

IDA BJORKQUIST
ELVERA KANERVA-INTERVIEWER
FINNISH SOCIALIST HISTORY

c. 1976

IB: 1901

EK: Where?

IB: Amberque, Wisconsin, to the parents of Charlie and Anna Mattson. And they went on the farm, my father worked on the railroads up until then, and wherever he would they had a stone quarry there. They used to work 15 and 16 hours.

EK: A day?

IB: umphmm. There was no unions, railroads had some kind but my father was looking around to buy a farm. And before that he had worked, and just think in those days it took my father almost 7 years to take and get enough money to get mother here and three girls.

EK: Were there three girls, I thought there were only 2?

IB: Yeah, well Jenny.

EK: Jenny and Tilly?

IB: and Mary!

EK: Oh Mary I forgot about her.

IB: But Jenny already she stayed behind cause she wanted to go to confirmation school over there because it was modern. There was almost five years in between them, between Jenny and Tilly but we never called her Jenny because her right name was Henny but nobody could say Henny in Finnish and my father's Finland name before he married mother his name was Annias, Zacharias Annias.

EK: When did he change his name?

IB: Well he changed his name when he went to mother, you know when he went to mother because mother's home was wealthy at that time.

EK: Her name wasn't Mattson.

IB: No, they changed their names here because nobody could say Zacharian here in America, he changed it. Papa used to go by the name of Zacharias Annias and they always, I remember the kids even and always cause they wanted to come and play with us kids so they would say lets go to Zacharila and play with the Zachary kids.

My mother's home name was Zarila , now that means island or islanders. It would be islanders because Zarila is like islanders.

EK: Well let's talk about after you married your husband. When did you marry your husband?

IB: In 1918. March 3, 1918.

EK: And then what did you do? Where were you living?

IB: In Hancock, Mich. And they would never take and hire your father over there because he had done quite a bit of union work. And everybody found out, there must have been stool pigeons all around there.

EK: Well he said that he was hired when he was 21.

IB: Oh, he forgot.

EK: They hired him in the Quincy mine.

IB: Yes.

EK: Didn't he work in the Quincy mine?

IB: Yes, but he worked in Minona too, but not very long because he didn't like the mines and then his uncle always wanted him to stay with him so that he could take and, you know, help him because Bill Lobby was American born and he wanted John to learn to speak English where he'd be with those tough old miners and he was in hopes of him being something a little bit better. But a northern boy like that they just figure I don't have to after they pay their bills. In those days pa paid all his bills. In fact he's always paid his bills, even if it took him a little longer sometimes. Those are the things that happened.

EK: And what did you do when you left Minona? You were living in Minona or Hancock? You were married in Hancock.

IB: Yes, but we met in Minona. He came over to a girlfriends house with another girl and I didn't even know him. And his cousin, Ida Bourquist, she introduced him and then this couple that were friends of John's too, they also used to go and visit them because they knew everybody before we did. I myself, of course my aunt did too, but I was so young at that time I was only 16 years old, I had just turned 16 and then that Jan. 1917 I turned 17 because 1918 the 1rst World War ended. You was only....no wasn't it in Nov. that it ended?

EK: Yes, it ended in November. Then what did you do? It ended when you were up north.

IB: Your father was working in the Quincy mines #2 and he came running cause three days already they had been told that the war had ended. The father came home first, but then the second time he didn't, he just found out that the war hadn't ended yet but that it would end during that week. When it finally came they brought all the men up from the mine pits and your father was between 7,000 and 8,000 level. And after the war ended he was still working in the mines but we moved away from that house where we were at when the notification came that the war had ended. He ran down that hill, remember when I showed you, weren't you in Russelwood?

EK: Yes.

IB: Well I showed you where we had lived. Now all of that is overgrown with trees from on top when you look from on top where that #2 shaft was. On the level ground there you could drive with a car, you could look down there and it looked like there was no house ever. But the house we lived in burned but it didn't burn when we were there. The people, themselves whether the wind storm or something struck it or something I don't know I never questioned these people. But it happened that the house burned. They moved out of there.

EK: Then where did you go from there? Did dad quit the mine or what?

IB: No he still worked there but we moved out of that Quincy Hollow, it was called Quincy Hollow and moved up to the Franklin mines. My mother's cousin, he always called me cousin too, and I've told you about _____. _____ were distant cousins of my father's, Mrs. _____ was. Her name was Lena, she married some...

EK: Wait a minute now, did you move over to their place?

IB: No, no we rented a house across the street from _____. We had a three room house there and Helma used to come over every darn evening and sit there like a bump on a log. But I couldn't get nothing done I used to tell her to go home to her mother.

EK: Well anyway then did Dad leave the mines?

IB: No.

EK: How long did he work in the mines?

IB: He worked there a little over a year. I guess he worked 2 years at that time straight, but they wouldn't hire him before that, before he got married because he was always agitating for the union, because he didn't like the 12, 14 and 16 hours a day. So he'd agitate to join the miner's union. So when they found that out...

EK: So why do you think they hired him, because he got married?

IB: Yes.

EK: When he left the mining, did he quit?

IB: He came to my home when we were there, we stayed there for a little while and in the mean time...

EK: In Wisconsin.

IB: ...you were about 6 months old I guess, he went to Racine, Wisconsin. And he got a job at the KCTN it was the thrashing machine, it meant thrashing machine so they called it KCTN Company. Then he got laid off when you were about 2 years old, when your brother was born. Do you remember when you picked up that little tub? You wanted to take and help mama when you were scolding your dad that you didn't like when he was always gone but he was looking for work. He would come home in the evening but he was looking for work. You were so mad at your dad because he wouldn't come and help me lift those tubs. The water was pumped out of the well. Then he worked there, I guess Johnny was 2 or 2 1/2 years old when we moved out of Racine and went to Moline, Illinois, and the railroads were on strike at that time, Rock Island Line. I didn't know that but I was so scared to death. Somebody told me at the last minute after I'd packed everything and bought the tickets and read the depot that the Rock Island Line is on strike, to watch out or they'll blow up the engine. I was scared to death that they would blow up all of us. We got there safely because the people scabing they brought the train alright. I didn't have no difficulty but I was scared all the while. Father was at the Moline depot to meet us and brought us home.

EK: When he was in Racine remember this article that was written in the paper about you joining the Communist Party in Racine?

IB: We didn't join no Communist Party then.

EK: Why was it printed in the paper?

IB: I don't know, they must have gotten it some way mixed up like lot's of times...

EK: In that Daily World.

IB: They must have gotten it all mixed up. You know lots of times those things got mixed up. You didn't have to join no Communist Party. You learned to be a Communist yourself as you're pinched hard enough for work and everything. But your father knew about all of those things and so did I but when you're a young kid you don't pay any attention. You're father even met Lenin but he didn't know it was Lenin until he was gone. Because he, the Russian Army-the White Army were chasing everybody so his uncle and all they were railroad people and he played ball with them the night before

and the next morning and all of a sudden he disappeared. He didn't come in the house even because he didn't want to get nobody involved in it.

EK: Yeah, well we're talking about dad, we want to talk about you. We'll talk about when you were going to Moline. Where did dad work there?

IB: He worked at Moline Body Company they were making automobiles. But you're father had learned to make the automobiles already in Racine but not as much as he did in Moline. From Moline we went to Buffalo, New York but do you know now because I am tired I cannot think of the names of those companies that he worked for, but they were great big-Pierce Arrow- that I remember. When they went on strike the first time pa had a Pierce Arrow auto body that had to be finished...

EK: Where was the strike?

IB: I think it was in Racine, Wisconsin. The boss said that if you keep on doing that...the company won't pay...

EK: Doing what?

IB: Finishing the body, the company won't pay you anyway. So he left it on the floor but he wasn't suppose to leave it on the floor- nothing on the floor. They called it the floor when a big automobile body after it's been hammered out and shaped then they got to file it. You're father used to do the filing, they called them finishers. You're father did that, and when he got a little older he got himself that job over here at this other shop where he didn't have to work so darn hard.

EK: Are you sure they went on strike in Racine?

IB: Yes. Because they told him if he did finish that Pierce Arrow car he wouldn't get paid for it anyway. So he left just like everybody else but he just couldn't figure-they didn't come and tell you that there was a strike there or anything like that. The bosses never tell you that.

EK: Is that why he went to Moline?

IB: No. ~~He didn't go to Moline~~

EK: Then why did he go to Moline? If he had a good job.

IB: Well the shop was closed so long and you know at one time the finishers were all, they were either married men that had their wives in Finland or they had been...their wives had left them because they got sick and tired of their drinking and stuff like that so they picked up and left and went to visit their folks. When they were gone their husbands just decided to quit their jobs and going somewhere. Father didn't do that but your father

when they, somewhere they come around and say, "Oh they're giving twenty-five cents an hour for the same job you're doing for like if the wages were a dollar and a quarter an hour or a dollar and fifty-cents an hour well then they would come around and say well you can get one dollar and seventy-five cents for the same kind of work. Father would follow them and try and tell them...

EK: You know they didn't get a dollar and seventy-five cents at that time .

IB: No but thats, at that time they didn't not even a dollar and one half.

EK: How much wages did he make?

IB: He used to make a dollar an hour in those days.

EK: Even in the 1920's

IB: Yeah, that was real good times then right after the first World War, heavens yes. But you know we kept going around all the time and then we helped my mother and everybody else because of poor times and our father had died and mother lost the farm and everything. Well that's what happened.

EK: She lost the farm finally.

IB: Yes. So then I saved spending money three hundred dollars, for mother she was going to lose the farm and whe was going to lose—they had built a silo and they were going to come and pull that silo down. She was going to lose the farm because she didn't have three hundred dollars so the silo cost sixty dollars in those days to build, a beautiful silo it wasfull of the stuff for the winter for the animals. So the stuff was from the field and mother was crying and worrying and she would write to me and ask if we were coming down so I told her yes and pa used to love to go hunting anyways. Do you remember any of it?

EK: Yes.

IB: He used to love to go hunting, in the fall. He'd take, and while they were changing the models and laying off a lot of men, of course pa didn't have to because the company's always liked him and his work and in those days your father didn't drink or anything like that so they kept him on so then what happened he came to my mother's and he paid for the silo and I remeber Mr. Redmond telling pa if you want to you can have those papers signed over and you can keep the farm and let ma and the children stay there but I said no you'd better not because I figured if he did stay there then some of the others when they get grown up would take it away from him anyway.

Then there would be all kinds of quarrels and everything so I didn't want to.

EK: We used to go back there more than once back to the farm.

IB: Oh, many, many times.

EK: Then we went to Moline and from Moline we went to...

IB: Buffalo, New York.

EK: Was he always organizing?

IB: Well not always but mostly the men that went around that always talk about organizing and talked about the union.

EK: Was he in the IWW then? Dad.

IB: No. He might have been before me but I don't think so. There was another called the.. something to do with the union but to tell you the truth I just don't remember anymore. Remember I've been a very sick person too for a long time.

EK: But there wasn't any real Communist Party then?

IB: Oh, no. And if there was we didn't belong to it at that time. But I used to love to go listen to them because...

EK: What about the Socialist Party?

IB: It was the Socialist Party, that's what it was called. And then I remember I used to love to listen to them and I'd look at them and they'd never swear the other speakers that belonged to the IWW. They swear all the time and I was always afraid I was swearing myself and when I get mad I got mad I didn't want my children to listen. You know men always swear more than women. All the women say darn it and damn it and stuff like that. But the children would stay there and they'd always follow Johnny when he was just like our little Brady is now. He'd always take and listen and whatever a man would say was better than what the women as you know.

EK: What speakers did we hear in those days? I remember Foster.

IB: William C. Foster, I always liked him and his speeches. Then there was...

EK: What about Elizabeth Gurley Flynn?

IB: Oh, yes. She was real good too.

EK: Where did you hear her?

IB: Mother Bluer was the first one that I heard and I remember when she...

EK: But that was in the 30's.

IB: Yes, but this was long before this that I heard her and also Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and I heard both of them.

EK: What did they say?

IB: Well, to tell you the truth try to think way back, what did they say. They were always organizing the women because they wanted us to know.

EK: We came to Detroit in 1926, the first time.

IB: Yes.

EK: Remember last night when I asked you about joining anything or joining the Communist Party in Racine, Wisconsin?

IB: Yes.

EK: Would you like to change what you told me?

IB: Is it on now?

EK: Yes.

IB: Of course because I didn't know that I could talk about it.

EK: Well you can talk now, you don't have to be afraid, You see these are the people that pushed everything and made the Party, made the United States strong.

IB: Of course. We wouldn't have anything, we wouldn't have any unions, we wouldn't have no free speeches, I think we would have had Fascism right on the button. If we didn't have the Communist Party and the people that were behind it I think myself that a lot of these people did very good work. I don't know if I should mention any of the names of the people that worked in it.

EK: Oh, you can mention names.

IB: I remember the first time when they arrested six of them all at one time.

EK: Where was this?

IB: Here in Detroit.

EK: Oh.

IB: And Sena Felt was the lady, I think the only lady. Then there was Doctor Chapman and.. are you sure we can say anything about this?

EK: Sure you can.

IB: Phil Raymond and Nat Ganley and plus I think about Nat Ganley that they stuck all these five others in jail. I don't remember all of their names. I know that there were a couple of the lawyers that were stuck in jail.

EK: Well that happened, though, in McCarthy's time.

IB: Yes, that's what I'm talking about.

EK: Well that was in the 30's, that was in the 50's.

IB: Well which one did you want to talk about?

EK: We're still talking about Racine, Wisconsin let's go way back there. You had some Finnish halls over there. Didn't you go to some Finnish plays or something?

IB: Yes but we didn't have a Finnish hall. There wasn't a need. ~~able~~ There was Finnish, the working class people that were supposed to be the Right and the Left. They did have a couple of the meetings there.

EK: Who was they?

IB: The Finns.

EK: Didn't the Socialists have any meetings in Racine?

IB: Yes. But I don't quite remember, it was called The Finnish American Socialist Party.

EK: But didn't the IWW or any of the other people have any meetings in Racine?

IB: Oh I suppose they did but I don't remember.

EK: How about in Moline? We went to Moline from Illinois from Racine.

IB: No. But these were all after the ones I was talking about now. I remember we had chorus and everything, we used to sing.

EK: In Moline?

IB: No, over here.

EK: Oh.

IB: In Moline they had plays. We did form a...

EK: This was a Finn hall like?

IB: No, there was no Finn hall but we'd rent a small hall. In those days you could rent, any nationality could rent. Anything. Nobody never said nothing. Martin Henrickson coming and speaking. I used to get so mad I'd say, "Why in the dickens do we have to listen to a man that swears every other word that he talks"?

EK: Well, those were Finnish speakers, and then in Buffalo?

IB: In Buffalo, New York they had a hall and that's where we joined the...

EK: The Finns had a hall.

IB: Yes. It was called the O' _____ Hall.

EK: What did you join?

IB: We didn't join, I don't remember, we were members of the Finnish Socialist Movement. That I remember but I don't....

EK: Then from Buffalo where did you go?

IB: We only stayed three months then we went back to Racine, Wisconsin because pa liked it over there and then we were closer to mother and all my sisters and brothers. The only brother we had was only about 10 years old when father died.

EK: And then where did you go back when you came out of Racine.

IB: You mean the last time when we left from there?

EK: Yes.

IB: We went to my home town first. This was in the 30's.

EK: When did we go to Kalamazoo? We lived in Kalamazoo.

IB: Yes about 3 months in between that time. No, not from... Gloria was born, my niece, she was born in 1926 I think and....

EK: Well, let's talk about when you came...when did you get interested in these women's organizations? Remember you've done a lot of things in women's organizations.

IB: Well, when we came here. I had forgotten to show you, I'll give you the book or the minutes that I wrote down when I wrote that article in the paper, and you can look at it yourself. You can either look at it or keep it and bring it into the archives or do whatever you want with it. That was during the peace movement. We had that Women For Peace.

EK: Here in Detroit?

- IB: Yes. But that ain't so very long ago it's only about just before I had this pacemaker put in.
- EK: Yes, but you went over to...what were you in that time when you went over to the McCormick's farm a long time ago.
- IB: I didn't go to no McCormick's farm. That was your father and Philippe worked over there as a maid and cook.
- EK: Where was that?
- IB: In Racine, Wisconsin.
- EK: I thought that was John Dear.
- IB: Well, it was but McCormick was taking...
- EK: No, I'm talking about...well who was it that you went on that, it wasn't McCormick then that..that guy that made farm machinery that had this big home in Ohio. You went on some _____ for Women For Peace, and you were living here and you took a trip to Cleveland or some place.
- IB: That wasn't McCormick that was Eaton.
- EK: Oh, yes. I knew he made farm machinery and I got it all mixed up.
- IB: Cyrus Eaton.
- EK: What organization was that?
- IB: It was the same...this Communist Party Organization but we didn't go there as.. it was the Women For Peace Movement at that time.
- EK: That's what I said it couldn't have been the Communist Party you went for.
- IB: No, at that time we had been Communist Party for over 50 years, but I didn't dare to say anything before.
- EK: You were always involved in the Women's...
- IB: Women's Movement, Women's Peace...
- EK: Women's Peace Movement and the Women's International
- IB: Organization
- EK: What did they call them?
- IB: Oh, I can't think about them you always start late when I am ready to go to bed.....

EK: You enjoyed singing in the Finnish Women's Choir, you had a very good voice.

IB: Not a choir but a chorus.

EK: You enjoyed singing with them.

IB: Helma _____ used to direct us, there were about four or five of us.

EK: In plays?

IB: Well, we were only in one play and then we stood there for...we sang nine or ten songs and we stood there until our feet were just burning from those hot foot lights singing those songs, Finnish songs. Instead of the whole play it was just recited by the lady that directed the play and then the whole chorus had to stand and sing all those songs after she'd recite what had happened in the play. But to tell you now what it meant or anything I couldn't even remember, but I always remebered those songs but to go ahead and sing any of them right now, my mouth is so thick from a cold that I got.

EK: We don't have to talk now, I've got you on tape anyway from a couple of years ago, what we did at my house...
Ida Bjorkquist was talking on this tape and her last public meetings were in 1968-69 she was involved with the Women's Strike For Peace and she had attended a meeting on May 25, 1968 at St. Patrick's Parochial School, 80 Parsons St. in Detroit. The speakers were Barbara Robb, attorney, was a chairwoman, Myra Wolfgang, secretary-treasurer of the Hotel-Restaurant Employees Union, gave the main address. The closing session was Ruth _____, recently returned from Vietnam. They had several workshops that were on Education, Racism In Our Country, Status of Women, Rising Cost of Living, Meeting the Challenge of Community Health. Mother gave me all these programs and the minutes she took and that she reported on to The Finnish Educational Association. She attended these meetings and she brought back these reports to the Finnish Educational Assoc. as it is called today. She is very inactive now, and doesn't go out of the house at all. We tape here at home, but she doesn't remember and she is very upset about trying to talk about being involved with Communism because the fear is there although she was never really afraid if anybody came to the door as the FBI did for her. She lost her temper instead of being quiet she'd shout at them and wave a broom at them and a frying pan one time. She was harrassed and the family. I personally have never been harrassed but they have come to my parents home so that the Bjorkquists' have been harrassed. It has been a hard time for them and so she absolutely denies belonging to any Communist Party. Be that as it may that is their story, but they were involved in organizing all through the years and we're going to donate into the Archives father's union cap, which he has kept all these years since 1937 and he has his union button strung on it. It's kind of a nice little momento and as we come across papers and books we will donate them to the Archives of the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University.

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