

EI-454

KATHERINE SLADEK STEFUNEK

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 13, 1899

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 9, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:32

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1996

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 2/2010

CZECHOSLOVAKIA (AUSTRIA-HUNGARY), 1913

AGE 13

PASSAGE ON "THE RYNDAM"

PORT OF EMBARCATION: AMSTERDAM

RESIDENCES: BEUKOVEC (NEAR Mijava)
PENNSYLVANIA; NEWARK, NJ

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Stefunek's pet bird can be heard in the background throughout the recording of this interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/5/1996.

LEVINE: Okay. Let me say that I'm here today with Katherine Stefunek, who came here from Czechoslovakia when she was actually thirteen years old, and that was in 1913. Um, it is April the 11th.

STEFUNEK: Today?

LEVINE: Is today the 11th? Oh, wait, careful, you have the microphone. It's Saturday, and it's April 10th.

STEFUNEK: 10th.

LEVINE: And I'm here in Staten Island.

STEFUNEK: Oh, because when it's 11 I have to go to the dentist.

LEVINE: And I'm here in Mrs. Stefunek's home.

STEFUNEK: Who lives in a housing project. You can put that on.

LEVINE: Okay, it's a housing project.

STEFUNEK: You put on Tar Hill Housing Project. This is pretty decent here. This was a paradise. But they, they have ten housing projects here on Staten Island and it's all full of dope. That's why David wanted to retire, because he's scared. He's got two beautiful girls. One is already going to college, and the other one's ready to go, and he's scared.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, let's start, Mrs. Stefunek, talking about Czechoslovakia before you came to America.

STEFUNEK: Right.

LEVINE: Tell me your birth date, and the town you were born in.

STEFUNEK: And the town? Beukovec. B-E-U-K-O-V-E-C. Beukovec.

LEVINE: And how, uh, what was your birth date?

STEFUNEK: My birth date? November 13, 1899.

LEVINE: Okay. And, um, did you live in the same town up until the time you . . .

STEFUNEK: Yes. I was born there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you went to school there?

STEFUNEK: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

STEFUNEK: Up till twelve years old, sixth grade.

LEVINE: Okay. What was your father's name?

STEFUNEK: Martin Sladek.

LEVINE: S-L-A-D-E-K. That's your maiden name.

STEFUNEK: Right.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

STEFUNEK: My mother was Catherine Kuban, K-U-B-A-N.

LEVINE: And, um, did you have brothers and sisters?

STEFUNEK: Yes. I had two brothers and three sisters.

LEVINE: And could you say their names in their order, the oldest one? Who is that?

STEFUNEK: Yes. I'll write them down for you, okay.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we wait till you finish, and then you can write them. Were you closest to any particular one of your brothers and sisters, or your mother and father?

STEFUNEK: Now? Now?

LEVINE: No, then, when you were a little girl.

STEFUNEK: Oh, yes. We all (?). We had a beautiful home.

LEVINE: Tell me what your home looked like.

STEFUNEK: Well, it was a small town, and, uh, let's see. And it must have been about two hundred families in there. We were all like one family, you know, and the kids, all of us. Most of them were here in the United States, all my age. There were a different place. Some was in Michigan. You know, they were

working. They came to the United States to learn the technique. When I left, when I was leaving, they already had electricity, they already had water running in the house. We had sinks already then. (?) here, they came over there, and they stayed there. They all had property, small properties. Not like here, like over there, you know. (bird noises are completely out of control)

LEVINE: Just one second. Let me just pause here. (break in tape) Okay. We're resuming now. We've put the birds in the bedroom, so it will be a lot more quiet. Now, you were saying that in your little town, what was the name of it again?

STEFUNEK: Beukovec. B-E-U-K-O-V-E-C.

LEVINE: Beukovec.

STEFUNEK: Beukovec.

LEVINE: Beukovec. When you were living there, you said people, a lot of people came to America and then they came back.

STEFUNEK: A lot of them, a lot of them came over here.

LEVINE: And say why they did that.

STEFUNEK: And their children, their children, when they came back from the United States, their children came to the United States after, a lot of them. They wanted to know what's what. They, they worked all over in, uh, Michigan, in different factories and different things. We used to have a newspaper, but we don't have it no more, you know, a Czechoslovakian newspaper that used to be printed in New York, but I notice it's kind of fading out, you know.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about the techniques they learned in the United States and then brought back to . . .

STEFUNEK: The electricity, the water, putting the water in the houses, the bathtubs. All that modernizing, you know. And, uh, what else? I don't know, a lot of things I couldn't remember.

LEVINE: Well, tell me . . .

STEFUNEK: The way of living, you know.

LEVINE: Tell me what your house looked like, where you lived.

STEFUNEK: Oh, my father had built a beautiful house over there.

We had four rooms. We had a basement. We didn't have refrigerators at that time, but after I came here we sent them some money, and they got refrigeration. And they had, what you call, radios, at that time, and I already left. Little by little was coming in, because the people that came back from United States, they brought all these things along, you know.

LEVINE: Your father built your house himself?

STEFUNEK: No, they build it a long time before he left the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. You mean, did he actually help build it, or . . .

STEFUNEK: He was an engineer, my father.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what did he do for work?

STEFUNEK: What work?

LEVINE: What was his work in Czechoslovakia? What . . .

STEFUNEK: Oh, he was directing the builders, and the architects, you know what I mean. He was telling them how to do it, and then ordering everything, what's needed.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Did she work at all?

STEFUNEK: No. My mother stayed home. And, uh, my mother came from the family that her father was one of these, uh, what they call, like an assistant mayor from the smaller town, but he was from different town from my mother. My mother married across town, you know. And there were six of us, and I'm the oldest one, and they're all gone. And my brother was over here. One brother was a priest, and I had only two brothers, and the other brother came to the United States, and he came to Canada, and in Canada he was working for the electric, big electric companies, you know, for quite a while. And then, uh, I think he was in Canada about seven years. Then he went back to Europe, and he married over there, and he was directing the whole town over there, showing them how

we do things in United States, where we live,
American town.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what, what was your family Catholic?

STEFUNEK: Yes, some of them. They remarried, you know, because
it was mostly people there, there was only a few
Catholics in the small town where I came from.

LEVINE: What were most people, what religion?

STEFUNEK: Protestant, Evangelic, what they call it. Evangelic,
what they call it in the United States. We only had
two churches over there. We only had one Jewish
family there. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Were they considered different from everybody else?

STEFUNEK: No, they got along with us wonderful. They had a
little store, and everybody was supportive. They
were the only ones that knew how to manage to get the
stuff.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, did you observe religious holidays
when you were a little girl?

STEFUNEK: Yes, yes. All the time.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of them, what you did, what people did in the town?

STEFUNEK: What people did? Well, when we had something going on religious in the other, in the Protestant school, there was only about two or three of us, me and my cousins, who was Catholic. See, my father was very strict Catholic, and, uh, there was only a few of us, so, uh, they chased us out when they was practicing the Protestant religion. So her, her and my cousin, we had to stay outside. But we knew it all, you know what I, they just chased us. Because the only thing that was really changed was the Hail Mary, so they didn't want us in the class. But afterwards, you know, we made a run with them anyway. We knew more about their religion than they knew about us. And that's all. But it was, uh, we was with them all the time, funerals and everything, you know. We were just like one family.

LEVINE: What was a funeral like in your little town? What happened? How were funerals, uh . . .

STEFUNEK: Just like here.

LEVINE: Just like here.

STEFUNEK: Only we didn't have any undertakers. No, the people, you know, they take care of one another. Everybody went to a funeral. Nobody, you know, it was this one or that one, don't make any difference. And the kids, they were going to school all together. We learned everything. We had wonderful teachers. They were here from the United States.

LEVINE: Oh. They came here and went back.

STEFUNEK: They came here and went back.

LEVINE: Do you, what was school like? Do you remember any things that happened in school that stick in your mind?

STEFUNEK: Oh, we had plays. The teachers had plays. And we had, we had to behave. We had to be nice. Nobody was rough like here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And, uh, what did you play? What

kind of games did you play?

STEFUNEK: We had plays like here. We had like (?). We learned a lot, yeah. Just like here.

LEVINE: And did, were the girls and the boys in the same class in school?

STEFUNEK: The boys was one side, the girls was on the other side.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, uh, what, did you play sports? Did you have any kind of games or sports?

STEFUNEK: Uh, I remember ballgames. No, the kids played their own, you know. Wherever they are, they will, everybody had a little place, you know, a farm, and the kids got together on certain place and they played, they got together. But we didn't have no roughnecks like here. Nothing.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And, let's see. Uh, how about food? Do you remember any of the dishes that your mother made when you were a little girl?

STEFUNEK: We used to raise our own. We had enough property.

Fruits, we had a lot of fruits. We had, uh, we used to take the, uh, what you call, to the mills, you know, where they make flour. And out of that we made bread and cakes and everything. Oh, we had a beautiful living. When somebody didn't have, so the end, somebody, my neighbors used to come over. He says, "Your mother got this. Let me borrow something." Then they gave it back. It was beautiful, really. I loved to go there. But I have nobody there now. I mean, the kids are gone out from the older ones, you know.

LEVINE: So, um, did you have grandparents?

STEFUNEK: My father, yes. I never knew my, I knew my grandmother. She was, uh, at that time she was, I must have been about eight when she died. My grandfather, I never knew my grandfather.

LEVINE: Now, is this your father's mother that you knew, or your mother's mother?

STEFUNEK: My mother's mother. My mother's father, he was, uh, he was with the politics. He was watching over the

town, like we didn't have no, at nighttime we didn't have nobody announce the news, and he would call out the hours at nighttime, you know, that everybody should go home, children should go home at nine o'clock. That's what he, that's the way it was.

LEVINE: Would he be, like, in the town, in the center of the town?

STEFUNEK: They had a little place where he had gone on top of the town. There was kind of a hill over there, and they had a little place over there where he used to come together. Everybody that came over had certain hours to watch. And my grandfather was up there to see that they're on time. You know, in case there was a fire or something, they would give a signal what to do and all that.

LEVINE: I see. So they were watching for fires, and for . . .

STEFUNEK: Fires, and what else, whatever they would. But they didn't have no, nothing like we have here, you know. Nobody went gangstering around and bothering anybody.

LEVINE: What if there was a fire? Was there running water at that time? How would they put out a fire?

STEFUNEK: Uh, how did they put out? I couldn't tell you. We had some water, but we didn't have enough. We didn't have no hoses or nothing. Not that I remember.

LEVINE: Probably buckets, buckets of water.

STEFUNEK: Well, we didn't have no rivers flowing. Everybody had a little well. So many houses, they used to go with the buckets to get the water. In fact, we had, after my father came back to the United States, he made the water go in the house, like we have with the faucets. A lot of people used to come over and look at it, you know. "Can I get a bucket of water from you?" They were too lazy to go down the creek, you know.

LEVINE: So before that how did your mother do laundry? How did the women in the town do their laundry?

STEFUNEK: With the washboard, with their hands. Now they got washing machines.

LEVINE: Yeah. But, I mean, did they go down to the creek, or did they . . .

STEFUNEK: Yeah. I had to go down there, too.

LEVINE: What kind of chores did you have when you were a little girl before you came here? What kind of chores did you have to do?

STEFUNEK: Oh, like we have to do now. We had to make the beds, we had to take care of the chickens and whatever. Everybody had something to do, you know. My mother used to order, we all worked. Look at my hands. See my hands!

LEVINE: When you worked, did you help grow the vegetables, or did you . . .

STEFUNEK: Yeah. We had to hoe them, we had to pick them. Whatever we didn't need, we had to throw out, you know. They taught us, you know. I know how to do all that.

LEVINE: Did you have any other livestock besides chickens?

STEFUNEK: We had, yes, we had cows, we had horses. And, uh, I

think we had a couple of, uh, lambs. I think we had a couple of them, I remember. I know one pricked me over here one time. I know, he was, he was eating some cherries from the cherry tree, and I went, I went to chase him away from there, and he hit me with his little horn over here. I had a little mark over here. Yeah.

LEVINE: What did you use the horses for?

STEFUNEK: Uh, do all the plowing in the fields. And going anyplace, you know, in another town to buy something with the horse and wagon. Yeah, all the farmers.

LEVINE: Do you remember any market days?

STEFUNEK: Market?

LEVINE: Market days, or days when the market would be, when you would go to buy things?

STEFUNEK: Well, we had to go to the next town, which was a small city.

LEVINE: What town was that?

STEFUNEK: Mijava.

LEVINE: M . . .

STEFUNEK: Mijava. Yes. M-I-J-A-V-A. Mijava. That's the big town. They used to have, uh, every Wednesday I think they used to go over there. Sometimes they had a big market. When there was a small market usually every Wednesday. There was a couple others, but they were much farther.

LEVINE: Tell me about what market day was like. What was it like to go to the market?

STEFUNEK: Just like, uh, I don't know where they have market. In Brooklyn? They got some, like on the street, you know, and they would, each one would have something, what they're selling there. Fruit, or milk, or butter, or whatever, you know, or jelly. They would, each one would have separate, that's all. One would bring one thing, the other one, and they had these little stands there. And that's all. Just a plain old street, you know, one after the other.

LEVINE: Did you go to market with your mother?

STEFUNEK: Yeah, most of the time. Or sometimes I went with some of the neighbors. My mother didn't go all the time. Sometimes when she had time she used to go. My mother was a beautiful, what you call, she used to make such fancy stuff, clothes, fancy embroidery, things.

LEVINE: Did she make your clothes? Did she make clothing for you, your mother?

STEFUNEK: Yeah, sure. All of us, she had to make clothes.

LEVINE: So you didn't buy ready-made clothing. Your clothing was . . .

STEFUNEK: No, we didn't have, only once in a while we have some (?), the younger girls that learn how, and we used to go over and they would make something. But my mother used to make most of our clothes.

LEVINE: Can you remember your clothes? What were they like, the clothes you wore when you were little?

STEFUNEK: Well, I was thinking, I had some pictures. Maybe I got some, I'll show you.

LEVINE: Can you, can you tell what they were? We'll look at the pictures afterwards.

STEFUNEK: Okay. Yeah, it was all embroidery. It was beautiful. A little vest, and we had like white blouses here, you know. I have some pictures that I brought back. And all the embroidery, gorgeous embroidery stuff. And the little boots. I never wore boots much, because my feet were small. So when my father, he always bought me regular shoes over there, you know. Sometimes, all the other kids, they wore boots. They were poorer, you know, they were a little more poorer than we were. But then we gave them away to the kids, you know. We were sorry for them, a lot of clothes. I had, I had two cousins. Their mother and father was here in New York. They were born here, and they learned a little bit of being a doctor. They went to Czechoslovakia. They were both doctors. One was about twenty-nine. They both died, though. One was about thirty-two. They both died, because they had some kind of a disease over there. It was something like a smallpox. At

that time it was unknown so much, you know. So they had to go someplace, the next town, take care of these children. They both died, one after another, in one week's time. Those are the only children, they were born here. They were born in New York.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about the medical care? When you were a little girl, before you came here, what did people do about illness?

STEFUNEK: Well, we had doctors in this next town that I told you, Mijava, and there were two doctors over there. So when we were sick, we had to go over there. In the meantime, if it wasn't a very bad sickness, we had ladies in the little town that used to go and take care of it. "Oh, take this," you know, some of the medicine (she laughs) from the grass that they used to cook, from the linden tree, you know, the blossom for cold and all that stuff.

LEVINE: What tree was it?

STEFUNEK: Huh?

LEVINE: What kind of tree?

STEFUNEK: Oh, we used to, they called it a linden tree over here. In the springtime in about May they had blossoms on. So we used to pull off the blossoms, dry it, and cook it like tea. And it, it breaks up the cold. I used to do it here. You couldn't even buy it in the store.

LEVINE: Can you think of any other remedies that you remember from Czechoslovakia?

STEFUNEK: Oh, other remedies? When you broke a hand or a foot or something. There were people, my mother know how to do that. She used to know how to set the bones and all that. Yeah. My mother was really a doctor over there. Go and call Mrs. Sladek. (she laughs)
My mother used to have more kids over there. She used to, when they had children they brought them in from another town. Let me see what they had, the diphtheria, the diphtheria. And she had these great, big, uh, wooden, like barrels, not barrel, like tubs made, and she used to bathe them in there, and they got a little better, paralyze, some of the children.
And my mother used to keep them sometimes a whole

week and two weeks. She had to bathe them, not in water, but she made, uh, what they call that, from the milk, whey. I think they call it the whey. She used to heat that, and she used to bathe the children in there. And they were so stiff, and they got better, a lot of them. Yeah, my mother was very famous for that. I don't know, she had sort of a gifted hand.

LEVINE: Um, how about, uh, childbirth? Do you remember . . .

STEFUNEK: Yes, midwife. They had midwives. But they were trained. They were very nice, a lot of them. We had two or three, sometimes, in the town. When the older ones was kind of fading a little bit, the younger ones took over. And they said, "Oh, go to that one. She's better than that old one." We manage.

LEVINE: Were there any other herbs or any other kinds of things that people boiled up or used for any kind of illness, or . . .

STEFUNEK: There was a lot of different.

LEVINE: Different . . .

STEFUNEK: There was a lot of different things in the woods. You know, like, when the seeds came out in the woods, a lot of the people say, "Oh, you want to go in such and such a place." They Says, "We're going to pick this and pick that." You know, and they knew how to do it. That's the old-fashioned way. But they lived. I wish I was there. Right now I have got nobody there. And the kids, you know, the kids were grown up now. They're mostly educated. Czechoslovakia was under communism, but they were highly educated, some of those people. My brother's daughter is, uh, what was she, she was a post-mistress. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, how was it decided that you would come to the United States?

STEFUNEK: How did I decide? Well, everybody that came back from the United States, everybody was worshipping, you know. So I wanted to go, I wanted to go, that's all. So my mother says, "Well, your father's there." My father was here already about four years that time. So he says, "Why don't you ask your father?"

So I wanted to go so bad, my mother didn't want to let me go. I'm telling you. I came here, the judge didn't want to let me stay.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, um, did you plan to come back? Did you plan to go back there?

STEFUNEK: Well, I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know how United States, I wanted to go back so bad after about two years. Oh! I didn't want to stay here.

LEVINE: So your father had come four years before that?

STEFUNEK: He came before me. He was here about four years before.

LEVINE: And what was he doing when he was here?

STEFUNEK: He was working in mines in Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: And, uh, and he, did you write to him back and forth?

STEFUNEK: Yeah. He used to come over, and I used to go visit him in Pennsylvania, because when I first came I had to go to school over there. And I went to school for about a year. Then my mother's two sisters was over

here working in Newark. They were doing housework, and taking care of other people's children. So when I got a little bit older and learned a little bit language that they'd take me over, and they got my job.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, tell me first about leaving home. How did you feel when you were leaving, when you were leaving your mother?

STEFUNEK: I don't know. I couldn't tell you. Because she went to Vienna with me until I got settled, because in Vienna I had to stay there all week. So my mother stayed there with me. I don't know. I just couldn't tell you.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, how did you, when you left, were you, were you traveling alone? Were you going to come to America by yourself?

STEFUNEK: No. There was a lady that was here in the United States before, from our town. And, uh, she came over to Europe. I don't know, I think she had one child, and she got somebody else's child that the parents

was here in the United States. They went to Michigan. And, uh, I came with her, with the other lady, and she had two children. I remember we were all in the same, the same, uh, what you call it?

LEVINE: Cabin.

STEFUNEK: Some cabin on the boat. But she had to leave before my father came from Pennsylvania to claim me in Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, how did you, when your mother, when you left your home with your mother, how did you travel to Vienna?

STEFUNEK: With the train.

LEVINE: Was that your first train ride?

STEFUNEK: I think so. No, I used to go to my grandmother. It was only a short ride, you know, maybe. Maybe about a half an hour, from one town to another. But on this ride over there it was the whole night, it was a long. I didn't know. I just don't know how I felt. I didn't want to go, and I want to go, you know what

I mean? And I was scared.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you knew about the United States before you came here, what you thought it was going to be like?

STEFUNEK: No. I didn't know. I didn't know. Because I didn't speak English, and then we were in Ellis Island, there was always talking, different people. We were there a whole week, you know. We had to go from one place to another. And I don't know, I got kind of mixed up, but I was scared.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, tell me the name of the ship you went on.

STEFUNEK: Ryndam.

LEVINE: Ryndam. And, uh, did you have any examinations before you came?

STEFUNEK: Yes. I had to be vaccinated.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

STEFUNEK: And, uh, I don't know what else. I guess everything.

LEVINE: Was this in Berlin?

STEFUNEK: Huh?

LEVINE: Was this in Berlin?

STEFUNEK: No.

LEVINE: Where?

STEFUNEK: What? The vaccinations?

LEVINE: Yeah. Where the ship left from?

STEFUNEK: The ship left from, uh, let me see where the ship left from. Amsterdam, Holland.

LEVINE: Okay. So, uh, when you got to Amsterdam, is that where you had the vaccination?

STEFUNEK: No, before that. Before they let us go across the border. No, before that. And let's see, Amsterdam, we were hanging in there for a couple of days, too, for something. I don't know what. I don't know. I was mixed up. I didn't know whether this was America, or which was which, you know. I didn't, and I didn't care too much. As long as I could see my

father or somebody. I had two uncles. My father's two brothers was over here. The one that was here quite a while, he was working in buildings in, uh, what you call it, in New York. Uh, and they had the two boys, they were born here in the United States. They brought them back to Europe. And the grandmother took them, raised them over there. Then they came back, and they brought them to the United States. They were both doctors. Then after they got doctor degrees, they went back to Czechoslovakia. You see, I came a family, I don't know, it's kind of mixed up, you know what I mean. We want to see a little bit, it's a different world.

LEVINE: So, um, when you were on the ship, did you have any experiences aboard ship?

STEFUNEK: Yeah. There were so many people, mostly Jewish people, most of them. And we were so backed up all the time. It was all.

LEVINE: Do you remember, uh, the food?

STEFUNEK: The food on the ship? I don't remember.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

STEFUNEK: No. We got right into Ellis Island.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Tell me your impressions about Ellis Island. How was it for you?

STEFUNEK: Well, I went, they took us around. Especially kids like me, you know. We wanted to see everything. They were nice to us. A lot of people spoke our language over there, you know, the higher-ups. Even the judge that didn't want to let me go, he spoke beautiful Czechoslovakian. I was shocked.

LEVINE: Tell the story about the judge.

STEFUNEK: He said, "Martin, this little girl is too small. You've got to put her to school. She can't come in." And my father says to him, "Please, please, let her come in." He says, "I got two sister-in-laws in here, they'll watch her, they'll take care of her."

She don't want to go back there." He says, "(?), she came over here." He said, "Martin, you work in the mines. What are you going to do with her?" He says, "I got people gonna take care of her. Let her come here." So then the judge looked around like this. He turned around, he said, "Okay." He says, "She'll fit in here. She'll be a nice little girl." He says, "Okay. She could stay." But he made me stay there. My father went back to Pennsylvania, and my aunt had to come two days after because she was, they were both working. They were both working in the same place. My aunt, my mother's sister was here about three times before that. She had a little boy, and her husband was working. Let me see, some place in Jersey. They had a store. Her husband was a tailor, from Europe, and they had a tailor shop, and she worked in there with them, you know. So she, uh, she took me, and they sent me to school. I was knocked around all over. I don't remember all that.

LEVINE: So in other words the judge wouldn't let you go just with your father. He wanted them to be a woman.

STEFUNEK: He didn't care. He didn't care if I go with my father or not, but my aunt said, "No. He'll take her here." So I was over there. But then, for a while, then they took me to Pennsylvania, and I had to go to school over there. I went to Catholic school.

LEVINE: And how was the school different in Pennsylvania than it was in Czechoslovakia?

STEFUNEK: Well, I didn't go to Catholic school in Czechoslovakia, because we only had those two religions. Over here I mingled with the other kids. They were kids born in the United States, but they were teaching in the Catholic religion over there in Pennsylvania. But then we had English classes, you know. I had to learn. I had to learn everything. You know how it is. You don't know nothing. ABC's and all that we know. And I know how to write and read, but I didn't know how to speak.

LEVINE: How did you learn? What helped you to learn to speak?

STEFUNEK: The other kids. Even I got a job. I went, my aunts

took me there, and got me a job. The people who was Jewish, but they had eight children. And they were little ones, you know. So I had more time with them, to dress them and this and that. But they teach me.

Yeah, they took me down on a table, bought the paper and stuff. They showed me, when I said something wrong, they corrected me. Yeah, a whole bunch.

LEVINE: So, um, were there certain things about the United States and about Pennsylvania and Newark that struck you as very different, things you hadn't ever seen before?

STEFUNEK: Well, I was only thinking all the time how come that they got sinks over here? How come they got all this modern stuff over there? Why we haven't got it over there? We had beautiful grounds. We had beautiful creeks. We had beautiful swimming pools and everything. But they, they were, they wasn't swimming pools yet, you know, and they were just wild. You should see now what they got. When I went over there in 1950, ooh, I was shocked. They want to show me everything in one day, you know what I mean?

Everybody was interested. Oh, Catherine, she came from the United States. Let's take her here, let's take her here. Different functions they had, the kids from the school. They used to go on the picnics, you know what I mean? They had a lot of, a lot of these castles different places, which I happened to see before I left. And when, when I came over this time, they wanted to show me what they have now, what they accomplished.

LEVINE: Tell me about Ellis Island, what it was like being there.

STEFUNEK: I was only scared. This one colored guy, every time, no matter where he was I had to find him. I didn't go look for him, but I seemed to see him in every corner where I went, I was scared.

LEVINE: Now, what did you think?

STEFUNEK: I thought he was the devil. I didn't know there was any black people. I kept looking at him, and he kept looking at me all the time, and I was shaking. I couldn't talk to him, but he looked at me, smiled.

Of course, he talked English, and I didn't understand it. He was a handsome guy, now I got used to.

LEVINE: So did you have any different foods when you came here, things that you hadn't had when you were . . .

STEFUNEK: Oh, yes. They had just, they would give you just a piece of bread, some salami, something that I had never had before. And we had some potato soup, or green pea soup. You know, we had one dish of soup or something, on the ship. Nothing extra.

LEVINE: Um, and so what, you went to school in Pennsylvania, then you went to work in Newark, and did you stay at that job a long time?

STEFUNEK: Oh, I don't know, about a year, I guess.

LEVINE: And then what?

STEFUNEK: Then I was looking for something better. Then I went to work for some people. They had a grocery store, like vegetables, oranges and that. And they had two little boys, and they teach me. After that, what did

I do after that? Oh, quite a while. Then I went to New York, and my aunt got me a job doing housework, and learning how to cook. And I got around different places, you know, with the people, with the younger people. We went to the employment agency, and then I got a job. I worked for people in New York, 108th Street in Manhattan. And, uh, they were in the liquor business. So I worked with, stayed with them for six years. And one of the daughters was married to a judge in Long Island, and, uh, she used to come in a lot. They used to get me nice clothes, send me to the shows, you know, to help me out.

LEVINE: What did you enjoy doing in New York for your own, uh, time off?

STEFUNEK: Once in a while, I got in with some younger girls, a lot of nationality. I joined the society, and then, uh, we had a lot of dances, a lot of shows. I played in the water, like, water, we had a show once in a while, and I learned it, with a whole other bunch of kids like me already, you know, some of them already married, and some of them are single, and then, uh,

different. They're all gone now.

LEVINE: When you did the vaudeville, did you sing and dance?
Is that what you did?

STEFUNEK: Yeah. After, after we had the show, we were in a
show, we went downstairs in the dance hall and we
stayed. We enjoyed ourselves. We usually had
boyfriends, somebody to take you home, that's all.
It wasn't like now. You wouldn't dare walk the
street now.

LEVINE: And tell me about the Czechoslovakian Society? What
did they do? Did they have meetings?

STEFUNEK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Besides the dances?

STEFUNEK: Yes. They teach you everything.

LEVINE: English, did they teach? Did they teach English?

STEFUNEK: No. We already knew English. No, they, they teach
us different things, what should we do. Like, uh,
politicians, you know. They used to come over, and

they used to lecture, this and that. And in case they said something, you listen, but you use your own mind, you know. Because a lot of politicians came over, you know. A lot of our people was already politicians there. I, I learned a lot of, the higher-ups, you know. That's where I met my husband over there, in one of the halls. I didn't know him from Europe. He come from another town from Europe.

And, uh, I met him after he come back from the First World War, in one of these dance halls in New York, 72nd Street, when this, uh, one general came over, what you call trying to organize the fellows from here to go and help United States, go in the army. You know, I met all those big shots.

LEVINE: Do you remember when you first met your husband?
What was the situation?

STEFUNEK: That's where I met him, in the dance hall, with a couple of other fellows. I know him. They introduced me to him. I didn't think nothing of him.
No, he only had the uniform on, you know, the soldier's uniform, and I thought myself, "Oh, he was

here in the United States. Why did you have to go over there?" Because he come back, and he was shot over there. He was hit in the head, over this way. He had about eight stitches over there. They were prisoners over there. I don't know. I think it was in Italy. I think it was in Italy.

LEVINE: So that was before you met him?

STEFUNEK: Yeah. Just before that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So what changed your mind? What changed your mind about him?

STEFUNEK: Well, nothing, only that he was, uh, he was living not too far away from us in Europe. I know he was decent, you know what I mean. I didn't know he was, a lot of other guys that was around, you know, from different places. I just, I don't know, I just happened to think that he was one of ours, you know. I met a lot of other fellows, English and all kinds of different fellows, the other girls, too, but we only stuck to our own because they were Czechoslovakian. They was not gangsters like the

others, you know. The other girls, when they went out, this one, oh, watch out for this one, and watch out for that one, be careful. Tell that little bitty (?), he says, "That little one." Me, I was the little one. "Tell her to watch out," you know, because some of them was rough. They was looking for sex, and I was scared stiff. I didn't want to have nothing to do with them. Some of them was much older than we were, you know. There was about eight of us used to clam around to get at the girls. Even when we were, one would work on one corner and the other one is, "What are you doing today? Are you going any place?" He says, "You want to go to the dance hall or something?" I said, "No." So we didn't go. Sometimes we just walked the streets. Sometimes we went to the park. A little bit we was even skeptical of the park.

LEVINE: Was that Central Park?

STEFUNEK: Central, yeah. We went to Central Park, too.

LEVINE: What was Central Park like then?

STEFUNEK: Well, I couldn't tell you anything much about it. I don't know. I don't even know how we got there. The other girls, you know, they worked for different people, and a lot people had cars, and they went with them. And there was a whole bunch of nice girls. Let me see, where did we go to Central Park? I don't remember what we did in Central Park. We used to go and walk around, see what's what, that's all.

LEVINE: So did you stay friendly with that group of girls?

STEFUNEK: What?

LEVINE: Did you remain friends with that group of girls?

STEFUNEK: Yes. They all passed away, all of them. There was eight of us. We belonged to that society, and we used to, I told you, all of us belonged to that place. This one was picked up for this, this one for this, this one for that, and we used to go every Thursday evening. That was our days off, every Wednesday, because they were all doing housework for people. That Thursday evening we all arranged to go, so we went over there, and there was a lot of our

people, you know, the bigger people that was teaching all these things here, like the plays and everything else. This is the time we, this is what we're going to do, and this is where you're going to learn, and all that. You know, it was all up to our people that was here before. Some of them was, had stores. It was usually up in 72nd Street in Manhattan, East Side. They had a Sokol Hall over there, you know, that's where we used to belong. We rent over there. That's where we got together. We didn't do any rough work or nothing. It was beautiful.

LEVINE: So were you friendly with those eight girls for, like, twenty years or more?

STEFUNEK: Well, they each married. We each got different places. Some of them married upstate New York like I did. I lived upstate New York in Little Falls for about twenty-five years. That's where I had my daughter over there, and I educated her over there. Then she came down here to learn the trade. She was a beautician. So she was down here, and she met this fellow, it was the World War, so she met this fellow,

he was in the navy, so she got married. So that's when I come down here again after. I lived up there for twenty-five years.

LEVINE: What did your husband do?

STEFUNEK: My husband? My husband was up there. He had two sisters over there, and, uh, let's see who else. His one sister was married, and he was a boss in the knitting factory. So he took him in, and he learned how to knit sweaters and bathing suits and all that. They made cloth, and out of that they made different. So I have, when I got up there, I happened to, uh, got a job, they got me in. I was working in a knitting mill. I was working, I was making sweaters, different things, you know, putting them together. Then after a while the knitting mill got, uh, the war was on, and my husband had to go to the war. And so, uh, they got somebody over there was teaching the girl how to make parachutes. So that's where I landed for about almost two years, parachutes. You see my fingers? You know what the parachutes are?

LEVINE: Yeah. What did you have to do?

STEFUNEK: I had to put them together. You know the parachutes to open up, it's an umbrella. You know it has seven strings on? And the machine was over here, and it would have double stitching, it would go from here to there, and those needles was not able to reach the other side because the parachutes wouldn't go up and down, you know what I mean. So I had to hold it like this so the strings in the parachutes, like an umbrella, would go through here, and I had to hold and look. See my finger? I made the most perfect parachutes in New York. The business president from the Ladies Garment Union came over. She says, "Cathy made the perfect parachutes. Who want to jump from the Empire State?" (they laugh) Oh, I'm telling you. I went through life. I don't know how in the world I ever did it. How I could ever explain to you? I was perfect, a perfect worker. I made very good stuff. They all know it, you know. I never made no junk like they're making now. This is all foreign stuff that's coming over here.

LEVINE: Well, tell me. If you think of yourself as Czechoslovakian, and you think of yourself as American, in what ways do you think of yourself as Czechoslovakian, and in what ways do you think of yourself as American?

STEFUNEK: The America was beautiful. I loved it over here.

LEVINE: Well, you said there was a period of time when you wanted to go back. How come you wanted to go back at first?

STEFUNEK: I don't know why, but I didn't want to stay. I went there, and I only stayed six weeks, because the, what you call, the communism was on. The minute I came off, I came there on the train, they put me in one place on the train with a whole lot of seats around, and I was sitting there all alone, and there was a man over here sitting there, and all of them, they asked me everything about the United States. Really. And I didn't know anything about it, and I was scared. "What have you got over there that we haven't got?" You know, and they wanted to know, the United States (?). "What did you bring over here?"

Don't you think they looked everything I brought over? I brought some clothes from the United States, some different things that I know that young kids over there like. Don't you think they took it all apart on me over there? They investigated everything.

LEVINE: Well, um, but then you came to like it here?

STEFUNEK: They want to know if I like it? Yeah. They wanted to know why I wanted to go back. I didn't want to, I didn't want to hurt anybody, because I was afraid to say anything, you know. But they was with me over there the whole seven hours, the whole night, on the train. And I didn't know what Czechoslovakia was at that time. I knew it before, but during the time I was in United States, was many years ago, it changed. They was bad to me. They were nice, but they wanted to know how United States was, how did the (?) get around, and everything else, and they were talking about themselves in Russian. A couple of words I already understood. They says, "How come this one's so nice and a lot of the other ones are so rough?"

You know, I understand that much, and they were talking. Because they must have been interviewing different people now. And then the one said to the other one, he says, "Well," he says, "you're going to interview the people from Poland and from different places. They got different ideas. You know what I mean?" This one, it happens that she went in there young and she learned all this stuff from beginning to the end. And he says, "Here, you got her over here. You see, she's a perfect lady." Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, do you think you have kept some of the ways of Czechoslovakia, some Czechoslovakian ways, things that you do, or attitudes, or ways of thinking?

STEFUNEK: Yes. You know what?

LEVINE: What?

STEFUNEK: When, what you call, if I, one lady came over, she know my father from Europe yet. So she come over, and she brought her little girl over there. And, uh, I ask her something, and she says to me, she didn't say, "Huh?" or "What?" "If you please?" "Would you

please repeat it?" A beautiful, all the kids like that. And they would get around me, and I would be sitting in the middle, and they would be sitting around on the grass, and they would be asking questions about the United States. "Why is it a free country? Why we got this? Why we can't even talk? Why we can't even go anyplace? We got to be scared."

You see, everything was a beautiful language, no matter who I met where. In other words, I had to learn their ways, because I felt, I felt that they were nice, much more nicer people brought up than I knew how to be before, you understand?

LEVINE: So did you, did you become more formal in the way that you spoke?

STEFUNEK: Uh, no. I didn't need to, any older people. What I, what I meant, already they were just cursing the Russians. They were already mad, the older ones, you know what I mean. The younger ones, they were already turned the other way.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what it means, what difference did it make in your life having been born in Czechoslovakia

and coming here, immigrating here, and then living out most of your life here, what difference do you think that made to you?

STEFUNEK: All the difference in the world.

LEVINE: In what ways?

STEFUNEK: I didn't have to be afraid to go look for a job. Oh, I didn't have to be afraid. I knew I had a home, I had an apartment, nobody bothered me. But now it's changed.

LEVINE: But for you, being here, living in this country . . .

STEFUNEK: It was free. It was a different life. Now, I don't know, I can't, I can't explain it. You know, I was scared. I was scared to go across the street to the store. I was scared for you to come over here. I got a black one over here, stay very nice. She's taking care of all the people around different places. They're black, and her husband was a bus driver. The one across the street, I don't know, he never even says hello to me. And I was wondering, I ask her the other day, I says, "Is he here, this one

right here?" Because they got two kids. She says, "Yes." I says, "I haven't seen him here for two months." I says, "What's the matter?" She says, "I can't tell you. He doesn't answer me." But I found out, through my grandson, how I found out. He says, "You keep away from him. He was working across the street. There is people, that is a senior citizen house across the street. Older people is over there. So some lady was living there on the second floor, and he was working there as a maintenance man, picking up garbage and stuff. And there must have been another guy there with him. So I don't know, there is quite a lot of families in there. I met a few, but some of them already passed away. So I understand, my grandson found out something. He says, "You be careful." He says, "You don't know who's living next to you." I says, "What is it, David?" He says, "I didn't want to tell you." He says, "I found out they choked some lady over there, she was eighty-two." She was living on the second floor. I'm on the first. I'm even worse. And they pushed her in the house. I don't know what they did

with her. They choked her. They must have stole something from her. But she had children. I don't know, they must have been a little bit more educated, they found her over there, but she wasn't dead yet when they found her. But now I understand that he was in on it, because they found him right away. And then that apartment over there was empty. Then when they moved him in, I didn't know who was moving in there. Then afterwards they said to me, they says, "He's the one that was mixed up for over there." And, my God, I got so scared. They only had one child then. Now they have another one. The other one's already about five, and the other one is about ten or eleven. And they were kind of rough, but they're so quiet now. So I couldn't understand that they told me that he was mixed up in it, and now it's about three years already, they're investigating it now, you see. And his wife was working over there by Bailey Seton, you know where that is, the hospital, where I go there every time? She was working over there, and one of the, one of the houses, it's not city housing, but it's some kind of a housing

project, too, because I had to go past there yesterday, and she was working there in the office, and she just got fired. She's not doing anything. Because there's a lot of dope over there, and I see nothing yesterday but a whole pile of police, and the ambulance driver stopped, and he says to me, "You want to see something?" He says, "Don't open that door." He says, "Because I got to go in, I got to pick up somebody." The ambulance driver, he already knew me. He took me through. "Don't open that door for nobody." He says, "I got to go and pick up somebody." So when he came back I said to him, "John," I says, "what happened?" He says, "Don't you see?" He says, "This damn place is full of dope." It was full. And they were walking around the street, all of them.

LEVINE: Well, we're near the end of the tape. Before we end, why don't you tell me the names of your children first.

STEFUNEK: Oh. Well, I don't want to tell you his name, but I'll just say he is a policeman here for twenty

years.

LEVINE: Okay. And you have two daughters?

STEFUNEK: He's got two daughters, and his wife is working. She's taking care of some retarded children. Not too much retarded, just a little bit. I don't know, she's got about ten or twelve of them. Not too much, but that's what she's working on.

LEVINE: And how about your daughters? What are their names?

STEFUNEK: My daughter? My daughter was a beautician. She passed away four years ago.

LEVINE: What was her name?

STEFUNEK: Veronica Stefunek.

LEVINE: And your other daughter?

STEFUNEK: My other daughter? Sharon. She's an ophthalmologist. Her name is David, Sharon Budnets [ph]. I was going to give her father's name. No, her husband is a lawyer. He works for the city.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how many grandchildren do you have?

STEFUNEK: Uh, grandchildren? Great-grandchildren? Well, one has, this one has two, six. My other, the oldest daughter got two boys. One just graduated from that Arizona University, the other one is still in a scientist's class up in the Bronx. And David's girl, she's in a Catholic school. She's finishing up the last year and going to college, and the other one is the same school. She's thirteen. And, uh, let's see, that was Sandy, and Sharon, and David's going to, Christie's going to Catholic school. I don't know where else she's going to go. The other one goes to the same school. And, uh, Sandy's one is in college, and the other one's getting out. Sandy, Sharon and David. Well, David was a cop, and she's going to Catholic school.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what you feel very proud of, what makes you feel satisfied that you did in your life?

STEFUNEK: Because they tried to educate themselves to fit in the world, you understand? I worked awful hard to try to help them. I sent the one, Sharon, that's in the medical, ophthalmologist. I gave her so much

money, I worked so hard all over on the needle trade, and David, well, he was in Vietnam for a couple of years. When he got back, he went a little bit for telephone people for a while, but then he got into, there was some problem there. Then he got into police work, so he was with the police now for almost twenty-two years. Now he's out of police. What he's doing now I can't tell you.

LEVINE: Okay.

STEFUNEK: Because I don't really know exact. I have an idea, but he's still under that police.

LEVINE: And so you're most proud of what you did for your children.

STEFUNEK: I am very proud of them. I was proud of my daughter, very, very, very proud, and I miss her so much, but now I can't do nothing, because she's gone. The only thing she told me, my granddaughter told me yesterday, the one with the eye doctors, she says, "I promised my mother that I will take care of you." And she says, "I will keep my promise." Because they

want to put me in a nursing home now, and I don't want to go yet. So she says she's working on something to get somebody in here to help me, because when I'm here alone I'm scared.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think we have to end here. I want to thank you very much.

STEFUNEK: You're going to put all this on a tape?

LEVINE: With pleasure.

STEFUNEK: Ooh!

LEVINE: Talking to you. And I'm going to send you a copy of the tape.

STEFUNEK: Oh, thank you very much.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine. I've been speaking with Catherine Stefunek, and we're here in Staten Island, and I am signing off.