

EI-565/Belstak

EI-565

MARY BELSTAK

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 2, 1899
INTERVIEW DATE: NOVEMBER 13, 1994
RUNNING TIME: 59:55
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION:
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: LESLIE CICCONE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

HUNGARY (LATER BECAME CZECHOSLOVAKIA), 1913

AGE: 14
PASSAGE ON: THE ROTTERDAM
PORT:
RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Sunday, November 13, 1994. I am in Saratoga Springs with Mary Belstak. Mrs. Belstak came from Czechoslovakia in 1913. She was 14 years old at that time. Present also with me is Fran Gaba. Mrs. Gaba is the daughter of our interviewee. Anna Crupa (?) and Mrs. Belstak knew Anna Crupa when they were girls in Czechoslovakia. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

BELSTAK: 1899, February the 2nd.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me the name of the town in Czechoslovakia where you were born?

BELSTAK: Vakacostalani (?)

SIGRIST: And was that Czechoslovakia at that time?

BELSTAK: Yeah... no. I think that was... no.

Gaba: Hungary.

SIGRIST: Was it (?) at that time?

Gaba: Hungary. Hungarian.

SIGRIST: Well, um... (::laughs::). I also want to say for the sake of the tape that you may hear the ventilation system. Mrs. Belstak, what do you remember about the town that you grew up in? What did it look like when you were a girl?

BELSTAK: (?) That's all. That's all I can remember, that's all we were doing. Go to school after 6, you know... 6th grade. And then I was big girl. I had to come to this country.

SIGRIST: Was there a certain part of town that sticks out in your mind when you think back to that town? What do you remember about the town itself?

BELSTAK: Not much... not much. See I don't, you know, when you wanna farm, you don't go no place, it's not like over here, you knowing... not much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house that you lived in?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me?

BELSTAK: Small house, you know one of them... the roof was... shingles, that's all I can remember. Small shingle house.

SIGRIST: How many rooms did it have?

BELSTAK: 3.

SIGRIST: And, um... who lived in that house?

BELSTAK: My parents and all my... my sister and my brothers.

SIGRIST: You had 1 sister.

BELSTAK: 1 sister and 3 brothers.

SIGRIST: What was your sister's name?

BELSTAK: Milligava. Milly. Millana.

SIGRIST: Millana.

BELSTAK: yeah.

SIGRIST: And was she older than you?

BELSTAK: Younger

SIGRIST: Younger? And you had 3 brothers. What were there names?

BELSTAK: One of them was... Seril, John, and Steve.

SIGRIST: Seril, John, and Steve. And were they older?

BELSTAK: Younger.

SIGRIST: They were younger.

BELSTAK: I was the oldest one.

SIGRIST: You were the oldest. Being the oldest girl, did you have special responsibilities in the house?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: What were you responsible for?

BELSTAK: Taking care of them. Taking care of the like stacked chickens and stuff like that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you brothers or sister were born?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember?

BELSTAK: What I remember... I was making super with my father, and I heard my mother screaming. (Laughs) And then a little bit later I heard the baby, so my father was so glad. He said, "Oh thank god." (Laughs) That I remember.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any stories about when you were born?

BELSTAK: Maybe.

SIGRIST: Did people talk about those things back then?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah. That was terrible then, they never used to say anything to us.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

BELSTAK: Steve

SIGRIST: And what was his?

BELSTAK: Stanko

SIGRIST: How do you spell that you suppose? Stanko?

Gaba: S-T-A-N-K-O

BELSTAK: That's right.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what your father's personality was like.

BELSTAK: Well... it was anything like... what should I say? (Pause) what should I call that? When something happen that he was the one to denounce (?) it. Like oh the damn (?)...

SIGRIST: Like a town crier?

BELSTAK: Something like that. Yeah.

SIGRIST: He told everybody the news that happened.

BELSTAK: Yes. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And um... what was he like as a person? What... What was he like as... as your father? What do you remember about him?

BELSTAK: Wonderful man... good looking man.

SIGRIST: What did he look like?

BELSTAK: Well they say that I look something like him.

SIGRIST: Describe. Picture him in your mind and describe him for me.

BELSTAK: How can I do that? (With my stage. ?) Big man... good looking. (Laughs)

SIGRIST: What did you father like to do for fun?

BELSTAK: What should I say? Work.

SIGRIST: He worked. Did you have a farm?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did your father do on the farm?

BELSTAK: (raise?) the vegetables and (stu?) the weed and stuff like that. We had chickens, cows, and you know the... a lot of work to do... keeping busy.

SIGRIST: What kind of vegetables did you grow?

BELSTAK: All kind of vegetable. Any kind of vegetable you think of, we grew it.

SIGRIST: Did you eat the vegetables?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever sell any vegetables?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where would you sell the vegetables?

BELSTAK: There was a... like a market. (?) twice a week. I used to go sell it. They take a basket and I went... and I sell them.

SIGRIST: Is that what... did lots of farmers do that?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What else did they sell at the market?

BELSTAK: Not much, only... most of the vegetable. Nothing else like... fruits, you know? We got (?) that would sell the fruit... that's all.

SIGRIST: What kinds of foods did you eat when you were a little girl in Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: Homemade bread, homemade cookies... not cookies, the cakes. Not many cookies... once in awhile. While the rest of it (?), any soups... pot roast.

SIGRIST: Where did you get the meat?

BELSTAK: Market. There was a butcher. We got it from the butcher.

SIGRIST: And um... did you ever slaughter your own animals?

BELSTAK: Pigs and chickens.

SIGRIST: How did they slaughter a pig?

BELSTAK: With the (?). And then they... grab her and stab the knife in her. They don't shoot it at that time.

SIGRIST: And what would they make from the pig?

BELSTAK: Bologna... blood bologna, rice bologna. And like liverwurst. And rest would they smoke it. Like even the (?) they smoke it in. Once in awhile they give us some. (Laughs)

SIGRIST: Now did you make these things at home?

BELSTAK: Yes.

SIGRIST: How would you make a blood bologna that you just mentioned?

BELSTAK: How would I make it?

SIGRIST: How did they make that?

BELSTAK: Oh, how did they it? They grind the meat. Cook it first. They grind it. Cook rice or ribs, sometimes barley. Mix it together, you know, with unions and garlic, salt. And they got (pigs?) to put it in. And that the way we used to do it. And then they boil it just, you know, not boil it... just put it over hot water for a while and dry it and then its got (?).

SIGRIST: It would keep along time.

BELSTAK: Not too long, perhaps a week at a time. It keep about a week or so, not no more, not more.

SIGRIST: Was there a special place in your house for storing food?

BELSTAK: Not much. On top of the attic like they used to do it.

SIGRIST: And what would they store on top of the attic?

BELSTAK: Bread and meat. They used to store it in the chimney. They hang it up in the chimney and smoke it and they keep it over there.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you ate soup?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did they prepare the soup?

BELSTAK: Well... how they do it? In water and put meat in it or... the way I make it. Take the skin (shinned?) you know, the pigs, from the blood take it all (or off-?)... and put vegetable in it. And... boil it. I can't explain any other way.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your house?

BELSTAK: When I was in (?).

SIGRIST: When you lived in Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: My mother.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

BELSTAK: Anna

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

BELSTAK: Kolar.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

BELSTAK: Kolar

Gaba: K-O-L-A-R

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your mother's background? Do you know anything about her history?

BELSTAK: Well... I know that there were 2 families living together. 2 brothers married 2 sisters, so I (and?) my grandmother... and they were living together and my mother was the oldest one. When she was a little bit older she had to go out because there was the other 2 then. She had to go out working for somebody else. That all I could remember of what she used to say. That she didn't have very happy life, you know, because she had to go some place else.

SIGRIST: How old was she when that happened?

BELSTAK: Oh, maybe about 12, 13.

SIGRIST: And when you say she went out to work, what kind of work did she go into?

BELSTAK: Mind the... taking care of the children... and helping, you know, with the farm work.

SIGRIST: And this was at somebody else's farm?

BELSTAK: Yes

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe for me what your mother looked like?

BELSTAK: My sister. (Laughs)

SIGRIST: She looked like your sister. But what does your sister look like? (Laughs)

BELSTAK: I made her laugh. She was a big woman... not as big as I am. She had a little bit of a smaller face than I had.

SIGRIST: Is there something that you remember from Europe about your mother that you enjoyed doing with your mother when you were growing up?

BELSTAK: I tell you, not very much... because there was always small children and I had to go always, I was the oldest one, I always had to go out work, work, work. I can't even picture myself, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: It was a hard childhood.

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What would you do for fun when you were a little girl if you had some time to do something you enjoyed what would you do?

BELSTAK: Go out play with children because I was only a child.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a game that you played as a child?

BELSTAK: Hide go seek. That I remember now. All of the little things, I don't know, played with the... (?) And ball.

SIGRIST: Were there other children who lived near you?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

BELSTAK: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Do you remember going to church as a little girl?

BELSTAK: Yeah. Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about that. Do you remember the church?
What it looked like.

BELSTAK: Yeah. Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: What did the church look like?

BELSTAK: It's a big church...

SIGRIST: How often did you go?

BELSTAK: Well... every holiday and Sunday, and sometimes when they had like a
devotion, we used to go. (?) every Sunday, and every holiday, and devotion.

SIGRIST: And how long did the service last?

BELSTAK: (?) mass used to last one hour. And Sunday mass was a little bit more than
an hour.

SIGRIST: Did the priest ever visit your house?

BELSTAK: No. I can't remember that.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how you celebrated Easter.

BELSTAK: How I celebrate Easter? Before Easter we used to go out and... um, what you call it? I know the... Color the eggs and stuff like that, and before sun... before Easter, that Sunday, we used to go out with (?) and go from house to house singing. And they give us something, you know... we had basket. And they give us something, usually eggs. (Laughs) That was Sunday before Easter... what you call it? I cant...

SIGRIST: (Pum?) Sunday.

BELSTAK: (Pum?) Sunday! So that I remember, I used to go every Sunday, my father got the big tree for me and I used to make all decoration. Color the eggs, you know, the shell... and make all kind of things. They hanging down and people took one when they come out, they took something from the tree and I went to next one. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you celebrated Christmas... in Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: How should I... what should I say?

SIGRIST: Did you go to church for Christmas?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then how would you celebrate at home?

BELSTAK: Well... we got feast. Christmas was feast, you know.

SIGRIST: Were there special foods that were prepared?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what any of those special foods were?

BELSTAK: Yeah. Some kind of a soup, but I didn't like it. (Laughs). But then, it was something, it was like a... little bowl, with a lot of poppy seeds and sugar on it. That was-that was good. That I remember, and we had them waffle stue (?)... waffle, honey, and (?) was a little bit of drink. (Laughs). The children (?).

SIGRIST: Did family join you for the feast?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: Who would come over to the house to have Christmas dinner with you?

BELSTAK: Usually on Christmas everybody stay home, they don't go.

SIGRIST: Did you have grandparents who lived near you?

BELSTAK: Yes. My grandmother but she wasn't living with us, but... she wasn't too far away. She was living with her son. And my other parents, they die when I was about 3,4 years old.

SIGRIST: Your other grandparents died when you were young?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about your grandmother? Did you go and visit your grandmother?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: What-What... What did you enjoy doing with your grandmother?

BELSTAK: When she give me something (to hold?). (Laughs). She always had little something. And... she used to come over and help a little bit my mother. I enjoy her. That's all I could say about her.

SIGRIST: Did um... Did you go to school when you were in Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you started school?

BELSTAK: 6, I was 6... 6 years old in February, and then I start the school... in September.

SIGRIST: Can you... can you describe for me what the school building looked like?

BELSTAK: It was a full... full large rooms. With (?) glass, that was one room. And the second room was for 2 and 3. And the other one was 4 and 5. So...

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did they teach you in school?

BELSTAK: Write, read.

SIGRIST: What language were you taught in school?

BELSTAK: Czechoslovakia...

SIGRIST: Were there...

BELSTAK: Hungarian! Hungarian! But, I know very little about that. (Laughs). I can- I can remember... much about that. That's what they were teaching us. Hungarian and...

SIGRIST: And Czech.

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school the whole year? Or did you have part of the year off? Did-Did you attend school for the entire 12 months of the year?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Were you ever let out of school?

BELSTAK: Sometime. Not much.

SIGRIST: When you were going to school, did you also have chores at home that you had to do?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What were your chores at home?

BELSTAK: What was my chores? Take care of the house, take care of the stuff... take care of the children. (Laughs). And sometimes when, when there was something in the big, you know, who had the big place, like a lot of people, I cant explain, but, you know. They need the help, so I used to go work it over there... for a couple of dollars... for a couple of cents, (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Did you have any relatives in America?

BELSTAK: My cousin.

SIGRIST: Is this a man or a woman?

BELSTAK: Woman.

SIGRIST: And where was she in America?

BELSTAK: In New, New Work... New York.

SIGRIST: In New York?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was she doing in New York?

BELSTAK: She was a housewife. She had children. She wasn't working no wheres.

SIGRIST: When you were living in Czechoslovakia, what did you know about America?

BELSTAK: Not much. My father was in... (?) he... he was in New... America about 4 years, about... I was small that time. I was only about little over a year old when he left, and then when he come home I was about 3,4 years old.

SIGRIST: Why did he go to America?

BELSTAK: To make up the dollars and buy little (?). And he want to stay here. He want my mother to come over, but she didn't want to leave the parents. She was afraid. She didn't want to come over here. But he always say that he sorry that he didn't stay here.

SIGRIST: When he was in America for those few years, what was he doing for... to make money?

BELSTAK: I thought he was in a mine, but my sister told me that he wasn't. He was working in a bakery.

SIGRIST: A mine? Like mining?

BELSTAK: Mine, yeah. About that much... he was working in a bakery.

SIGRIST: So your father knew how to do... baking?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that what he did in Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: No, he was this sort of news announcer at the town.

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did you want to come to America?

BELSTAK: Because all my friends come over here, and I thought I'm gonna make a little bit money, and go back and get married... and I had little something to leave on.

SIGRIST: So you intended on going to America but go back to Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: Did your cousin help you to come to America?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: How did you get the money to pay for the passage?

BELSTAK: My Aunt lend it to us. My mother's brother's wife. She had the money, so she lend me the money. My cousin, she didn't even know that I'm coming over, because she move from one place to another and she didn't write to her mother. So then I was in Ziland (?) for 2, for whole week, that nobody didn't call for me.

SIGRIST: So your cousin in America didn't know you were going to be coming?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: Your Aunt gave you the money. Do you remember how much money she lent you?

BELSTAK: It was like a 200... what can I say it? Like 200 dollars.

SIGRIST: That was a lot of money in 1913.

BELSTAK: It was, it was, but it wasn't the money, it wasn't... in American money I think was 80 dollars.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. It was 200... what kind of money did you have in Czechoslovakia? What was the name of the money in Czechoslovakia?

Gaba: Korun.

SIGRIST: Korun.

Gaba: Korun.

BELSTAK: Korun.

SIGRIST: krown or krone?

Gaba: It's called a ko-Roon, which translated means korun.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, Fran?

Gaba: Korun is K-O-R-U-N.

SIGRIST: Ok, thanks. So, it was- it was more in Czechoslovakia than it was in the American dollars.

BELSTAK: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did American... um... Did people want to have American dollars?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah. Sure.

SIGRIST: How did people think about America back then? You said you had friends that went to America... did any of them ever come back to their hometown?

BELSTAK: Not...no.

SIGRIST: No. Did you ever come in contact with anyone who had been in America and then gone back, other than your father?

BELSTAK: Not... I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the process of getting your papers and getting ready to leave Czechoslovakia? Where did you have to go to get your papers?

BELSTAK: Me? That time I was like... run away. My mother- my father send the money... the (?) in (Vienna?). He send the money over there. I didn't have anything. I wait like a... there was a... I got ticket. There was some kind of feast... it was some kind of a feast... a holiday invented in another country like, you know what I mean. Maria (?), no that wasn't... in, in France is that

lord, they paid a ticket to the lord (?) about... only to run away from
the country. Then when I got to (Vienna?), I get off and I can go to the...
where I'm supposed to go, where I got the ticket.

SIGRIST: You went somewhere else.

BELSTAK: Yeah. There was a couple of other people, but you know... so we went like
that. But that was such a foolish thing to do.

SIGRIST: Why did... or how did your parents feel about you leaving? How did your
parents feel about you going to America?

BELSTAK: Well... they were happy that, you know, that I want to go there, that I... they
thought that I could make a little something out of myself. Make some
money and come back. That's all they... that time they didn't have a feeling
like we got now with the children. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Did you're... I'm just curious, did your father want to go with you to America?

BELSTAK: Yes. He say he feel bad that he can't go with me, because he was here, so he
know.

SIGRIST: And he liked it here...

BELSTAK: Yeah, he loved it very much.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if your family gave you a goodbye party or a goodbye
dinner before you left?

BELSTAK: Yes. They roast me a duck. (Laughs). It was a big super and one she roasted for me to take it with me. (Laughs). Small young duck, it wasn't very large yet but... nice, that I never forget.

SIGRIST: And that was a special thing for them to do?

BELSTAK: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did- did either your mother or... or somebody in your family give you a present to take to America?

BELSTAK: Yes. My mother gave me a small feather pillow, to give it to my cousin. That's all I can remember.

SIGRIST: Were feather pillows an important part of life in Czechoslovakia? Was that... was a feather pillow a special thing?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah. She had (?)... my mother thought it would be good for her children, you know. A nice feather bed- feather pillow.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what else you took with you?

BELSTAK: Nothing else, because like I say... I was, if they would catch me on the... (?) they would examine the thing... to find out, if they catch me they would... uh... not lock me up but... my father would have to pay, because I was like running away. So I didn't have anything, a couple of dollars with me.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you carried your money?

BELSTAK: Tied up in hanky-chiff.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you left your parent's house, do you remember what you were wearing?

BELSTAK: Yes. They bought me a... not what I used to wear, they bought me like a long dress. That I could wear it over here and I did wear it.

SIGRIST: What color was it?

BELSTAK: It was a navy blue.

SIGRIST: And it was an American style dress?

BELSTAK: Yeah. I used to wear it here.

SIGRIST: How was that different than what you usually wore?

BELSTAK: I used to wear all, you know, short clothes, different kind, fancy. All embroidered and things like that we used to wear it.

SIGRIST: Did you make those clothes?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Who taught you to do the embroidery?

BELSTAK: My mother, she showed me. And my father used to show me how to thread the needle. (Laughs). That I never forget. So, I used to embroider it.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving your family?

BELSTAK: Well, I thought I'm going to go to the... different world, happy. Because they all say it's so good here, so I went with happiness, but it changes.
(Laughs).

SIGRIST: How did you get from your town to (Vienna?)

BELSTAK: Train, by the train.

SIGRIST: Had you been on a train before?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh. That wasn't your first time on a train?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: And then, what happened when you were in (Vienna?)? You decided not to go on to France?

BELSTAK: We were waiting till the agent... he had my money. I had nothing, I was like a lost child. He's taking care of everything, he had... my father sent him the money and he was... we were there for one week, till the boat come- till the ship come.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

BELSTAK: Rotterdam

SIGRIST: Was this the first time you had ever seen a ship?

BELSTAK: That's right.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what your impressions were of this ship?

BELSTAK: Nice. But I got sick right away. (Laughs). I was so sick they had to carry me from the (?) to the deck... and night they brought me down. I got sick right away, and that's all I can remember. I don't even remember how the water look... because I was sick all through the thing.

SIGRIST: Where did the ship leave from? Where did the ship leave from?

BELSTAK: That I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Um...

BELSTAK: Like I say, I was only 14... dumb child, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you were in the ship? Where did you sleep on the ship?

BELSTAK: On the top deck. Down stairs.

SIGRIST: What did it look like down stairs?

BELSTAK: There was beds, you know, like... I don't know how many. I cant remember how many beds there were, but one was lower and one was on the...

SIGRIST: Bunk beds.

BELSTAK: Bunk beds, yeah.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people in one room?

BELSTAK: Bout... bout 6 of them... or maybe more. 6 or more.

SIGRIST: And you were sick the whole way?

BELSTAK: Yes. ...They thought, they thought I never gonna make through. My, I never forget my cousin- my friend... she went with me. She said that she was crying all the way and she was uh, she was my friend. And I was so sick that she thought if I'm gonna keep on like that, I might even die on the ship, or their gonna send me back. So...

SIGRIST: Who was this friend that was traveling with you? Was she someone from your town?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was she your age?

BELSTAK: She was a year older than me. She's dead now.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what her name was?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What is her name?

BELSTAK: Mary Bohacik.

SIGRIST: bohacik?

BELSTAK: bohacik.

Gaba: Bo-hacik. That would be B-O-H-A-C-I-K, with a check mark over the C.

BELSTAK: That's right.

Gaba: (You spell it?) just the way it sounds is the way it's written.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about- about Mary? What- what- what she was like as a friend to you.

BELSTAK: She was very nice. A little bit older, you know, but... good friend.

SIGRIST: How long were you on "the Rotterdam"?

BELSTAK: How long? I think 9 days.

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

BELSTAK: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

BELSTAK: I remember a lot of small boats come over, took us... you know, the... where we supposed to go.

SIGRIST: To Ellis Island.

BELSTAK: That's right.

SIGRIST: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

BELSTAK: Oh yes.

SIGRIST: Did you know what that was?

BELSTAK: Yes. Yes, there. Some people were staring us over there, you know what it means.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened at Ellis Island.

BELSTAK: Well... I was there and I sent a telegram to my cousin and she wasn't living at the same place where I got the address, so I was there for whole week. They were sending telegram to her, nobody come for me, so... then, that was on Sun- that was on Sunday. She come over to pick me up. She went there... her husband was in the church and somebody told her that somebody's telegram was looking for them. So we wanna find out what kind of a telegram so they come over to get me. A whole week and next day I was supposed to be sended to some- some home over here where they give you a job, so that friend of mine she was with me because her sister never come for her neither, so I had company.

SIGRIST: So when you were detained at Ellis Island, you were with your friend Mary?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The two of you.

BELSTAK: Yeah. But... They give her job over there and I don't- I can't remember how she find out about her sisters.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on Ellis Island for a week? What sticks out in your mind about that experience?

BELSTAK: Not much. I can't... you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: It was a long time ago.

BELSTAK: Yeah. (They laugh).

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep on Ellis Island?

BELSTAK: We got like a bunk bed too.

SIGRIST: And... And did they feed you while you were at Ellis?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where they fed you?

BELSTAK: No. That I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any medical examinations when you were at Ellis Island?

BELSTAK: Not... they examine me like you know, listen to me and not much examine.

SIGRIST: Do you remember- did you have your luggage with you when you were at Ellis Island?

BELSTAK: Feather pillow. I only had that pillow. (They laugh).

SIGRIST: Did you see anything at Ellis Island that you had never seen before?

BELSTAK: Cannot remember those things.

SIGRIST: Ok.

BELSTAK: Like I say, I was a dumb child yet you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Why do you say "a dumb child"? Why...

BELSTAK: Because you know, ah... we didn't have to (change occasions or take vacations?) like over here. Work, work, work, work. That was our middle name.

SIGRIST: You were very innocent?

BELSTAK: That's alright. Till work. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Well so, your- your cousin's husband, correct? Comes to get you at Ellis Island?

BELSTAK: Not him, her come over.

SIGRIST: Oh, she came over?

BELSTAK: She came over.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw her? Did she look different to you than...?

BELSTAK: A little bit, but when- when we got home, she started to fight with me like we (Laughs). She was telling me that our grandmother, I was their baby, and the grandmother never liked them. And she always hold it against me. Always, till the last day that I see her, she always hold it against me. How terrible she had it, got from her grandmother. And I was the- I was the favorite.

SIGRIST: You'd think that at that point it wouldn't have been something she was concerned with.

BELSTAK: So many times her husband told her, he says, "Why do you do that?" Because I used to cry every time I got over there. On my day off when I was working, when I got over there I always had to cry. So her husband say, "Why do you make her cry like that? Can't she help it, is that her fault?" But she was... she was funny woman, you know.

SIGRIST: Can you describe where they lived for me?

BELSTAK: In New York on first avenue.

SIGRIST: And what did their apartment look like?

BELSTAK: They had 4 rooms. Like railroad rooms.

SIGRIST: Did they have electricity?

BELSTAK: I don't think so. I think it was only a gas.

SIGRIST: What did you do your first day in New York? The day after you arrived, what did you do?

BELSTAK: That was Sunday. When I got here, Monday, she took me to the store buy the clothes and told the agent to buy me different, a little bit more clothes. And she (made or met?) some agent that he should come over and take me and give me a job, so... Monday, that was Sunday, and Tuesday I had to go to the office if I could get a job, you know, they used all the (servants?) used to come over there. So I went there from... over 2 weeks. There was no- no place for me. It wasn't- it was a lot of (servants?) And they were- it was a hard time somehow. We couldn't get no job. So then when I got one I got one. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Well when you went to the office, what was the procedure? You would go to the office...

BELSTAK: And sit there and wait till somebody came over.

SIGRIST: So the employers would come and choose?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Ah-huh... that's interesting. Were they all immigrant girls?

BELSTAK: Yeah. And naturally they pick out somebody, you know, who know a little bit more and a little bit older.

SIGRIST: How did you feel sitting there?

BELSTAK: How I feel? Starving. (Laughs). When I got there in the morning, I used to come there I think first one always. (Laughs). And... I open always and I lock it always. I stay there until... (Laughs), if I could get something.

SIGRIST: When you weren't getting a job were you sorry that you had come to America? Like everyday you go,

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: and nobody chooses you... at that- at that point were you sorry that you had come to this country?

BELSTAK: Feel bad. You feel bad. Feel like going back right away if I could- if I could do it.

SIGRIST: Were you writing back to your parents?

BELSTAK: Yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were you telling your parents about your life?

BELSTAK: Nothing about the bad news. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Cause I'm sure your father, especially is interested in...

BELSTAK: Yeah, I know it.

SIGRIST: hearing about what you're doing.

BELSTAK: Well they just tell me, "Just take it easy. Take it, don't listen, you know."
All sorts of things.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the first job that you got.

BELSTAK: Well... Jewish lady, she had 3 children, 2 boys and a girl- a baby. And... my... I was so lousy it wasn't even funny. (Laughs). She had the baby by like it was over there and I never forget that. They give her a present, a little bit, a little comb. And I find that comb and I comb my hair. And believe me I was like a... (Laughs)... so lousy. And when she had the baby, the noise... she saw it in my head that I'm, ah... I- I got (louse?). So they gave me, they bought me 2 combs and believe me I was combing myself every single day, every time I had chance to. And I was like that for couple of months.

SIGRIST: Did you live in the- in their apartment with them?

BELSTAK: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did she treat you?

BELSTAK: Well... not so good. Believe me she was very- she was, she used to be herself, she was a (?). So she was- had to work so hard it wasn't even funny.

SIGRIST: What were some of your responsibilities that you...

BELSTAK: The children, the baby. One time they move out and I was home with the baby and I had big basket ironing to do. I used to, I had her in the nighttime because the daytime I had no time to iron because I had the other children to take care of. So... and the baby was crying so I slap her through the face. Her lip swell up (Laughs), when they come home 2 o'clock. When

she saw the baby, her lips were swollen. She went crazy. "What happened to the baby?" I say, "She was crying too much." But I didn't tell her that I slap her. She call up the doctor. He wasn't there. He was out. By the time the doctor come the baby was ok so... but if she knew that, what I'd done I don't know (Laughs) what would happen. I was so tired, you know what I mean? 2 o'clock in the morning and I had the- I was still ironing and the baby cry.

SIGRIST: How much did you get paid for this job?

BELSTAK: 9 dollars a month.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with your money?

BELSTAK: I had to pay to my cousin, but she bought me the clothes. But the way she bought it, at the boat when I was over there she charged me the (boat?)... so I had big list. So... I give her a couple of dollars and a couple of dollars for me. Buy the stamps and writing paper and the rest of it I use to give her, and leave some for (fear or fare or?), you know.

SIGRIST: How long did you work for the Jewish woman?

BELSTAK: 'Bout 4 months.

SIGRIST: Did they ever attempt to teach you any English?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: What language did they speak in the house?

BELSTAK: Jewish, usually Jewish.

SIGRIST: Did they, I'm just curious, did they attempt to teach you any Jewish?

BELSTAK: No. When... see, I ask for raise. I want to... all my friends that I know my friends, they all have a little bit higher than me so I ask for a raise. So she says that she would never pay more than 9 dollars. Well then I got another job. I got 12 dollars.

SIGRIST: Where was that job?

BELSTAK: In Bronx- Bronx. In New York. In Bronx.

SIGRIST: And, um... tell me about that family that you worked...

BELSTAK: They were- they were very nice to me. Very nice, but poor also, very poor. So, I...

SIGRIST: What would you...

BELSTAK: I (?) would take couple of months I also ask for raise because all the other ones they used to get 15- 17 dollars a month and me 12. So I told her, I say that if she can't pay me that I have to leave. She didn't wanna leave me... because she was like my mother. I like her very much but... I need the money. So then I got another job for large family. I got 18 dollars, but it was a big family.

SIGRIST: And what were you responsible for doing?

BELSTAK: Everything. Except cooking, her sister used to cook she was home. All the washing for them, cleaning, and...

SIGRIST: Were you the only servant in the house?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Um... were they English speaking?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did they ever attempt to teach you any English?

BELSTAK: Yeah. Yes they did.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what it was like for you to learn English.

BELSTAK: Very hard, you know what I mean? It's... it's... it's hard to explain.

SIGRIST: Did you want to learn English?

BELSTAK: Yeah. I learned a little bit from the children when I... when I was working for them. I get a little bit from this one. A little bit from that one, you know. That's how I learn a little bit. And over there I learn good.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first word was that you learned in English?

BELSTAK: Should I tell you? (Laughs). You wouldn't want to believe it. When I got to my cousin's house... son of a bitch. (Laughs). You wanna know so... (you

started if I tried away?). That I remember. (Laughs). But I didn't know what it was. (Laughs). Something to remember.

SIGRIST: (Laughs). How long did you live with your cousin?

BELSTAK: Well I didn't live long till I get the place so about 2 or 3 weeks. I can't remember, I think it was 2 weeks.

SIGRIST: So these positions that you had, you lived in the house with the families?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Um... the family that had lots of kids, you said that you weren't responsible for the cooking. Um... I'm wondering, were the family members interested in your background?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: Did they ever ask you, you know, what was life like?

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: No. Were you- were you treated as one of the family or were you treated more as hired help.

BELSTAK: Like hired help.

SIGRIST: Do you ever remember an instance where you did something incorrectly and you were scolded for doing it?

BELSTAK: Yeah but I done something they didn't know it. I break the... when I wash the dishes I used to break them from the (?) handle. (Laughs). And I break so many and she had 2 sets the same so I put- take the broken one and put it over there and take the good one downstairs. And I was afraid when she find out that she's gonna make me pay.

SIGRIST: You know what we're laughing about this now...

BELSTAK: But it wasn't funny.

SIGRIST: But... it wasn't funny.

BELSTAK: No.

SIGRIST: I mean you're constantly being in a situation where you're frightened of- of...

BELSTAK: Yeah. I didn't wanna do it but it just happened. I did...

SIGRIST: When you worked for the big family, how many days a week... did you work?

BELSTAK: 7 days.

SIGRIST: What- when did you have time off?

BELSTAK: Like Sunday afternoon, after dinner. And like Tuesday evening.

SIGRIST: And what would you do on your time off?

BELSTAK: Meet some of my friends. Walk around.

SIGRIST: Your friend Mary that you came over with, is she in New York also?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Are you seeing Mary?

BELSTAK: Not much. I found another one I got from my same country.

SIGRIST: Were these women also doing domestic work?

BELSTAK: No. She used to work in a... big place. In hotel, used to be- make the beds and stuff like that, clean up. See I didn't- I wasn't little (fool?). About year and a half I didn't see her. I couldn't get in touch to- I don't know how to get touch with her.

SIGRIST: But then you eventually found each other again?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about- were there lots of Czechoslovakian people in that neighborhood or, you know, where you lived? Was it a Czechoslovakian neighborhood where you lived?

BELSTAK: Yeah. On first avenue. There was a lot of Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: Were there social events that happened where you can meet other people from Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: Not very well, because my cousin she- she the worst. She was the one that- she didn't want to bother with nobody. So she didn't have many friends.

SIGRIST: Your cousin was sort-of a pain in the neck?

BELSTAK: Yes. That just it. See that's a why her mother was like that. That's a why my grandmother she don't care for them. Because they was like...

SIGRIST: Would they not allow you to go out and do things?

BELSTAK: No. I couldn't. They don't want me to go no place.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing to get adjusted to here in America? What was the most difficult thing to- to- to become adjusted to?

BELSTAK: To learn how to speak English. That's what I wanna do though. That time I could speak much better than I do now. Because after when I got married I was living with always Czechoslovakia people. Always Czechoslovakia store. No matter where you go that all you speak. You never speak English. So...

SIGRIST: Did um... did you go to church when you came to America?

BELSTAK: Oh yeah. Sure... when I find out where the church is, you know, once. If we get... like... if I live close to church for 6 o'clock mass, I ask the women if I could go to church Sunday morning 6 o'clock mass. So...

SIGRIST: Did they allow you to do that?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer that you remember in Czechoslovakian right now? Can you say a prayer for me in Czechoslovakian?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you do it on tape?

BELSTAK: What do you mean? What?

SIGRIST: Can you say a prayer? Or say?

BELSTAK: Our father?

SIGRIST: Can you do that in Czechoslovakian?

BELSTAK: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, by all means. Do the "our father" in Czechoslovakian.

BELSTAK: (She starts to recite "our father" in Czechoslovakian). (Laughs). It... seems so funny.

SIGRIST: (Laughs).

BELSTAK: (She continues reciting "our father" in Czechoslovakian).

SIGRIST: Thank you.

BELSTAK: Welcome.

SIGRIST: Why did that feel funny to you?

BELSTAK: Uh... I don't know. (Laughs).

SIGRIST: Has it been along time since you've said that in Czechoslovakian?

BELSTAK: Oh no.

SIGRIST: No?

BELSTAK: No. Oh... that's my middle name now. I got nothing else to do but to pray.

SIGRIST: (Laughs). When you think, do you think in English or in Czechoslovakian?

BELSTAK: Half and half. Many time I think in English every, you know, when... many time I think... like half and half.

SIGRIST: In the first couple of years that you were in America, did you ever experience any kind of prejudice against you because you were foreign? Did anyone make fun of you?

BELSTAK: No. Not I remember.

SIGRIST: Um... do you remember, did you go to school at all in America?

BELSTAK: No. No.

SIGRIST: Did you want to?

BELSTAK: No. Because I had to work.

SIGRIST: Were you sending money home to your parents?

BELSTAK: I... yeah. I had to pay my, you know, the... debts what they give me. And I used to help little bit, not much because I didn't have much.

SIGRIST: Did you ever want to go back to Czechoslovakia?

BELSTAK: No. Maybe like for visit if I had money. If I could afford it to go. But... I never have that much money to spend for fare.

SIGRIST: Well I want to thank you very much for letting me come over and ask you these questions.

BELSTAK: I don't think... I wasn't like Mrs. Cooper, she could talk much better.

SIGRIST: Well there are very different kinds of interviews. You know, your experiences were quiet different, so... Well anyway, Mrs. Belstak I want to thank you very much.

BELSTAK: Oh, you're welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Mary Belstak on Nov. 13, 1994. Um... Fran Gaba in attendance and we are at the Wesley Nursing home in Saratoga Springs, New York.