EI-502
CHRISTINE McKEOWN VOSKOVEC
BIRTH DATE: JUNE 30, 1918
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 16, 1994
RUNNING TIME: 1:00:50
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE
RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1996
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG

HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Voskovec recounts the experiences of her husband, playwright George Voskovec, who was detained at Ellis Island in 1951, when he arrived in the U.S. from Czechoslovakia

LEVINE: Today is July 16, 1994, and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Christine Voskovec, who is the widow of George Voskovec, which would have been pronounced Voskovetz.

VOSKOVEC: Want me to do it for you? Voskovetz.

LEVINE: Voskovetz. And you, technically, would have been pronounced Voskovekova.

VOSKOVEC: No, Voskovsova.

LEVINE: Voskovskova.

VOSKOVEC: They leave out some of the end, and add some to it, so it comes out Voskovsova.

LEVINE: Okay. And, um, this is an atypical interview in the sense that we are not interviewing someone who had direct experience here at Ellis Island, but because, um, George Voskovec was so well-known and, uh, and, uh, is not, has died, and is not available to be interviewed. We're interviewing his wife, who can tell us something about the eleven-and-a-half month stay that Mr. Voskovec had here at Ellis Island. So I'm delighted to have the opportunity to talk with you.

LEVINE: I'm very grateful to be here, thank you.

VOSKOVEC: And, uh, why don't we start by your telling, just sort of fill in, when your husband first came to this country from Czechoslovakia, and how it was that he landed at Ellis Island.

VOSKOVEC: All right. His first trip to the USA was, he left Czechoslovakia in 1938, fleeing from Hitler, because he and his partner, Jon Werich, had one of the most influential and successful theaters in the history of Czechoslovakia. And they wrote and starred in and put on plays with a company of ninety. They were large mu-- large plays with

music, not musicals. And with the advent of Hitler they became politically satirical and very, uh, viciously against Hitler. And so they were first on Hitler's list to be annihilated when Hitler marched into Czechoslovakia. So he and his partner, Jon Werich, fled by the -- and got out by the skin of their teeth in 1939 and came to America.

And they spent the war years here, and he appeared (their first debut in America) the two of them played in Shakespeare's The Tempest, Margaret Webster's production on Broadway. And they were Stefano and Trinkula in The Tempest, and it ran a very long time for a Shakespearian play on Broadway. And after that, uh, they returned to Prague. And their intention was to bring American plays to Czechoslovakia and Czech plays to America. And so they went back. My husband brought back Finnian's Rainbow, which he adapted and directed, and it was put on at The National Theater, and also Skin of Our Teeth, and The Man Who Came To Dinner, in which his partner played the Wolcott version, Sheridan Whiteside. I think that was the name of the character.

My husband directed and played Banjo in that play. And by public demand, they re-opened their theater, their own theater, and they were playing exactly the same play in 1948 when they re-opened their theater, when the communists came in. They were playing the same play that they played when the Nazis came in. So they had to close the theater. They couldn't put the play on any longer because it no longer was a comedy. It became a tragedy when the communists came in.

LEVINE: What was the play they were playing?

VOSKOVEC: It was called P?st na Oku, which means A sock in the Eye. And it closed the theater, both under the Nazis and under the communists. So my husband then decided that he was not going to stay under the communists, because he couldn't get along any better with them than he did with the Nazis, and he decided he was going to leave, and, uh, he was then married to an American. He had an American wife, Angelette, who was an actress and director. And they, and she went to Pa-- he went first to Paris. And he got out -- because he was hired to come to UNESCO, in the film and creative ideas department.

And so with that he had a telegram from Julian Huxley to come to Paris to be interviewed. And with the telegram he, and the people he knew in Prague, he was able to get out legally, which is part of the reason he landed on Ellis Island eventually. Um, so he got out legally and went to Paris, and he and his wife opened what was called the American Club Theater in Paris. It was plays, American plays, British plays, French plays, all in the English language. And, uh, and the theater was quite successful. And the French began to come to it. There were a lot of American living in Paris at that time and --

LEVINE: What years were these?

VOSKOVEC: That was 1948 till -- it had to be closed in 1951, as you will see why. And, um, so they were, and I was in London, and I was studying acting, and observing at the old Vic. And I came over on a Christmas holiday to Paris, and people said to me, "Listen, why don't you

go visit the Voskovecs and see if you can work in the American theater there?" Which I did, and I interviewed Angelette, my husband's first wife at the time, to see if I could have a part, because George, uh, had gone to America. Because before he left America in 1948 to return to Czechoslovakia, he had taken out his first papers. He wanted to become an American citizen.

So he had to go back every year to keep establishing his residency here. So he was on one of his trips back when I interviewed his wife, and I became an actress in the American Theater at that time, and eventually met my husband there. And there was no, we were very, we thought very highly of each other, but there was no romance starting -- at the time. As a matter of fact, I used to travel so much, and I'd say, "Don't put me in the next show. I'm going someplace, because all my friends are coming to Europe after the war." And I would come back, and I was -- I don't want to get off on another, on my story. I want to keep it to my husband's story. I'm afraid I'm getting a little bit carried away here.

Anyway, uh, we met then. We became very good friends, and had great admiration for each other, but we never, uh, we never re-met again, seriously, till 1959, and George's wife had died in 1958. And, so we re-met in 1959, because we were both working now in New York for the same producer. I was raising funds for the American Shakespeare Theater in Stratford, Connecticut with Lawrence Langer, and George was in The Love of Four Colonels -- that was on Broadway, and Langer was the producer. And, of course, I used to go and see George in any play that he was in when -- during this period, from '49 to '51, or '49 to '59, and - and during his career in the United States. Now, what happened, how he landed on Ellis Island, to come back to the original story, is, in 1950, yes, 1950, he was making his trip, uh, back.

LEVINE: [interposed] To establish residency.

VOSKOVEC: His - his annual trip. And he was taken from the plane and brought to Ellis Island. He was detained at the airport and brought over to Ellis Island and detained here, and he was quite upset about it, because he was now two or three hours late. And, uh, then they told him he was going to have to stay overnight, which really upset him. And then he had and one day led into another and he was kept here. And they said he would have to prove his innocence. He said, "Of -- what am I, of what am I accused?" And they said, "We can't tell you." And so, it was quite a Kafka world for him at the time.

So he stayed here on - on the island day after day, and he finally was allowed to contact his lawyer in Manhattan, Victor Jacobs, who came to the island told him to write everything he could write about his life that would make him suspect as an undesirable alien. So he wrote every -- George then began to write, but he was here on -- in Ellis Island and spending his days in the Great Hall, which was full of people and children playing and screaming and crying, and people talking, and radios going -- three or four radios. It was like bedlam all day long. And then they would go to their dormitory at night, and, uh, and sleep.

And then eventually he got a typewriter. Someone, his friend from Manhattan brought him a typewriter.

And he began to write, as he was a writer anyway, and he was writing all of the stuff for his lawyer. And that went on, and they never could get any legal, official meeting or any, any reason why he was staying here. It took several months to get any kind of an official meeting, I guess you would call it. And, um, and then he, during his stay here he said, you know, the beds were not comfortable, but they were not uncomfortable. He was fed healthily, but he would – he was confined. And they called them passengers at the hall, and he said he was a prisoner. (she laughs) Eventually the guard took pity on him and got him a table someplace in the hall where he could write, and he had a table.

And, uh, which -- if you stayed here for some time you had certain privileges -- you knew how to acquire, and he protected that table as his own so he could write on it. And then he was also, he talked about allowing to be -- to go out into a triangle of grass outside of the hall where he used to sit and have picnic lunches sometimes with another woman who was detained for a couple of years, a German woman named Ellen. I can't remember her last name. And I have photographs of them on the – the lawn out there. So finally there was tremendous publicity about him, because he was rather well known in the theater world here and the film world. And there was tremendous publicity in the newspapers, in the Herald Tribune and The New York Times. And then The New Yorker magazine did a series of articles on this, everyone protesting the fact that he was being left alone, left to – to uh, just languish on Ellis Island for no reason. And . . .

LEVINE: No reason had been given when this . . .

VOSKOVEC: No. It was suspect that he had communist – it – we – communist affiliations, because he got out of Czechoslovakia legally when the communists came in. And that was . . .

LEVINE: That was a sign that you had some connections.

VOSKOVEC: Yes. And, and George had several theories, and -- that this might have happened because of a – a drunk who used to come to his house in Czechoslovakia, who worked at the American embassy. And he would turn up right before George would -- at dinnertime, before George would be going on to his theater to play. And he never talked with anyone before a performance. And this man had the habit of turning up, and he asked him, "Please, you're welcome any time, but don't come unannounced and before theater. After theater, you can come around." And the man took quite an exception to this. And they don't know whether he had something to do with, in spite, or what. But, anyway, um, there was m-- many people came to, and gave affidavits as to what kind of a wonderful citizen he would become here. Because he was a great hero in the war in Czechoslovakia, you know, against --. And he was a man of great integrity, and great honesty. Brave, and did so much for the Czech nation during the war. And . . .

LEVINE: Do you mean through his plays and through . . .

VOSKOVEC: Yes, through his plays and the way he stood . . .

LEVINE: And political satires . . .

VOSKOVEC: . . . his ground on the political situation. He was not Jewish, which never meant, this was not meant, had never meant anything to him. He would never say one thing or the other. But Hitler said he was worse than the Jews, because he was taking up the side of the Jews. And, uh, because he was an anti-fascist and anti-Naz—and anti-Nazi, and so this was, he was then considered by Hitler. I think he called him a white Jew. (she laughs) If you can imagine what that could mean. And he was a man of great integrity, tremendous talent. And his writings were, well, they're part of Czech culture today. As a matter of fact, President Havel said he couldn't write the way he writes if it hadn't been for my husband and his partner. He was such an influence on the writings, on -- on the writers that followed them. And so he was a man most desired to be accepted into any country. And, uh, people like Thornton Wilder and, uh, let's see, Howard Lindsey, and Russell Kraus. Uh, oh, many theater people wrote their affidavits saying, and protested his being kept here.

LEVINE: This was after all the, the publication . . .

VOSKOVEC: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . about his being here. Uh-huh.

VOSKOVEC: The publicity in newspapers. And so, finally, there was, some kind of a hearing was gotten together, a trial. It was a hearing, really, which George's lawyer presented his case. And I think he was again refused at that hearing. And that th-- there was a -- one dissenting vote or something. And then Victor appealed it, and on the appeal they found that they had nothing with which to hold him. There was only one, what would you call it, one person who spoke against him, you know, for it. And he was, uh, never known my husband. He just said that he had heard that he had communist affiliations, which was not what my husband had. He never joined any party, and was always very free, and his partner. That was part of their philosophy and what their plays were all about. And so they could never, they never had anything with which to hold him. So after eleven months, eleven months and I don't know how many day-- weeks, eleven-and-a-half months.

LEVINE: This was all during 1951?

VOSKOVEC: Yes.

LEVINE: The eleven-and-a-half months? Uh-huh.

VOSKOVEC: Yes. He left Ellis Island with his, by that time he had lost everything in Paris. The theater had closed, and his wife was selling all of their furniture that they had brought from Prague, their Biedermeir and everything, to live on. And he left Ellis Island with two

suitcases. And that's all they had left in the world. But immediately the film people gave him, brought him to Hollywood and gave him a job so he could start working immediately, and he was in a film called The Iron Maiden with Rita Hayworth. This was one of his first films. And his about third film that he did was Twelve Angry Men. And then he . . .

LEVINE: So he didn't go back to Paris. He stayed here, then, after he left Ellis Island.

VOSKOVEC: Yes, yes. Because everything, uh, and I once said to him, "George, why didn't you just say goodbye and return to Paris instead of sitting on Ellis Island for no reason?" He said because they would have returned him to Czechoslovakia. And he said that if he was returned to Czechoslovakia he would have been killed, tortured and killed, so he's had no choice. He said, "And besides, I wanted to become an American citizen." That's -- was his dream. And, uh, so he sat, sat it out, and it worked out eventually that he did become an American citizen. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: And famous for his work here.

VOSKOVEC: Here, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Even though he had already . . .

VOSKOVEC: Yes. Yes.

LEVINE: Well, what were you doing? Where was your life, and where were you during the time that he was, um, let's see, he came from Paris to come back here in 1951. And where were you at that time?

VOSKOVEC: I was, I was in Paris, and we were putting on Our Town in the theater. And that was one of the -- and it was so funny because, it's strange, because being accused of doing communist plays in Paris like Our Town. It was a terrible time in American history, too. It was the McCarthy era, and, McCarthy era, and it was a terrible time. And every little thing was used against anybody who might be suspect. And, um, I was there in Paris, and we were putting on Our Town. And I had, I was doing the publicity for the, for the, uh, show, and I wanted to do a clam bake on the banks of the Seine, and I got all the permissions and all the, uh, cooperation from everybody in Paris. Pugnet [ph] was going to supply the – the fish and all of this, and we got what we wanted.

And I went to the American embassy to get some support. And we had all the magazines, Look and LIFE, all of the Paris press, The Herald Tribune, was all going to cover this thing, because it was going to be our clam bake for the French stars. And at that time we were trying to do very much Franco-American relations, particularly cultural relations. So I went to the embassy to their cultural attaché and said, "Come on, we need some hot dogs and Coca-Cola and that sort of thing." And I just got shunted from one office to another, and I went back to him and I said, "What is this?" And he said, "Well, I must tell you." I said, "Something is wrong here." He said, "Yes." He said, "Voskovec is under a cloud of suspicion." And I said, "Well, he's in America getting,

getting his final papers." It was his final papers when he came. And he said, "We know that, and if he gets out, if it's, if everything's okay everything will be okay here, and we'll go on with the, with the clambake." And he said, "You are, you're doing a great job. You're doing my job for me, you know, with the French and American relationship."

So, anyway, it didn't work out. He was kept here. The theater -- eventually, we put on, we put on the show, which was quite successful, Our Town. And then the next show was Knickerbocker Holiday, and my husband designed the sets here while he was in Ellis Island, and sent them back to Paris. And, uh, so then when the theater closed and I finally came back to New York and started working here in – in my career. And I was working with Lawrence Langer, and I got involved in public relations for the theater rather than acting in the theater at the time and raising funds for the theater. And I kept in touch with my husband. I didn't come out here to Ellis Island because I didn't know he was here right away when I came. I didn't know he was still here when I first came back. Then I found out, then I kept in contact with friends, and I saw people and tried to do whatever I could do by sending things to him. And then he finally got out of, uh, he got out of here just a few months after I arrived in America.

LEVINE: Was he able to make telephone calls and receive and write letters and all that while he was here?

VOSKOVEC: He could receive and write letters, and he could, he could receive visitors, I don't know, on their visiting days. And he could, uh, yes, he could make telephone calls, which he made to his lawyers, mostly. But I don't think he could -- he could write letters, but he, I don't know about telephoning like to Paris. He certainly couldn't from here. But, uh, he did write letters because I have packets of letters that he did write during that period, yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

VOSKOVEC: And letters that he received.

LEVINE: So it was the, would you say it was the French government which would not permit his theater to continue in Paris?

VOSKOVEC: Oh, no.

LEVINE: No.

VOSKOVEC: It was the lack of funds. It was, uh, this way. My husband was working at UNESCO at the time, and making a wo-- very good salary, and he put a lot of his money into the American Theater. A lot of his money just went back into that theater. And then at one point, I was going with a chap whose mother attended a – a luncheon at the American embassy, and, uh, she got up and spoke. Uh, Adida Morris [ph], her name was. She got up and spoke at the luncheon to ask the embassy and everybody there to support our theater. She said, "They're doing such wonderful work." And every, all the Americans in Paris should be

supporting them and -- and including the cultural attaché at the embassy. And there was quite a silence after she made this plea for the theater.

And later one of the women came to her and said, "Well, you mustn't talk about that theater, you know, they're communists." And I thought, "I can't believe this, this happening." You know, because, at that time in many summer theaters, because they would go into small towns in America, there would be talk about us being communist. And it was nonsense. And there -- it had sort of this rumor in the – in the embassy had gotten round, and, because the cultural attaché knew about it when I went to see him. And we didn't know about it. And I said, I said, "I know, I work all day long in the theater, because I do the publicity, I do the acting." And I said, "We don't have time for anything else, but to put on the plays." (they laugh) Nor the interest.

LEVINE: Well, so, then it was actually the, the cultural attaché, the American . . .

VOSKOVEC: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: That because of that rumor . . .

VOSKOVEC: Yes.

LEVINE: Was then not supportive of having the theater continue.

VOSKOVEC: Of the theater, yes. And he said things like, uh, "We know you're all right." He offered me a job with the Ballet Russe, doing their publicity. And I said, "No. I'm working for the American Theater, and I want to stay where I am." And, um, I said, as though we had all been, uh, I guess we had all been -- had dossiers on all of us. Because he told me I was okay. I was furious when I heard it. And I said, I said, "We work so hard there. I can't believe that you -- and it's needed here. We have five thousand permanent American residents here because of the ECA." And, uh, you know, when the, after the war, what was the, Ful-- Fulbright and, oh, what was the wonderful thing that they were doing to restore Europe? It's terrible. I can't really think of the name. The Marshall Plan. There was a lot of Americans working there.

LEVINE: I see.

VOSKOVEC: And so, and the theater was very successful, but they started -- well, we didn't have money to keep it going to begin with when George was brought to America, was kept in America, I mean.

LEVINE: Were you aware of the publicity he was getting in this country? Were you aware of that in Paris?

VOSKOVEC: No. Because he wasn't getting it then when – when he was first there. Because his wife was writing to everybody, and then I went on to London when the theater closed, and I stayed in London for a while before I came back to New York. So I wasn't too aware until I got back to New York of what was happening. And it was just, you know,

devastating for everybody, because it closed their lives for a while, as a matter of fact.

LEVINE: And how about you when you got back? Did you have, uh, contact with George when you were back here?

VOSKOVEC: Yes. I, uh, yes. We were always friends, and he was in -- whenever he was in a play and I was in town, not out of town, I would go and see the play. And then afterwards, we -- I would go back to see his wife afterwards, and we'd have supper together and reminisce about our days in Paris. Incidentally, when he was writing his story here for his lawyer, that, what he wrote here on Ellis Island became a television script, and it was put on by the Armstrong Circle Theater in the series that they were doing at that time.

It was put on in 1955, I think. They took all the, my husband turned it into a television script, and he played himself. The play was called 'I Was Accused'. And he played -- it was about him, his life in The American Theater in Paris, and then his stay on Ellis Island, what happened to him. I tried to get it at the Museum of Broadcasting yesterday. They don't have it, but I'm trying with NBC to see if I can get a copy of the play. Because now there is some interest in doing a film about it, putting this into a film. But that was, uh, that was on the Armstrong Circle Theater, and he played himself in it. And that won several prizes that year in television.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here to turn the tape, and we'll continue in a few minutes.

END OF SIDE ONE BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

[Pause}

LEVINE: Okay. We're continuing now on the second side of this tape with Christine Voskovec. Um, okay, so when, do you remember the first time you saw your husband, who was not your husband at that time, but after he came out of Ellis Island, after he was released?

VOSKOVEC: Oh, yes. I saw him backstage at the, at the, um, 'The Love of Four Colonels', which he was playing in on Broadway. And, um, uh, that was, I guess, maybe was the first time. And then I saw him when he played Uncle Vanya. I saw him when-- whenever I was, whenever he was in anything I went to see him. Because I admired him so greatly as an actor. And, uh, also I'd like to tell you some-- would you like to hear some of the little stories he told me about his stay on Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Yes, definitely.

VOSKOVEC: He was, uh, one of the stories he was telling me, because, see, this is a man who was a very successful man in Czechoslovakia. He and his partner had everything in Prague before they left. They were enormously wealthy from their theater, and even though they put tons of money right back into the productions, and he had every comfort. And,

and, of course, they had a rough time when they came here in 1938 because they had to leave everything, and no money. And then when he came to be on Ellis Island, then he---. The first night they put him in, you know, dormitories with the men, and that was his life for the next eleven months. I can hardly, I saw them today, and I can hardly believe my husband sleeping there, because he's a very private man. And, um, and then he would, they would sit in the Great Hall all day, and there were hundreds of people here at that time, immigrants with children and women and children and men, and all nationalities.

LEVINE: And detainees, I would imagine.

VOSKOVEC: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Who had to be deported.

VOSKOVEC: Yes. And, you know, the tile walls and the floor, the sound just reverberated. It was just like reverberation of sound all day long. And then, uh, then they – they would spend the day there, go to eat in the cafeteria, and then go to bed at nine o'clock I think, and then the lights were put out at ten. And eventually, uh, he had a toothache, a very bad tooth. So they were going to take him to the dentist in Manhattan, and this was his great trip off of Ellis Island. And they took him with a guard to the dentist's office, and he said --- and he said, "For the first time I saw wood floors and carpeting and wallpaper on the wall, and everything was soft and quiet." And he sat there and he began to cry. And the dentist thought it was because he was in such pain. (she laughs) And he said, "I'm sorry you're having such pain." He said, "No, no, no, it's just so quiet here." (she laughs)

LEVINE: Oh.

VOSKOVEC: That was, it was that sort of, just the kind of thing. But during that time he said the guards were very kind to him, and they would always try to find him a little place where he could be a little bit quieter, and he got a place, his bed got a, I think he got a place by a window, or his, the table they use for his desk was put by a window. And, um . . .

LEVINE: He got that out of seniority, I imagine.

VOSKOVEC: Yes, that's true, yes. And – and then one night one of the guards said, "You know, George, I said a little prayer for you tonight." And that was just a few days before he was released from Ellis Island, which was quite a, quite a thing.

LEVINE: What kind of a man was he, I mean, personality wise? I mean, uh, I would imagine just from his career he had a good sense of humor.

VOSKOVEC: Yes. Well, he and his partner were considered the greatest comedians ever in Czechoslovakia. They were, their plays were written, they wrote them for themselves. They were, uh, satiric comedians and very intellectual comedians, but yet it touched e-- on every level. For instance, the format of their theater was these musical plays which had a

cast, and they had their dances, and their own ballet company, and their own orchestra, and everything. And they wrote all the songs. They wrote, not the music, but they wrote all the lyrics. They wrote the lyrics and the book to the plays. And one of the big -- what made them so famous was -- at the end of the first act, they would come on the stage, the apron of the stage, and they would improvise a dialogue, and they never knew, most of the time, what it was going to be, except when they were making up before they were going on stage.

They would -- incidentally, they – they wore whiteface. They were very, it was very commedia del'arte. It was like a combination of theater arts. The play was music, satire, and the commedia del'arte. And they wore whiteface, and they were kind of an everyman that went through the thread of the plot. And they would come on stage at the, usually at the, towards the end of the first act, and they would start a dialogue about a word or an idea. They would say as they were making up before, before the performance, we'll use this word tonight. And they would put the word up on their bulletin board and think about it as they were making up, and they would come out and do this. And then if they would develop the dialogue in front of the audience.

And it was always funny. It was very comedic and satiric and as things got worse, it became very political. And so people would come again and again to see what they were going to say about this situation or that situation. And then they would take these dialogues and wor -- and if they were successful, they would develop them every night. And then they would sometimes reach a certain plateau, but always develop the more as things changed. And this kept people coming back and back and back to their theater. It was a very large theater, incidentally, that seated eleven hundred people. And, uh, they always had about a hundred and fifty standees at their shows as well. And so that was the kind of theater that they had. Now I beg—now I forget the question you asked me. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Well, I think I may have gotten you off track. We were talking about his personality.

VOSKOVEC: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: And his being here on Ellis Island.

VOSKOVEC: As a comedian. Yes. They were the great comedians, and the strange thing, when he came to America, he did nothing but dramatic acting. He was considered one of our great dramatic character actors in America, which was a big change for him. And he was, he was highly intelligent. He had a scholarship when he was fifteen at the, at the Frens-- French Lycee in, uh, in Dijon, and he did it – took -- got his bacheau [ph] there, and went back to the Charles University in – in Prague afterwards, and he and his partner attended the university together. And he was a very -- he was shy, but very strong when he felt idealistically about something. He was no, he was shy, but he was a gentle man. But he was not a, uh, a weak man.

He was a very strong man, and had a tremendous sense of humor. His kind of humor was something that would just look at something different. We'd twist a different twist. I remember when I first started to go with him how the humor would, he would look at something or an idea, and it would just be twisted to a certain way which would make you look at it in a different way, in a very amusing way. And, uh, and he and his partner were like one head, two heads on one body. One could begin a sentence, the other could finish it. And when they, they died in-- they, in Czechos-- they both were born in the same year and died the same year.

And they never had an argument their whole life about their work. They had certain, just one or two rules which they abided by, never had contracts. And they are so admired by the Czech people as being not only funny. All they have to do is clear their throat in front of the Czech people. I remember this would happen here in New York when Czechs would come to visit us, and they would laugh because they were so used to being laughing – laughed at by the Czechs. And one time I told a Czech, they were entertaining me while my husband was on stage, this was in Vancouver, uh, in a play with, he and Hal Holbrook. It was a two-man play, and I was being entertained while he was on stage -- at the home with some Czechs. And they had, they all came with their records that they had brought from Prague. They all left, whenever the refugees left Prague they would take the four volumes of Voskovec and Werich plays, and all the records of their songs. No matter what else they had, that went with them. So I told this Czech how I, how touched I was at the love that the Czechs showed for these two men. They said, "Oh, you don't know what your husband meant to us. He was all of your Danny Kayes, all of your Bob Hopes, all of your Jack Bennys rolled into one, plus Abraham Lincoln." (they laugh)

LEVINE: That's quite a complement. Where was, um, your husband's partner while he was being detained at Ellis Island?

VOSKOVEC: Uh, Jon Werich, when the, their theater closed in -- when they -- the two of them decided to close the theater in 1948 when the communists come in, Jon decided he couldn't run any more. He said, "I can't do that again. I can't go through it again, and I can't put my wife through it again, and I can't put my daughter through it again." His daughter, Jonna, when they first came to America, was three years old in 1938, and she was eleven years old when they returned to Prague, and she was an American child. She spoke with an American accent, her English, I mean. And she hated leaving America. She hated Prague. And she would just be getting back into liking being in Prague again, getting used to being in Prague, when this happened again.

And his wife, Isdenka [ph], did not like being in America, because in Czechoslovakia she was considered the wife of Jon Werich and very, and liked it there. And when she came to America they had nothing and they all lived in a big house, in the beginning in Bucks County, and Isdenka [ph] was cooking for all these people. And so she didn't want to leave Czechoslovakia again and go through all that again. And George said, "I can't stay under --," he said, "I will, they will kill me if I stay under this regime, and I have to go." And he had an American wife

who also didn't want to stay, which was, made it easier. And so that's when they left and went to Paris.

And Jon stayed there, and he used his power, because he was untouchable, and he used his great outspoken humor and satiric power against the communists, and they couldn't touch--. Several times they were going to put him in jail, and they came from Russia. The heads of the theater said, "You can't do this. It's – it's he's too, he means too much to the people, and it won't be worth it." So they didn't put him in jail. And he stayed there, but he, and he was, many times they would never publish what he wrote, and during the Stalin period he was very sort of persona non grata, but nothing happened to him. And he had so many fans and friends that they all tried to take care of him. But then eventually in the '60s, right before the Prague spring came, they made him a national treasure, a national artist. And he wrote to my husband and he said, "I don't want to accept this." And my husband said, "You're crazy. You're living in--," he said, "this will give you certain privileges. You'll be able to write. You'll be able to have a lot of privileges that you don't have now." He said, "You should accept it, you deserve it." And, uh, so he did.

LEVINE: Why did he not want to?

VOSKOVEC: Because he didn't want to -- the communists to confer this – this honor on him. He didn't want to accept it from the communists. And, so, but he did, he did accept it, and it helped him and his family a bit. I mean, he could have, people always looked out for him because they loved him so much, as much as they could, you know. You couldn't do too much for someone in that regime.

LEVINE: Well, did, did your husband and his partner ever re-unite after, uh . . .

VOSKOVEC: My husband would never, would never go back to Czechoslovakia while the communists were in power. He said they would make too much out of it, and it would look like he was coming as their guest, and he couldn't do that to the people. Uh, when the Prague spring came, they were, there was great talk of bringing my husband back, because they thought there was going to be a liberation then like there is today. And there was great talk of bringing him back, and they were going to do several evenings of their old dialogues and their songs in this large theater that seats five thousand called Luzerna [ph], and we were preparing for that, and, uh, there was a whole junket going from New York of photographers and the press and the media. We were all going in the same plane over, because they wanted to photograph and have a record of this return, and their re-meeting of these two men, which was a big event, or would have been a big event in Czechoslovakia.

What happened was, the first thing that happened was President Johnson just then announced that he was not going to run for the next term. It doesn't seem very important now, but it was a tremendous surprise at that time, because everyone expected him to run again. And he made his announcement he would not. And so the whole press was called back to cover, you have to stay here to cover the story.

So the next, so that was okay. So then a few, and that calmed down. We started, everybody started to get organized again, and the next thing that happened, I heard my husband go out, and we had a brownstone here in New York, and I heard him go out to pick up the paper from the front step-- doorstep, and I heard him through the window. I heard him say, "My God, I can't believe it." And it was -- Robert Kennedy was assassinated, and the press was all called back for that.

In the meantime, George got, was in, got a job on Broadway in Cabaret. And, uh, so he told Hal Prince, the producer, he said, "But I want to go back to Prague. We're doing this thing." And how Prince knew about my husband's theater, and his partner, and all that. And he said, "Absolutely. You can go back. But," he said, "I need you for the summer, and in September you can take a month off and go back to Prague." So this was getting organized, and August the 22nd of that year, the Russian tanks came in and that killed everything. So he never went back to Prague. It's so sad, you know that the -- what has happened in, in, uh, 1990, or 1989, in Prague, didn't happen in 1968. So they never, but my, uh, in '68, after the tanks came in, um, I was sent over by, by a group of people who wanted me to go over to find out if I could help any of the intellectuals get out if they needed to, to give them money to get out. And, um, they said, "You'll be a logical one to go, because you could be visiting the Werichs, and you could say we want to see Prague before the -- becomes impossible to go." So I went, and I said, "I think it's too early. I don't think they'll -- nobody will know what they're doing yet." And it happened to be that way. I was able to help a couple of writers, but it was much too early. Everybody was in a state of shock. So, uh, so it never happened.

LEVINE: They never saw each other again.

VOSKOVEC: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Now, so I went over, and I arrived, and Jon met me at the airport, brought me -- the next day I came to his house for breakfast, and to see him again. We've spent the evening together before that. And I came, and there his wife, 'Sdenka [ph], was packing his suitcase for him, and outside was a car waiting for him. I said, "Where, what are you doing?" He said, "I have to leave." He said, "My friends have come with the car, and they're taking me to Vienna, because we don't know what's going to happen right now, and what's going to happen to me, and what's going to happen to my passport, so I have to get out of the country."

So he went to Vienna. In Vienna lived a man named Turnauer [ph], who was a Czech who went to Vienna. And -- and he went and stayed with him. He's a great fan, and he was an enormously wealthy man. And, uh, he brought Jon over to his place in – in Vienna, and George and Jon talked from Vienna by phone, and George flew to New York, where we were living at the time, and he spent several weeks with my husband in New York while I was in Prague with his wife, and we were calling back and forth every night. He was still here when I came back. And that was the last time they were together.

LEVINE: Wow. Do you think, having known your husband before he was at Ellis Island and then after, would you say that it affected him in some way that had reverberations later, his being here?

VOSKOVEC: Not really. Uh, it, it's, every, it's an interesting question, because, and my husband having lost his country twice in his lifetime, and everything, and, uh, then had to struggle here to become an actor in this country, I su-- I and many of our friends, who were just furious at his detention here on Ellis Island would say to him, "Why don't you sue the government for what they did to you, and why don't you, you know, how can you?" He took it all in his stride, and I guess it just made him, because he's such an extraordinary man, it was -- it's hard to tell. He always seemed to be able to take these things in his stride and be calm about them and philosophical about them and go on and do what he had to do. He never -- there was one thing he never did was look back, and I don't know that Ellis Island had changed him.

It may have deepened him and made his, appreciate things more. Certainly it was a humbling experience to be here for him, and, um, in his, and in his biography, his autobiography that he was writing, he calls the autobiography In The Shadow of Liberty, so I'm sure that -- it came from being at Ellis Island, because he used to look out at the Statue of Liberty every day through his windows. And, uh, but he was such a -- an extraordinarily deep human being, he was quite a human being, a giant in his talent and what he could do, and as humble as he could be with people. He had this great capacity for seeing things also, in -- in the light of universality and eons of time, never in small ways. And he was a very, he was very calm, but he also had quite a temper if it -- when it came to it. Really it was hard to evoke or provoke the temper.

LEVINE: Can you think of any instance, something that would have provoked it?

VOSKOVEC: Sure, Oh, yes. (they laugh) I remember vividly, it was always political or somebody saying something about his pa--. Well, this was, some Czechs had come up from Washington, DC. He was quite a well-known Czech. He was with the World Bank. And they came to New York, and they went to see my husband in a play. I think he may have been in Cabaret at that time. And they came back to our house for dinner afterwards. They were both Czechs, and the woman is, was quite a woman for trying to stir up trouble and arguments. She was a very argumentative person. And they were sitting at the table, and I was in the kitchen preparing something, and they were speaking in Czech. And I hear this, something going on, and I hear this tremendous--. We had a statue of my husband and his partner. Which was -- it's a famous one in Prague, of the two heads on one base, and you can turn it around, you know, and one side is one and the other is the other.

And it was sent, a copy was sent to us, and it had just arrived that week, and it was sitting on the sideboard of the dining room table. And the next thing I know the – the --he grabbed at the statue and plunked it down on the table, injuring the base of the statue, and saying, "This is what Jon Werich is. This is what we are." And I came

in and, of course, it was explained to me later that this woman was saying, she was criticizing Jon Werich for staying in Prague and not standing, not doing what George had done, and criticizing him for not taking a stand against the communists, which he did. He signed the Charter of '77. He did all the things that he should have, he took chances on doing. But she just chose not to, she, not to do it. And he was so livid that he just grabbed the statue. I was furious, because I loved the statue. (they laugh) And then he explained to me what was happening, and he told them to leave. He said, "You leave our house!" And this was so unlike him.

LEVINE: Yes.

VOSKOVEC: But once he, he did that, he told some other people once to leave our house, too. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: How about his autobiography? Where was that left when he died?

VOSKOVEC: Well, he was in the thro -- in the throes of writing it, and he had – we ha—I have in the archives four large cartons of his notes, and some of it's written, and it's all out in California. And right now, uh, when I go back, my big project is to start. We have the archives all sorted out, but we're going to start on certain things that have to be published. And I have somebody who's coming there, and we're putting these things together. And I, when I went to Philadelphia recently to see President Havel, we talked about the archives. And I said, "You know, I've offered them to be taken over and put in the archives in Prague with Jon's archives." And Havel said, "That's exactly what I want to be done." So he is going to write back, and we're going to get everything together. But the book has got to be put together by a writer working with me to, uh, it's not assembled yet. It's in different forms, and it's written in English, Czech and French, because my husband wrote equally well in the three languages.

LEVINE: And the notes are in three languages?

VOSKOVEC: Yes. It was whatever he was writing about, or whatever mood he was in. 'Cause he knew, he had planned to write the book himself when he had finished, so things are written in the three different languages, which makes it a little difficult for all of us.

LEVINE: Right. Well, we have just a little while left for today, but I guess you would be the primary person who would be, um, bringing forth whatever material or information on your husband at this point.

VOSKOVEC: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Is there any, um, do you see this as a kind of mission or, I mean, how do you view your bringing out information about your husband at this point?

VOSKOVEC: Well, at first I thought, you know, I feel very responsible to both my husband and his partner, and to try to guard their work, and

to see that it's brought out the way it should be. And, secondly, it was, it has been thrust upon me. I'm busier now than I've been in my whole lifetime. I'm supposed to be retired and just doing as I please, but I'm not. But, anyway, it's a tremendous job, and it's a big responsibility, and this is my mission, and – and what I, I'm not only want to do, but I am forced to do, because there's no one else who can do it. I have to do it with people. I have to do it with certain Czech writers, I have to do it with certain English translators from the Czech, and it's, it's a job almost I feel too big for me. But I have, I'm so involved in it, I have to be in it, and this is what my life is about now. And it's interesting and wonderful, and sometimes just terrible, because I'm also dealing with publishers and people in general. They're still doing my husband's plays in Czechoslovakia, and his songs are being played all the time, and publishing whatever writings they can get their hands on that he's already written, and not paying much attention to the copyrights, and this is very difficult, because they don't realize sometimes that you have to obey copyright laws there, and it's quite difficult.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to close here. Just one last question. What country is your country of origin?

VOSKOVEC: Oh, I was born in Philadelphia. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Okay.

VOSKOVEC: I'm Irish, Irish, English and Danish descent. Typical American.

LEVINE: Okay. I've been speaking with Christine Voskovec, and we're talking about her husband, her late husband, George Voskovec. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on July 16, 1994. Thank you very, very much.

VOSKOVEC: Oh, it's been a great pleasure, thank you.

LEVINE: Signing off.