

Kent Brayec

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Kent Brayec

Kent Brayec, 53, is a Croatian musician and resident of Bethlehem, WV outside of Wheeling. He is the grandson of Croatian immigrants from Prugovac who settled in Benwood, WV in 1907. Brayec serves as secretary/treasurer of the Croatian Lodge #2 in Benwood and plays with a Croatian musical group in Cokeburg, PA. He spoke about immigrant communities in the area, Croatian traditions, foodways, music, and community that was centered around the Croatian Cultural Club in Benwood.

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KB: Kent Brayec

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Alright, so could you introduce yourself, say where you're from, how old you are.

KB: My name is Kent Brayec. It's spelled B-R-A-Y-E-C but in Croatian it's a "J". There's no Y in the Croatian alphabet. And I live in Bethlehem, outside Wheeling, West Virginia, and I'm 53 years old. And I'm the grandson of Croatian immigrants that came over in 1907. My grandfather came over in 1907 when he was 15, came to Benwood, and my grandmother, his wife, came from the same village in Croatia which was Prugovac. I still have connections there today. And she went to Pittsburgh and somehow my grandfather ended up in Pittsburgh and met here--they were from the same village and she was about oh, maybe 8 or 9 years older than him. And they married and they ended up going to Brownsville, PA and they got married and had their first daughter and they came back to Benwood.

EH: So was there a big Croatian community in Benwood?

KB: Actually, the Croatian community really started around 1892 in Benwood. A man named Ivan Ljubic started a--he was a tavern owner and he started an organization for the benefit of Croatians that was more like insurance and he started this organization and organizations like that with Croatian immigrants started throughout the United States and they met at one time and decided to form together so they had more strength and more financial stability and the actually met in Pittsburgh or Chicago, I'm not really sure. But they decided to form and they elected Ivan Ljubic as their president. He was actually president twice. And actually the Benwood Lodge predated all the other lodges and today we're all encompassed in the Croatian Fraternal Union of America based in Pittsburgh. And Lodge #1 is in Pittsburgh, and Lodge #2 is actually in Benwood. And Lodge #2 is actually older than Lodge 1, but the agreement was that Ljubic would be the first president and then give Pittsburgh the bigger city, the designation for Lodge #1. And at one time, Benwood had approximately the 3rd largest population city in West Virginia because of the steel mills and factories.

EH: Wow.

KB: And you know there was a lot of Croatian immigrants there. There are throughout Pittsburgh and really throughout the United States in industrial and mining areas. And then West Virginia actually, there was a Croatian Lodge in Star City outside Morgantown, and Bluefield, Weirton has a lodge and I think there's one that still exists in Warwood that's the north part of Wheeling.

EH: Okay.

KB: But I'm actually secretary/treasurer of lodge #2 in Benwood. And through what happened was, we had elderly people were in the lodge and they died off, we still have a president and our secretary died. The treasurer decided to resign--she's 96 or 7 years old. And she decided she didn't want to do the work anymore so she resigned and we had a secretary which was a close family friend that was my uncle's sister-in-law. She was the secretary and she died. And I was involved in music in Benwood and actually we went to, we would go to Pennsylvania to play music and after these people died and everything, I got involved with Cokeburg, PA Croatians with music. And I go there to play today. And through that, our national president was president of that lodge also, and he asked me if I would take over the lodge here in Benwood, so I said I would. So I was appointed by the executive committee as secretary/treasurer more or less in Benwood. But we still have a president--he's 90 years old right now.

EH: (laughs) So what does the lodge do?

KB: In the past, the lodge would meet monthly. They would have Christmas parties and different events. They would sponsor a picnic nearby Oglebay Park or Bethlehem Community Park or various other areas in the past. Actually down here in Glendale in Marshall County, they've had picnics before. And the lodge would have their meetings at the Croatian Club in Benwood. Most lodges and clubs, Croatian Clubs are the homes of the lodges. And they are owned by the lodge. But in Benwood it was actually individuals, Croatian individuals that owned the Croatian club and the lodge would just go there to have their meetings. And what the meetings were, in the past you would go there and you'd pay your insurance premiums. Because what the CFU is, is a life insurance company more or less, but we have social programs, music programs, sports programs and everything and the people would go to the lodge meetings and they would pay their insurance premiums and their dues. And their dues would go to the lodge and the lodge would use them to pay for the Christmas parties and different events and dinners and let me think here...And as time passed, the older generation died off and the young people weren't interested anymore and it was harder and harder to have lodge meetings. And now the insurance premiums go right to Pittsburgh to the national office. And the national office sends back the dues to the secretary treasurer or the treasurer or the secretary, depending on the lodge how it's set up. And we put the money in the bank and have accounts. What we do now is we send it back to the lodge for scholarship funds. The CFU Croatian Fraternity has a large scholarship organization that provides scholarships for members and their children to go to college, or different charities such as flood relief in Croatia or the Vukovar Water Tower reconstruction in Croatia that was a symbol of independence during the war in the 90s. Or like our lodge donated to the St. John's Church Fund in Benwood, which was the Catholic church in Benwood that the immigrants went to. The Croatians, the Slovaks, the Polish people--it was the church in center Benwood that burnt down about a year and a half ago and they're reconstructing the church so we sent 'em some money to help with the church reconstruction since the Croatians were so tied into that church. We've also sent money to the Mine Disaster Fund in Benwood. Actually we sent it kind of late, so we're in with the, we sent money for the upkeep of the Mine Memorial and there was a lot of Croatian immigrants that died in that mine. It was in 1924. Croatian, Hungarian, there was a Ukrainian that was a relative of one of my uncles that died in that and the mine disaster happened in 1924. My grandfather actually worked at the mine at the time and he did not go to work that day because his children were sick.

EH: Wow.

KB: So he was spared. He had 1 son that was born in 1926 and if he would have went to work that day, that uncle probably wouldn't have been born.

EH: Yeah.

09:26

KB: And the Croatians, the Croatians really moved to wherever there were jobs. They were immigrants, they came to this country to look for work. A lot of them came to this country just to make money, then go back to the, back to Croatia and buy property and have their own place. Actually I had relatives, my grandmother's brother came here, came to Pittsburgh, ended up in Benwood, made his money, went back to Croatia. Went back to Prugovac, little village out in the middle of nowhere close to the Hungarian border and he went back and he stayed there. I had my grandmother's sister came here and married a man from Prugovac. They made their money and they went back to Prugovac and opened a general store. And my grandfather and grandmother they went to, were in Pittsburgh, Brownsville, and to Benwood and after Benwood, they went to Niles, Ohio to work for National Tube, which there was a National Tube in Benwood and I don't know why he went back to, went to Niles, Ohio, but he went to Niles, Ohio to work

for National Tube and then he picked up with his wife and kids and they moved back to Croatia. And they spent a few years there and they wanted to draft him in the Austro-Hungarian Army and he didn't like that idea, so he came--and his children hated it there. The oldest 2 daughters that went to school there, hated it there and I remember them telling me that they said "we're not gonna stay here, when we get old enough, we're going back to America." And the family came back in 1921, back to Benwood again.

EH: Wow. Could you tell me a little bit about what your parents did?

KB: My parents, my father is still living, he's 94. And he actually had a twin sister that died a year or 2 ago. And my mother's of Ukrainian lineage, her family came from Piskorowice in Poland. It was actually a Ukrainian village. And everyone the came to Wheeling that's involved with the Croatian, I mean Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic Church in South Wheeling came from the same village. And through my research I found out through family trees that everyone from the village is related. So everyone that came to Wheeling is related.

EH: (laughs)

KB: On the Ukrainian side. And the Croatians are a little bit different. My grandparents came from the area close to North Croatia close to the Hungarian Border and they lived in Boggs Run with a lot of Hungarian immigrants and I think that actually the valley they lived in, most of those people immigrated at the same time, and they spoke the same languages and understood both and they came over together, the Hungarians and the Croatians. And they predominantly settled in the Boggs Run area of Benwood.

13:05

My parents, my father was a WWII veteran, he went to the South Pacific. Spent 4 years in the service and when he came back he had various different industrial jobs and he worked for Wheeling Tile Company in South Wheeling and my mother did also. All my mother's brothers worked there and a lot of my father's family worked there and that's how they met at Wheeling Tile Company. And they were married and they had their only son, me, 13 years after they were married. I'm like the youngest of my Croatian side I'm the youngest cousin. I have twin cousins that are 88 years old right now and that was, one of them was Natalie's [Natalie Criss, who put me in touch with Kent] grandmother. And Natalie's my relative--she's a 1st cousin, twice removed actually.

EH: Okay.

KB: And throughout the years, in the past, the Croatian Club in Benwood would have like kolo dances, that's the dance, the Croatian dances, the circle dance. The Greeks dance to the right, the Croatians dance to the left. And actually when I was a child, 7 years old, I went for kolo classes and I would dance down there. And then the Perkovich family that lived in Boggs Run, even back in the 30s had a orchestra, it was called the Velebit Tamburitans Orchestra and they played, actually went all over the state to the coal mining towns and played where there was Croatian immigrants. And they actually played on WWVA radio, a Jamboree Radio on Saturday mornings, they played there and after years, you know, they tried to keep the band up and they would have actually had some young children play. And they actually wanted me to play in the past and I just wasn't that interested, I was busy with school and I was in band in school and everything. And after the years it kinda fell off and then back in the 90s they decided to start up again. Olga Perkovich. Her name was really Helen Russ was her married name. Helen Olga Perkovich, when she was married it was Helen Russ, but she went by Olga Perkovich, she was divorced. She was a music teacher in New Jersey and she moved back to the area after she retired and she wanted to start up the group again with her brother John.

15:50

So Natalie's uncle, Leonard Subasic wanted to learn the bass, so he decided to learn the bass and a Hungarian man named Steve Nemeth which used to play in little groups in the past in Benwood had an instrument and he wanted to play. He played the cello. John played the Bulgaria which is like the rhythm instrument. Olga played the prim which is the first part and then there was a brach part. It's called the Tambura Brach. It's a larger instrument about the size of a baritone ukulele or small guitar and they asked me if I wanted to come play and I said sure. So I went and I started to learn. So I played, we had a few people, we had a lady come over from Shadyside to play. She was into bluegrass and country, but she wanted to learn this. She was not Croatian. We had a lady from the Worwood area north of Wheeling, in the north part of Wheeling, came down and learned how to play. And we got a group together and we actually had Natalie Criss, was Natalie Games at the time, she learned, she was 14, 15 at that time and she got in and she learned how to play and sing. Olga did most of the singing, Natalie did a little bit of singing. But most of us just played. It was tough for me to sing because I really didn't know the language and it was tough for me. I was just learning. I was more concentrated on the music. But actually we went and played, we played at the Vandalia Festival in Charleston I think twice. We played at the Augusta Festival at Davis and Elkins, we played at St. Francis Xavier Street Fair here in Moundsville. We played at the Cadiz Coal Festival in Ohio, Oglebay Fest in Wheeling, the Glass Festival at Oglebay and different parties and events, birthday parties for people and Christmas parties. So we kept it up! But the people were getting old and John died and it was tough. And we still tried to play a while but it was tough, and then Leonard our bass player died and Olga was older and she went to live with her son in California, so we stopped playing for a while. But we even went to Cokeburg, PA to play picnics, CFU picnics. It was called the Four County picnics. It was West Moreland, Greene, Fayette, and Washington counties. Benwood was always included into that Four Counties organization. Still are today.

EH: Okay.

18:52

KB: I go up there for banquets and things when they have Woman or Man of the Year. But the Croatians actually went where the jobs were. When Benwood in the past when Benwood was booming with steel mills and a coke plant and coal mines, and people lived all along the hillsides, it was packed with different ethnic groups and a lot of Croatians and through progress Route 2 came through and took out the hillside. It took out the part of Benwood that was called Harmony Hill. And there were bars and houses and a lot of immigrants lived on there, and when the road took it, a lot of the people moved away. I know a gentleman that was a neighbor to my grandparents, his name's Walt Maholovich, his family moved to Cleveland and he plays accordion and he plays in a group called Harmonia. And they are, they play mostly Hungarian and Gypsy music and he plays at like The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and he does it professionally.

EH: Oh yeah, I've heard of them 'cause I used to work for a organization that put on folk festivals and they would book them.

KB: Yes! And he was actually, his family was a neighbor to my grandparents and when my father was in the army, he went to a hospital to visit a friend and he bumped into his neighbor in the, you know, out of the blue in the hospital. But the Croatians moved around a lot like my grandparents did. A lot of 'em moved to Pittsburgh. A lot of 'em had families in the Pittsburgh area. Most of the Croatians in Western Pennsylvania were from the same county in Croatia. So more or less there's a lot of relatives. I always say everyone in Western Pennsylvania is related on the Croatian side. They all came from the same area, same churches and everything. And Benwood was a little different. We had some people come from that Karlovac County, we had some come from, like my grandparents from Northern Croatia close to the

Hungarian border. And then we had a lot of Dalmatians which were people from the coast. They were Croatians but they called themselves Dalmatians. And actually the first organization in Benwood was called the Dalmatian-Croatian Corporation. It was incorporated I think April 10, 1892. And that's when the lodge started in Benwood.

21:36

EH: What are some traditions that you remember that would happen or that you'd take part of with your family when you were little? Could be food...

KB: It was the food, it was the picnics. The biggest thing about a Croatian picnic or Croatian party and it's still today, is roasted lamb. That was prevalent in all the occasions--picnics, Christmas parties. Lamb, kielbasi, sauerkraut.

EH: Is that different from Polish kielbasa?

KB: Very close. Very close. I actually made kielbasi at the Perkovich General Store in Boggs Run. John Perkovich would hand cut pork, add garlic and salt and pepper, grind it all up and I would stand there and turn the crank while we filled the casings. And he had his own smokehouse in the back of the store and he would smoke it with cherry wood. And he'd make it every Christmas and every Easter. And in the middle of the store there was a potbellied stove and our music group would actually practice around that sometimes when we didn't practice at the club.

General store, I'd look at the shelves and I'd see 8mm movie cameras from the 50s still in the box. That's how old things still were in the store.

EH: Wow.

KB: It was a shame that it had to go away because it was something that wasn't around much. They had every--they had shoes, they had cameras, food, shoelaces, pencils. Anything a general store would have but it was a very small place but they had everything.

EH: Is that building still there?

KB: The building's still there and it's actually a gun shop now. Someone bought it. And the Perkoviches lived on the 2nd floor of the store. And they had all their instruments, musical instruments there, and they had a vast music library from the 30s when they had a Tamburitians group and all through the years. Had files and files of the old time music. And they donated all their instruments after John died and Olga went away to California. They donated all their instruments and music and music stands and musical equipment like amps to Cokeburg, Pennsylvania, to their lodge. And that's where I go now to this day to play music.

But I would go to picnics in Cokeburg and play with the Benwood group and after it dissolved I still went to the picnics and listened to music. So I liked the music so much. People from the Benwood lodge would go up, our families would go up, aunts and uncles and cousins, we'd go up there to listen to music and have lamb of course, 'cause that's what we had at every picnic. People in our lodge, some of them lived in Shadyside, Ohio, they would always be there, Bridgeport, Ohio, and we'd all meet up and go to this picnic in Cokeburg. And Cokeburg had a little--they had an adult group and a junior group, which is still in existence, and they had a little combo that would play at the picnics and they saw me there and they recognized me from coming up from Benwood, and they said why don't you come up and play with us.

So I said sure. So I drive on Tuesdays when I can. Tuesday evenings I drive 44 miles one way just to play music.

EH: Wow.

KB: And I play with them and with their music group. I've gone to, we have a yearly music festival where groups from all over the United States and Canada get together. This year it was in Pittsburgh. We had 36 groups. 32 groups actually. They came from as far away as Kansas City, Kansas and Hamilton, Ontario and we all get together and have a 2-day party and showcase our music from all our groups. And every year this festival is in a different place. Since I've been involved I've been to Columbus, I've been to Cleveland, Hershey, Pennsylvania, Las Vegas, Nevada we went! And what's nice about Las Vegas, Nevada, the groups from California and Washington state come to the events. And with the Cokeburg Adult Tamuritans, I've gone to places like Steelton, Pennsylvania to play, Cleveland, surrounding areas around Pittsburgh, different lodges we visit and play. Youngstown is a big Croatian population. And a lot of the people in Youngstown actually lived in Benwood at a time.

EH: Oh really?

KB: But what they did is they moved with the jobs. And the Croatians that stayed had jobs that lasted. Ones that were in the steel industry kind of left, the coal mines left but some of 'em stayed. And the problem was that a lot of the younger people really didn't care about their heritage and a lot of the original Croatians came here so early and their children married other ethnic groups, like my father married a Ukrainian girl from Wheeling and they still have a Ukrainian church there. It's barely in existence but they hold on. A lot of my Croatian relatives actually go there because they married people with Ukrainian background

27:24

So a lot of the ethnic groups in the Benwood area are intertwined. And I still like to play music to the [this] day. And to jump back in the past when we would have music on Tuesday nights at Benwood, we would go there and practice and practice and practice and as time went on we would just play and we would have dancers and we had dance classes there and our dancers went with us to places like Charleston and Elkins and the different places. But we would have Croatians come from Carolina, West Virginia, from around Fairmont could come up and they were the aunts of Alabama football coach Nick Saban. Their last name was Saban and they were his aunts and they would come up and dance with us and perform with us different places. And JoAnn, one of Nick's aunt's would bring her accordion and she would play. She would sit there and play her accordion and she was a dancer with us but she would play her accordion when we had breaks. And that was interesting that they would drive all the way up from around Fairmont, Carolina, and to Benwood to listen to music. And I think they were actually, they were Dalmatians from the coast, from the coastal area. 'Cause I had an aunt that was from Benwood area and her family was Dalmatians. And she would, her mother would write to her family down there in Carolina.

Most of the people came from the same villages and they actually stuck with their village people no matter where they were, if they were in lower West Virginia, they were in Ohio or whatever. Croatians weren't centralized to the Benwood area really. Anywhere there was Croatians, they would go. To go with the people that were like them.

EH: Um...oh, go ahead.

KB: Go ahead. I'm just rambling.

29:42

EH: (laughs) No, it's great.

KB: If you have any specific questions...

EH: Oh yeah, what's your--what's that name of the group that you play in in Pennsylvania?

KB: I play with the St. George Adult Tamburitians. And they have a St. George Junior Tamburitians. And actually our lodge tries to donate to their junior group to keep it going, to keep the young people involved in the culture.

EH: Do you ever play in West Virginia anymore?

KB: I haven't played in West Virginia for years. In the past, in Benwood, the Duquesne Tamburitians from Duquesne University, they played in West Virginia. They played at Capitol Music Hall in the 40s or 30s they actually played in Benwood when they were first starting out. But I haven't played in West Virginia for oh, 15 years probably. It's been a long time.

30:38

There's no demand for the music. Most people that are Croatian don't even real know what Croatian is. You know? If they were members of the lodge and still receive our newspaper then they have a good idea. But a lot of people out there that I talk to, they say they're Croatian, but they know very, very little. They don't know the history, they don't know the music. Younger people like all different types of music now--rock music, rap music. I'll listen to rock music. I'm big into 90s alternative and grunge but I still play the traditional Croatian music. In Benwood we played the real old songs. The songs that came over on the boat per se or on you know, were big in the 30s and 40s and 50s. The music I play today is more modern--Croatian folk music. Our group, we always have to play the latest things out for some reason. Which I really don't like but I still like to keep on it. Actually I sing now with the groups. I never sung in Benwood, 'cause I'm more confident in playing now so I actually sing. Our group in Cokeburg comprises, in Pittsburgh we had 35 people on the stage. And you know, it keeps me busy.

EH: Are they all from Pennsylvania mostly?

KB: They're all from Pennsylvania. They're not all from Cokeburg. Some of them come from McKeesport, come from Belle Vernon, come from area between Weirton, West Virginia and Pittsburgh out in the middle of nowhere. We have mostly members from Pennsylvania, I'm the only West Virginia member. But there are other groups in Pennsylvania areas and lodges that have members that live in West Virginia.

EH: Okay.

KB: I know some people that live in Weirton that go to Rankin, Pennsylvania.

EH: Okay.

KB: And they actually sing in the group there but I think the group may have dissolved now but they may play with other groups. A lot of the people that play in the groups play with multiple groups.

EH: And then in Benwood, you said you still have an annual picnic?

KB: No we don't. We had that when the club [Croatian Cultural Club] was in existence. And the club wasn't profitable and the stock, they couldn't find anyone to run it and the stockholders got together and decided to sell it and they sold the club and the new owners which I said, the gentleman is part Croatian, they kept the Croatian Club name and in years past we'd go there for Christmas parties, we'd have corn roasts. The lodge would try to have meetings and lodge Christmas parties and they had a Junior Lodge, called it a Nest. And the Nest manager actually, it's down about 10 members. In the years past they would have Nest Christmas parties at the club. And 10 or 12 I think our Nest is now.

EH: Do they still serve any Croatian beer or food there at the bar?

KB: Croatian beer, we never served any Croatian beer because the way that the beer situation was set up in West Virginia, it was always the low test beer until recently and Croatian beer is a little bit higher alcohol content, so they couldn't sell it there. There was restrictions. Now with the craft beers and everything it all opened up and I always, when I can get my hands on Croatian beer I do. A good one is called Karlovacko. It's from the county Karlovak county where all the Western Pennsylvania, a lot of the Benwood immigrants came from. I like to drink that one a lot, especially when I'm out in different areas in Pennsylvania or Cleveland.

EH: So you can find it around here?

KB: It's tough to find around here. Actually I have a friend that bring it back for me from Minnesota a lot.

EH: Oh wow.

35:24

KB: At the club I mean they would have the parties and sell kielbasi and kraut and cabbage rolls were good, big. Polish people have 'em they call em golabkis. Croatians call 'em sarma, and...

EH: Okay. Are those stuffed with meat?

KB: Meat and rice. And it's similar to grape leaves but we wrap 'em in cabbage. It's actually a carryover from Turkish and Mid East and you know, northern parts of India and that. That's how they made it, the original immigrants. Croatian people aren't a pure bred people. Waves of immigrants through Europe made the Croatian people. There were the original inhabitants and there were people who came from the East. Croatians actually moved down from the area in Poland, it was called White Croatia. They moved down south and immigrated. So a lot of the names are still the same. Like my name is Brayec and there's people with that name in Slovakia. There's a lake in Poland with that name, which is mystifying to me.

EH: (laughs)

KB: And back to Benwood, I think in the 2000 census, 2.3% of the people claimed Croatian heritage. And if you look at Benwood in 2000, how many people were there? 3,000 people. 2% of 3,000 is small.

EH: Yeah.

KB: So you know that's our problem. Our people moved out of the area with the jobs.

EH: And young people might not claim it either.

KB: And you know, young people don't know and don't know how to claim it, don't know what they are. I mean at my house, I fly a Croatian flag with the United States flag. You know to celebrate the heritage. My father really wasn't involved in the lodge that much. He was a member with life insurance. My grandmother was actually, attended lodge meetings. I never knew my grandparents. My grandmother, the Croatian grandmother died when I was about 3 months old and her husband, my grandfather died I think in 1956. I was born in '63. So and my Ukrainian grandparents were even older. I never knew them. My grandfather was born in 1870, my grandmother in 1881. So the generation gap there with everything, I'm way far behind.

EH: Yeah.

KB: But the interesting note with the music, through the music, the Croatian Fraternal Union would bring over different groups from Croatia and perform at different lodges and they would always come to Benwood and we would have a party and we would have a concert and a dinner for 'em. And they would bring over these different groups. And one year they brought over a group from Pitomaca, Croatia and in our lodge paper they listed all the performers and where they were from, and I noticed there was a 25-year-old cymbala player--cymbala is like a hammer dulcimer.

EH: Oh yeah, mmhm.

KB: And that's mostly a northern Croatian instrument and it's big in Hungary and Romania and places. And he played the cymbala and he was from the same village where my grandparents were from.

EH: Wow.

KB: So he came over, he came to Benwood and I got to talk to him, since he was under, he was 25, his second language that he was taught in school was English. And people that were a little older, their second language was German. And so he spoke English pretty well and I talked to him about my relatives over there. I knew what their names were, and he says, "Yeah! They live 2 doors away."

EH: (laughs) Wow! Amazing.

KB: So he took over my name and address to a relative of mine and she started writing me letters. She knows no English. She knew German. She wrote it in Croatian. So I translated the letter with help of my father and the Perkoviches and one of my aunts. And I started writing letters to her. And it seems in the past, my grandmother would always write letters to them and her family and they'd write back. And so we started trading pictures and I'd send them pictures of her family and she had an uncle that was killed in the WWII time. I'm not sure who he was--he was involved in wartime massacre more or less and I'm not sure if he was killed by the partisans, the Ustashe, or the...I don't know if he was killed by the nationals, the communists, or the Nazis, more or less. I really don't know who he was killed by but he was killed by one of the groups. And so I sent over pictures and she, it was the first time she ever saw a picture of her uncle that died.

EH: Wow.

KB: And what was nice about, since then Facebook developed. So I found all my relatives over there on Facebook back in Prugovac and like I said, the Croatians want to go where the jobs are. I have cousins on Facebook that were from Prugovac that just moved to Landshut, Germany to work for BMW. I have cousins that moved to Switzerland to work for the, in the watch factories. And I have some that moved to

Helsingborg, Sweden. She's a nurse, which is my cousin, and her husband, he's a Bosnian-Croatian, works for IKEA in the world headquarters.

41:48

And you know through Facebook I got to communicate with all these relatives. In the years past it was a letter that would take a month or so to go over, now it's instant.

EH: Yeah!

KB: And what's fortunate--they know English now.

EH: Wow.

KB: So I get to talk to them and I even chat with 'em sometimes, younger one, she just turned 18 years old. She just moved to Germany. She'll chat with me on there.

EH: Oh yeah.

KB: You know, it's really--it would be tough for me to visit right now because I take care of my parents. My father's 94 and my mother's 90 so I can't get up and go. I have the resources to go and I have the connections to go, and actually I had a chance with my music group to go about 3 years ago and they would have paid half my airfare. They go every 7 years with the junior group. They have their festival in Zagreb, Croatia, the capital, and if things work out 4 years from now, I'll be able to go and they'll pay my airfare. But you know, the downside is if it works out, it means my parents won't be here anymore.

EH: Right.

KB: You know, so...

EH: Mmhm.

KB: That's the give and take there.

EH: Well do you wish that the community here would have some sort of revival or awakening?

KB: That's part of my job, that's why I was appointed secretary/treasurer of our lodge to try to keep it going, 'cause I was a younger person. But if I look at the lodge roles, our lodge in Benwood, our lodge membership is in California, it's in Myrtle Beach, it's in Baltimore, it's in Southern West Virginia and if you look at the people that are actually in the lodge there's maybe 12 people that live in the Benwood-Wheeling area. Maybe 15 if you count into Ohio, but what happens was we were a founding lodge. The national headquarters wants to keep us alive. So if there's new members that come in that want to join the CFU, and they don't have an affiliation, they might add into our lodge to keep our lodge up. Right now we don't have the base of people to have meetings. I mean we'll have a meeting, I'll go to our president's house and visit him and I'll tell him we have this much money in the bank, tell him who died, how many members we have down. And I'll take my father if he's able and try to get some other people and have a meeting, which is really tough to do. But our, we're based in Benwood, but we have members everywhere, and a lot of people moved out of Benwood and their lodge affiliation still stayed in Benwood and their children have an insurance policy with the lodge and so they are still affiliated with Benwood and they might live in California. Or Myrtle Beach.

EH: Yeah, it was interesting--I mean I think that even non-Croatian people are interested. Young people. 'Cause I posted a picture of the Cultural Club and I got a lot of response, people like "Oh, my mother's Croatian, I would love to take her there, tell me more about it." And I was like, well it's kind of a bar at this point.

KB: Yeah. See what it is is everything's in hindsight. People see it now and say "Oh, we wish for the past." Well they never kept up their past and their heritage through their life. You know I started playing the music when I was in my 30s and now I'm 53. I had a little advantage 'cause I played music in grade school and high school so I knew music, but I just had to learn a new instrument. People are more...people as I see it, people are more interested in themselves today, or you know they're busy with work. I mean I work an average 50 hours a week, you know, I'm a restaurant manager and last night I worked night turn and I got home after 1 in the morning, and tonight I'll get home after 2. You know, I'll work, like one day I'll work 5 days a week, one day I'll work 6 days a week. The other week I'll work 4 days a week but I'll still work over 40 hours. So you know it's tough. It's tougher to keep up for me to play music, to go to Pennsylvania on my days off. It's tough to keep up things with our lodge and you know, what it is is, any ethnic heritage today people aren't that in touch with it. I was fortunate that my grandparents came over from there. The lodges in Cleveland, the lodges in Steelton and Canada, and Kansas City, Kansas City areas and different metropolitan areas, even Pittsburgh had a lot of influx of immigrants in the 90s. So these people are still into the culture and they still want to be active. So the lodges in Canada and Pittsburgh and Steelton have a steady, steady membership of people coming in--newer immigrants. The problem with Benwood, most immigrants came over in the 1900s. We had no recent immigrants and as anything goes on it fades away. Actually at one time there was a Slovak home in Benwood. And the Italians still have the Giaribaldi Lodge in Benwood--it's still active. It's a bar but they still have spaghetti dinners and things. But it's tough to keep people active and certain areas of the country, there's still Croatian churches which are big into keeping the heritage. I don't think we ever had a Croatian church in Benwood. We may have had a chapel because there was a Croatian school in North Benwood. It was called St. Catherine's and my father and his brothers and sisters actually attended school there. But you know, places without a Croatian church, that was real tough for people to keep active. If there was a Croatian church here, there's still a Croatian church in Pittsburgh. There was 2 of 'em and one closed due to highway, but the one up there is beautiful with beautiful murals and I actually attend church up there once in a while. Drive to Pittsburgh just to say I could go to a Croatian church. I've been to Croatian churches in Canada in Hamilton, when I was there for events, we'd always go to church. And when we go to have these national festivals with the music groups, we always have a mass. With Croatian priests and Croatian service and Croatian Tamburitzans orchestras. So you know, it's tough to do when you're the lone one out there and you know a lot of people really don't know what it's all about. And I was charged with this office to try to drum up support, but the people aren't out there. Years ago when we had a club, the Perkoviches were active, we always had a picnic every year. We'd bring in groups from Youngstown or Pittsburgh to play there and you know, play the music and keep it going. But where there's not population, you really can't do that anymore.

EH: Yeah. Well is there anything else you want to add?

49:48

KB: You know, it's just like anyone that knows their ethnic heritage should celebrate it. They should research it, try to learn the language a little bit, do their ancestry. You know, I mean I traced my family back to the 1740s in Croatia on my grandfather's side through church records. And it's available out there like the Mormons have a familysearch.org now that you can find anything for free almost. DNA tests--I've found people I'm related to on my Ukrainian side in Detroit. And her great-grandmother was from the village and she sends me her great-grandmother's birth certificate and I see a name on there and it was my grandmother's sister!

EH: Wow.

KB: And you know it's amazing what you can find out through genealogical research and DNA and just family stories. But people have to embrace their heritage, you know, we all live in the United States and we're all becoming homogeneous more or less. The last names have changed, our last names, the spellings have changed, become Americanized and you know, hold on to what you can of the small ethnic things, you know. Even if it's your own family traditions. I've gone to Serbian, a Serbian friend of mine, he's an older gentleman, and he has Serbian Christmas every year at his house, which is almost similar to Croatian. You have a pig head on the table, you have the grass growing you plant on St. Nicholas Day and you have the pork, food, you know, Serbians and Croatians never really got along--EVER--but they share the same traditions, same language, just a different alphabet and the religion's slightly different, you know. But people have to hold on to that little bit of things. More or less, that's it. I don't want to ramble too much.

EH: (laughs)

KB: I hope I coulda helped you a little bit.

EH: Yeah! That was great.

KB: You know, there's a lot of people like in the Weirton area that still have picnics. They have a Serbian picnic.

EH: Yeah, I heard about that.

KB: The Serbian church in Steubenville has the picnic grounds there and they have a picnic and I went there this year first time ever and there was lamb and roast chickens and they have a group come in from Pennsylvania to play and they had a pick-up group and I actually sang with them a few songs, because they're the same songs! The same songs, the same words.

EH: Wow.

KB: And you know, I enjoyed myself. The Weirton area has a Serbian Center, they have weddings and parties at. They rent it out for different things but you know, their ethnicity, they keep strong through their church in Steubenville, Ohio. That's their advantage, they have a church. And if people hang on to their churches, they have Ukrainian church in Wheeling, hang on to the church and keep things alive with the dinners and street fairs and remind people of the way things used to be and how they can bring it into the future. We're all Americans but we all came from somewhere. (laughs)

EH: Yeah, totally. Well thanks very much!

KB: You're welcome.

53:24

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW