NPS-159
JOHN CHOMOS
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 1, 1913
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 11, 1988
RUNNING TIME: 40:52
INTERVIEWER: BRIAN FEENEY
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION: CLEVELAND, OHIO
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 5/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: STACEY B. MENAKER, 6/1995

ROUMANIA, 1913 AND 1916
BORN ON ELLIS ISLAND

FEENEY: This is May 11, 1988, Cleveland, Ohio. This is Brian Feeney, interviewing today John Chomos. Good morning, John.

CHOMOS: Good morning.

FEENEY: I'd like you to tell me what year you came into the United States and how old you were.

CHOMOS: I arrived March 1, 1913 in my mother's womb and was born on that day on Ellis Island.

FEENEY: Did you remain on Ellis Island at that point?

CHOMOS: I was dispatched to that dispensary or that hospital that they have on the grounds, and stayed there

fifteen or twenty days. This I am saying from what I am told. I don't remember those days, naturally.

FEENEY: Did you and your mother then enter the United States?

CHOMOS: No, we did not. Papers and whatever necessary entries was not in order. My father was in the United States already, having arrived here in October of 1912. But the, my mother says from the language barrier and other mixup, we wound up as being put back onto the ship after that time, and deported back to France, and from France back to my home village.

FEENEY: Where was that?

CHOMOS: Uh, it was Vasad, V-A-S-A-D- in the county of Slaj, S-L-A-J, in Roumania. This is at the juncture of the Hungarian and Roumanian border. My father was Hungarian. My mother was Roumanian. But border town people talked both languages, and it was a very homogeneous type of area as far as the two entities of my mother and father.

FEENEY: Do you think . . .

CHOMOS: I stayed there for three years subsequent to that. These were the trying times during the entry of the

European countries into full conflagration, from 1914, '15 and '16 were hectic to the point that by 1916 I was given passport with my mother to come to America.

I did not stay at the first instance because, as I am told, the papers were not in order, both at this end by my father, or the other end, when we left Europe to come to, my mother, when she left Europe to come here in that pregnant state.

FEENEY: Did your parents ever talk about their native land, what it was like?

CHOMOS: Oh, yes. The hectic years between my first and up to the third year were, as I say, the war-torn years of Europe, and it was during that time that the Russians were involved, and they were moving forward into the area in which we were living. At one instance, I was told that my mother had me under her arms and everybody in the village, old men and ladies, were ready to leave, because the bombings and whatnot that were in the area were pressing in on them. I have myself no knowledge of this. It's just from what I hear from my parents. My mother did lose two brothers in the first week of the war after 1914 when the full conflagration was there. And I suspect her eagerness

to get out of there and finally be able to do that and come to, as I understand, Cherbourg, France, to embark again on a second trip for an arrival to Ellis Island, at which time I was three years old. Arrival was there, was at March 16th of 1916, which was three years subsequent to the March 1st date of 1913. I arrived in Cleveland and my parents tell me, we got off the Pennsylvania Railroad station at East 55th and Euclid, and my father was there and my uncle was there. It must have been a joyous occasion for my mother, because she'd gone through three tough years.

FEENEY: When you were finished processing at Ellis Island, do you know if anyone met your mother and came to Ellis?

CHOMOS: Nobody. She had a few foreign monies, whatever they were, Hungarian or Roumanian, in her pocket, and no capacity for the English language at all. I suppose there were translators there, but it was, she says, a very terrifying time. First needs were taking care of her through the pregnancy. Then subsequent to that, hopefully getting on through to wherever my father was. He was in Cincinnati for a while, and then he was in Cleveland, I understand. But on the second arrival it was to Cleveland that I came, and I've

lived here ever since.

FEENEY: Did your mother ever talk about what it was like to be processed on Ellis Island?

CHOMOS: (he sighs) The processing that she remembers mostly was the good care that she said she received at the hospital, which is more than she would have received even back home. It would probably have been a midwife or something like that. But there you had professional hospital care. They had facilities there better than she saw in our own little village, I'm sure, unless she got into our big city in Europe, in Hungary or Roumania. They lived in a rural setting in this town of Vasad in the county of Slaj in Roumania. The birth certificates or whatnot, the baptismal certificates here recognized, that I have here as evidence.

FEENEY: Did she talk about the second time coming through Ellis Island?

CHOMOS: Yes. The lanes that were opened up, and history points this out. During the war, between 1914 in Europe and 1917 when the United States got in, the ocean lanes had lanes in them in which traffic moved

back and forth via ship. But if you got out of those lanes, the German submarines would surface. I don't know this from knowledge, but just from reading it and researching it. And in one instance they got out of their lanes and were asked to stop. And then the submarines, as I understand, shot off one of the smokestacks they had one, two or three of. And everybody else on board ship had, along with my mother, a life preserver put around her, and me under her arm, and all of them on the rail side ready to go either into the boats, because they thought sure that after the warning shot that the ship had not stopped, I suppose, there might have been dire results. This stood out vividly in her mind, and the trip took over sixteen days due to this movement through these waters that were infested with the war contest that was going on, see. We were shipping there, and they were shipping here, the neutral countries, or whoever they were. There was ships moving back and forth, but had to stay in neutral waters, and the neutral waters limited the lanes as they would have been, I assume, marked out navigationally. But at one instance this did happen, and she always spoke of that with terror, because she thought, "Well, now, this is it."

FEENEY: How about entering New York Harbor? Did she remember seeing the Statue of Liberty and seeing New York?

CHOMOS: She did that, yes, yes, yes. And she was, she was much concerned, except that she had papers that she was told to present because, and then she would then get onto a train to Pennsylvania Station, the Pennsylvania Railroad train to go directly to Cleveland, and that my father would be there waiting for her. All that seemed to be in order, and it did happen. Now I suppose her time spent on Ellis Island might not have been more than a few days that are necessary to process, as I understand, in those days. And there were great numbers of people, and it was rather hectic, as I understand.

FEENEY: Did she make any friends on the voyage over that she kept in contact with in the United States?

CHOMOS: No, because she, (he laughs) the history of that comes from that she was the youngest in her family, and my father was the youngest in his family, and the two of them ups and gets together in 1912 or whereabout. In 1913 I'm born . . . (he laughs) And the parents on both sides were not all that happy,

but as much as my father was already gone, she wanted to join her soldier husband. But we did have in this country already in Cleveland, Uncle Charlie Chomos, my father's name was John, and other, Theresa Papp, who was a dear friend from the same, and they were already in Cleveland. Cleveland had a large Hungarian community and still does, and that was one of the big attractions. So I think that that time on Ellis Island here must have been as quick as it possibly could have been. It wasn't anything more, I understand, she says, than being taken from the island to the Battery, I would assume, and from there over to the Pennsylvania Station, whatever manner they used, and then the next thing you know, in twelve or fourteen hours or whatever it takes to get to East 55th and Euclid, that was it. Then from there we were directly to West 24th Street. My dad had an apartment or housing, behind the West Side Market on West 25th and Lorraine, it's now a famous, it was built just about that time, 1912.

FEENEY: Although you were only three years old at the time, do you remember anything at all about coming here?

CHOMOS: I remember the environment around the house more than

anything else. Everything else seems to be a blur. Not even a blur, I'm just, I had a picture of my mother holding me and I must have been, well, maybe about three or four by that time. It was taken by a local, a local photographer, Secaris [ph], on Lorraine Street (he clears his throat) close by to the west side, where I was residing. I lived there, and in that environs, now I only live as far out as two miles from that center, all of my life, for seventy-five years.

FEENEY: What was it like for your mother when she first settled here in Cleveland?

CHOMOS: The Hungarian Church, St. Elizabeth's, St. Emerick's, not Elizabeth's, St. Emerick's, was directly across the street on West 22nd Street running east and west. It has since burned down. A new building has been built, but St. Emerick's and the parish life in that Hungarian community, that was it. Just as I see it now, there was an Irish-Catholic operation in walking distance, and there was a German-Lutheran and German-Catholic community, and the Slovak community, all within a one-mile radius of that center point of the West Side Market at the corner of West 25th and

Lorraine. And to this day those churches are still there and a viable part of the life of that community. It is since, through mass exodus from the city, become less a factor, but at that time that was in walking distance to work, and my dad worked right down in the valley, in the flats, Main and Center Streets, and my mother within, a short while after I was there, was working in the knitting mills on West 29th and Detroit Avenue, which is within walking distance. She was making a dollar a day, ten cents an hour for ten hours. My dad was making two dollars a day down in the flats as a cabinet maker. She even tells a story about paying twenty-five cents an hour for the babysitter to take care of me. That was a neighbor in the same housing that we were at. You're not familiar with it, but that whole west bank of the Cuyahuga River, which is full of greenery, I don't know if you know where it's at, down in the flats, that was all housing, and streets ran up there and houses were there. All of that is gone. We have now the high rise that you see. But you asked a question, I'm sorry I'm digressing a bit.

FEENEY: You say, then, it was with the help of the local

church . . .

CHOMOS: Oh, yes. Much a factor, to this day, to their death, the same parish, buried by the same, some of the priests that were there were men that had come from various Hungarian communities of Europe. Because in talking with the priest from time to time, he remembers the towns and the villages that these people came from in Europe.

FEENEY: Did it take your folks a while to assimilate into American society?

CHOMOS: Oh, yes, by 1927, ten years later, my dad was already in the moving business, had two or three trucks with a partner, and they were doing fairly well up to the 1929, the crash, 1930. And then he wound up subsequently working in the steel mills from 1930 to, for some eighteen years.

FEENEY: What about going to school? Do you remember your school days?

CHOMOS: Mine? Yes. I attended about six or eight weeks, the St. Emerick's so-called kindergarten or first grade, and then we moved three or four blocks to West 30th

Street, about a half a mile from the original place. And then I attended the school that was right in that neighborhood that happened to be a Lutheran elementary school, and attended there for eight years. Subsequently I went to West Tech High School in Cleveland, which is a mile or two away, but that was 1927 already. Then went on to Valpresa University, and I was able to attend there for only about six months, less than that, and had to return back to Cleveland because my dad lost his work, my mother became ill, and I attended Cleveland College in downtown Cleveland, Western Reserve, and kept up with the class that I had for about two years, then stayed strictly in the field of accounting and taxes, at night school for, oh, six years altogether, before I was able to get enough credits to qualify as an accountant, which is the profession I followed the rest of my life.

FEENEY: Did you find when you were growing up that you kind of remained within an immigrant community in the Cleveland area?

CHOMOS: Yes. We attended Hungarian plays when I was a kid, Hungarian light operas or whatnot that were being held

from time to time in the various facilities. There was one, the German Turnbrine [ph] on West 40th and Lorraine Avenue. It's only a mile away, maybe less. And choral groups that my mother and dad both participated and were active in. The weekly and festival periods were heavily filled with our own people, our own community. We would have ours, and the Slovaks would have theirs in their own community or facilities. So that kept on, and it happened to be a west side Hungarian community. The larger group of Hungarians that came to Cleveland lived on the East Side in the Buckeye Road area, which is famous for a strong Hungarian community. It's now been heavily dissipated, so true in the neighborhood in which I lived. There are many empty lots. It's the inner city. And that tend to disband and destroy, as I see it, that ethnic community. There are two or three still in Cleveland, Slovak village and one or two others that are strong, but they're being so-called washed away because the second and third generation, my children, do not speak Hungarian. But while I was here, and I went to the English school, parochial, at elementary school, we even had German there, a small amount of it, but it was in English. And my dad would

insist that I attend, on Saturdays, the Hungarian school, which was only a block-and-a-half away, because it was important to them that you continue with the language, so that I wouldn't forget it. I did pursue that, and even made an application in 1933 or four, to act as a translator for the State Department, but it didn't come through for a long while, or I didn't qualify till after I was married, and then I had gone to other ventures, and did not follow that pursuit.

FEENEY: Although you grew up in America, you say you grew up in a very strong immigrant community.

CHOMOS: Yeah, but there were immigrants of all different languages, and we spoke one language. We spoke English. We spoke Hungarian in the house, but when we stepped out, we spoke English to my Slovak friend, or to my Irish friend, or to my German friend. (he clears his throat)

FEENEY: Did you feel a part of the larger American society, or did you feel that you were just a part of this small ethnic community?

CHOMOS: It was somewhat uplifting when we went on Sundays,

particularly on weekends, to either the operetta or to the church, and heard your mother tongue. But then on Monday morning it was all gone, and it didn't take too long before the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays overtook the Saturdays and Sundays, so that you lost it. My brothers are very minimal in the language. One of them is a lieutenant colonel born five years after, older than I am. The other one is three years older. They have very little language capacity in Hungarian, but I think because I was forced to continue it, I still am able to read the paper and translate, I mean, the Hungarian paper, and find that a rich and rewarding thing that I might have that somebody else does not have. And I feel badly that there was no way that I could insist that my children should learn the mother tongue, because I married a girl who did not speak Hungarian. And that's not unreasonable, because we didn't all marry into our own language, so that we did become homogenized. But I do feel that I'm richer for being able to have the capacity to handle the other language and do it fairly well.

FEENEY: Mr. Chomos, can you tell me about some of the other

immigrants that lived in your community, some of their experiences, perhaps coming to the United States, or what it was like for them when they settled here?

CHOMOS: When we came here, immediately we went into a community that had in it Hungarians that all were members of the same parish within a block or two of our residents. Some were immediate relatives, cousins mostly, and any number of countrymens from the village. In small villages, everybody knew everyone else, and it made it a very comfortable, joyous occasion on weekends, when we would come from our work, my parents, to get together, attending chorus presentations, light operas, dancing and church festivals. There was a great deal of that every weekend. I recall those vividly, because you all looked forward to the Saturdays and Sunday affairs. You got to, my parents particularly, to talk to those of their people who they knew in Europe, which I think was a great help to them. It didn't help them with the language, because as I understand, my dad and mother, my mother learned English much quickly, much more quickly, because she was in the marketplace, and the language dictated it. Although in the community,

whomever did have an establishment better be able to talk two or three languages to be able to maintain a good program within its own little community. I, myself, in 1931, unable to find work after I'd come back out of college to help myself, within a year I was able to, with borrowed money, open up a store in which we sold both meat and, um, groceries. I had had a small background in meat cutting, and found that to be successful for five years. But even there I had to begin to learn Slovak, I had to learn more German, and I had to learn the language of the community, or I would have died on the vine. It did go on for five years, and then went deeper and deeper in the Depression until 1936. I myself was going to night college during those years to be able to affect my goal of becoming an accountant, and with the good Lord's help I was able to do that and to carry on through. In the immediate community of those of our own language, the happy weekends stand out vividly in my mind in early childhood. And the separatism between the presentation of these operettas and other affairs was always the separate. The Slovaks put on their own affairs. The German-Catholic put on their own affairs. Because they had the same concern.

There were a great deal of German immigrants who had a large community church where John Carroll University was subsequently established, and now is St. Ignatius High School, that was the drawing point there in that community. Yet we who spoke English during the week, well, we just fought together in English, but the weekends continued to be the focal point of various customs. My parents, my friends had our Hungarian costumes for both dancing and for presentations that were brought forth. And it was just two worlds apart, weekends against the week. When we came home, came into the house, playing with the kids out in the streets, I had to revert back to Hungarian and be strict with it. My father was very strict about, "We don't talk English here." My mother kind of took exception to that, and she was a little bit more worldly, I think. She was learning the language, and then that was a contest for quite some time. And by the time my second brother came along, it was six, seven years later, that died down and, okay, let them learn the English language and so be it.

FEENEY: Did any of the people in your community talk about their decision to leave Europe and what it was like

for them?

CHOMOS: Most of them are under the aegis of the war-torn Europe. They wanted out. These streets were paved with gold. Even though my mother and father finally found out, finally, they immediately found out it was two dollars a day for a ten-hour day, and my mother got a dollar a day for a ten-hour day, hard work. The streets were not paved with (he laughs) down the Main, down 25th Street and Lorraine Street in Cleveland. They were not gold. It was a struggle for them. They worked hard at it. They kept the family unit strong. (he clears his throat) They kept the church and the, its program, a vital part of their concerns.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

FEENEY: How did the great economic Depression affect your community?

CHOMOS: That hurt. It did this, as it stands out that, my father in particular, he couldn't understand why people would take the so-called dole, that they would get paid and not even work or make an application for

some relief, because things were very bad. He would just run around and work in the neighborhood and do odd jobs, even as a carpenter, rather than take the dole. He wanted to be independent. He and others the same way. Some of the community, they were not happy that that was going on. It was a great time of struggle for them, "Why did we come here? I could be back at home on the farms." And we had our, the rural element, the rural setting is not as difficult during a Depression as it was in the inner city where there was no work. Because my dad went one time for eighteen years, eighteen months in the steel mills without a day's work. And it depleted their monies to the point that the residence that they bought in 1927, by 1931 or two they'd almost lost it, even though it was quite a modest amount, in today's standards.

FEENEY: Did they ever consider going back?

CHOMOS: (he sighs) I never heard it mentioned. Part of what, at least it wasn't until after 1924, if I remember correctly, when amnesty came into being. When all of those immigrants, including my father, who came by way of Halifax, when he came to this country. And down the St. Lawrence seaway to the Windsor

Detroit Bridge, and walked over, he and millions of others. I'm not telling a military secret. This is something that is common knowledge, like, well, that's how he came into this country. He didn't come via, he did not get passage across. He got passage on a ship that worked its way to Halifax, and Halifax down into this country, and then came over. But for those twelve years, from '12 to '24, he was under duress because he was concerned any one day that they were going to knock on the door and say, "Hey, you go back to where you came from." Which is, this is so current today with the Hispanic program. And he was here, and then all those that were here, and he was there for twelve years, and they went down and they got their amnesty papers. Subsequently myself helped, the library, the school helped. My father got his citizen papers, my mother got her citizen papers. They went to the library and studied the civics. I tried to help him. I was in the fourth or fifth grade or something like that, with the questions that might be asked, but it wasn't all that difficult. And they were accepted in this country as citizens, which was a unique thing. Then after that, whatever evolved. Others of our community went back and frequently

visited in Europe, and we were in touch with them, we were writing back and forth, at all times. Not the first few years, as I understand. When things opened up in the early '20s, but for about a ten or twelve year period you were in a furtive, difficult, stressful times for not only my mother and father, but for all of the rest of that community. Although our government wasn't shipping people back, but they were all the time they were afraid that it was going to be like Europe, where they rap on the door and they come and get you, you see. That seemed to be the big difference. They were happy about the liberty that they had, but they were worried that somewhere, as my father says, "Boy, if they ever say that they want me back, what can I do? I left there, so-called, without a passport."

FEENEY: Do you still feel a part of the immigrant community today?

CHOMOS: (he sighs) More so than my brothers, because of those first four or five years, and they say that the impressions are stronger then. My brothers were all born right in the community and have no, not necessarily memories, but not that tie, whatever

tenuous that might be. I don't know if you sense the difference. And to that extent I'm more of a foreigner than my brothers. They don't speak the language, for one thing. My brother Steve is a lieutenant colonel retired with high honors, lives in Las Vegas, was in the service for twenty-seven years as a signal corps officer, spent seven years in McArthur's command, two years, three years in Korea. And a (?). So his image would be, his understanding of Europe would be different. Although, in his twenty-seven years in the service, he spent time in Greece, Germany and elsewhere all the while he was in the service.

FEENEY: Do you find that . . .

CHOMOS: My other brothers did not serve. Both of us were 1-A in the late '40s. We were either too married or had too many children and were not taken, but we weren't far from it. The war ended in '45.

FEENEY: Do you find that your Hungarian immigrant community is still growing today? Are there people coming today?

CHOMOS: No, no. St. Emerick's church is lucky to have a hundred people in its pews, and had an enrollment of

way over a thousand, fifteen hundred members, when I was a kid. The German-Lutheran church that I attended, subsequently became a Lutheran myself, baptized, I mean, confirmed into it, even though I was baptized as a Catholic, Greek Catholic. That community is altogether different now. Trinity Church itself that at one time had eighteen hundred members, and from it has grown many, many other churches, sisters and daughter congregations all over the West Side, is now down to an enrollment, membership, of two hundred and fifty people, of which a great variety, mixed cultures, Hispanics, Negroes. Germans, which was the predominant one, might be only twenty-five percent. And even their ancestry, these are the old-timers that are still there and maintain, and are able to continue to function as an entity with the, look into the future, that the buildings were there, the facilities were there, the school, which has been in operation for a hundred and thirty-five years, and still functions as a school, much smaller than it was. When I went to school there was two hundred and forty of us there. We had four teachers. There were sixty in a classroom. Two grades, one teacher, and that was my elementary teaching experience, uniquely different

than today. But it cannot be identified as German because, if anything, we're having Hispanic classes, we have Hispanic services, and German services. One time it used to be German, then it was German and English, then it became only English, now it's English and Hispanic. It was strong enough two, three years ago that it was a Hispanic church as an offshoot of this large German church, had its own entity two blocks away.

FEENEY: Do you think that there will be a strong Hungarian community in this area in the future?

CHOMOS: No. There's only one school that teaches Hungarian now, and it's very limitedly attended under forced draft, I would assume, by some of the old-timers asking their children or the children having some interest in their heritage. Not even as a second language, but as a historical outlet of the parents' background.

FEENEY: Would you like to see Ellis Island some day?

CHOMOS: Oh, yes. I expect to be there. I was hoping to be there that day, but we couldn't get out on the island, at the festival. I have dear friends in Bronxville,

upper New York, Manhattan Island, a dear friend, Dr. Schultz, a Concordia College. And I'd be staying there. Well, I've been in New York any numbers of time, but I've never gotten to the island, for whatever reason, was it business. My wife's folks are from Norwalk, Connecticut, and have passed through New York City a number of times and been to the Statue of Liberty a couple of times, but never on the island. It's been closed for so many years, the years in which I might have been there.

FEENEY: Why would you like to go to Ellis Island?

CHOMOS: Now? Well, my birthplace, for one, and see just, or catch some of the flavor that was there when I was there, even though I wasn't aware of it. It, a hospital room is a hospital setting, and Lord only knows how much crying I was doing at the time I was born, or whatever. (he laughs) And would not be able to, I think, absorb that into my mind. But I would like to be there, and I will be there. Lord willing. (he laughs)

FEENEY: Mr. Chomos, thank you very, very much.

CHOMOS: You're most welcome.