

**EI-897**

**JULIA MINCAVICH [PH] JONIS**

**BIRTHDATE: MARCH 19, 1897**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST**

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**LITHUANIA, 1898**

**AGE: 1**

**SHIP:**

**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES:**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. My name is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1997. I'm at the University Commons Nursing Home in Worcester, Massachusetts and I'm here with Mrs. Julia Mincavich—

JONIS: Mincavich.

SIGRIST: Mincavich. That's okay. She's okay. Mincavich Jonis.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Mrs. Jonis came from Lithuania in the summer of 1898. She was about 14 months when you came?

JONIS: I—I was born here four months later, after I landed here. My mother landed here and I was born four months later. I was born in Lithuania.

SIGRIST: You were born in Lithuania.

JONIS: But I was from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania—from Pittston [PH], Pennsylvania. That—

SIGRIST: Well, what—what's your birth date, Mrs. Jonis?

JONIS: March 19<sup>th</sup>.

SIGRIST: What year?

JONIS: 1897.

SIGRIST: Okay. And tell me a—and I should also say for the sake of the tape that your son, Joseph, is with us also—

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —here. Tell me again where you were born.

JONIS: Wilkes—oh, Sevelkis [PH]—Sevalky [PH], Lithuania.

SIGRIST: You were born in Lithuania.

JONIS: Yeah. The name of the county was So—Sevalky.

SIGRIST: And—and—and is that—that's the county name?

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes. Is there a town name where you were born?

JONIS: I don't know. That's all I know is Sevalky.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's begin by talking about your mother and father. What was your father's name?

JONIS: John.

SIGRIST: And what did he do for a living in—

JONIS: Coal miner.

SIGRIST: Did he do that in Lithuania?

JONIS: No, not in Lithuania. He was a farmer there.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about his background?

JONIS: All I know is what he did in Pennsylvania. I don't know much about anything of Europe. Of—of his life there, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about his childhood and his growing up at all in Europe?

JONIS: He did with the old folks, not with us kids.

SIGRIST: I see.

JONIS: My mother used to talk with us.

SIGRIST: So—so when he came to the United States he was a coalminer.

JONIS: He was a coalminer. And my uncle Bill, my mother's brother, lived with him. They boarded at one house. He asked my mother to come out. There was a chance to get married. She was 23 when she got married. That is terrible to get married that late. So she came out here. She married my father and then sometime later she went back and I was born four months later.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

JONIS: Magdalene [PH].

SIGRIST: Magdalene.

JONIS: Maggie. They called her Maggie.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

JONIS: Murashka.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

JONIS: M-U-R-A-S-H-K-A. M-U—I have to write it down to see it. I can't—

SIGRIST: [unclear]. Go ahead and write it down.

JONIS: I can't write on a paper because I can't see.

SIGRIST: Oh, okay.

JONIS: I can—

SIGRIST: Well, that's okay. We'll check it later. That's okay.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You said that your mother did talk about her life in Europe.

JONIS: Yeah, she did. I had my broken nose on the stove. I fell off the kitchen stove, cemented with bricks and cement and everything. And I—I used to put—be put there to be warmed up. And when I warmed up, I rolled off, somehow. I broke my nose and, of course, no doctors. That's why I'm crooked.

SIGRIST: So your nose is crooked because you broke it in Europe.

JONIS: Yep.

SIGRIST: Okay. [chuckles]

JONIS: And right—right, fell off the stove.

SIGRIST: [chuckles]

JONIS: That's a funny word, fell off the stove.

SIGRIST: So you fell off—

JONIS: Cement stove, built in the house.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you what the house looked like that she lived in in Lithuania?

JONIS: It was one room, bedroom, kitchen, parlor, wh—it was just like a little sitting room. That was all. They were big rooms but they were small.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have a job in Lithuania?

JONIS: Oh, she was a farmer with her grandmother on their own lot.

SIGRIST: Can you—can you talk a little bit about that? What—what did they farm?

JONIS: They—all vegetables. Wheat, mostly. Black—dark wheat for black bread and then the—the white, the light for the white bread. And that was all I ever remember.

SIGRIST: Do you know how she met your father?

JONIS: Oh, she came to—well, to Pittston, Pennsylvania and my uncle was there. She greeted him and then he said, “Here’s a boyfriend for you. John Mincavich.” And my mother thought, ‘Well, by golly. That’s fast.” Well, anyway, they were married a couple of months later in Pittston and they began their life that way.

SIGRIST: So your mother and father married in Pennsylvania.

JONIS: Yeah, in Pittston.

SIGRIST: Do you know why your mother came to America in the first place? Was it this uncle?

JONIS: Because her fath—her uncle—her only brother asked her to come out, get a chance to get married because they weren’t getting married until they were 15, 16 in Europe. And she was 23 and she wasn’t married so he was afraid she was going to be left out, so he asked her to come out here. And when she came out, they hitched and that was it.

SIGRIST: Why did your father come to the United States, initially?

JONIS: That I don’t know. I guess to make more money. I guess that’s it because fathers don’t make anything. They make five, six dollars a year when they work for another farmer. They make five, six dollars—ten dollars. If they get it, they’re an expert.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year your parents married?

JONIS: 1896.

SIGRIST: ‘96.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Then—then when did your mother go back to—

JONIS: When I was four months, five months pregnant—she was—she was pregnant with me. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: She was pregnant with you. She went back to Lithuania.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Why did she go back?

JONIS: She was homesick and her mother was sick so she wanted to see her mother before she died. When she went back she stayed a year and a half because I was born and then she was still living. When she still lived, then she c—when she died, then she came back.

SIGRIST: You're talking about your mother's mother.

JONIS: My m—my grandmother.

SIGRIST: Mother's grandmother.

JONIS: Yeah. And my mother came back to my husband—to my father when I—when she was dead, buried. Then they separated the gardens. They put a stake here and a stake there. "That's yours. That's yours." Everybody's piece of land by stakes and their name is on it and that's all. That's the only contract they had. And they—they did that and then she went and she sold it to her sister for a dollar.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you about the day that you were born? Did anything—

JONIS: They were on their way to church on a Sunday. She felt the pains so she thought, 'Well, I'm going back home.' She told her mother she was going back home. She's gotten a crampy stomach. She said, "And I'm afraid I might have to use the bathroom." And instead, was me that was born. And she had me all alone and my mother ca—my grandmother came home and I was there. I beat my grandmother home.

SIGRIST: [laughs] You said you were on your way to church. What religion were you?

JONIS: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Catholic. So th—

JONIS: Lithuanian.

SIGRIST: They were on the way to the Catholic church when—

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —when [unclear].

JONIS: And they went, Julia and my moth—grandmother, Barbara, they went to church. My mother went back and it was not far back, but they—they take their shoes off and they walk. And when they get near the church

they put their shoes on and go in the church. And they all stand in church. There's no pews there then. Now, they have pews. Now, they have it like Americans do. There was no pews there then so she had to st—sta—and then she thought, 'Well, maybe—maybe something else was wrong with her.' She heard from the ladies in Pennsylvania what happens but she didn't know anything. She had seven sisters and one brother so she didn't know anything. So then she found out and then when she got home, she no sooner got home, I was born.

SIGRIST: That's a good story.

JONIS: She was getting prepared for everything. And all of a sudden, she said, "I was so sick I was wishing my mother was here." And she said, "She was in church at mass so I prayed and she prayed at church, 'Whatever is happening to my daughter, let it be good.'" And that's—that's how it ended.

SIGRIST: Did—

JONIS: Then she came home and she found the baby. She said, "Oh, my good little Barbara." But my mother ma—named me Juliana [PH]. And now I'm Julia.

SIGRIST: Your mother named you Juliana?

JONIS: Yeah. My grandmother.

SIGRIST: Were you named after somebody?

JONIS: My sister—My aunt—my mother's other dau—sister. My mother's other sister, I was named after her because she was the godmother. So she was—I was named after her. And then my mother, "Yula, Yula [PH]." That's Julia in Lithuanian. She said, "Yulita [PH]." That's a pet name. "Yulita, Yulita." And it stuck that way. And when we came to Pennsylvania I was six years old when I was starting talk English, and the teacher says, "You better talk English. You can't talk Lithuanian here." And she says, "A, b, c," and all the way through, slowly. I had to follow. Then. "One, two, three," to a hundred. Oh, I thought it was awful sinful to work here. I was going to change schools. I thought another school would be better.

SIGRIST: Let's go back to Lithuania for a second. Why did your mother wait the 14 months before she came back to the United States?

JONIS: Well, she wanted to be with her mother until she died. And she didn't die for 15 months or so. I was a year and a half old. Then she got—my father sent her \$50 and she came. It was only \$50, those days.

SIGRIST: What did your mother tell you later on about her trip to get on the ship and being on the ship to get to America?

JONIS: Oh, she only says they—there were cows next door, cows, a couple of horses. They were in the cellar, like. They didn't come in a big passage or place. They're upstairs with the rich people. Downstairs were the poor people. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Do you know the name of the ship that she came on?

JONIS: That's the trouble. She did—she had the card and she landed in the Castle Garden. She threw it out the window. She thought she was in America; that's enough. And then we were kept there three weeks because they wrote to Lithuania, Russia and Germany, because we came on a German ship that she knew, she thought she knew because it was on a fork, Germany. I had the little fork with me when we sat there at the Castle Garden. So my mother said, "Maybe it's this one." But they wrote to Lithuania, Po—Russia and Germany and it took three weeks. And they came back and they said, "You're okay." My mother said, "Fifty dollars." You know, in—in Lithuanian. "[speaking Lithuanian]." And she came with a half a hundred.

SIGRIST: Do you know what kind of papers that your mother threw over the deck of the ship—what kind of papers, specifically?

JONIS: Her—her—the paper that she was supposed to give in the office here, and she didn't. She threw it out the window. And she cried and she cried many a year. Even when I was growing up, she'd cry when she'd talk about it. "Why did I ever be so dumb?" But what are you going to do? You learn as you live.

SIGRIST: So they kept you for three weeks until they could—

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —verify that you were okay.

JONIS: And she cried and cried. Her eyes were bulging red and they thought that she was—had sore eyes of some sort so they had doctors examine her. They said, "She's crying too much." So then they let us stay there and three weeks before she was g—and the lady that traveled with her from Lithuania stayed with her. And she said, "You take Julia home and

you marry my fa—my husband and keep her,” because she thought she was going to die because she had those red eyes and some disease with her. Sore eyes.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you any other stories about what happened during the first three weeks?

JONIS: In the what?

SIGRIST: About what happened during those three weeks that you were held.

JONIS: Oh, that’s all she did was cry, cry, cry.

SIGRIST: That’s what—that’s what she told you.

JONIS: And the lady took care of me, the lady there that was with her, she took care of me. She was Lithuanian. And they—they were in the cabin, like they called it a cabina [PH], a cabin, like, and the horses next door and mooing, the cows.

SIGRIST: That was on the ship, yeah.

JONIS: And it was—

SIGRIST: When you were released from Castle Garden—

JONIS: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: —and they let you off of Castle Garden, [unclear]—

JONIS: Oh, my father was there. He came and he said, “Oh, my Julita, Julita.” And he took me and he cried because he couldn’t see me for a year and a half. And I was wiggling to get out to my mother’s arms because I thought he was a stranger. And I—it took time for me to get used to him because he’d come home black from w—work, and he’d wash up and he’s white again.

SIGRIST: Where did you go? From New York, where did you go?

JONIS: To Pittston, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: You went to Pittston, Pennsylvania.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay in Pittston, Pennsylvania?

JONIS: Oh, abou—about a year. And then we moved to Ashley, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: Ashley.

JONIS: That's past Wilkes-Barre, another town, and down.

SIGRIST: And was he still coalmining when you went to—

JONIS: He was—oh, he coal mined the rest of his life.

SIGRIST: Fine. Well, what's your—what's your first memory? What—what's the very first thing you remember?

JONIS: Well, now, my father put down \$15 for two weeks pay. He says, “[speaking Lithuanian].” That's the amount in Lithuania. And then she says, “What am I going to do with a”—he—she didn't know how to shop or anything. That was the first pay he got and she didn't know what to do with it. She wasn't used to shopping by cash or anything.

SIGRIST: You're talking about your mother.

JONIS: No—yeah, my mother. She never knew anything about shopping with money, was a farmer. We had gone to the garden, picked up what we wanted. We had cows. We had chickens, geese and we lived on that, same with we—we did in Wilkes-Barre. When I was—I was almost two, my brother was born, was two years old. I was March 19; he was March 12<sup>th</sup>. He was two years, or less one week or two younger than I. And he was born. And then she learned. The lady next door was a Lithuanian so she helped her shop. She says, “[speaking in Lithuanian].” That was in Lithuanian. “This one, buy. This one, buy. This one, no, no. It's too expensive,” and everything.

SIGRIST: So there were other Lithuanians—

JONIS: Oh, they were all Lithuanians there. There was a Lithuanian church there and everything. It was five miles di—distance from where we lived to church but we walked to church, my mother did and would carry me. She—

SIGRIST: How would she carry you?

JONIS: Here, on her arm and then on the other arm when she'd get tired. And it was about seven miles away from our house.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about your memories of your father's work in the coalmines?

JONIS: Oh, he dug coal. He—they used a drill about six feet long, heavy drill, and they'd drill in a hole, turning the drill around and taking it out, blowing in there and getting all the dust out. And then the—the—they put the blast in there, push it in with a drill and then, "Fire!" They'd holler, "Fire," and they'd go out. And they don't let anybody near their place. And then when a bang goes off, then they say, "Okay. Okay." That was the first ler—word in English he learned was okay. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: What time would your father leave to go into the coalmines in the morning?

JONIS: What—what do you—

SIGRIST: What time in the morning would your father leave to go to work in the coalmines?

JONIS: I—oh, five o'clock—six—no, seven o'clock. And he'd come home five o'clock. And then later was one hour less. And when Jo—John L. Lewis was the president of the coalmines, then he made it nine hours and then eight hours after that. And they worked. What he said was done by the Coalminer Union. And that way, we fixed it up and we even got a dollar and a half a week when the strike was on, and before that we got nothing.

SIGRIST: What year was the strike?

JONIS: Oh, I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about your father's—

JONIS: I was about four or five years old.

SIGRIST: D—do you remember your father's experiences at all during the strike? You were pretty young, I realize.

JONIS: He spent some time in a barroom. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: He had time on his hands, I guess. [laughter] Tell me, w—do you ever remember there being an accident in the mines?

JONIS: Oh, yes. He had an accident. He was shot with coal dust. His face was all pock marked and it was under the skin. There was no doctors in the mines, nor outside. They had mules down under. They'd lift up the

lookes [PH] on a chain and ride them out to the s—service and come out and unload, go back in. And they'd bandage the mules' eyes so they couldn't see the light because they were underground all the time. And it was—oh, I wish you could see it! It's a beautiful place. But when the bang goes off it's awfully noisy. And everybody got to get away from there. There's shifts, one flight above the other with I don't know how deep between, but they were flights like. And—and now they have it four and five floors deep.

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

JONIS: Ah, was okay. He wasn't much for kids. No, he's—he was smoking his pipe backwards. That's all. He'd be p—playing cards once in a while with others but not much. He wasn't much of anything on that line.

SIGRIST: W—

JONIS: My mother was the digger. She saved every penny she could. She'd rather get it from the garden than buy it from the store, and then she saved—tied it in a knot round, under her knee. And she made the money. She made \$25 f—she was—I was three or four years old when my mother had enough money, \$25, and she went to a Lithuanian lawyer and asked what she could do with it to make some money. He says, "Buy a lot. There's a lot on South Empire Street, \$25, 25 feet wide, 125 feet long." And she did. She had that for about two years or so. And after that she thought, 'Well, I can build a house.' She had geese there, ducks and we lived on another street. And she had all that and she figured, well, she can work. She's gonna do it, because some women were working, housework. But she thought, well, she wants to do some kind of work. So she did that and then she went housework. She worked for a Jewish man and he said, "I'll pay you for the rent, \$6 a month. You—you work for me and I'll pay you the r—I'll give you the rent." You know, the—the—the p—part of the \$6 was the rent.

WOMAN: [sentence unclear].

SIGRIST: Oh, all right. We're just going to pa—[tape off/on] Okay. We're resuming now and, Julia, you were telling me about how—how good your mother was with saving money. She bought this piece of land.

JONIS: Oh, God! She was a miser. She was a miser. It hurt us. She gave us a penny a week, a penny every payday, twice a month for spending. And then she said, "Save five cents and you buy buttons and I'll make a jacket for you." That's how we had to spend our five pennies. We were never allowed to buy candy or anything. She'd make some sugar and

water and make candy, like sugar candy and give us that instead of anything else, if we wanted sugar.

SIGRIST: What were some of her chores around the house? What was your mother responsible for doing when you were growing up?

JONIS: When I was growing up, my mother got a machine from Sears Roebuck for \$35. She sewed for everybody. She bought a pattern and she copied from a pattern and she sewed. She wasn't sewing in Lithuania. She sewed in America. And she sewed, oh, ruffles on the bottom, ruffles on the sleeves, ruffles around the neck and loose. Then you put a apron on. You tie—and the apron used to be down to the floor. When they go to the grocer's, they'd take the apron and all the groceries the man put in the apron. Then they walk home with a big bundle, every woman in Pennsylvania. I don't know now, but then everybody there was going with a big belly full, as they call it. That was grocers.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your household?

JONIS: My mother.

SIGRIST: And what kind of food did she cook?

JONIS: Oh, we had—first, c—we had three cows, a mother cow and a grandmother cow and a baby cow. Then we had 16 geese. We had four or five—I've forgotten—ducks. And—but they were expensive to—to feed so she only had 'em for meat. And then she had the three cows and then she planted the garden. She got seeds from different people. She went around and she said, "How do I get seeds? Where do I buy them?" She heard about them but she didn't know where to get 'em. And she got the seeds from the ladies; they helped her. And she planted them and she did one tree. She didn't like the peach on it. So she grafted four more fruits, apples, pears, plums and cherries, I think, or something. And then they all come out different times and they—they blossomed and you ate what was on that branch, not on what—on the other branch is another fruit. She wanted to be different from the other women.

SIGRIST: But what did she—you've told us everything that she grew—

JONIS: Mmm.

SIGRIST: —and she took care of, but what did she cook? Tell me what foods—

JONIS: Oh.

SIGRIST: —she cooked for you.

JONIS: She'd cook a head of cabbage, sl—slice it up and cook it, put a little vinegar in it, little bit salt and then, yeah, vinegar and salt and boil it and we had it. We'd put a little bit of lard in it or s—or butter. We had our own butter so she'd put that in. She made everything to use from her own yard. We had little piglets. She'd kill a piglet. We had meat. S—my father used to eat the salt pork, the skin on—the skin was thick on the pig and so she—he'd have that and then parts of the bacon.

SIGRIST: Was there a—a—a special recipe that she would make that was your favorite food when you were a kid?

JONIS: Oh, her recipe was red beet soup, c—cabbage soup or what you call—what do you call that yellow at—fruit in the yard?

SIGRIST: [unclear].

JONIS: Turnip. Turnip fruit. Turnip. She'd cut it up with some potatoes and—and maybe rice or something, mix it up for a change. She had no—no recipes.

SIGRIST: What about for a special occasion? What would she make?

JONIS: Oh, her special occasion was her stove in the backyard. She had a—in spring with little curls on it, used to sink down. And she used to take that and put it on a wooden frame herself. She did it on four legs and she put wood inside and then the spring and then cement on top. And she dried it for a couple of months thoroughly before she used it. And then she put a fire inside and burned all the wood up and let the—the stove go. And the stove dried up and then she baked bread for everybody.

SIGRIST: How often would she bake bread?

JONIS: She'd put the loaf of bread under her arm and slice a piece off, slice another one, slice another. On the circle, it was a slice this way. It was—

SIGRIST: Across the circle.

JONIS: Yeah. It was—[chuckles] it was no from the middle down like a pie. No. And then the lady was making pies and gave my mother one. She liked it.

SIGRIST: How often did your mother bake bread?

JONIS: Oh, almost every week, one, two loaves for ourselves and somebody else's. And if she made it for somebody else, then they'd give her a part of a loaf free for using the oven. And that way, she got her share out of it. She knew how to make it.

SIGRIST: What—what were your responsibilities around the house? What did you have to do to help out with household?

JONIS: Wash dishes and wash the floor.

SIGRIST: How did you wash the floor back then?

JONIS: With my feet because I was dizzy walking around. I had—I have a dizzy spell even now. Maybe that was what—what bothered me from then [sniffs] because when I'd bend down, I'd fall. And I used to wash the floor with my foot and then my brother would follow with a dry rag, any kind of a rag, and wipe it up, then go further and do it that way. But we were taught when we were young, before I went to school, even. I remember going to school. I said, "Oh, wait'll I get to school. I won't have to do it." And she slapped me in the face for saying that. Oh, she—she was a strict woman.

SIGRIST: What—what language did you speak in the house?

JONIS: Lithuanian.

SIGRIST: And did your parents attempt to learn English?

JONIS: They what?

SIGRIST: Did your parents attempt to learn English?

JONIS: My mother attempted to learn by giving me a penny a night, an hour for teaching her English. Next night was Joe's turn. He was two years younger. And the next night was my turn. My sister was seven years younger. She's still living, 93 now, and she's in the hospital in a nursing home and hospital together because she can't walk anymore.

SIGRIST: And she was born here in this country.

JONIS: Oh, they're all Americans.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

JONIS: Just like him.

SIGRIST: You're pointing to your son.

JONIS: [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Tell me some more about—you started telling me about school before.

JONIS: Oh, I went to school.

SIGRIST: You didn't speak English. Tell me about how—how you adjusted to going to school.

JONIS: There was a girl, a Russian girl that spoke English. She was in the second grade [sniffs] and she was En—English at home. She had older brothers and sisters so it was all right for her. So she took me to school and she said, "[speaking Lithuanian]?" "What is your name?" And I told her, "Yuli Mincavich [unclear]." That's in Lithuanian. And then the teacher said, "Speak English. Speak English." I said, "How can I?" I was thinking to myself, 'How can I? I don't know how.' And the girl was telling me, "[speaking Lithuanian]." It's hard from me to say anything in English. So she said, "Yesterday, today, tomorrow, month, January, February," and that way, I learned a couple of words. For four months, I almost began to talk good English. I was so glad I—oh, the teacher patted me on the shoulder and everything, was so good that I was Lithuanian and yet, I could speak English as much as I could. Was broken English. Then I was in the second grade. That was better. I couldn't read the word "thousand" on the b—board. I was trying to t—say it so "toe—to—to." I couldn't make out. And then the teachers say thou-sand. Then I—I tried to say it and that [unclear] done that. And I—I picked it up. In the fourth grade, I was English. I was a good English—

SIGRIST: When your mother was giving you a penny to teach her English, how would you teach her English?

JONIS: [speaking in Lithuanian].

JOSEPH: Explain.

JONIS: Up to a hundred and then "ah, bay, say" in Lithuanian, then, "a, b, c." And she said, "Over again." "Ah, bay, say, day, eff, vou, g—gah," all that in Lithuanian. Little bit further. Little bit further. And she was able to talk to the lady she worked for. She didn't know how to talk. One lady was Jewish and she was able to talk Lithuanian. She was from Lithuania so she spoke Lithuanian but she was actually Jewish so—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SIGRIST: What about your father? Did he—how—did he try to learn English or—

JONIS: He wasn't caring because they were all Lithuanians and Polish and he—he could speak Polish and—and Russian and Lithuanian. So he spoke with the crowd and that's all. He didn't speak English until he began to learn "son of a" [chuckles] and "you so and so," what you call, like the other men used to say.

SIGRIST: Swear words.

JONIS: Scr—scramble the words.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

JONIS: Yeah, and then he began to talk. Then he bought a printer, a little printer. You push the thing back, was a wheel, one finger here, one finger there, and you type. So he used a typewriter to write to Lithuania. That he was good at, pretty good, but not in English but in Lithuanian.

SIGRIST: Who—whom was he writing to in Lithuanian?

JONIS: In f—his family, his—his mother and father were still living. I visited with them when I was a baby and then—

SIGRIST: Did any of his family ever come over to America?

JONIS: I don't remember at all ever speaking of his family. No, my mother's brother was here and then he went to Colorado and he died in Colorado.

SIGRIST: Was your mother's brother here after you got here? Did he come after you?

JONIS: He came here before.

SIGRIST: Before.

JONIS: Because he w—he got my mother married.

SIGRIST: Oh, he was the one who—who—

JONIS: Yeah, Bill.

SIGRIST: —hitched your mother up.

JONIS: He got my mother married. And then after a while he went to—to Colorado for a better job in the golden mines.

SIGRIST: In the gold mines.

JONIS: And—yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how your family celebrated Christmas when you were a kid—

JONIS: Oh.

SIGRIST: —in Pennsylvania?

JONIS: We had herring put on with some green leaves around it and a slice of onion. And then we had potatoes, whole, with skins on, without skins. We didn't have much of anything.

SIGRIST: And did you decorate your house somehow?

JONIS: No. We didn't decorate the house at all. We—we got the house, 1912, and we came to Wilkes-Barre at 1906, and she worked for the Jewish man and he was very good. So she put up wallpapers for him. And if there was a shortage of paper, he said, "Put that other piece down," another kind. And then we wallpapered the ceiling too. And so she put all colors in her ceiling. When the organist came up to take census from the church, he says, "Why did you mix that paper up?" She said, "It was leftover. The boss told me to use it." So she used it all mixed up and even the ladies laughed at her, and she said, "Ah, [unclear]!" I—she didn't care for anything.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind when you were a kid?

JONIS: No, just a table and chairs or a bench. There was two chairs and a—a bench behind the wall and bench on the side and two chairs on the side. We had two boarders. My mother r—roomed two men in a—in the same bed. And they paid \$2—oh, no, dollar a week, I think she said. And then they paid \$2. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did they come from?

JONIS: Lithuania.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about living in a house that had boarders?

JONIS: “Don’t bother talking with the men. Don’t—don’t follow them.” Don’t go here or don’t go there. And we had to stay away from them, don’t bother them. And we’d be sitting on the swing and one of them would say, “Hi, Julia.” I’d put my head down. I couldn’t talk. We weren’t allowed to talk to them. Then later, it was okay. They—she let us. She was teaching us quietly, “Don’t have them touch your legs. Don’t have them touch your hand.” Don’t have them do this, do that. And I didn’t know why. She didn’t tell me until I was 12 or 13 years old. Then she told me. I was wondering. Oh! That was terrible.

SIGRIST: That’s very interesting.

JONIS: Ah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about—you said your mother worked for a Jewish man.

JONIS: Oh, she worked for a Jewish for—I—

SIGRIST: What—but what was she doing, exactly?

JONIS: Cleaning house, washing dishes.

SIGRIST: Domestic work in the house.

JONIS: And oilcloth they had. Oh, she was very surprised about oilcloth and she went—she bought a piece and put it down in—in her house. And she just didn’t nail it or anything. You’d hook your feet on ‘em. And, oh, she had a piece of oilcloth down, just like the rich woman had. And she’d wash clothes. She’d iron. They taught her how to iron. She never used an iron in Lithuania. They used to fold their clothes when they’re a little damp and press ‘em down with something heavy, like a heavy pillow. The pillows were heavy, very heavy and she’d pr—press that down. That was keeping it.

SIGRIST: Did—did the clothing that you wear look different than American [unclear]?

JONIS: Everything down to the floor. Everything was down to the floor.

SIGRIST: Even the little kids? Even the—

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

JONIS: And we grew up in 'em. They—we—we were growing up i—in—and I was there a year and a half. But when it came to Wilkes-Barre, I had long dresses like nightgowns, ruffled here, a yoke.

SIGRIST: Around your neck.

JONIS: And then long sleeves. In the summertime it would be a short sleeve, just a straight cuff, no—no cuffs or anything. And then she learned by pattern. She learned by a lady working there that taught her how to cut it out and everything. But she couldn't make it when she was alone. So they—they—she bought a pattern and she copied. And then I copied from her idea and I made myself a dress. And my mother came home and found me working. She says, "What are you doing? You'll break my machine. I paid \$35 for—that's a lot of money." And I said, "I—I didn't know what you paid for it but I want to sew." And then she looked at my dress. She says, "Pretty good." She said, "Here you need a little fixing. Here you'll need a little fixing and that's all." Then I was able to sew. And now I sewed. I patched everything. I made curtains. I made different things. Even when I had a store, I was sewing for my customers, curtains, sheets by the—by yard. They'd buy crib sheets or long sheets, three yards long. They'd put it under the bottom and under the top, no wrinkles in those beds like they are here.

SIGRIST: This is—this is the point in the interview where—where I want to ask you to tell the story about you becoming an American citizen. You're very special because you just became an American citizen—

JONIS: Oh.

SIGRIST: —when you were 99 years old.

JONIS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: And you're now a hundred years old. And I want you to tell the story about why you wanted to become an American citizen and how that happened.

JONIS: My husband was a citizen in 1921. I signed for my first papers. I got 'em but I didn't know my ship—what ship I came on. And my mother was—she was living yet but she didn't know either. So anyway, I went to the priest and asked him and she said, "German ship." That's the first time in my life I heard of it. And so I says, "Okay. Now I know where I am." And then when—when the p—the second—oh, the f—first paper I got, the law changed. The ladies lost their vote and the men got the papers. So I was no citizen, not even for him, nor alone or anything. I was just for myself, all by myself. My husband used to laugh because he was a

DP and he was in America only two years, and then he was three years afterwards and he got his papers. And I can't get mine and I'm American raised. I was raised here many years. I was 19, 20 then—20, 21. I was 21. And then I thought to myself, "Well, I'll be get—I'll be getting my papers." So I tried to get 'em and still, we couldn't get 'em. So they—he said, "You don't have to try. Your husband's a citizen." So that knocked me off and I didn't go until my daughter worked for the Catholic Charities. And she had the man working for her—he was the boss over her, and he was talking about citizens. And my mother said—my daughter said, "Oh, my mother would love to hear you talk like that." And he said, "Why? Is she American or a citizen?" She says, "She's a foreigner and all of us are citizens except my father." So when he found that out, he checked with Boston and with Washington. He went to o—one place, the other place. He found out that we didn't know our ship. So he wrote also to Europe and he got the papers right this time and the first time the—some other people got it. And then I got my papers back here and all I—all of a sudden I just remember, she asked me when she came up from Boston, and she said, "Did you have anything to do with any policemen?" I said, "No." I thought maybe she meant something wrong. I says, "No." And I was already on [unclear] and then I said no. And then she said, "I mean arrested." I said, "No." I said, "I was once but it was the laundry's fault, not mine but my name was used in it." So he put the laundry's name in it and my name.

SIGRIST: You're saying laundry?

JONIS: Laundry. I was doing laundry for—was all cash and carry for me.

SIGRIST: I see, on laundry. Okay.

JONIS: And so I w—I was doing that and they told me, "Oh, my God! You can go in, be American." And I thought, 'Well, I'll—I'll try again.' I tried, 1923. I went to the post office and I asked. They said, "No, you can't get 'em. There—there's a reject on your paper," my old paper that I had there. So I—out completely. And now, Mr. Doland, I think is his name. Was it?

JOSEPH: Cronin [PH].

JONIS: Huh?

JOSEPH: Bob Cronin.

JONIS: Cronin. He came up to me and talked to me and he asked Phyllis [PH] all kinds of questions, and Phyllis knew because I repeated, repeated a lot of times.

SIGRIST: And who is Phyllis?

JONIS: My daughter. Felicia [PH].

SIGRIST: And Phyl—Phyllis is your daughter.

JONIS: Felicia.

SIGRIST: Okay.

JONIS: And I said to myself, 'Well, maybe he can do something for me.' She came over. He was there and she said—

SIGRIST: You're pointing to your son.

JONIS: Yeah. He—he was visiting with me. And h—she said, "We might make something out of it." And so I says, "Oh, good. If that comes up." I said, "Oh, my God." I said my rosary three times the night before the—the people came from Boston, the two ladies. And where—she took m—she said, "Raise your hand." I s—they asked me what president was, and I don't remember anybody else. Did he ask me—she ask me anybody else?

JOSEPH: No.

JONIS: Just who the president was and I said Mr. Cl—S—Bill Clinton, I think I said. I know I said Clinton. And then, oh, I think she said Washington too. I'm not sure but I think I was—also, who was the first president? And I said Washington because I read a lot of books on different things, on history, especially. And so she said, "Raise your hand." My mouth opened. I got scared. I was thinking, 'What now?' And she said, "Now, take a pledge." And she made me take a pledge. It had something to do with saying I served—learned to—no, I'll serve the country if called upon, everything. And then afterwards I said, "Well, I'm ol—99." She said, "That makes no difference. If you're 200, you have to take a pledge." So I got the pledge and, oh, tears came down my eyes. I couldn't talk. Even now, it makes me shake. Oh, that was the most beautiful day. I kept that flag and I got it today. I said, "Joe, if I die, bury it with me." [chuckles] "Let my citizenship go." He's got my papers at his house because he's a widower now and—

SIGRIST: You're talking about your son.

JONIS: Yeah. And he's—he got a chest up there and he uses it in his chest.

SIGRIST: But it made you feel good to be—

JONIS: Oh! You don't know. Even now, makes me shake like—

SIGRIST: W—and they gave you a flag?

JONIS: They what?

SIGRIST: They gave you a flag, you said?

JONIS: Oh, yes. She gave me a flag and I—I think it was her. Was it you or her?

JOSEPH: No, I got the—[clears throat] the big flag from the Veteran's Post.

JONIS: I can't hear him.

SIGRIST: That's okay. T—tell me.

JONIS: Okay.

SIGRIST: Tell me. Talk to me. Where do you have your flag now?

JONIS: I got it on my winter—C—Christmas tree in my room.

SIGRIST: Here—here at University Commons.

JONIS: Yes, sir.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

JONIS: It's—while I'm here, it's there. And then when I'm dead I want to be buried with it. I [laughter]—I don't want to give it up. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: You waited a long time to get it.

JONIS: Oh, God. How many times I prayed and prayed and prayed. I said the rosary three times, the 15 decades. One decade is five prayers and 15 is three prayers. So I said that one night and I was sleeping and I was still praying. And I was thinking, 'Oh, God. Give me the power to get that paper. Oh, that paper means a lot to me.' When I went there that day, oh, God. I shook—shook like a leaf.

SIGRIST: [chuckles] Let's—let's backtrack. Thank you for telling me that story. Let's backtrack just a little bit. You said you got married in 1921.

JONIS: In 1920.

SIGRIST: 1920.

JONIS: I came here 19 years old, from Wilkes-Barre.

SIGRIST: Oh, right. And what was the name of the man that you married?

JONIS: Vincent Jonis.

SIGRIST: And you said he wasn't—was he born in the United States?

JONIS: No, he was a Lithuanian. He was—h—he died a Lithuanian. [chuckles]  
I hate to say what—what he died from.

JOSEPH: He's asking you about my father. Your—your husband, Vincent.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You got married in 1920.

JONIS: Yeah, July 16<sup>th</sup>—

SIGRIST: And—and—

JONIS: —1917—1917. Wait a minute. I came—I came, 1916, out here and  
1917, I got married.

SIGRIST: You came from where in 1916?

JONIS: Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: You came from Pennsylvania to—

JONIS: Yeah. I—I married in 1917, July—July 17, 1916. Wait a minute. I'm—  
I'm forgetting.

SIGRIST: Well, that's okay. We—but you married Vincent.

JONIS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have?

JONIS: Three.

SIGRIST: And name them for me.

JONIS: Joseph.

SIGRIST: Who's with us today.

JONIS: Yeah, he's 79 now. Here next, this month coming he'll be 79, 80.

JOSEPH: Seventy-nine.

JONIS: And then Vincent is 74, 75.

JOSEPH: Uh-hmm.

JONIS: And Felicia was three years later, each one three years between.

SIGRIST: How did you meet Vincent?

JONIS: I came to live in that house with a—with your sister-in-law and I didn't know he was—he came—he took me to his home. That was his home and with his sister. And I b—boarded there just a few months and we got married. And we were engaged already for a year, almost, when went over there, when I was in Newton Upper Falls [PH].

SIGRIST: Is that in Pennsylvania?

JONIS: No, that was—

SIGRIST: Massachusetts?

JONIS: —B—near Boston.

SIGRIST: Okay.

JONIS: Newton Upper Falls.

SIGRIST: Just trying to keep the geography straight. [chuckles]

JONIS: Yeah. It was near the Echo Bridge.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

JONIS: So, yeah, I was there and then we came—

SIGRIST: Did you—I'm sorry. Go ahead.

JONIS: I—then he took me to Wilkes-B—to Worcester and he says, "We'll live with my sister." And we lived with her and she prepared the wedding

and everything. It was a kitchen wedding. No, not a kitchen wedding but [chuckles] everything done at home and dancing next door in a—in a apartment. That was all. And I got married and I got stuck. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: And did you ever go back to Lithuania—

JONIS: No.

SIGRIST: —to visit?

JONIS: I wish I could.

SIGRIST: Did—

JONIS: Now, it's a beautiful country. Now, it's a stately country. It's more like Worcester. I saw pictures of it and every—

SIGRIST: Did you always want to go back to see it?

JONIS: Oh, yes, but I—but the money part was a hundred-something dollars.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father ever go back?

JONIS: My mother went back; my father never did. No, his mother died after he left. His father died after he left and my mother's father was dead before that. He was dead at 43 or 44.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had grown up in Lithuania?

JONIS: Oh, [unclear]—a farmer. I—that's all they had is all farms, all big lots with stakes in 'em. That's—that's the life they lived. Yeah. And it was a—off the—off the countryside, like. 'Twas not where rich people live but the—where the poor people. They'd have stakes where the rich people—they had monuments put up. The Jonis monument would be put up at one and Johns—somebody else another one. And it was all for—and then a—a rope around.

SIGRIST: How do you think of yourself in terms of nationality?

JONIS: Oh, I—I'm proud of my nationality.

SIGRIST: But—but I mean what nationality do you think yourself of? Are you American? Are you Lithuanian?

EI-897/JONIS

JONIS: I'm—oh, no. I'm American. [chuckles] I was Lithuanian all the while. Now, I say I'm an American. [chuckles]

SIGRIST: Good. Well, Mrs. Jonis, thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions.

JONIS: Oh.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Julia Jonis on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1997, Wednesday afternoon at the University Commons Nursing Home in Worcester with her son, Joseph, in attendance. Thank you very much.

JONIS: Oh, okay. I hope you can make something out of it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]