

KECK-142  
KATHERINE VITALIC KUCICH  
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INTERVIEWER: DEBRA ALLEE  
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YUGOSLAVIA, 1904  
AGE 5

ALLEE: This is Debra Allee, I'm speaking with Katherine Vitalic Kucich, it is Friday, February 7, 1986. We're beginning the interview at 1:00, we're about to interview Mrs. Kucich about her immigration experience from Austria which was sort of Yugoslavia, right? Let' start at the beginning, when and where you were born.

KUCICH: On a Komisa, Komisa, Yugoslavia in, April 9, 1904. How I,  
How I--all I can remember is my grandfather before I left and we boarded a ship, it was called Italia Verona from Genoa and we came there from, to New York. That was in May, in April and we got here in May. It took a long time then because things were kind of slow and we stayed in there I think only two days, 'cause we didn't stay in Ellis Island too long. We, and then we took a train and it took us about five days to come to San Pedro because things were really slow then, too. And then we met my father, met my father and he had a big moustache, I was so scared of him, I didn't want to go to him because, see I was born after he left so I didn't remember, know my father at all. And then, life started from there, we came to this

little town in San Pedro here which was a little town, we didn't have any sidewalks, or streets or anything then, you know, no gas, no electricity, it was really like out in the sticks, you know. But, we all survived and then I had three sisters after that and a brother and--

ALLEE: Can we go back for a minute, to your, you say your father left before you were born. Do you know why he came?

KUCICH: Well he was, it was tough over there, you know, they couldn't make a living or anything so everybody came to this little town then, you know.

ALLEE: Was there someone from your hometown who had--

KUCICH: I think there was some relation to my father because he was here a few years before we got here, my mother and I.

ALLEE: What kind of work--

KUCICH: Fisherman.

ALLEE: Your father was a fisherman?

KUCICH: A fisherman over there and fisherman here.

ALLEE: Oh, I see, so--

KUCICH: That's all there was at that time here, you know, there was just a handful of us then.

ALLEE: And so the town you lived in, in Austria or Yugoslavia, Komisa,  
was a fishing town?

KUCICH: A little fishing town also, right, like a village, you know,  
it's on the Adriatic coast and--

ALLEE: Do you have any, do you remember a little bit about the town?

KUCICH: I don't remember a thing but just I was scared of my grandfather and  
I know he had gray hair and a moustache and he kissed me when we left for the boat, that's  
all I remember. And then I remember we got on the ship and one night, was great big storm  
and they opened up all the portholes and we had to hang onto the rails, it was just going  
to sweep us on the deck, you know, and finally the storm eased up. And my mother was  
always seasick, always seasick so we had to give her lemons, the purser would give her  
lemons and I'd take them in to her and then he always took me into his little place where  
he had candy and stuff, you know, and took care of me 'cause she couldn't do anything, she  
was always in bed, you know. Well, it took us a month to come across the Atlantic, you  
know, the boats were slow then.

ALLEE: So you traveled from Komisa to Genoa--

KUCICH: To Genoa, Italy.

ALLEE: Was that on a train?

KUCICH: No, by boat.

ALLEE: You traveled by boat to Genoa?

KUCICH: Boat to Genoa and then boarded the ship in Genoa, Italia  
Verona was the name.

ALLEE: Did people on the boat to Genoa, were they mostly Yugoslavs?

KUCICH: Well, some of them were Italians, some Italians and some  
Slavs.

ALLEE: Had you met any Italians before?

KUCICH: No, well if I did, I don't remember because I was too small.

ALLEE: Did you have a reaction to them, did they seem different?

KUCICH: No, I was just a child and they were all kind of looking out after me  
because my mother was sick all the time (she laughs) so I had a kind of a guard all of the  
time, watching me.

ALLEE: So it's. it's the big boat from Genoa to--

KUCICH: That was the big one that had that big storm, it was terrible. I  
thought we were all going to all drown. Imagine on that, come over and stay a whole month,  
now you can make it in a few hours, you know. And it was quite an experience. And it was  
tough when we came here because things weren't like they are today, you know, things were  
tough, you didn't have money and you didn't have, you had to, I went to work when I was  
fourteen and things were, you know, things aren't like today. If you made a couple of  
hundred dollars in a year you were doing okay, you know. Now, now you can't even go to the  
store and spend that much, you know, which is true.

ALLEE: Can we go back to the boat for a minute, when you were coming over were you in like third class?

KUCICH: Ah no, we weren't. I think in second class because the third class is way down in the hold, we were on the--

ALLEE: In the middle?

KUCICH: In the middle, on deckside, yeah.

ALLEE: So you had like a room with you on deck?

KUCICH: We had a room with two bunk beds.

ALLEE: And it was just you and your mom?

KUCICH: Just me and my mother and that's all I really remember until we got here and I started school and I came, that was, started kindergarten when I was five and--

ALLEE: Well let's see if I can get you to remember some more about the journey which is what--

KUCICH: Well, that's really all I can remember.

ALLEE: Can you remember arriving after a month having the boat come into the Harbor?

KUCICH: No, I don't remember that. The only thing I remember is some people had, we had to sign papers that my father had sent, I guess or something, because he wasn't a citizen, you know, and we came on a visa.

ALLEE: Oh you did?

KUCICH: Yeah.

ALLEE: And did you come through Ellis Island?

KUCICH: Through Ellis Island. We were there two days at Ellis Island.

ALLEE: Do you remember anything about Ellis Island?

KUCICH: No, I don't remember a thing about that, I was too small.

Augie will be able to tell you because he was older, you know.

ALLEE: Well let's see if there is a thing that you can remember.

Um, do you remember lots of people?

KUCICH: There was a lot of people on the boat.

ALLEE: Do you remember a lot of people on Ellis Island, too?

KUCICH: No, I don't remember a thing about that. I just remember that we were, my mother and I went to some people, she had to sign some papers and then we had a room.

ALLEE: Then you spent two days there?

KUCICH: Two days.

ALLEE: Did you get to stay with your mother or did you have to sleep  
with other children?

KUCICH: No, No we slept in one little, like a little cubby-hole,  
you know.

ALLEE: A little cubby-hole room?

KUCICH: Yeah, just a, they weren't too big.

ALLEE: There were a lot of those little rooms?

KUCICH: Little rooms uh-huh, on the boat.

ALLEE; Oh, that was on the boat?

KUCICH: In the boat.

ALLEE: On Ellis Island?

KUCICH: On Ellis Island I don't remember about Ellis Island, I think we had  
to stay someplace, I guess, but I don't exactly know.

ALLEE: You probably would remember if you were taken away from your  
mother?

KUCICH: Oh yeah.

ALLEE: So you probably--

KUCICH: I was with her all the time, yeah.

ALLEE; So you stayed with her?

KUCICH: I stayed with her so that was, but, uh--

ALLEE: And Ellis Island, you don't remember the big dining hall  
where--

KUCICH: I don't remember any of that. You know when you're five you don't,  
and I was kind of, you know, coming from one little town and you come to the big city, and  
its scary, you know. All I wanted to so was be with my mother, you know, and if she ever  
just got away to go to the bathroom I was right, I was right with her, you know. When  
you're five you're just a child, you know.

ALLEE: That's right. So do you remember the feeling of the big  
city?

KUCICH: I remember all the noises and the bells and the boats, making all  
this noise with their horns and everything. I was kind of scared because we never had that  
where I came from.

ALLEE: Right. Did you notice the tall buildings?

KUCICH: Ah, yes the tall buildings, you know, in our little town they had

nothing really, especially then. Of course now it's built up a little bit but at that time there wasn't too much of anything.

ALLEE: Well, and you were also little so the buildings must have looked very tall.

KUCICH: Right, right. But I remember the Statue of Liberty and after my husband passed away, he never wanted to go back to Europe, you know, I had never gone back until I went back in '73 with my sister. And then in '76 I wanted to see the Statue of Liberty once before I, I, you know, had to leave, so I went there in '76 and we stayed in New York for four days and we went down to see, we didn't go actually on the , on the Statue. From the shore we watched her and all the tug boats and everything going up and down the Hudson River, I think that is.

ALLEE: Yes, it is. Did you, when you looked at the Statue again did you remember seeing when you were five?

KUCICH: I remember a little bit but I kind of had a funny, you know, when you see something like that after so many years, kind of gives you a funny feeling, you know, it's great to see once more, 'cause we live in a great country, don't we? So I guess about all I remember then just growing up here and going to school and getting married when I was, you know--

ALLEE: Well, you could tell me a bit about the train ride, you must have taken a train all across the country?

KUCICH: Yeah, I don't remember a thing about the train ride, its the finniest thing, I can't remember. I've tried to remember, I can't. But I just remember getting on it to come to San Pedro, to come to Los Angeles and my father was there with--

ALLEE: Were you excited, do you remember?

KUCICH: Well, I was scared because my father scared me, he had this  
big--

ALLEE; No, but I mean when you were going to get on the train, do  
you remember being excited about going to the new place?

KUCICH: Well, it was exciting I think because I had never been on a train  
before, you know, and those big things over in our little town everything went by boat  
because it was right on the ocean and there was no trains and no cars or, just like where  
when we came, there were no trains, no buses, no cars, you know, you had to be, have a  
little money to have a car then. There were probably half a dozen cars, that's all.

ALLEE: Do you remember the noise, the bustle around the train too?

KUCICH: No, you see I don't, its awfully hard, I try and try to  
remember but the more I try--

ALLEE: The harder it gets.

KUCICH: Yes, if I was a little older maybe I could have.

ALLEE: You must have slept on the train?

KUCICH: Yeah, I think we did sleep on the train but I can't  
remember that.

ALLEE: You don't remember if you slept in a chair--

KUCICH: No, I can't remember until I, getting out and meeting my father.

ALLEE: So you arrived in Los Angeles--

KUCICH: The fifth day, it took us five days to get here on a train, so that was--

ALLEE: And he was at the station, was he?

KUCICH: He was at the station, yeah. Of course, my mother grabbed him and hugged, I just stood there, scared, shivering (she laughs), you know. Five years old and you don't, he was just a man to me, a funny looking man with a moustache (she laughs), you know?

ALLEE; And how did you get from Los Angeles down here?

KUCICH: Oh, I think, I don't remember even how we got down here, I remember, I think it was a train or something, a little red and white train I think it was. And then when we got here, there was few of Slavonian people here and they, my father had found a little house for us, you know. It was just a two by four but it was a house and then, you had no heat, no electricity, no nothing, but still it wasn't so bad because we never had that in our little town.

ALLEE: I was going to ask you that.

KUCICH: Never had it, there was no gas, we had to have a wood stove and, of course, as years went on you'd make a few dollars, then you kind of improved yourself a little bit, you know, but its a long time since 1909 until now.

ALLEE: It certainly is. Um, there was a Slav, a Slavonic community here--

KUCICH: Yes.

ALLEE: Was there also other kinds of people here?

KUCICH: Well, there wasn't too many other kinds of people but they started to come, the Italians, a lot of Italians finally came. See, somebody had to come here or somebody had to bring you over here and be sure that they took care of you for so many years before, you know, I think it was five years they were responsible for, and a lot of people didn't have the money and a lot of people didn't want to take that chance, you know. But as the years went by, a few came down, a few came in, then my father came, his brothers came, two brothers came and then they brought somebody else and like that, in about four or five years, it populated pretty good, you know.

ALLEE: And then Italians came?

KUCICH: Then Italians, 'cause you see our little town, Italy's right close by and they used to have these fellows come in these boats and sell vegetables and fruit and different things to the Slav people, all our Slav people knew how to talk Italian.

ALLEE: I see.

KUCICH: Because they used to buy things from them, you know, and then they'd go back to Italy to Rome or Naples or wherever it was, you know, and stock up and then they knew just exactly when the boats were coming in so down everybody would go down on the place where the boats docked, you know, little piers, just a little tiny village. All the old-timers now, there's only a few of us left now, seems like, seems like Augie and I are the oldest ones here now (she laughs). All my father and mother and aunts and uncles are all gone now, you know, because I think Augie and I, we've lived a pretty good, he's in his, late in his seventy's, I'm going to be eighty-two in April, so I think we're doing pretty good.

ALLEE: I think so. So you came here and you grew up here. Did you have, did it seem very different from Europe when you came here?

KUCICH: It did because everything, uh, lifestyle was different, you know. Over there everybody lived in one house, grandparents, parents and their kids and if the girl got married she went to live with his folks and if the man got married, he stayed at home, brought his bride there and they, they all lived, they were clannish, you know. They never lived in separate places like we have here, apartments, you know. And the houses were all made of brick, you know, and when a boy got married he just brought his wife there and raised his family there and then if the girl got married she went to live with his--

ALLEE: It wasn't that way here even though it was a Slave community?

KUCICH: No, no it wasn't like that here. Everybody had their own place. It wasn't elaborate but it was, little two by fours, you know.

ALLEE: And you went to school here?

KUCICH: I went to school and I went to, where my girls went and my grandchildren went and they had a Founder's Day one day and they invited me to come and I was the oldest one that started school there (she laughs). Had to get up in front of the class and give a little speech.

ALLEE: Was it a public school?

KUCICH: Public school, uh-huh and uh, I felt kind of silly going up there (she laughs) I was the oldest one there, 1910 I started there.

ALLEE: Do you remember learning English or did it--

KUCICH: No, well, when we were at home we couldn't talk English. My father wouldn't allow it, he wanted to keep the Slav language. But then when us kids were alone, we, we all learned to talk English, you know. It took us a while, it was quite a change but young people learn faster than older people, you know.

ALLEE: Yes, that's true.

KUCICH: It's uh, when I look back, I have pictures and things and I look back when I was in Europe. I hadn't seen the town since I left and I went in '73 and I met my husbands folks, I didn't have anybody there, everybody was dead. But his folks were all living and I had a nice visit.

ALLEE: Did you have a feeling, when you went back to the town, about what your life would have been if you'd stayed, compared to--

KUCICH: Well, I knew how they lived, you know, none of them are, were very aggressive in work, they just worked to get by, most of them, you know, they weren't, fishing wasn't that good but we all lived. They had their fish, we had out little gardens and things like that. Of course, after I left, you know, I don't know how it was 'cause I was so young, you know, but I remember my mother going fishing with my grandfather when she was just a young girl, you know, and that doesn't happen too often. I guess if I been a little older, I'd have been out there with them too.

ALLEE: So what you're saying, it was a less ambitious kind of life?

KUCICH: Well, yes, not ambitious like here, yeah. But you see now the younger generation are getting better. They're going to school, they're getting educated, they're going to college. You see, the schools over there, they don't have to go as much as they do here in the States , you know. When they're in the sixth grade, they've had quite a good education, you know.

ALLEE: Yes. Do you remember any like, different kinds of food or funny new things that you found here?

KUCICH: No, but I remember a lot of fish and spinach, we used to have, if we didn't have that, why, because you know, we weren't primitive, but almost, you know what I mean? But, they always had enough food, we never had fancy clothes or anything like that or fancy houses to live in but we all survived, I guess. I guess today kids have too much, they don't know what they want.

ALLEE: I know that in Yugoslavia, they probably didn't have bananas and avocados and things like that?

KUCICH: No, not at that time. But when I went home--

ALLEE: They had them?

KUCICH: They had them then, they had the little, it's right on the ocean, it's all cemented and it's, oh about this wide and then people sit out there every night and they go for a walk every night. And they have a little stand, wheels that they can move out and they have candy and gum and vegetables and bananas and things like that, you know, and watermelon in season, and a lot of grapes because they raise their own grapes, you know. But it was fun going back after all those years, I wanted to see where I was born, I wanted to go see the house where I was born and the lady let us come in and see, you know. It was fun.

ALLEE: You say you went to work when you were fourteen?

KUCICH: Fourteen.

ALLEE; What did you work at?

KUCICH: At the canneries, Starkist Cannery.

ALLEE: It was a fish cannery?

KUCICH: Fish cannery, uh-huh.

ALLEE; How was that?

KUCICH: Well, when you're fourteen, it's, you get pretty tired fast, my mother worked there and I had, you know, things were tough then. Things, you know, everything was cheap and there wasn't too much work to be had, you know?

ALLEE: Yes.

KUCICH: But this Slavonian man had the cannery and he put all Slavonian people to work so it was lucky that way. But I can remember a lot of things that were tough then that don't seem so important now, you know.

ALLEE: Can you give me an example?

KUCICH: Well, I mean like, you could, now you can, if you have a few dollars, which everybody has a few dollars in their social security and all that, you can buy a few things that you really want. Over there, at that time, you couldn't do it, it was just for necessities, you know what I mean?

ALLEE: Yes, I do know.

KUCICH: You know, just necessities. And it was tough, I had to have one pair of shoes and one dress to go to school, if it didn't get washed, we didn't go to school. So, that's the way things were, you know, and of course today you've got a closet full of clothes and when you go someplace, when you have nothing to wear (they laugh) isn't that true?

ALLEE: How long did you work at the cannery?

KUCICH: Oh, well, I only worked for maybe a couple of years and then I got married.

ALLEE: When you about sixteen?

KUCICH: Sixteen.

ALLEE: Did you meet your husband in town?

KUCICH: In San Pedro, he came from San Francisco and then, I had my two children, I had two daughters. And when one of them was twelve and half and one was ten, I went to work at Starkist at their big plant and I worked there for thirty-five years. So things got a little bit better then, you know, there was money coming, my husband worked there too. So from that time on it got better, you know, but up to then it was touch and go I just had to, you had to watch where you spent your money, or else. And then, you know, they didn't have welfare then, you could borrow money, but when you went to work, you had to pay it back. You couldn't uh--

ALLEE: You could borrow money from a bank?

KUCICH: From the county and then when things got better, you had to pay it back. It's not like today, you get it free, you see.

ALLEE: About how much did you make a week at the cannery when you started?

KUCICH: Well, when I first started, when I first started work, I made three hours for a dollar.

ALLEE: Thirty-three cents an hour?

KUCICH: First it was twenty-five cents and then thirty-three and then they got to fifty cents and then it went up.

ALLEE: Fifty cents is big time.

KUCICH: And now it's pretty good.

ALLEE: Did you work five days or six days?

KUCICH: Sometimes six days, sometimes seven days, all depends. All depends when the fish would come in, you know. But it was tough, you had to work summer and winter and then we have to work on the wet fish which is the sardines and stuff, you know, you'd go in the wintertime and it's raining and it's cold but we all survived I guess, it was a good thing.

ALLEE: Do you still eat fish?

KUCICH: We had to (they laugh). Oh yeah, we had tuna for lunch (they laugh). I love fish, I get out to the market and then I, see, I cook a meal every night for myself. I don't open cans like some people do. I like to, I don't eat much but I like, you know, nourishing stuff, you have to keep up your, especially at my age now, you know, I gave to watch. You see, last year I had surgery, I had my kidney removed. So then I had to go on a diet and I gained so much weight. I gained about thirty pounds and it's terrible. The doctor gave me, he bawled me out, I shouldn't have gained that much, but he told me I had to, so I kept getting all these goodies (she laughs) that I'm not supposed to have. Now I got used to them, now I hate to give it up.

ALLEE: Yes, yeah.

KUCICH: And I lost my husband in 1972 so you know, so I've been on my own now for thirteen, fourteen years, it's a while.

ALLEE: It's different--

KUCICH: How's the thing coming, is it okay?

ALLEE: It's coming okay. I'm just trying to think if I have any more questions. Um, I guess not. I was trying to think if there was any way that I, anything that I could ask you to jog your memory from when you were really little. But I guess not so uh, I think--

KUCICH: Is that okay?

ALLEE: Yeah, that's fine. This is the end of the interview with Katherine Kucich. This is Interview Number 142, the time is 1:2, 1:30? 1:30.