

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Project

Life Experiences

O. H. 721

VLADIMIR SAMSA

Interviewed

by

Douglas M. Silhanek

on

April 9, 1985

VLADIMIR SAMSA

Vladimir Samsa was born on November 13, 1913 in Bessemer, Pennsylvania, the son of Anton and Mary Samsa. He attended Bessemer High School and graduated in 1932. He served in the navy as a cook and baker between 1944 and 1946. His service career was spent in preparation for overseas duty, but the war ended before he could be transferred to any combat areas.

After the service he returned to Bessemer and joined his wife Martha in the grocery business, opening a small market in the town. The two remained in business until retirement in 1982. They have raised four daughters.

Mr. Samsa is a member of St. Anthony Church, Bessemer American Legion, Bessemer Croation Club, A.A.R.P., Slovenian National Benefit Society, and the Croation Fraternal Union. He enjoys golfing and reading about American history.

Douglas M. Silhanek

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INTERVIEWEE: VLADIMIR SAMSA

INTERVIEWER: Douglas M. Silhanek

SUBJECT: basic training, Depression, growing up in the 1920's,
Navy experiences, small town life, outbreak of the
war

DATE: April 9, 1985

SI: This is an interview with Vladimir Samsa for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on World War II, by Doug Silhanek, at Mr. Samsa's home, on Tuesday, April 9, 1985, at 7:00.

What do you remember about Bessemer in your childhood?

SA: The biggest things were the quarries, cement plant. With the quarries we lived near the dump. The dump was for the dirt removed above the stone. During the nighttime you could hear the dinkies rolling close by. We lived on Fifth Street. You could hear them coming right up just a short distance from where we lived. Then you would hear the dinkies running during the night. In the quarry there were also steam shovels operating.

SI: What was all that for? Was that everything for the cement plant?

SA: That was stripping for the limestone for the cement plant and for the steel mills.

SI: Youngstown?

SA: Yes. The good stone went for the steel mills, and the stone that wasn't so good went for the cement plant, which gave the cement plant a high profit in earnings. Shamrock Company bought Bessemer Limestone because of its earning power. It had a big earning power.

SI: What do you remember about your parents and your family as you were growing up?

SA: The biggest thing was dad working so much, so many hours. He used to work like ten hours in the blacksmith shop, come home and eat, and then he would go back for an extra four hours in the pulverizer plant.

SI: What years would this be, from when to about when?

SA: That would be from 1915-1920.

SI: How many days, six days a week?

SA: Usually six days a week, and mother would have to do all of that working. We used to have boarders. Housing was scarce. She took care of the boarders, washing clothes, cleaning, and cooking. That is the thing I remember. They were working all the time, just about all of the time. There were four of us, also.

SI: What about the rest of your family besides your mom and dad? What do you remember most during your growing up stages?

SA: We had to work in the garden. That was the big thing, working in the garden, doing the chores around the house, chopping wood; that used to be my job, chopping wood, cutting the grass. I was the oldest boy in the family, so I had to do most of the cutting of the grass and chopping wood, cleaning the basement up. My sister helped too. As we grew older my sister helped too. During the Depression we also dug down 50-60 feet of dirt for 18" of coal.

SI: You had to do that. That was just to get by.

SA: Yes. Before I could play I had to get all of the work done first; then I could go and play. Those were some of the jobs I had to do.

SI: What do you remember about going to school like grade school or high school? What sticks out most in your mind about that?

SA: As far as school goes, I could hardly wait to get through school classes so I could go watch football practice and baseball practice. This was after all the stone had been taken out. The field was up at Eckman's. I used to go up there. I used to pick green apples for the football players. When I was going to school, I just can't think of anything as far as schoolwork goes. You had to bring a report card home. Mom and dad would really holler if I didn't.

SI: What were your favorite subjects?

SA: I liked history and geography. They were my favorites.

SI: If you were going to have a good time before the war and in school even in the summertime, what could everybody do for a good time? What did you do?

SA: A good time was playing baseball, going sledding, playing football. Everybody got together. We even used to walk in the evenings from here way down to the mill, the Petersburg milling. We used to see people and they would say, "Hello," and everything and talk things over. I thought that was pretty nice. Today when you walk down the street, you hardly meet anyone. On a bad day I used to walk from the store up here to dad's. When the snow would be pretty high there was only one person I used to meet, Katie Swanson. She was the only person I used to meet on the road. That was about four blocks.

SI: Was everything pretty much centered around town then?

SA: Yes, everything in town. We used to have softball games. We had a league; we all played; we all got together three times a week. Then we had an all-star game. Then it was four times a week. That was a lot of fun. I remember we used to go skating, play hockey, a lot of hockey. That was a lot of fun. The only bad part was that there was no work. There was no money, but otherwise, it was a lot of fun. Dad and mother were worried because there was no money coming in and everything was going out.

SI: So the longer the Depression went the . . .

SA: Yes, it was a long Depression, but we had a good time. The only thing was we didn't know it, because there was no money. I was in the best physical condition in those days.

SI: Were there a lot of cars in town? Do you remember a lot of cars in town?

SA: Not too many.

SI: If you wanted to go someplace, you had to walk.

SA: When I was a kid, where the store is on E. Poland Avenue is now you could sled ride down that hill that is above E. Poland Avenue and go across the road and down to the main offices of Bessemer Limestone. You didn't have to worry about cars. There were just very few cars.

SI: What do you recall most about the Depression if there are a few things that stick out in your mind?

- SA: All the gardens around. This road out here used to be the old road between Bessemer and Hillsville before the present road was put in. It was taken out because of the stone. It was replaced by the Bessmer Limestone Company after the stone was removed. Both sides of the road there were beautiful gardens, on either side of the road, beautiful. Everything was in very good shape. That was how you had to get most of your food so you could have something to eat. It was nothing like today, unemployment and compensation and all of that that we have now. In those days you didn't have that.
- SI: Can you remember when you first realized America was going to war? Was there one event where you thought we were going to get into it or they were going to get into it?
- SA: The first I remembered was when they attacked Pearl Harbor. It was on a Sunday morning. I was listening to the newscast. I realized that we all had to get into it.
- SI: You knew right then?
- SA: Then and there that would be it. I didn't know how soon. I figured pretty soon we all were going to get involved. We were all going to have to get in.
- SI: Were you drafted?
- SA: Yes.
- SI: What was the mood of the town when Pearl Harbor was hit?
- SA: Everybody was for it to get into the war and lick Japan. It was kind of scary too because America wasn't equipped for war; it was really scary.
- SI: Did you ever think that we would be attacked, like the mainland?
- SA: Well, we did have that one attack on the west coast there. I wasn't thinking about that. At that time I wanted to keep the war out there and beating them out there. We had the war with Germany too. That was the big one. I was worried more about Germany than I was Japan at that tme. We kept up with the newscasts to see how America was doing. Of course, at that time America wasn't in it. Then we were helping the allies with war materials.
- SI: Can you recall where you went for basic training and what you went through? What was that all like?
- SA: When we first went in, I felt like we were cattle, being shifted back and forth. Then when we got to boot camp some

of those young kids, eighteen years old or so, really got homesick. (I was thirty years old then.) One night I heard one kid crying when I got up during the middle of the night. Later on before the basic training was over, he was very good. We all got in pretty good shape by then too.

SI: Where did they send you first?

SA: Great Lakes. It was good out there. They had a good training program. They gave you a strength test when you first got there and when you left after five weeks. Their training program there was very good. When I left boot camp, I went to cook and baker's school in Dearborn. They had an athletic program there that they thought was very good. When we first got to cook and baker's school in Dearborn they gave us a strength test again, the same one we had in boot camp. I just went through it real easy so I didn't have to push myself too much. At the end of five weeks after our program was over, they gave us the same test again and I had a hard time matching it. Their program wasn't as good as the one at Great Lakes. Of course, we had the training there for cook and baker, so you didn't have as much time to spend on physical training.

SI: What was that like, the training for that?

SA: For cook and baker, that was good. In the bakery line you had some of the best hotel chefs around. When the officers heard that we had a good hotel chef here or a baker they would have a party at night. Boy, could they make beautiful looking cakes and fancy vegetables. They would carve them. Boy, it really looked beautiful. The people in Dearborn were very nice, some of the nicest people around. I never had to spend a penny for food while I was in Dearborn, not a cent. The people treated you number one. Of all the places that I was stationed at, I think people in Dearborn were the nicest.

SI: When you were there, did you just learn to cook for a large group?

SA: Yes.

SI: Was there a large group there to cook for?

SA: Yes. There must have been 1,000 anyway. I know there were 1,000. When I went to Camp Perry, there were 2,500. I got a little bit of training from each department, like in coppers. They had those big, eighty gallon coppers. You had a little training there. Then they had these roasting ovens. You had to do a little bit of work on all the different equipment so you would know and have an idea of what to do when you went to the next camp.

SI: Were you picked for that or did you volunteer for that?
How did that work?

SA: When you go in for an interview at Great Lakes, they would ask what kind of work you did before, while you were at home. I was a meat cutter, so they put me in cook and baker school.

SI: Where did you go after that then?

SA: I went to Norfolk. We stayed just a short while at Norfolk. While we were there, they used to have this food there for overseas troops. It was real salty. I didn't work there. I was transit personnel there. They would boil the salt out of the beef, and then there would be no taste to the meat. It was still nice there.

Then from there I went to Camp Perry. There we were being trained for advanced base supply duty, island duty.

SI: What would that be?

SA: While we were there at Norfolk, we had to learn how to run light machinery for island duty. We just stayed there a short while. But we did get some training there for light machines and for cooking outdoors.

SI: When you were in Norfolk were there any signs of war there where they were close to being ready? Can you remember anything on that?

SA: No. There was nothing there. We were right across from the naval air station. The camp was right across from the air station. It wasn't really under heavy security.

SI: Did you do any ship repairing or anything like that?

SA: No.

SI: Where did you go then from Camp Perry?

SA: From Camp Perry we went to Lido Beach, New York. We didn't have too much training there. While we were there, the war ended with Germany. I didn't stay there too long. From there we went to the west coast to get ready for Japan. When we got there, the war was over with Japan too. That base held about 10,000. As our orders were being canceled, everybody was shipped out there. Since no one was leaving there must have been about 20,000 on that base. They had the gym halls filled, the rec halls filled. Everything was filled up. All we did mostly was get in chow lines and wait for chow.

SI: What was the feeling like then? Was everybody relieved?

SA: Yes, everybody was relieved; everybody felt good.

SI: Was that the only time you ever felt like you were going to see action when you finally got to the west coast? Did you feel maybe when you were on the east coast that you . . .

SA: When we were on the east coast, we thought maybe we were getting ready for Japan. We had to learn how to handle rifles, carbines. There was just nothing more. It wasn't for combat duty; it was more for if you were being attacked. It was just to protect yourself, not for combat, just protection.

I got my ship in Long Beach and then sailed for San Diego. On the ship there we used to train these pilots. We followed these small flattops. If a plane wouldn't make a landing on a ship, we would pick them up if that ever happened. We would go out in the ocean and just go around in circles. We went around the Catalina Islands in circles for like ten days at a time. Then we would come back into port.

SI: Were there any reports of Japanese around in the area?

SA: No, that was all finished. That was all over. As far as being worried about the Japanese, why, we weren't; that was all over with.

When I was out there we had one mass on the Bon Homme Richards, which was tied out in the bay there. They just came back from combat. It was a big ship; it was like a small town.

SI: What was your ship?

SA: Robert K 781 Hunnington destroyer.

SI: Destroyer?

SA: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about hearing from home? What did you hear from home when you were there? Is there anything that sticks out in your mind about that while you were in, communications from home?

SA: There really wasn't much, just the local news, which was about men in the service. There wasn't too much news.

The only thing I was mostly worried about was the war news. When we were in boot camp too, every day they gave a bulletin out over the loud-speaker how the war was going. That was the big thing. I was worried about the family and how Martha was doing and how she was running the butcher shop. Those were the things that worried me more than anything else. Around town I don't think there was really much anything going on.

SI: You were married before you went into the war?

SA: Yes.

SI: What did you miss when you were in the service?

SA: Family, and in the small town that I was in everybody knew each other. When you were out of there and you went down-town, you didn't know anyone. You didn't know anyone out there, and that is what bothered me. In big towns everybody was walking and nobody paid attention to you. Here in a small town everybody says, "Hello," and says a few words like "How are you," and so forth. When I was in the store, it was the same way. Out there you are sort of a lonely person.

SI: Did you ever run into anybody you ever knew from back home, a familiar face when you went into surrounding towns?

SA: When I was aboard ship Harry Smith's boy was delivering mail. We had to serve a lunch for him, just a quick snack; they were sandwiches. I think that is the only one. I did meet Bill Grimes on the train when I was in Camp Perry and I was coming home. He was coming home from a prisoner of war camp. I came home with Dick Makochick too.

SI: Where would that have been?

SA: Just in town. That would be from Washington, D.C. to New Castle. Actually, in the service I guess that was it. Bill was the only one who I actually met. A lot of us were just on a train. We had to prepare a meal for the Smith boy. I have never seen him since either. I also met Dr. Mellincoff, a chiropractor. I met him in Milwaukee. We had a weekend off. I don't think I met anybody else. That was about all.

SI: What about your brother? He was in Europe. Did you correspond?

SA: Yes, we corresponded; we wrote. Of course, he couldn't tell too much. You weren't allowed to tell too much. They were censored, but we kept tab of each other and what we were doing.

SI: Did you have to watch what you wrote, or did they open your mail? How did that work?

SA: John was the one they really watched. On mine, I didn't have much to tell, but John had a lot to tell. I didn't have to watch because I really didn't have much to tell. But John had to watch what he wrote.

SI: Why was that?

SA: He was in combat there in Anzio and also in the Southern France invasion. He was in action right up to the German border. After that he had to leave because of his nerves. He had to go to a rest camp for a while. He had a lot to tell.

SI: Did he have a lot of combat duty?

SA: Yes.

SI: Was there enough time to worry about him too?

SA: I worried about him, yes. There were the newscasts. Yes, you worry about him. You never know. He had a really bad time in Anzio, but he will tell you about that.

SI: Was he at the landing then?

SA: No.

SI: At Anzio, or did he come later?

SA: Later. He came in there when it was at its worst. He flew his plane up from Southern Italy, and while flying over Naples our guns were shooting at him until they found out who he was. Yes, you worry. You never know what is going to happen.

SI: If there is one thing you remember most about the war or more than one thing, what do you think it was? Looking back, what stands out the most?

SA: One of the big things was that we were all waiting for that . . . when they opened up the front over in Europe for D-Day. That was one of the biggest things. When we were in boot camp, they announced that D-Day was starting and everybody cheered. When we were at boot camp, we knew that the war was getting better for us because there were more washed-out cadets in camp. They were getting more particular on who was going to make pilots or not. They were washing more out than they had in the beginning. In the beginning they took about everybody. But when their losses weren't so great they were getting more particular on the pilots that they trained.

SI: You are talking about the navy pilots?

SA: The navy pilots, yes.

SI: What about the military? Would you say there was something that you would like to see change or something that you didn't quite understand or maybe didn't agree with?

SA: You didn't give much thought to that. I think I was treated pretty fair. They had nice training programs. I was treated fair, and I think in the service if you are doing your work well, they recognize it.

SI: Is the navy different, do you think, than from the other branches, a little bit tougher treatment or anything?

SA: My neighbor was in both services. He thought it was maybe better in the navy. I liked it in the navy; I was treated good, and there was good food. I kind of liked it and I kind of liked the water. If I would have been a single man, after the war was over I think I would have enlisted in the reserves and taken a cruise. They had that program where you could pick out the time of the year you wanted to train and the spot where you wanted to go, and that is what I would have taken.

I thought it was really nice on the ocean. I really enjoyed that when the sea was rough, but not too rough. I used to go on the second deck and ride the waves. I was the only guy out there; I liked that. Of course, it wasn't real tough. The first time the sea got rough we were having pork chops. It was too late to change the menu. Usually when the sea got rough we served sandwiches. But we already started on the pork chops and they were falling on deck, and we had to serve them. What could you do?

SI: What years were you in?

SA: From 1944 to 1946.

SI: You were in toward the end.

SA: Yes, early 1944 to early 1946. It was about two years I spent in it.

SI: Was that the way the draft went or were they starting to send people home?

SA: Yes, that was the way the draft went. I wouldn't have been discharged that early if the ship wasn't going to China. All of the fellows who had enough points or were close enough got off the ship before it left for China. Otherwise, I would have had to spend a trip to China before I could get off. Of course, now I wish I had made the trip.

SI: How did the points work then?

SA: I forget how that worked--age, I think, your family back home. I think if you were needed at home for work to provide for the family, I think that all added up. I forget. I forget the total that you had to have, but that was how I got out.

SI: What was it like when you got home? What was the mood of the town?

SA: Everybody was happy; yes, everybody was really happy. Everybody was glad to see you; that was the big thing. I overheard one fellow say that he wasn't in the service. A man would be talking to him, and if he would see a serviceman who just came home, he would leave the person he was talking to and go see the serviceman and see how he was. One fellow came and told me that later. He said that he really felt hurt. This man was ready to go into the service. He had his commission; he had his uniform bought. He was supposed to report and he got sick. After he got over his illness they said that they didn't need him anymore because the war was going pretty good then. He felt bad. He was a good man too.

SI: Was there a central meeting place for everybody then in town anywhere?

SA: No, not anymore. During the Depression years everybody used to meet down under the police station and play cards. At that time I don't think there were any groups where the whole town would be together.

SI: Does anybody stand out who didn't come home, who you remember being close to?

SA: There were a few who I knew: My neighbor Milon Percic and the Deletis boy and my next door neighbor Sterling Grimes when we lived on Fifth Street. He was one of the first casualties. The person I remember too who was a good, patriotic man was Archie Shorys. He was one of the best ever and Dr. Campbell, one of the best patriotic men.

SI: What would Dr. Campbell have been? Did he serve?

SA: He was a World War I veteran. He used to give you a free examination if you would join the legion or when you paid your legion dues. If you went down to the office, it was a free visit. He was great for that.

SI: Was he a doctor in the war?

SA: I think he was, yes, in World War I. He was great for all of the legion affairs.

SI: When you went back, you didn't even have to look for a job because you had the store.

SA: We had a store, yes.

SI: Could you tell the difference between then and the Depression?

SA: Everything before the Depression . . . Before I worked in the store, I worked in the plant. The most I worked was nine months. There were years I worked only five months and three months. When I came back from the service everything was booming. Even before I went in the service, it was starting to boom, but it kept booming right after the war. You could get a job anyplace--cement plant, out in the quarry. During the Depression years they were bad years. I did work for rent money at the cement plant. Half went for rent and half went to yourself; I believe it was 22¢ an hour.

SI: Do you remember them having any war contracts at the cement plant? Did they boom during the war because of the war?

SA: I don't think so. I don't think they had any war contracts, not that I know of. They were really booming though. Everybody was working full-blast, working as much as they wanted.

SI: Is there anything else that may have picked up at Bessemer because of the war?

SA: I don't think so. I don't think there was anything.

SI: It was pretty much centered around the town.

SA: Town, yes. I don't think there was any manufacture of any war material.

SI: The guys who came back, did they go into the plant?

SA: Most of them went into the plant. Some went to the mill, but quite a few of them went right back on their old jobs again. Most of them were working in the plant before they left.

SI: So they were pulled off of there.

SA: Yes, and went back in again.

SI: Did they lose any of their time or anything?

SA: No. For their pension it was all counted for their seniority. A lot of the older people worked in the plant, so they were

lucky to get a job. If you were older, you couldn't get a job somewhere else.

SI: Was that an agreement between the plant and the worker? Was there a union then?

SA: No, that was after the war then the union came in. Then they agreed on what the veteran should get.

SI: When they came back, they didn't know that they had actually been given credit. Say if you would have gone in 1941 and got out in 1944, you would have been out of work three years. When the guys came back in, they didn't know that . . .

SA: If they worked before they went in, yes. They had credit for their seniority.

SI: But they knew that right then when they came back to work.

SA: No, just when the union came. They agreed on whatever they agreed on, but they got their seniority that way.

SI: When did the union come in?

SA: In 1946, 1947.

SI: So it wasn't too long after the war.

SA: In 1948, something like that. I don't know the exact year.

END OF INTERVIEW