

Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: Zolly Barabas
Interviewer: Jason Ziemer
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JZ: You're from Romania? What part of Romania are you from?

ZB: I'm from Transylvania.

JZ: Is that on the eastern side, or the western side?

ZB: It's on the western side.

JZ: How old were you when you came over here and what was it like living in Romania?

ZB: When I came to the United States I was twenty-one years old, when I left Romania I was nineteen. I stayed two years in a refugee camp in Austria before we finally got a country to take us.

JZ: What year was that?

ZB: 1986.

JZ: Was Romania still under Communist rule?

ZB: It was still under the Soviet regime pretty much but the leader was Nikolai Chowcheska still and it was a communist regime. It was three years after this that revolution broke the communist hold there. In the time we were living there, it was a totally different thing than living here. It's strange here how often people change their jobs and how they can move on. You cannot do that over there. Over there you better stick with what you got. Schooling is different. After 10th grade I went to a trading school, I learned carpentry. Over there more of the people carry on the family heritage. My dad was a carpenter and then I became one. At least of my kids will carry on the trade.

JZ: How many kids do you have?

ZB: We have two of them and one on the way.

JZ: Why did you feel you needed to leave Romania? What prompted you to leave and come to the U.S.?

ZB: I am a nationality Hungarian so I cannot speak Romanian. But I speak Hungarian, my family heritage is all Hungarian. We were considered the minority in Romania, that was one of the reasons. The other reason was the religious reasons, you didn't have the right to do that. That was what prompted me to leave. Plus, a lot of my generation went out and we heard back from them and then we just assumed we would have a better opportunity and a chance for a better life.

JZ: Sounds like the type of story you hear in the history textbooks when the family goes over and tells the family back at home about how great it is. And then they come over. You're the minority in Romania, did ethnic Romanians discriminate against you while you lived there?

ZB: Yeah. First of all, schooling we were taken away. You couldn't stay. When I started schooling in 1st grade it still was where you could have the newspaper, but after we left that all stopped so we just, it was God willing that we got out at the time. I just don't have any doubt about that. After that, everything just falled down and down. Schooling was taken away from everybody. The authorities were so difficult to deal with. If you were in a group and you were talking they would come in see if you were saying anything. If they find something that didn't please them you would be down in a police station. If you went to a different city, the cities are really small over there. If you had to

go to in a big one like Bucharest or Krushnapolkov (?) for instance, that would be in a big city, but the smaller ones are in the mountain area where we lived. People kind of know each other in those cities. If they see a strange face they would catch you and ask you what you were doing in this town and what your reason being here. Do you work anywhere?

JZ: It's so different from here.

ZB: Oh yeah. We always were ducking cops trying stay out of a questioning position. You never know what they can do. I had a friend, it was my neighbor in a city. He run out in a border town and they caught him and thought he was escaping. They beat him so bad that he became mentally impaired.

JZ: Do you think that was direct effect of Communism and the oppressive nature, or was it just the Romanian police?

ZB: It must be a government thing, it's just the regime how it was. They just wanted to show an example of what could happen. Most of the things happened because they wanted to keep everyone in line. No uprisings happened. It could have been because your food was on ration. You were getting so much a month.

JZ: Was that the way of life?

ZB: It became that way after, I think my dad told me that after '65 and growing up in the 70's Romania had become so bad. Romania borrowed a lot of money from countries from outside and they could not pay it. So they were taking the products that they made and they were paying their balances with products instead of money. So whatever goods there were in Romania they were going out of the country. So there was a lot of exports.

Around our town we had a lot of chicken farms and rabbit farms. We had a pig farm.

We had all these farms, but the town didn't have anything to eat. Everything was leaving the country. Only thing you could hear under the table who worked in supermarkets that some meat was coming in and waited in lines starting at 4 in the morning. People were taking chairs out there. If you were able to wake up early in the morning, you got something but if not, then you would end up with nothing.

JZ: When I stand in line I'm standing in lines to get sports tickets or something not food, to live. It's just really different.

ZB: Like sour cream, it is used in a lot of home-cooking over there. So if you want to bake a cake you needed sour cream. It was available once a week on a Thursday morning. If you wanted to make sure you get some you were out there at 4 in the morning. Milk was the same way, and bread.

JZ: It's unlike here where the farms produce too much food. Shelves are always stocked here.

ZB: I was really surprised when I walked into Meijers the first time. I was gathering my chin from the floor. It's so hard for me, I'm married my wife, she's from the U.S.

JZ: You met her here then?

ZB: Yeah, I met her here. The day comes and she's hungry and she doesn't know what she wants to eat, even if there is food in the fridge. Still she doesn't know what to eat. How can you say you don't have nothing to eat, the fridge is full, you got something. Or, it was weird for me if I go to a restaurant or something and you get your food and it will be cold or under cooked. You can give it back and they will change it for you. You don't have that over there. You get one course and that's all you get.

JZ: Yeah, I walk into Meijer and I take it for granted that I mean there is so much food and you kind of forget about places like Romania or Africa.

ZB: Now that I hear more from missionaries from church who went to Africa, Romania was in a pretty good position because we would endorse things and we didn't starve to death. But it was a whole different thing than we have here.

JZ: Do you have any other family members in Romania?

ZB: Pretty much my family is all scattered from Australia, to West Germany, to Hungary, to wherever, pretty much close cousins and uncles. After the revolution happened it was a better opportunity to do that so they scattered. I do have a sister in Romania. We had tried to sponsor her, but it's still in the government somewhere.

JZ: How long has that been going on?

ZB: Four years. We have not heard anything yet.

JZ: They really have become more strict with their laws here regarding immigrants.

ZB: Immigration has become hard for everyone right now.

JZ: How long did it take for you to get approved?

ZB: I think we waited for about a year for the United States. Our primary country was Australia because we didn't have anyone in United States. My mom had a distant aunt living in Australia so we tried to go over there so we would have someone to show us the ways and things. It was as kind of scary coming over here, just the four of us land. I have my parents here and my brother he's younger than I am. So four of us came out of Romania. We wanted to go to Australia but my parents were already 45 years old and the reason for objecting for us to go there was the age for my parents. My dad was 45 and my

mom for 42. They couldn't accept us because of that. I don't know because of climate change or something. Then we had 3 countries. We could have stayed in Austria, we could have gone to Canada, New Zealand, or the U.S. Canada had the same problem, they were looking at age. Austria was really against immigration. We would have had a hard time making it over there. We always would have been considered an outsider. And New Zealand you had to wait 7 years for them to accept you and you had to speak English.

JZ: So I'm assuming you didn't know any English when you came over hear.

ZB: I had two years of schooling so I knew a little bit, I understood it more than I spoke it. I had a fear of speaking. Sometimes I still have problems. People were like, "What, what, what?" So it was kind of hard to get going at it. I had a job when I got over here because the sponsor was to a Protestant Reformed Church. We were reformed denomination in Hungary and Romania. So when you come in Austria, they have some organizations over there that handle your papers that were religious based. You go where your religion is and you get in contact with you officer and the people and they take all the information, reasons you left, reasons you want to come. They forward those papers to the Freedom Flight offices. That's how we came to the U.S. The Protestant Reformed picked up our papers but there were 8 families from the Reformed who sponsored us, not the church itself. They needed to provide living space and job. So when I came into the country already I started working 3 days after. We had to wait to get Social Security number to arrive and then right after that I started working. I think it was four days or something. I was working for (?) Builders in Jenison. I didn't speak. I just did my job. They told me

what to do. It was pretty self-explanatory. So caught on really quick. It was three or four months before I talked to the guys. I sat in the corner eating my lunch or something. But I did know what they were talking about, I just didn't say anything.

JZ: Holland was the first place you came to.

ZB: We stayed in Hudsonville and I worked in Jenison. I changed jobs in '91. I wanted to work for (?), working with carpentry. I started manufacturing doors, kitchen cabinet doors for them and I stayed with them until '97. Then in '97 me and my dad did a business adventure, that's what we're doing right now. We install kitchen, cabinets, and doors. We have a small company. That brought me to the Zeeland area. Then we had bought a house in Port Sheldon, what would be Hudsonville still. Then a year and a half we decided to sell the house because we had financial problems so we had a choice to either give up the business or sell the house. We decided to go with the business. We sold the house and moved in with my wife's parents in Allegan.

JZ: What were your first impressions of the Holland area, or the U.S. in general?

ZB: It was totally amazing how free everyone is. Just the freedom that is available over here. I think a lot of people take it for granted. They scream and yell about things when they should just keep quiet. If they would actually know what everyone else has to put up with in different countries. I don't like to get too involved in government issues because of the experiences I had back in Romania. Over there a lot of it was a class system so we didn't interact much with who was in politics. It was a dictatorship so they had chosen a person to lead the country and you couldn't do anything about it. If you tried to do something about it you were hanging on the tree. I still have a built in fear about that. I listen to

what people say. I listen to presidential candidates and what they stand for. I did become a citizen so I can vote.

JZ: How about adjusting to life here. You didn't know anyone. Some problems that you faced trying to adjust?

ZB: I didn't myself, but my parents did. Instances when they were laughed at or screamed at because they couldn't say what they wanted at the store. Someone was just not patient enough. My mom would come home several times crying from a store saying she would never go there again. I never really had a problem with anyone.

JZ: Any discrimination from anyone because you were an immigrant?

ZB: No, that I can't say. If you look at the United States everyone is an immigrant. The older generations all come from different countries. I think that carries in. I think everyone should think about it a little. The original people were Indians here so we just punched the Indians out. I never encountered anything like that. That doesn't mean that I won't

JZ: How close were you to Yugoslavia?

ZB: We were not close to the border but Romania is a border of Yugoslavia.

JZ: Did the Serbian crisis last year have any effect on you or Romania that you know of?

ZB: I didn't hear anything from relatives over there.

JZ: Why have you stayed in Holland? Have you ever thought about going to a different part of the country?

ZB: Pretty much the circle of friends that we have built here and to go somewhere else we would have to start all over again. We didn't really know too much about the rest of the country, we had some guiding over here and the jobs were fine. My mother still works

for the company she started with. We didn't feel the need to move on. It would be hard to start again and rebuild friendships.

JZ: In what ways have been involved in the Holland community? Obviously you are affiliated with the church. How important was that when you were in Romania and your coming over here now?

ZB: It was important to carry on with my religious beliefs. I strongly believe in God. I feel that I have been called to tell people who don't know about God. I did change churches, I was going to Protestant Reformed, but I did not feel that I believed, that my beliefs weren't in the same line as theirs. That's why we changed. My wife was not a believer before I met her. She had come to Christ by me and my friends. So in this way I tried to be her instead of be me. Then for her to be able to have the joy that I have and stuff just moved me a little bit.

JZ: You were Reformed in Romania, I didn't know that they had Reformed churches in Romania.

ZB: Hungarians are Reformed and Romanians are Orthodox. Because I am a national at the Hungarian, I am Reformed.

JZ: Whenever I think of Reformed I think of the Netherlands. When you see newer immigrants in Holland, do you know anyone who has come over from Romania that live in Holland?

ZB: We had friends that came before us and after us. We do not keep close relations with them. I think it is mostly because where we came from the social status was about materialism and a lot of gossip and trashing people. We did not want to be involved with

something like that. My parents did not like the experience. My brother and I had interests in learning the language and trying to fit into the country rather than keeping ourselves sheltered. So we did not mingle with many immigrants. I do not have any problem with any of them. I do give them credit that if they see they do not have a future there and if they realize it and come here. We still hear from the people back home that we deserted them, but looking back at the way they live over there compared to here, I think the choice was a better one to come over here.

JZ: Can you describe your feelings toward Tulip Time and other heritage festivals like the Cinco de Mayo in the Holland area?

ZB: I think it's awesome. That's what you couldn't do in Romania. You couldn't do a festival and be with your own people. That was not allowed. I really think that this a real good thing that the government lets you do over here. They actually give you the streets of their town. I'm not anyway involved with any of that stuff, I know that Grand Rapids has Polish, Italian, and Mexican festivals. I've seen a couple of them. I don't really like the crowd. I'm not into the drinking thing.

JZ: But you like the idea of it?

ZB: Yeah. I just like they promote the heritage. They let you experience it and still carry it on. That's what is so nice about this country. That if you speak your own language that no one will jump at you or beat you up. At least over here in this area. You see movies sometime but that's pretty much Hollywood.

JZ: I suppose there would be no way you could have a Hungarian festival in Romania.

ZB: If five or more people are in a group over there a policeman would come over ask what

you guys talking about. Just to make there isn't going to be a Revolution or something.

JZ: In Romania, you don't have McDonalds or any other restaurants.

ZB: Everything is controlled by government. There was nothing private. Toward the end before we left it was starting to open up a little bit. You could start something up, but it still was government controlled. My dad started a business over there, actually took over part of a company, he was fixing broken glass, but he had to pay so much to the government each year for the taxes. Taxes were a lot different over there. It was a set tax. Before he bought the business, the government took a look at what kind of business he had and taxed according to that for his upcoming years. He had to pay a so much a year, it wasn't about how much he sells or how much he makes. Sometimes he made more or less but he still had to pay the same amount. Sometimes it was a good deal if you made the money. Then you had a lot left over. Over here you have to pay percentage wise.

JZ: Which way do you like more?

ZB: I like it over there more. When you were making money you had a lot more left over for yourself. Here you have to pay a certain percentage out. A lot of the smaller businesses over here is just taxes are killing you. You first pay taxes for having a business and having machinery. Then you pay taxes on your income. Then you pay a gross amount. There are so many taxes that it's really hard to make it for a small business. When I was working as an employee for somebody I thought of the big guys as making a ton of money, but now I started my own, I feel my own and see how hard it is to get where they are. I'm against people who he's a business owner and he has so much. Look at how

many people who own a business have heart attacks compared to employees. It's so much competition. This world is a money driven world. You can have the best quality and doesn't matter. In Romania if you had the best quality you were king of the whole country. Not the money issue, it was quality. If you have the product, that was the most important thing. Here they cut a little bit of the money off of it and a little quality. They build a product that can last 5 years rather than one that lasts 20 years. They the person spends the same amount of money every five years. They spend more than what they could spend at one time. It's hard for a small business to make it. If you make a good name for yourself. You build a good name for yourself you can make it. You got to really watch it what you do.

JZ: A lot of small businesses will open but after one or two years they have to close.

ZB: There's so many of them. It's hard to get the name out. People do build relationships, we such a good relationship with some of the dealers around here. Another thing in Romania you build relationships, he's a customer but he was still kind of like a boss. It was a class difference type of thing. Here you make a good relationship, you are friends. You can joke with him instead of just talking about the product.

JZ: Do you think the community celebrates your heritage very well?

ZB: I don't think Hungarians are celebrated very well. I think we're the minority over here again.

JZ: At least you are not getting beaten.

ZB: I like seeing the Tulips and the city.

JZ: You have not experienced any discrimination in Holland. What paths have your children

taken? Do they speak Hungarian?

ZB: I would like to teach them the language. Right now they're 4 and 2. It would be the prime to start doing that. Our interaction is mostly with English. My wife speaks Eenglish. My mother in law speaks English. My parents live 32 miles from us and in this busy world it's hard to get together. But every weekend we try to get together. They don't speak a lot of English, my parents don't. It's a lot of Hungarian over there. I'm hoping that I can teach them the language. When were in Austria, in a refugee camp, we were in a motel with 20 families. Hungarians, Romanians, Yugoslavians, Polish, to everything. There was a Hungarian family with a 4 year old little girl. The parents were working somebody different was watching the kid everyday. She knew like 4 different languages. She was awesome. She was speaking German, Polish, everything. She just starts talking with her family and she doesn't know what she's saying because she's talking in a totally different language.

JZ: I learned Spanish in high school and now I don't remember too much of it. It is hard to retain that sort of stuff. What would you say to a friend who is considering moving to the United States? What advice would you give them?

ZB: I would really suggest to him to seek his heart for the reason he wants to leave. We've come through a lot of people in the recent years. A lot of them were looking for something that would get them rich quick. Why do you want to come? If they're the right reasons, I would support them. But if they want to get rich quick or get famous, stay where you're at. You're going to get heart broken. One of the families in the same camp they had these views they were going to start a business. After one year they went home

because they didn't have a job. There were jobs available but they didn't like what they were doing and they didn't like to work. They went back to Hungary. Another friend of ours, a doctor, he just thought he was going to go out there he was going to start his practice. Well, when he went out there he had to do 4 more years of college because everything was different than Romania. I didn't hear what happened to him, if he did receive his diploma to be able to do that. It's difficult if you don't have the right drive. You just can't expect to fall into this country and expect to do whatever you were doing at home. It's harder if you don't know anyone and don't have the connections. Even in the U.S. you still need the connections to get some places. Like Steel Case, for instance, family based. If you don't know anybody there you have a slim to none at all chance to get in there. You have to have connections too.

JZ: The good thing about the United States is that it gives you the opportunity to do what you want. Other places don't. You still have to get the breaks. Well, unless you don't have anything else to say....