

Mary Trbovich
Interview by Mary Murphy
Butte, Montana
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Mother & father born in Yugoslavia; conditions were so bad, this is when people came to United States; parents both born in Budva, on the Adriatic Sea; is close to Dubrovnik

Father came to Bisbee, Arizona, had a cousin there w/ a job at Copper Queen Mining Co.; he loaned money to Mary's father to come over. Parents were married in 1906; had baby boy in 1907 who died. Then Father came to Arizona; mother had daughter shortly after father came to the States in 1908. In January 1912 he had sent enough money for mother and sister to come. Her mother and mother's brother came with sister Stella; spoke no English.

Mary born in Bisbee in December 1912; brother also born there in 1914. Stayed in Bisbee till summer of 1918; copper mines were closing and father had some cousins in Butte; there was more work here so moved to Butte

Father had been a stonecutter in Yugoslavia. One time before he was married he went to Constantinople doing some stonecutting.

Mary speaks Yugoslav fluently.

"I remember a few times when conditions were so bad in Butte that he had to leave us and go--one time to Cle Elum, Washington, to work in the coal mines over there...He had to be away from the family and try to eke out a living for himself, plus keep the family in Butte, which was very difficult."

Lived way over on South Gaylord; were very many Serbian people here then, they all followed mining or whatever they could get. "Even if they didn't have any experience, they knew that they could get a job and live. That was the main thing. Course, lot of them had a lot of pressure from shift bosses and people that were over them, in being forced to do a lot of things that they weren't supposed to. But they had to do that or they were out of work."

Serbians and immigrants got most difficult jobs. Men couldn't live on days pay so worked on contract; would work 14 or 16 hours, just to make more money. It was better for the foreman to have a showing like this. Serbians in later years got to be shift bosses but not right then.

Spoke Serbian at home, though parents did learn English. Had Serbian school on Saturdays, taught by the priest. "We didn't run around like the other kids. We had to be downstairs of the

church learning our language."

Parents were very religious. Definitely that generation of Serbs were religious. "They expected us to go to church and believe in the creed, and grow up to be good citizens, but we weren't pressured in any way."

Parents became citizens; went to classes at the YMCA; mother learned to read and write from her children; would go along and do homework with kids. Mary went to Grant School; was mixture of everything. Chinese family lived on East Park; lots of Finns; Irish, Swedes, you name it.

Maybe in early 1930s had a drum corps of the youngsters in the Serbian church. Used to have Serbian programs when would have a play; would be held at American Legion Hall, which lodges would rent. Children all took part in program. "There were fraternal organizations that provided insurance, they all came under the federation that was in Pittsburgh. They each had their group lodges here." Only two left, branches of Pittsburgh organization. One is Serbian Bokelian Brotherhood, No. 69; can't remember English name of second branch.

"People at that time wanted to belong to their own. When you worked for people you weren't covered with group insurance like they have in the later years. So the people really didn't have anything to fall back on but these organizations which paid a real small amount for health insurance, and not much in a death benefit, but then, of course, their premiums weren't high, you know." Lodges were for both men and women and a junior order for children, which was 25 cents a month. Was \$250 death benefit if child died before 21, later increased to \$500.

re plays: "I remember one time we even translated Cinderella, and put that play on." would be in Serbian; mostly plays from Yugoslavia; weren't a lot of traditional festivals or holidays in early days, but starting in 1930s would have different saints' days. Holy Trinity was a religious day in early spring. One reason people more settled, had a little more money; more educated; created a good association with other nationalities in Butte. Would share ideas and attend other groups food sales and lunches and everything. "We would go to theirs and they would go to ours; it made a nice feeling."

Doesn't remember rivalries between ethnic groups; but was at one time real hard feelings between Serbs and Croatians; difference was over religion, because languages very similar. real bad feeling during the years when King Alexander was assassinated; even during World War II claimed a lot of atrocities committed by Austrians; was some hard feelings in Butte, but not in past twenty or thirty years

Mesopust was Croatian festivity during Lent; at one time on S. Montana St. had a community with lots of Croatians and had hall down there, parade, big celebration, would carry effigy in front of the parade, then would have a dance, and murder the effigy; Mary went when she was in her teens. Serbs didn't have anything like it

After high school she worked for Montana Power; quit when she was married; when she separated went back to Power in 1941; worked until 1975. Was a secretary. Was 21 when she got married. Didn't work when she was married because "a lot of companies would not hire married women. I know the Power didn't. You could not be married and have a job. They were very strict about that. Even when I came back to go to work there, I had to prove that I was separated and that I was not receiving any support from my two children. Then they became more lenient in later years."

Husband worked for his father in Anaconda; lived there for 6 years. Were lots of Serbians and Croatians there. Had a hall there, but no church. Would come to Butte for services and priest would go to Anaconda.

Old Serbian church was on corner of Porphyry and Idaho; it was damaged by subsidence; one time ACM paid to have repairs, but it continued to get worse and Co. made full settlement with parish, which became down payment for new building on Continental.

Circle of Serbian Sisters was organized in 1934 after the assassination of King Alexander. "This group of Serbian women here thought it would be nice to be organized and take an active part in affairs in Butte and be a part of the community and all...I think after the assassination it brought a lot of people closer together. Mrs. Ducich, she was quite a leader in her day, a very active woman, she had a lot on the ball. She thought it'd be nice to have a women's club where we would be represented everywhere. I know she went from house to house and contacted all the women. When this was organized there were, I'd say, between eighty or ninety women that belonged to it. You had to have a Serbian background and be Orthodox. We have had a few that--Serbian men married a different nationality. But these women became very active in the group, too. As a matter of fact, we had a Mrs. Stanisich there that was a Mulcahy. She spoke beautiful Serbian."

Wasn't a great deal of intermarriage in those years; "Even when she was married, there was a lot of hard feelings there between the Irish and the Serbs. (laughter) But she didn't let it bother her, she was very happy, and like I say, she was a brilliant

woman...I'll never forget, one of our priests that came here to Butte at one time. We were having a large celebration and she got up and gave a speech in Serbian. He was asking here afterwards what part of Yugoslavia she came from. She started to laugh, and she says, 'I've never even been there.' And he couldn't believe that she was Irish. He was absolutely stunned."

All the priests came from elsewhere, most were from Yugoslavia; only in later years had priests born and raised in U.S.; did have three Butte men that became priests; only ever had one priest

Circle had lots of bake sales where would make Serbian specialties; had luncheons where would serve sarma (cabbage rolls); had rummage sales and raffles. Povitica was one specialty; mentions another kind of fritter (gives Serbian names)

Tape 1, Side 2

Had embroidered badges; still wear small black badge when one of members dies; have a short service in the mortuary; circle goes in a group and stands there while the choir sings; used to all wear white dresses; have lost close to 80 members over the years, all their mothers, aren't too many left in her generation. younger ones have drawn away. Would wear white dresses at wakes and funerals; were always six women selected as honorary pall bearers and would wear white dress and badge

Would have some old Serbian costumes; showed picture of first drill team in 1936, wearing puffy sleeved blouse, short red vest and navy blue skirt. Lots of beautiful gold braid on them.

Looking at pictures of weddings; women could not go to church even to see their own daughter get married; only bride and maid of honor present. Didn't have bridesmaids; only one attendant. Mary was married in 1935; husband's family from Lika (sp), they were more liberal, his mother and sisters came to their wedding; had a large banquet in the old church

In response to question about being an actress in Serbian plays: "Oh, I loved it. Oh, my, yes. (laughter) In those days, you know, we really thought we were sophisticated. That was a lot of fun." what kind of plays: "A lot of dramas. A lot of 'em, too, were love plays where the man had to go to war and his fiance waited for him to come back. I know one particular one, after the war was over, this man came back and he was dressed in a Serbian uniform, and the girl was crying and she asked him if he knew her husband, they had just been married. And he told her that he knew who he was and that he was killed where he saw him. And then they went on and on. She was crying. And he told her not to cry anymore. He says, "Look closer to me, I'm that soldier, I'm that man you are married to." And everybody'd cry.

(Laughter) I was the widow, sure, one time."

Lot of young people in the plays, "we had a lot of older ones that were in it, too. Our young boys didn't want to go into those, so sometimes the girl would dress like the man, you know. I know this particular one, Helen Orlich, that I showed you her picture, she was the soldier, yeah, or the bride, I forget what it was, but anyway one of us acted the part of the man."

Was girls' group for unmarried women; put on plays and sang sang all the Serbian songs; choir even now sings in Serbian and service is in Serbian; sing all responses in Old Slavonic language

Wasn't as important for generation after Mary to learn Serbian; her daughter understands, but doesn't read, write and speak

Mothers brought daughters into Circle. "As soon as a girl got married they presented her name, like at that next meeting, for membership. So there's several of us that have belonged to the Circle all these years, ever since...well, I was married in '35, so that's when I went into it." Had to be married to be in Circle. The Mothers' Club is younger women who are responsible for children who are altar boys, had a lot to do with the Sunday school classes. Can be a member of both.

Circle had a building fund, thinks they turned in \$12,000 toward the new church; turn most of the profit from their projects over to the church treasury; "They don't ever get enough to keep things going and this helps them. We usually have one or two pasty projects a year, which is a good fundraiser for us. It's a lot of work. At our last one we turned over everything that we made to the church treasury." How money is spent is up to executive board of the church. Are a couple of women on the board in last 20-25 years.

Priest has "mostly all religious" authority. "But we were always taught to respect the priest. There aren't too many of them that had their wives here. They have to be married before they could be ordained. But we have had, oh, a few priests come here that their wives were left in Europe." priests usually stay 3-4 yrs then transferred elsewhere. Current priest's wife and 3 children are here; prior priest's wife stayed in Yugoslavia. He always said his wife did not want to leave her family and come to the US

Circle & Mother's club now meets once a month at the church hall; In older days met twice a month. At the meetings: "They would discuss church problems mostly, because they are a branch of the church, the auxiliary is, and their needs, and anything that could be done. Always money raisers to help the church out. Women have crocheted all the table covers in the church.

One of goals "definitely" to preserve Serbian customs, "the religion first I would say, and then the customs, and harmony between the people, which I think is nice. It's too bad that a lot of the younger generation doesn't feel this way, because they're really missing out on a lot. I'm glad I had it.

"We do have real pretty Christmas services. We have an evening service January 6th. As I told you before, we still celebrate the 7th of January, which is according to the Julian calendar. Although that's getting smaller and smaller every year. Because so many now are American-born. It's too difficult to go through two Christmases and naturally you're going to observe the 25th, which is what your children look for and everybody else. I'll never forget when I was small how embarrassing it was that we could only observe the Serbian Christmas. Because we would have the other Christmas vacation, and then come back to school and the teacher would want everybody to get up and tell what they got for Christmas presents, and what their Christmas tree was like and so on and so forth. And I know those of us who were Serbian felt real badly because we even had to make up little stories that we got a dollar or something, where we didn't. Oh, it was very difficult. Growing up at a time like that was hard on a youngster. Our family was very strict about it and the same thing would happen at Easter time. Our Easter was always a week later. It would depend on the calendar. About every four years it would come on the same date."

"At that time the women would have to stay in their own homes and they prepared huge banquets of food. They always had the traditional pig's head on the table, that would be roasted with an apple in his mouth."

"A group of men would go from one house to the other. Oh, and we had a lot of Serbian families here, years ago. The men would never work on Serbian Christmas, that was always a day off. So they'd just go from one house to the other and only touch the jug of wine or whatever they had. They would never drink a full glass of anything, because two or three houses, they'd be passed out. (Laughter) They'd go from house to house and sing the Serbian songs. Then a lot of the Irish joined them. The Irish used to love our Serbian Christmas. There are many of them that used to come around with the Serbian group. This would go on all day long, until way late at night by the time they finished going to everybody's house. We used to love it. We used to wait there until the next gang came and count how many would come to the house all day."

"The table would be loaded with all kinds of food, and most of them didn't even feel like eating, you know, they'd pick at something in each house. They would never even sit down. They just come to wish everybody a Merry Christmas and kiss the woman of the house three times. I could never understand what the

three times were for, unless it was the way we bless ourselves."

"At Easter time that was another big celebration the women couldn't go. The men would. I remember when my mother would dye a whole case of eggs...There were a lot of Serbians in Butte, and a lot of single men. They would come in groups to the house and each one would take an egg and then hit the egg of the man of the house. You couldn't hit it on that flat side, it had to be the point. Then whoever egg broke the other one would be the winner you know. Oh, they used to love this."

"I'll never forget one time, I had the job of dyeing the eggs. God, I used to hate that. And I thought I cooked them long enough. (Laughter) Anyway, one group of men that came to our house, one man had bought a beautiful beige suit, and after he took the egg and cracked the other one, he put it in his coat pocket and somehow it got smashed. You could imagine and the eggs weren't even cooked hard. I pretended I didn't know anything about it. But my mother knew who dyed those eggs. (Laughter) We used to dye the eggs and used onion skins. Came out kind of a deep orange color, like a burnt orange. We could boil a dozen at a time in the onion skins, and get 'em all in that same color. We'd candle them first with designs and then put 'em in to boil, and wherever you had the design it wouldn't take the dye, so they'd be quite pretty."

"Lot of our Serbian women kept boarders at home. My mother used to have ten or twelve living at our house. We only had three bedrooms upstairs for the boarders and then there would be two double beds in each room. Then if we didn't have room for the men to sleep, they'd sleep in a rooming house somewhere, then come to the house for the meals."

question: did you help out...? "Did I ever. I'll never forget the buckets I've washed, dishes, and cooking and all. We had it pretty rough. So did our mothers. They used to do their laundry, too, on a board. No washing machine or anything."
("boarding included all meals, laundry and buckets)

price of board: "I remember a time when it was only \$40 a month. But then wages were real low, too, and sometimes there was no work."

people on the East Side mostly stayed there. "Because a lot of people that lived on the West Side always thought they were too good for us. That was quite a feeling years ago, which now it isn't, of course."

MM: Even up through the 20s and 30s?

MT: "Oh yes, definitely. Even some of our Serbian families, one or two families in particular, they didn't want to associate with any of us on the East Side because they thought they were

better because they lived on the West Side. (Laughter) Isn't that silly? But this is how times were."

"I think that was very difficult on the women, because most of them came here never to see their families again. My mother never saw her mother or father. One brother came with her...He settled in Jackson, California, where they had a lot of copper mining." a lot of men went to Bisbee, AZ and Jackson, and Butte "I know my mother was always crushed that she couldn't go back, and then years later when she could afford to go--well, her mother died in '36. I know my daughter was just born then, '37. My daughter was just born when my mother received word that her mother died. When I went to Yugoslavia in '78, I saw my mother's sister there. And she cried, too, because never forgot in all these years that she didn't see her sister. It was difficult. Those people had a rough time."

Tape 2, Side 1

Sister moved to California, was very active in Serbian Sisters organization, was president of western region

When Circle formed in Butte were already other circles in other cities and states; almost every Serbian community had its circle; Butte's was one of the later ones. Earlier one's were back east in Pittsburgh, Chicago, etc.

Was like a night off for her mother: "And they didn't even have cars to walk all the way from where we lived up on the East Side down to the Serbian Church. There were no cars. They'd walk down and walk all the way back. We used to, too, for church and Sunday school and everything."

New church finished in 1965; shortly thereafter tore down the old one, it was all caving in

Mary is now financial secretary of the Circle; has had an office almost since it was organized; "That's my big beef, I'm tired of it and want somebody else to take it, but they won't." (Laughter)

The local circle no longer belongs to the national organization; are too small to pay the dues they expect; has been about 20 years since withdrew. National conventions were held in central states, Chicago. Mrs. Sophie Ducich, who was president for many years, used to go. "She was excellent; she was a wonderful organizer. Had a lot on the ball. She devoted all of her time to the Circle--many, many hours. People don't do that anymore. They're not that committed."

Are younger women joining the Mother's Club; the Circle has several of the younger married women, some of them are "even American born." All meetings now conducted in English, not many

opportunities to learn Serbian. Meeting and minutes used to be in Serbian. Started changing in the late 1930s. Her sister was secretary for years and her minutes were in Serbian; later the American-born would replace them and couldn't read or write Serbian.

Butte and Anaconda have a tamburitza band; went to a big tamburitza festival in San Jose, were Serbians and Croatians. They sing a lot of Slavic songs, not just Serbian, some are Croatians.

Mary also involved in Senior Citizens' Group, has been secretary of that since 1979.

Circle always met in the evenings, right from the beginning, and still do. Women were too busy to meet during the day. "But always found time for everything, just like their food sales and everything that they had. Regardless of what they had to do at home, they always found the time and the energy to work on these other projects."

"I'm really glad that I've been a part of it. I didn't realize how nice it was that I could speak Serbian until I went to Yugoslavia and my relatives there were dumbfounded that I could carry on a conversation with them. They thought being that I lived in America that I didn't know any Serbian, although I had been writing to them for many years."

"I used to do all the corresponding for my mother and dad. It was easier for me to write the letters and read them when they came back, although my dad was real good at it. My mother didn't have much of an opportunity to learn until we when were grown up--and then she picked it up from us."

Mother didn't have much schooling because they were raised in a village. Even the men didn't have the opportunity to go to school. Mary used to have to go to Serbian school every Saturday.

Thinks most women in her generation, who had writing skills, kept in touch with families in Yugoslavia. "Of course, during the war years, a lot of the families have been exterminated, and a some people don't have anybody there now."

A lot of people came after World War II. "They used to call them d.p.s--displaced persons. A lot of them came to the United States. But more of them went to California than anywhere...We had several come to Butte, but not very many, because there was nothing here...Conditions back in Yugoslavia were real bad after the war."

Mother died in '54; dad in '57. Father was miner until he

retired. "I didn't realize how wonderful they did with conditions the way they were until I was older and could see. But we didn't ever want for anything."

During the Depression: "I graduated [from high school] in 1930, and it was bad."

MM: Was it hard to find a job?

MT: "Well, I was fortunate because I was able to get a job at the Montana Power. They were just putting in the gas at that time. They started in '30, '31, '32. They were digging up all the mains in Butte and laying the pipe and everything. I know I was getting \$60 a month. And I'd give my check to my mother, so we were able to live on that."

Father was out of work a lot during the Depression, even went to Cle Elum, Washington and worked there in the mines.

END OF INTERVIEW