

AKRF-29

MARY VASILY

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AUSTRIA-HUNGARY (born U.S.), 1912

AGE: 5

SHIP: THE KAISER WILHELM

PORT: BREMEN

RESIDENCES: HUNGARY: HAZEN, UNGRAV

US: DUQUESNE, PENNSYLVANIA, TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

APPLEBOME: This is Edward Applebome and I'm speaking with Ms. Mary Vasily on Friday, September 13, 1985. We are beginning this interview at 11:15. We are about to interview Ms. Vasily, about her immigration experience from Austria-Hungary in 1912. Start of tape one, side one. Ms. Vasily, could you tell us where and when you were born?

VASILY: I was born in Dusquene, Pennsylvania, September the 15th, 1906.

APPLEBOME: And how did you come to immigrate into the United States?

VASILY: Well, I, uh, my mother took me to Europe, Austria-Hungary. I don't, I guess I was an infant, I don't remember anything. But, come, we were there for about five-and-a-half years when I, we were coming back to America.

APPLEBOME: Do you know why your mother had taken you back to Austria-Hungary?

- VASILY: Well, she got married here, and like a lot of men at that time, they were thinking they were going to make some money here and go back and have a home and live there. But, it didn't happen that way. So, we came back.
- APPLEBOME: Had your parents been immigrants to this country?
- VASILY: Yes, yes. My mother was from thus, uh, from this Hungary, the state of Zemplin and the village of Lastomir.
- APPLEBOME: Why don't you spell those for us?
- VASILY: My mother, where my mother came from state of Zemplin, Z-E-M-P-L-I-N. And the village of Lastomir, L-A-S-T-O-M-I-R. And my father came from Austria-Hungary, state of Ungrav, U-N-G-R-A-V. And the village of Hazen, H-A-V-E-N.
- APPLEBOME: And what kind of work were they doing in Pennsylvania before they went back to Austria-Hungary?
- VASILY: Well, my, my father didn't go back to Austria-Hungary, only my mother went with me. My father, I guess worked in the steel mills in Dusquene, Pennsylvania.
- APPLEBOME: And, do you have memories of what it was like when you went back to Austria-Hungary?
- VASILY: Oh, yes. I remember my mother had to go. She was working, like for maybe wealthier people, because she had to make a living of some kind. My father would send her some money, but probably not enough. And I had three, we had three geese and one gander. And I used to take them out on the field all day long. And when my mother would come home from work I would bring these geese home. And oh, I, we had to sell them when we were coming to America. And I remember going from my father's town to see my grandmother with the geese. We were going to sell them in the, in the town, you know, where it was like a little city called Michalovec. That was the big city where people would go there and sell eggs and milk and butter and things like that. So we were taking these three, four geese and we had to pass a railroad tracks. And my geese were afraid to cross over. And I had to pick them up one by one and carry them over. Then we sold them.
- APPLEBOME: What kind of house were you staying in?

VASILY: We had our home in my father's, uh, in my father's, uh, village. We bought, my mother bought a home. It was nice. It was, what I remember, we had a kitchen and a bedroom and what they call a pantry, like. And, uh, it was like sort of on a corner lot. And we had fruit trees like plums. And then I remember this one time, it was like this time, in the fall, or when the plums are all ripe. My mother cooked them up and they, we had maneuvers coming into this town and right catty-corner where we lived there was a church. And these men were coming from this way toward the church and they would sit all around the church and my mother would see them. And I remember we had cooked, um, plums, prunes or whatever they were, and she put it in a bucket with lot of juice, and I would take this bucket to the soldieries with a ladle and I would give them each a lade to help themselves to have some prunes, and drink the prune juice.

APPLEBOME: That was nice.

VASILY: Yeah, I remember that.

APPLEBOME: Did they pay you for this?

VASILY: No, no, no, no, no. And then I remember coming back for another bucket. All I remember is two buckets taken there. Yeah.

APPLEBOME: There were soldiers in uniform?

VASILY: Oh, yes, yes, they were on maneuvers. I guess they were, they were getting ready for the, that First World War. They were all Hungarian soldiers. Yeah.

APPLEBOME: Okay, and had you expected your father to join you?

VASILY: Oh, yes, but he didn't so then they decided for my mother to come back.

APPLEBOME: Who made that decision?

VASILY: I guess both of them, I don't know. I think maybe my mother more or less.

APPLEBOME: Did the other children in the village know that you hadn't been born there? Did they treat you differently because you were from the United States?

VASILY: That I, uh, I don't think so. You know, you're kids, you play, maybe I didn't even know probably that I was born in America until my mother told me that we're going to America.

APPLEBOME: Okay, and how did you feel about that?

VASILY: Well, I remember when we were going we went to the other village where my mother, uh, her, my grandmother, my mother's mother, and my mother told her we're leaving, you know, for America. And she wanted to keep me, but my mother wouldn't let me stay. And then I remember getting on a train and, oh, we rode, we rode for a long, long time. I don't know it was day and night, day and night, and I think we, the, the ship, uh, it was coming in the port of Bremen, Bremen Germany. And the name of the ship was Kaiser Wilhelm and that was sunk in 1914, my mother told me.

APPLEBOME: During the war.

VASILY: During the war, yes.

APPLEBOME: And you were traveling then through, in 1912?

VASILY: 1912. Yes, I was five-and-a-half years old. I would have been six in September, yes.

APPLEBOME: What did you travel with, do you remember?

VASILY: I guess just the clothes we had on, and I remember my mother having a little bundle. I don't know what was in that bundle. And we came in third class and, uh, I remember it was all the way down in the ocean and they had these great big round windows and all you could see is the, oh, you know, the waves, you know, passing by. And then it was like army cots, you know, in the army, how they have, that's the way.

APPLEBOME: Rows of cots.

VASILY: That's, that's the way, that's where our beds was. It was all open. Nothing private. Nothing private. And I don't know how many days we were on this ship. Finally this one morning as we were coming, I guess we were in America, because my mother, she must have been on deck, and she was coming real fast and she got a hold of me and in Slovak she says, (Slovak), "Mary, Mary, come, come." And she's pulling me up the steps. We got on the pier, on the, on the deck, and with her left hand she's pointing, "Mary, Mary, marcho, marcho, tu America, tu America." The Statue of Liberty

was America. And I'm looking, and that sight, as long as I live I'll never forget. And I'm looking at the Statue of Liberty, and I'm looking and then the ship was going like this, like toward Ellis Island. Yeah, then when we got to Ellis Island we had to go for an examination. Well, I went first. And I came out all right. And then my mother came. And then...

APPLEBOME: This was the medical examination?

VASILY: The medical, oh, yah, medical examination. Yeah. And as, uh, when we came out then I remember going up a long, long walk. And a man came to my mother and asked her where she was going. Now this is what my mother is telling me later on. And my mother said she wants to go to Jersey City ferry and my mother, being that she was here before, she raised her hand. "Jersey City ferry, three cents." And he kept talking to her but and we were walking, and we were walking. Then he left and another man came.

APPLEBOME: How much had he been asking for?

VASILY: Three dollars. And my mother says, "Jersey City ferry, three cents, three cents." And as we were walking, and as we were walking, then the second man left and we were coming to like, like a street. And my mother saw an American policeman. She told me to stand on the corner he was directing traffic. That I remember. And she went over to him and she told me she wants to go to Jersey City ferry. Then he came with my mother where I was standing, he took her because we were on the wrong corner, and he took us like catty-cornered where there was a trolley, where the trolley were coming, and he told us to wait there. And we waited there, waited there for quite a while till that trolley came. Then the policeman came back. And he puts us on the trolley and I remember seeing my mother. She had no pocketbook, you know, they had a handkerchief and they would tie the money in the, in the handkerchief. And the, the policeman put me on the trolley first, I remember that. And then he paid our trolley fare. My mother's and mine. And he told the conductor where to leave us off for Jersey City ferry. And then we, we rode for quite a while on that, uh, trolley and then when we got there I remembered there was an awful lot of people. And I guess we were directed to Jersey City ferry, and we got off at Jersey City because that's where the, we had the address.

APPLEBOME: And what address was this? Where were you going?

VASILY: Jersey City. We lived in Jersey City. And we stayed there for quite a while and then from there we moved to a town called Fords, New Jersey, where my two sisters were born.

APPLEBOME: Had your father come to meet you in Jersey City?

VASILY: Oh, yes, yes, oh, yes, yes. And then we moved to Trenton, and my father worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad, uh, you know, when they had the old fashioned engines where they used to shovel coal, you know, for the engine. Yeah, and that's how we settled in Trenton.

APPLEBOME: Okay, we can back up a little now, Ms. Vasily. Okay, um, when you were in Hungary and your mother told you that you were coming over here, did she tell you anything about the United States? Did you have any idea what to expect?

VASILY: No, only she did say, when we landed at Ellis Island and she says, if she doesn't pass the examination physical, that she does not want to go back to Europe. She wants to stay in the United States. I guess she didn't like it there after she saw America, see. So that's that.

APPELBOME: And, on the boat trip over, did, um, did you meet any people?

VASILY: Well, yes, you know. Down where we were, and I remember one time, um, a lady asked if I wouldn't go upstairs to the kitchen and she's like to have a soft boiled egg. I remembered that. And I went to get her a soft boiled egg and I fell down the stairs. That I remember.

APPLEBOME: What languages or what countries were the people from who were on the boat?

VASILY: Well, mostly, mostly there were Polish people, Hungarian people, German people, you know from that part of Austria-Hungary.

APPLEBOME: Had you ever seen people from other countries before that?

VASILY: No, no, no. I didn't see, no, no. And, ah, well, I'm telling you, I would always like to go back to see, you know, where I used to mind the geese. And my grandmother's home. And, but, I never got there so far.

APPLEBOME: Did other relatives of yours come over afterwards?

- VASILY: No, um, yes, my aunt, my mother's sister came over. After my mother. And that's when they were singles girls, you know. But after that, no. After they were married. Only my aunt was the same thing happened to her. She got married and she had one son and she and her son went back to Europe and then, but he came over when he was fourteen with his mother.
- APPLEBOME: And so, and what was life like for you in the United States?
- VASILY: Me? Well...
- APPLEBOME: As a girl. Because you came here, you didn't speak English?
- VASILY: No, no. And then I went to school. It was hard, but you know, when you're young you pick up a lot of things, you know. And, yeah. I, oh, but I love this country. Oh, when you said I was born in Austria-Hungary I resented that. I'm an American born. (she laughs)
- APPLEBOME: I didn't mean to say you were born there.
- VASILY: No, no. I know. I know you didn't know. No. That's all. So.
- APPLEBOME: We'll see, go ahead.
- VASILY: My mother, when we were, she was getting ready, she says, "We're going to America." I says, "Yeah?" So, one day she came over. I guess she must have been to the agent, the ticket agent, or whoever, you know, takes care of that. And, ah, she came home and she said, as I remember, she says, "Mary," she says, "Marcho," I'm talking English in Slavic. "You know, I we're gonna go on a fancy ship." So, fancy ship. Then a couple of weeks later, a couple of weeks later or whatever she said, she says, "You know, we we're not going on that fancy ship because there's no more room." I think nothing of it. No more room, no more room. So, time went by and we came to Jersey City and, uh, I think my mother got herself a, a job in the laundry. I remember that. And being it was April, it was, you know, too late for me to start school, you know. And I remembered going to meet her after work, like a child, you know, and she says to me, "Mary, Marcho, Marcho," you want me to say it in Slavic or no?
- APPLEBOME: Both are fine. Both are fine.
- VASILY: (Slavic)

- APPLEBOME: And in English.
- VASILY: “Remember, remember, Mary, what I told you. We were supposed to come on that fancy ship?” She didn’t mention no ship, she didn’t mention anything, but it sunk. Could that be the Titanic? It was right after that. We came here April, the first week in April. And the Titanic was sunk in the 12th, wasn’t it? 1912. Yeah.
- APPLEBOME: This was a fancy boat she had been talking about?
- VASILY: Talking about. She didn’t mention...
- APPLEBOME: That traveled from Europe to New York?
- VASILY: Yeah. The Titanic. So she didn’t mention no ship. I don’t know anything. But she said it was sunk. So that’s why, can it be of any interest to you or not.
- APPLEBOME: It may have been a close call for you.
- VASILY: Who knows? Who knows? I didn’t want to say that here, but, oh, my sister, my brother and her son, Mary, please tell them. Maybe it was the Titanic. I said, “Well, I thank God that we weren’t on it.” Yeah. So that, I don’t know.
- APPLEBOME: Do you have any other memories of being on Ellis Island itself? You said what it looked like and what the medical examination was like.
- VASILY: Well, yes. When we went in, cause even that fellow asked me, and, you know, they had an awful lot of doctors. Of course, they called you by name, or whatever, and I went first, and oh, they examined me, well, you know, for, I guess your eyes and your ears and your mouth and blood pressure and things like chest. I remember that. And then my mother. I cam out, then my mother was going in. And that’s when she told me. She said if she doesn’t pass she is not going back to American anymore.
- APPLEBOME: What do you think she would have done?
- VASILY: I think she would have gone overboard. There was nothing but water there. That’s what I remember.
- APPLEBOME: Where were your bags when you came onto Ellis Island? Whatever you were traveling with?

VASILY: Uh, like a little bundle. You know, you take a, a, oh, something that you tie up with, bundle like. No suitcases. No, nothing like that. It was a bundle. Oh, and I had a very, very sore foot. My left foot on the train. And my mother showed it to the conductor. I had, I had boots coming here and when the conductor saw my foot and it was all sore. And he brought me a slipper or a, a shoe or something open. I came to America, to Ellis Island, with one shoe and one boot. And I still think I have, like ten cent pieces up around my ankle. That I remember.

APPLEBOME: This was on the train that you were taking to Bremen?

VASILY: Yes, yes. But then, that's the way I came to America on the boat. And every, 'cause I only had one boot and one shoe.

APPLEBOME: So you got new shoes when you came to the United States?

VASILY: I guess, I guess. Yes.

APPLEBOME: Do you remember your impressions of the United States?

VASILY: Well, I'll never forget the Statue of Liberty. State of Liberty, when, when I saw that, and then Ellis Island. All the people. Oh, it was crowded. All the people there. And now, like now when we were there and this fellow took upstairs and he asked me if I remember that. I said, "No." You know, that where that long table was with the dishes on it and all. I said, "No, because we weren't here. We were only downstairs for one day."

APPLEBOME: How long do you think you were on Ellis Island for? How many hours?

VASILY: Oh, well, well, you know, it took quite a while by the time they called your name and your reexamination. I, that I don't remember. But we were there for quite a while, you know, till you name. You sit there and you wait. And you wait till your name is called.

APPLEBOME: And it sounds like your mother was quite nervous?

VASILY: Yes, because she was afraid she wasn't going to pass the examination. But she did, thank God.

APPLEBOME: And what happened when you finally saw your father again?

VASILY: Well, of course, you know, to me, I didn't know him. I remember my mother saying, uh, to me to call our father to come, that dinner's

ready. I would go say, "Hey, (Slavic) Mom is calling you for supper." But see, I didn't know. We, we were only just my mother and me for six years, almost six years. And it was strange to me. But after that you got used to it. Yeah.

APPLEBOME: What do you think would have happened if you had stayed in Austria-Hungary?

VASILY: Who knows? Who knows? God, I'm glad we're here. Oh, why now with all the Communists and everything. Oh, it must be terrible, terrible there. We had a friend here, not too long ago, that my brother met in Austria-Hungary. He went for a visit and they came to see their daughter at Fort Lee. And my brother drove up with his wife and he brought them to Trenton and, uh, in fact, my sister had them down her house. And they can't, couldn't get over our supermarkets here. All the food we have. All the stuff that they have to wait two and three hours in line for a loaf of bread. Now this was just a few weeks ago. Yeah, so. H, oh, I shouldn't say that. Oh, well. So, I, my mother brought me an ice cream cone and we lived, I think in an, we were living in an apartment in Jersey City. And this was warm, I remember, because the windows is open. So I'm just licking the ice cream. But the crust, you know, the cone. I didn't know you could eat that. So I was dropping it down. Until finally, after almost to the end I tasted it. I thought, "That was good." Boy, did I run down those steps to pick up those pieces. (she laughs) That's what I did, as a kid, you know. Yeah. That was funny. It wasn't funny because I was sorry that had dropped all that good stuff. I could have ate it right with my ice cream.

APPLEBOME: What else was different?

VASILY: Where?

APPLEBOME: In the United States. What were things that you had never seen before?

VASILY: Oh, the buildings. The trolley cars. And, uh, well, horses and carriages we had in Europe, but the trolley cars and those buildings, tall buildings and I saw that great big river, it must have been the Hudson River that we crossed. All that. Especially the tall buildings. We didn't have that. Course we were always in a very small village.

APPLEBOME: Right. Were you able to make friends?

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VASILY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And then later on I guess I went to school. And, you know how it is, and here we are.

APPLEBOME: What school like in the United States?

VASILY: Well, it was hard from the beginning, you know, because you didn't know the language. But, then you had girlfriends and start talking to you in English and you pick it up. And then you learn. Yeah. And then we moved from Jersey City to Forget, New Jersey because my father got a job there. And his sister.

APPLEBOME: What kind of work?

VASILY: Laborer. I think they had, uh, they used to make bricks there, if I'm not mistaken. And his sister lived there. My father's sister, my aunt. And that's how we settled there. And, oh, we were there till, off, for, well, Helen, how old were you? Helen was about...

HELLEN (MARY'S SISTER): I was born in 1917, so I was born and then Betty was born in 1914. And I was three years old when we came to America, so it, I mean to Trenton, so it must have been about 1920 when we came to Trenton because my brother was born the following year.

VASILY: And then we stayed in Trenton ever since.

APPLEBOME: Why did you move to Trenton?

VASILY: He got a job on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

APPLEBOME: The railroad job.

HELEN: And he worked there, for, oh maybe...

VASILY: Yeah, um, oh, he worked there all, you know till, you know, till they got, they discontinued those engines.

APPLEBOME: Was your mother working also?

VASILY: Yes, part-time, you know, here and there, I think when she, uh, when we lived in Fords, New Jersey she got a job during the war, she got a job in Johnson & Johnson. She traveled to New Brunswick. Yeah, I remember that. She worked there. And then in Trenton, no, she very seldom, I don't think she worked.

HELEN: Tell them about the influenza epidemic when I was a baby in France.

VASILY: Oh, that.

HELEN: That was a world wide epidemic.

VASILY: Oh, yeah, 1918, yeah. And, uh, then we had an explosion in Perth Amboy. I think it was a DDM March Company. It was a German company. It exploded and Helen, that time the Red Cross came around and trying to get people out of their homes, you know, because they were afraid another magazine was going to go off. And Helen landed in some hospital by the Red Cross and my sister Betty in another one. And me with people, you know, you ran for shelter. And then, that was some experiences during the war.

APPLEBOME: Did you hear anything from Hungary during the war?

VASILY: Yes, my mother, uh, not during the war, I don't think. But my mother corresponded with her sister. She had two, two sisters and a brother. And they used to correspond. Yeah. But they're always asking for help. All the time asking for help. But my mother, my mother would always send some money, like, uh, especially in the summertime. Pentacost Sunday in that village where my mother came from, they always had like a big festival, like the Italian nights we had here a couple of weeks ago. And my mother would always send her some, I think a dollar or two-dollar bill, two dollars. And, you know, at that time, American money, I think, it was worth eighty-four karoonyes. That's a German word, Hungarian word. And, uh, then, after my mother passed away, and I tried to do the same thing. And the first thing, you know, I would get a beautiful bundle of feathers. Oh, beautiful bundle of feathers which we have quilts made and, uh, pillows. And she used to send me, that I had to sometimes give them away. Yeah.

APPLEBOME: What kind of work did you do when you finished school?

VASILY: What kind of work did I do? Well, I worked in factories, uh, here in Trenton.

APPLEBOME: This is the end of side one of tape one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPLEBOME: This is side two of tape one. You were telling us about the work you did.

VASILY: Oh, I worked, uh, in different factories. I worked in, um, Parbag, which was the switling, the gold bag, where they made golf bags. And after that Photo Mart where they make prints. And then the war broke out. I, and here General Motors, we had General Motors here and we, we still have here in Trenton. It went, they converted it to airplanes. I worked on the Avengers during the Second World War. Steady nights. For, I think, two or three days after, three weeks after the V-J Day, until the last planes went out of the, out of the factory. They were all at that time. And then after that I was home. I filed for unemployment compensation and I only received two checks. A friend of mine worked for the State and they needed help. Unemployment Compensation. So she asked me if I would be interested. I said, "Well, I could try." So I went with the State Unemployment Compensation. And that's when I made up my mind I wasn't going back into no factories. And when the civil service examination came up I took it. The first one I failed. And then I tried again, as a clerk. And I passed. And that's where I was till I retired. I retired from the Department of Environmental Protection, Office of the Commissioner.

APPLEBOME: Okay. I think, a last question. Do you think your mother was glad that she came back?

VASILY: Oh, most certainly, yes. Most certainly. Oh, she never wanted to go back to Europe. Never.

APPLEBOME: And her life here was good when she came back that second time?

VASILY: Oh, yes, yes. I guess like everybody else, ups and downs. But I'm glad we stayed in America anyway and I'm glad I have a wonderful sister and brothers and all.

APPLEBOME: Okay. Thank you very much.

VASILY: You're welcome.

APPLEBOME: This is the end of side two of tape one of the interview with Mary Vasily.