

E-733

MARY MESTRICH

BIRTH DATE: JULY 21, 1907

INTERVIEWING DATE: MARCH 23, 1996

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: DOUGLAS TARR, MAY 2006

CROATIA, 1922.

AGE: 15

SHIP: BELVEDERE

PORT: TRIESTE

RESIDENCES:

CROATIA: KUKLJICA

**U.S.: JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY AND
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

LEVINE: Ok, today is March 23, 1996 . . .

MESTRICH: Um--hmm.

LEVINE: . . . and I'm here in Staten Island, with Mary, born Maria. . . .Jaša, changed to Jasa, Mestrich.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: She came from Croatia, Yugoslavia, in 1922 when she was 15 years of age.

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MESTRICH: Right.

LEVINE: Today Mrs. Mestrich is eighty-eight years of age and I'm very happy to be here and I'm looking forward to whatever you can remember.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: So we'll start at the beginning and then you can . . .

MESTRICH: All right. Thank you.

LEVINE: . . . tell me whatever you remember.

MESTRICH: Ok. Thank you.

LEVINE: Ok. Where in Croatia were you born?

MESTRICH: Kukljica.

LEVINE: Kukljica and that's spelled K-U-K-L-J-I-C-A.

MESTRICH: C-H. C-A.

LEVINE: Right. C-A. And did you live in Kukljica up until the time you came to the United States?

MESTRICH: Yes, um-hmm.

LEVINE: And your birthdate?

MESTRICH: This was in Kukljica . . .

LEVINE: Yeah.

MESTRICH: You want the day of my birthday?

LEVINE: Yes.

MESTRICH: July 21, 1907.

LEVINE: Ok. Now, when you think, could you descriv--, describe Kukljica, a little bit, what you remember about . . .

MESTRICH: Well, it's a nice little island. We had a (laughing), We had a lotta fun when I was kid. I used to go with the sheeps, I had about five sheeps, and my friends, and we used to go out in the, in the field. Take care of them.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. What was your father's name?

MESTRICH: Krlo.

LEVINE: Could you spell that?

MESTRICH: K-R-L-O.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

MESTRICH: Kristina.

LEVINE: Kristina. And her maiden name?

MESTRICH: BeniĆ.

LEVINE: How do you spell that?

MESTRICH: You . . .

(Her daughter Julia says, B, B-E-N-I-C.)

MESTRICH: Yeah, BeniĆ.

LEVINE: B-E-N-I-C.

MESTRICH: Be-niĆ. B-E-N-I-C. BeniĆ.

LEVINE: Ok. And what did your father do, for work, when you were little?

MESTRICH: Well, they usual, fishing, fishingman. But when he, when First World War start, he was . . . out, someplace in, I don't know, some island. They were looking for the stones. They were building, a house, my father want to build house for himself. And that time, war started 1914 and he finished this house before the war started. Then, they took him in a war, in 1915, he was, I, I don't, he was injured and he come home and they took him back again and he was killed. Second time, he never come back.

LEVINE: Oh. Now where was the house?

MESTRICH: In a . . . Kukljica.

LEVINE: I see and did you . . .

MESTRICH: That's where we lived because we had just a little house. One room, my daughter was there. One room upstairs and downstairs, like a basement. Then my father built another house next to it . . . and that time, he was, he was young man so he was active, he was doing things for himself. He was fishing, he was going for the stones to get, you know, whatever he needs. And that time, the, he, good thing he finished the house, but he went to war and he was killed.

LEVINE: I see.

MESTRICH: And he left three children and my mother.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Now what, what are your, was it sisters or brothers, or one of each?

MESTRICH: We were four children, but my brother died, he was, I don't even remember him. He must be, maybe about year old when he died. I was the oldest one.

LEVINE: And who was second?

MESTRICH: And he, my brother was second. Then my sister was third, and my younger sister was third. When our father died, I was eight years old . . . the brother died when he was baby . . . year or two years old. Then, my younger sister she was but, three years old, she just died last year, my sister here.

LEVINE: What was her name?

MESTRICH: Ivana. And Milka, she was . . . she was in crib, yes. She was baby. So we were very young when my father was killed in First World War.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Do you remember, do you remember that?

MESTRICH: Yeah. Because we didn't believe. When my mother went to the city and she come home and somebody says there, "Kristina, we heard that your husband got killed," so we went, like, close in that picture, in other house that the woman had a letter from her husband and she wrote, when sh-, her husband saw when my father was killed. And we went there and we all come home crying—it was true, that he was killed.

LEVINE: Well, what memories do you have of your father?

MESTRICH: Not much.

LEVINE: Before he went to war.

MESTRICH: Not much, because he wasn't much home. He was always out doing something.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

MESTRICH: I remember him couple times, he used to teach me, you know, like reading because I was going in school, so but the other, my sister, they were young. But, so, I remember him little bit, I was a little older, but the others there they don't remember him at all.

LEVINE: Do you remember any other experiences with him besides . . .

MESTRICH: No, that's all.

LEVINE: . . . his teaching you reading?

MESTRICH: That's all.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Uh, huh. And how about your mother? Do you, what, what memories do have?

MESTRICH: Oh my mother's always with us. My mother used to, because we were left, there was after World War, everybody was poor there. They didn't, when we had a, they work in the field, and they had a winery. That's made the most living, making wine. And they had a lot, olive trees, they make oil . . . for themselves. And they had a, figs tree. So, they used to work all, from spring to summer. And a, like they had a patches of, a land, near the houses. So like, he a, you know, but they were mostly open field so each had a like, a little piece of land and they used to plant a beans, a lettuce, spinach, like that.

LEVINE: For their own use?

MESTRICH: Yeah for their own use . . .

LEVINE: Each family for their own use?

MESTRICH: Not to sell because they didn't have enough to sell, just for themselves. They didn't even have enough for themselves.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Could you describe a little, was it stone house that your father made . . .

MESTRICH: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . before? Could you describe it at all?

MESTRICH: Sure. You wanna see it?

LEVINE: You have a picture of it?

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, ok. Well why don't, for the tape, why don't you tell about it?

MESTRICH: It's a stone, stone house and we had a picture of it there.

(Unidentified woman says, "Well you have to talk.")

LEVINE: Yeah, but, so we have it on the tape. Can you . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . just describe it?

MESTRICH: It's a, it's one room, but it's nice. It's big as this, maybe bigger. And it's built all, the stone and still standing.

LEVINE: And, and . . .

MESTRICH: And nobody's living there now because we're all here.

LEVINE: Do, was, it was one room and did it have an upstairs?

MESTRICH: Yeah, upstairs and downstairs and my aunt came and she built the beautiful patio for us.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: Because we had just a beams, to walk on, you know like steps. Because we were afraid and we didn't have the money to build.

LEVINE: And did you have. . .

MESTRICH: So when my aunt came here, the one that bring me to this country, she came and she build nice patio and stairs all from the concrete, very nice. And the house was built all, from the stone.

LEVINE: Wow.

MESTRICH: And we had a, three windows, two on this side, one that side. And the door here. (Unintelligible background comment.) Very nice.

LEVINE: Do you remember, like the inside or how it was furnished or anything like that?

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MESTRICH: We didn't have much, just a beds. Just beds, I don't think we even have a chair or dresser or anything.

LEVINE: Did you have a stove?

MESTRICH: No. We had a, build, from bricks like. I don't know how, how you would call that Julie? We call

LEVINE: Like a stone fireplace?

MESTRICH: Yeah, something like, but it's not covered, it's open. So we used to cook there and have a little fire. But when we go upstairs, we used to bring little bit wood (laughs) and burn in that some kind, we had like little pot or something, we would burn to warm up little bit, upstairs, because we didn't have no heat. But it wasn't cold as here.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: It, we, we didn't have the snow one year. I don't remember seeing snow or anything, little bit once in a while.

LEVINE: Did you have running water?

MESTRICH: No. We had a well. It . . .

(Her daughter Julia says, "A well.")

MESTRICH: 'Bout ten minutes walk, and we had a pail on a rope and let it go down and grab the water and bring up still and fill up the pot that we bring and carry it on our heads.

LEVINE: Wow.

MESTRICH: (laughing)

LEVINE: How old were you when you started carrying the water on your head?

MESTRICH: Oh, I was ten year old, from ten like till I came here.

LEVINE: Wow.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now how about washing. How did your mother do the washing?

MESTRICH: Oh we had a sea. You know the, we used to go there in a, in a . . .

LEVINE: Adriatic.

MESTRICH: Salty water. Yeah. And there's all, rocks there, and we used to . . .

(Her daughter Julia speaks.)

MESTRICH: . . . you know, wash on the rocks. We didn't have no . . . washing board or anything. We used to go there and water, and wash our clothes there.

LEVINE: Now would you, would you, would your mother go to the, to the water . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . to do the washing? And would the-, would there be like . . .

MESTRICH: I used to swim all day there.

LEVINE: Oh.

MESTRICH: I used to just put the apron on (laughing). We didn't have a bathing suit. We had a apron and we tie up here (laughing) and we go in the water. (laughing) And we used to swim, I-I, I think I still could swim. Yeah. I used to love the water. My mother when she come home from, farming she work or city, she used to feel my hair because we had all long hair that time. Today they wear like here. Clothes and hair and everything.

LEVINE: How would, how did you wear your hair then?

MESTRICH: Braids and tied here. Show them my pictures, Julia

LEVINE: Braids tied up in front.

MESTRICH: Yeah, front.

LEVINE: Pulled right on top. Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: Yeah. And she used to feel my hair and she should be glad I know how to swim, but didn't bother her, anyway. I used to, we used to, love with kids, we used to swim all day in water.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Did you have grandparents who were around when you were little?

MESTRICH: I don't remember my grandfathers, they died young. But, my mother's father I don't remember and I don't remember my father's father, they died young, but my grandmother, I remember them both.

LEVINE: What, what do you remember about them? When you think about them, what are the memories that you have?

MESTRICH: We, I lived, she lived with us.

(Long pause)

LEVINE: She lived with you.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh. So . . .

MESTRICH: We all lived together.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: My three . . . three kids, my mother, my grandmother, and my aunt. She wasn't well, so she, there was six of us and nobody could do any job, just my mother. She used to go some another . . . villages, you know, above, not on island, above the, Zadar, where Zadar is, Split, and all that.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: And that's where she used to, when we had a vinegar, or wine, something, little sheep, young sheep they used to sell in summer time. . .

LEVINE: So she would . . .

MESTRICH . . . just to make a little money.

LEVINE: She would take the wine. . .

MESTRICH: And she used to be, bring a food, like, corn and meat or something like that for us.

LEVINE: So, so she would take the wine, she would take the vinegar, maybe a little . . .

MESTRICH: Not much wine, but vin-, wine we used to sell in place where we lived. We called that, krčma. They used to open, like po-, maybe week and just neighbor used to come and drink and pay whatever.

LEVINE: What did you call it?

MESTRICH: Krčma.

LEVINE: Could you spell that? This is the, this is the name of the wine?

MESTRICH: K-, no it. Kr-čma.

LEVINE: Ok, so.

MESTRICH: Krčma.

LEVINE: K-R-C, with the, with the accent. . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: M-A.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what does that mean?

MESTRICH: Krčma, like what do you call here, a saloon?

LEVINE: Oh, you'd have . . .

MESTRICH: But saloon here, they had it open all the time. We had only certain time in the like . . .

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(Mrs. Mestrich's daughter Julia says, "Fall.")

MESTRICH: . . . before when fall, before fall comes. That's when they had a wine.

LEVINE: I see so, so then, people would come by . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah

LEVINE: . . . and they would drink and they would pay for the wine.

MESTRICH: Yeah like old people, old man, you know, come and take a litre, we call litre.
And he would drink it or they buy, take home.

LEVINE: I see.

MESTRICH: That's how they used to sell their wines.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: So, your mother then, what, she would, she would take the vinegar . . .

MESTRICH: Vinegar when she . . .

LEVINE: . . . or maybe a small sheep . . .

MESTRICH: . . . had some eggs and like I said before, we had sometime, one little sheep or two. It was little ones, babies one. When they few months old, then they sell them, so they make . . .

LEVINE: And so how would she go, to, to the city?

MESTRICH: On a boat, those little boat that they have and they used to . . . and they used to row, because my mother didn't have a man, so she gotta do . . . do herself, rowing. And we used to, we used to go, they used to go early in the morning. They don't go like in afternoon. They go before sun comes up and they go to the Zadar.

LEVINE: Zadar. Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: Yeah, and from there wherever they have to go, they, those people, you know in Zadar, they, they . . . they don't work in the fields, so they like to buy, you know, vinegar, eggs. If you ever have something for sale, it's to make, so the people from my island, they make a little money like that.

LEVINE: I see. So this is . . .

MESTRICH: Now they don't do that no more.

LEVINE: So this is how your mother supported the family.

MESTRICH: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Wow. Now can you remember helping your mother do anything?

MESTRICH: I used to work (laughing) it, like I said before, we had a, I don't know, four or five sheeps and we used to go three or four girls together and one had a two maybe one . . .

(Unidentified little girl talking in background.)

MESTRICH: . . . out in a field and I used to bring my mother wood. That's for my grandmother needs . . . to cook on a, on that . . .

LEVINE: That stone in the fireplace.

MESTRICH: . . . little stone, that we had a fireplace. She loved that wood I used to bring because it was dry, but my mother used to go like, once in two months to cut a lot of these branches in the, in the, in the woods. We used a lotta wood. And she make big bunch and tie up with a rope and carry on her back, home. And that dry up, we used to use it. But my was a, good help, that dry wood I used to bring, branches and things I used to make and bring her home, almost every other night and they like that.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. What do you remember about your grandmother?

MESTRICH: And we used to go in the field, wine because it's not done on the island. You gotta go up, like I said, on the boat early in the morning. I didn't do much, but my mother, and my aunt used to go. That's where they, got the wine . . . plant there and they used to take care of that. That takes lotta care. They gotta dig around, they, they, peel those leaves from the branches and they gotta take carry, you know, with till they ripe. The grapes get ripe and they cut it (laughs) and they stomp it with, with their feet to make wine. And they put them in the barrel and that's how they boil start, start boiling and or they bring them home. And that's when they, drain out and they get a wine. Very nice, red wine. Mostly red.

LEVINE: Now how about your grandmother and your aunt. Do you remember doing any kinds of things with them . . .

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: . . . when you were little?

MESTRICH: This, my grandmother had a asthma, so she wasn't much. When she was young, she was doing things, just like my mother . . . like that. But when she got old, she just was home. And she died, she was still living when I left.

LEVINE: Do you remember any kind of medical care that people got, when you were a little girl in Kukljica?

MESTRICH: I remember I was in the hospital. I don't know, I hardly remember when they come and took me home, I don't know why I was there or what and, and never went to doctor. We didn't have no much there. Today they had a doctor in a, in a place there. When I was child, we didn't have it. We had to go to Zadar to, I don't remember I ever went.

LEVINE: Do you remember any home remedies that people used, in place of a doctor?

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: Things that people did, for different illnesses?

MESTRICH: We didn't have a good coffee, we didn't have a good tea. We didn't, mostly what we called kaša. You know like farina, we cooked that from the corn and polenta, you know that polenta, that's that thick. And if you had a fish, and you make (laughing), that's what my grandson liked, but I don't make it, my husband used to make fresh fish with the tomatoes and onions, vinegar and oil. And you put over that polenta, that sauce, it's very good. (laughing)

LEVINE: That you remember from when you were a little girl?

MESTRICH: Yeah, if you had a fish, we didn't have it all the time, but when you had, it was very good.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Uh, huh. And what do you remember about any kind of ceremonies that took place when you were a little girl?

MESTRICH: Just August 5, we had a, that's our, that we celebrate, that was Blessed Mother Day, Julia, isn't it? Yeah. Yeah, that's . . .

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(Her daughter Julia says, “Lady of the Snows, Lady of the Snow.”)

MESTRICH: Oh. Gospe od Sniga. That’s Lady of Snow.

LEVINE: Ok.

MESTRICH: Blessed Mother, we call Gospe od Sniga.

LEVINE: Ok.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And, and when you celebrated that . . .

MESTRICH: We gotta picture. . .

LEVINE: . . . what would you do?

MESTRICH: And, oh, yeah, they all get together (pause). We had a boat, I had a boat over there I’m gonna show you, and they go, we had a two churches. One it’s in a village, one is (pause) by half hour go with a boat or walking but maybe an hour till you get to the . . . end of island, we had another church there. So we keep Gospe od Sniga there. So August 5, we bring it to our place home, in our church, where we lived. And we keep it, I can’t remember, maybe for month, then we take back to the other church, end of the island and stays there till August 5, again . . .

LEVINE: Now . . .

MESTRICH: So people they get dressed nice, they have a drink, they cela-, like they, they play, they ko-, they kolo, they, you get a, you kolo, you know, they get together and they play.

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LEVINE: Color?

MESTRICH: Kolo, yeah, not dance, but they ko-, igra i kolo.

(Long pause)

MESTRICH: Ig-, igra-, igra i . . .kolo.

LEVINE: So that's, so that's two, two words.

MESTRICH: See. Igra

LEVINE: E-

MESTRICH Igra kolo. Igra kolo. They get together and then go around.

LEVINE: It's like a circle.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh wait. We're resuming now, after your grandson and great-grand – daughter . . .

(Her daughter Julia says, "Yes.")

LEVINE: . . . have just left. Ok.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: We've been talking now about Gospe od Sniga, which means our Lady of the Snow.

MESTRICH: How do you pu-, how you would put the G? Gospe.

LEVINE: This is fine. This is fine. I'll spell it for the tape. It's G-O-S-P-E, one word .

..

MESTRICH: Gospe.

LEVINE: O-D . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . another word . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . and sniga, S-N-I-G-A.

MESTRICH: Yeah. Gospe od Sniga.

LEVINE: Our Lady of the Snow.

MESTRICH: Snow, yeah.

LEVINE: Now we're talking about, this is a Catholic church . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . cele-, ceremony . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what was, what was the significance, in other words, what was the thing that happened, that this celebrates? What was the event?

MESTRICH: They said that they find . . . Gospe Sniga, pictures, statue in a, in, underneath the water there. That's where they built that church.

LEVINE: Oh, they found a statue . . .

MESTRICH: Statue.

LEVINE: . . . of Our Lady of the Snow.

MESTRICH: Yeah, like . . .

LEVINE: And it, and it snowed on August 5 . . .

MESTRICH: Fifth.

LEVINE: . . . which would be very unusual.

MESTRICH: Yeah, so that's why they built that a church there, and Gospe Sniga . . .

LEVINE: I see.

MESTRICH: . . . the statue, they bring it . . . there.

LEVINE: So then you take the statue from the church, where, where the church was built, where it was found, and to your church.

MESTRICH: Church, yeah. And stay in our church, for maybe couple a weeks or month. Then we bring it back to the, to that church.

LEVINE: Now was there also a ceremony when you returned the statue, back to the original church?

MESTRICH: Yeah, we all go, not is like on August 5. August 5, that's main, main, celebration.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: But after they just bring to church and lotta people they leave there gold pins and lotta pins gold pin on a, I don't know if its still, on it like that, but when I was kid, they, they have it.

LEVINE: They pin gold . . .

MESTRICH: Pin a gold pins . . .

LEVINE: . . . on the statue?

MESTRICH: Yeah. They leave, leave for, they pray, for the, for good luck and things like that.

LEVINE: How big is the statue?

MESTRICH: Oh it's like a person.

LEVINE: Oh it's as big as a person. Ok.

MESTRICH: Yeah. It's like a person.

LEVINE: And is it, and is it . . .

MESTRICH: And it had a little ange-, we got a picture of it.

LEVINE: And, did it, did it, it had clothing on, that you pin these things on?

MESTRICH: Yeah, yeah. Beautiful statue.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: And it had a, a little angel on her left arm. There it is, see.

LEVINE: Oh. I see. And she's carrying the baby Jesus?

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Now, um, you mentioned . . . igrata kolo.

(Julia says, "Igra.")

MESTRICH: Igra kolo.

LEVINE: I, I-G-R-, A. Kolo. K-O, L-O.

MESTRICH: Ko-

LEVINE: And that was the kind of circle dance . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . that . . .

MESTRICH: Just like I showed you, wha-, circle dance.

LEVINE: You link arms and you go in a circle. . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And, and dance. And that was done, on this day.

MESTRICH: Yeah. Today they don't do that much. They mostly have a dances. They dance, they play music, like here and dance, but that's when I was a kid. That was that time. It's not . . . that time when I was kid, it was nothing like here. When I went back to Europe thirteen years ago in 1982, they had a music Kolo(?) to midnight. And they dance and restaurant in that, I show you those mud houses they have. But that time when I was, we never have anything like that. We just have that kolo. We says, "Igra kolo". (laughing) That's what we had.

LEVINE: Did, and tell me about school. What, what, what kind of school did you go to?

MESTRICH: Oh, we had a nice, a nice school, but we had a, during the war, then Italian soldiers came . . . and I think I had only four years schooling. And when they came, Italian soldiers, they took over our school. We couldn't go to school, they were sleeping there. They took our, where we were going for the border, we were afraid to go, but they were good. They didn't do nothing to us. But they used to wash their clothes there and everything, so it wasn't comfortable. And I don't know, for couple a years they were there so when they, the war was over they, they move out, they went back to, they where they came from. So they, want us to go back to school, so I never went back to school. Coup-

LEVINE: Was this a public school? Was a public school?

MESTRICH: No, it was Catholic school. We gotta priest every Friday, yeah. And, I was a, my time came to come here with my aunt and that's how I left.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about the First World War, when the Italian, army was, was occupying your town?

MESTRICH: Well, I used to be with my mother in the field and when they, lot of us, we didn't have buses, now they had a bus, we didn't have it, we used to walk. Wherever we went, we walk. So they, we used to see the soldiers walking from our village to another village. I don't know how many miles the, each village is apart from and they had a different name. Our name, Kukljica. Where my friend come, their name was Kale.

LEVINE: How do you spell that one?

MESTRICH: Ka-, K-A-L-E. Kale, yeah. And the other ones Prejkva.

(Unidentified person says something.)

MESTRICH: Yeah. And another one was Prejkva, and all like that. And they used to walk. And we used to hide behind the piles of rocks or something because we're afraid. Maybe they wouldn't do nothing to us, and they used to, and oh, and then, and when we were in the village when we were home, they used to come like talking to us, teaching us, like say in Italian something. Like how do you call bread. They call panna. Because we need a bread, we would be glad that they give us piece a, you know, bread.

LEVINE: Were they, were they nice to you or . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, they were nice.

LEVINE: Did you, were there any occasion . . .

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: . . . when they weren't nice?

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MESTRICH: No problem. They didn't abuse nobody (clears throat) and they said they, every place they, they went, they find a girlfriend, but our place they didn't find any. They went out like that.

LEVINE: Oh you, you . . .

MESTRICH: Easy. Easy to go with them, you know. Girls wasn't like that.

LEVINE: I see. They . . .

MESTRICH: Y- . . .

LEVINE: . . . didn't fraternize with . . .

MESTRICH: Bother them? No, never.

LEVINE: . . . with the local people.

MESTRICH: Right.

LEVINE: Ok, let's see. Is there anything else, when you think about your early life, up until you were fifteen when you were still there. What are the other things that, that come to your mind, that stick in your mind?

MESTRICH: Over here, they tell you, you gotta boyfriend. You gotta boyfriend, and we used to go with the sheeps and they used to come follow us. And we used to sing. (laughing) We used to sing so, show them you know where we are.

LEVINE: (laughing)

MESTRICH: So they used to come, otherwise they can't find us. (laughing)

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LEVINE: Can you remember any little songs that you sang when you were, when you were young, when you were there?

MESTRICH: Oh gee, I wish to sing group, but I don't know.

LEVINE: If you can remember any parts of them it would be very nice to have it on the tape.

MESTRICH: Well, when I was leaving (laughing) my place and I was upstairs getting ready for next day to go to . . . America and there were group of boys passing and they were singing: [Recites lyrics in Croatian and laughs.]

LEVINE: What does that mean?

MESTRICH: Oh, my, Maria, moy-, my sweetheart, like. If I could a, kiss you sweet. But, in our language, it comes like a . . .

LEVINE: A poem?

MESTRICH: Yeah, it rhyme, rhymes. Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. So did you have a boyfriend before you came to this country?

MESTRICH: Not just what they say this is your boyfriend, but I didn't have no, ah, serious boyfriend. My husband was my neighbor, not far away. I never think of him getting married, me and him.

LEVINE: But you knew . . .

MESTRICH: Because he was five years older than me, he gotta girlfriend, and I was only fifteen. He was twenty when he came to this country. And he went to Chicago.

LEVINE: I see. But did you know your, the man who was to become your husband?
Did you know him bef-. . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . when you were still in Croatia?

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And what, how did you know him? How did you, meet him or how did . . .

MESTRICH: Ah, because he was only couple houses away from me.

LEVINE: Oh.

MESTRICH: Yeah. So we seem, I know, I know he had a girlfriend. When we went out to the wood. He used to be with his girlfriend out there, and I was with my friends, girlfriends and all. I never carried anything, loved anything. None. Not in my time, we weren't like that. But, but my husband he got a girlfriend, but not to live with them, or sleep with them. They weren't doing anything like that. No. But . . .

LEVINE: Ok. I'm sorry, go ahead.

MESTRICH: Yeah. But, her family, they don't want her to marry my husband. So anyway, his father was in this country, in America. My husband's father. And he was in Chicago, and he came home and he was widow, his fa-, mother died. My husband's mother. And when his father come back, to Kukljica, to Yugoslavia, and then he married, he, he married his sister-in-law. And he went back to America, and he bring his son, that's my husband, with him. And they went to Chicago.

LEVINE: This was before you left?

MESTRICH: Yeah. And I, I left after. I think I left after, couple months. I don't know before or after, but it was same year. He went to Chicago, and I went here. So one of our friends, that was here in New York, he went to, Chicago. And he says, to (laughs) to my husband. He was just neighbor then. He says, "Why don't you write to Maria? She's in the New York, in Jersey over there." So he started to write me and I write to him. (laughing) And I had a boyfriend, I was engaged.

LEVINE: Was your boyfriend also Yugoslavian?

MESTRICH: Yeah, but for different village . . . way out, different village. From different island than I was. So my mother didn't like, what I have, that I was engaged. She liked the one that, my neighbor. So, and my aunt here, the one that bring me here, they all like my husband, that was (?). So anyway, so I, I, I didn't give a my ring to that boy that was engaged. I left with his friend. They were living next block. So I says to these two sisters. I say, give this to (?) name is Sam. Give him this ring and I'm going to Chicago, I'm gonna marry my, his name is Bože Mestrić.

LEVINE: How, how do you spell his first name?

MESTRICH: Bože. B-O-Ž-E. Only you put that on top. . .

LEVINE: Accent.

MESTRICH: Z.

LEVINE: Over the . . .

MESTRICH: Bože.

LEVINE: Over the Z?

(Her daughter Julia says, "Over the Z.")

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Ok. And, and you spell in Croatian, it's M-E-S-T-R-I-C, with the accent, but in a, in the American way that it's spelled its M-E-S-T-R-I-C-H. Right, well . . .

MESTRICH: So . . .

LEVINE: Ok, go ahead.

MESTRICH: So, so I, I went over there in April. Then my aunt and my uncle, and their two children, they come to my wedding. And we got married, fourth of July (laughing) Nineteen . . .twenty-six. 1926. And Julia was born in 1927.

LEVINE: So why was it that you chose to marry your husband?

MESTRICH: Because they all like him, and he was my neighbor. I know him. And my first boyfriend, he was big fella, blond, tall. But I didn't know him much, like I know my, my neighbor, my husband. So I decided to go there and marry. But, thank God I did. Maybe if I married the other fella, he was with his brother here, he would take me to Europe, maybe I would be dead over there, by now. (laughing) Right.

LEVINE: So, before we talk about the situation when you left Yugoslavia. When people were married in your little town, in your little village, were there any kinds of customs, that, that, pertained to marriages and to the ceremonies of the marriage, that you recall from other people's marriages, when you were there?

MESTRICH: No, they, they just did. Everybody knew each other.

LEVINE: Was there a dowry involved?

MESTRICH: What's that?

LEVINE: In the marriages?

(Her daughter Julia says, "No.")

LEVINE: No.

MESTRICH: No. No, we never, there wasn't anything. No, no problem.

LEVINE: Ok.

MESTRICH: We never have, never had any problem. Everybody that knew each other, we know, you know—because they know each other, they know who they want to marry. And they lived good. No problem, no fight, no . . . separation or anything.

LEVINE: So how was it that you decided to come or it was decided that you would come to the United States when you did?

MESTRICH: Well, that was 1922. My mother was getting old and my sister was. . . we had nobody to take care of us. So, I didn't want to go because I don't want to leave my mother, I don't want to leave all my friends. I'm going someplace, I didn't know the language, I didn't know anything about. But my aunt came, she built that—patio for us, she was very nice. She spent a year, few months with us, and half year she spent, she was Czechoslovakia. She went to visit her people in Čzaha[sic].

LEVINE: Now this was, this aunt was married, who, how?

MESTRICH: My uncle.

LEVINE: She was married to your mother's . . .

MESTRICH: My father brother.

LEVINE: Your father's brother. Ok.

MESTRICH: Yeah. And my . . . my uncle left, he was only seventeen years old, when he left Kukljica. And he went to work on ship and ship came to this country, I think New York someplace, and he jumped the ship. He never could make citizen paper because he never find the name of the ship that he came on. So he never, he feel so bad, he even died without being citizen man . . . and he was good man. And he married this Czechoslovakia girl, that she came to this country just like me, when she was young. And they had a two children. Then he send her to visit us and to visit her country, to Czechoslovakia.

LEVINE: And that's when she made the steps and the patio for your house.

MESTRICH: Yes and her little girl was only five years old, and boy was two and a half years old. Julie her name was and Emil, my cousin. So, (laughs) I used to carry him all the time because he was a little chubby one. (laughs) He couldn't even walk. So anyway, so when she built this for us, we were so happy. God, was so nice of her, and my uncle. So, then she went to visit her people in Czechoslovakia. She was there for few months, then she come back. It was almost year that she's in Europe, she wanna come back because I guess she make for one year to stay over there. So she asked me to come with her. I didn't want to go. I say, "I don't wanna go." I say, I say, "I don't want to leave my mother and my sisters and my friends." I said, "I don't know anything about over there." She says, "If you don't go I'm going to take your cousin." But I know she didn't want her, (laughs) because she was

much older and she wasn't that—but she was telling me like that way. So my, I ask my mom, mother, she says, “Go”, she said. “Ida, ida” she says.

LEVINE: Ida is your aunt.

MESTRICH: Yeah. No, ida. Go.

LEVINE: Oh, ida, go. [In Croatian, “ida” means “go.”]

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Why did your mother think you should go?

MESTRICH: Because she know what kind a life I, we got over there. And I'm young, and I had a sister there, so they, she think that I'm gonna help them. And I did. I was only fifteen and a half years old when I went to work in a factory here. I had a job in factory, making these . . . what they call that. I can't think of that name now, anyway, and was only I think ten block from where I live, in Jersey City, on Henderson Street. And I walk there every morning, going and coming. My aunt worked there, so, she got two kids and she says, “Maria,” she says, “You go to work up there, I'm gonna ask, you gonna get a job there and I'm going to work—my in, gonna work in the building in the morning.” So she could be with her, children, all day. So I did, I got a job right away. I was only fifteen and a half. I was only here six months.

LEVINE: Well, tell me what was your aunt's name?

MESTRICH: Elizabeth.

LEVINE: And . . .

MESTRICH: Jaša. Elizabeth Jaša, that's it. She was . . .

LEVINE: Jaša would be J-A-S-A.

MESTRICH: Yes. Yeah.

LEVINE: And, and do you remember leaving? Do you remember when you said goodbye to your mother and, and . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: . . . and your friends and family?

MESTRICH: In the morning, was August 6. We get up early morning, before sunrise, it's still dark. And I was waiting to go on . . . they had a different boat than what they have a, not moter boat. They had a on top, that you could, row. And they had a underneath that you could go and sit and dress up. (laughs) She make a dress for me, I don't even, I, I didn't even wanna put that dress on when I was home. When I got to the city, then I went underneath that . . . boat there and I dress myself, and shoes and she gave me everything . . .

LEVINE: Can you . . .

MESTRICH: . . . because I still have over here you know, that blouse, apron, that we had on the dress. I didn't wanna put dress on, because I don't want nobody see me when I'm on the boat and outside before I get to Zadar. When I got to Zadar, I went underneath, and I put my dress on and I cry, my mother cry, that was the last I see my mother in I think thirty-six years. And my sisters. And then we went on the ship and we, we stop in . . .

LEVINE: Trieste.

MESTRICH: Trieste. We spent there two nights and two-, two days and two nights, till we got a, I guess to get ready on the ship . . . to get to this country.

LEVINE: Now, where did the ship leave from, where did you, where did you . . . what was the port?

MESTRICH: From Trieste, I don't know the port.

LEVINE: Did you take the same ship to Trieste?

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: What . . .

MESTRICH: That's different ship.

LEVINE: A different ship.

MESTRICH: Yeah. That, this is bigger ship . . . that they, they, I don't know. We went third class. There was so many people there. Mostly womans. And my aunt, cause she got two kids and me and her, so she make a like, I don't know, they give her, she's thread. She got even sheets and pillow she bring everything, so we had a nice to lay on it. But like, you know, lot of em when in a fight too, because they were, I don't know, hundred, two hundred people down in third class. So during the day, we used to go up on the deck, when its nice sunny. But sometime it's a bad weather splashes. But when its nice, even my aunt she used to always, not crochet, embroider, something. Nothing bother her, but I was sick for (laughs) three, four days. Specially when I went in bathroom, they used to put that white stuff, that smell. It used to kill me.

LEVINE: What, what would people get irritable about when they were down in the, in the third class?

MESTRICH: I don't know. I guess, they were, the way they talk to each other and whatever. Because I didn't bother much, only what I hear from place where, where we were standing . . . staying.

LEVINE: Were there people from a lot of different countries . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . in, in, on the ship? You didn't remember . . .

MESTRICH: Not the . . .

LEVINE: . . . the name of the ship?

MESTRICH: *Bel-, Belvedere.*

LEVINE: Oh, *Belvedere.*

MESTRICH: *Belvedere.*

LEVINE: Good.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

MESTRICH: *Belvedere.* And when we came here, see they give me . . . I have them when I was going to school but they, they never get me. I never got a mark, never. So before I got on the ship, they did this to me, and there were big sores, see I still have them. And when we got on Ellis Island, a lot of them, they send them back because they were sick. Thank God, I, I feel I was young and I w-. (laughs) My uncle said he didn't know how I make I was so skinny. Because you know, was long time, on the, on the ship. We stop in in a Pula, Pula with Iganopolis, whatever they call. We stop there.

LEVINE: It-

MESTRICH: Italian port.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: Then we stopped in Algiers, to fill coals, whatever they need, because that was the last stop to go to Adr-, what they call that, Adriatic Sea, that you don't see know more land. Till we got to New York.

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

MESTRICH: Yeah. I don't remember anything, I think was a night when we came. I know we, we went on the ferry. Then we went on, cab. And my uncle and my aunt, they live Jersey City, Henderson Street. 425 Henderson Street, and they had a two boarders, Frank and Tony. And when we got there in their house, those two fella was there. Because that time they didn't live the separate, they used to live on boards, with the people. If you had a room, you give them, and they live. So, these two fella, they live. And we know them because they from my village . . . from Europe. But they here long time, many years they were here before.

LEVINE: And what would the boarders do? They would pay . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, they would pay the board. I don't know, I think they eat there too. And they sleep and, and they work, then they pay their board, whatever they charged them.

LEVINE: And would they be like part of the family? Would they sit around . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: . . . and would you talk in the evening and the . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, very friendly because, they not, from far away, they all from same village, from Europe. We know the family and all, so they were, was nice like that.

LEVINE: Be-, before we talk more about life here, what do you remember about Ellis Island? You were detained for a couple of days.

MESTRICH: Ohhh. When we got there, we got a . . . there were lotta people there. First time I saw black man. He got up on like a table, and call your name, to go in. They want you, you know, whatever ask you, so you could leave, to go out. So we spent there two days and two nights.

LEVINE: And why did you spend that time?

MESTRICH: Because, I guess they wanna know, governor whoever, why my aunt went with the children, I guess they wanna ask her, to Europe and all that. So when they call our name, we went to some office there. I don't understand much, but what I remember, they were talking to them, my uncle and when he explain everything they let us out. But we were there for breakfast in the morning (laughs), show her that picture Julie . . . yeah, in that book. It's over here. This one. We used to get table, all people. I never saw the butter in my country over here. They had a, a butter, coffee, whatever. But . . . see this ships?

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Uh, huh. Yeah. That's the steerage on the, on the deck of the . . .

MESTRICH: See the . . .

LEVINE: Yes.

MESTRICH: . . . the table. That's the way that we used to. Yeah. We were, they took . . .

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LEVINE: And how was the food? What do you remember about, about eating at Ellis Island?

MESTRICH: I don't know. It was, I don't remember eating, but I know I had a coffee. I remember butter, bread. We didn't have that.

LEVINE: That was the first time you ever had it?

MESTRICH: Right. I never saw the butter . . .no. But that's the way, we were there for two ni-, two days.

LEVINE: Now were you treated well?

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: How were you treated at Ellis Island?

MESTRICH: Yeah. On Ellis Island, you used to come for your breakfast, lunch, and supper.

LEVINE: And what did you do, other than . . .

MESTRICH: Just sit around. Do nothing. No.

LEVINE: And did your uncle, your uncle was there?

MESTRICH: Yeah, he came. He came to whatever they ask him. And, second day, we came out. They let us out.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: And that was it. And he came to Jersey City, and I, I take care of helping my aunt, house. She was working and my uncle working, they got two children.

So I came, like 1922, in a July, when August, September. Sometime in September and that was like 1923, was like middle of 1923, I had a job in factory. Eveready Battery they were making. Eveready Batteries we were making there. And I worked there three years, til I got married to my husband, went to Chicago, we got married, I stayed there six months. (laughs) We come back to Jersey City, my uncle, and we live next there my uncle and we both had a back. I had my job back and he got a job back.

LEVINE: What kind of a job did he get?

MESTRICH: Eveready Batteries.

LEVINE: Oh.

MESTRICH: Yeah. But they were there and they were moving. They were moving. They were moving out, so I didn't wanna because I got pregnant after. I didn't need that job any, but my husband. The boss like him so much, that his boss went to work in can company, and he wants him there, with him. But my neighbor was working in stockyard, he was foreman, and he get my husband job there, before his a boss ask him to come work for him. So he stay in working in a, in a railroad, like stockyard. And he worked there for I don't know how many years.

LEVINE: What was the company you said, that he, that wanted your husband to go . . . with him?

MESTRICH: A can, can company.

LEVINE: Can, uh huh.

MESTRICH: Yeah. And so, then after when I got two children, I work in a building in a morning. And my . . . my aunt, my uncle move out to New Jersey, Garwood, New Jersey. They bought a house there. When I had a my second baby

(laughs) they took my jewelry, they kept for a month. Till I get better with my baby. They were very nice.

LEVINE: And so, you, you, your first baby is Julia . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, my . . .

LEVINE: . . . and your second one?

MESTRICH: Dorothy.

LEVINE: Dorothy.

MESTRICH: My Dorothy. See this picture over here.

(Her daughter Julia says, "This is Dorothy.")

MESTRICH: My grandchildren. These are all my grand and great—children. (long pause) And (pause) so from there, we move, we live, how many years, I got married, till nineteen . . . forty . . . three. No, no heat, no hot water. We had a cold water. We didn't even had a tub, we had a tub to wash clothes and take a bath in it. On Henderson Street, because I work in building, my husband work but, but that was during the Depression time. You know, because she was born in Depression and was, I got married and Depression was 1929. And it last till the war started. Till Roosevelt . . . became president. Then, then I was working in a bu-, I was on my vacation, in last week of July and my neighbor says, "Mary," she says, "Why don't you go, see in Weston Electric?" She says, "They hiring people."

LEVINE: Now what year was this? Was this in the Depression?

MESTRICH: 1943.

LEVINE: Oh, 1943.

MESTRICH: When war was, Second World War was on. So I, I, I went there and she went, she was in high school. Because they had a trolley cars then, you had to take trolley cars to, from, from Jersey City to . . . what was the name New Jersey?

(Her daughter Julia says, "Kearny, New Jersey.")

MESTRICH: Kearny, New Jersey. Yeah. Kearny.

LEVINE: That's where the Weston Electric was?

MESTRICH: Yeah. Weston Electric. And I had a job there, right away. So, I says, I'm, so the woman says, "I'm gonna call your boss and tell her you gotta job." I says, "I don't care, as long as I got a job." And they give you pass and your picture on it, because was war. We used to make, they used to make something for the war, for the soldier on the field. So I got a job, and I work, I work there twenty-nine years. And I retire from there when I was 55 years old.

(Her daughter Julia says, "Sixty-five.")

MESTRICH: Thank God I get pension and I get Social Security and . . .

LEVINE: Sixty-five you were when you retired.

MESTRICH: I was sixty-five, I wanna work more. But they said, they keep only till sixty-five, and they give me paper to fill out, that so I could collect a year unemployment. Because I never collect unemployment. That was only that time. They give me paper, Weston Electric. "Fill it out," he says, "You gonna collect unemployment." So I did, and I worked there twenty-nine years.

LEVINE: Um, huh. And do you feel, were you satisfied working there?

MESTRICH: Oh yeah. Oh, we still get in touch . . . co-workers, some of us. But lot of them died. I lost the other day, my friend, we used to go to dinners all the time. Because we had a luncheon, like next Monday gonna ha-, I got a letter to go, and then they had in October, then they had it in Bayonne. I don't know if you know any Bayonne. It's next to the Staten Island. Every July, they are beautiful music and oh, Fourth of July, and dinner. We, I used to go with my friend, she died. She died two weeks ago.

LEVINE: Ok, we're gonna end this tape right here, and I'm speaking with Mary Mestrich, who came from Croatia, Yugoslavia in 1922 when she was fifteen, and this is the end of tape one.

[End of Tape 1]

LEVINE: This is the beginning of tape two and I'm here with Mary Mestrich, who came from Yugoslavia, Croatia, 1922, when she was fifteen and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I want to also mention that Mrs. Mestrich's oldest daughter Julia, Julia Cassidy, is also here with us today in Staten Island. Ok, let's, let's just back up a little bit to the Depression time and if you could tell me, you started work at fifteen, for the Eveready Battery . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . and then when the Depression hit, wha-, how, how was that in your experience and what did you do . . .

MESTRICH: Well . . .

LEVINE: . . . at the time?

MESTRICH: When I went it was 1929, when Depression hit.

LEVINE: And were you still working at Eveready Battery at that time?

MESTRICH: No. No, I was working in a building. I was married and had a babies.

LEVINE: And what were you doing in the building?

MESTRICH: Building I was cleaning, picking paper, vacuum the carpet, dusting desks.

LEVINE: Where was, where were the building?

MESTRICH: Mostly 11 Wall Street. I w-work there. 11 Wall Street. And there's two more building, but I work there only I think year or two years, but 11 Wall Street I work there seven years.

LEVINE: And you were coming from Jersey City, and you were working . . .

MESTRICH: One-thirty in the morning I used to get up at night. One-thirty in the morning. My friend, my neighbor, we used to meet and go to get the Grove Street train to go to Cortland Street, New York. From there we walk about five, six blocks to Wall Street and that's where we worked. So we, four lady was there and her old mother, she had a her place to take care. I got mine, but, in that place was nice to work. They had a man to pick the paper up, you know, that they throw because there's a lotta, bags of paper. So they had a man to pick the paper up, a woman to do the carpets, and another woman to dust. So I was dusting and we had this four lady mother, she used to make ah, tea for us around five o'clock (laughs) so we had a cup of tea. That was like rest period for, about half hour. And I work there for seven years, till I got the job at Weston Electric. But I, thank God, I was working all the time and my husband was working,

didn't make much, what thirty five dollars a week, something. And our rent was sixty-five dollars. Cold water flat, no hot water. We got a cold stove, our own stove used to, then my husband after coal stove, they, he put something came out, oil burner. They had oil burners, so they put that oil burner, was easier for us, we didn't have to shovel this coal and clean the ashes, so it was nice that oil, they put there, put in the ov-, in that stove.

LEVINE: Were you happy you had come to this country . . .

MESTRICH: Yes.

LEVINE: . . . from beginning . . .

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: . . . from the very beginning?

MESTRICH: No.

LEVINE: When did your, when did that change?

MESTRICH: When I came, my, my uncle, my aunt lives same next door, they didn't have a hot water. Same ap-, room like ours. Because when I came from Chicago, I rent right next door of them. And when I came there, I slept in living room. They had a sofa, a leather sofa that they open, so I used to sleep there. I used to wake up at night and cry. Because I can't speak the language, I have no friends. I wasn't working yet, you know, when I came there. It was hard for me.

LEVINE: How did, how was it for you, learning the language? How d-, how did you come to learn it?

MESTRICH: I was, like now I'm, I always, I like to read, whatever I could, I always had a paper, I always read. And talk with the people, whatever I, I could and I was always working, always with the people try and I liked it with them, like that.

LEVINE: When did it start that you liked being here?

MESTRICH: Well, I think it started like . . . when I, I got married and I had a family. That was nice after when, I had a, my family. But before, I used to go with the girlfriend, we used to go to, what they call Columbia Park, swimming there. But I wasn't that happy. But after then I had my family and, and I got used to it with the people and I learned more, then I was satisfied. And thank God I'm here today (laughing), thank God and my family. I love them. And everything what I have, I'm, I'm happy.

LEVINE: What do you remember about when the Second World War broke out?

MESTRICH: Well, Second World War . . . I don't know, lotta, even my husband was crying, he think they, they gonna because he gotta register too. But he was, I don't know, thirty-eight or something, so he didn't go. But it was sad. D- . . .

LEVINE: Were you citizens by then?

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Both you and your husband were citizens?

MESTRICH: I got citizen paper I think was 1937 . . . 1937 I got my. You know that when I got my citizen paper, it's not like today I see. They get them in a group. When I, my citizen paper, you go by yourself. You gotta have two witnesses.

You gotta learn, who, who's the President and who's the name. And it took me long time till I learned and I had a two witnesses to go with me, and, I, I passed.

LEVINE: Was that . . .

MESTRICH: I made it.

LEVINE: Was that a big day for you, when you, when you became a citizen?

MESTRICH: Yeah when I became citizen. You gotta go to the court, you just, they don't call everybody, just your two witness and you and ask you question and you gotta answer them. And that's, today I see they, all these different nation, now, they have them hundred together and, they proclaim them it's a citizen, but not eh, in my time. When I, nineteen thirty-seven.

LEVINE: So when the Second World War was going on, wha-, how was that . . .

MESTRICH: I was working.

LEVINE: . . . affecting you?

MESTRICH: I was working. I was working Weston Electric that, I had a job there. And it was hard, for the, for people, I didn't have nobody in the war then. I didn't have nobody like, but for the people that we were making the units for the, for the soldiers on the field.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Now tell about the piecework that you worked on in the factory.

MESTRICH: Oh, piece, all the time piecework. Man stands with the clock and the book, pencil. And you work, and he put down whatever, how many time you spin them that. How many, you could make an hour. So, when I got job there I didn't stay on one job. They change you on different job. I was there, I, I

don't know how many years till I got, I think after war. And you know, after, when war was over, lotta people worked at the desk and they got laid off. I never got laid off. They kept me. I stayed there.

LEVINE: Because you, you could do a lot of piecework?

MESTRICH: I guess, I guess I was good worker. And I stayed there, like I said, I worked twenty nine years. I said, I wanna make thirty years, but (laughing) I was sixty-five, so they said (laughs) you gotta go. But the bosses they were nice, people were, because they were sections, you know. This section does this job, this section does that job. And then I got my section here, I was there I think, over ten years, fifteen years was there. And (?) and all that the lotta my friends work, so it was very nice. We, we, we even when we talk today, talk, call each other on phone, we says we wish, we, we wish we could go back. (laughing) We used once in a while they used to have a bus for us and when we used to go to see the show, like L-, what's that singer, Hempa-, (laughing)

LEVINE: Ohh. Ok.

MESTRICH: Hempa- . . . (laughing)

LEVINE: Who is it?

MESTRICH: Humperdinck. We used to, when he was in Long Island singing, he was young then, e-, we were young. We had a dinner and we went to see him. We went to see Andy Williams. And what that brothers? Those five brothers and sisters? Ooh, I can't think of them. Andy Williams and I can't think. Asma-, Asmond brothers. You remember, Asmond.

LEVINE: Osmond Brothers.

MESTRICH: Yeah, Osmond Brothers. We went to see them. (laughing) And we had a dinner there and it was beautiful. They were only kids, us, Osmond Brothers, that time. Yeah.

LEVINE: Were there some things that you held on to, like customs or ways of doing things, that you learned, up until you were fifteen, when you were in Croat-, Croatia? Do you remember, I mean, did you carry on some of those kinds of traditions here?

MESTRICH: You mean like in a Europe I . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, things you learned as a girl, that you kept up with even though you were now in this country.

MESTRICH: Well, there's, in my country when I was the, young kid, there's not much to learn there. There's not much, only that I kept my, . . . what do you call, I never went out you know with drinking or sleeping or anything like that. Never, I never did that, things like that.

LEVINE: How about, were you, you kept up some of the cooking, right? Some of the ways of cooking . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah, I forgot my grandson that's what he wants me to learn. Show him how to make the fish, I says your grandfather's here. He used to cook more than I did . . . because he, he's, he used to go in the fishing, too. When my grandson from Jersey went with us, they took him on fishing trip and they stay on the island, and he like that, you know. It's nice, but I, I, say I forgot, I don't have that fish like you had at that time. We live in Jersey City, my used, my husband used to go and they had that market street and and Ita-, they call Little Italy in Jersey and he used to, every Friday bring fresh fish and he used to cook and bake or do something. But I, I don't do those things and I forget.

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LEVINE: Now was there a commu-, a little community in Jersey City of Croatians?
Were there many people either from your building or . . .

MESTRICH: Not that I know. No.

LEVINE: No. Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: But I had a friends, they were Croatians. They were, living, my friend Teta
Anica, and Tessie, and Jakica, the two sisters, so we were friends and . . .

LEVINE: When you would get together,

MESTRICH: But . . .

LEVINE: When you would get together would you . . .

MESTRICH: We used to, we used to get together. We talk about and it was nice to talk
but, but they all dead now. So I don't s-, and they children in different state
and so we don't see. I called, that must be about three, four years ago, her
daughter. She lives in New Jersey, some place and I asked her how her
mother is and she said, "My mother pass away". She said, "She's not here no
more." So, there's nobody, died, you know all gone.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. When you look back over your life, what gives you good, a lot of
satisfaction. What do you feel satisfied with?

MESTRICH: I feel satisfaction what I have now, but not when I was young. I didn't have
nothing, It was so, everything sad. Little bit, you know, when, like the
holiday, when we had that . . .

LEVINE: Our Lady . . .

MESTRICH: Gospe od Sniga. Yeah. That was, and sometime, we kids on Sunday, we used to start a, that kolo, then they, big girls used to come, then fella. Then they cut us to side and make it, you know, so that was something to remember, yeah. So, like that, but, the food, we didn't have much food. Now they got it good. Like I said, when I went to visit, I was there three times. They got nice place to live, they don't have to work hard in the field. They have everything. Some of them, my sister in law, she still works on the grapes, she gets grapes and whatever. And we, before I left, she took me out to, to pick some figs. Yeah, and they were coming already in August. And it's, it's like here to me, it's very nice over there. They very happy.

LEVINE: How, how . . .

MESTRICH: But now that war is, you know, so old that refugee came and take over those thing, maybe now they gonna move away, when the, the war is over. So maybe they start again, they making good money. They rent the rooms for them. See they don't even have enough room for these tourist in that place, what they call that? P-, in those buildings there, so they, people rent them, bedrooms, like give them to sleep and they making money like that. And my sister-in-law, brother-in-law they got beautiful home there. And my niece, she built a house there and she's gonna go in August to see it again. But we hope that the war stop altogether so that people start coming again, tourists, so they make living like that. I don't know.

LEVINE: How do you feel about having come here when you were fifteen years old, now that you look back on it? I mean, you, you've lived longer here in this country then, then you ever did in Croatia. How do you feel about the fact that you immigrated . . . now?

MESTRICH: I don't know what you . . .

(Her daughter Julia says, "Are you happy that you came here? After all these years. Are you glad that you left there and came here?")

MESTRICH: Well I'm glad I'm here, I'm happy here. I don't, I don't look back. I'm looking what ahead. And beginning of my life it wasn't that happy so, I was growing older, I was getting happier. And, the family and everything, and I'm happy the way it is today for me. I know I lost my husband young, he was only forty-eight, my husband died, but I got good children, two daughter, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren and sixth one is on a way (laughing), sometime in August.

LEVINE: How did you feel . . .

MESTRICH: So thank God.

LEVINE: Yeah, how did you feel when you visited Ellis Island? Oh, you didn't visit.

MESTRICH: I didn't go there.

LEVINE: Oh, someone else brought you the, the form.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: You started . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah but I'm gonna go there.

LEVINE: Oh, you're gonna visit after.

MESTRICH: But I went to Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

MESTRICH: I went, we went up to, walk that way up to the arm there, not the head, they could, that time they, wasn't, fixed something, so we walked up to her arm

and we were, I don't know what year was that. Fifty? In the fifties, yeah. So that was nice.

LEVINE: Do you feel a special connection to the Statue of Liberty?

MESTRICH: Yeah, I like to see it, you know, I, I, I can't forget that time that I was there. When I got there. All those people and ohh! And lot of them was crying, they didn't know if they were gonna make it. And they gonna, because they, not a lot of them, it's not just that they in New York, they were gonna to like Chicago, different places, from there. And I was happy that, they, they kept me. They accept me, you know. That it was alright. Yeah.

LEVINE: Wha-, to what do you, to what do you owe the fact that you look so young and you're so alive and . . .

MESTRICH: I don't know, see like me, I like to talk (laughing).

LEVINE: (laughing) You like to talk.

MESTRICH: You know when I was young I was very shy. Ohh, I guess in Europe you know, I didn't see much people. I was, when I came to this country I was shy because I couldn't speak. When I was, with my aunt, my uncle, and they had a Mrs. Lee(?), Irish woman. Down in basement, and first floor she lived. They had two grandchildren and a two daughter, and they were grow up, they were working. And they were Irish (laughing), she was such a nice, Mrs. Leahy. She was a, a heavy, a white-haired woman. I remember her like today. So I used to go down, and I can't speak but while I was learning, then she moved out, she moved to, where the Lincoln Park, they bought a house there. And she move out there, and didn't see her no more. But it was hard to like, get used to it, to like learn and then I got friends and all. When I went to Weston Electric, that was best for me. Gotta good job there, was making good money and, and my two girls was having boyfriend, they were getting married. (laughing) Weddings and everything, and they bought, they had a

homes, my J-, daughter in Jersey, she got beautiful place. She's married to a doctor, Anthony Demato. And my Julie and her husband Eddie, he was, he's retired policeman. And they had a daughter, she's Eileen, she's working. She's secretary in New York. And two boys, they both policeman, they married and my daughter in Jersey and her husband, he's retired doctor now, and they had a three children and they all had they family, they live nice. I'm satisfied, thank God. Everything's alright. And my, my both sister, they all, both of them and they family come to this country.

LEVINE: How was it that they happened to come?

MESTRICH: I think that happen. A her daughter is Ante, the son. He was no, they were, they were girl. She was supposed to marry somebody and she was working as beaut-, not beautician, wedding dress she was making. She make even wedding dress for herself. So she went to Europe to get married to this fella. When she saw Ivan, my nephew, my sister's son, she didn't want that man, she want (laughing), they fell in love. And they got married and she come to this country, and she bring her husband here, then he brings his mother and father., and his sister, they all come here. See? My other sister, her husband Tece. He was working on the, on the ships, so he jumped ship here in New York. He didn't, that was during the war. It was a little before, before, before we started war, but was in the Europe, war already. So he stayed here. He didn't want to go back on a ship. Then . . . what happened. Then war started here, they want him to go to war. He couldn't even speak English. He wa-, but he was, no he wasn't citizen, so he was in the, inside the, wherever they take, took him that he's in the war for three months, six months. And they said, they can't keep him because he can't read, he can't write in English, but he got his citizen paper because he was on the six months in, in the service. So they gave him citizen paper and then he bring his, my sister that was his wife and son and they, still here and my sister died. And they had another boy, and there's their children over here. There's their children. So I had all my family after that, see? They all came here. I wanna bring my mother even, when I, my husband and I, when we bought a house, we move

from this cold water flat, when I worked in Weston Electric, we moved to Greenville, in Jersey, by Greenville, there was the better place. We bought a house there, with the heat, and hot water. (laughs) And, and we got a nice, nice place. So . . .

LEVINE: You wanted to bring your mother over.

MESTRICH: Yeah. So I want to bring my mother here, she didn't want to come because, she said, she gotta all her family over there because my sister and her grandchildren, they were all there. But when they all coming here, she was left alone. She live, I think, only year after that, when she didn't see nobody around, her grandchildren, her daughter. Then she died. If she came that time when I want her, but, I mean we help her. We did send her money, the neighbors took care of her, but she miss her family and that's why we think she died, she didn't live--. But she lived to be about eighty-five. Yeah.

LEVINE: Ok, is there anything else you can think of that. . .

MESTRICH: I think that's it . . .

LEVINE: . . . we could've covered that, you'd like to say

MESTRICH: I'm here, I'm living here. Paying rent.

(Her daughter Julia says, "She still sends money to Croatia.")

LEVINE: You still send money, to, Croatia?

MESTRICH: Oh, yeah. Yeah. To, I send to my brother in law. Everytime somebody go, I, I used to send the, that was when was quiet, peace in the letter. Like, one time was missing so after that, never. So my, ever, if anybody goes, that I know, and my niece, she lives in Long Island, and then she gives to these people, they mostly people that she knows. I don't know anybody of

Croatian here. They mostly in New York, Long Island. So, she knows them. She gives them money, then I send her check. Pay her. And those people goes to Croatia, and they give my brother and my sister in law, and they children, or my sister in law, the one that died, her son, one that's now (?). I send him sometimes, something. So I help them . . . what I can.

LEVINE: Have you been affected, in any way, directly by what's been going on in, in Croatia, in Yu-, the former Yugoslavia?

MESTRICH: No it doesn't bother me nothing, because where my people is, they don't fight in there. We are in the villages, they fight in, up, in S-, Sarajevo and all those, where's those big places, big cities, and all that. I feel bad that they destroy those beautiful country by now and everything. It's a bad what you see, what they, kill so many people. But, like my sister-in-law says, so far, they had enough food, only need the money. Because they don't make money now. People don't, tourists don't come. So that's why I, I like to help them, you know, when I can.

LEVINE: Ok. Well I think this is a good point to stop.

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: I want to thank you so much.

MESTRICH: Thank you.

LEVINE: Very interesting interview.

MESTRICH: Yeah, yes. It's very nice to, talk to, with you.

LEVINE: Oh, thank you. And now this tape will be part of the oral history collection at Ellis Island.

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MESTRICH: I hope it's (laughing) . . .

LEVINE: (laughing). Ok, I've been talking with Mary Mestrich . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . who came at fifteen, in 1922, from Croatia. . . .

MESTRICH: Yeah.

LEVINE: . . . and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.