

EI-955

MARIA MASAK LAZNOVSKY

BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 3, 1898

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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CZECHOSLOVAKIA (AUSTRIA-HUNGARY), 1899

AGE: 1

SHIP: THE MEGARA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Okay. Today is September 25th, 1997.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: I'm here at the Mary Manning Walsh [PH] Home and I'm sitting with Maria Laznovsky, who came from Czechoslovakia when she was one year of age in 1899.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: At the time of this interview, Mrs. Laznovsky is 99 years old.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: And I'm delighted to have met you and I'm looking forward to this interview.

LAZNOVSKY: A—and so am I.

LEVINE: Good. Okay, if you would say for the tape your birth date and where in Czechoslovakia you were born.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. I was born in Raby. You call it Raby.

LEVINE: How do you spell that, Maria?

LAZNOVSKY: R-A-B-I. You know, the Y like this, not I. Y.

LEVINE: Okay.

LAZNOVSKY: Raby. It—well, in Austria.

LEVINE: Oh, it was Austria?

LAZNOVSKY: It was Austria, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. And that was on August 3rd.

LAZNOVSKY: Right. When I was born.

LEVINE: 1898.

LAZNOVSKY: '98.

LEVINE: Okay. Do you remember Raby? Do you remember that?

LAZNOVSKY: [telephone rings] Oh, that's my phone.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause. [tape off/on] We're resuming here after the phone rang. You—Raby. We were talking about Raby, which was Austria when you were born.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, Raby.

LEVINE: Yes.

LAZNOVSKY: N—not the Rabin [PH], you know. Raby.

LEVINE: Raby.

LAZNOVSKY: R-A-B-Y.

LEVINE: Okay. And I suppose you have no memories of Raby because you were so little.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: But maybe you can tell what your mother and father told you about coming to this country, why they came.

LAZNOVSKY: Well, my mother had her father living in Nebraska quite some years before she started to come here. And when he came to visit her during that time and saw how hard she had to work to raise those seven children, he said, "Why don't you come to America? I have a estate but I have people, Indians, working on it for me. And you could have a good home and your children could go to university and be educated, while here they wouldn't get no education." And she didn't want to sort of make the move. He says, "All right. I'll leave you with the thought. Anytime you feel you would like to do it and try it, you let me know and I'll come back for you so you shouldn't feel lost, that you're traveling alone like this. And I'll bring you to my place in Nebraska. And there's a lot of Czech living there. It's a Czech colony and there's a Czech school. So you wouldn't be out of your regular environment." And that's how it happened.

LEVINE: Now, what was your mother's name?

LAZNOVSKY: My name—my mother's name was Slapak. Slapak. S-L-A-P-A-K.

LEVINE: And her first name?

LAZNOVSKY: Anna.

LEVINE: Anna. And your father?

LAZNOVSKY: Edward.

LEVINE: Edward. And his—his was Laz—Laznovsky.

LAZNOVSKY: No, Masak. His name was Masak.

LEVINE: Oh, sorry. I'm sorry. Masak.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. Masak. Edward [PH] Masak. And he came from a very fine family. His father was at the—on the university and teaching, and his sisters all were educated. Two of them were teachers and one son was engineer, electrical engineer.

LEVINE: Now, how did your father feel about going to Nebraska?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, he thought it's an adventure, which you have to try to know what it's all about. And so when Mother decided to come to America, as I told you, her father came and brought her to New York. And they stayed in a hotel here for, well, he said over a week. And then h—he got the trains tickets and all that. And then they finally took off in Nebraska.

LEVINE: Was—was that with the seven children?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes, with seven children. And they all learned about farming. He had a big estate and he had Indians working for him. And so he trained them to—well, to be farmers because he wanted to leave that property to his daughter, and my mother was his daughter. And so that all came to pass and, of course, Mother decided she didn't want to live so far away, that she had some friends in New York. She wanted to live in New York. So they booked transportation and she came to New York, and she lived in this neighborhood. My two brothers found an apartment on Second Avenue in a new building, 75th Street, and moved her in when she came. And that was the beginning of the—well, of the Laznovsky family.

LEVINE: Wow. Now, how long did—did your mother and father and your whole family stay in Nebraska? Do you know how long they stayed there?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, it could have been as long as her father lived. But I'm not sure of the date when her father passed away.

LEVINE: Do you remember how old you were when you came to New York?

LAZNOVSKY: I was a little girl playing on the sidewalk, like with other children from the house. I must have been about four, five years old.

LEVINE: I see. Do you have any memories of life in Nebraska?

LAZNOVSKY: Only remember that they had horses and I loved them and patted them, brought them a lump of sugar, and that it was a big—I used to call it a garden—but it was an estate, a big estate. But they had fruit trees, plows and he was importing things to different cities, my grandfather.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's what I remember. And then when I—when we came, New—New York, Mother joined the Catholic church. Well, it was

Maria Methom—no, see, it w—it was right in 60th Street. The church is still there. It's between Second and First Avenue.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's where she put us to school, so she wanted us to be Catholics.

LEVINE: Were you Catholics when you were in Austria?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, we were all Catholics.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And she didn't want us to lose that.

LEVINE: I see. Could you say anything else about what your mother told you, or your father, about Nebraska? Anything else about the family—

LAZNOVSKY: Well—

LEVINE: —when they were there?

LAZNOVSKY: As far as I could remember, Mother used to say, "My father was a very wealthy man. But he just didn't know how to go about it. He wanted me to take over and I knew nothing about farming." And her husband was a secretary to some high official in the government and he knew nothing about farming. So she said, "It would be lost to us. So he should give it to the city and let people that could work it take it over for their benefit, to prosper and don't let the land go into German hands." See, they wanted—he wanted that land to belong to Czechoslovakia.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: Because he was a born Czechoslovak.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And there was a whole community there of Czechoslovaks.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right. Then it prospered. It—well, Prague is a big city, cultured city today. People go to the university to study and all that. It's a big, beautiful country and—

LEVINE: So your mother wanted her father to leave it to Czechoslovakia?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, he—no. She—he wanted it should stay in the hands of the people that had it now, that had it and they were Czechoslovak people, not from my mother's town but from their own—coming from Prague around the c—cities, the—around there and going to the university, a lot of them. So he didn't want that to go to some other country. He wanted to stay Nebraska [unclear] university to be called [unclear]. And it still is. It's [unclear] University.

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Now, your grandfather's name, do you remember that?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, it's Slapak. Well, my mother's name was Slapak, her maiden name.

LEVINE: Right.

LAZNOVSKY: So her father's name was Baclav [PH] Slapak.

LEVINE: How do you spell his first name?

LAZNOVSKY: B-A-C-L-A-V.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: Baclav Slapak. S-L-A-P-A-K is Slapak.

LEVINE: Okay. And do you have any memories of that grandfather?

LAZNOVSKY: Very slight. No, I don't. Mother had her picture hanging in her living room and h—he looked, you know, beard and all that. And I used to call him Santy Claus. [laughter] Grandpa Santy Claus. [laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. So then you remember being in New York on the—on the East Side, Upper East Side and playing in the streets there.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right, with little girls, the jacks, you know, how you throw and catch with the ball.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And we had a little dog who was always with us sitting and watching the ball going back and forth. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And we were happy children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: Mother gave us a big piece of black bread when she baked with a piece of—she used to call it schleppy [PH]. She—[unclear], you know, from the—when she roasted a chicken.

LEVINE: Oh.

LAZNOVSKY: That fat, to put it on. It tasted very good. And that was our happiness.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: No candy or nothing like that.

LEVINE: Now, what did your father do when he came?

LAZNOVSKY: My father, as I told you, he was a secretary. He was—came from a very wealthy family and they never wanted him to marry my mother. She wasn't of the type—

LEVINE: Of the right class—

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —or status.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And—but he married her anyhow. So they sort of—then this—owned him, you know. His sisters, some of them stuck to him and some of them just got away, thinking he wasn't good enough, because he done something what his parents didn't want. But my mother was very happy with him and she had two children with him, my brother, Edward, and me. And he died quite young, because he got pneumonia and they didn't know how to treat it, so he died at the age of 39.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: My father.

LEVINE: Wow. And so your fa—you said your mother had seven children.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: So she had children before—

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: She was married to a man that had big house and horses and all that, but he was a gambler. And his—her parents were saying, "He's not a man for you." But you know, he was a cavalier like, you know, [unclear] and all that. And she fell for it. She was a young, pretty girl and she fell for it and they got married without their parents' blessings. And he had a big house. He had servants. And at the beginning, everything looked beautiful. And they had these children. But he was a gambler and my mother received, well, they called it 40 gold pieces. How much a gold piece was worth, I don't know. And he gambled it all away.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: So when that happened, her father said, "She cannot be in bondage with a man like that." And that's when he came and took her to America. He says, "The marriage isn't a marriage I want for my daughter. They're not going to be educated. They're going to be like the father, a gambler, a loose man that didn't think he had a family to support." So that's how, when they came to America, my mother with the seven children, her father took her and made her come. He said, "You'll—you'll be a pauper. You'll be nothing. And you won't be even able to bring those children in the proper way they should be brought up." And that's how it happened here.

LEVINE: I see. So when your father came to New York, first of all, I—I imagine—oh, you said your grandfather had died.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: That's when they came—

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to New York.

LAZNOVSKY: That's right.

LEVINE: And—and d—do you know if there was a pull of New York for them? Was it New York, something about New York that they wanted or they just—

LAZNOVSKY: No—

LEVINE: —wanted to get away from the farm?

LAZNOVSKY: They just wanted to get away and so that it was a bustling city. You know, busy people, church, two churches, the bells ringing for the mass and all that and people online, ready to go to church. So—and they were holy people, you know. They were [unclear] like that. And he said, “This is going to be our home.” And they settled there and his folks bought him the house they lived in. And my mother gave it to the city when she moved to New York for people that had hardship and needed some help. She gave the city this house to do with it what they it had would be the best—

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: —for those people.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And that’s how it was.

LEVINE: I see. Now, in New York City, what did your father then do for work?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, he got a job in an office. He was trained and he wrote beautifully. He knew figures and he got a job in a firm that, well, they had quite a number of secretaries and all that. I don’t remember the name of the firm. But he made out all right, my mother. She did beautiful knitting. You know, they learned it in the—she went to the—where the sisters taught the young girls homemaking. And she learned all this beautiful knitting, designs, beautiful shawls. And she made them and they sold them. The place sold them and they made money like that to keep it up.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: See?

LEVINE: So now, you started the parochial school?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, I went—

LEVINE: The Catholic school.

LAZNOVSKY: —to the Catholic school. Mary of—Holy Mary of Perpetual Help. It's still there on 68th Street between First and Second, and I go to mass there. And when my baby was born, I made the priest that called—taught me catechism—to christen her for me and bless her. And so we went to church. My brother was the godfather and my mother was the godmother. And that's my daughter, what I have today. She's a beautiful young woman and she's a teacher.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wonderful. What do you remember about the school, the Catholic school?

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, it was wonderful. We were standing on line waiting till the—we went to mass. First, we went to mass and then we had to form a line outside and wait for—the bell started to ring that the school is open. And we marched in like orderly children and kneeled down and said a prayer. And then the teacher—well, it was a sister or a father that taught the school, blessed us and—and the school started. And it went to three o'clock. And when Mother wasn't busy, she came and took me home from the school—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: —and bought me an ice cream soda. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] What do you remember about that neighborhood? It's probably changed but can you talk about that?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, it was mostly an Italian neighborhood. You know, they spoke Italian. And nice people, but they were Italian. They—and Czech mixed up with them. And the Cz—Czech boys married the Italian girls in the end. And it was a mixed up of Czech with Italians.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were there were Italian children in your classes?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: Yes. And they were trying to teach them to speak the Czech language but it was very hard. So they decided they could have two classes. They could have—

WOMAN: Oh, sorry.

LEVINE: That's okay. We're doing an interview. [tape off/on] I'm resuming here.

LAZNOVSKY: And then when I was 14, Mother was thinking, what should I be? You know, learn. So there was a very nice dressmaker in the neighborhood that made cute dresses for Mother. And Mother asked her that—told her that she's got a girl, daughter, that she loves dressmaking, if she could sort of take her as an apprentice. She said, "I'd love to. And she's smart enough. She'll be one good dressmaker." So she took me and I learned and I was a dressmaker.

LEVINE: Oh, wonderful.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, and, well—

LEVINE: Was that something you, yourself, wanted to do?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, I made dresses for people, charged \$3 a dress. [laughs] But it was a little help for Mother, so she could keep us all together and make us a decent, old-fashioned meal like they did in Europe with potatoes and little piece of meat and all that. And we were one big happy family.

LEVINE: Now, did your brothers and sisters work too?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, my sister got a—she spoke very fluently German because she was in Vienna before that, you know. Her—my father's sister was a married—he was supposed to be a count. And she took her in as a helpmate for the children. And meanwhile, she learned German and spoke and so she had no trouble getting a job. And she worked for the Aster people, for their children.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's how—

LEVINE: Did she live with them or did she live in town?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes, she lived with them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And if she came on Sunday, well, they made—you know, checked dinner and always told her, "Dinner is going to be here. You're

invited. Come. I'll hold it warm for you." And she came every Sunday for dinner.

LEVINE: What—what was a real Czech dinner that you would have on Sundays?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, Mother used to make delicious dumplings. Oh, they used to come up from the water. They were this big.

LEVINE: Ah.

LAZNOVSKY: And she sliced them with a thread, with a white thread. And they looked beautiful on the platter. And she roasted pork loin and made sweet and sour cabbage, and that was delicious. And the gravy from the meat on the potato, you had a delicious meal. And of course, we got a drink of tea and that was our Sunday dinner.

LEVINE: And what would the meat be?

LAZNOVSKY: What?

LEVINE: What meat would that be? What kind of meat?

LAZNOVSKY: Meat was pork.

LEVINE: Pork.

LAZNOVSKY: Loin of pork, she used to get. Or when they had a special, she got few pork chops and potted them very slow till the water evaporated. And then they were roasting in the juice and they were really delicious.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: She was a very good cook.

LEVINE: Wow. So [clears throat] let's see. So you mentioned earlier that in the school, in the Catholic school, there was an effort made to teach the Italian children Czechoslovakian.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, they tried.

LEVINE: Was it because it was a Czechoslovakian Catholic school?

LAZNOVSKY: No, because the parents thought, being they were going to the school, that if they would learn the language, it might help them, you

know, to integrate because they were Czech mix with Italians and Irish people. And they intermarry, you know, when they got old, you know. And that's what happened. They intermarry. They were— Italian boys, married Czech girls. Czech girls marrying Irish fellows an—and they were all happy family and going to church on Sunday. It was a pleasure to see. My mother used to say, "It's wonderful to look at." They all come in, bow, and make a sign of the cross and all fill in. Then when the church is over, they all walk out with their hands together and happily go home for dinner.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So [clears throat] let's see, you went to school on 60th Street.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, that—

LEVINE: And you were living where?

LAZNOVSKY: On First Avenue, 72nd Street.

LEVINE: Seventy-Second.

LAZNOVSKY: Between 73rd and 72nd. The house was just pulled down last week where I lived over 70 years.

LEVINE: Wow.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, they pulled it down. It was too old to re-fix and the landlord decided he's gonna put a beautiful big house in there.

LEVINE: Well, how did you feel about that?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, I felt happy for the people that will get a chance to live in a house like he said he's gonna build.

LEVINE: Yeah.

LAZNOVSKY: And I was thinking, 'Why can't I live there?'

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: But I was here.

LEVINE: Right.

LAZNOVSKY: So I thought to myself, 'I'm blessed as it is that I'm in a home.'

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was the house like when you lived there? Wh—

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, it was a very nice house. It had five floors and, of course, wooden stairs you walked up. And it was from one end to the other. One end was the kitchen and the other was the parlor. And you had two entrances. You could have gone from the front to the kitchen or, well, you know—or the kitchen—

LEVINE: The other door went—

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to the parlor.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. And you—you had two doors, back and front. And we were happy there. I got married from there and we had a beautiful wedding.

LEVINE: Did you have the wedding—where was the wedding?

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, the wedding [chuckles]—I don't even remember [unclear]. I was married 65 years when my husband passed away. So you could imagine—

LEVINE: Was he also Czechoslovakian?

LAZNOVSKY: No, he wasn't. He was an American. His parents were Czechoslovakian, but he spoke some words but we always used to laugh how he pronounced it, you know. [chuckles] He said, "You're killing the Czech language." [laughs] But he was a very, very lovely man.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

LAZNOVSKY: And, well, he passed away this past two years. He passed away.

LEVINE: Well, now, was there a lot of Czechoslovakian social life? Were there clubs in the neighborhood that people went to where they had their own music or where they had—

LAZNOVSKY: Oh—

LEVINE: —their own—

LAZNOVSKY: We had beautiful—we had two clubs. One was a dollybord [PH]. They called it dollybord. That means a crowd together. And one

was [unclear]. That means international society together. And they would put on beautiful shows. They had a man coming from—he came from Prague and he was a maestro, you know, teaching in Europe. They had beautiful shows put on the—on the stage. Well, he came and thought if he could break—break in here (there's so many Czechs mixed and Slovaks then) and make a real big break in the—in the Slovak world, as you would say. And he did and I joined it and I was around 16 that time. And I played in the play and got big review in the paper that I'm going to be some day a great actress. [chuckles] But here I am, sitting, talking to you. [chuckles] And—

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, Maria, w—where was the theater? Where—

LAZNOVSKY: Right here. It's still there on 73rd Street between Second and First Avenue. And it's called Narodine Budoba.

LEVINE: Could you possibly spell that?

LAZNOVSKY: Now, yes, I'll spell it for you. It's now—now, you're going to write down just what I'm saying.

LEVINE: Okay.

LAZNOVSKY: It's N-A-R-O-D-I-N-E. Narodine. And the Budoba, the house, you spell—that's another word—B-U-D-O-B-A. Budoba. That's—that's like a national house.

LEVINE: I see.

LAZNOVSKY: See?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And—and so there was a lot of theater.

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: People were interested in Czechoslovakian—

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, people—

LEVINE: —theater.

LAZNOVSKY: Used to be sold out. They—they practiced, you know, at night from when they came home from work. And—and they had a good—that man was a genius, you know, how he taught them. And they learned how to make dances, polka and all that, you know. And he—we had very good musicians, very good. They picked it up and

it was beautiful music and people couldn't wait to buy tickets to go and see it. It used to be jammed. And downstairs was a big restaurant, as I told you, Narodine Budoba. And people didn't even go home. They went there and ate the Czech meal and it was the biggest holiday. They went home dancing and singing [chuckles] and all the stuff. They were so happy [unclear] and all that stuff.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LAZNOVSKY: —were so happy and that's how I grew up.

LEVINE: Now, was there a newspaper? A Czech newspaper?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes, and there still is. It's called "New Yorski Listi." [PH] "New York P"—well, "New York Paper."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And we were—I was buying it still—I still buy it on Sunday, you know, to see if I know some of the names there who died and who—things like that, or who moved away. And sometimes, I find people that I knew and used to be friends with in that paper.

LEVINE: Yeah. So that paper goes back—

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —all that while.

LAZNOVSKY: All those years that paper was in existence. They called it "New Yorski Listi," "New York Paper."

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was there a paper that went out to the Czechoslovakians who were in Nebraska and out in the West?

LAZNOVSKY: Oh—

LEVINE: Was there a paper that all the Czech community read?

LAZNOVSKY: People used to have it sent to their friends in Europe, you know. They'd pay—paid subscription and they had it sent to their loved ones in Europe. And it spread and it was almost over [unclear]—over the city. You could of even get the Czech paper in Nebraska.

You could have gotten it—by plane now. You know, everything went overnight. And—

LEVINE: But in those days, before the planes were going, it was still being sent out to the West?

LAZNOVSKY: Sent—still, it's in circulation. It's still busy and people are buying it and waiting on the line on Saturday night to get it, so they could read it before they go to bed on Saturday night. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow. Well, how would you say your—what was your mother and father's attitude toward being Czechoslovakian and being American? How did they think about that?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, they felt great. My father was elated. He wanted to learn American ways.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And he learned English, already part of it. In college, he was r— learning English. And he was elated that they started to broaden up, you know, like that—and that there will be people that will teach their children the Czechoslovak language. And it really happened. They got a Czech school. It's, oh, still, you could go and ask in 73rd Street between First and Second. That's that Narodine Budoba, it's called. And that's a Czech school. They have classes on Sunday. And they have even classes on weekdays after the children are over with their own school. Yes. It had broaden out. It's international. See, and in other cities they have it the same.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: In Milwaukee, in B—in—in Cleveland. Cleveland is a big city with a lot of Czech living there, a lot of Slovaks. And Chicago is a Czech city. You could call it Czech city because it's—almost everyone is a Czech. They got building—their own houses. They have own settlements. They have own theater. It's—it's [unclear].

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. See, you wouldn't know that.

LEVINE: No, you wouldn't.

LAZNOVSKY: See? But it is.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: W—d—can you—is—this may be a silly question but is there a—are there certain qualities that you think people who are Czechs have? Is there a kind of ethnic quality that Czechoslovakians seem to—seem to have? Certain kinds of personality traits or—

LAZNOVSKY: Well, s—there's a—there's a barrier, as you would say. Some Czechoslovaks speak the high—high Czech. There is a high Czech you could speak. The words are little change but it—if you speak it, you're sort of educated. And—and there's the one that I know how to speak. That's the Czech language you learned f—at home—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: —when, as a child.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And—and they're both—those are two languages that are brought, that are over the—well, I could say over the whole [unclear] continent. They speak Cz—Czech in Chicago, in Cleveland, in Wisconsin, in Nebraska. There's people living that are Czech-born and they speak that language.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Okay. And so you went to this—to the school on 60th Street. And then how long did you stay in school?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, till I graduated.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: Till the ninth grade.

LEVINE: And then what?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. Then I went—as I told you, that lady was teaching me dressmaking.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: I used to go there after school and done very fine hemming for her or very fine rolling, which Mother learned me. And she took me on

as a apprentice. And then I learned how to cut and measure a dress out, you know, to be made and learned to run the machine. And she—I was her partner. Later on, she took me as her partner.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

LAZNOVSKY: And we worked together.

LEVINE: And how long did you do that?

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, that—doing that for some years, for quite a number. I done it you will my husband passed away. He says, “I don’t want you to go to work. I got married to have a wife when I come home from work I could talk to. But you’re never home. You always working. I don’t want you to work. You worked long enough. Now, give it up and be a homemaker. Forget you were ever a dressmaker.” But, well, I did but then when he passed away, what was there to do? Sad things to think about, going to the cemetery and I thought, ‘I’m going to go back because I’ll never pick up unless I try to forget a little.’ And I went back and I sewed with her like we did before.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And she’s still in business.

LEVINE: Wow.

LAZNOVSKY: And of course, she always said, “If you need a job, you just put your scissors in your bag and needles and come.” [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, did she have a shop?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes, she—[chuckles] she had a shop in her own apartment. But now, I lost track of her. I really don’t know. She li—she lived in—there were suburban homes built here in 73rd Street and in 78th Street. She lived in one of those four-room apartments, and one room she had just for sewing. But now, I—I lost track of her.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: I don’t know just where she is now.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Well, when you—how did you meet your husband?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, my husband was a physical director of a Sokol [PH], they call it. It’s a gymnastic association, American gymnastic association.

And he was a gymnast all his life. He competed in the—in the Olympics; he was a champion.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And so when he was a—he was a director for the YMCA. He taught them exercises, trained them for competitions and that was his work. He was a physical director.

LEVINE: Hmm. And so how did you meet him?

LAZNOVSKY: Meet him through my brothers. I had six brothers. They all were gymnasts. They all went gym—to gymnast—and trained for different competitions. And we had medals hanging in the wall, gold medals, silver medals, all kinds of medals. And through them, I met lot of Bobby's friends. I could have had three, four boyfriends but I only looked for one.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's the one I married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And he was still a director before he died.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when you're married, where did you live then?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, first, Mother had a big flat and then my brothers all got married already. And she was alone in that flat and my brother said, "Mother—be a nice thing. You always loved Mother. You always got along. Why don't you join—tell Mother, make her feel good, that you're going to live with her or that she's going to live with you?" So she's—she—"Oh, that would be wonderful." At least, she would have somebody to talk to at night. You know. So we moved in and she gave us the living room as a bedroom and we had two other bedrooms [knocking sound]—

LEVINE: Wait. We're pausing here.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. [tape off/on]

LEVINE: She—so she gave you the living room?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—

LAZNOVSKY: For a bedroom.

LEVINE: Bedroom.

LAZNOVSKY: We fixed it nice. My husband bought a beautiful bedroom set, you know, and painted it. And we put pictures on the wall and [chuckles] he made a lovely floor, wooden floor but—and then shined it, made it [unclear] that fancy floor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: [unclear], you shouldn't fall. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LAZNOVSKY: And—and he fixed it beautifully. He was very handy. And Mother had the other rooms and we joined for dinner. Mother cooked for all of us and I went to work and I worked and gave her money, and we were one big happy family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: Got along and everything.

LEVINE: So you stayed living there for—

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, no.

LEVINE: —a long time.

LAZNOVSKY: I don't live there. Since then, things have changed. My family slowly passed away. My mother went first. When she died, it slowly broke up. My brothers didn't come anymore. And—and I went to work and came home, made supper for my husband. And nobody—everybody had their own home. So I had f—nobody to cook for.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And so we decided we're just going to w—live like other people, just two of us and up to my husband when he died few years ago now, we kept the home and everything. And then when they told me they're going to pull the house down, that I got to remove the furniture and all that. I thought to myself it would break my heart to see that furniture go. I said, "If there's any people that are in need,

and I know they are, give it to who needs a piece of furniture. I don't want anything." I said, "What would I do with it? I'll have to get one room like anybody else and live in one room." And this is my place.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: I—

LEVINE: So you—you—you stayed in the same apartment that you—your mother—

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, I—

LEVINE: You moved in with your mother into [unclear].

LAZNOVSKY: —still—and from that apartment I came here.

LEVINE: Came here, uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. And they pulled—

LEVINE: Huh.

LAZNOVSKY: —the house down where I lived. I wouldn't have lived there anyhow—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: —because it was over a hundred years old, the house, and they said it needs fixing and that would cost more than a new house. So the man that owned it decided to sell it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And they're going to put a big high rise in there.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And this is m—my home since. And since—well, I was always around here. I sewed for them. After I came home from work, I—if they needed something to be sewed or like that, I came in and I sewed it.

LEVINE: Into here?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Into the Mary Manning Walsh Home?

LAZNOVSKY: The machine here.

LEVINE: Oh.

LAZNOVSKY: And I—

LEVINE: So this is a natural place for you to be.

LAZNOVSKY: Y—yeah.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

LAZNOVSKY: And I done it all free so they could make some money on it for
themselves. You know, for the club.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's—even now, when I'm asked, if it isn't too much, I do it for
nothing.

LEVINE: Isn't that lovely?

LAZNOVSKY: You know, sewn by hand. And, well—and as time goes on, I
needed glasses and I can't see [chuckles] so good to thread the
needle. And after all, I'm 99 years old.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And s—but this is my home.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, Maria, wh—when you think about your whole family
coming to this country and—and immigrating and then starting life
over here, do you think that immigration made a difference in the—in
the p—in the people in your family, in their personalities? Do you
think there was an impact?

LAZNOVSKY: I think so. I think it made better people, better understanding
between nations and—and loving each other and—and being nice to
each other. I made a big difference. There's people that you—you
know them from someplace but you don't know just—could—can't
remember right away where. They all tip their hats to you and say,
“Hello, how are you, darling?” or, “How are you, dear?” And say a
few words, “Are you getting along all right?” And those are people

that all immigrated here. And there's lot of them. And all of them are happy and all of them have jobs and they successful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: I think this was a—this is the New World. This is honestly a New World.

LEVINE: What was the high point of your life? What makes you feel very satisfied that you—you have done in your lifetime?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, the o—I could only feel this way. I have a beautiful granddaughter, who's a medical doctor. I wish you would see her.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And she made all the difference in the world. She was my sister—daughter. When my sister got sick and got ill, I said, “Debbie, you have to come and live with me. I want to see that you get the proper meal. I want to see that you go to bed the right time because I’m not going to have your life ruined like this. You’ve got p—you know, young friends coming in and they start to play cards and this.” I says, “I’m not going to allow it, Debbie, and you can blame me. I love you. I and my husband brought you up because your mother was sick. And I feel I deserve that from you. You’re going to live with me and I’m going to see that you get a proper meal at night when you come home from work. And I’ll make your clothes and you’ll be my biggest priority.” And that’s how it happened. And she lived with me for several years and all that and then she—of course, she met a nice man. And they talked and—and my—her father’s family had big property. You know, people used to get land free. You didn’t have to pay for it many years ago. And they even move you there to start a colony so people would come and—and patronize the place and have children, and it would make a city. That’s how K—Kansas City was built. And so she said, “Okay, Grandma.” She—[chuckles] and I see that they were going to get married and he got that property. So his parents had them—buil—build them a house. And it’s a big place. She sent me pictures. I— it’s too much to show you and all that. And—and she lives there.

LEVINE: Oh.

LAZNOVSKY: And she—she teaches in the hospital. There’s a Kansas City General Hospital and she’s there teaching young doctors different methods of healing different wounds and different things what she learned as—as a apprentice to be a doctor.

LEVINE: So, now this is your sister's—

LAZNOVSKY: This is my sister's daughter.

LEVINE: Sister's daughter.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: And—and she lived with you and your husband?

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Until she went to medical school?

LAZNOVSKY: No, she went to medical school when she lived with us.

LEVINE: I see.

LAZNOVSKY: Because I made her go.

LEVINE: I see.

LAZNOVSKY: I knew she was interested in medicine. That's all she talked about, medicine, medicine. I said, "Well, if you loved medicine, you would go in for it because they need doctors all the time." And she said, "Well, but it costs money." I said, "Debbie, don't mind the money. I'll work. I'll put it and you could get a scholarship," which she did and she went—started to go to medical school. And sh—when she graduated, it was one of my happiest days, to see her graduate and waving to me. [chuckles] And she's a—

LEVINE: That's lovely.

LAZNOVSKY: —very, very fine doctor.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And now, you had a child of your own? Did you?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, my child passed away.

LEVINE: Oh, I'm sorry.

LAZNOVSKY: And so this—she was everything. She took the place I would have had for my own.

LEVINE: I see.

LAZNOVSKY: And I feel she is my own because we did bring her up. And as I said, she's a fine young lady. She's a fine doctor.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LAZNOVSKY: And when I hear her calling, "Doctor," you know, it goes through me like a—[chuckles] like if you stuck a knife in me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's—that's the end of my story.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, is there anything else that you might want to say before we close about coming to this country? Your whole family, st—having a new life here, anything else at all that maybe we didn't really go into? You mentioned you went to Hunter College. When was that?

LAZNOVSKY: Well, that's still—Hunter College is there on M—Madison. It's Park Avenue, 65th Street.

LEVINE: Right.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah, it's a big college. It's—people come here from Europe to study. It's a—

LEVINE: W—did you go there—

LAZNOVSKY: Yes, I went there—

LEVINE: —while you were doing the—

LAZNOVSKY: —when—when it just started. It opened up. They had—first, they had high school. I went into the high school when they opened up. I went to Julia Richmond. That was here on 68th Street near First Avenue. And when they come to open up, I asked for admission and they admitted me and I was—started to go there because I knew if I do good I could go to college there. And so I did. And it still—it's—it's a big s—college.

LEVINE: Yeah, sure.

LAZNOVSKY: People come here from Europe to go to Hunter College.

LEVINE: So did—were you working on the dressmaking when you were going to college?

LAZNOVSKY: Yes.

LEVINE: You had the—

LAZNOVSKY: I made dresses on—for people that asked me. And I made them at night. I used to stay up late. And then when I got married and I used to stay up and sew [chuckles], my husband used to get up. He'd say, "Look, I won't have this. I won't have you sitting up at night sewing and then going to work." He says, "I didn't get married for that. You not going to do this thing because when it's time to go to bed, you go to bed and get your rest." And so, slowly, I had to refuse, told them, "I can't do it no more." And that's how I got away. But I made dresses for a long time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you went to Hunter, did—were you studying—you were studying for your own enjoyment and education? You—you really didn't expect you—you were going to do the dressmaking anyway. Is that—

LAZNOVSKY: I was trying to learn difference—things about sicknesses, how they started, how you could prevent it, what the cure was. And that's medicine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And that's when I started to learn. And I went to night school to learn that and then when I thought, 'Why should I be a dressmaker when I could be a doctor?' So I started to go to day school to a medical school. And that's how I got to be a doctor, medical doctor.

LEVINE: Oh, you did get to be a [unclear]?

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, yes. I got a diploma.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Wow.

LAZNOVSKY: Oh, yes. I would never give it up when I started. And I—I'm—I'm a doctor. I'm a medical doctor.

LEVINE: Oh, so—so you—your—your granddaughter is—is also a—

LAZNOVSKY: And she's a—she's a regular—

LEVINE: [unclear].

LAZNOVSKY: —medical doctor—

LEVINE: I see.

LAZNOVSKY: —working in a hospital.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay. Well, I want to say this has been very, very interesting. Is there anything else you want to say? Or we'll—we'll close here.

LAZNOVSKY: Well, that's about all I could say. As you see, this is my bed. [chuckles] [unclear] I got a friend. They had no place to put her. They had no bed for her. And she speaks Czech and she looked at me so pleadingly. I said, "Well, if you say you it's only for a few days, she could have the bed here." And I paid the rent, you know, for the room. And so she was elated but days go into months. [laughs]

LEVINE: So now you have a permanent roommate.

LAZNOVSKY: Yeah. [chuckles] And that's what it is.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: And she's nice. She doesn't bother me and we get along. And why c—should—couldn't I help somebody that needs it? It would be somebody else if it wasn't her.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: So she's not here. She's—

LEVINE: No.

LAZNOVSKY: —must be outside. She's got two sons and she waits out there to see them, to talk to them. And then she has her dinner and then she goes and lays down. But I—I said, "Well, if you have to lay down, lay down but be careful with the cover. Fold it up and then you could put it back again."

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LAZNOVSKY: So she does that.

- LEVINE: I see. So y—so you have someone living with you.
- LAZNOVSKY: Yeah.
- LEVINE: And it's kind of an act of kindness on your part.
- LAZNOVSKY: It's—that's just what it is.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- LAZNOVSKY: Because her brothers had th—had their children. They have two boys in college and I know what it is, you know. If you don't get a grant or you don't get help, it's a very hard thing to go to college and pay for—they raised the prices so much in colleges.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- LAZNOVSKY: So I said, "Well, I could do it. I'll help out."
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm.
- LAZNOVSKY: And as I said, she's nice. She takes care of her—well, she didn't made her bed today. [chuckles] The lady made the bed.
- LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.
- LAZNOVSKY: And we get along.
- LEVINE: Good. Okay.
- LAZNOVSKY: So I feel one hand washes the other. If we don't help each other, what kind of human beings are we? After all, everybody needs our help sometime, and I might need help, you know. I'm—thank God, people treat me like a lady here. Everybody likes me; thank God for that. And I'm [unclear] and thankful and I—and I'm friends with all of them. And I feel when I go to bed that the good Lord is very good to me, that He keeps me at least in His love and I have a bed to sleep on. And what—what else could I wish for? There's nothing. And when my granddaughter comes, I'm in two heavens. And she's coming soon.
- LEVINE: [unclear].
- LAZNOVSKY: Next month, she'll be here for a few days because she's taking some time off. And we'll talk and she says, "Grandma, I'm going to take you to good restaurants so you could get a good meal."

[chuckles] I said, "Well, I'm not looking for a good meal. All I'm looking, to see you." She said, "I know, but you deserve something extra." And s—she's one beautiful person. I—

LEVINE: Okay. Let's—let's stop here. I want to thank you so much. This has been most interesting and I appreciate being able to talk with you.

LAZNOVSKY: Well, and I thank you for coming and I hope you could use some of it.

LEVINE: Well—

LAZNOVSKY: And I have to show you my granddaughter.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm going to turn off the tape recorder.

LAZNOVSKY: Oh.

LEVINE: Let me just say, I've been speaking with Maria Laznovsky, who came from what was Austria but is Czechoslovakia, and she came in 1899 when she was just a—one year old. And it—at the date of this interview, September 25th, 1997, Maria is 99 years of age.

LAZNOVSKY: Right.

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

[END OF INTERVIEW]