough out they came, because they watched us, you know, they're waiting for us. I call them "the bullies." And so they came out, and they really did beat me, and they did knock me down on the ground, and the sidewalk wasn't much of a sidewalk, it was more like paths, you know, and there were dirt. They're rubbing my face and my body into it. And out comes my sister from behind that tree, and she took one of those girls, and that boy too, she pulled her hair, she gave it to them and good, and, you know they never touched us again, did they? Because, you know, as I say, before we didn't hit them back, we did not fight. We were wrong in not doing it, because they had to be told that we had, they had to respect us just as we

had to respect them.

LEVINE: And what were you treated like at school? Were the teachers in, were they very helpful to you?

CURTIS: Some were beautiful. Our first grade, sub-primary teacher was beautiful. I only felt I had two teachers who I felt were racist, going through school, and they definitely were racist, because we did live in a WASP town, and they definitely were racist. I don't know if my, I don't think my sister had anybody, I just happened to strike two of them. I got one in the fourth grade, and one in the fifth. And after that I had never a problem again, and I didn't really have much of a problem with teachers up until the fourth grade. But in the fourth grade I can't say I was the only one because some other children who were Americans got even, tell me today that she treated them very badly, too.

LEVINE: Was there much of an Albanian community where you were living at that time?

CURTIS: No. I think most of the eight or nine families at that point in time.

LEVINE: This is in Rockland, Rockland, Maine.

CURTIS: Not very many. I think two families were Greeks. It wasn't very many. It was definitely WASP in the thirties. It changed about 1936, and '37, '38, right through there, because then Van Baylan Halbrum came to town, the garment factory from New York, and they brought probably thirty families of Jewish people, and probably thirty or thirty-five families of Italian people. They brought them from the Bronx or somewhere, Brooklyn. And they, I remember the lady up the street telling us one day, "Where you girls live now is where the League of Nations is." Because on one side were the Vestanios, who were Italian. They were the Lohmans and the Levis that were Jewish. We were Albanian. The Norms and the Adamses and the Stevens, we were all Albanian. She says, "Down there," she says, "lives the League of Nations. Up here," she says, "lives the Yankees." Up the other end of the street. Well, it didn't bother me too much. I thought it was kind of a funny statement to make, but I learned to accept a lot of those statements. They'd just go in one ear and out the other.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: . . . your first Christmas in the United States.

CURTIS: Oh, that was funny because there was a lady, she was a very nice lady and she lived very close by to our home, in fact, almost next door, one house between us, I guess. And actually she was across the street diagonally. And she told us that Santa Claus was going to come and visit us and give us all these gifts, and we could go down to the Center Krane Store and we could pick out any toy and go see Santa and sit on his lap and tell him what we wanted and we would have that gift. We thought that was a great idea, so up to Center Kranes we marched and we saw Santa Claus, and we sat on his lap and we told him what toys around there we wanted. He'd go, "Yes, yes." (she laughs) So we went home and we told our mother that we saw Santa Claus and he told us we were going to have all these gifts. And she said, "Never heard tell of Santa Claus. I don't believe there's anybody going to give you anything for free." And we said, "Oh, yes, yes. Mrs. Willis told us that he would. And we went up and saw them and he said he would." So Mr. Willis, he'd

gone down to Owl's Head, and he had gotten a Christmas tree for his family, so he got one for us, and he put a stand on it. And she told us, "Take it home, and tell our mother to decorate the tree, and everything would be fine." And my sister and I, we took, we dragged this tree in our house, and my mother couldn't understand why were we dragging this tree and this stand in there. We told her it was a Christmas tree. It was supposed to be all decorated. My mother said, "We don't have any decorations." "All right. We'll put the tree up. Maybe Santa Claus will do it." (she laughs) So we put the tree up. Georgia and I went to bed at four o'clock in the afternoon to be awful good girls, and we got up the next morning (she laughs) and the tree was there and there was not one gift under the tree. (she laughs) And we said to our mother, "Well, Santa Claus told us if we were good girls, and we were good girls. And why didn't we get anything?" My mother said, "I told you there was no Santa Claus and nobody was going to give you anything for free." And so ended that, kind of took our Christmas, so after that we never really believed in Santa Claus. But on January the 6th we always do gifts, got gifts, but they were small gifts.

They weren't the abundance that you see children have today, or even back then. It's something small that they gave you. But you were very happy with what you got. But that was our first Christmas in the United States after we learned to speak English and could communicate with some of our neighbors and our friends, but we knew then that our mother was right.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other kinds of lessons that your mother taught you, or things that she wanted you to know about life or, you know, values that she tried to instill?

CURTIS: I think she instilled very, a great many values in our lives and the way she brought us up, she brought us up, I remember, she always told us we were two sisters first, and if one of us was rich and the other one was poorer, the richer one would pull the poorer one to its level, to her level. And we were, oh, we must never fight over material things because we were first a family. And I think that's probably one of the best lessons that Mother taught us. She taught us many lessons. I remember she used to, she was a great knitter, and she taught my sister to knit, to crochet. In fact, when I was in the fourth grade my sister

made me a little sweater, sleeveless, but she made me a sweater and a scarf. (to her sister) Remember knitting that when you was in the fifth grade. But our mother was a very good teacher. I feel we had a quality life, and our father was, too. And we were very rich because we had a nice family, a close family, and we worked always together, and we always helped each other.

LEVINE: Did your father work in the lumber line in this country, or . . .

CURTIS: No, produce. Produce. He started here in Boston, and then he, the Boston boat came to Maine, and he decided that that was sort of open country and he decided to stay there in Rockland, and they went there, several of them went there, and they sold bananas. And that's what they did for a living. They wholesaled some and retailed some.

LEVINE: And the boats were coming in?

CURTIS: The Boston boat would come to Rockland, and he would go down and unload his own bananas, and come up the gangway with those big bunches on his shoulder and load his wagons, and then he'd come home and we'd have

the basement, and in the basement he used to hang those big stocks of bananas, and they had gas pipes, no thermostat, so they used to get up all kinds of hours at night to tend those gas stoves so those bananas would not ripen too fast or too slow, whatever they needed.

LEVINE: And then he would sell, what, to grocery stores?

CURTIS: Yes, yes, everything, anybody. The people, they'd go from Rockland to Damariscotta on the wagons with the horses. Then after that he got the trucks. Then he retired, and then he opened the store.

LEVINE: The store was a grocery store?

CURTIS: Uh-huh. And he opened that when, after he had retired from the road. He stayed in retirement two years and he couldn't stand it any longer. So he decided he would go back to work. And what was he, seventy-two?

TASHO: He was in his seventies.

CURTIS: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: And is this what became Curtis Markets?

CURTIS: Uh-huh. That's correct. He started, he opened that

one. And that's how we got that store.

TASHO: We had the first IGA store in Rockland, Maine.

CURTIS: That's right.

LEVINE: Well, now, how long did you stay in school, till what . . .

CURTIS: Oh, we went right through school.

LEVINE: High school?

CURTIS: Oh, yes. High school. We graduated from Rockland High School, and my sister did, too. And then she came here and went to Bridgewater State. And my husband was stationed in the, was called in Korea into the United States Navy. So when I was in Virginia I went to William and Mary.

LEVINE: Well, now, how did you meet your husband?

CURTIS: I met him in the classroom at school.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CURTIS: And my sister, she was, actually she married a young man from this area right here who came to Rockland looking for another young lady, another date. And as

he, so that's how that happened.

LEVINE: So your husband was an Albanian?

CURTIS: No. My husband is not Albanian. My husband is English-Irish.

LEVINE: Now, was that a problem for your mother and father that you did not marry an Albanian?

CURTIS: No, because they had both died and they never knew who I married.

LEVINE: I see.

CURTIS: See, they died when I was, my father died when I was about nineteen years old, my mother died when I was nine.

LEVINE: I see.

CURTIS: And I wasn't married till I was about twenty-six, twenty-seven. Twenty-six, I think.

LEVINE: Was your mother happy that she had come to this country, do you think?

CURTIS: No.

LEVINE: Why not?

CURTIS: Because she didn't have any relatives here at all, and she had left her mother and her sisters, who she was very close with, and her own family, and here there was nobody. And she really couldn't speak English either, so it made it very hard for her. She could speak fluently Greek, and read and write in Greek, too, but she, and she knew Turkish, too, but she didn't really master the English before she got sort of sick herself, and then finally she just simply died.

LEVINE: Well . . .

CURTIS: My mother was not very long here in the United States. See, we came in at the end of '30, '31. And in '36, in five years, my mother was really, had died.

LEVINE: I see. Well, now, is there anything else that you would say. I mean, looking back on the fact that you were born in Albania and you came to this country and really lived most of your life here.

CURTIS: That's correct.

LEVINE: That whole experience of immigrating and

establishing . . .

CURTIS: We never lost it because, you see, in our home it was perpetuated from the time we came here till the time my father died when I was nineteen, so that was almost twenty years there that we had our own way of doing. We did everything, as I said, we were Albanian in the home, we were American outside the door. Only when an American came in our home did we speak English and do everything like you would today.

LEVINE: Was there a time, I mean, it sounds like in the beginning you were discriminated against.

CURTIS: Yes, we were.

LEVINE: And was there a point where that turned?

CURTIS: I thought it had turned for many years, but then I took a public office, and then after that I found there was still racism even today.

LEVINE: You were prejudiced against for speaking Albanian?

CURTIS: Uh, yes. Well, for being foreign, being foreign. And I remember one schoolteacher, as I said, said in the classroom, at that time when Van Baylan and Halbrum

came here, and those children hadn't come into our classroom yet. She said, "All these foreigners are coming into our community and taking our jobs from our people." And I was in the, and those kids all turned around and looked at me, because back then I still had an accent, in the fifth grade.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about your career. I mean, you finished high school and then you married.

CURTIS: And I had four children.

LEVINE: And what are your children's names?

CURTIS: Their names are Douglas Curtis, Jr., Gregory Stevens Curtis, Irving L. Curtis and Georgia Stevens Curtis.

LEVINE: And do you have grandchildren?

CURTIS: I have nine grandchildren.

LEVINE: And how about your career? You have a public, you've had a public office. How did that come about?

CURTIS: Well, it came about because one day they needed somebody to, they didn't, the Republicans didn't have anybody to become their treasurer, and they did not want to lose that slot. And so one of the hierarchy

came to me and he said, "Would you please run for that office because," he said, "we need to fill that." And he says, "You could do that work and do it very well." And, well, I said, and it didn't pay very much at the time, so I said, "All right." He said I wouldn't have to do very much, because I was still working in the store for our family. So I says, "All right, then I'll try and do it." Because I always liked public service anyway. I always did something for the church or for somebody. So I did get in on that and I did win that election which was, I had probably two opponents at the time but I did manage to get through, and also I was the first woman in 125 years to hold that office, because other than that it had been held by a man. So I got along pretty well at first, and after a while I saw some things that I just didn't think were quite ethical, and I brought them out to the commissions, and they didn't like what they heard me say. So they said to me, "You rock our boat." And I says, "Your boat needs rocking." So then, and I did rock their boat. And things did straighten out. They needed straightening out long before I got there, though, and things haven't been too bad. But it did make for hard feelings. And then one of them said,

"These foreigners, they've not only come and take the jobs but they try to run the government, too." So I knew, I felt the racism was right there. And from then on I, sometimes it would be pretty good, and then from time to time just a couple of years ago I felt I had another racist thing. So you can almost sense them, because they really can't find anything wrong with you because you're bright, you do your work and you do your homework. You do more than they do and give a lot more than they do. They're lazy, really, but they try to belittle and demean you.

LEVINE: How long did you hold this office?

CURTIS: I'm still holding it. It's fourteen years. So the people know, and that's who I really have to go by, what the people say.

LEVINE: So do you get re-elected?

CURTIS: Yes, I do, every four years.

LEVINE: And what is it in your life that you're proudest of?

CURTIS: My children, I would say.

TASHO: Tell her about your children.

CURTIS: I feel my children are very good children, and they grew up through the Vietnam era, and I, at least the boys did, and I always felt that if I could hold the line right there with my oldest boy I would probably conquer the other two boys much easier. And I really felt I did because I had some very nice friends and their children went astray, and I was very pleased that I was able to control my own children during that hard period, but they did find, they all went on to college. My oldest boy is now, well, he went to the University of Maine, and the University of Southern California where he got his Master's Degree in Public Administration. He served in the United States Army for thirteen years now as a major. My other son, Gregory, he went to the U.S. Naval Academy, and from the Academy he served in the South Pacific and then he went to Monterey, California and got his Master's degree in computer science. He's now taking courses for the War College here to graduate in Rhode Island. And he's working in Washington, DC. He's got a new job now with the . . .

TASHO: With the Secretary of Security.

CURTIS: No, the navy.

TASHO: Navy.

CURTIS: And that's who he's working for now. He's just come off the S.S. Biddle and he's spent, oh, I would say sixteen months over there around the Persian Gulf and in through Italy. You know, and then my other son, Irving, he has a captain's license and he sails the Gulf East Coast for a company called Sabeen Towing and Transport. He's on one of those big merchant ships. And my daughter, Georgia, she's in law, her second year of law school.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Did I ask you your husband's name?

CURTIS: His name is Douglas.

LEVINE: Douglas. Uh-huh.

CURTIS: Douglas Curtis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, is he alive?

CURTIS: Oh, yes. My husband is very much alive and he's in Rockland. Yes, he is.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think, is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

CURTIS: No. I think I'll let my sister tell you a few things, because I think she is quite knowledgeable.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

CURTIS: Thank you, Janet. It's been my pleasure to have you come and visit with us today.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've been talking with Pauline Curtis. It's September 18, 1992, and we're here in Brockton, Massachusetts.