

**EI-656**

**ULASTA FINCH**

**BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 16, 1911**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: ALICIA BONES**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:**

**CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1913, 1924**

**AGE: 2, 13**

**SHIP: *GEORGE WASHINGTON***

**PORT: ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS**

**RESIDENCES:**

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**CZECHOSLOVAKIA: PÍSEK**

**CZECHOSLOVAKIA: MELIFSKOV (?)**

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Parks Service. Today is Thursday, August 24, 1995. I'm in upstate New York -- this is Latham proper?

FINCH: Latham.

SIGRIST: Latham, NY. With Ulasta Finch. Mrs. Finch was born in Czechoslovakia. First came to this country when she was two years old in 1913. The family then stayed in America until she was approximately how old?

FINCH: 'Bout thirteen, fourteen.

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SIGRIST: About thirteen. Went back to Czechoslovakia for how long?

FINCH: About a year.

SIGRIST: About a year. And then returned in 1924 and we think she was thirteen at that time.

FINCH: Mm hm.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date please?

FINCH: Right. January 16, 1911.

SIGRIST: And where were you born in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: In Písek. P-Í-S-E-K.

SIGRIST: What do you know about the town you were born in?

FINCH: Well, I – I had some very nice recollections of it. It was a lovely town. It had – the thing I remember most vividly is the mill where people used to bring their grain in to have it ground into bread, and then the bread would be made into dough, and it would go into the baker to get baked, you know. And it had a lovely – where the big wheel was – in the mill there, there was a like a little river we used to flow through it. And I remember going in a row boat with this friend's – he wasn't my cousin, but he was a boy that lived next door – and we would go, and talk to the fisherman, and they would give us little fish that they didn't want. You know. Those were some of the memories that I have of that. And, and I remember they used to have wonderful plum trees there, and lovely flowers. And it was very quaint. I remember my grandmother baking the bread, and bringing it into the baker, and they would bake about five loaves of bread. And at the end of the week when the bread got real stale, they would take bacon -- or the, the pork that they had rendered the fat, and they would put it in frying pans and put slices of bread in it to make them nice and brown and crunchy. Those were things that I remember about that.

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SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape that we're not far from the Albany Airport, and so the airplanes may be picked up.

FINCH: You are on the airport. I have a hotdog concession as they go by.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. Tell me why your family decided to come the first time.

FINCH: [superposed] For -- it was, I think my fa -- it was, it was, I think it was a war thing. He just didn't want to fight for the wrong side of something. At that time or something, anyhow. He -- they, I think they lived in Vienna at the time before they came. And of course all the immigrants at that time thought America was -- a land of gold. So they all aspired to come here. And I think that was one of his reasons. And also it was fighting for the wrong war, which he didn't want to be engaged in. I think that was one of the reasons, too.

SIGRIST: Where did your family go when they first came in 1913?

FINCH: To America?

SIGRIST: Yes.

FINCH: Most immigrants that came to America came into New York City at first. And they lived down between 73<sup>rd</sup> and 72<sup>nd</sup> Street towards the East River. Which is now a very exclusive apartment house section, very wealthy. But at that time we didn't realize it was wealthy, we just liked the water there. And they would have their *sokols* [Czech community and fitness center] there, and their theaters, that was known as Little Bohemia then.

SIGRIST: They're *sokols*?

FINCH: S-O-K-O-L.

SIGRIST: What is that?

FINCH: It's a -- see, the Czechs believe this is an old slogan of Czechoslovakian and Bohemian people -- which they were originally -- that if you have a healthy

body, you'll have a healthy mind. So as soon as their children are able to walk, they start training them in gymnastics. Okay? And they – sometimes you see men up on rings that are seventy-two years old and still ath – athletic. And they have what they call a *sokol* meet in Prague which is the capital of Czechoslovakia. They still do it, I think. Everyone in all sections of Czechoslovakia trains [tape skips]. And they all – they all perform as one unit. Each one is trained, but they all perform as one unit because they've been indoctrinated into all this gymnastic – broad jumping, the horses, the rings, the parallel bars.

SIGRIST: When you were a young girl in New York did you – can you talk about your own training in doing gymnastics?

FINCH: [superposed] Oh yeah. Oh sure. Oh yeah. I – I was on the rings and the parallel bar. I wasn't very good at it. Becau—my strength was in my legs, I could run better and I could high jump. [coughs] But the rings that required control, I wasn't that good at. But I've been athletic because of that all my life. I swim twenty laps in the pool, even at this age.

SIGRIST: Were – were both girls and boys expected to take this kind of training?

FINCH: Oh absolutely. You went there when you were about – you started, some, some start them at four - four years of age. You know, doing tiny things, and then develop into the bigger things.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever -- or somebody in your family -- ever tell you any stories associated with your birth?

FINCH: With my birth?

SIGRIST: Maybe something that happened. Or the circumstances.

FINCH: I'm trying to think. No, I guess it was a – I don't -- no, she never did, come to think of it. I don't think she ever told me anything about that. You know. She

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had an odd background anyhow. In the European countries, you know, her mother – are you interested in her background?

SIGRIST: Yes, please. Tell us – say your mother's name first.

FINCH: Her name was Ma – Mary.

SIGRIST: What was in –

FINCH: Mala. Her last name was Mala.

SIGRIST: Can you spell –

FINCH: M-A-L-A. Which means small. Translation is small.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you know about your mother's background.

FINCH: Well, all I know about my mother's background – her father died when she was very young. He was a brass smith. See that pet – petal – pestle?

SIGRIST: Oh the mortar and pestle? Yeah, up on the shelf.

FINCH: [superposed] Yeah. He made that. Yeah. Years – you know, when he was young. And he died very young. And she was left with two children, two girls. And she had a sister who was a wealthy farmer and they had no children, so they took my mother as their daughter. And she was to inherit everything after they were gone. The only thing that happened was that the - - my mother's aunt died first and the husband got involved with a sixteen-year-old farm girl and married her. So my mother lost everything, you know. And she had to go to work very early in life, so on and so forth. She's a very hard working woman. You know.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

FINCH: They never – they never really talked about it. I think because they went to the same school in the village, I think that was more or less what it was.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's personality like?

FINCH: Well, she was – she was as big as I was but a little heavier. And she was very strong – a very strong-minded, a very, well, she worked – she could do most anything. You know. She'd work at anything that would create a dollar for us. So, we never knew want even when it was bad, you know. She would work as a housekeeper, she would work in stores, she would work anywhere that brought her money. And she could do it, you know. And so we never knew want, which was prevalent at the time when I was growing up because the Depression. And so she was a very, very strong-minded woman.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you like to tell about maybe an experience you shared with your mother when you were a child? Or maybe a story that reflects her strong-mindedness?

FINCH: Mm. Well, I'm just trying to think. But we, we used to laugh a lot together. You know, she could find humor in most everything. You know. And we could laugh together [skips] her sense of humor wasn't that good. I'm trying to think of what, well, she believed anything I was doing was good. And she believed in education. Where my father believed in education, but it was restricted to the European viewpoint that after you get through grammar school, you go to work. You know, that was the tradition in all the European countries, a girl went to work after high – you know, you don't go to high school and that was one of the bad things I remember of my youth because I wanted to go to high school. I went to school in New York. And I made the rapid advancement classes, and the teachers all – I've always been interested in education all my life. And I wanted to go to school, and he didn't feel that I should. So I did – I did it all on my own. All my life I've been going to school. I started college when I was almost seventy, here at SUNY. And I went right up to Master's. And in my early days, I kept going and taking courses here, there, and everywhere. And I finally finished my high school education the first year I was married. So that – that's the way I went through my life. But I'm trying to think of something that my mother and I did. She

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was absolutely afraid of the water where we lived across – we moved finally to Boston, and I grew up mostly in Boston, and we used to live right across from the ocean. And I taught myself to swim, but she was absolutely afraid of the water.

SIGRIST: Do you know why she was afraid of the water?

FINCH: Well, I think that in her early days somebody pushed her in the river when she wasn't able to swim, and she almost drowned like most people do. And so she always cautioned me every time I went into the water, you know. But I became a strong swimmer, as I tell you, I do twenty laps in the pool, even –

SIGRIST: Tell me what your father's name was.

FINCH: His father couldn't stand – see, that's another thing. My father couldn't stand, in the European countries when you're growing up, the priests is the most central point of your life. I mean, the church tells you almost who to marry, and what to marry, and how to do it. Just absolutely controls you. And my father was a very independent man. [skips] Almost became – yeah, everybody in Czechoslovakia at that time was Catholic. And so the church had a great hold on all the little villages. And everything that happened was part of the church. So, he rebelled against that. He almost became an atheist when he came to America. And, but he was very literal. He loved to read, and he loved playing in Czechoslovakian plays, he played – I always remember him mostly studying for a part in some play. And he did, I think, R.U.R. [Rossum's Universal Robots] on Broadway. Years and years, you know, it was a play. And they had a wonderful theater in the sokol, as I told you, it was part of the, com – you know, community thing. And they put on plays constantly. Czechoslovakian plays. So they kept the heritage of the Czechs going all the time. But they put on all kinds of American plays, too, just translated into Czech. You know. And I remember that that was his life, he just loved it. And he had a business where he had a store, he manufactured

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or made Mershon pipes. And pipes of all kinds that were – everybody bought at that time.

SIGRIST: This was in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: No, this was in Boston.

SIGRIST: Oh, in Boston. What kind of pipe?

FINCH: Smoking pipes.

SIGRIST: But you used a specific term.

FINCH: Mershon. M-E-R-C-H-U-N [sic], I think.

SIGRIST: Are these – can you describe one of these pipes?

FINCH: Well, they're, what they were, they were beautifully designed faces in the bowls. See, the bowl would be here, but the face would be here on the pipe. And those pipes had to be smoked very carefully, so that the color in them would change beautifully, you know what I mean? And so, he had – and then he, he had beads – mersh—amber beads, and things like that, you know.

SIGRIST: What did he do in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: He did the same thing. That was his trade. That's where he learned it, in Czechoslovakia. Making smoking pipes, which was a big thing at that time. You know, every man smoked a pipe.

SIGRIST: Did he smoke himself?

FINCH: Oh yeah. He smoked himself, yeah, oh yeah. I remember him smoking – always smoked a pipe, never cigarettes, just a pipe. Different people would have him smoke pipes that they bought from him, so the color of the mershon would be the proper color.

SIGRIST: What would change the color on the pipe?

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FINCH: Just the heat and the smoke, I imagine, you know.

SIGRIST: And it would change it from what color to what?

FINCH: From white. It was done in white to begin with, and then it would change to sort of an amber color.

SIGRIST: Huh. Very interesting.

FINCH: Yeah, it was interesting, you know. And...

SIGRIST: Was that a family trade for him?

FINCH: Well, he learned it in Czechoslovakia, you know that, see in Czechoslovakia—

SIGRIST: Did his father do that, too?

FINCH: We don't know who his father was at all. He had – both of them had broken backgrounds, as it were. He was sent from an orphanage in Prague, he was sent to a town called Mileskov, to two people who were farmers. And there was money sent for him every month, according to what he said. And he never found out who his parents really were. And I've been having one heck of a time – I've been trying to go and do a background check on him. And the stupid jerky people over there, I send money to them to do this, and I – they come back and they send me exactly what I told them. So I got—I've gotten no further with that background.

SIGRIST: What name did he use as his surname? Your maiden name?

FINCH: His name was Fanta F-A-N, like the kid – like the soda.

SIGRIST: F-A-N-T-A.

FINCH: [superpose] T-A.

SIGRIST: Where did he come up with that name?

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FINCH: That was his name. That was given to him on his birth certificate. And he said he checked when he got older, he went to Prague, and checked, and he thought that this woman was his mother, but she had just died. The week before he came, you know. And it might have been something, you know, in the old days, if there was an illegitimate child from wealthy people, they were sent out into the countryside, and money was sent to take care of them. But they wouldn't have anything to do them, so we figured that might have been at that time. Where today it doesn't mean anything, you know.

SIGRIST: That's right.

FINCH: But in those days, it was a social disgrace.

SIGRIST: Do you have any first hand recollections of the first coming to America?

FINCH: No, I was only two.

SIGRIST: So, tell me about – tell me about the Czech community in New York, and every day life at that time.

FINCH: Well, it was a very nice life because they had restaurants you could go there, and eat. And there was a community, you had somebody to talk to all the time. There was a great number of them, and they had the gymnastic things there. They also had the playhouse there. So it was a pretty nice contained community. And people worked at various things, you know. Some were in the clothing business. Some were brokers, and some were – they worked at various jobs all through NYC.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in New York before you went to Boston?

FINCH: Let me see, I'm trying to think. I think I was—well, we lived there about, maybe about eight years, and then we moved to New Jersey. And from New Jersey we went to Boston. We bought a house in New Jersey – in Sea Caucus of all places. And then my father bought this business in Boston, so we moved to Boston. He was right next door to the – what do they call them?

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Old Howard, which was where all the comedians made their first break. We used to see all the famous old stars that were eventually movie stars, but they all started at the Old Howard to get their background. Comedians, and of course, they all looked down at the women that went to the Old Howard, you know, which was like a strip –

SIGRIST: A burlesque house?

FINCH: It was burlesque house, that's what it was. And I'm trying to think of the word, yeah. It's burlesque. Old Howard was here, and his store was here – we could see coming in and out all the time. I've never been in there, but I always wanted to. I always wanted to do it, you know.

SIGRIST: Let's go back to New York for a little bit. Talk about the people with whom your parents associated. For instance, what language everybody spoke, and the kinds of social activities that they did.

FINCH: Well, there was a, a – there was a break betw—now on 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, that was more Slovak. 72<sup>nd</sup> Street towards 70<sup>th</sup> Street were Czechs. There was a division there. Now, the Slovaks had their own sokol hall on 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, and they- they never liked each other too well. They came together as a country because it was necessity. But personally, as you know, they're separated again. And so, they – they had their own lives. 73<sup>rd</sup> was Slovak and 72<sup>nd</sup> Street was Czech. And they – the people on an everyday basis they would meet together, and you know, some of them would make wine out of elderberries, and then they would have groups come in when they had to suction it off, you know, and put it in bottles and things and have parties. And they were very musical. They'd have a lot of musical groups together. And they would meet and play cards in some places. We never played because my father was always rehearsing for some play. Most of them had a very nice life. We had a camp when I lived in New York City. We had a camp in Pelham Bay. You know where that is? Frog's Neck. Pelham Bay. And then you had to go to Pelham Bay, and you had to get into a rowboat and row to

this little island, which was Snake Island. And we all had little tent camps there, you know. And I know my neighbors had a motorcycle and a side car, and they used to take me in their little side car and drive all the way to Pelham Bay. And that was interesting, too, you know. And of course the traffic wasn't so bad there. I learned how to rollerskate on First Avenue, just imagine roller skating there now! [laughs]

SIGRIST: What language did your parents speak in the house?

FINCH: Czech.

SIGRIST: Did they make any attempt to learn English?

FINCH: Oh yeah. My mother went to school, and so did my father. And then, as a second language, it was German. Because Czechoslovakia at that time was under the domain of the Germans. So you had to speak German, you couldn't speak Czech when they first came over. So they spoke very fluent German. And I was a very nosy kid. I didn't know -- I wanted to know what they were saying all the time. So I taught myself ear German. So I could understand what they were saying that they wouldn't say in Czech. And one day I got so proud of myself that I said, "Ich weiss was du hast gesagt," and if you know what that means it means, "I know what you've said." So they never spoke German in front of me again. [laughs]. So that was one of the kid tricks you do. And of course, I can understand ear German, I can't go into it in any degree. And when I went back to college, oh, I could do German, I know some German, so I'll take German as one of my courses. But I wasn't prepared for the conjugations of the ca-cases, and so on and so forth. And I think I just passed on the fact that I could translate, you know. But, it -- it's interesting because I travel a lot.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your experience with immigrant parents. For the first, you know, you're young and you've gone into the school system, so you're more Americanized, I assume, than they are. Well, how did you feel about having

immigrant parents, and was there any tension between your ideas and their ideas?

FINCH: Oh, there, there was. You know, because they had strict ideas what girls could do and what girls can't do. But my fat--

SIGRIST: [superposed] Well, what could girls –

FINCH: Well, at that time, you know, you couldn't go out with a fellow unless you were chaperoned, and you couldn't do, what would you say – my parents were very liberal though. They said I had to decide my own – my own things in my own way because I had to do this for the rest of my life, you know. And if I did something wrong, something would happen that would take care of that for me, you know. So, I've always been very independent because of that, but most children, I mean, most of them there were trying to work into the scheme of American society, you know. The only time I was ashamed of my parents, my husband got into business with the Chasen Sanborn people, you know.

SIGRIST: Coffee.

FINCH: Coffee people. And of course, we used to go to their parties and things, and of course my mother couldn't understand that, you know. I mean, you don't go to all these parties, and you don't go into the Chasen Sanborn's house, you know. There was a caste system in their thinking, do you know what mean? So, that's when we sort of didn't get along too well.

SIGRIST: Did your parents visually look different than how you would think Americans would look at that time? In dress and hairstyle.

FINCH: Yeah, well, my mother was – you know, I just looked at her as my mother. You know, she was – she always kept up pretty well, you know. I mean, she had very beautiful long hair, and she tried to keep up with the styles of wherever she lived. [sneezes] 'Scuse me. So, it didn't seem that she was

incongruous in any way, you know. Not that was noticeable, no, not to me it wasn't, you know.

SIGRIST: Tell me why your parents decided to go back to Czechoslovakia.

FINCH: I don't know. I think my father just got tired of working for somebody at the time when we went.

SIGRIST: Was he still making pipes at that point?

FINCH: I'm sorry?

SIGRIST: Was he making pipes at that point?

FINCH: Yeah, he was making pipes. And I don't know whether he got disgruntled with the whole system, you know. They were always going on strike or something and he got sick of that. And he thought that maybe now Czechoslovakia had gotten out from under the Germans and stuff. And maybe there would be some room for him to work the way he wanted to in Czechoslovakia. And so he went with another couple, you know.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving America?

FINCH: Well, I didn't want to. I didn't want to. No. I – I, well, I think my mother and father had a falling out when we got to Czechoslovakia, so it seemed I was with my father's people part of the time, and I used to have to get on a train all by myself to go cross country to see my father, and finally, I guess, before they came to America they made up, you know, and we came back all in one group, but there was a lot of dissension when I was there in Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about packing to leave for Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: Well, let me see, I don't think I remember that too vividly. You know, when your parents say you're going, in those days, you went.

SIGRIST: Were there any other children at that point?

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FINCH: My brother.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

FINCH: Yeah. Joseph.

SIGRIST: He's younger?

FINCH: Yeah, he was five years younger.

SIGRIST: So he was born in New York?

FINCH: No, he was born in – no he was – what – no he wasn't five years. I think he was two years younger than I was. Yeah. No, he was born in Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: He was born in Czechoslovakia.

FINCH: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: Do you have any first hand recollections of going to Czechoslovakia, the ship, being on the ship, on the way over?

FINCH: Yeah, we went on the George Washington.

SIGRIST: To Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: To Czechoslovakia. And we came back on – that was a fourteen day journey. Coming back it was horrible. It was – it was the most horrible thing – I've never been able to go on a boat. We took in Rotterdam, I think, in Holland.

SIGRIST: Well let's – we'll talk about that when we get to –

FINCH: Oop – is that falling off?

SIGRIST: Let me fix your microphone here.

FINCH: There we go.

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SIGRIST: So what do you remember about the ocean voyage over?

FINCH: Well, it, everybody, I remember there was lots of food. I don't remember we were in any particular, big stateroom. It all seemed to be all terribly crowded – we were all together in one little stateroom, you know. That was double-bunked and stuff. Which was –

SIGRIST: You talking about the other couple, also, that was travelling with you, or just you and your family?

FINCH: No, that was – they had their own stateroom, we had our own. And I remember, it was way down on the bottom of the ship, so it couldn't have cost very much, you know. It wasn't steerage, but it was almost that.

SIGRIST: And then where did the ship land?

FINCH: I think it landed in, no where did that land, because we had to do a lot of travelling after that to get to Czechoslovakia.

SIGRIST: And then how did you go from there to Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: Then you had to go by train. D

SIGRIST: Do you have – do you remember anything about the train ride to Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: No, all I remember is it was very long, and we got to Prague, and they didn't have enough of a wind – it was winter – and it was cold, and I know that I had to go to dress shop and get some warm clothing, you know. That I remember. And I was very proud of the dresses they bought me because they were very pretty, considering that they were European, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember them? Can you describe them for me?

FINCH: Well, I think one was sort of a little check, and it was green, I remember that. And it was, it was – a very pretty thing, I felt very, very dressed up in it, you know. And, and, well, I had it for a long time after I was there.

SIGRIST: What was the style of clothing at that time?

FINCH: I think, it was short, it wasn't too long. I mean, with the girls, didn't wear too long dresses, you know, at that time. And I remember going to school in Czechoslovakia and I could'n't understand, you know, I couldn't – I could speak the language, but not very fluently, as a Czech would, living in Czechoslovakia, and I couldn't read it, really, so I had quite a time in transferring myself into their psyche as it were. But I enjoyed a lot of the way they taught because for science and different things, we'd go out into the fields and see actuality the growing things, and how it worked, and you know, I thought that was a good way of teaching. I enjoyed that.

SIGRIST: You were there about a year, correct?

FINCH: Where did you live during that time?

SIGRIST: I lived in Melifskov.

FINCH: Mel M-E-L LIF L-I-F – I don't—I can't spell. My spelling is horrible.

SIGRIST: Alright. With whom were you living?

FINCH: I was living with my husband's foster parents.

SIGRIST: Your father's foster parents.

FINCH: Yes. And then I lived with my mother part of the time, too. I was, you know, going back and forth between them because they had had a big fight or something there, and they separated when they got to Czechoslovakia. So each one was living in a different place, and to see them both I would have to go on these trains all by myself at that time. When I think about it now, you know you wouldn't do it now, but ...

SIGRIST: Tell me about the house you lived in with your father's family?

FINCH: Well, it was very interesting. There weren't too many – it was a typical farmhouse in the – that they had in the European countries. They had these

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beautiful tile stoves which I wish I had one of. And they were – they were made so that the old people could sit on this side of it, and get the heat. Are you following me? They were made like so, and then like this.

SIGRIST: You're taking your hand and you're making a shelf.

FINCH: Yeah, right. And in the shelf, the older people would sit to get the heat of the stove.

SIGRIST: How big were these?

FINCH: Oh, they sometimes – oh, eight feet? You know, they were just all made out of tiles. Ceramic tiles.

SIGRIST: And were they heated?

FINCH: I really don't – I think it was coke or something. I mean, what would consider. I don't think there was – maybe it was coal. I don't know. I really don't know. But I know a lot of wood was used. And now those stoves that I'm just describing – they have beautiful designs on some of them, they're museum pieces and they sell for thousands of dollars now, you know.

SIGRIST: How many rooms did the house have?

FINCH: Well, I know that there was – you went, let me see. I think there were about four rooms, and you had to, you had to be, you had to be in with somebody else to sleep because they didn't have that much room. And then the house opened up into the barn, so that they could go out and feed the animals during the winter time, you know, when it was cold and snowy out.

SIGRIST: And did they keep animals?

FINCH: Oh yeah, they kept animals right in the barn there.

SIGRIST: What animals?

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FINCH: Cockles [ph] and, what was it, a goat? And they had chickens, and I don't know what else they had.

SIGRIST: Did you ever have to interact with the animals when you were there?

FINCH: Well, I was taught how to milk a cow, and I don't know how to do it anymore, but I was taught how to do it at the time, you know. But I wouldn't do it again.

SIGRIST: These are your father's relatives – who are they exactly? Are they ...

FINCH: Well, they're the people – they're the foster parents.

SIGRIST: The foster parents.

FINCH: Yeah, they're the foster parents, yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about them, and what they were like as people?

FINCH: Well, all I can remember is the mother was a typical European – old, old. She wasn't old at the time, but she looked very old to me, with a babushka, you know, always kept it on her head. And she was small and bent over when I met her, you know. And the man – his foster father – was an old, tall man. And I know that there was a sort of a foster brother, too. They weren't very pleasant people you know. And I don't remember too much of them, because I didn't like them very much.

SIGRIST: What did they feed you while you were there?

FINCH: Well, the typical European – see the European food for Czechs is roast pork, sauerkraut, and dumplings of various kinds. You know. And that's your typical deal. Otherwise, they would – they never lost any part of an animal. You ate everything. They had the stomach, and they had the – well, every part of the animal was eaten in something, you know. And you learned to eat it.

SIGRIST: And how would they prepare the entrails? What kind of a dish would they make?

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FINCH: Well, it's surprisingly like they make kidney, which is used in England the same way. It was very tasty until I learned what it was, then I couldn't eat it anymore. And the stomach was kind of a white sort of thing and they made a cream sauce. They had all kinds of sauces, like the French make more sauces than they do food. And I – the sauces were to cover a lot of the imperfections of the food you were eating, you know. And they made – they thought up more sauces – they had sauces for string beans, they had sauces for everything. And so the food was very tasty, until you grew up and you knew what part of the animal it was, and then you wouldn't eat it.

SIGRIST: Where was the food prepared? What kind of a --?

FINCH: Well, they, they had a place in the kitchen. They had, you know, they brought in, I don't think there was running water. I think you had to go out to the well to get the water, and they would have a sink, and a place to prepare the food, you know. And then you had tables to sit at. And you know.

SIGRIST: I guess what I'm getting at is what, what – like was it a fireplace that they used or did they have a cook stove?

FINCH: Well, they had the tile stove. That was the thing that they cooked on, too. A lot of them would have this place over here for the old people, and then over here it would be where they would, would cook.

SIGRIST: So that's on the opposite side?

FINCH: On the opposite side. Yeah. And they use that for cooking, and they used it for heating, and for many, many things.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture in that house that sticks out in your mind?

FINCH: Not really. The stove is the one that always attracted me, you know. But it was mostly rustic furniture made out of – you know, they made their own furniture. Like the sofa would be homemade, and the chairs would be all made out of wood, homemade. Most of it was homemade stuff. I don't

remember any particular thing. As I said, I wasn't very happy there, so I didn't – it hasn't stayed in my mind too much.

SIGRIST: Yeah, how did you feel having come from the United States, and a somewhat more technologically advanced lifestyle to having – to be forced, really – to, to be in this situation.

FINCH: Right, well, I wasn't very happy about it. But as a child during that particular time, you didn't argue with your parents, you went and did what they said. Because they were, they were very demanding, you know. They, you were theirs to do as they wanted with. That's the way the kids were brought up in those days. I mean, now the kids rebel, I mean they have laws that govern the kids, but in the early days of our culture, you more or less obeyed your parents and whatever they wanted to do as much as you hated to do it.

SIGRIST: You just accepted your fate.

FINCH: You accepted it. And I was just hoping we'd go back to America, you know. And I was delighted when they did. I enjoyed – it's a beautiful country – and because I liked the outdoors, I would love the woods, and I would walk in them and I loved the mountains – I loved the scenery, it was beautiful, you know. And then a friend of mine had a son, and we used to go and do crazy things together – steal fruit and things like that there. I remember that – oh, I'm sorry [loses microphone].

SIGRIST: That's alright.

FINCH: I remember the plums.

SIGRIST: Yeah, the plums.

FINCH: We had plum trees and I remember we swiped some of the plums off one night, and they were the most beau – maybe because we stole them they tasted that much sweeter. But they were the most delicious things I ever tasted in my life. I went back to Czechoslovakia just two years ago, which

was a great disappointment. And I tried to emulate those plums, but they were nowhere to be found.

SIGRIST: [laughs] Tell me about what your religious life was like while you were living with your foster grandparents.

FINCH: Well, it seems that they weren't too religious either. Neither was my father or my mother, you know, they were born Catholic, and I was christened a Catholic. But we never professed it – I mean, my father didn't believe in going to church or anything. But I always wanted religion, so I as an individual would go to church. But it wasn't anything that I was forced to go to with my parents. Yes, I do remember a really lovely thing. Because I like going to church, they had these monasteries there, and I would sneak away towards evening when the monks would be doing their prayers – you know, and the high mass was done with beautiful singing, and their voices were just beautiful to hear in the evening, you know. And I used to enjoy that a lot.

SIGRIST: What about celebrating religious holidays at all? Do you remember celebrating a holiday while you were in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: Well, they would celebrate Christmas, of course. And Saints' Days. But I think his parents felt all that was nonsense. You know, you shouldn't stop working just because it was a holiday, or something like that. But the main ones like Easter and Christmas, which everybody celebrated in the village, you know, they would, they would go along with that. And the big meal at Christmas time was goose. It had roast goose, and the same thing – sauerkraut and dumplings.

SIGRIST: Was the goose one of theirs?

FINCH: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

SIGRIST: And then how was killed?

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FINCH: Well, they just wrung its neck. That's the typical way they did it. And then they would stuff the goose with all kinds of goodies, you know, and things that they particularly liked.

SIGRIST: What would they do with the – how would they get the feathers off the goose?

FINCH: You dip 'em in hot water. And then you pluck 'em. Did you ever do it?

SIGRIST: No. Then was there some use for the feathers after that?

FINCH: Oh sure. You took those feathers and you kept them – all chicken feathers, goose feathers, mostly were valuable. Especially the little ones because you made down pillows out of them, or you sold the down.

SIGRIST: And the down pillows – did you use those in the house in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: Oh yeah. Oh. I still do. Yeah, everybody had down pillows and you slept under a great big down, well, I can't say it was a puff, but it was made like a great big bag and it was full of down feathers which were very light on your body, but very warm because it was very cold there.

SIGRIST: Who decided to return to America?

FINCH: I think my father and his friend who was also there, didn't like what he saw, you know. So they both decided to come back.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about getting ready to leave Czechoslovakia? Packing and that sort of thing.

FINCH: Well, yeah, well the packing wasn't too bad because we didn't bring that much stuff. You know. So we just packed up what we had and said goodbye to a lot of nice people that we had met, and I hated to lose my companion that I had had for a year, you know, and his family were very kind to me. And we started off – I don't know – we took the train to England, I remember crossing the Channel. You know. And it was very rocky. I mean,

the boat, you know. The Channel is very rough, over in England. I remember crossing that, and we went over to Rotterdam to get the boat back. Yeah, and the typical thing is when Europeans leave Czechoslovakia or anywhere the, the thing was you would buy a great big salami, they weren't going to feed you anywhere, so you had to come prepared with your own food. That's what they all thought. So they'd have these great big long salamis – hard salami – and they'd bring a big loaf of bread with them. I remember that very vividly, because I use to sneak pieces of it, you know. And you brought that with you just to sustain you unless they didn't feed you somewhere, you know. Czechs like to eat. That's one, one thing they do have all throughout Czechoslovakia. And they would make the most delicious pastries you ever ate in your life. You know, in Czechoslovakia. Absolutely delicious.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship you took back to the United States?

FINCH: It was the same one – George Washington.

SIGRIST: George Washington. And where did you pick the ship up?

FINCH: In Rotterdam.

SIGRIST: And what – you alluded to it a little bit earlier –

FINCH: Oh, it was the most horrible trip I ever had in my life. We started out in January, and that is the worst time to be on the Atlantic Ocean. Because the storms are all in there. And the waves were so bad they would come right over the top of the boat. And we had to be tied in. We had a rope around us all the time we were on the boat, so we wouldn't fall overboard. And there were no stabilizers on boats in those days, so it was always going one way or the other. You sat down to eat at a table, and nine times out of ten you never finished your meal because it was in your lap. It was the roughest thing I ever went through in my life. And when I saw that Statue of Liberty, I could have gone up to kiss it. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my

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life, but I'm all – I'm very patriotic. I love the flag. I – I hate to see them desecrate a flag. And I'm very angry when people don't stand up and tip their hats when the flag comes by. So when I saw that Statue of Liberty, I just thought it was the most wonderful thing I ever saw in my life.

SIGRIST: What other things stick out in your mind about that crossing back? For instance, can you describe for me where you stayed on that trip in the ship?

FINCH: Well ,we were down the same idea. You know, you – you, they came back, they didn't have that much money. You know, the money was gone after a year, so we were way down in the hold. And you had to go way upstairs to go to eat, or anything, you had to go way down. And I always – I always remember, I hated – I hated it. And I was very much afraid because I don't like to be confined anywhere, and being down in the hold in a little tiny cabin was horrible. We had double-deckers on, you know, on both sides of the room. And we slept there. At nighttime when the boat was pitching, you fall out of the darn thing if you didn't hold on. It was – it was that bad. And, and the food was not that good either because you didn't get that much of it and most of the time you were feeding the fish anyhow. You were throwing up because the voyage was so bad.

SIGRIST: Were there any safety drills on the ship that you can recall?

FINCH: Not a one.

SIGRIST: Oh.

FINCH: Not a one.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the ship took?

FINCH: How long it took to come over?

SIGRIST: To get to New York.

FINCH: Two weeks.

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SIGRIST: Two weeks. And you said you saw the Statue of Liberty and that made you happy.

FINCH: Oh absolutely.

SIGRIST: Then what happened, once the ship came into the harbor?

FINCH: Well, let's see. We went back to 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, and we lived in an apartment.

SIGRIST: [superposed] Well, before that. I mean, talk to me about Ellis Island.

FINCH: Oh, well, I met this girl about my age, you know. And she came from Russia or somewhere. I don't remember what country – Budapest, no it wasn't Budapest. Well, anyhow, one of the European countries, and we had a lot of fun together. But she had lice and I didn't know it. And I had long hair all the way down to my buttocks, you know, way down. And I contracted her lice. So when I came, when I was going out, they – they examine you, you know, before you leave the boat. And they examined me and I had the lice. Well, I couldn't dock. I couldn't go into America until I was deloused. That's how I happened to get on the Island. And that's where they did it.

SIGRIST: Well, how did they delouse you?

FINCH: Well, I remember – it's varied [ph] to me – but I remember they poured kerosene or something in there, you know. And I had to keep my eyes closed so that it wouldn't, you know. And then I remember them putting me under a shower, and that's when I came into that and I heard all this noise and the people all grouped together, and crying and stuff, you know. And the smell was terrible. And then I asked about the places outside, they said, a lot of people will have to be sent back to whatever country they came from because they're sick. You know, things like that.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about going through this experience?

FINCH: Well, it was very degrading. You know, I felt terrible that I had to go through this. I was a very proud kid. And, and to have lice to me was horrible. You

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know. And to be having to go through this to get into America again was terrible to me, too. You know. But it was something I had to do to get into America again, that was the only thing I could do. W

SIGRIST: Were your parents brought out to Ellis Island with you?

FINCH: I – they must have been. I don't seem to remember them being there, but they must have been because they, you know, I went with them afterwards. So they must have been there. And I don't just what capacity. It didn't take too long for me to be there. You know, they did a thorough job, you know, of whatever they did. And I think I was only there overnight.

SIGRIST: Oh, you stayed overnight at Ellis Island.

FINCH: I think I was there overnight. I don't remember where I slept though. Or maybe I didn't stay overnight. It's so long ago, you know, it's hard to remember. But I know when we left there, we went back to New York City again. But I remember all those – that's why I wrote that on that letter – is, I remembered, you know, they were all in like lines, you know, waiting –

SIGRIST: The immigrants were.

FINCH: Yeah, the immigrants. Waiting to get their passports or whatever to allow them to come into America. You know, there will be an exam, and their names were being yelled at, and people were crying, and babies were crying, and messing. And there was such a smell at everything – the smell is what got me, you know. I remember that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember having to be examined in any way once you were there?

FINCH: I think they did examine me. You know, because they examined everybody. You know, if they had tuberculosis or anything, they were all sent back. I think I was examined.

SIGRIST: And somehow your brother escaped having lice.

FINCH: He didn't have to do anything, no. He was all right, and, you know, he was with my parents all the time. I don't remember him being with me at all.

SIGRIST: Were your parents American citizens from having been in America all those years?

FINCH: Yeah. They – my father was a citizen then, yeah. That's why he was able to come in. You know, he didn't have to go through the lines, I know that. You know, I remember finally getting to them and we just took for on the bus – or was it? Yeah, it must have been the bus. No, because Ellis Island – no, we had to go on a boat first, and get into New York City. And then, you know, evidently we had some friends there or somebody that we stayed with the first couple weeks that we were in New – you know, in America again. And I don't remember who the heck they were! But we – I know we didn't have a house or anything, you know. We just had to stay with them.

SIGRIST: Did you stay in the same neighborhood that you lived in – again that Czech neighborhood?

FINCH: [superposed] Yeah. Yeah. The same thing. Every Czech goes back to the same neighborhood, you know.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about being back in America at this point?

FINCH: Well, they were happy to be back there. I don't think they're – well, I guess because they had, you know, they separated when they got there, they weren't too happy about the whole, the whole situation. But my parents, my mother, my mother wasn't as intellectual as my father was. Do you know what I mean? He was – he really was a very well read man for his day and age. And my mother, and he was very handsome, and women liked him. And he had a lot of problems with my mother because of that. And so they were always getting together and separating, and I'd bring them together again. And this went on in the United States, too. So, I-I-I was old before my

time, if you know what I mean. And, evidently, they got jobs as soon as they came back because, you know, I –

SIGRIST: Do you remember what those jobs were?

FINCH: I don't remember. I think my mother – I remember one time she worked in a bakery selling baked goods or something through some friends of hers. When she first came back. And my father got a job in his – in the factory doing whatever he did, you know.

SIGRIST: So they stayed in New York then with this [not understood].

FINCH: Yeah, they stayed in New York for a while, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever relate to you her experiences that she had had while she was in Czechoslovakia, and how she felt about coming back?

FINCH: Not really. It's – that's a funny part of it. I look back and I think, no, she really didn't talk too much about, except she talked about not having a mother, you know. Because she didn't.

SIGRIST: Well, where did she live when – I know she wasn't living where you were – but with whom did she live when she was in Czechoslovakia?

FINCH: Well, she lived with some friends, you know. And then I – I went to live with her. When I was in Czechoslovakia, you know. I left – I didn't like living with where my father was, so I went to live with her. And she was with some friends, and it was much more pleasant atmosphere, you know. But I don't remember her telling to – it's the funniest thing, when you're young, you don't think about the past. You know, you don't think you want to know. And all we knew about them was that they, neither one of them really had a background of parents. So, there wasn't really too much – she used to tell us a story about this uncle who married this girl who was about sixteen years old, you know, and then she was thrown out on her own because she took over everthiyn, you know. And so she was very unhappy about that.

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SIGRIST: Am I—then am I right in assuming your mother didn't talk much about what she was feeling about things.

FINCH: No, she didn't. No. No, she didn't. You know. No.

SIGRIST: Did you have relatives in the United States?

FINCH: No, I had – see, neither one of them had any relatives because they didn't have any family. So we knew nobody as far as relatives. Which we – which I missed terribly because it seemed every one of my friends had so many relatives. And I had nobody, you know.

SIGRIST: When you first got back to the United States, how did your time in Czechoslovakia change you, or alter the way you looked at things?

FINCH: Well, I knew that, you know, I went back to school then. I was P.S. 86 in New York City, and every time I walked from there – we were on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, and I walked all the way down to 86<sup>th</sup> Street to go to school – and I'd see that American flag flying up there, my heart would just flutter. Something or other, I was very patriotic. That thing – just buy – you know, just affected me to see that – the flag flying there. I was so happy to be back in America, you know. 'Cause I was getting – there wasn't anything really for me in Czechoslovakia. You know. And it seemed to be – just, I was riding from one parent to the other. There were always disturbances, you know. So it wasn't a very happy time.

SIGRIST: Did being in Czechoslovakia and having those kinds of experiences affect the way – your desire to speak Czech in America at all?

FINCH: No, that never bothered me. But see, what I would do all my life when I lived in New York – every Sunday I would head up to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue – I was always very curious about – I always want to find out about everything. And I would go into the museum of art there, and I would go to the lectures they had there. And I would go through the museum. So I gave myself a veneer of

education, just by myself. You know what I mean. And they let me go – my parents with me. And they let me go any way I wanted to go, you know.

SIGRIST: Your father obviously could write and everything, but could your mother read and write?

FINCH: Oh sure. They could write Czech and German and Eng – and I mean, their English was not of the best, but they could get along, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you find that when you went back to school when you got here that you were treated differently? I mean, did people consider you American or Czech?

FINCH: Oh no, they considered me American. Yeah. I mean –

SIGRIST: Your peers, I mean.

FINCH: Yeah. No. I got along, you know, with everybody. And that's where – in this P.S. I was – I was in the eighth grade then, and I made the rapid advancement class, you know, because of an intelligence test. And [laughs] I couldn't – I couldn't finish it because I had blood poisoning and they had to operate on me on the chicken table. [tape skips] In those days, children wore black stockings, okay, and I was a very tall girl – I was as tall as I am now, and in those days you weren't tall, and my feet were just as big. And they only made a certain shoe for women, and I had to put – squeeze my long, big feet into this little shoe. And so I was constantly getting blisters. And the dye was not permanent in those days in the black stocking, and it got into my blisters, and so it created – my whole leg was just – stiff. And they couldn't even get me to the hospital, just had to operate on the kitchen table.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that experience?

FINCH: It was horrible. I remember the doctor putting the – the thing on my face. My mother was putting all these poultices, like the old timers used to do, you know. And of course, I had a great big lump up here. And –

SIGRIST: Oh, on your thigh, your—

FINCH: No, it was in my groin. Yeah.

SIGRIST: In your groin.

FINCH: And it wasn't getting any better, and the foot was just getting harder. It was stiffening up. And so she finally called the doctors. They didn't usually call doctors, you know, matter or take care of all these little problems themselves.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the poultice was made out of? What – how she would --?

FINCH: Well, usually what they used was raw potatoes. Because potatoes draw, okay?

SIGRIST: Draw meaning absorb?

FINCH: Yeah, well, it draws the poison out. You know, and different things that would draw the poison out. But it was too far gone at that time. So the neighbors told her she had to get a doctor. So when the doctor came, he took one look at me and he said, if we don't operate on it right now, she'd lose a leg and she'll die – parathynitis will set in. She's almost got it now. So he operated on the kitchen table. Was very primitive. And – I've gone through quite a few of those crazy things like that. I had hydrophobia injections when nobody was getting them either. So, but, I guess I lived, but I lost the fact that I couldn't go to school and finish my two years of [not understood]. So I lost out on that.

SIGRIST: An education always being so important to you.

FINCH: Very important to me. Always. I always wanted to learn, you know. Anything. I was omnivorous in my, my thinking and my reading, you know.

SIGRIST: If you – if you had the opportunity to give some advice to a young person about how to lead their lives successfully based on the things that you did and you wanted, what would you tell someone?

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FINCH: It's a difficult thing to tell somebody how to live their life. Because each one is an individual, and absorbs things that happened to them in different ways, so it's very hard for a person to tell them. You know. The only thing I would say would – keep an open-mind and learn. Learn everything because there's nothing in this world – if it's done by somebody, you can do it too. That's the way I always look at things. If I look at smoeing, and I have to, it looks very difficult to do—I'll say, well somebody did it. I'll have to learn how to do it! And I think if you keep your mind open and absorb everything that comes along, and try to keep a good outlook on it, I think that's all you can do. You know. And try to be happy about it.

SIGRIST: Well, thank you. Mrs. Finch, we're going to end now. I want to thank you very much.

FINCH: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist, signing off, with Ulasta Finch on August 23, 1995 in Latham, New York.

FINCH: Right.