

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Yugoslavian Immigrants

Personal Experience

O.H 1172

ADOLPH KRALJ

Interviewed

by

Frank Mancini

on

November 23, 1988

## Adolph Kralj

Adolph Kralj was born in Yugoslavia in 1942. He was two years old when his family moved to Austria. Adolph's village in Yugoslavia, named Seplock, was bombed by the Americans in 1944. Before Seplock was destroyed, Adolph's father worked on the Yugoslavian railroad where he held a high position. His father owned several hundred acres of land and his family lived quite well. During the war, Adolph's father fought with the Germans for two years. Adolph's mother was of German ancestry.

Adolph's father was able to secure passage out of Yugoslavia when times became rough in 1944. His high position secured a railroad passage to Austria. His parents and two brothers spent the next eight years in a refugee camp in Austria. The camp had the bare necessities to survive. Adolph attended four grades of school at the camp, which was a former concentration camp. His father worked as a watchguard for the camp. He was employed by United States officials. As a child, Adolph often played in the surrounding woods where he occasionally found machine guns left over from the war. He remembered several children of his area that were blown up by unexploded mines left over from the war.

Adolph's family sought to secure passage to the United States and was able to do so through the Catholic Relief Services. Through a loan, Adolph's father brought his family to Springfield, Illinois. They were put up in a motel for two months until his father could find a job. Adolph could not speak English, but excited about America. His 10 day journey to Ellis Island was highlighted by the Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty was well known to Adolph in Austria. His family spent a day in New York before leaving for Illinois. Some of the people from Adolph's village emigrated to Austria, but

many came to America Adolph's family kept in contact with these individuals

Adolph learned the English language in about six months with the help of a special teacher and priest in Illinois He spent four years in Illinois before his father found work in the Youngstown steel mill After a year, he was laid off. He never went back to the steel mills, as he found a job elsewhere

Adolph felt that Americans helped make his assimilate with other American children He felt it was a natural way of integrating, almost like an international language Adolph was very grateful he came to America and felt the circumstances of the war played an instrumental role in his emigration from Austria

M This is an interview with Adolph Kralj for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Yugoslavian Immigration, by Frank Mancini, on November 23, 1988, at 7:00 pm

Where were you born?

K I was born in Yugoslavia in 1942

M. How old were you when you came to the United States?

K I came to the United States when I was 10.

M What do you remember about your life in Yugoslavia?

K. Well, not to much because at the age of two, the Americans came in and bombed our village and we had to move to a refuge camp in Austria

M. What was the name of you village, do you remember?

K Zeplock.

M. Who moved you to Austria?

K Well, my father was involved with the Yugoslavian railroad and he got some transportation to get us out of the country He was fighting away from us, and so he set some kind of a point where we met and he got us out of there, and we went to Austria

M What did your father do for a living?

K. Before the war he worked on the Yugoslavian railroad He was like an engineer Then we kind of lost track of him for about three or four years and he finally led us up into Austria

M Did you go to school as a child?

K. Yes I attended the first four grades in Austria. Then, actually, my dad applied to come to the United States because he worked for the U S Government as a watchman in Austria. We got passports to come over here

M Was there much fighting going on in Austria?

K No This was after the war. We left Yugoslavia in 1944 and the war ended a year later I cannot remember too much of the fighting going on

- M What was Europe like, Austria or any parts that you saw?
- K Austria was beautiful I have been back there once and it is a beautiful country. The country was unstable and he [dad] decided that it would probably be a better place to raise his family but it was a beautiful country
- M Were there many immigrants, families along with yours that migrated to the United States?
- K Yes, quite a few. As a matter of fact, from the refugee camp, there was quite a few people that either came here to the United States or some of them went to Australia
- M What was the refugee camp like?
- K It was like wooden buildings, dirt floors, not really too much Kind of just the bare basics No plumbing or heating, just like an old barn or whatever you might say
- M When you found out that you were coming to the United States, what did you know about America at the time?
- K Not to much Only that I was looking forward to it On the way over I knew about the Statue of Liberty and that is one of the points that I looked for when we were coming over here
- M: Did you speak any American or English before you came over?
- K No, not one word
- M: Your dad had a job here in America, correct?
- K No We came over and we had a point of destination but that was it He kind of had to look for his job We spent about two months looking around before he got a job
- M: So how many, all together, in your family came to America?
- K My mother and father and three children Three boys
- M Where did you stay? Did you have a place to stay before you came or did you just plan to take off and see what happens?
- K We came thought the Catholic Relief Service and they put us up in a hotel for a duration of time or until my dad got employment and got a little place

to live

M How was your journey to America? Did you have to stop at an immigration center?

K Well, our journey was a long journey across the ocean. It took us about 10 days to get here, and we came through Ellis Island, but we did not have to stay there because we already had a planned destination. We spent one day in New York. They put us on the train and it took us right to Illinois, where our destination was.

M Did the Catholic Relief Services line up work for your father?

K: No. They lined up the transportation arrangements, but then, naturally, my father had to pay everything back. Everything that was incurred on the bills my dad had to repay. The only thing that was arranged was the city of the final front that we were going to be at, other than that nothing else was arranged.

M. So you came to Illinois and your father found work, and you went to school?

K: Yes, I went to school there for four years and then my father decided that he would try to better himself. He had some friends here in Youngstown and, at that time, the steel industry was booming and they all told him to come over to Youngstown because they had plenty of jobs. That is why, in 1956, he came to Youngstown. He worked for about one year in the steel mills and then he got laid off and he never did get called back to the steel mills.

M: When you were at Illinois in school, what was it like adapting to America? What was the hardest thing about adapting to this land?

K. Well, it was very rough, considering that I did not know one word of English, and as I can remember in fourth grade, I had to read first grade books in front of the class. I will never forget that. It was a period of time I went through. It was a tough period getting to know the language and all that, but considering the help that I got from the teachers, it was not too bad.

M How long did it take you to learn the language before you could speak comfortably?

K Well, I would say that it did not take too long because I tried to learn pretty hard and concentrate. I would probably say a matter of six months. That was speaking English pretty decently.

- M Do you remember any examples of people being discriminatory against you because you were an immigrant?
- K Not really I was the kind of person that wanted to learn the language and there were people that got to know me and liked me and took me in their homes and showed me around and things like that So I cannot remember any discrimination against me really
- M So basically you had a lot of help with other Americans?
- K Yes
- M Were they other immigrants?
- K No, Americans They would basically try to help us out and reestablish themselves and help us out all the way They were really good people.
- M Did you run into any other Yugoslavians or immigrants from other countries when you came to Illinois? Did you keep in contact or did you stay by an area of other immigrants?
- K No, we did not We just got thrown right into the main stream Really, the only people that my father contacted were the people that came across on the ocean with us from our village He stayed in touch with those people, but in Illinois we really did not go to an area where all immigrants were We just got first hand to the main stream.
- M What was exciting to you as a child in America?
- K Just to be free and a better place to be in Looking forward to growing up in a great, great country
- M Would you say that you lived in fear when you were in Austria?
- K Yes, because it was unstable Previously, we had wars going on and so forth and you really did not know what was going to happen That is how it was when we left
- M So it was this idea of freedom and knowing that you were going to have food.
- K Right, and a better place to live, and not worry about wars and who is going to take over and what is going on happen next At least we had a stabilized government and things were not going to change within 24 hours

- M What customs, if any, did you keep from that your family might have had in Yugoslavia to when you got to America and even present day Which ones do you still keep?
- K Really not too much I actually, my mother was German and I spoke German and Yugoslavian, and the customs that we keep basically are I guess cooking, and family get-together and other than that, I cannot really think of too much
- M If you had to describe your emotions about leaving the place that you were born to a new land, first of all, your emotions on leaving -- how would you describe them?
- K Well, I was young at the time and, really being 10 years old, I do not think that you have that many emotions that you know I really was excited about coming to a new country more than anything because, as I remember, that was a period of time right after the war. It was really unstable and there was a lot of territory that was in shambles and so really I was looking forward in coming to America
- M As a child, what did you know about the war itself? Did you know much?
- K Not really that much Only that it was devastating and I used to after the war go play around and I would go into the woods and play with machine guns and you would read in the paper that kids were being blown up by exploded grenades and bombs and so forth like that
- M Do you remember what role or what importance Yugoslavia played in the war?
- K Well, Yugoslavia was kind of the country that had a lot of different factions within the country. Some people were fighting with Germany, some people were fighting with themselves, and other people were fighting for even the Russians So it was kind of a mixed up country with a lot of different directions. I can remember my dad, he fought for the Germans, he went with the Germans, so everybody was kind of mixed up It was the kind of country that really did not have any one specific you know country that they would side with or whatever. They were mixed up
- M How long did your dad fight with the Germans?
- K About two years
- M Did you follow, after the war, what was going on in Yugoslavia?
- K Not really, because we were too busy trying to stay alive.



- M: Once you got to America, did you follow?
- K: No, not that much either, because I was in the new country and I was trying to adapt to new ways that I got kind of thrown into
- M: Did you feel that your life was ever in jeopardy when you were in Austria? Were there times and specific examples that you can remember you felt maybe that your life was in danger?
- K: Not really. As a child you do not think about it that much, but I am sure that my mother and father did. That is why we decided to move over here.
- M: What was it like when you stayed in Austria. Did you stay with the other group of people?
- K: Yes. They were all of people that had left their own homes, country and whatever, and it was like a big, it was actually the former concentration camp which they broke down into a refugee camp. We had a long wooden buildings that were just like barracks that you might see on army base or something like that.
- M: Who administered this refugee camp?
- K: Really, I do not know. Probably it had to do with something, maybe, with the United States Government at the time, as a watchman at the base, so really I do not know and cannot tell.
- M: The United States Government did not hassle or bother your dad about the service to the Germans?
- K: No, because actually they helped us get over here so really they did not hold anything against him. He fought with the Germans.
- M: Okay. Turning back to America, how would you say your life was affected by this 10 or so years that you were almost displaced? How did that change your outlook on life and what did it make you think about in which direction that you wanted to take?
- K: Well, a situation like that makes you very hungry and it kind of puts you in a perceptive where you want to do the best and you know you try to strive and do the best that you can to improve yourself and family or anybody else that you can come in contact with. So I think that it made me a better person in that I worked hard and I tried to get the best out of myself all of the time in that respect.

M Was the opportunity here much greater than it ever would have been if a war had not existed in Yugoslavia in Europe for you?

K I really do not know because my dad had a very high position in the Yugoslavian railroad, so I really cannot tell what might have happened; we had a beautiful home, we had maybe a couple hundred acres of property, land so I really do not know what might have transpired. Since the war did come, after the war, I can see now that we made the best move to come here because the rest of our family that is still over there like in Yugoslavia, they still have it pretty rough because it was controlled, which was not too bad. Still, he was kind of in the shadows of communism so he was his own man but still the country is not as good or as free as the United States.

M. Did you keep in contact with these relatives?

K Yes, as a matter of fact, we went back in 1976 and I traveled through Yugoslavia and Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Germany. My mother still has rights. Her last brother just passed away last year. Once in a while we call and she still communicates with her family there.

M Did they ever indicate to you any oppression felt by the Russians?

K No, not really. They are kind of living pretty good right now compared to going back to the 1940's and war time, so anything is better than it was then. The people have food and money to live with. My one cousin kind of expressed a regret that he had not had the opportunity to come to the United States like I had.

M Did any of your relatives at all come to America besides you and your immediate family?

K As a matter of fact, my cousin came here two years after we did, but other than that, they all stayed behind.

M Did he stay with you?

K. Yes, they came over and stayed with us. It was a lady, and she stayed with us for about four years; then she got married, so she is on her own and she lives in New Castle.

M When you came to America, how would you describe the normal, average, typical day?

K A typical day, we came here in April and the first few months were totally

like being secluded. We were in a motel room until my dad finally got a job on the lake as a return man on boats, which was in Illinois. The typical day, you get up, played around most of the day, and went out to eat. We had a designated area, restaurant to go and eat at for the period of time that we stayed there. So it was like really not too much, except playing around as a kid usually does, go out to eat and come back, and that was about it.

M Anything else at all that you would like to say either helped or hindered your development as an American? Anything that stands out in your mind? Any examples of pole going out of there way to help you or maybe things that stood in your way?

K Well, like I said, the gentleman that kind of took me under his wing when we came to Illinois helped me because he kind of told me that I was a hard worker and he had not seen that much, a kid my age doing things like that. So he kind of took me under his wing and counseled me and got me over my fearfulness of getting involved with people and so forth and getting to know the language a little better. So really that kind of a person came along. Another person that stands out to me was a priest that kind of took me under his wing in grade school. He used me to take me and spend time with me, with learning the English language and reading and so forth. I am very appreciative to these people that helped me out. Other than that I really did not experience anyone who was against me.

I did for example occasionally, my name was Adolph so that kind of was a situation that created a lot of tension on the way up, because people were like after the war the first thing you know you would tell them that your name was Adolph. The next thing that you know your duking it out. So that I can remember happening occasionally.

M. What was the hardest thing that you had to learn? Was it the language? Do you think that was the most difficult part of adapt to, or was there something else?

K. No, not really. I think that language came pretty easy, but it was hard in the beginning to get up and reading first grade books in fourth grade in front of the class. I do not know what those kids thought of me for the first time.

M Did you find yourself wanting to become an American and doing things that American kids were doing?

K Oh yes, real quick. I wanted to do that real quick. I strived to really forget about the old country and adapt myself to whatever they were doing. I would get involved in football, playing with the kids and try to do whatever

I could to make myself Americanized really

M: What things made you like America right away? Was it sports or was there something that caught your attention and said, "Wow We did not have this back in our old country. This is really neat I did not know it was like this "

K: I never learned about baseball, football, and sports I got moving in the direction of mingling with the kids and that I was pretty good at it The kids kind of respected me. Sports kind of have a natural way of things because you do not have to worry about being this or that. If you are a good ball player, they say, "Hey, I want you on my side " It kind of helped me a lot Sports helped me a lot to get involved with the kids Probably the most influential thing that made me kind of strive for things

M Did you continue to hold on to your Yugoslavian language?

K Yes, for a period of time After 35 years of being here, it kind of slipped away, and I do use it occasionally, but not as much as I should

M Anything else at all that you would leave, if you had to tell somebody in 100 years from now about your life and transition? What would you tell? What would you want to leave with them?

K I would tell them one thing. that this is the greatest country that there is and anybody who does not believe that ought to go over there in Hungary and ask my wife over there, she was over there for three days and she wanted to leave the first hour we got there So this is the greatest country as it has ever been and ever will be as far as I am concerned The opportunities are the greatest and anybody that does not appreciate it does not know what they are missing

M: You realized this because of what?

K Because of my vast experience.

M Vast experience?

K. A lot of kids just take it for granted, because you really do not know what it is like If you are living under communism -- we were back in 1976 -- to go to Hungary and you have guys walking around with machine guns, you have no freedom, you have dirt roads, dirt floors, people have very little to eat, so you have to realize that you are in the greatest country of the world I will never forget the opportunity that I had to come here because now I am appreciative, and other people do not have the opportunity to come here, so that it about the only thing that I can leave

End of Interview