

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Niles Project

Life in Niles

O.H 1587

George Krok

Interviewed

by

Marcelle Wilson

on

October 24, 1994

GEORGE G. KROK

George Gay Krok was born on September 11, 1915 to Joseph and Theresa Panatz Krok. His family was originally from Hungary and immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s. They had relatives in Niles and eventually settled in the area. Gay Krok was just one of six boys in the family and he grew up in a house on East Park Avenue in the city of Niles. Mr. Krok attended St. Stephen's School and graduated from Niles McKinley in 1933.

He served in WWII in the Navy as a Sea Bee and was honorably discharged in 1945. He worked various jobs throughout his life and opened his own printing shop, Krok's Printing Service, in Niles in 1945. He sold his business to his son Richard in 1980. Mr. Krok currently works as a sales consultant for Altobelli Real Estate.

He is also very active in the Coy Scouts of America and has received the Silver Beaver Award, the St. George Award, and numerous other awards and honors from that organization. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus in 1963, was awarded Man of the Year in 1976 by the American Legion, and was awarded Man of the Year in 1979 by the Niles Jaycees. He was past president, and is a current member of the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), and he was a volunteer for the Niles Red Cross. He is also an active member of the Niles Community Services.

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INTERVIEWEE GEORGE KROK
INTERVIEWER Marcelle Wilson
SUBJECT Life in Niles
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W This is an interview with George Krok for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Niles Project, by Marcelle Wilson, on October 24, 1994, at 805 Robbins Avenue, at 8 30

Where did you grow up?

K I grew up right here in Niles I was born and raised in Niles

W What street did you live on?

K I was born and raised on East Park Avenue

W What was your childhood like?

K I had five brothers We came from a big family. Of course, the depression was on when we were growing up so we didn't have much We had fun We made our own baseballs Everybody had to keep their string and we all got together and made the ball Then we got some tape from somebody else We would go out in the woods and cut a bat, or something to make a bat with We played like that Of course, in those days we played on the street because the streets were all dirt There was hardly any cars It was something when we were young

There used to be an airplane going over. It was the mail plane. This one neighbor was older than us. He would be the first guy in the middle of the street because there were no cars. He would yell, "Here comes the plane! Here comes the plane!" Everybody would run out in the middle of the street and watch it. It was up there pretty high. We would see it go and that was a big deal. We had to be in when the street lights went on. They always went on at 9:00. We all had to be in.

W: Would you have to be in by dark?

K: That is it. We had to be in by dark.

W: How and when did the first members of your family come to Niles?

K: I don't know exactly when. First they moved to Youngstown. First of all, when they came to America they were in New Jersey. Then they came to Youngstown. Then from Youngstown they came to Niles because my dad was a steel man, a steel worker. There were three or four mills here in Niles at that time. So he got a job at RMI. It used to be the Falcon Steel. He worked there. Like I say, I was born and raised on the East side. We never had a car. Dad walked from one end of town, all the way to the other end to go to work.

W: Did he do this every day?

K: He did this every day, so we bought a lot over on that side of town, five blocks away from the mill. Mom and dad built their house and it is still there.

W: Did they come from Hungary?

K: Yes, both of them came from Hungary.

W: Did they have any relatives here before they came over?

K: They had someone here, but I don't know who it was. I think it was my great aunt who was here. They could not speak the language when they came here. When they first started out, I believe they said that they lived with their aunt for a little while. Then they got out on their own. In those days, rents were only about a dollar a day. Of course, you only made a dollar a day. If you were making a dollar a day, that was a big pay. That was a prevailing wage, really. I got into the boy scouts and I have been in the boy scouts for 65 years. I got to be a leader and I stayed with them to right now.

W: What was your neighborhood like when you were growing up?

K: I don't remember too much about the neighborhood when I was a kid because I was six when mother and dad moved us to the west side. We moved on the west side and that was only the second or third house on the street at that time. It was a very nice neighborhood. Everybody was nice.

W: Was it all Hungarian?

- K No We were the only Hungarians on the street at that time The rest of them were all Welsh and English, and there was an Irish family there
- W Did your family build the house there?
- K Yes
- W What was the house like? How many rooms did it have?
- K It was a two story building and it had three bedrooms upstairs, a living room, dining room, kitchen, and a full basement At that time there was no garage because we didn't have a car We built the garage when my oldest brother got a car. We built the garage ourselves
- W Did you have indoor plumbing and running water?
- K Yes We didn't at the first house we were at It was outdoor plumbing there where I was born and I lived there for six years. It was all outdoor plumbing When we got over there that was pretty neat You didn't have to go outside in the winter time
- W How many people were in your family?
- K We had two girls and the one was born dead and the other one was still born at a week or ten days old There was a total of eight children I never knew the girls Then there were six boys. We always helped each other We still stick together My brother bought a house It was kind of odd My mother always kept saying, "It's time that you guys got married " I was 27, "When are you going to get married?" My fourth brother got married first
- W Who was that?
- K John, who is dead The second one to get married was Joe There was three of us that got married inside of a year John was the first one, then Joe, then me Then, Dave got married after he was in the service He got married when he was in service One wedding was in October The other was in November and then we got married in March We all got married within nine months My mother lost three of us She tried to get rid of us
- W Be careful what you wish for (laughter) Besides your brothers, did you have any extended family living with you in the house?
- K No
- W Where did you go to school?
- K I went to St Stephen's School through the eight grades Then I went up to high school for four years I graduated from McKinley High School in 1934
- W What did you do for fun as you were growing up?

K We did not have a whole lot of fun (laughter) We had our own games.

W Did you play games like softball or baseball?

K We played marbles Marbles was the big thing Like I say, the street was not paved They used to have big tournaments in town for marbles They had a big ring I forget how many square feet it was in diameter They had the championships They had it at the schools in the summer Do they have the playgrounds open in the summertime?

W I think they do

K They had them here during the depression That was the main thing We would go there and we would ride the swings We played ball there There was something else We played volleyball there We used to go swimming a lot We would go walk to what was called Third Farmers because there was a farm here and there was a couple miles of road That is the way it was named, first farmers, second farmers, and third farmers We would walk over and swim We swam in the Mahoning River a couple times and that was a filthy river

W Was it filthy even back then?

K Yes My mother would ask, "Where were you guys today?" We would say, "Oh, we were just out in the woods walking around " Then she would ask, "You didn't go swimming?" "Oh, no," we would say You could see the yellow

W Would there be yellow in your hair?

K Yes (laughter) Of course, we went swimming in the nude We didn't have any bathing suits There were always a couple of guys where there were train tracks about 25 feet away They would run out just when the train was coming and expose themselves (laughter) They waved at the train "We didn't go swimming mom " Then I joined the boy scouts and I was very busy

W What did you do in the boy scouts?

K I learned how to tenderfoot and advanced in different programs, first class and second class, star, life, and eagle, which was the highest I went and got the eagle Then I was still with them so I became a leader I got to be assistant scout master I got to be a scout master for thirteen years Then I went in the service I went in the service for 26 months Out of those 26 months I spent twenty months overseas

W What branch were you in?

K I was in the Sea Bees That was part of the Navy

W What did you do in the Navy?

K The Sea Bees were construction people We went ahead and built mess halls We had our rifle

with us. Everybody was issued a rifle. We built recreation halls for the officers, and we repaired the camp and things like that. While I was in there they asked for volunteers. I didn't volunteer, but because nobody else did they picked a couple of people out. I was one of the guys. They said, "You, you, you, and you. Tomorrow morning we are going to take you to some other camp." They took us to another camp. I went to Casablanca. What is a big port down there?

W I don't know.

K Anyway, we went there. There was about 500 or 600 guys, but there was just three of us from our outfit. We had to get in on this PBY which was like a sea plane. A ship was sunk. We were flying low to find if there were any bodies or any oil slicks, anything like that. There were only five parachutes on the plane, or six rather. There was seven of us on there and I never got one. (laughter) I didn't think it was too dangerous. After we got out, guys asked us if we wanted to go back. They said, "Were you guys on that plane?" We said, "Yes." "How come there were seven of you on? Somebody was without a parachute." I said, "Yes, I was." They said, "You know, they shot a couple of those planes down a couple of times." We were Americans and our planes all had the flag on it. I finally made it home. We came home for 30 days, then we were supposed to go to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. Before the 30 days were up the war was over in Europe. We didn't know why, but they didn't ship us out. They let us stay and Margaret came and stayed with me. She was there for a couple months with me. They knew more and we didn't know why we were being delayed there and back in the United States. We finally found out that we were winning the war pretty handily, and they were going to drop the bomb. Then, the war was over and Margaret came home. About 45 days later I was discharged.

W Where were you staying?

K It was a little town outside Providence. I suppose Providence is close enough. It was right outside Providence. They shipped us to the Boston Discharge Center. I was there for a couple weeks and got discharged and came home.

W What kind of games did you play as you were growing up, besides marbles? Did you play football, baseball, or card games?

K I liked baseball the best. We used to play cards and we would play for matches. We didn't have money to give. In those days they had wooden ones. We would play with them. We played marbles, too, for keeps. If we knocked your marbles out of the ring we got to keep the marble. Some of these guys that were good had a lot of marbles. Louie was good. (brother of George Krok) He was good. He won the city championship the one year. Then they sent you to Cleveland and you competed against Cleveland. Columbus was the last place they went for the state championship.

W How many of your family members completed high school?

K Joe didn't. Joe was the oldest and Dad made him quit after eighth grade because he had a job in the mill for him. Dave was next. Dave went to eleventh grade. Then he thought that he didn't need anymore school and he had a job, so he quit school. He never finished. I was the first one to finish high school. Then John got through, Louie got through, and Eddie got through.

W Was it hard for some of your brothers to speak English.

K For Joe it was because in our family we always spoke Hungarian. When poor Joe went to first grade he could only speak a couple of words. They held him back. That was the reason he was in the first grade for two years. After that he was all right.

W Was it tougher for him?

K Yes, it was hard because he couldn't understand English.

W Do you still speak Hungarian today?

K Yes.

W I was talking to Eddie (brother of George Krok). He knows a little bit of it, not as much, I think.

K He didn't hear it as much as we did. We learned it when we were young. Mom and Dad always spoke Hungarian. That is how we learned it. When you are young, just like this little guy over here, you wanted to learn Hungarian so we taught him a few things. Boy, he remembered and picked it up just like that. When you are young it is easy. When I was in high school I wanted to be a bookkeeper. I took a commercial course. It just so happened that they had a printing class and I got into the printing class. I was one of the few guys that got to go through the four grades of it. Usually they don't let you out of the three years. We had it for four years and I liked it real well. That is how I got started in the printing business.

W. Did you start from high school?

K Yes. I worked for somebody. I had to go into the war. When I came back my job was still there. So I went and worked for him a couple years, then I decided I wanted to get out on my own. I started a little business. I had it for 31 or 32 years, then sold it to my son.

W Did any of your brothers go to college?

K No.

W Nobody went to college. Where did your family go to church as you were growing up?

K We first started with St. Stephen's in Youngstown. We used to take the street car. It used to go right up in front of the house. It was all paved over. Then we would have to transfer and that took you right down to the city of Youngstown and downtown. Then you had to take the other one. It would be an all day affair. By the time you got home it would be 2:00 or 3:00 p.m.

W How much did it cost to ride the street car?

K I think it was a nickel. It was just too much for the whole gang to be going. My Dad and Mom said, "We might as well go down here." So, we went to St. Stephen's in Niles. We have been

going to that church ever since

W Who were some of your ministers at St. Stephen's that you remember? Did you have a favorite one?

K Father Gallagher was a good priest, so was Father Hohman. There were a couple of other ones that were real good. What was the one that was here not too long ago? We like the father that is here now. There was one priest that all the parishioners didn't like. He only lasted a couple years. The one we have now is real good. We had Father Hohman, Father Gallagher, and the priest that is in the front room now. He was a good priest.

W What were some of your favorite things to do as you were young?

K I never had a gun. We went out in the woods and got black walnuts, or we would go out hiking in the field. We did a lot of hiking. Is there anything else then?

W Yes. What did your father do for a living?

K My father was a stone mason back in the old country. When he came out here he got into the factory he worked in, the mill. He worked in the steel mills for quite a few years. When one closed down he would go to another mill. Finally when the Falcon Mill closed down, he got into the Niles Firebrick. He worked in the Niles Firebrick for about ten years.

W: What did he do there?

K He was just a laborer there. When he was in the mills, he was Shearman and I forget the other job. He had two different kinds of jobs.

W Did your family run or own a business in addition to your father working at the firebrick?

K No.

W Did you have a big garden as you were growing up?

K We always had a garden. Everything in the back yard was garden. In the front we had grass because everybody else had grass. When we first moved over there, like I say, it was the third house on the street. We had our own chickens, rabbits, and I don't think we ever had a cow over there. We started getting more neighbors there and they started to look down on us because we were keeping chickens. So finally we stopped the chickens and never had anymore.

W You just kept them for meals?

K Yes, right.

W What kind of jobs did you and your brothers have as you were growing up?

K We all had paper routes. We cut grass in the summertime. One brother always worked in a

store. He worked in a delicatessen. It wasn't a delicatessen, but it was something like that. They called it a Confectionery Store where they made the floats and sundaes. They had sandwiches. Then he got into a clothing store. It was a big clothing store where he worked for quite a while. Then he went into Youngstown Steel Car. He worked for Youngstown Steel Car. Then, my brother John kind of took over in the store. He worked in the store. When the store closed up, the guy had two or three sons, and he wanted his sons to take over, but none of them wanted it. They had a nephew who came down from Buffalo to run it. He ran it for a year and a half or so. My brother John worked for him. So when they closed the store they asked John if he would come up to Buffalo. That is how John moved up to Buffalo.

W What store was that in Niles? Do you remember?

K E J Abraham. The stores has been torn down. They tore the store down. They tore the town up and opened them all up.

W Did anyone in your family belong to a local social club or fraternity like the Elks, Eagles, or a Hungarian club?

K Yes, Mom and Dad did. When we were young we started our own Hungarian club. We had about 40 different people in there. Slowly after years went by they got married off and they started a family. So the club broke up. How long was it, about five or six years? We had our picnics and we had our dances. One dance she told me about had the two orchestras. I still have the ticket. It cost 25 cents. That was a lot of money in those days.

W Did some of the families try to arrange marriages back then? Did they want their son or daughter to marry within their own ethnic group?

K No. Mom wanted us to get married, but she didn't care who we married, as long as we got out of the house. She was tired after 28 years. She got rid of three of them in the one year. It reduced her load.

W What was a typical family meal like for you?

K We always had soup. My dad wanted soup so we always had some kind of soup. We had some meat and vegetables. Not too often would we have dessert. The only time you could have dessert was more like before you went to bed. My mother would bake. She always had something to bake.

W Was everybody present when you had your meals?

K You better be. If it was off the table there was no such thing as going through the refrigerator. At 6:00 you ate. Noon was not that prompt because we always had to walk home from school to get our lunch. Then we would go back to school. Mom would have something for us. The main meal was always the supper. We had some kind of soup because my dad insisted on it. He wanted it. You had to be there for meal time.

W Did you have a lot of Hungarian meals?

K Most of them were Hungarian style. When mother cooked we never argued because you didn't have much choice on what you ate. Whatever she cooked we ate.

W Do you remember any special family birthday or a special Christmas? Did you do anything or have a special family tradition?

K No. Christmas was a big solemn ceremony for us. We would be at midnight mass, but of course, we didn't go to mass as kids. Everybody was home on Christmas day. Mom would always have some special kolachi and the Hungarian style dinners. The happiest day was when we got a refrigerator. We worked the new house quite a few years. I got a job at Republic Steel. I was working for Republic Steel and I heard that you could buy a refrigerator through Republic Steel if you worked there. I ordered one for Mom and Mom did not know it was coming. She cried all day. I just brought it in and put it in for her. Boy, that was really something to have. That is why I said young people today expect everything the day that they get married, just like their mom and dad had.

We had that house. It was a new house. One year, mom and dad never bought anything unless they had twenty percent down or whatever. They bought a couch. The couch was the only thing. The floor was bare. We just had a couch. The following year we had the rug. They just have the different sized rugs. We bought one to fit in that room. It was the best you could possibly get, if it was nine by twelve. Most of them were built so that nine by twelve would fit into it nicely.

The following year, I can remember this, she bought one easy chair. The following year, another easy chair, then she got a rocking chair. We couldn't get them all at once because we were paying on the house. Mom and Dad almost lost the house. The depression came. We got a notice from the bank that they were foreclosing on the house. They still owed a little over a thousand dollars. It cost \$4,000 to build the house. They still had a thousand dollars and the bank wanted their money. We couldn't sleep for a couple days so we said, "Let's go down to the bank." We went down to the bank and told her what the story was. There was six kids. The banker says, "Well, we don't want your house. If you will just pay the interest we won't bother you." About a year and a half, all they did was pay the interest.

Dad got a steady job and Joe got a steady job. Well, that job wasn't steady. He had to show up every morning. If the guy wanted him he would say, "Go to work." If not they would send him home. There were a lot of times that Dad wouldn't take a lunch figuring they were going to send him home anyway. Then Mom would fix a lunch if he wasn't home then by 9:00. She would fix the lunch up and get it down there by 11:00. I remember taking it down a couple times. That's how I know.

W Was that at the brick yard?

K Yes, that was at the brick yard.

W Did your brother Joe work there, too?

K No, Joe never worked at the brick yard. Joe worked in the steel mills. Then he got into the Niles Steel Products and stayed there about 25 or 26 years. Dave, like I said, always worked in the store. I worked in the mill. I worked in the Mahoning Valley about a year. Then I got a job.

down here at Steven's Metal. That was when I was still single. After I got married I worked in the printing department for Republic Steel. Then I quit that and worked for a private guy in Warren. Then I went into service. When I came home I worked for the same guy for another year and a half. Then I started my own business.

W What was the name of the man that you worked for?

K I worked for Wayne Wagner. The name of the place was Oriol Printing.

W What type of transportation did you use as you were growing up?

K They are right here. (gestures to feet)

W Did you walk a lot?

K Yes, we sure did. Mom and Dad never had a car of their own. Joe got a car when he was around 22 years old. In those days you drove it for about seven or eight months and you put it in the garage. You didn't touch it again until spring because you had to have water in your radiator, and it froze. There was no such thing as anti-freeze. The only time you took your car out was to put water in it downtown. You would make sure to hurry back because if you stayed too long it froze up and you were out of luck. You see how lucky people are today. You don't have to worry about freezing up. Joe was the first one to have a car. It was a touring car. It was a four door, but there was no glass. In the winter time we would put up some izing glass. It was like plexiglass only a lot thinner. You would freeze because there were no heaters in the car.

W Was there a radio?

K No, there was no radio. (laughter) We were lucky to have one in the house. We just had one in the house. I don't think they had them in the cars. They didn't have them in those days. It was a lot later.

W Did you listen to the radio a lot as you were growing up?

K Yes, that was our main thing. Before we got the radio we had a victrola. You had to wind it up and put the records on it. I think it only held one record. Now they have them that you could put four or five records on it, one after another. It was a different world all together.

W What happened when a family member died, or a close relative or friend? What kind of service did they have?

K The wake was always at the house. There would be a wreath out front on the porch. That indicated there was a death in the house. You would have it two nights and then they usually buried them the third day.

W Were there no funeral homes?

K There was just one I think. Only the rich people went there. It was very fashionable to have it at

the house. They thought it was disrespectful to take them down away from the home. That was the idea in those days. Now, if you have it in the house you are the odd ball. (laughter)

W What did things cost as you were growing up? What did a cup of coffee cost?

K It cost five cents

W How about a meal at a restaurant?

K It cost about 90 or 95 cents

W How much did a gallon of gasoline cost?

K A gallon of gasoline was nineteen or twenty cents. Then they started the tax. There was no tax on it then. Then they found out how lucrative it was, and it cost another penny, another two pennies. That is why today you have about thirty cents on each gallon just for taxes. In those days they didn't even have sales tax.

W How about income tax?

K Yes. You had to make over \$3,000.00. Not very many made \$3,000.00. I only made \$1,900.00 the first year I worked at Republic Steel. Seventy-five cents an hour, 40 hours a week. Eggs were thirteen cents a dozen, but if you bought two dozen it was 25 cents.

W What music did you enjoy as you were growing up? Did you listen to a lot of Hungarian music, or polkas?

K There wasn't too much Hungarian music around in those days like there is today. You could pick up any ethnic language that you want. We would listen to Sammy Kay, Guy Lombardo, and all the big bands.

W Was your family involved in any local politics or unions?

K Mom and Dad never were. Dave was the politician. He was in pretty strong with the union. He was also strong in politics. He was pretty good with politics. He was always an officer for quite a while.

W Do you have anything else you would like to add?

K No, I do not.

W Thank you very much.

K You are welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW