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WILLIAM JOHNS
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ALBANIA, 1938
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SHIP: "THE REX"
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? ALBANIA: KORCË
? US: Worcester, MA

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm here today in Worcester, Massachusetts. And I'm here with Bill Johns, who came from Albania in 1938 when he was six years old, nearly seven. And today is August 10th, 1993, and I want to say that I'm very happy to get a chance to talk to you, and that you took time out to come and do this.

JOHNS: Well, thank you. It's really my pleasure. I enjoyed your talk when you were here months ago, and I was eager to, to be interviewed, really. It brings back many memories.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Well, that's wonderful. Okay, let's start with your birth date.

JOHNS: I was born January 10th, 1932.

LEVINE: And what town were you born in, and would you spell any...

JOHNS: Korcë.

LEVINE: ...Albanian names?

JOHNS: Korcë, Albania. K-O-R-C-E. And that's hyphenated C, Korcë.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, did live in Korcë the whole time...

JOHNS: Yes.

LEVINE: ...before you left?

JOHNS: Yes. I was born in Korcë and lived in Korcë until we left for the United States.

LEVINE: Okay. Was it a big town, a city, a...

JOHNS: Yes. Korcë was around fifty thousand population in those days, which it was probably the largest city in Albania. It – it -- I think it was larger than the capital city of Tirana.

LEVINE: Oh. Okay, so...

JOHNS: And Korcë was known as the Paris of Albania because of its schooling. They, they had grammar schools, they had high school there, which was the lycee [PH].” And there were not many school throughout Albania, so the people that were educated, I’d say most of them came from the Korcë area.

LEVINE: I see. Well, you left, had you gone to school at all there?

JOHNS: Yes. Yes, I had gone to the first grade. I was in the kindergarten which we call the “kortoporcë [PH],” and then I was in the first grade when we left to come to the United States.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about school?

JOHNS: Yes. Yes, I do. And it reminds me of when you see the pilgrim day schools here with the long benches and the long tables, and putting the books underneath, and everybody sat in a bench which stretched across the whole room. And the thing that I remember is that when we would go to school, every morning out in front they would raise the Albanian flag, and we would sing the Albanian nation anthem. And it was, I can remember it as if it was yesterday.

LEVINE: Really. Do, well, what was your father’s name?

JOHNS: Nicholas.

LEVINE: And, and your, now was your name Johns when you were in Albania, or was that changed?

JOHNS: No. Our name was Kamencia. And...

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

JOHNS: Yeah. K-A-M-E-N-C-I-A. Kamencia. And Kamencia is a town that my father came from. And there were no last names. My father’s name was, in Albanian, Koli [PH], and referred to as Kamencia. And everybody in the town was Kamencia. So when we came to Worcester in 1938, and you got involved with the people and they were all Kamencia. Everybody that came from that town. And I guess years later they broke this up where people had to take last names. So my name, Johns, came from my grandfather. My father’s father was Yanni [PH]. Translated, Yanni is John. I don’t know where the ‘S’ came from.

LEVINE: So Albanians in this country would often have first names for last names because they started out with the name of their town?

JOHNS: Right. Often. Often. And even now, you'll hear my mother. My mother is ninety-one. And when we would talk and she'd say, "Nick Bolovoda [PH]." Well, Bolovoda was a town. I have no idea what Nick Bolovoda's last name really was. It was just a town. And my uncle, my father's brother was in Albania, and his name was Pandi [PH]. Pandi Kamencia. And we would send all the mail there, Pandi Kamencia, and it would get to him. And then all of a sudden the government there says we, we can't continue this, and, and he changed his name to Visar, V-I-S-A-R. And that's the name that my father used when he first came to this country in 1920. He came here with a passport of the name Visar. And we would ask him, we would say, "Pa, where did you get the name Visar?" That was his grandfather's first name. Viska [PH]. Viska is actually David. I don't know why he didn't use David, but he used Visar.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, in Albania today are, are people walking around with the last names of their towns or of their first names of their relatives?

JOHNS: No. The first names of the, of their parents or so forth, they, they, they stopped that, because I visited Albania twenty years ago and thirteen years ago, and of course, the first place I wanted to go was Kamencia. And everybody there was, last names were Kamencia. And they asked what, what was I doing there. And I says I'm from Kamencia, and they just all pour out to see you, you know. They want to see an American from Kamencia.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay, your mother's name, what was her name?

JOHNS: Olimbia [PH]. And her last was Flaqui. And she came from the town of Flaqui. F-L-A-Q-U-I. Flaqui. And here they pronounce it "Flohkee." My mother was under the name of Flaqui when she got married, Flaqui. My uncle that passed away a year ago January was here, and his name was Flaqui. When I went to Albania my mother had three brothers and a sister there. Their last names was Tomco [ph]. They had to take the name so that it could be, you know, everybody there was from Flaqui. So my mother's maiden name now, of course, was Flaqui. Flaqui. And my mother says, "That's not my name. My name is Tomco." All our papers, everything that she came under, if you look at her passport, it's Flaqui. (he laughs) But she says, "That's not my real name. My name is Tomco," which is T-O-M-C-O. Tomco.

LEVINE: And whose name was that?

JOHNS: That was her grandfather's name. And her brothers in Albania had to take that. But her brother that was here in the United States and lived in New York City most of his life was Flaqui, like my mother.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: Because he had come here in 1920. My uncle came here with my father in 1920. They came together. And then my father went back to

Albania in 1925 and married my mother. Then he came back to the United States to make some money so that he could bring the family over there. In the meantime my oldest brother was born in 1925. Christy. And then my father came back in 1931. I was born in 1932. Now the first time I remember seeing my father was in 1936. My father came to Albania in 1936 to visit and get all our things ready to come to the United States. And we had everything ready. And in 1938 when we made the voyage to come to the United States on "The Rex," which was an Italian ship, and I, I don't know, it was such a...

LEVINE: Well, let me, let me understand. Was your father originally thinking he'd come to the United States, make some money and go back?

JOHNS: Definitely. And buy some land and be a farmer.

LEVINE: In Albania?

JOHNS: In Albania. And my father came here and was in the restaurant business. And for the life of me -- he came here in 1920. And I can't believe that he was in business in 1922. In Amesbury, Mass [sic], he and two others opened a restaurant. The Star Restaurant. And I'd often say to him, "Pa, where did you get the money in those days?" And he says, "Well, it was no big deal then. It was a hundred dollars to open." And three people get together and put in thirty-five dollars a piece and open their business. And my dad was in business since 1922, and he would always say, "I never worked for anybody. I was always in business myself."

LEVINE: Wow.

JOHNS: He was so proud.

LEVINE: Was he, was he in the restaurant business in Albania?

JOHNS: No. My father was a farmer. They had farms.

LEVINE: Oh.

JOHNS: Kamencia was farm area.

LEVINE: I see.

JOHNS: He came here as a dishwasher, and in two years picked up the language and saved a few dollars and went into business.

LEVINE: So how long did he stay with that Star Restaurant?

JOHNS: He stayed with the Star Restaurant till 1925, till he came back to Albania to marry my mother.

LEVINE: Now he knew, when he went back was he going for that purpose, to marry your mother?

JOHNS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Because my grandfather, now I'm backtracking. My grandfather came to the United States in 1904. He was probably one of the first immigrants. Came to the United States 1904, was in Manchester, New Hampshire, and died.

LEVINE: What was his name?

JOHNS: That was John.

LEVINE: Oh, right. (she laughs)

JOHNS: See?

LEVINE: Right.

JOHNS: Yanni, Iovan [PH]. And he came to this country in 1904. My dad was born in 1902, my uncle was born in 1904, and my grandfather must have died here like in 1905. And for years we would see if we could find his grave in Manchester, and they must have just thrown him in. Potters Field in those days, and we couldn't, you know.

LEVINE: So, do you know why it is your family all came to New England from, when they came here?

JOHNS: Yes. There were, Worcester had a church, which was...

LEVINE: An Albanian Orthodox...

JOHNS: An Albanian church, yes, which had started in 1917. And I think that this drew the people into Worcester and into Boston area, and there's a lot of Albanians in New York City. But, of course, they're split. New York City is so big, and Worcester, I think that the Albanians are very close. Our church is very close, the homes for the elderly, we're very fortunate in having an Albanian priest. We have Father Spiro Page. And Page is not Albanian name. His name was Paza, P-A-Z-A. When his father came over, Father Spiro says that he just scribbled to write his name, and he wrote Paza, and it looked like a 'G', and they said Page, and Page has stuck.

The other thing that, that pokes into my mind all the time is that my father always wrote his name Nikolas. N-I-K-O-L-A-S. I says, "Pa, why did you do that?" He says, "Ni-ko-las." Because he couldn't read or write. He could read and write Greek, but he couldn't read and write English or Albanian. Because the schools in Albania when my dad was going to school were all Greek. And they were Greek teachers and so forth. And he could read and write Greek. He could speak Greek fluently. He could speak Albanian fluently, but he couldn't read and write Albanian. He learned how to read and write Albanian in this country.

LEVINE: Wow.

JOHNS: It's, it's remarkable.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, so he was an entrepreneur you might as well say?

JOHNS: Hmm.

LEVINE: He, and so, so, okay, then, how did he, how was it set up that he would marry your mother?

JOHNS: My grandmother had arranged this, and my grandmother never married. She was nineteen years old as a widow with two sons. And her husband died in Manchester. And we would say to her, "Nanna, how did you know?" She got a letter from somebody. My grandmother couldn't read or write. She got a let -- but she could do figures. My God, she could do up to a penny. If she went into a store she knew the prices. She knew the dollar. And she did not want to let my father come to America. In 1920, she says, "No, I lost my husband there." And all she did was get a letter saying your husband died and they buried him. And that was it. And we would joke with her. We'd say, "Nanna, he probably ran away with another woman, and how do you know." And she'd say, "He wasn't that kind of a man." And, you know, we would tease her. And she made my father promise when she let him come that he would come back in five years to get married.

LEVINE: And she picked the woman?

JOHNS: Well, no, not really. He came back. And I, I told you that he came here with my uncle, my mother's brother. So there was sort of a connection. And he went back and my mother and he known each other. They had known each other. And they had known each other since they were young. And my mother said, "They made me parade in the court yard," walk back and forth. And my father stood in the window and looked at her and let her walk. He says, "Will you walk well?" And this and that, and he says, and that was it. They got married and...

LEVINE: You mean that was like a test? (she laughs)

JOHNS: Yeah. Yeah. They got married, and, they were married for a long time.

LEVINE: Yeah. Wow. Okay. So, now, they got married, then your father came back here...

JOHNS: Came back here.

LEVINE: ...but your mother stayed there?

JOHNS: She stayed there because he didn't have enough money. He came back here, and my dad opened another restaurant. And he ran this restaurant until 1931. Then he came to Albania and I was born in '32. When he came to Albania in '31, he thought that he would bring my mother over. My grandmother had her other son there and she lived with us. And she says, "No, I can't leave my son alone." Now in those days my mother couldn't leave her mother-in-law there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: As much as she wanted to come to the United States, she says, "No. If she can't come, then I can't come." So anyway my dad was trying to get my father here. In those days the quotas were closed. And he had arranged for my uncle to go to Australia. And my uncle made the biggest mistake of his life. This is my father's brother, Pandi, that I spoke earlier about. He had made up his mind, either the United States or nothing. So he got stuck in Albania throughout all the years with the Communists and so forth. And when I went there twenty years ago to visit, he says, "I made a mistake." He says, "I should have left." And that was it.

And in 1936 when my father came over my grandmother was still hedging on leaving her son there, and my father finally put his foot down. He says, "Now, either everybody packs up and comes, or you can stay here with your son." Of course, then, she came with us, and it was 1938. So I had not seen my father. I was born in '32, and when my father came in '36, it was the first time that I had seen my dad.

LEVINE: Do you remember what that was like, seeing him?

JOHNS: Oh, I didn't know, I didn't know him at all. But my father would come over, and we had a nice home. We didn't leave because of poverty. We had a good home. We had everything we needed. We had electricity in our house. Why did we have this, because my father was in the good, old U.S.A.

LEVINE: And he was sending money?

JOHNS: Sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: He would send money so that we could live well. And I'd say to him, I'd say, "Pa, how much money did you send?" And, and he would say, my mother would say, "Your father used to send two hundred dollars a year." Well, two hundred dollars a year, you could live like a king in Albania, I guess. And the only thing I'm sorry about that I didn't ask my mother many more questions. You know, I should have, because her memory was unbelievable. Now my mother is in a nursing home and she just doesn't know what's going on. But I would ask her questions and she knew.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any experiences with your grandmother when you were still in Albania?

JOHNS: Oh, sure. Sure. She, my grandmother was the kingpin. She ran the house, you know.

LEVINE: What was the relationship between your grandmother and your mother, who was her daughter-in-law, right?

JOHNS: Daughter-in-law. They lived together from the day that they got married, my grandmother lived with us. My grandmother lived with us

here until 1956. Then she went back to Albania to visit her son. And the Communist regime was there then, so she couldn't get back out. She wasn't feeling well. She thought she was going to die, and she wanted to visit her son. She was a strong lady. She lived to be ninety-five years old. When she went back to Albania she didn't die until 1970. So she lived in Albania from 1956 to 1970.

LEVINE: How did she feel? Did she, did she want to come back?

JOHNS: She wanted to come back to the United States. Of course she did. And she would write, say, "See if I can come back." The Communist regime would never let come back, you know, so she died there.

LEVINE: So what do you remember about her when you were little, when you, before you ever came here?

JOHNS: She could do anything. She could cook, she could bake, she could sew. She was, I don't know how many children she delivered. She delivered me.

LEVINE: Oh. She was like a midwife...

JOHNS: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...to other people, too?

JOHNS: Oh, sure. She delivered I don't how many, how many children. And we would always laugh with her, because we would say, you know, "How many children have you delivered?" She'd say, "Oh, hundred." "Did you ever lose one?" "No. No. No. No." And her medications were unbelievable. If you had a stomach ache, she had something that they call Lulebasami. Don't ask me what it is. It was some sort of a flower that she put in with something. If you took it and you had a stomach ache, your stomach didn't ache any more.

LEVINE: Do you know how to spell that?

JOHNS: Lule would be L-U-L-E, is flower. Basami would be B-A-S-A-M-I. Albanian is very easy because it's like Latin. You spell it exactly the way that you...

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: Pronounce it.

LEVINE: Pronounce it.

JOHNS: See?

LEVINE: So what, what other sort of home town folk remedies...

JOHNS: You know, it's a funny thing.

LEVINE: ...did she have?

JOHNS: I can remember one time that somebody had sprained their ankle terribly, and it was just purple as could be. And my grandmother took them, and she would chop up an onion. (he gestures) And put vinegar or something with it, and put it on his black and blue, and tie it on. And the next day it was gone. It was clear. And we had Doctor Saruni [PH] in as a doctor. And we had Doctor Saruni since 1938 until the time he died. And we would laugh. And he'd say to me, "Those old fashioned remedies," he says, "They work." And, and she would do all these. She could do anything. She could do anything.

LEVINE: Did she do that when she got here, too?

JOHNS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. This is here that I'm talking about.

LEVINE: This is here, too?

JOHNS: Yeah, she would do these things. We never bought a chicken in, in a market. We would go to Bartlett Street and buy a live chicken, and my grandmother would slaughter it, or my mother would slaughter it, and the feathers and so forth, and we ate it. We lived on Sycamore Street. We had a back yard and, and that's the way it went. I can remember my grandmother slaughtering a lamb for Easter. She would slaughter the lamb...

LEVINE: Here or there?

JOHNS: Yeah, here. And I remember her doing it there, too. But here she would do it, and she would skin it. God, I couldn't skin a lamb if my life depended on it. (she laughs) She would skin it, and they would sell the skin for more than the lamb cost.

LEVINE: Oh.

JOHNS: People wanted the, the...

LEVINE: Lambskin.

JOHNS: Yeah, the skin.

LEVINE: Right.

JOHNS: And she would sell it. And she says, "Well, the lamb costs us nothing.". Because she would skin it, and she was just unbelievable. She could do anything. But my mother was the same way, because she lived in, on the farm, and they did everything. My mother could bake bread. She could, anything. Anything. They made, I can remember as a youngster that we had a big loom. And my mother made carpets that you wouldn't believe. I'll show you one...

LEVINE: Really.

JOHNS: ...if you'd like to see a sample. And she would make these carpets, and they would dye them with berries. They would take the

berries and dye it. And if you looked at this thing it just unbelievable. Un, you know, I don't know what the cost is. And, you know, that the Albanian ladies always favored the boys. I have two daughters and a son. So my mother left my son the flashiest and the best...

LEVINE: Carpet?

JOHNS: ...carpet, you know. She wouldn't act like she was playing favoritism, but my daughters knew it, and they just laugh. They said, "Look who got the flashiest and the nicest one." And if you'd like to see it I'll show it to you. I'm so proud of these things.

LEVINE: Now did she do that kind of thing in Albania?

JOHNS: She did it in Albania. We brought all these things here. And...

LEVINE: Oh, that's what I want to ask, too, what you brought.

JOHNS: Yeah.

LEVINE: But first, your moth-- it sounds like your, well, your grandmother was kind of the matriarch, would you say?..

JOHNS: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...over there? Now how was her, what was her standing in the community?

JOHNS: She was a leader.

LEVINE: Yeah?

JOHNS: She was a leader. Wherever she went everybody fell all over her. And she was always at the head table, whatever, whatever took place. Her name was Thomidhia.

LEVINE: Spell it? T-H-...

JOHNS: T-H-O-M-I-D-H-I-A. And my oldest brother's first son was Thomas. Thomidhia, Thomas, you know, Saint Thomas is the same saint, same name day, see? And she was the kingpin. She was the kingpin.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: She controlled the purse strings. She knew where the money was going and so forth. And she was thrifty and she knew what she was doing. When we came to Worcester in 1938 -- that's when the hurricane, the big hurricane that hit Worcester.

LEVINE: Oh.

JOHNS: We lived on Sycamore Street, and there were sycamore trees. When we came all the trees were over and cut, and we couldn't figure out what would happen, what had happened. And we'd say to my father, "Why are these trees over?" "Oh, they're just taking them out." He was afraid to tell us that there was a hurricane, and it had blown the roof off of our house. My dad had, had that all fixed. And we moved, we had a three decker. We'd never seen a three decker. And my mother and grandmother looked out in front, and they says, "You want us to move into that house. We're not moving there." It was a wooden house. They said, "This thing is going to burn down."

Now in Albania you, you never saw a wooden house. Everything was stone. And there we are, going into a wooden three decker. The he says, "My God, how can we go in there." And the three decker had six rooms. It was 19 Sycamore Street. It had six rooms. Three bedrooms and a bath. And it was completely furnished. My dad had our cousins furnish it. And when we moved in, the stove was there, and the beds were there, and it was a, it was a nice house. It burned down about three years ago. And I would take my kids by it. And I'd walk in because the same people lived there. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Wow. So your mother and grand, your mother and grandmother were right, right?

JOHNS: Yeah.

LEVINE: It burned down.

JOHNS: It burned down. Fifty years later.

LEVINE: Well, tell me how that compared with the house that you lived before you left Albania.

JOHNS: In, in Albania?

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: Oh, the house in Albania was a better house. We lived in a single home. It was two stories. And it was...

LEVINE: Stone?

JOHNS: ...all stone. And it had a little court yard. It didn't have an indoor bath. It had the outhouse. And we had a...

LEVINE: Did it have running water in the sink?

JOHNS: No. No. We had a pump, though. We had a pump, which was a classy thing...

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: ...in those days.

LEVINE: Inside you had the pump?

JOHNS: Yeah. We had a pump. So we had water. And we had electricity, which was a big thing to have electricity. I, I said that we, we lived well. And when I mean we lived well, we lived well. And I'd say to my mother often, I'd say, "Ma, what did we eat?" Because I don't remember eating a lot of meat. And she'd say, "Well, we ate lamb, and we ate pastrama." Pastrami. My grandmother would hang this in the cellar, and our cellar in Albania was like a refrigerator. It was a big cellar, cement, and it stayed cold. And we had barrels there, tubs. And we would have cheese, olives, everything you could think of.

LEVINE: Hmm.

JOHNS: When we went back during the Communist regime in 1973, my mother walked in, she says, "Where's the 'kade [PH]?'" Where are the barrels. No barrels. There was no food. No barrels, no cellar, you know. So it was, you know, it was a dramatic thing. I, I walked through my house, I couldn't stop crying.

LEVINE: In Albania...

JOHNS: In Albania, yeah. I walked through it. And I knew where every room was, exactly the way it was. The only thing changed that they had, they had running water inside, and they had a toilet inside, instead of having the outhouse. But the house was exactly like I remembered it. And the only thing that was down, we had a big peach tree in front, and this thing would load with peaches. And that had broken and was removed. But everything else was exactly the way I remembered it. My uncle lived next door to us. My father had built the house there. And my uncle had a bakery. He used to bake bread. And people would bring the bread in, and they would bake it there. It was like a pizza oven here. Unbelievable.

And it was with wood. And the wood used to come in from the mountains, and they would bring the wood down on donkey. And as a kid I would be around those donkeys, because my uncle would be unloading the wood that they would burn to do the, the baking. In fact, I, I got kicked by a donkey, because we would go and pull their tail. I got kicked, was thrown across the street. My grandmother came out with my mother, they thought I was dead. And when they found out I wasn't the two of them started beating me. (she laughs) The donkey kicked me with its hind legs and threw me across. Lucky it just kicked me in the chest.

LEVINE: Well, tell me how boys were treated differently from girls in Albania.

JOHNS: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure, the girls were just minor. The boys were the big thing. And we were three brothers. And my grandmother was so proud of it, if my mother had ten boys it would be great, and if she had ten girls they would look down. They'd say, "What are you doing?" you know, because when they were married they would give them a dowry. And how much could you afford to give? My mother gave my father a dowry, and my mother was upset over this for years. And she would pop up with

it, "I had to pay him five gold pieces. Why?" And my mother would throw it up at him, and my dad was very, very gentle. He was a very gentle man. And he would put his head down and walk away. "Why did I have to pay to get married?"

LEVINE: Well, but it turns out that your grandmother and mother were very strong women.

JOHNS: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: But they, but they still favored boys?

JOHNS: Oh...

LEVINE: I mean, it wasn't like...

JOHNS: Oh, yeah, my mother always wanted a daughter. And my mother had a miscarriage in 1934. And she always wanted a daughter. She says, "Oh, if I only had a daughter, so she could help me." And it's funny. In later after my dad died, my mother lived in a condominium by herself, and there was one of us there every single day. And all of her neighbors, you know, she would say, "If I only had a daughter." And her neighbors would say, "Well, why did you need a daughter. Olympia, look it [sic]. Your boys are here every single day." And my mother is in a nursing home now, and there's somebody there, one of us is there every single day. She was quite a woman.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah. Let's see. Is there anything else that you remember about customs in Albania that either got carried over to this country, or, or didn't?

JOHNS: Oh, yeah, sure. Our name days.

LEVINE: Yeah, tell about that.

JOHNS: Saint Basil, St. Vasili. Saint Basil. And my name day is January 1st. And it's always celebrated. I'm married to an Albanian, so I suppose that makes a difference. It's like Norman Simo [interview EI-369]. He's married to an Albanian girl I grew up with in fact. And we celebrate my name day, and the priest comes over, and we have the church bread. And I go to church and get my flower pinned on. And you give a little donation to the church. Then the priest comes over to the house. Then he blesses the house. And my whole family's there. All the relatives are there. And in the old days it was open house, and everybody came to your house. And this was every Sunday. St. Vasili, St. Basil, all my friends came in. And it wasn't, you would give them a drink, and we would give them jelly. We called it liko [PH] And it was a jelly. And the ladies would have a jelly, because the ladies did not drink. If they did drink, they were closet drinkers, but they didn't drink at a name day.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

JOHNS: And the man drank. You gave him oraki [PH], which is the Albanian whiskey, and most of it was moonshine. My grandmother would make it. (she laughs) She would make it. She had her own still, and she would make this moonshine. And it was white, now I guess they call it white lightning. It was like a vodka. And she would even make cherry liquor out of it. I can remember she would take the bottle and put cherries, fresh cherries in there and let it ferment, and it was cherry liquor. She would do anything.

LEVINE: But the women would have like, would it be like jam? I mean would it be thick?

JOHNS: Yeah. Yes. And they would make it, it would either be out of cherries, the licor. Cherries. It would be from a lemon peel. They would do the lemon peels. It come out unbelievably good. Watermelon peels, and, unbelievable. Unbelievable things. They were just delicious. As kids we would get it, too, because...

LEVINE: You couldn't have liquor?

JOHNS: ...the men would get the, the liquor. And...

LEVINE: So, so okay, so everybody'd come over, and the, and the ladies would get this liqueur or liquor...

JOHNS: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...and the men would have a drink, and then what?

JOHNS: Well, lamb would be there. Everybody would have something to eat. And as the house packed in, my father was very popular, and I'd say that on a Sunday of St. Nicholas, there would probably be over two hundred people at our house. And people would get up and leave, get up and leave. When they saw that it's crowded, the first ones that came in would leave. And this would continue for the whole week. St. Nicholas was the whole week. And no doubt in my mind that we had over two hundred people for my father.

LEVINE: So, so a person's popularity would somehow be, could be...

JOHNS: Popularity and a big family. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You know, my father always used to say, and he says, "You know, when you go to a wake you see how popular the guy was." And often I go to wakes and there's nobody there, and I think of my father. (he laughs) And I go to wakes where it's jammed and I say, father was right, you know. And that's what it was. It was how popular you were, you know.

LEVINE: Now the particular saint that is your, that is a person's name day, does that, do, does that mean anything like personal to the person or...

JOHNS: No, what it means...

LEVINE: ...it's that saint instead of some other saint?

JOHNS: Well, most of the Albanians, like in Worcester, are Orthodox. Now, I'm sure that Albania is probably sixty-five percent Muslim, twenty some odd percent Orthodox and ten percent Catholic. And every Albanian male is named after a saint. And you see that, Vasil. I was baptized Vasil, not William. Vasil. Saint Vasil, Saint Basil. My brother Andrew, Chenandrea [PH]. My brother Christy, Saint Christopher. And your name day falls on your saint's birthday. Now birthdays were never big in Albania. You never celebrated a birthday. You always celebrated your saint's birthday. Your name day.

LEVINE: And the day you're born is the day that saint died, right?

JOHNS: No, no, no, no. It's the, the day that I'm christened Vasil.

LEVINE: Oh, christened.

JOHNS: See? Christened. They, they christened me after a saint. It's always after a saint. Like you, yeah, when Norman Simo, he probably comes on to the dyzet dhjetë, the forty saints. That's where they throw all the names that are not popular. Like my son is Mark. There's a Saint Mark. Shën Marco. There's not a Saint Norman, but he comes under the forty...

LEVINE: He was named after a general. (she laughs)

JOHNS: Yeah. Yeah. Probably, yeah. (he laughs) He comes from the other part of Albania, which is Permet, and I, Norman and I are very friendly, we're good friends. And I always kid with him because Permet is in a lower part of Albania, and it's on the tail end of Greece. And you find a lot of Albanians that speak Greek from his section. And they say that they are Greek. They're really not Greek, they're really Albanian, you know. It's not a big deal, but they're right there, they're right on the border.

LEVINE: Right.

JOHNS: And...

LEVINE: Okay. So what other customs besides the name days do you remember being observed there?

JOHNS: Easter was big. Easter was very, very big in Albania.

LEVINE: And what would happen on Easter?

JOHNS: We would have Midnight Mass, and we'd go to Metropolia [PH]. And the church seemed so big to me. And when I went back twenty years ago, it really wasn't big, but I was a kid. And everything was held outside the church because there were so many people that you couldn't fit in the church. And there was a big square. And the square is where the school was where I spoke about the flag going up and seeing it. It was the church, and there was the high school. And the high school was the "lycee [PH]." And when you went to high school it was the equivalent

of going to college. You know, when somebody said he graduated from the lycee, they said, wow, you know, you were teacher or something, you know. It was really a big thing.

LEVINE: And what did, were there any, any things that your family did around Easter?

JOHNS: Oh, sure, yeah. Yeah. We would go to Midnight Mass and everybody would walk back with their candles. The thing was to get your candle back to the house so that you could light a candle there from the first candle that was struck. And when we had our church on Wellington Street, all the Albanians lived in that area, we used to do the same thing. We'd be walking back with the candles. And people look at you and they say, "What are these nuts?" And it was Midnight Mass. And it was funny. When you're young, you're a little embarrassed. As you grow older you're not embarrassed, you're proud like now. I take that candle, huh, and say, "Look at this," you know.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah.

JOHNS: The other custom, the Albanians, the males always kiss cheeks. When you meet, you kiss, and when I was younger and they would do that, and I'd say to my father, I says, you know, "Males don't kiss in this country." As I got older I didn't give a damn what they did in this country. I kissed my father on both cheeks.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: And we were in our own business and everybody knew it. My father would come in and that was our custom, and I do it now. I do it now. I think it's great, you know. When we came from Korcë, if you want me to backtrack. If you want me to stop, I'll stop anytime that you want me to stop.

LEVINE: Okay, go ahead.

JOHNS: We came from Korcë and went to Tirana by bus. I had been on a bus before. And we got to Tirana. We went to Durres and got on a ship. And we went from Durres to Bari, Italy. I thought this was the ship that was going to take us to America. And it was a small ship. And we got seasick crossing the Adriatic. When we got to Bari, Italy it was like a different world.

LEVINE: What was different?

JOHNS: We got on a train. I'd never seen a train. The only car that we had seen were Model T's that were used as taxi cabs. And I had been on the taxi cabs, because I, like I told you, we lived well because my father was in the United States. And we would hire a cab to go to the towns, to go to Kamencia or something, so I had been in a car. And the only real good car that I had seen was a Ranch Wagon, a Beach Wagon in those days. And it must, it was a Ford, and it must have been like a 1935 or '36. And, and the person lived around the corner from us in, in ë, and he had been to America and brought this car back. We would look

at it and just daze [sic]. Oh, it was unbelievable. So anyway, when we left Bari, Italy after to go to Naples, got on a train. We'd never seen a train. We didn't know what to eat, we didn't know what to order. We got on a train. I don't know how we got a ticket. We got on a train, we got off in, in Naples. And there was the ship there, the Rex. And we get on this ship, and it was just unbelievable. It was like a different world. You'd never seen these things, you know. And I found out a month ago that the Rex was nine hundred feet long. God, that's three football fields.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: And coming from Korcë and getting on this ship. (he laughs) And there's people all over to take the poor immigrant. We got on the ship and they brought us down to Class D, which is lower than Class C. We were in Class C. We got into Class D and there were two bunk beds. And my grandmother says, "How could my son do this? Where are the boys going to sleep?" And whoever had taken us on the ship was taking us on a merry-go-round. And he says, "They can sleep on top of the suitcases." And my grandmother says, when I get my son in America, she was going to kill him. How could he do this to us. And he hadn't. They took us for a sleigh ride.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: And we bumped into a [sic] Albanian that spoke Italian. And he got around, and we got up to Class C with four beds where we belonged. And I don't remember this fellow, they were two brothers. And they took care of things for us. And we got on the ship. We didn't know what to do. And I have pictures of the Rex now, and I see the dining room, and my wife and I chuckle. I says, "We were in the dining room, and they were giving us menus." And the menus were in Italian. It didn't matter what they were in. My grandmother couldn't read. We didn't know what was going on. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Right.

JOHNS: My mother could read and write Albanian, but that was it. And they were bringing us food. We had no idea what we were eating. My father had prepaid for all these things. We should have been having a ball.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: And when I look at the pictures of the Rex now and it shows people on the Lido deck, laying and sunbathing, my wife says to me, "Did you go on the Lido deck?" I says, "How did we know where the Lido deck was?" We'd go up and eat, and go and stay in our room. (he laughs) And it's the first place they gave us a banana. We didn't know what a banana was. We didn't have bananas in Albania. We had oranges and pears and so forth, and apples. We didn't know what a banana was. Had no idea. But I think back now, and I say, "Gee, what a wonderful cruise it would have been." And I think it took us eight days to come.

LEVINE: So you, you probably travelled, you weren't steerage. You were either second or third class it sounds like.

JOHNS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we were. We had our own bunk beds...

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: ...and we ate in the main dining room. And I don't know what my father paid to have us come over. And often I would ask him and he says, "Ah, no big deal." But...

LEVINE: Now were your brothers with you?

JOHNS: My brother was with me, my brother Christy.

LEVINE: One brother.

JOHNS: Yeah. He's older, and my brother Andrew was born here...

LEVINE: Here.

JOHNS: ...in 1941. My brother Christy was twelve years old, so he knew a lot more. And when we pulled in into New York, we thought that going to Bari, Italy, and seeing the train, and seeing the ship was something. And then all of a sudden you pull into New York. And this was in 1938, and I said to you the last time I had seen my father was in 1936.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: And my brother Christy would say to me, "Now, do you think you'll recognize him?" And I says, "I don't know."

LEVINE: How long was your father in Albania that time in '36?

JOHNS: He would come and stay maybe about nine months, close to a year, then he'd come back.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

JOHNS: And he would start a new business. Every time that he would leave here he would sell his business, and he would come back and start another one. And he was very, very capable for somebody that never went to school.

LEVINE: So, so your brother would say to you, do you think you're going to recognize him?

JOHNS: Your father. And I'd say, "I think so." And I'd look, and I'd say, "Is that him?" I, I had no idea who he was. And when my father came to pick us up in New York, he came with his friend. And his friend was from Kamencia, too. And his name was Koli Kamencia, Nicholas Kamen, the same as my father's. And they were buddies in Albania. They had grown up together in the town of Kamencia. And Nick Kamencia was from

Southbridge. But he had worked in New York City, so he knew how to get there.

My dad hadn't travelled around. But my dad had a 1937 Ford. 1937 Ford. And when we got off the ship, they took us into the building, and we're looking at these skyscrapers. And they took us into a garage. And my father pulled his car out, and my brother says, "Our father's a millionaire." It was a grey 1937 Ford. God. Never seen anything like it. Never. So I sat in the front seat with Nick Kamencia and my father, and he drove us back to Worcester. And he would shift and hit me with the shift, and he was doing it on purpose. And I'd say, "Why are you doing that?" You know, I couldn't figure out they were playing games with me. They were happy to see us. And that was it. We came into Worcester.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about Ellis Island?

JOHNS: Yeah. Oh, gee, yes, because there were very, very few people that got off at Ellis Island. There was our family and an older Albanian woman. She was old, she looked old then. I don't know if she was old, but she looked old because they had the head bands on and all this and that. And, and she had, I can remember her on the ship. She had some stones in her hand. And she says, "They told me to take these so I wouldn't get seasick. I'd always have land." And when the rest of us were seasick she wasn't. (he laughs) I says I wonder if that had anything to do with it. But she had her little bit of earth that they told her to take. (both laugh)

And, yes, we got into Ellis Island. And the big halls were all empty. It wasn't, you know, we thought that there'd be loads of people, and there wasn't. And my mother and my grandmother had money, because we had sold the house there and so forth, and they had a money belt. And they had this money in their money belts. So they took us there and they gave us a steam baths [sic], and they didn't know what to do with their money belts. They says, "What do we do with the money belts? They took our clothes and steamed them, they just left the money there. How foolish. Why don't they just say, when we got there, "I have this money. Here, hold it." They weren't breaking any laws or anything. They just didn't know. They didn't know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: They didn't know.

LEVINE: So was the money safe?

JOHNS: Yeah, the money was safe after we came back out. And that's where they gave me my clip. They, all my hair was gone. My mother looked and she says, "Goodness. What did they do to my boys?" They had shaved our heads. They had given us a steam bath, which we'd never had. I'd never seen a shower, you know. We bathed in Albania, but we bathed like here in the old days in the tub. My mother would warm up the water outside, put it in, and we would bathe. And then they had private bathing houses in Albania in those days, so, that the men would go and

get cleaned up there and the woman. But when they steam cleaned us here, when we came out, and I couldn't figure out why they shaved my head off, until later years. Then I found out, sure, we, we had lice, you know. We had to have lice. You know, we lived with the animals. The animals were there. And we got back and...

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about an exam there?

JOHNS: No. No. I don't remember having any sort of an exam or anything.

LEVINE: So did...

JOHNS: But I remember sitting in the big hall. And there were the wooden chairs. But there was nobody else there. There was maybe about ten people in the whole place. It, it wasn't crowded like we thought, when we're going to get off at Ellis Island we're going to see all these people, and like my father would say, "Oh, you know, there were thousands of people."

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: Of course, there were thousands of people when he was in 1920, but in 1938 there wasn't, and the war broke out in April of '39. If we hadn't left when we did in September we would have been stranded in Albania. And Norman Simo and his family would have been the same as us.

LEVINE: Was there any problem with your papers, with your health, with anything that...

JOHNS: No. The, the only problem I remember is my brother's Christy's eyelids were red. And they were almost threatening to send him back because of an eye disease.

LEVINE: Glaucoma.

JOHNS: And my mother and my grandmother said if they're going to send him back, we're all going back. There was no way that we were going to stay here. And they finally passed him. And we got through and that was it. But they had made up their mind that if they were going to turn my brother back, he was twelve, that we weren't, we weren't staying. We were all going back.

LEVINE: Now did your father and, and his friend go out to Ellis Island...

JOHNS: No. No.

LEVINE: ...or you...

JOHNS: No.

LEVINE: ...you went to Manhattan.

JOHNS: Yeah. They were in Manhattan waiting for us.

LEVINE: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

JOHNS: No. No.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you thought about the skyscrapers? Had you seen them before?

JOHNS: Oh, never saw a thing before. It was unbelievable. We were looking up and I said to my father, we were talking, and, my father was a very, very bright man. Very bright. And I says, "Pa, how do they get water up there?" And he says, "Money can do anything." He says, "Money brings the water up there." (he laughs) I can remember that. And I'd always think of him when I, when I say these things, you know, and ask him those questions. "Money brings the water up there," he says.

LEVINE: Was there anything else that struck you, your first few days or weeks in this country that you recall?

JOHNS: Well, yeah, because, you know, we didn't have any friends. And when we started going to school, went to Chandler Street School, and in those days it was very difficult because of the language barrier. And it's not like now where they tell you, well, okay, we got a Spanish teacher to teach you, and we got this one to teach you, and we didn't have that. And I went to Chandler Street School, and I started in the kindergarten. You know, I was seven years old. This is putting me back.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: You know. And I was a big, rugged kid. And I didn't like. I didn't like it. And it was difficult on me, but it was much more difficult on my brother who was twelve in the first grade. And my brother Christy at age sixteen left school. And it, he was practically forced out of school, because at sixteen to be in the fourth grade or something, you know, he was embarrassed, and he left school which was a shame. I didn't, of course, being at age seven. But I went through. And in those days, if you didn't speak English, and you said Albania, nobody knew where Albania was, so they'd automatically say, "They're Greeks." You know.

Because they knew of Greece and the Greeks and so forth. But nobody knew Albania. If you said Albania, said, oh, he's Greek. And being in the restaurant business that made you more of a Greek, because all the Greeks were in the restaurant business, you know. So we had a fight every so often. We had a fight in the school yard, because it's funny, I use the word, and I have a daughter that's going to be thirty-five. She has two children. She's pregnant, and I have another daughter, Sandra, that's thirty-one, and she has one child. And I have a son, Mark, that's twenty-nine, he's single. And I use...

LEVINE: What's the first daughter's name?

JOHNS: Karen.

LEVINE: Karen.

JOHNS: And I, I use the expression of "D.P." And I said, "They used to call us D.P.'s." And my daughter says, "What's a D.P.?" I says, "What's the matter with you? You don't know what a D.P. is?" She says, "No." I says, "Displaced person." That's what they used to say, "here's the D.P.'s." She had no idea what D.P. meant. And I started to laugh. I says, "Yes. And they would. They'd say, 'Here's a D.P.'" We weren't displaced persons. We were immigrants. But that was the thing.

LEVINE: But did you, did you run into a lot of OTHER immigrants here in Worcester?

JOHNS: Oh, yes. Yes. Because we had the Ionica [PH] Boys Club. And the boys club was one street down from where I lived. And everybody in those days was at the boys club, because you could play sports, you had swimming, you had the showers, you had everything there. And the Albanians in Worcester excelled in sports, because of Ionica Boys Club. And I can remember Mrs. Andrews, Themo, Themoclia Andrews. She didn't speak ten words of English. She was the president of the Mother's Guild at Ionica Boys Club. But she would cook and do everything, and it was unbelievable. And, and her sons would just, they excelled in sports. And that's because we lived there, and you didn't have money to do other things, so you went to the boys club and you became a good athlete.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember any particular experience learning English, where like clicked in or...

JOHNS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Oh, sure, when we went to the boys club, and I was trying to explain, and you needed a ticket, and you bought a ticket for twenty-five cents in those days. My father bought a ticket, and you had a ticket number. And they would sit there to mark your ticket number. Well, as you walked in, they say, "What's your ticket number?" And say my ticket number was 1342. I couldn't say 1342, so I'm standing there with my ticket, and the guy, "What are you, stupid or something, you know where your ticket." "No speak English. No speak English." And this happened in school, "No speak English." And you didn't have the teachers like you do now to, you know, spend time with you.

They, I can remember going one day, my brother Christy was sick, so I went to explain to his teacher that my brother was sick and that's why he wasn't in school. And, and I think of that now, and I have to smile. I go, "Christy, -- Christy (he gestures) -- on a pillow." And she didn't know what I was trying to explain, clap my hands together, and say this is my brother. And as we grew older after Chandler Street, there was other Albanians there. And a good friend of mine died a year ago, Charlie Malonis. And he comes from the same town that Norman Simo came from. But Charlie was "Man Mountain Dean." He was big and he was strong. And if somebody said D.P., Charlie was the king of the hill. He'd mow them down. So nobody picked on us. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So how did you meet your wife?

JOHNS: My wife is Albanian. And how did I meet her? My, my father and her father were friendly. I lived on May Street in those days, and my wife lived around the corner from me. And I'm three and a half years older than she is, so when I was in high school, we were in high school, I was a senior, a captain of the basketball team, and she was just a kid. I never paid any attention to her at all. I knew her, and I knew her well. And my grandmother from the old school, when I got out of the service, I was in the service. I was stationed in Austria. And in 1954 I was discharged, and I worked in my father's restaurant.

And he was bugging me to go to college. My father was a great one for education. And he thought the greatest thing you could be was a teacher. He never looked at what a teacher made, he didn't care, but he never had an education. "Go be a teacher. Go be a teacher." A teacher in those days was making twenty-five dollars or thirty-five dollars a week. I was working in the restaurant making a hundred dollars a week. What do I want to be a school teacher for? And anyway my grandmother would be outside working in the yard, and my wife was working at Wyman Gardens. And she would walk by our house, and always, "Hi," to my grandmother, and get the bus and go to work at Wyman Gardens, which is, was downtown Worcester.

And my grandmother would look at her and she'd say, "Hmm. Here you guys, running all over and going into all the bar rooms and all that." And she'd say, "The nicest girl in Worcester walks by this house every day and you're blind. You don't see her." And it was Loretta, my wife. (he laughs) And we were dating after, and my grandmother, when I brought her over, my grandmother would tell everybody, she says, "I picked her." She says, "And he listened to me, so he made the right move." And my wife even now says, "Your grandmother picked me, and she was right. She made the right move." And she really thought that she picked her, you know. But I'd say to her, "Nanna," we always called her Nanna. And I'd say, "How, how do you know she's a nice girl." She, "I know her father." And her father's name was Gregory Ligor [PH]. And she, "He's a good man. And he's tough." And he was. He was tough on the girls. And, "She's good. I know her father." And, and we would laugh when we were young about that. But now I think back and I think, gee, how true. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Well, was your wife born here?

JOHNS: My wife was born here. And once in a while she refers to me, her and Norman Simo's wife refer to us as the D.P.'s.

LEVINE: (she laughs) I see.

JOHNS: Gloria.

LEVINE: Was it a good idea in your, in your mind to marry an American? Was that something you wanted to do, or not particularly.

JOHNS: No, I didn't marry Loretta because she was Albanian.

LEVINE: Oh.

JOHNS: My, my oldest brother Christy is married to a German. My youngest brother Andy is, his wife is Irish and Lebanese. Of course...

LEVINE: But then she was born here?

JOHNS: She was born here. Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: Of course, my mother and my grandfather and my father loved the idea that I married an Albanian, because we were in the same background. But my daughter Karen is married to an Albanian. Everybody would say, "Gee, how did you arrange it?" And I laugh. I'd say it was a fixed marriage. My daughter was at Assumption College. Her husband was at Bentley College in Boston. They were at a dance. They met. He came over to my house, Howard, my son-in-law now, came over to the house. And he said to me, he says, "My father said to say hello." I had no idea who this kid was. And I said, "Who's your father?" And he says, "Norman Dono." Norman and I grew up together. We were in the service. I says, "Oh, you're Norman's son?" I says, "Sit down."

So he says (now they've been married eleven years, they have two children, my daughter's pregnant.) he says, "You never asked me to sit until after I told you who I was." That's his big thing. He says, "Then you told me to sit." And my second daughter, my, my Sandra, married an Albanian by the name of Dionis. And they met at the church, whatever, and they have a daughter ten months old. They've been married three years. And again I have two Albanian son-in-laws. That's just not done. And I brag to Norman. I said, "Look, Norman. You've got a Latino. Look what I got. I got Dionis and, (with the Albanian names, you know.) and, "Oh, shut up." Norman's daughter and my, my middle daughter, Sandra, grew up together. They're very close friends, they're close friends now. She's a Latino. So, she says to me, "Go ahead. Pick on my father." I said, "Look at that."

LEVINE: Right. Well, let me, we're running out of time, but just say...

JOHNS: Oh, we're...

LEVINE: ...just say how being Albanian, what it means to you, you're Albanian.

JOHNS: I think it's great, and I've worked -- my dad for years, with the churches, and nationalistic part of it. I'm not a religious, over religious person. My wife is, my daughter's are. My son's like me. But the things we do I think is to keep our Albanian heritage alive. And I'm busy as heck on those things. I pay more attention to that sometime than my business. And my younger brother who's in business with me will say that often. You know, he'll say, you know, "My brother runs around more on Albanian ethnic things than, than he does at business." And it's true. But I don't feel that we should ever lose our background. I think

that there should always be Albania. I think that there should always be an Albania. We have Albanian newspapers. I'm the president of one of the papers which is Liria which is Liberty. And it's ethnic. It's ethnic. We come out once a month. There are other papers that come now out. But to lose our identity would be a shame. You can...

LEVINE: I think, I think...

JOHNS: We're done?

LEVINE: Yeah.

JOHNS: Okay.

LEVINE: Let me just say that I've been speaking with Bill Johns in Worcester, Massachusetts, and this is Janet Levine signing off.

EI-371/JOHNS