

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups of Youngstown

Personal Experience

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Maria E. Schauer

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

July 20, 1988

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups in Youngstown

INTERVIEWEE: MARIA E. SCHAUER

INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McNamara

SUBJECT: Lake Balaton in Hungary, Camp Roeder in Austria, Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, St. Stephen's

DATE: July 20, 1988

M: This is an interview with Maria Schauer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Ethnic Groups of Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at St. Stephen's Church, on July 20, 1988, at 10:30 a.m.

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where you were born? Tell me about your parents, brothers and sisters?

S: My name is Mary Schauer. I was born in Hungary in 1942 during World War II. Actually I don't remember much of the war. My parents were business people. My dad had a small business that he was running and my mother was helping him. I have one brother and his name is Charlie, and he owns a business here in Youngstown right now.

M: Did your whole family come from Hungary?

S: Yes.

M: Both your parents and your brother?

S: Yes, my parents and my brother came. We left Hungary in 1956.

M: Can you tell me about your hometown in Hungary? What was the name of your hometown?

S: Okay, it was called Poloske and it is not a town, but just a small village where everybody knew everybody's name and you were friends with everybody. I mean there was just one grade school there and in eight years then you finished and that was it. High school was not part of your future.

M: Whereabouts in Hungary was this?

S: This was close to Lake Balaton, the western part of Hungary. We were between the Austrian border and the Lake Balaton.

M: What was your hometown like? Can you describe it for me? What were your houses like?

S: Okay, the village houses are basically the same. Most of them are made out of brick or they were, and some of them are made out of mud, which my husband knows all about how to build a mud house. He was telling me about it not long ago. We all had our little gardens, flower gardens in the front and vegetable gardens in the back. And everybody owned a lot that was behind their homes. Besides that they had some land that they owned out in the country. A certain amount that you could buy and a certain amount was assigned to you, and if a neighbor needed help everybody was out there to give him/her a hand. Sunday was usually church day for everybody, or basically Roman Catholics, you might have had two or three families there who were Protestant, but they would have to go to the city for Sunday worship so basically a strict Roman Catholic families.

M: What did your parents do for a living?

S: They, like I said, my dad had a business. Before he was married he was here in the United States for a few years and then he came home and he started into grain-buying and selling. For instance, he bought it from the farmers around the neighborhood and he had a big storage building that is where he stored them and later resold it. Like the wheat he would sell to the mills or the vegetables to the people in the cities and he had good connections and traveled quite a lot.

M: Okay, why did your family come here? Why did they come to Youngstown?

S: Well, there is a great big story behind that. You see my dad was not very happy with the Communists after the war, you know Hungary was taken over by Russia, and he was very openly out spoken against the Russian govern-

ment and Communism and as a result in 1948 he lost all of his belongings, the business, our home was taken over by...

M: The communists took it away from him?

S: Yes, yes, the government did. And even our house was taken and became government property. We were just there because they let us. And my dad one day...we had some people come over to the house and they said that they were from the city and they were going to take my dad to the city to give him a higher position. Well, the higher position never came about, as a matter of fact when he got in the city those two so called friends got on each side of him and they took him to the president of the Communist party who arrested him. We were never told that he was arrested, so we waited for him for days and days and we didn't hear anything. That kind of situation was very touchy over there, we figured that he might have been arrested, which was true. I mean for about six months we didn't know where he was.

M: Really?

S: Yes, nobody contacted us. Of course, you kind of guess, because people were disappearing in those days. Anybody that disagreed with governments, ideology, or just said the wrong words to the wrong person you know, you didn't have to be proven guilty, because you were guilty before...

M: How old were you at this time?

S: I was about six years.

M: Do you remember this?

S: I remember the night before he was arrested. He usually he didn't have much time to talk to me, but that time he took me on his knee and he told me about the Titanic, when it sank. That was one of his favorite stories. I will never forget that. The next day I remember the people coming to our house and I know that it was raining, and my dad was loading manure and taking it out to the fields, it wasn't raining that hard, it was sprinkling you know and he was loading it and he dropped everything right there when the people came. Then he left with the two men and never came back. The jeeps were the very famous in Hungary. Actually, they were mostly officials cars and those were the jeeps that belonged to the secret service people. It was just part of our lives.

M: So, what made you decide to leave then? Did your father

eventually come back?

S: Okay, in 1956 we had the revolution and that was because people were basically very, very unhappy with their living conditions. I mean you had to first of all make sure that you have enough. The government took all of your property. We did work on the land yet, but it was government property. You had to turn in so much of the wheat, grains that you had, some of your vegetables, your eggs. You had to have permission to kill a pig, even if it is your own pig and you know you were not allowed to kill cows because they were needed for milk, and you had to turn in so much milk before you could have some left. And then later on in 1956 the bread was rationed to you according to the size of your family. And since we only had two children in the family and my mother and grandmother, we were really on the bottom of the line. And in 1956 there were many other grievances we didn't have any religious freedom, we didn't have freedom of press. Definitely we couldn't speak our own minds because we never knew who we could speak to freely. So conditions were getting worse. That is when the revolution broke out and as a result about a week and a half afterwards they let all of the prisoners out, because mainly they were all political prisoners. I have to tell you that we didn't have time to become criminals. Nobody was a criminal. In my whole life in our village I only heard of one murder. So, people were against the government, not against each other. So, mainly whoever was in prison was political. My dad was working in one of the mines in Hungary and then the freedom fighters opened up the prisons and everybody was free to go. Of course, we had no transportation he hitchhiked and walked, but eventually he did get home. It was funny because we were walking on the street my mother and I, and somebody said to us, "Here comes your dad." Here we look up and that was my dad. What a reunion, it was unreal. So actually then he was home for a very short time, and then all of a sudden the Russians came back into Hungary and the revolution was lost and people were leaving the country and coming west. My dad was sentenced in prison for twelve years, so he said, "If I am going to stay here they are going to take me back for another six years and maybe they might not even let me live." We didn't know what they were going to do to prisoners.

M: Right.

S: So, actually we didn't even decide to come until Sunday, November 20th, I think.

M: What year was this?

S: 1956. This neighbor of ours came home from prison, he

was in Russia, he came home earlier in the year, so him and his wife said, "Well, we have to leave because I don't want to take another chance, I don't want to go back to prison." So they said, "Why don't you come along?" So my dad took about a half of an hour thinking and he said, "Yes, I think that I better do the same thing." As a matter of fact see my mother was imprisoned too for six months, as a result of his arrest, and my brother was imprisoned.

M: I see.

S: So, we just thought that it would be better for the family to leave the country. That was Sunday evening and Monday morning 6:00 a.m. this person who was working for the government, he was driving a truck, he said that he would take us to the nearest city but he couldn't drive too far because there were still police around, you know the secret police, and if they would catch you, he would be in trouble too. So, he took the four of us and his brother-in-law and sister to the nearest town and from there we walked all of the way to Austria, which took us one day and one night.

M: To go to Austria?

S: Yes, to go to Austria. We were so close to the Yugoslavian and Austrian border that we thought that we might go to the Yugoslavian border. See, where we lived was a little bit south of the Yugoslavian border, so we went north, but we didn't know if we went far enough or not. My dad was somewhat familiar with the countryside, so we kind of followed his instincts and we did get to Austria.

M: So, from there you came to the United States?

S: Yes, after staying in camps in Austria, then we were transported to Camp Kilmer.

M: Were a lot of people leaving Hungary at that time?

S: Oh yes, yes thousands.

M: So it was like a refugee camp you were staying in?

S: Yes, all Hungarians refugees, definitely. Even in Austria there were more Hungarians than Austrians for awhile. People really liked our family and my brother spoke German so he was able to communicate. He is ten years older than I am, and while he was growing up he went to something like a prep school and they were teaching German there, so he didn't have any problem with the language.

M: Well, what was the journey like coming here? Did you take a ship to the United States?

S: Yes, The General Walker, we were assigned. And we were just one of the last people who got on the boat. That was in January of 1957. We really stayed in the camp for almost two months and then finally someone interviewed us and they said, "Well, these people should go to the United States if anybody else, because of what they went through."

M: Right.

S: So, we did get on it and the journey was terrible. I was sick after we crossed the English Channel.

M: How long did it take?

S: I think that it was about ten days. It was winter and the ocean was just wavey and all I had to do was look up and I got seasick. They would carry us up to our cabin, and the ladies were separated from the men, they were in another section, so my brother and dad came down for us and took us up and sat us down on the deck and goodbye, they left us. The food was delicious. I never had such good food in my whole life.

M: Really? That is strange because you don't usually hear that.

S: Well, I never had fresh Washington apples in January my whole life you know, and I just loved fruit, I adored it. I was so sick after awhile I couldn't eat it. We had scrambled eggs and bacon and pancakes and sausage and whatever you wanted it was right there, and half of the people couldn't eat, it was sad.

M: When you came to the United States what city did you go to? New York?

S: Well, in New Jersey, Camp Kilmer, which I think is in New Burnswick I believe.

M: Okay.

S: It is up there somewhere. Well, actually we came in and landed on the Jersey shore somewhere and we were put on buses and taken to Camp Kilmer. Then we stayed there for about a week, and after that we had a friend from Hungary here, he was a priest, Father Heggi from Our Lady of Hungary Church on the Westside here, and we got his name and his phone number from the people at Camp Kilmer and gave him a call. He was happy to hear from us. He and my dad were good buddies in those old days.

He said, "Well, come on over and I will see if I can get you a job."

M: Did you have to know somebody in order to come to the United States?

S: No.

M: It was just your political situation?

S: If you knew somebody you had a better chance for example, my husband's aunt and uncle lived in Youngstown and when my husband found out, (I didn't know him there), that things were changing in Hungary he escaped in November 13, 1956. His father had a big family and most of his money went to his dad to support the younger kids. He was eighteen when he left Hungary, wrote his aunt and uncle from Austria and he was here by New Year's Eve. It was easier for him because the relatives sponsored him. They didn't have any children so they just loved having him here. But for us, we didn't know where Father Heggi was when we left Austria. We had just found out about him when we arrived in New Jersey. Actually, we had a choice to go to Texas or Youngstown. They had a big farm there and they could have used us there, but then we decided that we should go with somebody that we knew.

M: I see. How old were you then when you came to Youngstown?

S: I was thirteen.

M: Where did you live in Youngstown when you first came?

S: Well, when we first came here we lived off of Steel Street on Greenwood Avenue. That is where another Hungarian man, lived, he was a bachelor and he owned a pretty good size house, so he rented us the bottom half. His name was Bill Kenecsey.

M: What was it like growing up in Youngstown as compared to Hungary? Did you have a hard time adjusting?

S: Well, it was terrible, the language. I did not speak English. I mixed up "How old are you?" with "How are you?" I said Greenwood as Glenwood nobody understood where I lived. I went to Holy Name school. They put me in the fifth grade. It was March I think when I went there and there was a Hungarian girl in the class, so she could help me out. So, here I go the first or second day to school, we had church before classes everyday, and one morning my classmates are waiting for me with a hat and I thought, "What is the hat for?" I just said, "I don't like hats." You know, and they



said, "Well, you have to wear it." I kind of figured out that I had to wear it but I didn't like it. So, this one day I put it on and the next day I didn't put it on. So later on I found out that everybody had to wear hats or scarfs or have their head covered to go to church. See in Hungary we didn't have to do that.

M: Oh really?

S: No, only the old ladies did. That is amazing you know because that must have been an American custom.

M: It must have originated here.

S: Yes, well they use it Rome too I understand, but not in Hungary. It was weird and I just couldn't stand hats. I thought that is why everybody stared at us when we went to church the first day...Of course we didn't know anything about having the pews reserved in church for special occasions, like Easter and one Sunday mom and I go in church and said, "Oh, here is some seats there in the Front." Sure those are the reserved, but we didn't know that they were reserved. So, speaking about being embarrassed, yes. That was dumb.

M: So you had a hard time adjusting?

S: Yes, it was. I left all of my friends back there and it was really weird the Sunday afternoon I didn't know that we were leaving and I was in the village and you know we always used to get together around the square there and all of my friends we kind of had a good time and laughed, and I don't know why but I hugged and kissed all of them before I left and wouldn't you know it even my best friends didn't know that I was leaving and I didn't have a chance... Of course we didn't have a phone to call them and let them know that, "Hey, I am leaving." But there was one friend that I should have called, I mean I should have walked down to her house and told her that I was leaving but it was so painful. She was just heart broken. She would have been happy to come with us, and her life would have been much better here. Sometimes having things easier in life does not make up for the friends that you left behind and the lifestyle. It was just very, very hard.

M: Sure.

S: Of course we didn't have new clothes. To us second-hand were just fine. We didn't worry about having anything new as long as it was decent. As a matter of fact our first furnitures came from St. Vincent DePaul Society and some members of St. Stephen's. George Gregosits and Mr. Blasko (he died since) came and brought us our first furniture. I still have a couple

pieces of that and I tell you that those are good reminders of just where we came from and how far we have come then.

M: What did your parents do for a living when they first came here?

S: Okay, after we got settled here first they worked in. . . Father Heggi got in touch with the nuns at the Villa Maria who said that they could use my dad and my brother on the farm and my mother in the kitchen. They had a girls school over there so I had a chance to go to school with them, but of course I had never gotten any grades in English because I didn't speak English; but then I had a nun who would work with me a little bit and you know I had a hard time learning all of those adjectives and prepositions and I still don't know them.

M: Did either your father or your brother ever work in any of the steel mills?

S: Yes, right, that is why we left Villa Maria a couple of years later. I think 1959. Because my brother got a job here at the Sheet & Tube and he got my dad in there also. Then the company went on strike, I think that it was the big strike, then they were out of a job again. My dad had some Jewish friends, Hungarian, who had a fruit business here in town.

M: Your father did?

S: These Jewish people. And my dad talked to them and bought the business. So, he went into business for himself along with my brother. The fruit store was on a corner of Shields Road and Market Street for quite a few years.

M: So he didn't stay in the steel mills the for very long?

S: No, not for long, because I think that they had a long strike.

M: Can you touch on some of the ethnic customs that you practice in the church? You had already described how you didn't wear the veils in the church in Hungary, how about some of the holidays? As far as Christmas or Easter, how do they differ from what you practiced in Hungary?

S: It was funny comparing the two because here in Youngstown some of these churches and clubs and societies still carry on the older Hungarian tradition. In Hungary we changed already. You didn't have all of those traditions that these people still keep alive. It is

just amazing even their accents and manners still speak of the older generations. They learned it from their parents and in the meantime in Hungary we moved ahead and changed our behaviors and expressions and these people still hang on to that. Now, let me see, I can't think of any big...well like we have a sprinkling in Hungary. In Hungary we used to have the sprinkling of the fields and the wheat when springtime came around that was during the Ascension Thursday, Over here I can't think of anything right off hand that we would keep. In Hungary we only had Christmas carols that were church oriented. Now, over here you have all kinds in church and out of church, but over there it was mainly church connected. Now Christmas was very strict there. Santa Claus came on December 6, that was his feast day and he left us candy and maybe a stick just to remind us that we have to behave and he left us nuts and apples in the boots. We left our boots by the window sill and by the next morning Santa came around and filled it up for us. Over there Christmas was Jesus's birthday and that was it. While we were kids we were told that an angel brings us the tree. And on those days conveniently, my mother always sent me over to my aunts house, who had grown up children. So in the meantime she had a chance to decorated up the tree, which was left in the barn in the back. On Christmas Eve one of the girls in the neighborhood would dress up as an angel and bring in the tree. She had little bells and was tinkling and I just went into a frenzy you know because, "Oh, my gosh, an angel is coming." My mother was trying to keep it a secret even when I was past ten. After a while you start to suspect things. My dad was telling us a story when he was growing up he had a brother and a sister. On one of the Christmas Eve's when the angel came they were saying the "Our Father," when they saw the angel come in and leave the tree my dad and his brother jumped up and ran after the angel. They had to find out who it was. They cornered her in the garden and found out that it was one of the neighbor girls, so that was the last time they ever had a Christmas tree brought to them.

M: That is funny.

S: Yes, it is. As a matter of fact my father's dad was in the United States for quite a few years, left the family behind, came out and tried to earn some money, and during World War I they lost touch. He didn't know what was happening to the family so he decided to go home. On his way home he got sick I think that it was pneumonia, he was home for two days and died. He never told them about the money that he had stashed in the lining of his suitcoat. So, they buried him and the money was still in his coat. A few months later they got a letter from the United States, from a friend of

his, telling them where he hid his money.

M: Oh, my.

S: My grandmother was kind of stubborn, and a very religious person, she wouldn't disturb the dead. So, they left the \$1000.00, \$1500.00, I don't know how much it was, in his clothes, in the grave, and the family went on being poor. Isn't that sad.

M: Yes, it is. Do you ever regret leaving Hungary?

S: Not anymore, but I surely did when I was a teenager, yes. I missed my friends very much. I just didn't get the hang of it over here for a very long time. Especially, you had to learn the language first of all.

M: Didn't the Hungarian church help you at all? I mean as far as weren't there other people like you? Or teenagers your age?

S: Not too many my age. There were quite a few older persons, we would get together and we would play soccer on the weekends and we would have dinners and we would work on projects. When I was at the Villa Maria I was lost, because I just didn't fit in. I didn't have clothes like the girls were wearing. We had uniforms thank God, and I would just mostly stay in my uniform.

M: It was hard to adjust?

S: Very hard. We didn't have a car in the first few months. We had to depend on people to come and take us to the grocery store or bring us something like milk or bread. Then finally my brother took his driving test and then we were able to go places.

M: Can you make any comparisons to like Youngstown to the village that you lived in Hungary? Are there any similarities or are they too different?

S: No there is none. Actually, over there the bathrooms were out doors, no indoor plumbing, no running water you had to go to the well to bring in the water and leave it in the kitchen in a large container and dip it out when ever you needed a drink or for cooking.

M: Well, what was your impression of Youngstown though when you came here? Or of America itself?

S: Huge.

M: Is that what you thought?

S: I mean it was huge. Over there the houses are close to

each other because there are just so much room in this one little country; but over here everything is spread out. You have so much room. There are trees between the houses, we had trees too, we had nice woods, but it is just that you can't compare. Like with the car you could go twenty miles in a very short amount of time and over there you would have to take a bicycle or a motor bike, but the fastest was a bicycle in those days. Nobody owned a car. Over here you get in a car and my gosh you could get to Villa Maria from here in fifteen, twenty minutes nothing to it. You just can't compare the distances.

M: What about political freedom?

S: Oh, wow that is another thing. I am still amazed at how people can criticize their own president, and officials openly. I mean you have a right to say it openly.

M: What would have happened in Hungary at that time?

S: Well, people were arrested, that is it. You just can't criticized your officials behind their backs. Now like voting over here at least you have two candidates you can choose from. In Hungary you had one communist party and one candidate. Well, gee, it was your duty to go and vote but dog-on-it what a choice you have. You either vote for him or else. Then it was a unanimous vote, that is the way that they run it. And of course you can complain but who are you going to complain to nobody is going to change anything. I am not saying now but in 1956 and before of course.

M: You have been back since you left?

S: Yes, we went back in 1974 and 1979,

M: What did you think when you went back? What was your impression?

S: Well, things have changed. Like they have refrigerators now and they have television sets, now they didn't have colored television sets, that was very rare in 1979, but now they have more of those; they own cars now. Of course you have to order them ahead of time and by the time you get the car you better have it paid off. If you are building a house you have to order the bathtub months and years ahead of time and you might not even get it.

M: A totally different world?

S: I couldn't take it.

M: Well, when you went back who did you stay with? Did you

go to your hometown?

- S: Yes, my husband had four brothers and two sisters there.
- M: I see.
- S: The second time that we went back his mom and dad were alive but she was very sick, she was in the hospital. So, that is why we decided to go and visit her. We stayed with his family for awhile and then went to my village and stayed with my relatives. I have quite a lot of relatives still there.
- M: I can imagine. Is there anything else that you can...any other information that you can add, or anything that you would like to add or say?
- S: Yes, right now of course we are still involved with the farming, that is why we live in Columbiana. We have twenty-four acres. My oldest son is raising buffaloes.
- M: Really? So you think that this is a carry over?
- S: I think that the farming never went out of our lives.
- M: I see.
- S: It seems that my boys like it just as well. One of my other sons has raccoons that he is raising, and he will be going in to wildlife preservation.
- M: Oh that is wonderful.
- S: Yes, we are really involved with the Boy Scouts and he is getting his "Eagle" tomorrow. The other two older boys, have their "Eagle" also.
- M: How about some of the ethnic groups that you are involved in? Can you tell me about those?
- S: Yes, belonging to the American Hungarian Federation. My husband is the secretary and I am the second vice-president. Well, we joined through the church, but then the officers are elected from all of the churches. Once a year we have the Hungarian Day at Shady Run, for which we prepare days ahead of time. The ladies would be making chicken paprikash and they have kolbas dishes and they make all kinds of good pastries. I am in charge usually of the pastries and I sweat in the kitchen all day. Then we have two different Hungarian bands that play.
- M: So this keeps you together as an ethnic group?

S: Yes, and we do speak Hungarian quite a lot. And my boys also speak Hungarian.

M: I was just going to ask you that.

S: Yes, that is because grandmother is living with us and my dad, who died six years ago, always talked Hungarian to them.

M: That is wonderful.

S: Yes, it is.

M: Okay, is there anything else? Anything that you can think of?

S: Like when we have the Hungarian day all of these Hungarian churches, and there is five different ones, belong to the Federation. Their members help work there donating their time. Our kids here at St. Stephen's are still keeping up our ethnic identity. Since our pastor is not Hungarian, we still have one Hungarian mass once a month. Father George comes down from the Franciscan Friary and preaches in Hungarian, and we have Hungarian songs and we started saying the Our Father in Hungarian. The older folks, they know it, but the children don't. So, I am teaching C.C.D. here at St. Stephan's. This fall we are probably going to start practicing the Our Father in Hungarian with all of the children.

M: Okay, I think that is about it then. I would like to thank you for letting me interview you.

S: It was my pleasure.

M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW