

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Group Interview

Date: March 2003

Location: Drumheller, Alberta

Participants: Victor Avramenko, Lydia Husak, Elsie Kushnir, Jan Tarasoff

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I'm Lydia Husak, and I'm a coalminer's daughter from Drumheller.

My name is Elsie Kushnir. I'm the daughter of John Kushnir, who was a well-known miner down in the Drumheller valley, who worked in several mines there and was one who came from Nordegg.

My name is Victor Avramewko. I worked in the Atlas coalmine and Murray mine back in the '50s in Drumheller valley.

It's Jan Tarasoff nee Roberts. I'm a coalminer's daughter from way back. Our history goes back to the South Wales coalmines. It was a natural progression for us to be in the valley.

Lydia: As I said before, we all were miners. My dad was a coalminer, and I really worried about him. I didn't go to sleep until I heard his bus come into the little town where I lived in Newcastle. When he came home and was in the house, that's when I'd nod off and sleep. But until then I didn't sleep, cuz I always was worried he was going to get into an accident in the mine. Anyway, he didn't. He lived through it all, and we had some pretty hard times too. One incident I remember is the miners were on strike. I can't remember the year. I was in junior high. Because the miners were on strike and because most of the miners lived in Newcastle, we got our lights cut off because of that. We had to sit and do our homework in front of a kerosene light for weeks and weeks, until the strike was settled. But in Drumheller everybody had their lights. But Newcastle had to be cut off. Most of the miners lived in Newcastle area. Some lived in Drumheller and other areas, but most of them lived in Newcastle. Like I say, we all were miners. We all worked and we suffered with them too. I wanted to mention just a little story. You said we worked together, we played together. Yes, the miners liked to drink together too. They used to spend a little bit of time in the bar. I remember sitting in the car in Wain with myself and waiting for my dad to come out of the bar. He never got drunk, but he always liked to socialize with the miners. In fact they said at one time Drumheller had sold more beer per capita than anyplace in Alberta. They used to like to drown their sorrows, cuz they never knew when they were going to come home alive from that dungeon. The only other thing, I don't know whether this is appropriate or not, but I'm gonna say it anyway. My stepfather, I had a stepfather after my father, and he wasn't my stepfather then but he was our neighbour. He was involved in the Ukrainian Hall in Newcastle, and he was always for the working person. Worked hard and probably said a little too much at times. However, he was being introduced at the coalmine one day by the manager. He was just going to start a new job. He was introduced as Bill ?, communist. Well the mine manager is the one that said, this is Bill ?, communist. Just because he was a working man and he supported the working class and he was in our association of united Ukrainian Canadians, they just said Bill ?, communist. Well they didn't like that at all. In fact they actually kind of ostracized him for a little bit, but then they forgot. He's a very good man and they forgot that. But at first they ostracized him. They used to march in the Mayday parades and everything. That was their privilege. It was allowed.

Jan: Mayday parades were school holidays, and it didn't matter, school was on. But everybody took part in that parade. The kids would all be on the sidewalk watching their dads and some of their moms in that parade. It didn't matter what happened, that was it. Of course they had to live in Drumheller, that's true. But people came, the miners came from the rest of the valley to take part. It was more of a, like Lydia was saying, ya there were known communists. But most of them were not ostracized after they became known by the people. Because they weren't separate from the rest of the community. Their role in the trade union and the community was not to be outspoken about what was happening on another continent. It was what was happening in the community. They wanted better conditions for the people that were in that community. My own father, Lydia's stepfather, was a very good friend of my father's. The two of them, I can remember one time when they were both involved. Something happened in the mine. My dad didn't fool around, so we're all going home. So we knew if he came home at noon, it was a wildcat strike. We were going home at noon. So they came home, next morning they're all back at work and the grievance was settled. But it was because of those kinds of things that they were not ostracized after they became known in the community. It was somebody who was pushed around in the wash house by somebody who had a racial prejudice or a bias against Ukrainians or a bias against Russians or whoever it was. Or that the mine manager was picking on somebody because he wasn't able to load quite as much that particular day. They might seem at the time like they were trivial matters, but they weren't trivial matters. It had to do with the working conditions in those mines. My dad always said if he ran as a communist candidate he probably would've got elected if everybody he knew could vote. But a lot of them couldn't vote because they didn't have citizenship. They were immigrants.

Victor: We came over in 1948. I started working in the coalmines when I was 18, in 1954. I'm Ukrainian born. We survived WW2 in Germany. From Germany dad got a job in Belgium. He worked in those deep mines there. Then from there our relatives here in Ralleigh, they paid our way to come to Canada. I was 12. Yes, he started working in Camendo mine and Mac mine. He worked there for a year and a half, then his relatives bought us a house in East Coulee. Then he started working in Atlas mine. Something happened there. He got out of there and went to the Murray mine just a few hundred feet. In Murray mine I was a track layer's helper. Him and I, we did the track laying.

In the wintertime we worked in the mines, but in the summertime we usually went to the farm or some other job that was suitable for us. But my dad always stayed in the mine, because he had so many years. Ya, part of the time. Instead of collecting unemployment insurance, you didn't want that at all. You wanted to earn your money. So that's what we used to do. Ya, other jobs as well. Me, I worked partially underground. Then through the summer months towards the end, back in 1960 and '61, I worked on the oil rigs. That was just through the summer. Then I got a job in Canmore mines, and that's when I received my miner's ticket and started working as a contract loading coal. That was a good paying job. You get used to it after a while. The first 2 weeks is tough. Every sound, every air movement. Of course you've got people saying look out for this, look out for that. All that was computing. Every time you heard a noise you stopped right now. Not that you could

see it or anything. It was always there. Your sixth sense. For some unknown reason, your mind knew what was happening and you reacted to that. It's hard to explain. But I'll tell you one episode. In the Canmore mines we were working on the 16 foot seam. It was pitching about like this. I heard a bad noise like something has given way. I started running. Honest to god, it felt like the coal and timbers were pressing my heels, that's how close it was coming to me. I just kept running. When I did get back after everything settled down, I got back there. The shovel that I dropped was under about 15 tons of coal, buried completely. I would've been buried with my shovel. Just reacted, ya.

Jan: Do you remember any bad accidents in Drumheller?

Lydia: I do. I know that one of the Marchuk girl's father was killed in the mine. He was run over by a coal ..?

Elsie: I know of about 3 that died. You'd always hear the siren, and it was scary. There were about 2 or 3 I'm sure, maybe even more that died in the mine.

Jan: But there never were, as far as I can recall.

Elsie: The closest I've heard, this is second hand. When dad came to Canada in 1928 he came from the Ukraine as he said for a bigger and better piece of bread for his family. He left my mother and 2 children back in Ukraine and came here to establish himself. My dad apparently was very smart. He picked up the language very quickly. His story is that within 6 months he was acting as a translator for a lot of these people, who were like himself. He was in Nordegg at the time of the big explosion where 28 miners were killed up in Nordegg. Dad was working there. That's the first place dad was working, in Nordegg. Then he came to the Drumheller valley. I don't think there's a mine in the Drumheller valley where dad didn't work. He worked in ?, and most of his time was spent in Cambria. We lived in a little 2 room house. I was the first born in Canada. We lived in a 2-room house. The family in one room, and the borders in the other room. Mom would cook for 10, 12 single bachelor miners. She'd put up 3 meals a day for them, cuz they were working on 3 different shifts and you had to feed these men. And do their laundry. My dad was a fire boss, which meant he was in a supervisory capacity. He had to examine the mine first to see that it was safe for the other miners to go in. The story I always remember is that when he'd come home from work, I'd go down the road to meet him. I was 2 years old or so. The first sip of beer from his bottle of beer when he got home was mine. He left half a sandwich in his bucket for me. In our little community of Cambria, we went to school in a 2 room school. We always had concerts. The thing to do was xmas concerts. Presents were ordered for the children out of Eatons catalogue. You needed 10 presents for 10 boys 6 years old, girls 6-8 years old we need this many gifts. So on and on it went. The miners were deducted from their paycheck for these presents to be given out to the children.

?: The owners just didn't have enough money did they, to buy a little gift.

Jan: Then the union started paying for them. When the Higrade used to have their parties, the union bought the gifts for the kids. And paid the Santa Claus. The Santa Claus scared the daylight out of most of those little guys. It never was a good costume, it was always ugly as sin. As well as dad working in the mine, my parents were caretakers of the little 2 room school. The costume was in the basement of the school. As a child I was never so frightened as when I could hear that school bell ring and Santa's coming in to give these presents. And I knew fine well. The costume was there all year. I see it, because I helped my mom and dad clean the school. The costume's there in the basement. Sometimes my dad even dressed up as Santa. Sometimes it was even my dad. And I was just so petrified.

Elsie: What I remember is that the miners were deducted probably evenly distributed. The cost of the gifts was going to be x number of dollars and the miners each had to pay a portion of that amount. And a lot of them didn't even have children. A lot of them, as I said, were single men who, like my dad, left their family back in the old country and came to Canada. I don't feel extra privileged, but my dad always made sure that his family was looked after. He would go without, but his family got looked after. My mother was probably the first one that had an electric stove or fridge in the house, in the community. Because dad thought she should have. My dad and 2 other men opened a mine called the Join Mine on the way to Wain. After 7 years they declared bankruptcy and lost all their investments. He would go to the storekeeper and say, just put my groceries on a bill, to make sure the miners got paid their salary.

Jan: Well sure. I remember when dad was at a convention in Winnipeg. The fellow who lived next door to us ran a little store. In the middle of the night my mother was shaking us awake saying we had to get out of the house because the fellow next door set fire to his house. It burnt 3 of them, including ours. Dad was away and my uncle was working at the mine on the night shift. My mother and sister and I were home alone. Mom got us out and ran us across the street to another uncle's house. But it was the coalminers in Drumheller who got together and had a huge shower in the Newcastle Hall and supplied us with absolutely everything we needed for that house, except the big pieces of furniture. Dishes, pots and pans, everything. The community stuck together, they knew there was a need there and that's where it came from. It was absolutely amazing. We only did without and stayed with my uncle for a week. That was the end of it, we were back in our own place and pretty well looked after. Nobody had insurance, no. Couldn't afford it, for one thing. The community was there for everybody. That was part my dad's philosophy and of most of the people who were active in the union there, who were just active in the community. It wasn't a matter of just looking after yourself. It was a matter of looking after the interests of everybody that was involved. Dad didn't speak Ukrainian or Russian, he spoke Welsh and English. There weren't too many Welsh people that were talking to him at that point. But he did income tax for coalminers. He wrote letters to immigration. He looked after writing to bring their families. All these kinds of things. And he wouldn't accept anything for it. We ate really well, because we got roasters of cabbage rolls, roasters of perogies, we got homemade Hungarian sausage. We got all these things because he was helping out, and they were helping us out as well. It was just something that had to be done.

Victor: We used to walk down to the river, and you could see the tipple southeast of us. If the light was on, then you knew you worked the next day, so you had to be there by 8 o'clock. If there was no light, then you stayed at home. Simple as that. It just depended on your experience and what you did. There was people that set up the timbers, people that set up the airways on the ground. There's people that just did manual labour. Anybody that had a specific thing to do and it has to be done now for Monday, well they worked overtime or extra time or whatever. It just depended. If you made over a certain amount of dollars, then you're not qualified for the unemployment insurance. That's the way I understand it. Because it just seemed like I worked but I could never collect. Exactly. That was kind of hard. But after awhile you get used to it. Just like anything else.

Jan: It sort of did become a way of life, this business of working only 1 or 2 days a week, and climbing the hill to see if the light was on. In our case, we couldn't look down the river, we climbed the hill at the back of the house. Then you could see to Newcastle and across the river to Midland. The lights were up high enough so if they were on, they were visible. But it was, for a lot of families, subsistence living. Money went for groceries and to pay your rent, and for clothing. That's it. Insurance money, what's insurance? We didn't even have a telephone until the mid '50s. If we went anywhere, we walked. To Newcastle and back, 5 or 6 times a week. That's 3 miles from our place.

Elsie: My father wanted us to take piano lessons, both my younger sister and myself. Several times he had to borrow money from the neighbours to pay the teacher so we could have piano lessons. That was a real extra, for him to be able to take out \$20 for the month that it was going to cost him for us to have piano lessons.
I can still see Peggy Webster.

Victor: If you made over \$10 per day, that was pretty good money. If you worked overtime, that meant you were going to get a little extra on top of that.

Elsie: My dad is blacklisted in Nordegg. He was refused work, because he helped organize miner's unions. In 1928, 1930, that era. He helped organize the miners unions in Nordegg, and he was blacklisted. He couldn't find a job.

Jan: My father too, and my uncle. Both of them blacklisted in Drumheller. They worked at the ABC in Newcastle. They were both fired because of their union activity there. They were laid off for a long time. That would've been just before the war, I think. In the early years of the war. Because then my dad went to work for the Chinese market gardener there. There were 2 Chinese fellows there that owned the greenhouse. They both, my dad went to work there. My uncle went back to work in the mine because he was a timberman. They were hard to come by. They couldn't blacklist him, because they needed him. Then when they really got involved in the war, they took them both back. They needed coalminers. That's when Neil was telling me he started working in the mines, was in the early part of the war, because they needed him. If your father worked in the mines, you got a job. They were both blacklisted. Dad always said he was always happy he had become friends with Lee. I remember Lee very well, the other fellow I don't remember him. If it hadn't been for him, we'd have all starved to death. In the market garden. It was interesting, because both of these fellows used to come to the house at Xmas time with very fancy gifts for my mother. Pink silk tablecloth and chocolates and lychee nuts. We had lychee nuts before anybody else knew what they were. It was very interesting. Anything that came, the silk tablecloth, was raffled to raise money for some probably communist cause. That's where it went.

Victor: The wife and I, we got married in January '57. I wasn't getting enough work. We had a grocery store list. Every time you needed something you went to Romans there and put it on the bill. But the bill just kept growing higher and you couldn't pay nothing for it. So we got up to about \$80 already and I thought it was the end of the world. So what I used to do is, I had a 22. I'd go in the bush and shoot a couple of rabbits, bring them home, skin them. Then give to Joyce and she would cook them. That's how we survived the year of '57.

Jan: That doesn't seem so long ago to me. When you think about dates, I guess it is quite a long time ago. But it's about 40 years ago or more, but it doesn't seem that long ago to me. It seems like all this was just happening under our noses.

Victor: As a matter of fact, that's that last time I've had a gun in my hand. I aimed at one rabbit and I hit him. And that little fellow straightened right up and put his paws up and started crying. He doubled over and died. I thought, well that's the end. That was it, I never went hunting again. That was it.

Jan: I'm sure dad would remember. Because my dad chewed snuff until the day he died. The couldn't smoke in the mine. My mother thought it was the most disgusting habit that anybody could ever have, but we couldn't cure him of it. It was something, that's the way it was.

Victor: Something I couldn't understand. You couldn't smoke underground, but yet you could use carbide lamps. So it was an open flame. A lot of times the miner would drill holes into the coal to put dynamite in. He would take his light and put it up by the hole, and the flame would shoot out. That was the highlight. But yet you couldn't smoke. Oh ya, that was in the new place, the Atlas mine, they sent the shaft down. There was more gas there and they had to use the safety lamps...it's hard to say. In Canmore there was one mine, the Three Sisters Coalmine. They couldn't shoot during the day. They had to shoot as they came off shift. Everybody would leave the mine, then they would shoot, and then they would wait a couple of hours. Then the shift went in to start loading or whatever. They had everything all prepared for the next round. But they couldn't shoot the coal until everybody came out. And yet the place that I worked in, and it was just a little ways from the Three Sisters, we didn't have all that. A lot of places, the advance works would sometimes drill and it would start bumping. It would just explode and then a lot more would come. Once that's finished then you went down and start loading. I really couldn't tell you the deeper you went the more gas, I don't know. 1961 is when they started to shut down. They still worked a few people here and there. But not like the way it used to be. Of course they had big orders from Japan, especially for the steam coal. That's what they wanted. The mines still operated right up to '64 or '66 I think they were still going full blast. Because everything was being shipped to Japan and they dumped it into the ocean so they could pick it up later. They stored it underwater.

Lydia: I came here in 1953. My mom didn't come in till 1967. They were still functioning. My dad worked in the mine till the early '60s. He had a heart attack, so he couldn't work anymore. But they were open a little longer than that.

Victor: Yes, very much so. Because I remember back in 1952 I was working CPR in east Coulee. They were still burning coal so they would get clinkers and the engine would go over and shake the clinkers out and deposit them down below. I was getting paid \$5 to load a flatcar full of clinkers. That was big money, done by hand. Me and another guy, we split the \$5. They used it back on the railway tracks. The people that went and got themselves other means of heat than heat, they were an outcast. The union didn't like that very much. They said we should stick together and burn coal, never mind making it easy and all that. It was scary, for one thing. The only thing I knew was mining. I thought, what am I going to do next? I just did not know anything else. I was just petrified thinking I'd be out of work. Even though I worked other places through the summer, but in the wintertime I was just completely lost. What did I do? I kept looking and I finally did get a job in Canmore. That was back in '61. Back in the mine.

Jan: Many people moved from the Drumheller valley to Canmore, because the mines were still working in Canmore and they had been shutting down in the valley.

Victor: A lot of people went to Coleman, a lot of people went to Nordegg. A lot of people went to Canmore. It just depends who got the most of the orders. The order had to be filled. The person that might've charged a dollar more per ton of coal lost some business. That's just as simple as that.

Jan: It also depended a lot on the kind of coal that was being ordered. Because the coal in the Crowsnest Pass was a different kind of coal than what they were mining in Drumheller.

Victor: That's right. In Canmore there and the Crowsnest Pass it's all steam coal. In East Coulee in Drumheller it was all petuminous. That petuminous, you pile it too high and it crumbles. Besides that it'll just burst into flame, internal combustion. That's why when they had the rock piles and they'd dump them off the side of the hill, that was burning, and burned for a long time after. Always the sulphuric smell. That valley would fill full of smoke. Some of it was used for the home heating. A lot of it was shipped to Calgary here. A lot of it was shipped as far as Winnipeg and Vancouver for heat.

Jan: It was good heating coal. It was nice warm dry kind of heat in the house. Of course there was no central heating in a lot of our houses either, it was the coal stove in the kitchen and a heater in the living room. It was good heat.

Victor: Besides that it also depended on how much percentage of rock was in your coal, that's impurities. The higher the rock content, the more clinkers you're gonna get. So they went after anybody that could produce 2 to 3% of impurities in the coal, that's the one they wanted the most. Yes there was company houses. The government helped my dad to move from East Coulee to Canmore. I had to get everything myself. The wife and I moved into a house that was condemned. I rolled up my sleeves and got it all fixed up nice. It was a 2-storey building close to the mine. Then a place came vacant right across the peat moss place there. They asked me if I wanted that house, so I said sure. In 1964 the properties were coming for sale. Anybody that worked in the mine and lived in the house, they could purchase that land title and the whole works. But in 1964, that's when I got hurt and had to leave the mine. The hardest thing I ever did in my life. I came into Calgary and went to the compensation board. They said, aren't we paying you enough? Aren't you happy that we're looking after you? I said, that's not the point. I want to make my own money. Which I really meant. My way is the best way. I don't want a handout from nobody. I still don't really. If I can't make it on my own, that's okay I don't need it. Ya, I started with the government in 1965 and retired with them. I started out, they had me signed up as a caretaker. I was supposed to start on 16th avenue. But I never did. By the time they came around to get me in there, it was May. Dick, how would you like to work with shrubs and lawns. I said, oh I'd just love that. That's how I started. From there I developed allergies to the sun. So they put me inside as a caretaker. Then they pushed me around and I had to go do a lot of troubleshooting. Anybody complained about certain things, I had to go investigate and report back to the foreman. Anywhere in the whole city, anybody that had problems, like the car testing centre near the Stampede building. The head boy from the car testing centre was there, and Grant, the head caretaker, they locked horns. They got the caretaker outa there and put me in there. I stayed there until they closed the door. I worked right off the ?, but they had me in different places to troubleshoot, until they finally put me into the residence there in 1974. I was there for 18 years. They said only a couple of months, but there I was for 18 years till I retired. I knew I didn't have any education. I had to go get educated. So what I did is enrolled into night classes. Any time there was a seminar or program, I would get enrolled. At SAIT there I used to go and take various ... I went and took welding. Of course they mark you after so many months, you have to write an exam. Which I did pretty good, and I've still got the ticket up to this day. But the only problem was that I had 2 jobs that I could've had. But the pay I could not raise my family on it – 75 cents an hour. How you gonna go get a job like that, with 3 children and a wife. So I stayed with the government, which paid off a lot better. Because the wife and I, we worked this way. She would have 2 jobs and I had 2 jobs. At the government, and then I worked at the Highlander Hotel as 10a waiter. Then they put me tapping beer. I was there for 9-1/2 years. I worked 40 hours with the government, 40 hours with the Highlander. She worked at the professional club as a waitress. Then she worked at various other jobs – liquor store, mail sorting, secretary. She also went to school at night and upgraded herself. She took bookkeeping and secretarial work, so she did quite well. But me, I never thought I'd ever get that far, but I did get my supervisors ticket. Like I say, at one time you didn't

need much education. All you have to be is just proud of what you are. You gotta be strong to stand on your own 2 feet.

Jan: I think that was true of all the miners in Drumheller. They had to be very strong people. There was a lot of adversity for those people. For one thing, there was a lot of bias and prejudice in the community. Against immigrants, particularly Slavic immigrants. Eastern European people – Russians, Ukrainians, Poles. Bohunks. That was the name they gave us.

Elsie: It wasn't so much that they were a minority. I think they were resourceful. I think maybe the Anglo Saxons were a bit envious that these people came and were hard working and made do. They went into the mines and worked, but they also probably had a vegetable garden that they grew, and chickens and cows. They were resourceful in that regard too, that they looked after themselves. They weren't depending on anybody else to give them milk or eggs. When I was growing up, we had cows. My brother was responsible for delivering milk. We had chickens, we had a garden. My parents were caretakers of the school and my dad worked in the mines. That's the way it was for most people. You went out and dug, and did what you had to do. It was an unspoken law in our household that we were going to university. My younger sister and myself. That's all there was to it. There was an unwritten law that we were going to university. My dad did not finish school, he got to grade 4. His father said, I'm the son of a slave and my son's not going to get any education. My father was forbidden to go to school back in Europe. That's what sent him to Canada. My father was working on his own back in Europe at the age of 7. He came to Canada and he said, my children are going to school. So both my sister and I came here to university. My mom and dad stayed in the valley and they market gardened. My mom and dad had a huge market garden, and my mother was renowned for her flowers and bedding plants. They were renowned for the vegetables they grew, especially peppers and tomatoes. Then the Atlas Mine decided they were going to open a museum and touring spot. My father was one of the few who had a fire boss's ticket, a supervisory capacity. So he took on this job in his 70s as a tour conductor into the Atlas Mine. He would take kids and adult tours. It was very popular at that time when the Atlas first opened into tourism. So my dad always said he was 53 years underground.

Victor: They're still going strong making souvenirs, little coal cars with coal in them. I put on a couple of bumpers. I got just about 200 done, so they'll be for sale in Atlas Coal Mine. I don't know what the price is going to be, but that's my contribution. They'll be down there by April. I'm there usually a couple of days out of a year, promoting, talking to people of what it was like. They got a blacksmith there, so I tell them how important the blacksmith was to the coalmining community. A lot of people think, what's he got to do that's so important? But all our tools were sharpened by the blacksmith, the picks were constantly sharpened with heat and they were tempered on the ends. He did all kinds of things. Any tool that you wanted to design, you just explain to the blacksmith and they made it for you no problem. Like I say, they were very important.

Jan: And there were earlier days when those blacksmiths had to make shoes for the ponies. The ponies were underground and they stayed there.

Victor: They brought them out for a couple of weeks of the year.

Jan: They were always half blind. I shouldn't say this, but we'd have these treasure hunts when we were kids. Run over to the Higrade Mine and pull the hair out of the ponies tails. That's just the nonsense we used to get into.

Victor: When I started, I started as a pusher in the Atlas Coalmine. What I had to do was push the empty in for the coalminer. The driver would go in with the pony, hook onto the load, and pull it out. Then it was up to me to make sure I put an empty car for the coalminer to load. We had 6 or 7 miners that were doing the same thing. You just made your rounds from one to the other all day long. He would pull the load out and you'd push the empty in. It strictly was on what your knowledge was. If I was more interested in setting up timbers and my knowledge was a lot better than somebody else's, you know how to secure a loose roof or something, we definitely I'd get that job. Or if I was more interested in air movement to supply the air into the working face of a miner, definitely they would go ahead and make sure I did that. I worked with my dad laying track. It was up to us to make sure that track was laid before the miner got back the next day. Sometimes we had to go dig through rock about that deep, and throw the rock off to the side and push the rails in. The miner would just... load it up. By the ton, yes. Well they were paid by the ton, by so much in advance, by how many timbers they had put up. But the miners would have to pay for powder, taps, and something else that came out of their wages.

Jan: That was my father's job. He didn't work underground that last few years he was in Drumheller, he was the check weighman. That meant he was up on the tip where they brought the coal car up, and they weighed it. He recorded the tonnage for each miner. They had a number, and he knew the name and the number. I remember him doing the sheets at home, totalling up what they had coming to them by the end of the week. He'd turn the sheets in. It wasn't done by computer then, it was all done by the good old manual hard weigh-in. They'd be paid by the ton. Then they would also deduct a certain amount, if I recall correctly, for the amount of rock they thought was in it. That was taken off.

(Tape 2)

Lydia: It wasn't until 1920 that he was able to afford to bring my mother and aunt over in 1925. Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to bring anybody over from the old country. The Ukraine. It was actually Poland then. So my mom and aunt came in 1925 because my grandfather was able to work in the mine and save a bit of money.

Elsie: My dad came to Canada in 1928, and he left my mother and older brother and sister behind in the Ukraine until 1936.

Lydia: From 1928 to '36. My grandfather came here in 1911, and he wasn't able to bring my mother and aunt until '25, 14 years.

Jan: There were lots of single men in Drumheller who had families in the Ukraine, and they had another family here. It wasn't a matter of immorality or anything else. It was just a fact of life, and they just simply could not afford to bring a family here.

Victor: That's right. There was a lot of families like that. Even the house we bought by the river, he was a single person but yet he had a wife and some kids in Hungary that couldn't come over.

Jan: There were lots of interesting things about community life in Drumheller. Remember Mrs. Brown had goats. I remember dad saying he went up there and he wasn't feeling very well. Mrs. Brown was going to look after him. Part again of this community thing. She was going to look after him. She said, you've got to drink this goats milk, it'll make you feel better. So he drank it, and had to run all the way home because he was sick. Four miles.

Lydia: I would never have given up that life in Drumheller. You supported each other. We were all in the same boat, no one was different. So to us it wasn't hardship, it was just life.

Jan: I don't know if my dad ever accepted it. It wasn't part of his philosophy to accept anything that was, but we lived with it. He liked being part of the community, he liked the life. But he sure wasn't going to sit back.

Victor: My dad, he didn't care what happened to me. If I was even working right alongside of him, that would be fine. But yet when I got married and promised myself that my kids will not be the same way I was. And believe me, they're not. Our youngest one, he's a fireman here in Calgary. Our second one, he's the manager of a drugstore 64th Ave. Our oldest son, he's a doctor at Strathmore. He's got himself a practise there. I wanted them to have more than I ever had.

Elsie: I think that went for just about everybody. They knew what they had come from and they wanted to make sure their children had something better than that.

Victor: Exactly. And it still goes on today. You want your kids to have more than you had. It's a never ending circle. You just wanna be better for later on.

Jan: I went to school in Drumheller. We came here in 1956, because the mine dad was working in was closed. It was at the Higrade at that time. The mine was closing, there was no lives for us there. And because of my father's political activity, nobody in Drumheller was going to hire him. That was a fact of life. In fact, nobody would hire my mother either, because of their relationship. So obviously, the whole lifestyle there for our family became more difficult, not only because the mines were closing but because of dad's political activity. People my mother went to school with in Drumheller, she went to the same school that I did, to the same teachers. But they crossed the railroad so they wouldn't have to talk to her. I think it was probably one of the better days of her life when we moved to Calgary. Because then she was able to go to work here, and dad found himself a job with Spot National Fruit. Things picked up for both of them, for my mother particularly.

Jan: Oh, a very big role. I think it played a very big role in the life of the valley in many ways. For us more so. I can recall being frightened out of my mind when the Rosenbergs were on trial. It was a topic of conversation, not only in our home but in the circle of people we associated with. We were quite young, and the impression that if that can happen to those people, that can happen to people that we know. Lydia was saying she was frightened about her dad going to work. Well I never experienced that, because by the time I was old enough to know, dad was working on the surface. It wasn't quite as dangerous as being underground. My uncle was underground. But because of his union activity and because of his political activity, and my dad always said he had a big mouth and that's why. They were part of the Welsh community to start with, my uncle and my dad. But they were ostracized from that as well, because they didn't fit the mould. My uncle tended to be a bit more social than my dad. My uncle was the protector and my dad was the mouth. It separated the community. Because Newcastle became the hotbed of radicalism. AT least that's the way I perceived it. Anybody around a coalmine, particular members of the union, was perceived as being in this Red camp and everybody else was in the other one. It did affect the way we chose our friends. Not only as adults, but in the way we chose our friends as kids. I can tell you a story. There was a young person I went to school with, and we became quite chummy to start with, like girls. But her father was an RCMP officer. Mine was on the other side of the fence. It happened that this fellow had been in the RCMP at the time, the Ottawa trek and had been in Regina, and had been injured in that attack. Right away that separated us. There was no way that this friendship

was going to go very far. It couldn't. Because of the atmosphere and the papers were always blaring about the Reds. My mother paid for it more than we did. It wasn't so bad for the kids, but it did affect the valley and the whole community. I think there was a split in the community that way too. There were those that were considered radicals and those who were not. I remember dad saying, we knew who the right wingers and left wingers were. There was more a defined line the. He was a rightwing SOB and you don't have anything to do with him. There wasn't any social intermingling, that was it. It was black and white. It affected the whole community that way.

Victor: We never picked sides. We stayed right down the middle. We just did what we had to do, and that's as far as it went. But going from one side to the other, we never did.

Jan: It was very difficult for everybody. But it did make a difference in terms of employment. It made a difference in terms of your social life. Everything was affected.

Lydia: My grandparents were on relief. They used to get clothes and shoes and groceries. My mother and dad were also on relief for a while too, because there was just no work. I can't recall that. I was born in '34, so I don't recall. I know my grandparents were on relief for sure. My grandfather was older and couldn't work anymore. No, I don't recall anything about the RCMP being involved in relief. But I knew my husband's parents, they were on relief here in town in Calgary. They would get a truckload of groceries for \$10. The truck used to deliver the groceries, there was so much of it for \$10. But I knew my grandparents were on relief.

Jan: My dad and mother were on relief in the late '30s. And my mother was responsible for looking after her younger brother and sister. That's the only way they could survive. My mother's mother died when she was 15. There were 3 younger. My dad was the only one working. My grandfather had been an employee of the city of Drumheller, but had arthritis so badly that he could barely walk. So there was my grandfather and my dad and mother and my mother's 3 younger siblings, and my uncle Dave all living in the same house. Then along came my sister and I. That's the number that were being supported on 2 coalminer salaries, and not working full time. And then they were blacklisted. So the Chinese market gardener really saved, not only 2 people, but a whole raft of others. Then the war came along and the 2 boys enlisted. One was killed in Italy, and the other one came home and raised hell in Drumheller for a couple years after he was discharged. It was a difficult life.

Lydia: The war is what created more jobs. The miners did really well during the war, because they worked all the time. It was a good time for the miners but not for people in Europe.

Victor:

You hear a lot about the hungry 30s. At least they had some sort of means of food. The garden. At least there was a place to grow or buy something, like a chicken, or swap. In Germany right through the war, you couldn't do nothing. You were just given a little ration. I remember getting a little bowl of turnip soup, and there might be one turnip in it.

Then one slice of bread, and that was your ration for the day. I had twin sisters, and they both died after the war because they typhus. I used to go and looked through the bombed out buildings, and anything that looked like food and was good to eat, I'd take that to the bunkers so the kids could be fed. I did all kinds of things just to survive.

Exactly. We were there for one cause, and that's to make a better life for ourselves. That's what everybody was doing.

Jan: I don't remember the process exactly. But I knew he was hired by the miners, not by the company. He worked for the miners, to make sure they were being paid fairly for what they mined, for what was being brought out of there with their number. His political activity didn't matter much at that point to the coalminers. They were all in that coalmine together. There were various political opinions there, but dad worked for all of them. That was his job. He just made sure they were paid fairly. There were lots of disputes of course, and he was known to be outspoken if there was a dispute. Everybody always knew he came down on the side of the miner every time. Right, wrong or in between, it didn't matter. He was a coalminer, he was right. He'd bring the sheet home at night and total up the tonnages for the day. He'd take it back and post it on the wash house wall in the morning. So they could check it first. If there was a disagreement, then it would be checked again, and then it was handed into the office.

Victor: A lot of times there was a little bit of sly work that was done by other miners. You hang a chit on your car, somebody will come along and take your chit off and put theirs on. Then you were short 5 or 10 ton or something. You're scratching your head and saying, how can that be? I already marked down so many cars that went out, and you're paying me just so much. Any discrepancies like that, they dealt with later on. They would mark the cart on the bottom, because the carts would go into a hoop and be turned over. They would mark underneath the cart a number so if somebody switched the tags when it's being dumped it would show you just exactly.

Jan: There's a song about that. Keep your hand upon the dollar and your eye upon the scale. That was his job.

Victor: A lot of times things like that did happen. But they were dealt with by the individuals or the company would let them go. ...

Jan: It had to be somebody that the miners totally trusted. It certainly was a whole different system of looking after salary. Scott National Fruit. He did. He worked for Scott National Fruit, the salary was terrible. It was always nightshift. He was always looking for something better. That's when he started at the Calgary General Hospital. My mother started there shortly after he did too. He started at the Calgary General as a porter. As a porter, he was all over the hospital. He knew everybody.

Lydia: I started in 1956, '57.

Jan: So dad didn't start at the General until '57 or so. He knew everybody in the hospital. Wasn't there very long before he was the secretary of the union. Couldn't stay away, you see.

Lydia: Art was very respected for having an opinion. They used to always be fighting about union wages. But Art was quite respected by the business managers at the Calgary General.

Jan: I think as a spokesman, he never went looking to cause trouble. He went to settle it. We were talking the other day with somebody about strike action. Dad didn't believe in strike action just for the sake of hauling people out of their jobs. It was always a last resort, and he negotiated on that level always. After he worked as the secretary of the union, then he became a rep for the National Union of Public Employees and with CUPE after that. He was very proud of that job. Till he retired.

Victor: A lot of times once you've been in those upper positions and you change jobs, it doesn't take long before you climb the ladder again. Because of something that's noticeable by the management. I guess you just stand out. They just make sure you go up.

Jan: He made sure he was noticed by the management alright.

Victor: Like I say, in fairness, if they know that you are doing your best and you are 50/50, not one way or the other, you're gonna get yourself promoted higher and higher.

Jan: That's an interesting point. Because when dad worked in the mines, and I think this was true of most coalminers, he didn't slack off because he didn't agree with the management. He worked hard. When he went to work for Scott National, he worked. When he went to the hospital, he went there with the idea he was going to put in a good day's work, that's all there was to it. Once he started with the union, he was there not just for himself but for everybody else as well.

Victor: A lot of people hate the job but they look at their job. They're just bumps on a log. It goes on today. In stead of saying, I'm proud of what I do, and put your energy into it. But a lot of people they don't. Those are the people that are just going to be pushed off to the side. They live they way they want to and you keep chugging along.

Jan: It certainly was a lot better here. For my mother, it was a totally different life for her. She got to know people here, she had lots of friends here, there was nobody worried about her background. But my dad's mouth was always going. But you know something? I think that's why we never grew up with a fear of what he was saying. It didn't affect us in that way. We were very proud of the fact that he stood up for people. A lot of the stuff we were hearing in the papers didn't come across to us that way. The people we knew were good honest people, and worked hard and did things. Like John Brown and Lydia's stepfather, and there were a group of others around who were good decent hardworking people who just thought it should be a different world for everybody else. So all this McCarthyism, the stuff you heard about how evil everybody was, there were people who

believed that. And that's the way they viewed a lot of these people. But they were decent good people, and very honest in their desires for better life for people. Also, Don McKay was the mayor of Calgary at the time when he first started negotiating on behalf of the city workers. Don McKay was from Drumheller, his family was from the valley. He knew dad from way back and he refused to negotiate with him. He was forced to. But he refused to begin with. McCarthyism followed us in. But again, dad went out at 5 in the a.m. to jobsites. He'd get all dressed up, and mother would say, where are you going this morning? He'd say, I've gotta go out, they're digging a ditch somewhere and there's a big fight going on. He'd get up and get ready and go, didn't matter what time it was. That had to be the way it was, because they were paying his wages. It was his responsibility. You couldn't drag the union out of me now if you wanted to. Somebody said that to me the other day, you support anything as long as it's union. I said, that's right.

Victor: I still think the early days was much better, because everybody had respect for anybody that was on the upper level. Like policemen, they had a nice respect, because we knew what he was supposed to be doing. Doctors were the same way. Anybody with the union that was on the upper level, they were respected because they were doing something to improve your conditions. But now days all the respect is gone.

Jan: Dad used to say, the union's only as good as its membership. As a matter of fact, there used to be a fellow who came to the valley once a week to teach a course. Came in on the Greyhound in the morning and left on the Greyhound at night, and gave his lessons in between. Always had dinner with us. He was telling my dad a story about being on the bus with an RCMP officer that was leaving the valley. This fellow was telling him, I'm so happy to be getting the hell out of Drumheller. This is in the '50s. I'm so happy to be getting outa here. He said, why are you happy to be leaving. He said, well you know, those guys that are posted in Banff, they get their pictures taken with the tourists, everybody things they're wonderful. In Drumheller they spit on the street at you. I was true. They didn't have any respect for the Mounties because the Mounties were used against the miners at times. If they're used against you, the mistrust is always there, and it was there. But everything changed, and the valley's not like that anymore.

Elsie: Very much a tourism place now. Not so much agriculture. The institution in Drumheller. A lot of employees at the institution. That's the major activity that's going on there, as far as people. People are involved in tourism there because of the Tyrell Museum, it's world renown. And the institution has a lot of employees. I still have a fair bit of contact with the valley, because my sister is still down there. So I'm down in the valley every 3 weeks. When my dad was alive it was every 2 weeks because he was a widower for 20 years. Because I was the only one that was single and didn't have my own immediate family, I felt it was my responsibility to look after him. Mind you, he was luckily very healthy and stayed independent till the end. So I was at the valley even more so then. But the valley's changed, it really has. Unfortunately, some of the residents of Drumheller now are relatives of the boys up on top. So you've got your population that's a little on the shady side, lazy and this kind of thing.

Jan: I've heard people say, and I wouldn't know. After we left, I only went back once in a while to visit. But I've heard people say that the construction of the penitentiary really changed the whole atmosphere of the town.

Jan: When we left the valley there were a lot of people who actually moved their houses from the valley to places like Albert Park here in Calgary. Put the house on the truck and brought it here. Albert Park, I think some of those houses are still there.

Victor: I remember back in 1950. Colin ? had a store. They moved it up into Forest Lawn. He was the one that saved me from Julio. Julio had a chip on his shoulder, and I didn't know how to talk English. He was beating the heck out of me. It was a good thing that old man ? ... I thought he was going to kill me.

Jan: There was a kid in our neighbourhood, he was older than us, early 20s. He stole everything he saw. He came to our house one night and said the Mounties were chasing him. My dad said, what did you do this time? He stole such and such, and just needed a place to stay for a couple of days. Guess who's staying in our house? Characters everywhere. My sister and I spent half our life sleeping on the floor. There was either somebody political or somebody from the union or some organizer around sleeping in our bed, and we were on the floor. It was a good life, in lots of ways. A very rich life in lots of ways. Rich in experiences.

Lydia: I don't remember having nothing on the table. We always had food. That's the first thing my parents looked after, was food. We always had good food. We didn't have a lot of other things. We didn't have cars or phones or TVs.

Victor: I remember how many ladies there would scrub their kitchen floor and then wax it real shiny. Then they'd put paper all over it. ... A lot of times they'd put a partition across the living room and the kitchen. But they never use it.

Jan: Somebody was always coming home for supper. Didn't matter. Put a little water in the soup. My mother always had somebody extra. I don't recall this myself, but my dad told the story about this fellow they brought home in the early part of the war. We lived fairly close to the railway tracks. This fellow jumped off the boxcar. He was very sick, and dad brought him home. They put him to bed and called old Dr. Whitmore to come to the house. They had to put him in the hospital. The guy had acute appendicitis. So they hauled him into the hospital. Dr. Whitmore fixed him up and I don't know who paid for it. There sure as hell was no medicare. But Whitmore fixed him up and they sent him on his way. Dad thought at first the guy was just hungry. He was on the boxcar. But he was very sick. The Ukrainian Hall was the centre of activity.

Victor: A lot of times we sat at home and watched the noise coming out of the radio, tap dancing. Hockey Night in Canada on the radio. There was dances just about every weekend. And booze was flowing freely.

Elsie: I remember mom and dad used to go to East Coulee a lot, and they'd have fruit dances. It was a Hungarian custom. It was a community dance. I was just a kid and didn't go. But part of the deal was that you could go home with clusters of fruit that were hung from the ceiling.

Lydia: Around our hall in Newcastle it was all baby buggies. Everybody's buggy was sitting there, and they'd bring the children into the hall. They wouldn't have babysitters at all.

Lydia: Drumheller Valley had a very strong Slavic population. There was a very strong choir, orchestra, drama group. An instructor would come once a week and conduct choir rehearsals and orchestra rehearsals. I started playing the mandolin. I took lessons for 2 years and graduated into the orchestra. You got to play in the orchestra after you learned. That was the kind of social activity that was going on. Very much family oriented, community based.

Victor: My mother made sure that we were in tap dancing and into the choir. We thought it was real sissy stuff. There was a guy named Johnny Loft in East Coulee there. He was an ex boxer, so he'd go down in the basement of the Hungarian Hall and we'd have a session of boxing. We were pretty good. My brother George, he came down one time ??? That name stuck to this day. Even my mother, they wouldn't call her Mrs. Avramenko, they called her Mrs. Buboio.

Jan: East Coulee was a Hungarian community. Their music was with a Hungarian group. Newcastle was Ukrainian, so everything revolved around the Ukrainian Hall.

Victor: They had the Legion there, hotels.

Jan: It was interesting, because when we were going through those books Elsie has one ... That one belongs to Lydia, the Hills of Home. Elsie was talking about piano lessons, that's what we did too. My dad wanted us to play, so that's what we started doing. We had a music teacher that was big on doing things in the community. So we'd all get dressed up, and there were lots of kids from Newcastle who played violin. The Parama girls and the Marchuks, we all played and we had a little orchestra. But it isn't in those books. There's no pictures. It was a big part of the community. It was an annual event. There was a music recital with Peggy Webster.

Victor: At that time a lot of people had a lot of pride in themselves to donate something like that. They weren't looking for money. That was something they just loved doing. It's part of their makeup. They never thought of it as a money making scheme or whatever, because that was not on their minds. It was just to get out and get the kids busy somehow or other.

Jan: My dad used to make me cross the street rather than walk by the bar. My uncle was behind and if I didn't...

Victor: At that time I remember the women would go in one door and the men into the other. It was divided.

Jan: I was on my first picket line outside the bar in Drumheller. Four years old. They were picketing the one on the corner, the white house. I was 4 years old on the picket line, my first one. Now I'm going on another one in a couple of days. I gotta get my 100% supporter group button on and take myself down there. The whole thing is just part of us. You have to be involved.