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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

MR. HARRY KOSOWSKY (UKRAINIAN IMMIGRANT)

AUGUST 16, 1976

TRANSCRIBED BY

MRS. NATALIA B. MCDONOUGH

AUGUST 6, 1977

Interview with Mr. Harry Kosowsky
604 S. Heald Street
Wilmington, Delaware

August 16, 1976

Interviewer: Mrs. Natalia B. McDonough

Q: First, could you tell me when you were born?

A: 1894, in the Ukraine.

Q: Do you remember the town?

A: The village was called Peredilnitsa, in the state of Dobromil. The nearest large towns were Nizhankovichi and Przemysl.

Q: You know, it's very interesting. Almost everyone I've interviewed so far comes from the same area. Were your parents from that area too?

A: Yes, they were.

Q: What did your father do for a living?

A: He was mostly a farmer. Nights he was also a janitor in a big factory.

Q: He was quite busy!

A: Yes, he had to make a living.

Q: I gather that people really worked hard in the old country.

A: Yes, they did.

Q: How many children were there in your family?

A: Seven.

Q: What schooling did you have?

A: As far as high school.

Q: That's a lot further than most people got in those days, isn't it?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: Can you remember some of the main differences between life over there and then life over here at the time you came over?

A: There was a big difference. The people in the Ukraine were poor and lived off just what they produced on the farm. There were no factories where people could work or anything like that. Of course it was different in the United States in 1912, when I came over, from the way it is today. Life is much better today, and easier.

Q: Did any of your brothers or sisters come to the United States?
No, I was the only one. I came over with my uncle and friends from the same village. He came over here first then went back to the Ukraine and brought me to the U.S. with him when he returned.

Q: Did you intend to stay here for the rest of your life?

A: Well, yes, because the war broke out in 1914. I didn't want to go back because I didn't want to go to the army. My brother was in the army and was a prisoner in Italy for a year.

Q: But if it hadn't been for the war, would you have returned?

A: Could be, if I had been single, but I got married in 1915, and with the war starting, I didn't want to go back.

Q: Did you send any money back to the Ukraine at first?

A: Yes, I did. It helped my family a lot.

Q: So, aside from you, no one from your immediate family came, is that right?

A: Right.

Q: When do you first remember hearing about America?

A: Well, my uncle told me all about America because he had been there. He told me about living in America and so on.

Q: Do you remember specifically what he said?

A: He told us that life was different from European life.

Q: Did he say that it was better?

A: He said it was easier.

Q: Who paid your transportation when you came?

A: My uncle paid part of it and parents lent me the rest.

Q: How did you get to America, presumably by ship?

A: Yes, by ship. They took me to the train and then we went to Germany.

Q: Do you remember what city you went to in Germany?

A: We went to Bremen; and the ship we went on was also called the Bremen.

Q: That's one of the famous ships!

A: Yes, it is. It took us a week to cross the ocean. Seven days.

Q: Did you have any problems on the way?

A: No problems at all. It was a little dangerous because of rough seas, but we had no problems. They had a leader who was in charge of us on the train when we got to Wilmington, and other people to take care of us.

Q: Now, who was this leader? Was he an American?

A: He was an American Ukrainian.

Q: Was he from the Ukrainian community or from the immigration service?

A: From the immigration service. They had people for that kind of work.

Q: You arrived at New York, at Ellis Island?

A: That's right.

Q: And this leader brought you to Wilmington, so no one met you in New York, you didn't need anyone?

A: Yes, that's right.

Q: What were your first impressions of the United States?

A: It was kind of sad for me because I didn't have any of my relatives with me except for my uncle and I was young. And I had a few friends, too. Finally they got me a job.

Q: You mentioned friends. How many were there?

A: There were three of us plus the uncle.

Q: You came directly from New York to Wilmington?

A: Yes.

Q: So your uncle was already established here?

A: Right.

Q: Did your uncle find you your job?

A: Yes. He was a foreman for the Eastern Malleable Iron Company.

Q: How long did you work for this company?

A: Oh, at least five years.

Q: What was your specific job?

A: I was a molder. I made little tools and so forth. It was a mechanical job.

Q: Do you remember what the working hours were?

A: Ten hours a day, five and a half days a week. You had a half day off on Saturday.

Q: How much did you earn.

A: Twelve to fourteen dollars a week.

Q: Were you living with your uncle?

A: Yes, until I got married.

Q: Was it easy to find housing at that time?

A: Yes, it was easy. There were lots of houses. But five or six families lived in one house.

Q: You won't believe this, but I remember that too. Right after the Second World War housing was very short, so we ended up living like two families in one room in Europe. But... did you like your job?

A: Oh, yes. I was satisfied with it.

Q: After you worked there, you went on to a different job?

A: Yes, I went to a butcher shop. I went to school at night for about six months to learn a little English and then I went to a butcher shop.

Q: I see. First you went to school to learn it, and then you went to the butcher shop. In general, what did you like about life in the United States?

A: Well, life was getting better and better here and you could make more money. I was in the butcher shop at least five years until I learned something about products like meat, then I opened my own store when I got married.

Q: When was this?

A: 1915.

Q: You got married in 1915. But when did you open up your own store?

A: In 1921; I had a little store. That was the first store I had. It was on the other side (of the street) from us.

Later a lot of people built a lot of project homes here, there were so many people here colored and white and the store was too small, Then I had a chance to buy this home with a bigger lot and I built a bigger store on it.

Q: It's been very famous ever since. All the Ukrainians shopped in it.

A: There used to be at least 150 Ukrainian families on this side of the bridge. Now we have about three, four families left. Most of them passed away, some of them moved away. There's been a lot of change.

Q: Was there some kind of community life here among the Ukrainians?

A: Oh, yes. We had two churches over here, we had clubs and a lot of good social people.

Q: Somebody said this was called "little Ukraine"!

A: That's right, in south Wilmington.

Q: Now, you knew a lot of these people. Did most of them come from the Przemysl area?

A: Some of them came from Lwow, Przemysl, Ternopil, from east Galicia.

Q: I had that impression. But I thought that most Galicians would be Catholics, so they would be in the Catholic church!

A: They are. I was a Catholic too. But in 1921 there were some political problems and they opened up the Orthodox church.

Q: Maybe the change was somehow connected with the Pan-Slavic movement, but I really don't know too terribly much about it. How did you learn English?

A: I went to school. It was on this side of the bridge in a private home. It was an American idea to give the foreigners a chance to learn English. It was a night school. The teacher used to come over. I went there about six months, but some people went longer.

Q: Six months is not very long!

A: Then I bought myself a dictionary, a Ukrainian-English dictionary, and I studied some from that.

Q: Was this teacher someone who did this on his own?

A: It was someone provided by the city government.

Q: What was the purpose of giving these lessons, just to help the people out?

A: Yes, just to help them out, so we could get better jobs, and make a better living in the United States.

Q: When I came here after the Second World war, we had the same set up for English learning, but in addition to teaching us the language so that we could get better jobs and understand what's going on around us, they taught it to us so we could pass the citizenship test. Was that a consideration when you were taking English instruction? Did the people want to become citizens?

A: Right. They wanted to learn the language so they could become citizens. Then they went to the post office to learn the Constitution so they could become citizens.

Q: How did the American society accept the Ukrainian immigrants?

A: Very well.

Q: Were there any conflicts at any time?

A: No, not a bit.

Q: Were there any Americans who took advantage of the fact that you were immigrants and didn't know your way around?

A: No, I don't remember there were some that were not so nice, but most of them were good to us.

Q: Who were the ones that were not nice to the Ukrainians?

A: The Irish. They were mostly Irish.

Q: Were they also immigrants?

A: Some of them were and some of them were born in the U.S..

Q: Do you know the reasons why they didn't like the Ukrainians?

A: Maybe the reason was that the people didn't understand each other or something. But later all that disappeared. They became more sociable and lived together.

Q: When you first came, you came to this area and stayed here?

A: Yes I came directly here and never moved out. I've been here sixty-three years.

Q: You never wanted to move out?

A: No. I was always in my business trade in the grocery store. In October of 1975, we took a trip to Europe with my oldest son Mike. We spent one week in Kiev and another week in Lwow.

Q: Did you enjoy the trip?

A: We enjoyed it very well. Sometimes it was a little rough, but we were satisfied that we saw our village where I was born, we saw my brother and sisters. Also my wife had two sisters that we visited. For 59 years we hadn't seen each other! So, we were so glad that we enjoyed the family and so on. And we were sorry to leave the old country again.

Q: You said earlier that it was a little rough. Do you mean emotionally?

A: The living there. It was a little depressing. They all lived in one room. The only clothes they had was the ones they wore. My brother is still living in the same village. And I get a letter from him every few months. Also, my wife used to send letters to her sisters.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: Over here in the United States. She was living on the same street. That was on Apple Street, just a few streets away from here. It was no trouble at all. We both belonged to church and sang in the choir. We were well acquainted and I liked her. We got married in 1915.

Q: Was your wife from the same area in the Ukraine?

A: She was from the same area or state, but from a different village. It was called Arlamov, in the state of Dobromil.

Q: Did any of the people in your village come to the United States come after you?

A: A lot of them came. Quite a few came from my village and

quite a few came from my wife's village, that was later.

Q: How long did the people continue to come from the old country?

A: After the First War they were allowed to go back to Europe to see it and came back. Then after the Second War a lot of them wanted to come over, but it was difficult.

Q: I understand. For what reason did most people come to the United States around 1915 to 1919?

A: Most of them came because they didn't like Russia's system of government. Many people were living in Germany during the war and then they came to the U.S. afterwards; there were about 50,000 of them.

Q: That was a little later, after the Second World War, wasn't it?

A: Yes, it was later.

Q: But how about those people who came approximately when you did? What was their reason for coming?

A: Just for better life.

Q: Was there much political unhappiness?

A: Well, probably yes. Most of them were young boys who didn't want to go to the army. They had to go to the army for three years for Austro-Hungary, so they escaped to Germany instead. I was in Germany one year myself on a job. My uncle was in Germany for just a few months, and we heard rumors that there was going to be a war between Austro-Hungary and Russia. So my uncle said we better go to America. We went back to my village to say goodbye to my parents and then went to America. That was 1912.

Q: A number of the other people I interviewed mentioned that the war had a great deal to do with their coming and staying.

A: That's right.

Q: You said there used to be about 150 Ukrainian families in "little Ukraine". When did they begin to move away?

A: Some of them moved away after the First War, then went back. Some of them moved to different cities like Philadelphia or New York to be with their families and where they could get better jobs with higher pay; that's why they left Wilmington.

Q: Do you remember the time when this trend began?

A: Around the time of the war there was a little depression in the U.S., so people moved to other cities in search of better jobs and better life. That's why they started moving away.

Q: Was there any other time when there was a noticeable outflow of people?

A: No....

Q: Your daughter said when the black people began to move in there was another outflow of our people. How long ago was this?

A: During the depression around 1929, 1933 a lot of people moved out for better jobs and in search of better business. Most of them left.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: Seven. Four boys and three girls.

Q: What kinds of professions did they go into?

A: Most of our children have a high school education and they have been looking for jobs. The youngest one, Walter James, finished college. He's a neurologist.

Q: He finished more than college.

A: He is the only one who went to college and he moved away to Philadelphia.

Q: And you other sons?

A: Two of my sons are in business with me. Another one, Mike is a sheet metal worker in the DuPont Company. He makes good wages. The three daughters were all secretaries and one was additionally an organist.

Q: I imagine you have many grandchildren now?

A: Four grandchildren. And I have great-grandchildren.
My headache is very bad.

Q: Well, I think that is all we need. I hope your headache goes away.

A: I am retired from my trade now. My wife died recently, so I'm working in the store part time now.