EI-365
GEORGE (JURAJ) ZEMANOVIC
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 1/1994
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1/1994

CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1922
AGE 6
PASSAGE ON "THE MANCHURIA"

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Parks Service. Today is Wednesday, August 4, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island recording studio with George Zemanovic. Mr. Zemanovic came from Czechoslovakia in 1922 when he was six years old. Welcome. Let's begin by you giving your birth date, please.

ZEMANOVIC: April 4, 1916.

SIGRIST: And can you give me your name in Czechoslovakia?

ZEMANOVIC: Juraj. Juraj. J-U-R-A-J. Juraj. Jurij is Slav. Generally different Slavic countries have slightly different pronunciations of the name, but officially I was baptized Juraj. And as I understand, in English, the name is George, so I have been known as George.

SIGRIST: And Zemanovic was the same?

ZEMANOVIC: "Zeh-mah-noh-veech" was the way it was pronounced in Slovak. "Zeh-mah-noh-veech." But that, if you think that Zemanovic is difficult you should try to get people to pronounce "Zeh-mah-noh-veech." So we Americanized it. We just simply knocked off the accent off the "c", the accent mark off the "c", and it became Zemanovic.

SIGRIST: And that happened when you were in this country obviously.

ZEMANOVIC: Yes, it happened in this country.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me where you were born?

ZEMANOVIC: In the town, a little village very close to the Moravian border, near a country seat called Trencin. But the name of the little town that I, village, actually, that I was born in was called Dolna Suca.

That's "lower", there's a, there are two towns by, Horna Suca, which means the "upper" one, and Dolna Suca which is the "lower" one. On a map, Dolna Suca is below, Horna Suca, and... (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you spell all that for me?

ZEMANOVIC: S-U...That's D-O-L-N-A. Suca, S-U-C-A with the mark on it. The "c" with accent mark is always pronounced like our "ch," "cheh." So it's S-U-C-A, but it was pronounced "Su-chah." And that was why our name was spelled Z-E-M-A-N-O-V-I-C, because it had the accent mark on the "c," but actually it's Americanized, it just remains Zemanovic. That's, we changed it to the simpler pronunciation.

SIGRIST: And can you spell the other, the lower, you said the upper and the lower, the Hor...

ZEMANOVIC: The Horna is H-O-R-N-A...

SIGRIST: The town would be the same...

ZEMANOVIC: That means "upper." Suca is S-U-C-A with the accent mark on the "c."

SIGRIST: And then the county seat for us?

ZEMANOVIC: County seat was Trencin, T-R-E-N-C-I-N, with the accent mark on the "c." I, there must be a term for that accent mark, but since I never went to school there, and my knowledge of the Slovak language is simply, I guess, oral, you know, I never really learned the correct terminology for all the, there are actually I understand forty-two, letters in the Slovak alphabet. And that, I think fifteen of them have to do with accent marks. And so from what I know of the Slovak language is simply what I learned or remember from conversing in the house. Our family, we had, we all conversed in Slovak, of course, even when we got over here. And so what I recall of the Slovak language, and I recall (he laughs) much less than I would had hoped, why, that's as I understand as the way the Slovak language is constructed.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about this town that you were born in. What do you know about the town?

ZEMANOVIC: Well, it was a farming community. My, what, I have vague memories - I have vague memories of, that, we lived, we lived with my father's parents. In other words when, when my mother married, she came to live with my father's family. And so we were living there, and they had, they were considered quite well off as I understand. They had orchards. I remember that in the fall they used, they had apparently a very elabo- - large prune or plum orchard, because I recall that in the fall I, when they were drying the plums into prunes I used to love to eat the real warm prunes as they came off the drying rack, you know. I can recall that incident. I think that in the winter there were, the family consisted of my grandmother, my grandfather, and there were five sons. I think my father was the next to the youngest. Yeah. I believe he was next to the youngest. And so that we all lived as a, as a, there were a number of families, there were other, there were

other family members from my older uncles. But...

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the house? Can you describe the house for me?

ZEMANOVIC: The house was, the house was connected. Of course, it was all one story with a loft. There was a loft where I believe, I recall very vaguely that, I believe that's where I slept. Or at least that's where my mother and father slept, in a loft. And attached to the house but, in other words one continuous building, although separate was the barns, where the animals were kept. And I recall one other instance that at the time where we were - after my father had gone to this country, he had emigrated to this country a year before we followed. And during that interval that started to build the foundation for another house across the road, so to speak. I don't recall the lay of the village too well. I do know there was one main road. And there was a brook that ran along the side of the road, and there were little fishes in there which I used to watch with fascination. And I don't really know how many

families lived there, but it was a - we were big enough that we had, or we could support a church. We could support a Catholic church in town. And...

SIGRIST: And your family was Catholic?

ZEMANOVIC: And my family was Roman Catholic. And (pauses) the reason I was named Juraj as I understand was because the parish priest was retiring, and his name was Juraj, and he wanted to baptize somebody after his name as a commemoration to himself. But (pauses) six weeks later after I was born, my grandmother, who was also pregnant, she delivered another boy, and he was also baptized Juraj. So it was created quite a bit of confusion in this household when you had two Georges, and I was, two Juraj's , actually, and I was six weeks older than my uncle. (he laughs) That's what it amounted to.

SIGRIST: It is unusual.

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah. And so any time they called Juraj both of us

came running, you know. He and I played together. I recall that we did all sorts of mischievous things and whatever else. And, but I seem to recall that there was quite a happy time, and, you know, that I recall. There was no - no - no horror stories or anything like that. We, we, apparently ate well, lived well by their standards. And I just really don't know what prompted my father to come to this country, other than the fact that it was right after the war, and the country was newly formed. And so employment, of course, having - having three or four sons living in a, in a household and somebody had, somebody had to leave to make room for whoever wanted to stay behind. And apparently my father who had been in the military service for a couple of years decided that he would seek his fortune, so to speak in the U.S.A., and that's...

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

ZEMANOVIC: My father's name was John - Jano.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ZEMANOVIC: J-A-N-O. Jano.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about what his personality was like.

ZEMANOVIC: He was, he was strict. The one thing I remember he was strict because he had, his formative years were in the military, so to speak. I mean he - at the time the (pauses) -I don't quite really know the relationship except apparently all orders were given in German. See this was, at the time when I was born officially this was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under Emperor, for heaven's sake I can't remem-. I have a memory lapse - but anyway so that the (pauses) Austrian - the Austrian portion of the Empire was the military arm, and therefore all orders and training and all officer personnel, and all orders were given in German. So my father learned, that's where he learned German. And he learned (pauses) swear words very nicely in German. Because anytime he got really aggravated, he always reverted to cuss words in German. So that much

I remember, you know. I can't remember the words themselves, but they sounded very ominous.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about his military career...

ZEMANOVIC: Yes. Only to the extent...

SIGRIST: Did he tell any World War I stories?

ZEMANOVIC: Only to the extent that he was a prisoner of war in Russia for about a year and a half, I believe. I don't know under the circumstances that he became a prisoner except he had spent about a year and a half in Russia, and I don't where, in what area. He spoke about it very infrequently. But I do - that's why he learned Russian. So he spoke a variety of languages. Or course, the - at the time when he was going to school around, he was born in 1894 and, around the turn of the century, or very soon thereafter, the, well, things complicated. Slovakia at the time, there was no such thing as the Czechoslovak Republic. It was actually - the Slovaks were under the administration - that's the

prop - I shouldn't say, - I was going to say domination, but the nicer word is administration. That their business was administered by Hungary. The Czechs and the Moravians were under the Austrians. And so for one reason or another the Hungarians decided that the Slovaks should learn Hungarian. And so it became a law that my father and my mother both had to learn Hungarian when they were in school. It was officially proclaimed that they were supposed to learn Hungarian. And of course that created alot of bitterness in the household, because the parents were bitterly opposed, you know. They were Slovaks since time immemorial, and there was this ethnic, ethnic (pauses) rivalry or whatever you want to call it, you know. That, what they have now in Yugoslavia, which is exactly what my folks were experiencing under the Hungarian domination. Which is what the Czechs were experiencing, and the Moravians, under the Austrian domination. So everybody who did any travelling or whatever else learned to speak three or four languages. It was necessary...

SIGRIST: It was very typical of people at that time?...

ZEMANOVIC: ...of course my mother visiting her older sister in Budapest learned to speak Hungarian to a degree, but she was much older. By that time she had learned Hungarian when she was in school. But I don't - so when I was born in 1916 the country, the nation as known as Czechoslovakia did not really become official until 1918. That's the beginning of the Czechoslovak Republic. But by that time my birth certificate and everything is printed in Slovak, and it's got the Czechoslovak stamp on it, and everything else, so apparently there was a transition already that had started to take place during World War I.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

ZEMANOVIC: Katerina.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

ZEMANOVIC: Sedivy. Again it was S-E-D-I-V-Y. I have never learned the distinction between the "i" and the "y,"

because they both sound the same. And there is some basic grammatical rule where you either use a "i" or a "y," but I never could really figure out. But the "s" was again with the accent mark. It goes S-E-D-I-V-Y, but it was pronounced "Sheh-dee-vee," which means "grey," G-R-E-Y. Anyone who has grey hair, he was known as Sedivy. Sedivy Vlosi, you know, and stuff, so that - that was my mother's maiden name.

SIGRIST: And Katerina would be C-A-T-A...

ZEMANOVIC: Katerina, K-A-T-E-R-I-N-A, Katerina.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

ZEMANOVIC: No. No, not really. But I do know that the Zemanovic family originally came from Horna Suca. They were supposed to - from what I understand they were landed people. They had lots of land there, which is what the name signifies. "Zeman," "Zema" is "land" - "Zeman" is someone who is of the land, and supposedly Zemanovic was some land holder. And they, and as a matter of

fact I understand that that - that portion - my great grandfather donated some land to a church to be built in Horna Suca because they didn't have a church at that time. They - well, okay, now that you mentioned it, my mother and father met because my father used to come down to Dolna Suca to come to our church, or their church, okay? And since they had no church up in Horna Suca they used to come down to Dolna, which is - when we talk distances, we're talking travel by foot, okay? So that's one of the difficulties I had with my mother, trying to find out how far away things were because they always talked in terms of hours of walking, okay? So one hour walking, three miles, you know. So maybe Horna Suca is maybe three or four miles, maybe six kilometers away from Dolna Suca. But that's apparently how my mother, my mother and my father met. And then when my father - when my grandfather moved - I'm getting things twisted up - my grandfather and my grandmother met that way. And so that my father and my mother were already living in Dolna Suca. So again I got things a little confused here in the time frame, okay? But both my mother and

my father were born in Dolna Suca, and of course, apparently being a small village, why, they must have known each other since school days. And so it just happened, osmosis, let's put it that way (he laughs).

SIGRIST: Now, did your mother ever tell you, or your father ever tell you any stories concerning your birth, or when she was pregnant with you?

ZEMANOVIC: Not - not that I can recall. I'm trying to, no, I can't really say that I know - that I know anything about if she had any difficulties. Obviously there had been alot of hardship, because I think that I was born while my father was still a prisoner in Russia. I can't really say that he was present or wasn't present. I don't enough of the circumstances as to how and under what conditions he was released as a P.O.W.

SIGRIST: Do you know any details about that experience? I mean, you said he spoke of it infrequently, but what did he speak about when he spoke about it?

ZEMANOVIC: Well, he spoke that they were used for manual labor. They weren't abused. They were fed well. You know, considering everything they were fed well. They were not mistreated. I don't just exactly what kind of work, or manual work or labor they had to perform. It wasn't certainly, he didn't refer to it as slave labor of any kind or anything like that. It was just the normal...

SIGRIST: Like a holding camp, sort of...

ZEMANOVIC: ...it was a P.O.W. camp. And apparently they were free or were permitted to go and mingle with the populace. He seemed to, he seemed to, never had - didn't have any bitter or horrific tales to tell about his experience there. And so I can't really give you too much more information than that, as that he seemed to have survived the experience with no rancor or anything like that. He didn't refer to the Russians as, you know, in any negatives terms or whatever. And I would think that it was just a normal, natural routine of things. You surrendered and you were captured and you were put

into a P.O.W. camp and under some conditions they were repatriated or exchanged. But I don't have any feel for the time, the time frame.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have any siblings in Czechoslovakia? Sister, brother?

ZEMANOVIC: The only one that I had was a sister who came, that's Mary, she was three years younger than I. And so that the only that I can recall playing with is my uncle George, my younger uncle.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of your sister being born, or any of that?

ZEMANOVIC: No...

SIGRIST: You were still pretty young.

ZEMANOVIC: No, I was - I was only three years old or maybe, just around that time. And so I have no recollection of - I recall that before - no, I don't recall, but my mother

said that she had one child who died because of the influenza epidemic in 1919, or whatever in was, and that's...

SIGRIST: So it would be between you and Mary?

ZEMANOVIC: No, that was after, I think, after Mary. Mary was born in 1918 late, and so I think, I believe that, that the time frame was that this child only lived for a short - you know months or a few weeks or whatever, but my mother never of - didn't, you know, she didn't dwell on it, and she didn't like to be interrogated about it and whatever else. So it must have been a very unhappy event that occurred. But there were alot of people who were dying at that time because they had a horrendous influenza epidemic.

SIGRIST: Now, you said went to America to just sort of get out of the house, kind of. Did you have any family in this country? I mean, why did he go...

ZEMANOVIC: No. I - to the best of my knowledge the only relatives

- the only relatives that we had, and I don't know exactly the specifics of the relationship - there were no immediate brothers or anything. There were just cousins that he knew in East St. Louis, but he didn't go there. He - and again I had a lot of infor - not a lot, I had some information which I lost - he came to this country by way of Boston. He came through Boston. Why he came through Boston - he was actually heading for Newark, because he had some name that somebody had given him to, to find a place to live.

SIGRIST: Do you remember him leaving Czechoslovakia?

ZEMANOVIC: No.

SIGRIST: No.

ZEMANOVIC: No, I don't. I (pauses), I think that when I go back any, try to go back any further than, say, age five or four and a half, then things are very, very hazy. I have a few - I have a few mem - occasions I remember. I remember slashing my thumb when they were building

this new house I was telling you about. The carpenters were working and I was fiddling with the sharp knives and everything, and I cut my thumb and, and I recall that they sent me packing to go see my mother, and my mother happened to be at my grandmother on my mother's side, and I had to run across the village with this, with this blob of blood-soaked rag on my thumb, you know. And to this day I can't stand any hang nails because of the pulling away of that dried, encrusted bandage. It send shivers through, and it's just one of the hangups. I, I remember being chased by geese. We were, of course, every farm had geese, and I remember running in fear because the geese came hissing at me. I remember I wore a red cap. I remember that in this village nobody drank well water. Well water was not fit for human consumption because they had - they had carbonated water, or they had a special spring that bubbled, which apparently was carbonated water, which everybody said it was the best thing to drink, because you didn't get sick from drinking this carbonated water. They called it "kisela voda", sour water. It had a...

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for me, please?

ZEMANOVIC: K-I-S-E-L-A. Kisela voda. V-O-D-A. Kisela voda. Sour water. It apparently had had some mineral content in it. And local rumor was that if you drank kisela voda, you would never get pneumonia if you were overheated. What - how that connection was made - but that was - that was the local lore. That no matter how overheated you were, you could - if you drank this water you wouldn't get pneumonia, but why you should - but - somehow or other if you drank other water, you got pneumonia. But that's, you know, that was local lore.

SIGRIST: Is your father writing back to you, back and forth, sending money, or anything like that?

ZEMANOVIC: I - I sure that he did with my mother. But a por - there was a time frame of one year. We followed my father within a year or thereabouts. He came here with the purpose of finding, getting a job, and getting some, you know, get some kind of grubsteak for us to

come, so that we would not be bereft or anything, since we had no relatives to stay with. He was staying with a Slovak family that he had befriended, or somebody. And he was rooming with them.

SIGRIST: What job did he get?

ZEMANOVIC: Well, he was a laborer. He was, he worked whatever he could. I think that he was working in some machine shop as a maintenance man, replacing broken glass windows, glass and whatever, puttying jobs, and clean-up, and whatever menial labor, that a laborer, that they could find for him. That's what, he had no skills. He...

SIGRIST: What had he been in Czechoslovakia?

ZEMANOVIC: Say again?

SIGRIST: What had he been in Czechoslovakia?

ZEMANOVIC: Well, he worked, I remember that he left school at age

fourteen because apparently that was - by the local thinking was that if you went to school until age year fourteen you had learned just about all there was worth learning. And so at age fourteen he left, and he worked in the summertime. He worked the harvest fields. I remember that he and also my mother both used to become contract laborers to work the harvest fields in Hungary at these large family, manor houses, they called them, these estates. There was a lot of that apparently going on where the landed gentry, so to speak, they would hire out as laborers to work on this farmland during the harvest season.

SIGRIST: So aside from his military career, he did...

ZEMANOVIC: He was a farmer...

SIGRIST: ...he was a common laborer there, too.

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah, a common laborer. The household, the household had a winter project going where they used to make spinning wheels. I remember that. I can still

remember one of my uncles turning a huge wheel by hand and a belt going around, and then somebody working the sharp knives, the chisels, I guess you would call it, to make the spokes for the wheels, and whatever else. And there was always sawdust around this workshop that they had. And we played in the sawdust and whatever else, but that was a summer job - winter job, rather. And so they kept themselves busy. They were very industrious. And my father was a jack of all trades. I mean he, when he came to this country he worked as a laborer in the mason field. But he learned a lot at the same time. He built his own garage after we bought our house, and he wanted to build a garage. And I was his number one coolie. I mean, by that time I was old enough to give him a hand. And I learned masonry and plumbing, and whatever else that he worked I learned. And so...

SIGRIST: Now, when you were in Czechoslovakia, did you have any perception of what America was?

ZEMANOVIC: None whatsoever. I didn't even know there was a

Czechoslovakia, I mean as America, rather. I didn't know - my - I can still remember - one of the vague memories I have. And I don't know how old I was, but apparently I must have been at least four and a half or five, is when I first saw, when I saw my first vehicle that didn't have a horse or ox connected to it. I saw this so-called wagon moving down the highway with soldiers standing in it, and there was nothing pulling it, and yet it was moving. And I was horror stricken. I ran home in horror telling my mother what I just saw. And that, so that I knew nothing of any other country, or whatever, and I knew very little of why my father would be leaving. At the time it was beyond my ken, let's say, you know. I was a five year old kid.

SIGRIST: And it's not something that you talked about in the house. Your mother didn't...

ZEMANOVIC: No. No. I can't recall that there was any - there apparently had to be a lot of instability in the country. I remember my mother saying that when the country became a democracy, that people there - people

from the city - people from the city came from the farms and started to take the farmers' produce. Because every - this was - this was everybody's property now. You could just help yourself. They had to keep them off with pitchforks I understand because these, you know, they had a misconception of what democracy was, you know, and what freedom was, and liberty. They thought it was license, apparently, and said that, apparently was a very unstable period. And my father apparently decided there had to be a better way to earn a living or whatever. So that was why he had, why he had decided to leave.

SIGRIST: We need to pause now so Peter can flip the tapes over, and we'll get you over to America.

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING OF SIDE B

SIGRIST: All right, we're continuing now. Well, let's get you to America. Do you remember packing or any of that process? Do you remember what you took with you?

ZEMANOVIC: My, my mother came with one trunk, (pauses) and I think we had also a smaller suitcase of some for personal belongings or whatever. But in this trunk were - and I always marveled at what was considered her most valuable possession, was this feather, feather bed, feather (pauses) quilt and feather pillows. Apparently that, that was what every potential wife who expected to get married had to bring into the, into the family as a dowry - her part of the - her part of the contribution to a newlywed, you see. She, the women were supposed to provide the, well (pauses) pillows, and the quilts. And, of course, the - the process of making these quilts was one of the projects in the evening for these, I think I vaguely remember now that I'm dwelling on it is that in a loft, in these farmhouse lofts they had by lamplight in the evening they would have these down - goose down and goose feathers and duck feathers, and they would be peeling off the feathers from the quills, so that there would be, wouldn't be coarse, or whatever else. And so that was always something that every woman and groups of

women would get to do, and make these feather bedding - geeses and stuff. And that's what my brother - my mother brought with her in this trunk. I don't recall that she had anything else to contribute. She had this trunk and in there was this monstrous over-stuffed quilt and the pillows. And I don't know just how many there were, but I think there were just two, and maybe more, because I remember sleeping under them. Apparently, I don't recall that she brought any - any other material substance. We had the clothing, you know, for day to day clothing changes and whatever else, but I can't recall that there was anything else...

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying good-bye to your grandparents?

ZEMANOVIC: Say again?

SIGRIST: Saying good-bye to grandparents. Do you remember saying good-bye, or your mother saying good-bye to them?

ZEMANOVIC: I vaguely remember that we were driven to the station in Trencin, which again was only a few kilometers away, because that's where my mother used to go and other family members used to go to the market to peddle whatever wares that might have had - farm produce or chickens or ducks or geese or whatever else. There were, there were from what I can recall that there were not really any, there was no market in Dolna Suca. Anything that they wanted they had to go to Trencin, and that's where the railroad station was, and that's where we were driven to on our departure. But I don't really recall that there were, that I had any tearful farewells, or whatever else like that. I just, it was all a blur, you might say. That we, things were happening so fast, and I really didn't, I really even didn't know that we were leaving, except in a vague way that we were going to join our father, okay? That much I recall, that we were going to meet our father.

SIGRIST: So, now, where from Trencin did you go to?

ZEMANOVIC: From Trencin by train we went to Hamburg to await the

vessel that was going to bring us over, and I know that the name of the vessel was the Manchuria. And I saw a picture of her during one of our visits here.

SIGRIST: Here at Ellis?

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah. And...

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

ZEMANOVIC: We, we left - I think we stayed in, in Hamburg for a week or - I remember we were there waiting for the vessel to either arrive or for the time for our departure. I think it must, it had to be about a week because I remember that we, we were waiting. I remember running somewhere to buy a package of cookies. That I remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having to undergo any kind of examinations in Hamburg?

ZEMANOVIC: Yes. Yes, I think that (pauses) we had - we had to go

through a physical. I remember going into a group shower. Both my mother and sister and I with other women. It was, the children accompanied their mothers. But apparently, apparently this was done by the shipping company, because they were responsible for the people. We travelled steerage, of course, okay - and so they were responsible for the people to be acceptable. In other words they gave us a screening, let's put it this way, I think it had to be that they screened us to make sure that we would not be rejected. And of course then we would be the responsibility of the shipping company - that had to bring us back - they would - since we would not be accepted here. So they put us through a preliminary screening to make sure that they wouldn't have this burden of taking of us on return trip, in case we were refused entry to this country. And so apparently things at that time were not scheduled, you know, hourly, or whatever. You got there a little ahead of time, and you waited, and so things were done on a more leisurely time frame than I guess things are being done now. But I do remember that we did, I recall seeing in Germany for the first

time - I saw the first tri, tricycle automobiles. They had the one wheel in the front and the two in the back. And I was always fascinated by the way those little things would scoot around and whatever else, because that was all new to me. I had...

SIGRIST: Hamburg's the first big city you'd probably ever been in.

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you have any impressions of seeing the boat for the first time and what you thought about that?

ZEMANOVIC: No. No, because of course you were moved along a gang plank and right on. I do remember that we had a room in, in the lower part of the vessel. It was very hot and very noisy because we were apparently over the propeller shaft or whatever. That any time we were down there it was just thump, thump, thump, thump, thump. So it, and it was very uncomfortable. It had (pauses) just enough room for my mother and my sister

and me to sleep. And so I, my mother of course along with everybody else got sea sick. She was sea sick most of the time across the way, and I didn't. I, my sister and I weren't sea sick, and of course I had a ball on the vessel as far as I can recall. I climbed the mast, and I must have really driven the deck hands crazy, because one of the things that fascinated me and I never got tired of watching for some reason was, I found at this - at the aft end of the vessel, there was this huge section of gear with teeth in it and stuff. And it would move this way (he gestures), it would move this way, and it would move this way. And it was the steering mechanism. And I spent, I spent hours watching that thing for some reason. I could, there was not really much to do, you know, except run around on deck and try to keep from falling overboard or whatever. And so as a six year old who wasn't sea sick I had, we had the run of the main deck, of course, and we weren't permitted to go up into the other decks. They were reserved for the first class and second class passengers and whatever. And so we, we were fed down in the hold. I don't remember too much except one, one

kind of a soup that I had never eaten, had before. And it was sort of like bro - it was cons - consomme. It had very, something that looked like - well, very small granular things floating around in it. It, well, you know, it was just something I had never eaten, because the soups we ate at home were real nice, thick hearty things, you know, that you could chew on. (he laughs) And so this was something new to me. But I remember that. I think I...

SIGRIST: How long was the trip?

ZEMANOVIC: Ten days, I believe, is what it was. I think the trip the lasted ten days, and I recall (pauses) as we started to approach shore, that we started to see birds. And we saw things floating in the water. I don't recall very much of the approach into the harbor, or anything like that, except we moved right along and (pauses) here we were.

SIGRIST: So you arrived was it July, you said?

ZEMANOVIC: We arrived August the first, August the second I believe is when we got here. I think we got here, I think that was...

SIGRIST: Around that time?

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, so you probably don't remember seeing the Statue of Liberty, then, if you arrived...

ZEMANOVIC: I wasn't aware of it. I don't know if anybody pointed it out or anything. But I, at that, if I did, it didn't leave an impression, let's put it that way.

SIGRIST: Well, once you arrived in New York Harbor, then what happened?

ZEMANOVIC: Again, there is a, just a blur. I, we, everybody had their baggage collected, and they're waiting to get off, and from there on it was just, just one constant blur of activity where I don't recall the actual

passage. Obviously they had to bring us to Ellis Island on a ferry boat. I don't know what pier we docked in, or anything, and what the accent was. I do remember after we left Ellis Island, that when we got over to what I think was the Jersey Central Railroad Station, my father was waiting there. And that's when we first spotted him as we got off the ferry boat after we left Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it was like seeing father?

ZEMANOVIC: Well, yeah, we were all joyful, you know. I think, I think my sister, she says she spotted him first and pointed him out to me and my mother. She says, but whether that's in fact true or not I just really can't say. But (pauses) it didn't - you know all we - all I can recall is that my father greeted us, you know, and there was the hugging and the kissing and whatever, and then he, we went on a train, and then got off and got on a bus, and took us to this house where he had been living with this Slovak family.

SIGRIST: In Newark?

ZEMANOVIC: In Newark.

SIGRIST: Do you have any specific memories of Ellis Island before we get you all the way to Newark?

ZEMANOVIC: (pauses) Vague, vague memories of going into this big hall and being, being led along, you know, a procession of people, and going through various stops and whatever, and other than that I can't really say that I have any specific item that I could, that I had focused on or left any impression on me. That, that's about the only thing that I can say, that I...

SIGRIST: You probably went through very quickly.

ZEMANOVIC: It was, it was a very fast operation. I don't remember that we, we spent any time here or slept overnight or anything like that.

SIGRIST: Didn't eat here or anything like...

ZEMANOVIC: I think, I think, but I'm not sure that we were given a shower. But again I'm not sure. I think that I had mentioned in discussing things, I think my mother had mentioned that we were, we were offered a shower. But again whether that in fact took place I don't know, but...

SIGRIST: So you met Dad at the Jersey Central Station, and he takes you to Newark.

ZEMANOVIC: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you did the first night in America.

ZEMANOVIC: Slept without this thumping sound that we were, that we were exposed to for ten days and nights and whatever. And then there were, there were some young children, my peers, you know, and they, we tried to communicate. What, what, of course I knew only Slovak, and these kids I think may have known some Slovak also because they were Slovak family there. And they introduced me

to chewing gum, which was to me the most horrible tasting thing that I had ever experienced. And that, and I tried desperately to try and be a part of the group by chewing gum, and I just couldn't tolerate it. It would nauseate me. So I found a happy way to get around it. I would just take a slice of raw bacon and chew on that, and chew on it and chew on it and chew on it, and then I felt part of the group. You have to understand that we were very deple, we, very, fat was very scarce where, in these farming communities. Fat was, fat was, any fat was very, very choice. I mean you safeguarded it. You didn't throw anything away. I remember my sister and I arguing and fighting over the marrow from soup bones. How delicious it was. I remember my mother making toast and spreading lard over it. And that to us was a treat, that we were so starved for fats over there, and everybody, and then something that I didn't really learn until my mother told us. Said, "You know," she says, "Oh, we had very little meat." Even though you're on a farming, you live on a farm, meats were only served during festive occasions and holidays. Everything was just plain fare

and you used a little fat to provide a little sauce and whatever, and (pauses) whatever you called it, I don't remember the American term, "Sacmaska," they called it. You always took a little fat, and you took flour, and you, and you browned it, and you made sort of a gravy. I guess that's the term, gravy. And that was, that was about all of the fat that people had to eat, and so...

SIGRIST: So this was the first thing that struck you...

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah. Yeah...

SIGRIST: America being different that Czechoslovakia. Suddenly you have..

ZEMANOVIC: And then ice cream also. I mean, I loved ice cream. That was delicious. And, of course, as I said, we had a few samples of it on the boat and Ellis Island, but (pauses) the Americanized food was a novelty to us, you know, and...

SIGRIST: Had your father learned English?

ZEMANOVIC: He knew a few phrases. But in that one year that he was here he was able to, he was able to communicate with, with basic words. And actually it was, became my responsibility and I learned English very quickly, to act as an interpreter. Actually I recall that he, that, after I learned the basic English words that I did most of the translating or explaining or whatever had to be done. My, of course, I, I was, I had equal, I was also confused because I was six years and they put me into kindergarten. Of course, you know, I had no knowledge of English language, so I remember assembling little pieces of paper into weave, you know, basket weaving and stuff like that. And in a few months, why, then they moved me to another class where we started to read. And I was trying to learn the English language, and the teachers were being very patient. And one of things that I was very confused about was they were reading about Little Red Riding Hood and Peter Rabbit and all these other things, and these animals were talking, you know. And I came home,

I said, "Mom," I said, "I don't understand." I said, I was, we lived like, "We had animals all the time, and I never heard any talk. And here I'm reading about these animals talking." And she said, "Don't worry. It'll all, you'll understand everything. Just learn." And so (he laughs) that was one of the things that I can recall. And I can still recall my first Christmas tree. Oh, what an elaborate thing it was. This was an assembly for Christmas. And all the children got down and sang Christmas carols, and it was just beautiful. Of course, we had trees in Czechoslovakia in Dolna Suca. They were little, little conifers with a couple of candles stuck on them and stuff. They celebrated Christmas there very, very simply. And so this was my first real American lit-up Christmas tree, with all the tinsel and all the electric lights and everything you could imagine. So that was quite a, that left quite an impression on me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your first English word, or when the light bulb sort of went off, and it all started making sense?

ZEMANOVIC: (pauses) Well, I can't, I can't really say there was any one, there was any one. I had, I had difficulty in school between the singular and the plural. I remember one of the things that I was always be corrected when we spoke, "Peter Rabbits." And I was, they said, "No, no Peter Rabbit. One." And I would say, "rabbits," because of course at the time I knew nothing about plural, and you know, and singular, and whatever else, but, I, I'm trying to think. I'm sure there had to be something that, that hit me, but - chewing gum was probably the first thing that came my way (he laughs), because everybody talked chewing gum. Everybody was chaw - you know, chewing gum, you know. What - what else can I say? (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about you mother getting adjusted to this country. And tell me little bit maybe about her first year here, and what that was like for her.

ZEMANOVIC: It, our first year was miserable. My father found a cold water flat not too far away from the place where

he was rooming. And so that at least we had some people we knew that we could visit and ask questions and whatever else. And we were about three or four blocks away from where these people that my father was living - where my father was living, and so. But this was a cold water flat and it had a wood stove in the kitchen. And I can still remember my mother and father in the snow cutting wood with a cross-cut saw in the yard. And all the neighbors I understand were horrified at how my father was working my mother, you know to, to, I don't know where he got the wood from, or anything. Obviously they were big logs. And he must have borrowed the saw so we could cut, cut. I don't know if we had coal, if we bought coal. It was simply be, you know, one of these fifty pound bags or buckets or something. And it was cold. And it was, it was, only gas - gas illumination, gas - gas cooking...

SIGRIST: What do remember about having gaslight in the house? What sticks out in your mind about that?

ZEMANOVIC: I had one horrible experience with gas light in this

particular apartment, flat if you want call it. There was a, is that, one of the, one of the boys that was my peer, who I befriended or who befriended us and we - we would visit was that he was (pauses) very careless. And what he did was, he got some paper, and I was trying to light, I was trying to light the gaslight in the bathroom. And he got a wad of paper, and he lit it and it caught fire. And he dropped it and I think it started fire in the bathroom, and I was desperate. I can still remember how I desperately tried to beat this fire out and stomp on it so that it wouldn't set the place on fire. And I, I think, I succeeded in putting the fire out, but it made me very, very angry with this carelessness of this, this chap, this other kid who just it thought was a lark. 'Cause I was desperately afraid that my father would find out about it, and, and, you know, there would be all sorts of horrible recriminations and whatever. He would put up with no nonsense. But I must say that our first winter here in this country was really miserable. And to make matter worse I had, I had gone through a episode of measles. I had - I had - right after I started school I caught

measles and I had to miss school for about a month (pauses) getting over the case of measles. I don't know, guess, I don't know if we were vaccinated. I suppose we were, but not against, I don't know, whatever it was, it...

SIGRIST: So for your poor mother on top of having to cope with all this new world she's got an ill child...

ZEMANOVIC: She's got an ill child, and (pauses) not knowing the language, and not, in a strange land, no neighbors who could, you know. The particular place where there was a very grumpy lady living who would not associate with us. It was a (pauses) inhospitable neighborhood is all I can remember. I can remember running around in, they were doing some house building in the neighborhood, picking up scrap pieces of wood, bringing them home for kindling for the fire and whatever else, and...

SIGRIST: In their own way they're still sort of living a rural existence, I think...

ZEMANOVIC: Yeah, we were self-sufficient so to speak. You know we tried to be self-sufficient. There was, at that time there was no, no aid and assistance, public assistance or anything like that. And even if it was offered I don't think my father would take it. He was always very, very independent. He wasn't going to be a beggar, you know. And anybody who accepted assistance like that (pauses) he would lower his self-esteem. He was poor but he still had pride.

SIGRIST: We have just a couple of minutes left. One question I want to ask you, as a child did you ever experience any bigotry because you were foreign?

ZEMANOVIC: Oh yes. My goodness. It was, and to me, and I, maybe I'm wrong on this. But I think the people who were the most bigoted to us when I, the Germans ignored us. They, but the Irish seemed to go out of their way to make life miserable for us. We were the dumb Pollacks. They had only two terms for any foreigners. You were a dumb Pollack or you were a dumb Hunky. That's apparently Hungarian or Pollack. And there was no

other distinction. And that always made me, after I got, after I became older and read a lot about the history of Ireland and this and that it always amazed is that how the Irish, who were so persecuted over the years, would not be understanding or compassionate or considerate. Because they rode us unmercifully. I can always remember that we were, we were, we were always being abused by our so-called Irish neighbors after we moved into Hillside.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to return to Czechoslovakia?

ZEMANOVIC: No. No. My mother never wanted to go back, and my father had no interest in going back. I - I - I thought of it. I was over Germany one time on a business trip in 1952, and I thought, "Gee, maybe it might be interesting to pop into the neighborhood and see what's going on." And then I decided, well no, I'd better not. They have a little nasty rule over there that by, they have first claim on you because you were born there, and no matter what other citizenship you've acquired, if they need you they can hold you. I saw

that happened in a number of instances in other countries. And so I felt I'd better stay clear of it. But I know the language in the sense I can carry on a conversation. I have to grope for it al little bit, but I can work my way through it. It's a lot harder trying to correspond with somebody.

SIGRIST: Are you glad that your parents came here?

ZEMANOVIC: Oh, of course. Oh, good Lord. When I would consider what was in store for, for me down there, and what - what my relatives (pauses) went through, I, there was no questions about. I think that was the most sensible thing my father ever did was to come to this country. I mean I, I would've, I would've been just a farmer over there, I guess. (he pauses) When I, when I, when I consider the opportunities that were open over - to here that were not available over there, why, it's just mind boggling that - that I would ever regret or that my father came to this country.

SIGRIST: I see. I want to thank you very much for taking your

time out and coming. I suspect we could be here maybe for another hour actually, to continue talking. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with George Zemanovic on Wednesday, August 4, 1993 at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Thank you very much, sir.

ZEMANOVIC: My pleasure.