

Early years in Austria and immigrating to DePue, Illinois
an Oral History

Joe Ambrose, Interviewee
Of DePue, Illinois

Interview Date: January 6, 1976

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Narrator's Name: JOE AMBROSE
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Interviewer's Name: Vega
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Q: Your date of birth?

A: January 6, 1900.

Q: Where at?

A: Austria. (Words not understandable)

Q: When did you come to America?

A: 1922.

Q: Who did you come with?

A: Alone.

Q: How old were you when you came?

A: Twenty-two years old.

Q: What did you do for money up there? Where'd you work at in Austria?

A: On the farm.

Q: Oh, okay. Did you go to school?

A: Yes.

Q: Until what grade?

A: Fourth.

Q: The fourth?

A: That's all.

Q: Then you worked all from that time until 22?

A: That's right.

Q: When you came here, where did you work?

A: Oglesby cement mill.

Q: What did you do there?

A: Work in the mine.

Q: For how long?

A: Five years.

Q: And then you worked in the plant, right? In DePue?

A: Up at DePue, right.

Q: And what were your hours in the plant?

A: Pardon?

Q: What were your hours?

A: Eight hours.

Q: You worked eight hours?

A: Right.

Q: And what about your wages. How much did you make an hour?

A: Three -- I don't know -- \$3.80 a day.

Q: A day?

A: Yes, eight hours, \$3.80. Not much coming out, I don't know.

Q: What products did you make? This was about after World War I, wasn't it?

A: Right. Sure.

Q: What products did you make?

A: I was working here in this new plant. We was making lithopone for paint.

Q: For paint?

A: Yes.

Q: And how many years did you work there?

A: Up here I work ten years here, no, twenty-nine years here, then they shut down, then I went in the furnace, and I worked there ten more years up there. Altogether thirty-nine years altogether.

Q: Was the work hard?

A: No. Easy. _____ easy.

Q: What about working conditions? How were working conditions back then?

A: Some places was pretty bad, dusty. Like when I was working down here at the barium, bh, that thing stink and dusty.

Q: How long did you work there in the barium?

A: Twenty-nine years.

Q: Do you have any children?

A: Yes, two.

Q: A boy and a girl?

A: Boy and girl, yes.

Q: Were you ever in the war?

A: In the first war, yes.

Q: World War I?

A: Right.

Q: And then after that they you came here?

A: Then I -- then I went home from first war and then I stay home one year. Then I go back to service in Yugoslavian army for two more years. I was in the Austrian army for two; stay home one year, and I went into Yugoslavian army for two years; then I come here.

Q: [Coughs] Excuse me. How did you get here? By boat?

A: Boat, right.

Q: How long did it take you?

A: Seven days.

Q: Seven days?

A: Sure. When my brother come up here, it takes him two weeks.

Q: How did he get here?

A: On the boat, too. From Europe to New York. Slow, you know, the boat was going slow then.

Q: How come you decided to come to America?

A: Because I was scared of wars up there. It was wars up there all the time so I got the heck out of there. (laughs)

Q: What do you like about DePue compared to Europe?

A: Beautiful, okay. Better than Europe.

Q: In which ways? Better conditions?

A: Better food, better conditions, free. You could do more than you could do in Europe.

Q: What made you decide to come to DePue? I mean of all the places in America, why'd you pick DePue?

A: Well, I had two brothers here.

Q: Oh, they came before you did?

A: They come before me and they told me that it's good place to live.

Q: How did they hear of it?

A: Pardon?

Q: How did they hear about it?

A: Uncle was up here. My uncle was up here before he come to Europe, I don't know, on vacation, and he told us that it's nice up here so my brothers come up here first and then I come.

Q: What changes in DePue have you noticed?

A: Pardon?

Q: What changes in DePue have you noticed since you came?

A: PAUSE Not so much smoke like it was when I first come up here.

Right, that's one thing. I don't know.

Q: Not too many?

A: No, pretty near the same. More people than when I come here.

Q: The years that you've been here -- how many -- how many years have you been here now?

A: In DePue?

Q: Yes. In America.

A: Since 1922. How many is that? Seventy-two is 50, 53, 50. . .

Q: Fifty-four years.

A: Fifty-four years, right.

Q: The years that you've been here, have they been good or bad? A little of both maybe or what?

A: You mean how I live, how I. . .

Q: Yes. Did you get by good? I mean since there's such a big change. . .

A: Both good and bad, okay? That's good idea.

Q: Was it hard for you to adjust?

A: No, not bad.

Q: No?

A: It just -- pretty easy.

Q: How was your government in Yugoslavia different from the government that we have in America?

A: Well, you -- you're not free like we are here; there's no elections up there. Like up here they elect President; up there they just appoint themselves, like in Russia, you know. Communists.

Q: Did you -- did the people ever have any say so of who was to be the President?

A: Over there? They don't -- people ain't got much to say.

Q: No? So you like it a lot better here?

A: Oh, much better, sure.

Q: How old were you when you were married?

A: Twenty-eight years.

Q: Twenty-eight?

A: I was 28, yes.

Q: And your wife was from DePue?

A: From Oglesby.

Q: What's her name?

A: Marie. What her maiden name was? Marie Hrovat.

Q: Hrova?

A: Hrovat like her name, of her name. H-R-O-V-A-T, Hrovat.

Q: What about your foods? I mean I suppose you like goulash and strudel and everything.

A: I love goulash; I like soup. . .

Q: Blood soup?

A: . . .and noodles and turkeys, smoked turkeys.

Q: How were the foods different from ones in America? Did you have more. . .

A: In Yugoslavia? In Europe? The food is pretty well what we raise at home. Only things we buy in the store is usgar, coffee but we raise everything at home. We raise wheat and we take to the mill, you know, and then they ground up and make flour. And we raise corn; they make cornmeal; they make bread out of cornmeal. Then we raise potatoes at home, carrots, make sauerkraut. We didn't buy nothing in the Europe but

sugar and coffee and clothes. Most of the clothes they make at home. The ladies they would make the clothes at home.

Q: Did you have -- did you -- did you -- PAUSE Okay. What about your clothes? How did they make your clothes back then?

A: They make clothes at home.

Q: With what?

A: They raise this stuff -- what you call it? They raise it out in the field and then they take to the place. . .

Q: Cotton?

A: Yes, like cotton, right. And then they make threads out of it, you know.

Q: Threads?

A: And then they make clothes -- shirts, pants, underwear.

Q: Did the women ever wear pants?

A: They do, right.

Q: In Yugoslavia they did?

A: Sure.

Q: You mean everything your underwear and everything?

A: Yes, but for the ladies they buy a lot of stuff in the store, clothes, you know, dresses and stuff. But for us guys they make all ours at home.

Q: Did they?

A: For us guys to work. But to go to church they buy clothes in stores.

Q: What about when it came to washing the clothes?

A: We wash clothes at home. No washing machines. The ladies -- every Monday they take clothes -- all the neighbor ladies they go down by the

creek by the river and each lady's got her own stone and they put soap on the clothes and they beat it and they beat it and they rub it and they rub it, you know, clothes. And they'd hang right out by the river, everybody. Each lady's got her own clothesline, they hang clothes but sometimes it's raining for a couple, three days. They don't wash then.

Q: What about dishes and everything, the household. . .

A: They -- they got dishes like here. Plates, pots, pans, and stuff.

Q: You -- you had to pump all your water. You pumped it from the back yard?

A: Yes, we got it from outside systems.

Q: Did you have wooden floors and everything?

A: In the house, yes, wood floors, right. No rugs like over here. No linoleums. Wood floors.

Q: How was the climate different from there from here?

A: Up here? The same, like here. It got cloudy in the summertime, storms and a lot of time it was hailing -- hail, you know, in the summertime. And tornadoes just like here. In the wintertime a lot of snow.

Q: What about different holidays? How did you celebrate Christmas and New Year's Eve and different holidays?

A: Yes, we celebrate Christmas, Easter, and New Year.

Q: The same way they do here. . .

A: The same way.

Q: . . .with the Christmas tree and presents and everything?

A: We make a lot of Christmas trees, that's right. Go out in the timber cut Christmas tree and decorate them, just like here. But you know what we do with Christmas tree? We don't put them in house; we put them

outside by the house. Like up here they put Christmas tree in the house; we don't put them in the house, outside.

Q: Did you put oranges on them and different fruits and everything?

A: Right. Lot of fruit. Apples, oranges, and stuff.

Q: Is that what you got for presents, too? Is like apples and oranges and. . .

A: Right. That's right. Yes.

Q: What about religion? Were you Catholic, Protestant?

A: Oh, the religions, there's three, four different religions; there's Protestant, Catholic, _____ . That's all, I think.

Q: Were you Catholic?

A: Right.

Q: What about games, football, basketball?

A: No, just soccer games.

Q: Did you play soccer?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you? For how long?

A: Oh, yes. Oh, cry, as soon as I was eight years old, ten years old, we was out in the field practicing.

Q: You never heard of football then or baseball until you came here.

A: No football. No baseball. I never see it before. We played horse-shoes though.

Q: (Laughs) Horseshoes?

A: Right.

Q: When you came here did you ever play or do you like football?

A: I love it. I like it.

Q: Do you like baseball?

A: Baseball.

Q: Basketball?

A: Basketball.

Q: Hockey?

A: No, I never go to hockey games.

Q: You've never seen hockey on TV maybe?

A: On TV, yes, but I never go watch them.

Q: Do you like music?

A: Right.

Q: What kind? Slovenian?

A: Accordion. Right? Because over in Europe there was. . .

Q: Harmonica?

A: Yes, harmonica. In Europe there wasn't bands like over here. There was two, three guys only -- the accordion and the drum. No, I never seen violins, yes, and the guitars -- they got guitars there. And most of it's accordians.

Q: Do you like the music they have now, some of it? Western or. . .

A: Oh, yes. I like music up here.

Q: Pop music, rock?

A: Rock.

Q: You like all of it?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you ever dance? What kind of dances did you. . .

A: I love to dance, boy.

Q: Do you?

A: I was dancing when I was ten years old already.

Q: What kind?

A: Polka.

Q: Polka?

A: Waltz, slow waltz.

Q: How did you learn, at home?

A: At home and singing. I love singing them.

Q: Oh, were you in the choir?

A: I would sing in the church for a long time. Then I come to this country I sing in the LaSalle church.

Q: Did you?

A: Sing in the choir, right. St. Roch Church in LaSalle.

Q: St. Roch's?

A: Right.

Q: Did you belong to the Catholic church here?

A: Right. We belong to the church in LaSalle, St. Roch's Church in LaSalle.

Q: What about more of your work? Tell me more about your work in the plant. How -- was that your first job when you came to America?

A: First job was at Oglesby in the cement mill. I was working the mine under the ground.

Q: Was it hard?

A: No, not hard.

Q: What was your job? Exactly what did you do?

A: Then we was with drillers we was in holes, you know, into the rock and the blast gang come along. They put dynamite in there and they

blasted, see.

Q: Was it dangerous?

A: And then -- next then the shovel come in, you know, it pick up this rocks out and then next day we go in there. We always work in the morning early. We go down there about 2 o'clock in the morning and work until about 8:00. We drill holes and these guys come in and blast this thing out and then they _____ come and they load up this rock. I worked that for five years. Let's see, from 1922 to 1925, yes, no, 1926. Four years I worked that.

Q: How much did you make at that?

A: And I went -- up there? About three dollars a day, that's all. Then I went to Detroit from Oglesby.

Q: To the where?

A: To Detroit.

Q: Detroit?

A: There, I worked there one year.

Q: What did you do there?

A: I was working in the Ford factory making Ford's automobiles. One year I worked there.

Q: And how much did you make up there?

A: I was making good money there. I worked -- we worked eight hours and we was making \$4. Ford was paying good money all the time.

Q: What did you do, make parts for the cars?

A: No, I was working on the assembly line.

Q: The assembly line.

A: The belt -- the belt run all the time. We have to -- I was greasing

up the blocks that the motor -- blocks -- it's got a hole, you know, where the piston goes in there. That's, what I think, what I was doing. Clean out those holes, you know, and put oil in there. That thing move all the time. I'd finish up one, the next one come, eight hours.

Q: Did you like it?

A: It was not bad. Clean, nice clean job. No dust.

Q: How come you didn't stay in the trade?

A: Because I had a girl up here in Oglesby. I was in love.

Q: (Laughs) Oh, you were in love.

A: I was in Detroit -- I was in Detroit one year, worked there one year. I was in Oglesby five times..

Q: Out of that year?

A: From Detroit I come to Oglesby to see her. Oh, yes.

Q: How did you get back to.....

A: Detroit? Train. Train. I come from Detroit to Chicago on the train and then from Chicago to LaSalle on the train, then from LaSalle to Oglesby in a taxi. I didn't have no car.

Q: What about your work at the plant now. What did you do exactly?

A: Up here?

Q: Yes.

A: Oh, my goodness. I don't know how I can tell you that. I was watching tanks, for mixing that stuff in big tanks, you know, and we have to put some kind of ore in there. You don't remember when this plant was running here?

Q: No.

Q: They were making stuff that goes into the paint. Because without

this stuff we was making here, lithopone, you can't make paint because this stuff we was making here have to go into the paint. All kinds of paint, in any kind of paint.

Q: And then you worked until you were how old, until retirement, how old were you?

A: Why, until I was 65.

Q: And then you just quit. And what did you do for a -- hobbies to keep your spare time. What did you do in your spare time?

A: Garden.

Q: Garden?

A: Hunting in the wintertime.

Q: Do you fish?

A: Fishing in the summertime. I had big garden all the time.

Q: Go to football games and. . .

A: Pardon? Go to ball games all the time.

Q: Do you have any family left in Europe? Cousins or... .

A: Brothers, sisters in Europe.

Q: You have brothers in Europe? Do you ever hear from them?

A: There was eighteen of us kids in the family.

Q: Eighteen?

A: Eighteen. We were a big family.

Q: How did you ever make it? How did your mother and father ever make it?

A: Oh, we just keep on working on the farm. The cows, milking cows. We had our milk.

Q: Was there always enough food and everything?

A: And there was five of my sisters that were nuns.

Q: Five that became nuns? What about the boys?

A: Boys, well, two of them come up here to this country -- three of us come up here and let's see, there was eight boys. One got killed in the first war and then another got killed in the second war and then my brother just got killed here two years ago over there. They were building a house -- a neighbor house -- a big, big -- the houses over there have big stones, rocks, you know, and he was working there and the scaffold broke and the rock came down and killed him.

Q: Eighteen.

A: There was eighteen of us kids. Right.

Q: Were your mother and father living. . .

A: No, they passed. . .

Q: . . .when you decided to come to America?

A: Pardon?

Q: When you decided to come to America?

A: They were still living then. When I come here they pass away. Yes.

Q: Did any of your sisters decide to come?

A: I had one sister over here in this country only for five months.

Then my older sister she was up here. You know what? She was nun. She come to Cleveland in this country and she didn't like it so she went back to Europe.

Q: She didn't like it here?

A: No. She can't learn, you know, speak English, you know.

Q: Do you ever wish that you went farther on to school?

A: Pardon?

Q: Do you ever wish that you continue your schooling?

A: That's right. That's the worst part of it over there because they don't send kids to school.

Q: Oh, you have to work?

A: My work, right. Even -- even -- the only people that go to school up there are rich people, send kids to colleges. But when you're poor, work on a farm, work in factories, work in coal mines.

Q: Did any of your brothers and sisters get to finish school? Out of eighteen none of them did?

A: Nobody did, no. We all go just four grades and then forget it.

Q: Could you go on if you wanted or didn't you have any choice? You had to work?

A: Well, you have to work. How are you going to live. You have to work, right? Just like up here. If you don't work, you. . . Right, you have to work.

Q: Did you like your work here?

A: Oh, yes. I liked it. I enjoyed it.

Q: Did your wife work or did she just stay home and. . .

A: She was working before we got married at Westclox.

Q: At Westclox?

A: Right. How long? I don't know how -- well, she was working Westclox for a long time though. She went to work when she was sixteen years old and then we got married, let's see, she was 21 years old when she got married. Well, she was working Westclox for about eight years, about eight years or something like that.

Q: Okay.

PAUSE

Q: Since you came from Yugoslavia and you didn't talk any English there, when you came to America did you have any difficulties expressing what you wanted to say to people?

A: It was difficult, trouble, we had a lot of trouble because didn't know how to speak English language. That was the worst thing for me when I come here.

Q: Like what? Can you give me an incident?

A: Like one time in New York there was three of us guys; we all come from Austria, we don't know how to speak English language, so we go to restaurant and -- to get something to eat so girl, this waitress, she come up with menu, paper, I didn't know how to read. So I asked one guy, "What the heck we going to do now? We can't go down to eat; we don't know how to speak the English language," So I asked girl for a piece of paper and a pencil. I draw picture of a cow on the piece of paper there and then make arrow up on cow's leg, give to the girl. Oh, she a lot of fun. She laugh. She showed the other girls in the kitchen this. Pretty soon they come with a three big plates of steak, mushrooms, and potatoes and then I want something to drink. I don't like water so I like milk so the picture of the cow was still there so I asked girl for pencil again and make arrow up in those things that hang down from the cow. We call them booberinos in old country. (Laughter) And then she come with a glass and she give me four glassed of milk. One glass from each of those things that hang down there.

Q: Booberinos.

A: Booberinos, yes. What you call them in this country, those things? You don't know?

A: No. NO. No. Ask Louis, he'll know.

Voice from background: They're called udders.

A: What?

Voice: Udders.

A: Udders? The udders?

PAUSE

Voice: Go on, tell them.

Q: As you were saying, I'd be surprised by a different kind of drink.

A: If you go to different country, if you don't know how to speak the language, if you go to Spain or Germany, it's harder. That's right.

Only thing is real hard. It's hard to get job. How you going to get a job if you don't know how to talk?

Q: You learned fast though. How did you learn by -- I mean how did you express yourself when you came to DePue?

A: How I talked to the people? When I was in Oglesby I went to school.

Q: Oh, you went to school there?

A: In the wintertime to learn how to read and write. But to talk, to speak the American language, I just learn from people. But it's hard though. Go to store. Try to buy clothes. You don't know how to. . .

Q: You couldn't read prices or anything, could you?

A: Nothing. Heck no. Nothing.

Q: How did you learn math and everything?

A: Just by hand and -- one, two, three, uno, dos, tres.

Q: Cuatro.

A: Cuatro.

Q: It was hard.

A: Cinco.

PAUSE

Q: Okay, so you liked DePue a lot better then and you're glad you came here?

A: Yes, I love it. I love DePue. Nice place, good people. I especially love the young girls. I am 76 today; I still like young people.

Janet Kankaala
Transcriptionist

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(INTERVIEWEE)

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(Interviewee)

(for _____)