

INTERVIEW WITH THRESSA REPKO, HELEN VARGO, AND JULIA ORLOVSKY

By Mildred Allen Beik

**July 21, 1985
Windber, PA**

MB = Mildred Beik

TR = Thressa Nahalka Repko (July 8, 1896-November 21, 1992)

HV = Helen Repko Vargo (born in 1935) daughter of Thressa Nahalka Repko

JO = Julia Repko Orlovsky (1926-2013) daughter of Thressa Nahalka Repko

Beginning of Tape 1

MB: Could you tell me first what your full name is so that we can –

TR: Thressa Repko

MB: What was your maiden name?

TR: That's what it was – well Nahalka- that's how we spelled it.

MB: Alright. Would you mind telling me your birthday, what year?

TR: 1896

MB: What month? That's wonderful.

TR: July 8th.

MB: Where were you born?

TR: [Inaudible]

HV: At that time – it's Czechoslovakia now.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: I know that was the town, but I don't know how you'd say that in English.

HV: It would have to be Gemed because the other part means town.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: A province in Austria Hungry then?

HV: No. It's Czechsollovakia now.

JO: But when she was, it wasn't Hungry

MB: In Hungry then? But what's your native nationality? I thought you were Romanian.

HV: No, she's Hungarian

MB: You're Hungarian.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: Yeah [Inaudible]

MB: What was the area like that you lived in then? Was it a farming area?

JO: Farming, yeah.

MB: Did your parents farm the land then? Yeah? Did you go to school at all in Hungary?

TR: School? Yes.

MB: A church school or state school.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: Lutheran

MB: Lutheran. Also, were you Reformed then? Hungarian Reformed?

JO: No, Lutheran.

MB: Lutheran is different?

JO: Yes, it is.

MB: Did you live there for a long time before coming to America?

TR: When we came -

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: She was already married and had 2 children.

MB: So you had -

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: 23 or 24, maybe 22. Well, we could figure out. Irene was born in 1918. [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible] Well she was born in 1918, Irene. She was 3 years old, so -

TR: 1 boy and 1 girl

MB: 1 boy and 1 girl before you came. Could you tell me about what life was like in Hungary before you came? What you did? What kind of life you had.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: No. [Inaudible]

MB: I know.

JO: It's hard. Well, they had – they didn't have no wood floors. They used to scrub their floors with cow manure. That's what the floors were made of. They're still made of that in some places out there at big farms.

MB: What did they grow on the farms? Did they grow grapes? Like the Tokay grapes?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: Potatoes, corn, anything.

MB: Did you help when you were growing up on the farm? What did the young girls do?

TR: I worked all my life.

MB: Did you have a big family? Did you have a lot of –

TR: All we did was work. You no work, you no eat. [Inaudible]

MB: Did you have a big family? Did you have lots of brothers and sisters?

TR: Yeah

MB: How many? Could you name them? 6

TR: 5 girls, 1 boy, my mother

MB: Were you among the older girls or younger? In the family.

TR: No, my brother was older.

MB: Your brother was the oldest. And then where did you fit in after that?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: She was the oldest girl.

MB: Did you have to do more work because you were the oldest girl?

TR: No everybody did, I think.

MB: Oh, that's too bad. I'm sorry about that. So when you were growing up, did you do things around the house or did you help with the farming at all? Tell me what you did. Can you tell me what you did? What kinds of things did you do?

TR: I would clean.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible] all day

MB: So, you must have been there during the war, I guess when you were a young girl. That must have been hard on your family.

HV: That was before the war. She was there for the war because she always talks about how the soldiers came there and took everything.

JO: They came to Czechoslovakia. [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible] 1917

JO: 1917 she got married and 1914 the war was.

MB: Was that hard on your family? Did the men have to go off?

TR: Oh, yes.

MB: Did your brother have to go off and your father to the war?

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: They chased the people out of town to take their property.

MB: Oh, boy. So your family had a hard time.

TR: Yeah.

MB: So tell me about getting married. Who was this man you married, how did you meet him, and so forth?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: Was he someone you know all along, like from childhood?

TR: I got one boyfriend and then that was it. All my life. My husband died.

HV: He died in '35

MB: Oh, a long time ago. You've been a widow a long time.

HV: 50 years.

MB: Wow.

HV: Because he died right before I was born, so 50 years.

MB: So can you tell me something about your wedding or meeting him? What kind of a wedding did you have?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: Not too big? Did you have a wedding in the Lutheran church there, then?

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: No?

TR: Go to church

JO: You had to have your own feather tick and pillows that's what your parents gave you.

MB: Was your husband from the same village?

TR: Yeah.

MB: He was from the same village and you knew him pretty well, all along? What was his full name? Your husband's full name?

TR: John Repko. Do you want to see? Over there-

JO: Him and her.

MB: Oh yeah, isn't that nice? Beautiful picture. Very nice. So how did you end up coming to America, then? How did that work?

JO: How did you? [Inaudible]

TR: My husband come first. And then me.

MB: Did he come once? Did he have relatives here in America that he came to stay with?

JO: [Inaudible]

JO: Yeah, he had an uncle, his uncles were here first.

HV: They came for work. Things were bad over there.

MB: Did he come right to Windber? I mean, after he got off the boat and everything.

JO: Yeah, yeah.

MB: He knew he had contacts in Windber and they helped get him a job? Is that right? So he came here to mind.

JO: [Inaudible]

MB: And you had 2 children then, when you came?

TR: [Inaudible] one and then 2, died 19 years old, he died.

MB: Oh, I'm sorry.

HV: Do you remember the boat trip?

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible] I'm telling her to tell you in English. She already told us.

HV: She used to tell us fantastic stories. We always said there should be a writer in the family.

TR: I don't remember everything.

MB: I'll send you a tape of this.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: They had to scrub them for lice, real heavy, when they got here.

HV: She used to tell us stories.

MB: Maybe she's not in the mood. Did I hear Antwerp?

HV: Yeah.

MB: Is that where she left from?

JO: Yeah, that's where she left from.

MB: From Antwerp. Do you remember the name of the ship you came on?

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: No, she doesn't know.

MB: Had your husband been here for a long time before you came?

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

HV: She doesn't know.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: She doesn't remember already.

MB: But your husband had been here for a little while before he brought you then, because your kids were 3 and 2. So I guess he might have been here for a couple years then. Do you remember, when you first came, did you land in New York, then? Did you land in New York harbor?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: New York. I come over here to there, New York, then in car someplace.

MB: Had your husband been boarding with someone?

HV: Yeah

MB: He'd been a boarder with his uncle?

JO: And then they gave her a place upstairs in their house to board.

MB: Where was that? Where was the first place you stayed? Was it in 35? Mine 35?

TR: [Inaudible]

HV: Yeah, right down the street, here.

MB: Oh wow. So what did you think when you first arrived here in Windber?

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: I don't know. Seems like the old country.

MB: Did you meet lots of people who spoke Hungarian right away?

TR: Funny place.

JO: She thought it was funny.

HV: She didn't like it too much when she was here, once she told us. It wasn't like what she came from. It was cleaner where she came from.

HV: Where she come from, it was all farm lands.

MB: No mines in Hungry where you lived?

TR: No.

MB: So you weren't used to that. Your husband hadn't mined before he came here, had he?

TR: No.

HV: No.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: No.

MB: So he was in the mines and you came and set up housekeeping, then. Did you get your own house? Did you get a company house after a little while?

JO: After a while, yeah.

HV: We've heard most of these stories, that's why we're answering.

MB: Yeah. That helps.

JO: I'll tell her. Mom's been telling us for years already.

MB: Yeah, well that's nice. And so, if you were here at that time, then you must remember something about 1922 when they had the big strike in Windber.

JO: Yeah. And then they moved. They went to - [Inaudible]

MB: Were you one of them who got evicted?

JO: Yeah, they got evicted.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: Strike [Inaudible]

TR: 22

MB: 22nd Street.

HV: People took them in. They got kicked out of their house.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: Palchutes

JO: Palchutes, that's where she went to the doctor.

MB: Could you write that for me?

JO: Like parachute, Palchute.

HV: Pelchutes?

MB: Could she write it?

JO: She does, but I don't think she could

MB: It's close enough.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: If a child was sick or something they walked this far, to this place which was like – 2 hours they walked from their village. I don't know if that's right, just sound that out for what it is to you.

MB: I don't know Hungarian so even with pronunciation, I don't know. Could you tell me what you remember about 1922? What did you do after you went to 22nd Street? Did you have to leave the whole town eventually?

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: For 3 days you didn't know.

JO: Well, I remember she went to – Amy Run, he got a job there, it's outside of Barnesboro. It's a small community.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: And then they went to Youngstown, Ohio.

MB: Youngstown? What kind of work did your husband get in Youngstown?

JO: [Inaudible] Youngstown

TR: Some kind of outside work. She don't remember. He couldn't work in the mine.

HV: Because he was union.

MB: So when did you come back to Windber, then? Did you move back when-

TR: We come back and he go back in the mine.

JO: When they finished with the strike? [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible] No, Youngstown, couple months.

MB: Do you remember what year you came back, then? How long?

TR: Couple months.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: Oh well, then, that was quite a while then because we were born.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible] Youngstown, no. They're all younger than us, Mom.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: She's asking about 1922. [Inaudible] 1928.

MB: She might not have come back until then.

JO: No, she come back and stayed there a little while. I remember, she talked about it.

MB: That's ok. Don't worry. No, problem. So how many kids did you have all together, then Mrs. Repko.

HV: 9- oh, do you want her to say it?

MB: Sure.

TR: [Inaudible] 9

MB: 9. Wow.

TR: My baby, she's 50 now.

MB: So you had how many boys, how many girls? All together.

HV: 3 boys and 6 girls

MB: 3 boys and 6 girls

TR: And all them I raised myself.

MB: Because your husband died.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: He was killed in the mines.

MB: Oh, your husband was killed in the mines? An accident? Which mine was he working in?

JO: Number 6. This one up here.

HV: There is not more.

MB: I don't suppose that you got very much in those days if anything.

JO: She got \$35 a month on 8 kids. Was it 8 kids because Irene was of age already.

HV: No, Irene wasn't 16, was she?

JO: At that time, when you got compensation they gave you up until the child was 16. And all of us kids are 2 years apart so every 2 years they could cut off of that \$35. And you had to go and look for a job already.

TR: [Inaudible] in '36.

MB: Did you ever keep boarders Mrs. Repko? Besides you had such a large family, I don't know where you would put them.

TR: No.

MB: But some people seemed to.

JO: Yeah, they did.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: It must have been hard trying to raise the girls by yourself, then.

TR: Hard.

MB: Did any of your sons become miners then?

HV: No. No, way.

MB: I don't suppose you wanted them to be.

TR: Everyone was going to work at 16.

MB: What kinds of jobs did they get?

TR: 2 boys, 1 boy go in the Navy, another one Air Force

HV: My brother, our older brother, well, he's retired from the Navy. He was a Lieutenant Commander and my other brother works for the International Peace Corps. But he works in New York. He's a big shot.

JO: He's a big shot. He had that job when he was in the service. He was in the Air Force. He worked in the tower directing the planes and then when he retired, whenever he got discharged he got the same kind of job and then since then he worked, some 30 years ago.

MB: So what kinds of jobs did the girls get if they had to work at 16?

HV: In stores.

JO: I got in the Eureka store. I didn't have no problem and then – well in fact, 3 of us worked in the stores. In those days you didn't have to graduate to work there.

MB: No. I know.

JO: Wasn't like now. And then my oldest sister, she went to New York to work.

HV: Yeah, most of the older ones were sent off to New York to work.

MB: Did they have relatives in New York?

HV & JO: No.

MB: How did they decide to go then? Did they have some kind of person to contact?

HV: Well they had like some sort of agency or something

JO: Because these people wanted maids, nannies, and stuff like that. Because she'd come home and bring that little boy home.

HV: Yeah, there were always little- the whole heritage in this area when you talk about ladies that in their 70s, is that they were all sent off to work when they were 12 or 13 years old.

JO: Yeah

MB: Oh, boy.

HV: It was a different world.

MB: It certainly was.

HV: She's tired.

JO: Yeah, she don't want to talk no more.

MB: That's ok.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: So, Mrs. Repko, did you go to the Lutheran church in town then?

HV: No

JO: No, we went to Reformed because there was no Hungarian church that was Lutheran.

HV: It was the only Hungarian Protestant church in the area.

MB: Was your father a Reformed?

JO: No, both of them were Lutheran.

MB: So they were both.

HV: I think it was the German influence because they were both from – the part they were born in, I think it was the German influence because we all heard in this town when we were younger that if you were Hungarians, you should have been Catholics, but apparently a large part of Hungary is Lutheran.

MB: And, I don't know if that's viable anymore. Is that the church that burned down?

JO: That was the Reformed church.

MB: The Reformed church that burned.

JO: I belonged, actually until I was 16. And then we switched.

MB: It had a viable congregation at one time, I guess.

HV: Oh, yes. Very much so. Of Lutherans and Reformed. It was sort of split half and half.

JO: When we'd get communion half would get hosts and half would get wine or whatever it was. It was split up.

HV: But it handled both congregations well, but basically it was a reformed church. So then we switched over. There were some problems at the church with the hierarchy of the Reformed church and a lot of people left at the same time.

MB: What would that have been about?

HV: Well, that was, I was 16. Right before I graduated and I graduated in '53, probably around '50 or '49. A lot of people left at that time.

JO: There was no one left so the church kind of broke up. They didn't even have a priest come in and then after that- now some of them do still belong, they go to Johnstown. There's no longer any –

HV: I lived in the parsonage when the church burned down.

MB: Oh, really?

HV: Yes, and the reason we moved from the parsonage was after that, they took over part of the house for the church. And they took my living room and my dining room, so what was the use. So we moved. So see, we had the house because we kept the church clean and things like that for them. It was sort of- it was connected with the church and then when the church burned down we wanted to buy the house very badly, but we thought, we had an option, but when the church burned down, there went that. Because they needed it.

MB: Well since I'm talking to you, could you give me your full name so that they're on here.

HV: My name is Helen Vargo. Not Wargo, but with a V. We have a lot of Wargos around here, but I'm not one of the.

MB: What's your first name?

HV: Helen.

MB: And what's yours?

JO: Julia Orlovsky O-R-L-O-V-S-K-Y

HV: She's Russian

JO: My husband was Russian. I belong to the Russian church.

MB: So, you were both born in Windber?

JO: Uh, huh.

HV: Yes, everyone was except for the 2 born in Europe.

MB: So you remember what it was like being daughters of some of the original immigrants. Can you tell me something about that, you two, what was the ethnic relationships like? First of all, did you learn English right away or did you speak Hungarian?

HV: They all speak Hungarian, I don't speak Hungarian. I understand it as though it was English, but I don't speak it. They said I did when I was young, but my sisters, when we growing up, especially in my era already, something to hide being foreign. It's now like now where everybody is [Inaudible] and my sisters wanted me to speak English, so I can't speak Hungarian. They wanted me to speak English and slowly, I couldn't speak Hungarian anymore and they insisted that they speak English around me. Because at that time it was very hard when your parents were of foreign descent, at that time. That was the wrong side of the tracks.

MB: Yeah.

HV: No matter what that was, that was the wrong side of the tracks.

MB: Did you feel that at school? Any other places?

HV: You still get it in school.

JO: Oh, yeah.

HV: If a child is born in this section, in 40, you hear it from teachers. I live in downtown Windber and I hear it. If a child does well, you'll hear, I don't know how he can do so well because he's from 35 or he's from here or he's got a Polish name. You still hear it. It's still here. It was more so years ago, but it's still here. It doesn't leave. That type of thing doesn't leave.

MB: Well how were the relations between like the Hungarians and the Polish people and Hungarians within the districts.

HV: They seemed to get along.

JO: They fought like they do now.

HV: My mother couldn't speak Polish,

JO: but she could speak Slovak real good.

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible] Everybody had a lot of kids and they didn't have any money and they used to have a midwife- there was a midwife up the street. My mother had everyone of her kids delivered by the midwife.

MB: Oh, you had a midwife?

TR: Yeah.

MB: Can you tell me about that? Who was this?

JO: Mary her name was. [Inaudible] Mrs. Tote. I remember, she lived up there.

MB: People didn't go to the hospital for those things.

HV: No. I don't think anyone did. People of that age.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: The other thing was, my father wanted sons and my mother had – first she had the one son and then she had 5 girls after the 2 boys were born and the midwife hid it from my father from days because my father wanted sons and my mother was having girls. They wouldn't let him see if he had a son. When she did have the son they kept teasing him for days. Kept it hidden.

MB: Oh, boy.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: Everybody had large families.

JO: In those days everybody wanted sons. Especially the men. And every 2 years she had a daughter.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: Did he die in the war?

JO: No, he had an enlarged heart.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: That was when my father died.

MB: Did you belong to any fraternal societies? Hungarian.

JO: They belonged to the lodge. It was [Inaudible]

MB: Or William Penn.

JO: It was originally William Penn until they changed it, but she used to call it something else.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible] down 8th Street

HV: But that's just the place they had it, that's all.

MB: I wondered if you got any benefits when your father died.

JO: Well, yeah, -

MB: From the fraternal societies.

JO: [Inaudible] Yeah, but she can't remember

TR: Compensation

JO: [Inaudible]

TR: [Inaudible] Racotsy

MB: Racotsy. Ok. I see.

JO: I knew that's what it was, I couldn't think of it. I saw that program on PBS when they saw the ancestor in Connecticut and that was

End of Tape 1 Side A

Beginning of Tape 1 Side B (July 21, 1985)

JO: I mean, she must not understand much anymore. I mean, there were fantastic stories that we used to listen to for years and I always thought it would be great if we had a tape recorder and been able to tape all of it, but then she couldn't have relaxed. Like she doesn't relax with you. These are just things that come.

MB: I understand. Do you remember when there was active lodge life- either of you?

JO: When there was what?

MB: Active lodge life. I mean there was still some, there's the Polish Falcons, and for the Italians, the Sons of Italy, but when they had a lot of dances.

JO: Oh, yes I remember great dances. We used to go to the 8th Street club, it was a Hungarian club. My mother would take us when we were little. Like in August they would have a great dance and that.

MB: Do you remember anything else about the ethnic life like that or the community life?

JO: Well, we just played on the streets just like all the other kids. That's all. Then when you got old enough, you went to look for a job – or else.

HV: I was almost another generation.

JO: For her, it was like it is now, completely different.

HV: It was different for me because my sisters were older by the time I was born. And they kind of took over my upbringing, more or less. I was brought up unlike any other American kid because they already had jobs, they saw that I had things.

JO: We didn't have anything. Like for Christmas, we never had any toys or anything. We never had a Christmas tree. My mother would buy nuts and things like that. And we'd go Christmas Eve we'd have a play at the church and they'd give you a box of candy. Stuff like that we did.

HV: Not more ethnic, that was more just being poor. You know, really. I mean everyone lived that way.

JO: It was nice though.

HV: We didn't –

MB: Would you mind telling me how old you are? And the difference. You're 50 and –

JO: I'm going to be 59 next month.

MB: To get the comparison there.

HV: It was different for me because like I said, I think my oldest sister was 16 when I was born and she was married when I was 4 and she took over for everything for me. She took me places and did all kinds of things. Where I lived a completely different life than they did. And my father was dead of course then, it was completely different kind of life, so I kind of remember when she started working and she would buy me clothes and coats and spring coats.

JO: Help each other. Because we had to.

MB: How long did you each go to school?

JO: She graduated.

HV: I graduated.

JO: I went to junior year.

MB: What about the rest of your family?

HV: I had another brother that graduated, he was the only one. A brother older than me. My other brother lasted through almost through his senior year and then he went into the service.

MB: What about your parents' education? Now could they both read and write in Hungarian and English?

HV: They went to 6th grade. The equivalency of 6th grade.

JO: They went to 6th grade.

HV: They read the papers.

JO: My mother reads the American paper every morning.

HV: You wouldn't think so because she gets irritable, but she can read and she watches television and she'll argue with you with what's going on in the world and everything else.

MB: Well, that's great. Do you remember anything about, maybe you would know about this, about how people became citizens in different years.

HV: Oh, yeah. Well my mother, she didn't become a citizen until recently.

JO: Oh, yeah. How many?

MB: Did your father?

JO: No, my father was killed in 1935. He never even – they never even took Social Security out.

HV: Well that was before Social Security.

MB: They didn't have it. And the union was in, but I don't know if that did anything.

JO: But my mother had to become a citizen to get certain things and benefits so that's when we took her. I don't even know what year it was. Me and Andy took her to Somerset.

HV: I know I wasn't living here anymore. I was gone from the area.

MB: Do you know how any of that worked? Did teachers push people into becoming citizens in the schools?

HV: No, absolutely not.

JO: No, a lot of people because citizens because that was the only way you were going to get any benefits or things.

HV: That was the basic reason as they got older they became citizens. Was because of benefits. You couldn't get Social Security or you couldn't get help.

JO: Or there were laws, I don't, especially in an area like this, people didn't really understand, they didn't write down the language. I know my sister had to become a citizen. But I mean she wanted to. She wasn't older, but most of the older became citizens out of necessity.

MB: Most people had relatives. Did your mother and father have relatives in Europe?

HV: Oh yes.

MB: I mean everyone did come-

JO: My mother didn't have no one in America. My father had one sister who came to America then.

MB: So the parents were still living there and corresponded back and forth.

HV: We did for a long, long time until I think I was young and then it sort of discontinued.

MB: Has anyone in your family gone back to the native areas?

JO: No, no.

HV: Oh, yes, Bessie went back, didn't she? Our cousin went. She went back to the area. It's a little different. It's a very prosperous area right now.

JO: Oh yeah, she went

HV: Hungry is one of the most prosperous of the communist countries.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: [Inaudible]

HV: So it's a little different.

MB: Well, you've seen a lot of changes in this area.

TR: [Inaudible]

MB: You don't have to, it's ok. I'm just asking them a couple questions if they don't mind. You don't have to unless you feel like saying something, then butt in and say something. I know, it's tiring when you- I'm just trying to think of something.

TR: [Inaudible]

JO: Like she says, you don't have to.

MB: No. Relax, you don't have to say anything. Thank you for what you have said. I appreciate it. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. I think it's marvelous.

TR: When you get old, you don't get talk.

MB: You're doing fine. Can't help but get tired. 1896. She's really up there. That's great. I'm trying to think of what else there is to ask. So you've seen a lot of changes in Windber, you know from when you were young and when the coal mines were still working and then the changes that come. Stores, you worked at Eureka stores.

HV: We've seen Windber go from being a big thriving community to a dead town, yes, I watched it more, I noticed it more because I didn't live in the area and every time I'd come home Windber got smaller and smaller and more dilapidated and more dilapidated and things were worse every time we came back.

MB: Where did you live when – if you moved away.

HV: All places.

MB: And you were working at Eureka stores so you must have, which one did you work at?

JO: At the main.

MB: At the main. What did you do there?

JO: And then I got married. Well, first I worked up in the dishes, glassware upstairs and then I worked in fountain and then bread counter, in the grocery when they needed me. Then I got married and then I worked part time upstairs.

MB: Do you remember what year you started working there?

JO: It was during the war because I was working there when the war broke out.

MB: Oh, were you? I was working there when President Roosevelt died. I remember they closed the store.

HV: When was that? '45?

JO: Yes, it was during the war because I remember that part.

HV: I mean, there were jobs there and I mean, the way Connie was saying when she was up here, there were times when the mills and mines were going into the schools and trying to talk the kids into quitting school and going into the mines. Don't forget that was the height of the industrial revolution at that time and I mean, they didn't want you to stay in school. They would come and speak to you and try to talk you into quitting and going to work.

MB: A lot of old miners talk about lying about their age.

JO: My brother-in-law was 13 when he went to work in the mine.

HV: And the priest would sign certificates for you to go to work.

JO: Because in those days when you had children, the expression was, why did I raise you?

HV: The thing was, they needed the money. That's why they had large families, that's why they're still having them in Africa and China and places like that because they needed the families to feed each other. I mean, you had a big family, you raised a lot of kids who went to work and brought money home. It was a vicious circle. They're still doing it some places. Sometimes you think the world really hasn't changed that much.

MB: Do think that the union made any difference in the town? In the lives of people.

HV: It did for a while here, but now there aren't any jobs. I mean, they were very prosperous when they weren't on strike, but they were on strike a lot of the times even when the mines were working. They were forever on strikes. Nobody ever really got ahead much. Now later on, through the years, the ones who worked in the mines like your husband and the ones who stayed in the mills for a long time, they had a pretty good living. Had a very good living, I'd say in an area like this where people were uneducated basically.

MB: So your name is Julia, right? And you married someone of Russian descent? So how was it with marriages? Tell me about that- could people marry outside of their ethnic groups?

JO: My mother didn't care, but a lot of people did.

HV: Well, you had to become Russian, I mean, she had to join

JO: My mother didn't care who we married as long as we slept in our beds she always said- don't come home. But a lot of people used, you know, they wouldn't let their daughters go unless, you know, he was Polish or if he's Slovak or whatever, you know?

MB: Is that gone now?

HV: Some people are still, not like it was before. In fact, now you can get married in the church. There are services where there's a protestant and then a Catholic priest performing the services. Years ago, you could get married in the back of the church if you didn't turn Catholic and then, of course, you kids had to all be Catholic whether you turned Catholic or not. Marriages were performed in the priest's office and places like that.

JO: I remember our priest, when we got married, he told me that I'd never be happy because I was leaving our church. He didn't want to give me my baptism records, because you had to get all of that to convert.

MB: To transfer them.

JO: He said we had a lot of nice boys in our church, he didn't know why I was leaving.

HV: There were problems in our church back then. If you were Catholic and you married a Protestant you were kicked out of the church, well you weren't but you couldn't have the sacraments in your church anymore if you married a Protestant and they didn't turn.

MB: Marrying within the Catholic Church was one thing, but marrying Protestant to Catholic was another.

JO: And like I said now, in our church, in the Russian church almost everybody are converts. Just about everybody there. There's hardly nobody there that were original.

MB: So is your husband the son of some immigrants, too?

JO: No, my mother-in-law- was born here in America. But his father was born in Europe, but my mother-in-law was born here. Well, his grandmother just died last year, she was 96. So she was born there.

MB: Wow. And he was a miner, is he? I'm sorry, is he living, I don't know.

JO: No, he passed. It will be 5 years Wednesday. We have 3 sisters who are widows already.

MB: Oh, boy. Do you get together very often?

JO: Well, my sister just went back today. One of them, this morning.

MB: So you had a family reunion?

HV: Sort of.

JO: Sort of. Part of it.

MB: Do you have anything to suggest or tell me about that you think is important. Or any of those great stories that your mother tells that you want to share with me in some way or something else that you think is sort of significant for someone who never knew Windber? Or wasn't particularly familiar with immigrant life. Or mining or any of those things that you think they should understand that they might not understand?

JO: Irene would be the one to tell her.

HV: She went through all phases. Like I said, I'm out of that generation. It's just the way now. 10 years make a completely different generation. Oh sure, just like it is now. I mean, your kids are a completely different generation. It's hard. I can remember it being terribly hard to be a Hungarian, poor mother who just didn't understand, but like most teenagers don't understand them anyhow.

JO: It was different when we went to school, we didn't need everything like they need now. My mother wouldn't have given us anything to take to school, money to buy anything. We didn't have it anyway. Now your kid asks.

HV: And because you live in an area like this, your neighbors were the same. Our neighbors over here were Italian, but they were all the same, basically the same. They had more kids than my mother. I don't know how much it counts. They had more kids and you know, you were very, very poor. And when I think it got harder was when you left the local school system and you started going to Windber schools and then you got into different types of people. As long as you went, there was a school right here on the corner you were with your own group.

MB: Yeah, that would be harder.

HV: It was a different kind of life, I don't think it was harder. That bad or that good, or any which way. I wish I remembered more about it. It must have been fun. I can remember the streets being full of kids all over the place. I mean, now there isn't a sound out here.

MB: Yeah, it is quiet now. Now, did you ever have big gatherings in the park.

TR: [Inaudible]

HV: Yeah, 4th of July you went to the park.

MB: If there isn't anything more, I'll end this.

JO: Yeah, she's tired.

End of Tape 1 Side B (July 21, 1985)

The of the Interview



Thressa Nahlka Repko (July 8, 1896-November 21, 1992) was married to Yanos (Repka) Repko (February 10, 1895-February 5, 1935), both were born in Hungary, and lived in Windber, Pennsylvania