

EI-485/SOVJANI

EI-485

KOSTA VANI SOVJANI

BIRTH DATE: APRIL 15, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 1, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 1:03:20

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: COLONIE, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 8/1998

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 4/2010

ALBANIA, 1926

AGE 17

PASSAGE ON "THE ROMA"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: NAPLES

RESIDENCES: KORCE; ALBANY, NY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, July 1st, 1994. I'm in Colonie in upstate New York, outside of Albany, with Kostas [sic, Kosta] Sovjani.

SOVJANI: Sovjani.

SIGRIST: Mr. Sovjani came from Albania in 1926 when he was seventeen years old.

SOVJANI: Right.

EI-485/SOVJANI

SIGRIST: Well, anyway, good afternoon.

SOVJANI: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Mr. Sovjani, can I ask you for your birth date, please?

SOVJANI: Yes, April 15, 1908.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me where in Albania you were born?

SOVJANI: Yes, the city they call Korce, Kor--, you can put Korce.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

SOVJANI: Uh, K-O-R-C-A [sic, Korce], Korce.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in Albania is that?

SOVJANI: It's the northern part of Albania near Greek border.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about, because that's a city, isn't it, Korce?

SOVJANI: Right.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about Korce and what it was like in 1908 when you were born?

SOVJANI: Well, 1908, it was under the Greek government. i was born and baptized in Greek church. And in 1920, after the war, the World War, the League of Nations gave Albania, uh, gave Korce and some towns around to Albania from the Greeks. They surrendered to Albania.

And from the Greek school, we had to turn to, go to Albanian school for a few years. But...

SIGRIST: So all while you were growing up it was all under Greek domination?

SOVJANI: Up to, uh, toward ten, twelve years old, you know, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you anything about your birth or when she had you?

SOVJANI: No, they, they, they all were, they were not used to

telling the birth and all that because everybody
knew, you know, the birthdays and all that.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, did you live in Korce for most of
the time until you came to this country?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, good, let's talk about, about your early
childhood. For instance, what's the earliest
memory that you have?

SOVJANI: Earliest memory? Well, uh, when the school (and one
of?) my sisters. She was a teacher in the school.
So I went to school, public school, and I was ready to go to,
uh, high school. And that's the time they changed the
government from Greeks to Albania. And I had to
go just starting, like first grade in schools of Albania, for
a couple of years. After that, then I had to go
start a job to learn the trade. And I learn trade of shoemaker
because I had a sister here with a, my brother-
in-law, he had a shoemaker shop, so I thought
maybe I can come here and be help with him together.

SIGRIST: Before we get to that, let's talk about your early childhood. Can you describe for me the house that you grew up in, or the apartment?

SOVJANI: Yes, it was nice three rooms house. And they had the kitchen outside. My parents and my two sisters and o we, the three of us, lived together. We used to live in one room, the three children, and one room for the mother and father. Then my sister, the oldest one, she, after she was for a couple of years as a school teacher, she came in this country. She had, she got married and came in this country, right here in Albany, Albany, New York. And that's when they urged me to go, to come over this country because it was free and I could make a living better.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

SOVJANI: Father's name was John, John.

SIGRIST: And what is it in Albanian?

SOVJANI: Vani.

SIGRIST: Is it spelled the same way?

SOVJANI: Yeah, no. They spelled it, oh no, they called it V-A-N, Vani, V-A-N-E [sic, Vani], Vani.

SIGRIST: And what did your father do for a living?

SOVJANI: He was a grocery store man.

SIGRIST: Did he have his own store or did he work...

SOVJANI: Yes, he used to have it under, under the house, in the house that we lived.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the store and what kinds of things he sold?

SOVJANI: Sure. He sold all kind of groceries and he used to make his own wine, and sell wine.

SIGRIST: How did he make wine?

SOVJANI: Well, he used to have barrels and he used to ferment the grapes, make wine. And he used sell the wine

there.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

SOVJANI: He was very good father and husband. He used to keep us in clothes and food.

SIGRIST: When you think back about your childhood, what kinds of things about your father stick out? For instance, what did he like to do for fun?

SOVJANI: For fun? Well, my father wasn't much about having fun. See, in Albania they had, the man and the woman, they are as house, uh, keepers, you know, and like father to see that it gets, the family, enough food to eat, enough clothing. And the woman, they used to keep the kids and clothing and they used to feed the kids and keep them out of trouble.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

SOVJANI: Magdalene.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

SOVJANI: Her maiden name was, uh, R, R-E-S-T-O, Resto.

SIGRIST: R-E-S-T-O, Resto. Can you tell me something about our mothers background and her parents, maybe?

SOVJANI: Yes. She was born from a, her father used to be a priest in Korce and he had two children, two girls, my mother and another girl. And the other one got married with a Greek commissioner of the schools. So my mother married my father, and that's what it was.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

SOVJANI: Mother's personality was very good. She had friends. She used to visit friends and they used to visit us. And she used to keep the house spic-and-span.

SIGRIST: Thinking back to your childhood, is there a story you can tell me about the way your mother may have helped you do something or taught you how to do something?

SOVJANI: Yes. My mother used to teach me how to be friendly and have friends. And she used to let me bring the

friends home and she used to make something sweet like cakes and things like that, you know, to eat.

SIGRIST: What, what kinds of foods, you mentioned she made sweet things, what other kinds of foods did your mother make in Albania?

SOVJANI: Well, Mother, she used to make, uh, cooking the meats and, uh, especially she used to bake the lambs.

SIGRIST: Lambs?

SOVJANI: Lamb, yes. Mostly they used lamb. Not much of a beef over there. And then she would make vegetables dinner and she used to make pita with cheese and leeks, leeks and cheese. Make pita with a lot of boray [ph] in it.

SIGRIST: A lot of what?

SOVJANI: Boray [ph].

SIGRIST: Boray [ph]?

SOVJANI: Boray [ph].

SIGRIST: What is that?

SOVJANI: Butter, butter.

SIGRIST: Oh, butter. (Mr. Sovjani laughs) How do you spell boray [ph]? Is that Albanian for butter?

SOVJANI: Yeah, well, it's the same, B-U-R-T-E, uh, T-E-R, butter.

SIGRIST: Now, where would you get the lamb? Did you raise your own animals?

SOVJANI: No, they used to have the meat market. They used to have that only a couple times a week, like Friday and Saturday. They used to have fresh killed and we used to go and buy it. I used to buy the quarter of the lamb. They wouldn't sell, you know, like here, chops and all that. So she used to take care of it herself and make chops and things like that for the whole week, yeah.

SIGRIST: Would you eat meat frequently or just like once a week?

SOVJANI: No, a couple times a week because, like I said, only twice a week they had the lamb. They used to get more fish, too.

SIGRIST: Is Korce near the ocean?

SOVJANI: No, Korce is in the middle of the, of Albania, and they used to have lakes around. So they used to bring fresh fish from the lakes and they sell it, like I said, Friday and Saturday. Only those two days that they used to have market, open market.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of fish they would sell?

SOVJANI: Yes. Carp, eels, uh, minnows, you know, but mostly they have carp, carp.

SIGRIST: How would your mother prepare carp or eels?

SOVJANI: Well, she used to clean it and bake it with vegetables.

SIGRIST: And you said the kitchen was outside the house.

SOVJANI: Outside, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was it, was it its own building or was it just a stove in the backyard?

SOVJANI: No stove. They have like a, uh, in a camping, you know, open fire. But she had a tent, uh, tin on top of it so it wouldn't get wet if it rained.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about religious life. Now, you said your, your grandfather was a priest.

SOVJANI: Right.

SIGRIST: Were you a religious family?

SOVJANI: Yes, Greek Orthodox.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what attending a service was like when you were growing up?

SOVJANI: Well, where I was growing up, a service, we used to go on Sundays and holidays in church. And they used to keep us like no chorus or things, but they used to keep us kids, you know, side, on the side.

SIGRIST: Did you know your grandfather who was a priest? Was he living?

SOVJANI: No, he wasn't living when I was born.

SIGRIST: Was there some way that you practiced your religion at home?

SOVJANI: At home, only when we used to eat we say our prayers and then when we used to go in bed.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of those prayers?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Could you say one for us in Albanian...

SOVJANI: Sure.

EI-485/SOVJANI

SIGRIST: ...on tape right now?

SOVJANI: Uh...

SIGRIST: And say it slowly, please.

SOVJANI: In, uh...

SIGRIST: Actually, you might have had to say it in Greek, right?

SOVJANI: In Greek we used to say it, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, do that then, and slowly.

SOVJANI: (he recites the Lord's Prayer in Greek)

SIGRIST: And, thank you. What, what is that?

SOVJANI: Well, just like in English.

SIGRIST: Is it the "Our Father?"

SOVJANI: "Our Father, who art in Heaven," and all that, the

same.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you celebrated Christmas?

SOVJANI: Christmas? We didn't have no Christmas tree or lights like that but we used to have something special for dinner to, or cooking. My, my mother used to cook a lot of things and used to call friends, too, like her sister or cousins and that, and we celebrate by eating and drinking. And my father used to buy us new suits for Christmas, and new shoes.

SIGRIST: Was that a big deal, to get a new pair of...

SOVJANI: That was big deal there because lots of times, uh, the parents, they, the mother makes their own pants for the kids and all that, you know, all that.

SIGRIST: Did your mother do that? Did she make clothes for you?

SOVJANI: No, my mother could not make it. My mother was one handed. Her left hand, when she was young, got infected by a (?), when they, uh, (?) (he gestures), what do

you call it?

SIGRIST: A vaccination?

SOVJANI: From vaccination, and she lost the use of her left hand.

SIGRIST: Did she, did she still have it? Was it still attached or was the hand removed?

SOVJANI: Attached, yeah, attached, the only thing was in the nerves, you know. She could not touch anything with it.

SIGRIST: That must have been very frustrating for her.

SOVJANI: Oh, yeah. And she raised seven children.

SIGRIST: Can you name your brothers and sisters for me?

SOVJANI: Sure, uh, Virginia [he pronounces it Ver-gin-EE-ah]...

SIGRIST: Oh, you'll have to spell that for me.

SOVJANI: Eh, Virginia [he pronounces it Ver-GIN-ee-ah].

SIGRIST: All right, Virginia.

SOVJANI: And, see, now, come to think after so many years, you know, I cannot, Zoia [ph] two the sister, and the brothers Angelo, Christo, and John and me, Kosta, seven.

SIGRIST: How does, how did you fit into that? Were you...?

SOVJANI: Well, you see, in the cycle of the life of my parents, some of the children passed away.

SIGRIST: I see.

SOVJANI: There are only three of us left, two sisters and me, three.

SIGRIST: So all, all the boys died.

SOVJANI: Died.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the death of any of them?

SOVJANI: Only one of them.

SIGRIST: They died, did they die, the ones that died that you didn't know about, did they die before you were born?

SOVJANI: No, after I was born. They were infected, was some kind of diseases. They didn't have enough doctors or medicine to, to make them healthy.

SIGRIST: And which brother is it that you remember when he died?

SOVJANI: I remember Christo.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me what you remember about that experience?

SOVJANI: I remember him coming with boys, playing around. For me, I was just couple of years old, two or three years old. And I want to go with him and he, he didn't want me around. And you pass, just look after you.

SIGRIST: And then do you remember his funeral or anything like that?

SOVJANI: No, I don't remember. They, they didn't allow the children before four, five years old to, to go to funeral but I remember they, they came with black clothes in house. That's all I can remember. They talking about, and that's all. And when you're a kid you don't know.

SIGRIST: And you're kept very sheltered from that kind of thing.

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about the Greek occupation and what you remember about that when you were going up. For instance, I assume you had to speak Greek.

SOVJANI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about the Greek occupation?

SOVJANI: Well, the Greek occupation, they used to have schools, church and courts, all that. And they,

they had everything, you know, that was liberal.

SIGRIST: Were there Greek soldiers stationed in Korce?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do Greeks...

SOVJANI: They used to call "depot," (Greek), yeah, depot where they were, just outside the city. They had the barracks there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember there being any kind of fighting or any...

SOVJANI: No.

SIGRIST: That happened before, probably.

SOVJANI: No fighting, no. And, like I said, the schools, they were very strict. My uncle, like I said, he was the head of the schools. He was, uh, cash-master, you know, he used to pay the teachers in the schools. He used to keep everything there. And then when Albania

took over, they ask him to give all the rights for the schools and the, the (cash?), the thing and he wouldn't give them. He said, "They belong to Greek government." And they killed him. They shot him. I remember going. I was about six, seven years old. And as I was playing, and they said to me that they kill your uncle. I ran home and told my mother. I remember that. After that she left everything and she run over to the house, his house. That's all I remember then. Then, on the funeral I remember I was there at the funeral and the, my Greek teacher put me, when they took picture of him, put me in the front of everybody by the casket. I remember that, and I had the picture of that and I lost it.

SIGRIST: Is, is that a traditional thing to do, photograph family members next to the...?

SOVJANI: Yes, yes, they were.

SIGRIST: Can, can you explain to me, I mean that's an awful story really, can you explain to me typical funeral customs for Greek Orthodox people? I mean, is there anything different...

SOVJANI: Well, there's not any different than it is here. It's more modern than then. They used to take the corpse and they used to embalm him and put it in the casket and they used to keep it in the church for twenty four hours. Then they used to go funeral and bury them.

SIGRIST: I see. The uncle who was killed, was that your mother's brother?

SOVJANI: Brother-in-law.

SIGRIST: Brother-in-law.

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

SOVJANI: And his wife left Albania and she went to Greece. She stay in Greece, there with her two children she had, a boy and girl.

SIGRIST: Why did she go to Greece?

SOVJANI: Because she was afraid, maybe. You know, maybe they might kill her, too.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about World War One, if you have any recollections of World War One?

SOVJANI: Yes. I remember that, when the war started and the League of Nations allowed the French troops to go through the city, through Albania into Greece to fight the Germans. And I remember we didn't have no food, no bread, nothing. God bless her soul, my mother used to make from, uh, barley or what do they give the horses?

SIGRIST: Like oats?

SOVJANI: Oats, but, but the, they had that (he coughs), the skin of them was like needles.

SIGRIST: Like wheat?

SOVJANI: (he coughs) No, it wasn't wheat.

SIGRIST: But it was some kind of a grain.

SOVJANI: Yeah, grain, grain that they, she's making. I remember I used to eat and I used to choke (he laughs) because sometimes they, they, the fibers, you know, they used to stay on the, you couldn't sift it very good. (he coughs) And I remember going to the depot where the French soldiers, they were, and they had like dry bread like biscuits, dry biscuits, and I used to do an errand for them and they used to give me a half a dozen of them. I used to take them home so we could have something to eat.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about World War One? I mean, how did your father...

SOVJANI: Well, he couldn't do nothing, just waiting to see who is going to win, who is going to take over.

SIGRIST: Because you had no active fighting going on?

SOVJANI: No.

SIGRIST: It was just the French were occupying the...

SOVJANI: Yeah, occupied. And they went through the city to go

to Greece because, like I said before, the city is near Greek borders.

SIGRIST: As a child, what did you do for fun?

SOVJANI: Oh, for fun? We used to go around, play in the, and let me explain you about the city Korce. Korce was probably ten thousand people, living in Korce. But half of it was Christians and half was Mohammedans. And the city was divided by creek, a river, a dry river in, the river used to go between the city. And that's how we were divided. And as you say, what I was doing or the kids like me doing over there, we used to fight among the Mohammedans, the Turks, and the Christians. We used to throw stones at each other.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ever get hurt doing that?

SOVJANI: Oh, yeah. They used to get, a lot of them used to get hurt.

SIGRIST: Do you remember ever hurting yourself, as a child, in any important way, or a member of your family?

SOVJANI: No, no, not that, nothing happened, no accidents in our family.

SIGRIST: What about medicine? Was there a doctor in town ...?

SOVJANI: There was one doctor for the whole city. And sometimes the families couldn't afford, you know, to see the doctor so they used to make homemade medicines o treat things.

SIGRIST: Did your family do that?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you, do you remember something that your mother or father made that would treat some illness?

SOVJANI: Yes. Uh, like I fell down one time and scraped my knees. And they took raw onions, squash it and put alt on and put it in a rag and applied it to my leg.

SIGRIST: That must have hurt. (they laughs) Can you think of any other remedies that they used to do?

SOVJANI: Yes. The remedy of when you have cough or cold. You used to cough lots and all that. They used to have, what do you call that, garlic, salt and vinegar. They used to gargle with that. (he laughs) Just remembering that I shiver. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Well, you started telling me, was it a sister who came to the U.S.?

SOVJANI: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You had a sister who came to the U.S. What year did she come?

SOVJANI: Uh, she was here 1914 or 1915.

SIGRIST: So she came just as the war was beginning over in Europe.

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Where did she settle?

EI-485/SOVJANI

SOVJANI: They settle here in Albany, New York.

SIGRIST: Was she married before she left Albania?

SOVJANI: No. She come over here and got married here with the cousin that brought her here.

SIGRIST: And tell about what, what her husband did here in Albany and...

SOVJANI: First he used to work in shoe store. Then he open up shoemaker shop. He used to fix shoes, you know.

SIGRIST: Was this a common profession for Albanians in this area?

SOVJANI: No, no. Lot of them, they used to work in factories.

SIGRIST: Was there a big Albanian population in Albany?

SOVJANI: In Albany, probably they were about sixty families here. Most of them, they used to work in West Albany, they called. They used to the fix engines, railroad engines, the train engines. They were called

West Albany shops.

SIGRIST: So there really wasn't one profession that most Albanians went into, sort of...

SOVJANI: No, no. They just come and work in the factory.

SIGRIST: Well, what is your sister telling, telling the family about America?

SOVJANI: Well, she liked America because (he clears his throat), like I said, her husband used to work and used to bring things that my parents could not afford over there.

SIGRIST: What, what did you think about America when you were growing up?

SOVJANI: When I was growing up I thought of America, coming here and being king. (he laughs) Finding money in the streets, shovel it up. (he laughs) Then when I come here first, I start working as dishwasher. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a tough way to become king.

SOVJANI: (he laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about how you decided that you would like to leave Albania and come to this country.

SOVJANI: Well, like I said before, we didn't have no, no freedom there and if you do the Albanian police will go after you or your family. You wasn't free. And playing around we didn't have no toys, no things to occupy us. We used to make our own things but we didn't have no things to do things.

SIGRIST: Were the police a threat? I mean, were people frightened of the police?

SOVJANI: Yes. There was fright.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about that and why you were afraid of the police.

SOVJANI: Well, you see, the police, they always used to be

tyrants. If they get a hold of you, they used to beat you up without a cause, without giving you freedom to speech and all that. And they thought, you know, you ere or they heard that you were wrong in something, they used to get a hold of you, beat you up and take you in jail. And then the, the judge would say, "Why you done wrong?" when I didn't do that. "You're wrong," the policeman said that you're wrong. You never was right.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: So people felt very oppressed.

SOVJANI: Very oppressed, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did that ever happen to you? Were you ever rounded up by the police?

SOVJANI: Yes, once I was round up. Somebody stole things, you know, and then they thought that I was with him.

EI-485/SOVJANI

They gave me beating. And when they took me over to police station, the captain of there, he knew my uncle. And he says, "Hey, you dumb thing." And I told him the truth. I said I didn't. So he let me go. But I got a beating first.

SIGRIST: How badly did they beat you?

SOVJANI: No, they didn't beat me too much but they hit my back with a stick.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

SOVJANI: Oh, probably I was twelve or fourteen years old.

SIGRIST: That's a terrible thing to have happened to a young boy.

SOVJANI: That's it, yeah, that's it, young. That's why everybody were afraid. That's why I said, you know, I wish I could go, you know, out. That's why I figure out to come to this country. That's how I did.

SIGRIST: Now, did your sister send you passage money or did

you work and earn your own money?

SOVJANI: Yes, my sister send me passage money. Then, when I
come here, I worked (for her?) and I paid it back.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much it was?

SOVJANI: Yes. It was around six hundred dollars.

SIGRIST: And how long did it take you to get all your papers
together and...

SOVJANI: About a couple months.

SIGRIST: Now, how did your parents feel about you leaving?

SOVJANI: My parents? They thought that I could have better
living than what was out there.

SIGRIST: But, of course, they're all alone now, right? You've
got a sister in Greece and a sister here in
America, and you're the last one they've got.

SOVJANI: No, my, my mother's sister is the one who went to

Greece.

SIGRIST: Oh, oh right.

SOVJANI: My other sister stayed there, was there.

SIGRIST: I see. I'm sorry.

SOVJANI: So they had my sister.

SIGRIST: So they did have one of...

SOVJANI: They had one.

SIGRIST: ...their kids left. Tell me about the process of getting your papers. Where did you have to go and what did you have to do?

SOVJANI: I have to go in the city away from Korce, the capital city of Albania, Tirane.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

SOVJANI: T-I-R-E [sic, Tirane], Tirane, that's the capital of

Albania. It is still, even now.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what it was like to go to the city.
Was that the first time you ever went to the capital
city?

SOVJANI: Uh, yes. Went with a truck, they call commune [ph].
The truck, on the truck they just had boards sitting
on each side and people sitting on both sides. And going
through the roads, they were like country roads,
bumpy and all that. Eight hours.

SIGRIST: Were there a bunch of you going there?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: For the same reason?

SOVJANI: No, a lot of other things, too. So I went over there
and I applied in the office there and they made me
wait a couple hours before they took me in to answer things.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of questions did they ask you?

SOVJANI: Oh, a lot of things. I cannot remember all of them but they said if I had anything against the government or things like that, you know.

SIGRIST: And did you have to undergo any kind of medical examination as part of this?

SOVJANI: Not over there.

SIGRIST: Not there.

SOVJANI: No. When I come this country I got examined.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me, what, when you got your papers and it was all clear for you to go, tell me what you packed to take with you.

SOVJANI: When I packed, I packed just what I wore on and two, two sets of underwear. And the shoes, they were (he laughs) ripped off, had holes in the bottom. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Now had you begun learning how to be a shoemaker before you left Albania?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you started to learn?

SOVJANI: When I start to learn was fifteen, sixteen years old.

SIGRIST: Were you apprenticed to a shoe--, someone who was already doing that?

SOVJANI: Yes. A shoe--, shoe shop. And I work one year just for a pair of shoes.

SIGRIST: And when you were getting ready to leave, did your mother and father have some kind of a dinner for you or some way of saying good bye?

SOVJANI: Well, yes, they had something special, you know, dinner and sweets like baklava, you know, the one with (leaves?) and walnuts and syrup.

SIGRIST: And so that's how they celebrated...

SOVJANI: They celebrated, yeah.

EI-485/SOVJANI

SIGRIST: Now, when you left from Korce, where did you go to, to get the ship?

SOVJANI: From Korce I went to Durazzo, Durres they call it, Durazzo, D-U-R-R-U-Z [sic, Durazzo], Du- Raz-Zo, -O.

SIGRIST: And is that right on the coast?

SOVJANI: That's on the coast.

SIGRIST: Now, are you traveling by yourself or did your parents go with you?

SOVJANI: By myself.

SIGRIST: Was it hard to say "good bye" to your parents?

SOVJANI: Well, yes.

SIGRIST: Of course, you're a young man and you, you've been making, you know, you've been working and all, so...

SOVJANI: Yes.

EI-485/SOVJANI

SIGRIST: Did you get the ship there then?

SOVJANI: Uh, went to Durazzo there, waited 'til the ship comes out. Then to got to the ship from the dock, had to take a boat, you know, oaring boat, what do you (he gestures)...

SIGRIST: Like a row boat?

SOVJANI: Row boat.

SIGRIST: A row boat.

SOVJANI: And was rough the sea. Used to go over there, probably quarter of a mile and, oh boy, I got sick (he laughs) from all that oaring and (?)....

SIGRIST: And to think you weren't even on the big ship, yet.

SOVJANI: Yeah. Then I went big ship and they, the sailors were taking care of us because there were other people, too. And they look at my papers because I have the papers to show them and they put me tag (he gestures) and they ship me down in the room near the boiler room. And eight days, no, wait a minute, going

ahead of myself, from Durazzo I went to Italy. That was six, seven hours with the boat. That's when I was in the (engine room?), I got sick, they took me over there. And over there I went with another man that we got introduced when we got in first in the boat. He was coming in this country. So, we came to, we embark at Bari, the city of Bari.

SIGRIST: Bari.

SOVJANI: Yeah. And over there they took us. They put us in a warehouse with a lot of other people, waiting now for the boat to take us to America.

SIGRIST: And what kinds of things did you have to do when you were there? Did they do examinations on you or...?

SOVJANI: Yes, they examine us, yeah. They took our urine and examined coughing, if I had anything like that. And we were okay, so they give us a cot. We used to sleep in a cot. Then we, we apply to the ship, uh, to the people that came to be with ship and they say to those that the ship wouldn't come 'til eight days after, so we had to stay there for eight days. So my friend, the one

that I got introduced in beginning, he knew something about and he went around offices and found out that from Naples ship was leaving in two days for America. So, we asked, or rather he was applying, he applied to the company. And they put us in a train to go to Naples. And that's when we went there for a couple days. And we got the ship and we come over this country.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship you finally ended up on?

SOVJANI: Uh, Roma, R-O-M-A, Roma.

SIGRIST: And, uh, so you were, you were several days in Bari and then you took the train down to Naples and you were a few more days in Naples.

SOVJANI: Two days.

SIGRIST: This is quite a trip from, from Korce...

SOVJANI: Oh. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: ...to Naples. How long did that take? From the time

you left your house...

SOVJANI: Two days...

SIGRIST: ...until the time you got on the Roma...

SOVJANI: On the boat, about five days.

SIGRIST: And, uh, tell me a little bit about what it was like to be on the Roma? What, what do you remember about being on the big ship?

SOVJANI: Being on the big ship? That we could not, were not allowed to go from the first, or the deck, below deck to go up to the second deck or, we were just there. And looking through, uh, the walk, what they call walk side on the ship. You could see things (as though?), but you could not go up.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on the ship?

SOVJANI: Well, they had bunks and we sleep in the bunks.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own cabin or were in a room with

lots of people.

SOVJANI: No, a room with four.

SIGRIST: And, and what about feeding? Where did they feed you on the ship?

SOVJANI: They, they had the mess halls on the first floor there, there was (bank?) floor.

SIGRIST: Who is on this ship? What, what, were there lots of different nationalities on this ship?

SOVJANI: Yes, yes, there were.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the people that you were traveling with?

SOVJANI: Well, I was traveling with, like I said, we got together, from Poland, French, Italians and Albanians were there.

SIGRIST: How long was the ride on the Roma?

EI-485/SOVJANI

SOVJANI: (he laughs) Eight days.

SIGRIST: And was it mostly smooth sailing for those eight days?

SOVJANI: No, sir. Was rough. I got sick. I couldn't eat. I throw up. (he laughs) Good thing I had the man that I befriended, and he used to take care of me, used to watch me because he was older than me then.

SIGRIST: How did they treat seasickness on the boat? I mean what, what were you given for medicine or...?

SOVJANI: No medicine, no nothing. Just water, drink water 'til, no, no pills, no sickness, no nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember seeing the first and second class passengers on deck or...?

SOVJANI: No. Like I said, we used to go deck on the side, walk the side of the boat, what do you call that...?

SIGRIST: The, the, the, uh, I know what you mean.

SOVJANI: Yeah, the side.

SIGRIST: The promenade that goes around the ship.

SOVJANI: Yeah, we could hear them, you know, laughing and dancing and things like that but we could not go up there. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, do you remember coming into New York Harbor?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And, and tell me what you remember about arriving in New York.

SOVJANI: I remember arriving in New York and I, like I said, I had my brother-in-law and my sister. Now, my brother-in-law, I send him telegraph when the boat due to arrive. And he was over there. He came from Albany over there and see us when the boat come over to go to Ellis Island. And he said, "Don't worry. I going to pick you up." But, for me I had the papers, to be delivered to Albany. Now, he didn't know that, see? And he's

waiting for me there. After the examination that I went through and all that, they picked me up. They brought me from the ferry in the station and I got the train and I come to Albany. Listen to this. This is story. So I come to Albany, I said, "Gee, where's my brother-in-law?" I seen him in, from the boat, in the scale he wave at me, he says, "All right, everything's all right." And they brought me here to Albany. I had the ticket the whole time, you know, the tag. And they brought me, got a hold of me and said, "Sit here." So I sat there in Union Station, Albany. At that time they used to have interpreter that could understand people of the foreign country. So the lady got a hold of me and, "Sit down there." So I sit down. "Can you speak English?" (he shakes his head up and down) So she start talking to me. (he laughs) I sat there. She said, "Oh, you're not speaking English." "No." She started laughing. She says, "I know. All right." She says, "Can you speak French?" "No." "Can, can you speak Italian?" "No." "Can you speak Greek?" (he shakes his head side to side) "Oh," she says, she started laughing, "I know." Because in the other side, when you say "yes" it means this way (he shakes his head side to side), "Yeah, uh huh." When you say "no" (he shakes his head up and

down), "no" instead of "yes." See, different signs.

SIGRIST: Shaking the head means something opposite over there than over here.

SOVJANI: Yeah, shaking the head, (he laughs) yeah, so "All right," she said, "okay." So she went across the street from the depot, it was a restaurant, and she got one of the men there that talked Greek to come over to talk to me. And he come over. He said, "You Greek?" I said, "Yeah, yeah." And he started laughing. "I know," he said, "you are. All right." He start talking to me. I said, "Why they bring me here, they hauling me here? My brother-in-law is supposed to pick me up." "In New York City?" "Yeah." "Oh, maybe they, they, he didn't inquire, you know, to see that you were to be delivered right to Albany," he said. "Ah." So, he said, "Where you going?" So I told him, you know, about my brother-in-law and my sister. He said, "All right." He got the telephone number there and they called my sister.

My sister, they didn't have no telephone. So they called somebody near there and they found out that my brother-in-law is in New York. My sister was over to a friend's house staying there all night. She didn't want to

stay by herself. And nobody. So he said, "Nobody to pick you up." And was late at night, after twelve. "Well, what you going to do?" he said. "Well," he said, "come over to my place," he said, "there. You can stay in a booth there, you know, on the side. In the depot you can't sleep," he said. So, and they understood, you I know, the (trip up to there?) and they let me go with him. I went over there. He gave me something to eat and I stayed in the booth there all night 'til about seven, eight o'clock in the morning. They brought me back again in the depot there. So, over there, in the meantime they told the, the grocery store or whoever got the telephone from it, when my sister come over to the house and they got a hold of her, they told her, "Your brother is in the depot. He come over." She got surprise but she, in those days used to be trolley cars. And she got the trolley car and came over there, come over the depot there. And as soon as I see her, you know, I knew my sister, you know. "What happened?" she said, "How did you get away from your brother-in-law?" I said, "I didn't get away. They took me," I said, "from Ellis Island, put me in a ferry, (he laughs) and I came out and they put me in a train and here I am." (he laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a great story. Uh, tell me about, let me just backtrack you to New York a bit, do you remember, what exactly happened at Ellis Island when you were there? What, what...

SOVJANI: Well, in Ellis Island, like I said, I had the tag the whole time. I had the tag with me, so they took me and, in the office there they examined me. There was a guy that used to talk Greek all right, even. Then they put me in a, a shower place, you know, bathroom, whatever you call it. And I stripped over and they examined me all over. They took urine tests, everything. After that they told me dress up and I sit in a booth there with other people. So when the time came, like I said, all they did, they told me, "Get in the ferry." So I got in the ferry. I said, "Geez, (?) maybe I go to New York and I'll meet my brother-in-law." No, no. From there they pull me over, "Get into the train." (he laughs) So I got in the train.

SIGRIST: So you didn't even get a chance to explain. So how long, how long was it before your brother-in-law made it back to Albany?

SOVJANI: Well, my brother-in-law called up again that grocery store. They used to be friendly, you know, the shoemaker and them. And my sister went over there and answered the phone and said, my sister said, "What are you doing in New York?" He said, "Well," he said, "I'm waiting to get my brother-in-law." "Your brother-in-law is here (he laughs) in Albany," she said. "Well, how come?" he said, "They told me that I got, they going to get out in New York, the harbor." "No, they brought him right here," she said. So he came over. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me, we have about ten minutes left, tell me about what it was like to get adjusted to this country. Let's begin by you telling me what was different about America than Albania.

SOVJANI: Different about America was that you, you see people, you know, they're rushing, going to work and all that. And you go to grocers, buy things or, or supermarket or the clothing stores and all that, buying and paying and just going. Freedom.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything in say your first year in

America that you had never seen before?

SOVJANI: Not that I remember. Everything I see I knew because books, magazines that they used in old country and my sister always used to supply things, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I mean, you grew up in Korce, which is a city...

SOVJANI: Yeah, city.

SIGRIST: Tell me about learning English and how you went about doing that.

SOVJANI: Ah, all right, the first time I went to work in a Greek place to wash the dishes.

SIGRIST: That was your first job.

SOVJANI: First job, working there twelve hours a day, sweating like a pig. (he laughs) So, I used to talk with them in Greek, you know, a lot. I couldn't learn much like this. One of the brothers that they had in the restaurant, he tried to teach me some English, telling me to

do this "yes" and to do that "not." And he started saying "no," say "no" this way, say "yes" this way, not that. And then one day the, the counter man left. He said, "You stay there in the counter," he said, you know, "and whatever they ask you, you repeat that so that the cook can hear it." So, okay, I'm staying there and some guy comes there and said, "Hi. How's the soup today?" (raising his voice) "How's the soup today!?" (he laughs) So, again, all right, he said, "Nice day." (he laughs and raises his voice) "Nice day!" I couldn't speak English. I couldn't understand. So the guy started laughing. "Oh," he said. So the cook put his head through the hole there. He said, "He doesn't know English," he said, "you just tell him what you want," he said, "so he can order." So, he said, "Well, I don't feel like eating much today about sandwiches, so" he said, "make me a ham sandwich," he said. So, all right, he make him ham sandwich. And he said to me, "That's a sandwich." "Sandwich?" So I had a pencil and paper and I was, bread on the bottom, meat in the center and, and more bread on the top, called sandwich. (he laughs) That's the way, everything they used to tell me I used to write it down so I knew it. Then I went in school, night school I used to go.

SIGRIST: Oh, explain what that was like.

SOVJANI: Yeah. The first time I go there, the teacher said, "Oh, don't know it," so she started coming to me and explain to me every word, every letter, you know, what it meant. That's how I start to...

SIGRIST: Did you catch on quickly or was it difficult?

SOVJANI: Yes, quickly.

SIGRIST: What about your sister? She had been here for quite a few years. Did she speak English?

SOVJANI: Uh, not too much because like I said before, there was too many Albanians here that used to work there and they used to go, friends, you know, together and they never mix up with Americans to, to learn.

SIGRIST: So there was never any need, really, for her to learn English.

SOVJANI: No.

SIGRIST: But, but her husband, of course, is in business.

SOVJANI: Yes, he knew more of that. But, like I said, he was busy at that or he didn't care for me to learn much, uh, that's the way he was.

SIGRIST: Now, was he, was it your brother-in-law that you went to work for eventually or, when did you finally become, making shoes?

SOVJANI: I didn't make no shoes at all. See, I waste my time over the other side. I thought, you know, I'll be a shoemaker this side, being together with my, but he said it's all he had to work just for himself. He didn't have no, enough to have a partner or somebody working. That's why he sent me to wash dishes, to make some money on it.

SIGRIST: In, in two minutes, can you tell me the story of, of meeting your wife and going to Albania to get her?

SOVJANI: Yes, after, after eight years in this country I thought I would go over to see my parents. And as I went over there, they got with a, what do you call it, the wife

finders, you know, all that...

SIGRIST: The matchmaker.

SOVJANI: The match--, ah, matchmakers. And they got me a couple of girls, you know, if I want. So, finally, I decided my wife and that's how we got together.

SIGRIST: Did you, were you sending letters across before you went over there?

SOVJANI: No.

SIGRIST: Oh, this happened once you got there.

SOVJANI: Once I got there.

SIGRIST: And what year was it that you went?

SOVJANI: 1938.

SIGRIST: And what was your wife's name?

SOVJANI: Antoinette.

EI-485/SOVJANI

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

SOVJANI: Mborei. (he pronounces it Bore-ya)

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

SOVJANI: M-B-O-R-E-I, Mborei.

SIGRIST: And then did you marry in Albania?

SOVJANI: I married in Albania, yes, I did.

SIGRIST: And then you brought her to America.

SOVJANI: I brought her to America, yes.

SIGRIST: Did she like America?

SOVJANI: She loved America. And...

SIGRIST: How old was she when you brought her over?

SOVJANI: Uh, let's see, twenty five, twenty five, twenty six.

SIGRIST: So she's a young adult.

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did she adjust easily or was it, did it take her a long time?

SOVJANI: Took her some time because, like I said, we stayed with my sister for a while. Then I got a good job and that, and then we had apartment. And the apartment we got, the lady that had the apartment, she was Italian, and she and my wife got together and that's how she started learning English more then.

SIGRIST: Taught by the Italian woman.

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And did you have any children?

SOVJANI: Two, a boy and a girl.

SIGRIST: What are their names?

SOVJANI: Uh, the son is John and my daughter is Dolores.

SIGRIST: Have they ever gone to Albania?

SOVJANI: No. They both got married and they both got children. Two boys my daughter. Two boys my son. Four grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Wow. I guess my final question to you, Mr. Sovjani, is, do you think you made the right decision by coming to this country?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Albania?

SOVJANI: Well, if I stayed in Albania I would have been poor and nothing to learn.

SIGRIST: Except you would have had shoes (he laughs) probably all the time.

SOVJANI: Well, shoes, yes, the whole time but the pay was not enough to keep a family.

SIGRIST: When you went back to Albania in 1938, (Mr. Sovjani coughs), did it all seem different to you when you went back?

SOVJANI: Yes.

SIGRIST: You had been here twelve years...

SOVJANI: Yes, yes. I, I, when I went there all my friends that I used to have before, they thought me, I was a millionaire, yeah.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Albania (Mr. Sovjani coughs) that time? How long did you stay there?

SOVJANI: Six months.

SIGRIST: Six months. Were you anxious to get back to this country?

SOVJANI: Yes, but we had trouble getting visa for my wife to

bring her.

SIGRIST: Well, we need to stop now, but I want to thank you very much, Mr. Sovjani. (a telephone rings in the background)

SOVJANI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Kostas [sic, Kosta] Sovjani on July 1st, 1994. (microphone disturbance as Mr. Sovjani gets up to answer his telephone)