

Interview protocol Delia Crespo, December 1, 2009

Thanks to Ines Garcia-Keim for her translation work!

Interviewer: Christina Ziegler-McPherson

Interviewee: Delia Crespo, 1312 Bloomfield St., Hoboken, N.J.

Place: 1312 Bloomfield St., Hoboken, N.J.

Transcription made by Christina Ziegler-McPherson, 2009.

Translation by Ines Garcia-Keim

Consent: do you give your consent to record this interview/conversation for the purpose of preserving the history of the Puerto Rican community in Hoboken?

Crespo: Yes, I do.

When did you come from Puerto Rico?

Crespo: I was born in Puerto Rico.

Where in Puerto Rico?

Crespo: In a small town in the country, Ladis, Puerto Rico, but I grew up in Arecibo but at the age of 2 years my parents moved down and I lived there until I was 17 and then I came to this country.

May I ask when you were born?

Crespo: 9-11-37.

You said you were 17 when you came here, was that to Hoboken?

Crespo: Yes.

Where in town did your family live, what street?

Crespo: 12th and Willow, 1128 Willow, but when I came I was living with my aunt at 1215 Willow.

When did she (your aunt) come to Hoboken?

Crespo: My aunt? She came way before and then after a year, my mother and other sister came. My mother is around 50, 52 years over here in this country. But then I got married later on, and then I had my son, when my son was 17 I moved down to Puerto Rico again because my husband wanted to be with his family, especially his mother, and then since then I'm in and out, in and out, it's been six years now that I'm here again. Back and forth, but six years because I came with my mother for a visit and then she got sick and I have to stay here.

When your aunt came, was she the first person in your family to come?

Crespo: A few aunts, yes. At that time I had one aunt and one uncle in New York and one of my aunts in Hoboken.

Do you remember what year they arrived?

Crespo: In '58 I was married, so around two or three years before. It was in the Fifties, I know that. And everything was very hard for the Spanish people, it was very, very hard, they don't want us, I remember (laughs).

When you came here, did you go to school at all?

Crespo: No.

In Puerto Rico, when you went to school, did you go to a public or parochial school?

Crespo: Public school, of which I'm proud, because we learned a lot.

When you think of the Puerto Rican community in Hoboken in the 1950s and 1960s, what do you think of: (e.g., Tootsie Roll, St. Joseph's, job, housing services, community events, etc)

Crespo: It was very hard in every way, it was a lot of work, but it was very hard because of the communication, it wasn't that good, and as I said before, they don't like us, because they don't want to rent us an apartment, they thought we were so bad, I mean, we are not saints but in our community we have good and bad and then after, through the years, probably they learned, or I don't know how to say this, *cola comunicacion, como terido portando-*

Socorro Rivera: The communication and the way we behaved.

Crespo: The way we behave and then the community grows and then this way, we show them that we are not the kind of people they think we are. It's not that we are all good,

but we are hard working people, we work for everything, we never take welfare, we always work, so they think ... 'most of them come over here to live on welfare.'

What kinds of jobs did you have when you came here?

Crespo: Sewing always. My father was a presser, a coat presser, yes.

Did you specialize in a particular type of sewing?

Crespo: Yes, (unintelligible) machine, but I used to run three kinds of machines, I used to do hems and the seams and the straight stitch, and the middle.

Which factories did you work at?

Crespo: I remember I used to work in Diana Neatware and I used to work in another factory where Wallace [School] was but I don't remember the name, there was a factory there, Lucy [Crespo's sister] knows the name, it was shirts, only shirts.

And the people who worked there, were they mostly Puerto Rican or ...

Crespo: All kinds, all kinds of people.

Was it only women or mixed (gender)?

Crespo: Mixed.

Is your family Roman Catholic?

Crespo: Yes.

When you came here, what church did your family attend?

Crespo: I remember I went to St. Ann's and I went to Our Lady of Grace but because of the way of the Mass, we didn't catch everything, we didn't follow the way we followed in Spanish. Now, after the years, I can go to an American (Mass) and I can follow but in the beginning, it wasn't like that.

How often did you attend?

Crespo: We used to go every Sunday.

Would you call your family religious?

Crespo: Yes.

In what ways? (e.g., attending Mass, saying rosaries at home, going to confession, participating in festivals, church organizations)

Crespo: In the way that they used to go to the church, the way they raised us up. We don't pray every day, but on special days we used to pray, and everything you have, you ask God, you know, you kneel, my mother was (gesturing), my father, and we learned from them.

So most of your religious education came from your parents?

Crespo: Of course, yes, of course.

After 1965 (Vatican II), did your church start having Masses in Spanish?

Crespo: At the beginning, when he came to Hoboken, Father Eugene, Edward Zwahl was his name but we used to call him Father Eugene, there wasn't a lot of people, there were a lot of Spanish but there weren't a lot of people who used to go to church. At the beginning we used to do the rosary on Sunday because there weren't too many, but after a while, there were a lot of people, so he started doing the Mass on Sunday at St. Joseph's.

So you also started going to St. Joseph's?

Crespo: Yes.

About when did you start attending there?

Crespo: '58, '57, '56, around '56, and I got married there, and my son was christened there also.

And the priest who married you was Father Eugene or another one?

Crespo: Father Eugene, yes. And I have so many memories of him, because he used to help a lot of people, a lot of people, and he was so good and then the community, they get together and we have the Spanish Community Center at 224 Washington, on the second floor, yes. I remember we had a lot of room there and I remember that he bought or got sewing machines, around two, so the people who don't know how to sew, they used to go there and there was somebody else who helped them and the people who had to sew but they don't have sewing machines, they used to go there.

Was that just for home sewing or to get a job or both?

Crespo: Well, for both. Yes. He used to help a lot. We used to have all the birthday parties there, we had so many couples that he married, so many couples that came out from the Spanish Community Center, we had *Hijas de la Maria*, how do you say?

Rivera: The Daughters of Mary.

Crespo: The Daughters of Mary in church, there were a lot of them.

What were some other ways that you said he (Zwahl) helped people?

Crespo: He used to make meetings with some kinds of people, and if they find out that somebody needs for the rent or somebody needs to go to some place where they don't know how to talk in English, if he can't go, he always finds someone to go with them and he was always helping everybody, everybody. In the summer time he used to take us to Lake Welch or to the shrines. I remember that, I went there when I was married, it was less than a year that I was married that we went there.

When you think about attending church here versus in Puerto Rico, how was attending church different here than from Puerto Rico?

Crespo: Well, in Puerto Rico, being that we are Spanish, the scenes, we praise God ... it's not a little different, it's because we are from there, it sounds a little different, because over here, it's more silent, not in Puerto Rico (laughs), the Masses there especially now at Christmas time, oh boy, so nice.

Do you recall any tensions between Puerto Ricans and other ethnic groups in the churches? (e.g., one group not wanting a Spanish Mass or not wanting Puerto Ricans to use the main building for services, insisting on a basement or other facility?)

Crespo: What do you mean by tensions?

Conflicts between people of different ethnicities over whether services should be in Spanish or English or Italian, should one group get the use of one building versus another building.

Crespo: No, because we used to go to Mass when it was, at the hour when it was in Spanish, I guess it was 10:30 on Sundays, that was totally in Spanish. But it doesn't matter if you have to go to listen to an American one, because it's only one God.

Do you remember ever attend the Fiesta of St. John the Baptist in New York in the 1950s and 1960s?

Crespo: No, I never went there. My mother didn't allow us to go out of the city and without anybody, I mean, us alone, no, no, no (laughs). She was always after us.

As you know, we have three Italian festivals in Hoboken, all tied to religious festivals, the Feast of St. Ann, the Madonna dei Martiri, and St. Joseph's fest; why do you think there is not a Feast of St. John's or another Puerto Rican festival here?

Crespo: They don't have St. John's but they do a feast in summer time, the Puerto Ricans.

Rivera: But that's not a Catholic festival.

Crespo: No, it's not religious, no. Well, I don't know why. Now St. Joseph's keeps doing the Mass in Spanish, they have another priest now. It's a big group there.

Were there any other Puerto Rican festivals or church celebrations, community-wide events to celebrate saints days or anything like that that you can remember?

Crespo: Over here, but in my house, the saint days, the soul and the saint days we pray at night, always, and I keep doing it. Even if I'm alone, I don't care, I take my rosary, I always pray for them, that's a tradition. Like I remember for Christmas Eve, no, New Year's Eve, my mother used to open the window and throw water out, for good luck, or something like that. Those are traditions. I don't follow it, I don't do that, I'm not that crazy, they'll call a cop (laughs).

Was anyone in your family active in *Cursillos de Cristiandad*? In the men's group?

Crespo: The men's group? *Cursillos*, my father, yes.

What kinds of things did he do with them?

Crespo: They used to go to meetings and they used to go away, to retreat.

And for how long was he involved?

Crespo: I really don't know, a few years he was involved in that, because at that time I moved on to Puerto Rico and came only to visit. When he was alive I was living in Puerto Rico.

Was your husband not involved (in *Cursillos*)?

Crespo: Yes but in Puerto Rico. Over here he used to go but he never got involved in retreat and things like that. In Puerto Rico he used to go.

I'm wondering why St. Joseph's became such a center for Puerto Ricans here in town, given that it's not near where many Puerto Ricans lived?

Crespo: It was because of Father Eugene, who kept the people together, and because of the Catholic Center, so everybody, most of the people who went to the Catholic Center used to go and they kept bringing their families and friends, and we were a big, big group, right? Big, big group, the church on Sundays was full, full.

Did you know any non-Catholic (i.e., Protestant) Puerto Ricans growing up?

Crespo: Over here? Not really.

What about in Puerto Rico?

Crespo: In Puerto Rico, yes. I have my uncle's sister-in-law, she's a nun, and my aunt, the youngest sister of my mother, she is almost a nun, I don't know why she became a nun, because she's very, very Catholic, very, very. We thought she would go to become a nun, but then she got married, she got in love and then she got married, but she ... on my mother's side of the family they are very, very Catholic and on my husband's side of the family they are very, very Catholic, on my father's side, before, they was Catholic and then they keep changing. They go to *Pentacostales*. *Tengo tias Pentecostales, pero en el lado de mi familia de mi marido y de mi mama, son bien Catolicos, pero bien Catolicos.*

Rivera: *Ella quiere saber si tu conocias a alguien, a algunas personas que no eran Catolicas en este tiempo.*

Crespo: *Que se involucraron en el Catolicismo?*

Rivera: *No, que no eran Catolicos, que si tu conocias de otras religiones, personas de otras religiones.*

Crespo: I have Pentecostal aunts, but on my family's side, on my husband's and my mother's, they are very Catholic, very Catholic.

Rivera: She wants to know if you knew anyone, any people that were not Catholic at that time.

Crespo: That got involved in Catholicism?

Rivera: No, that were not Catholic, if you knew of other religions, people of other religions.

Crespo: We didn't relate much to people like that [Protestants]. Let's see, we used to know a lot of people who didn't go to church, but most of the people we are related go to church.

When you became involved with the Daughters of Mary, what attracted you to that?

Crespo: Well, when I was in Puerto Rico, I used to go, then we were so young, so many young girls, a lot of them, so we became the Daughters of Mary, a group, they are in my wedding pictures.

Did you stay in touch with them?

Crespo: Well, when I was here, yes, but after a while, everybody was getting married, some of them moved out of town, you know, most of them, some of them are dead already.

Can you think of any Puerto Rican social or cultural organizations here in town that were separate from the Church?

Crespo: I remember but I don't think it was Puerto Rican, they were Spanish, over here they used to play dominos on 14th Street, I mean on Willow Avenue between 13th and 14th Street, they used to play dominos, men, yes. But they were Spanish, because there was a friend of ours who used to go to the house and he used to play there.

I'm curious about other Puerto Rican institutions, organizations here in town separate from the Church. It seems the Catholic Center was very, very important but I'm wondering about labor unions or the Democratic Party or other political organizations, if you can remember.

Crespo: Jimon, I remember (unintelligible) I remember the name, the Puerto Rican association or something like that, but I don't remember the name, Jimon [Muñoz], he used to be involved in that.

What kinds of things did they used to do?

Crespo: I don't know, I know it was a Puerto Rican association.

So it sounds like most of your social activities were through the Church.

Crespo: Yes, yes. As I told you, my mother did not let us go no place, no place, even when I was engaged. I used to go to the Catholic Center or anyplace with my younger sister. If she didn't go with us, I didn't go to that place. My mother was so strict.

So, how did you meet your husband?

Crespo: Walking to work (laughs). He used to come down to 13th Street and I was walking down Willow and that man used to say to me every morning, 'good morning.' That's the way I met him (laughs). 'Good morning.'

Maybe he was afraid to say anything more?

Crespo: No, because he was going that way and I was coming this way, and it happened almost every morning that we met, but then I met him for real at your (to Rivera) husband's family, at Eddie's house, yes, because they used to know each other and he used to stop there, so when I go there, I really met him, yes.

When did his family come to Hoboken, your husband's family?

Crespo: My husband's family never came to Hoboken.

Oh, so he came by himself.

Crespo: Yes, he came by himself.

So how old was he?

Crespo: He is five years older than me, probably he was around 20, 19 or 20, something like that, he was very young.

What kind of work did he do?

Crespo: Anything. He started working in antennas, in antennas, he was in Madison, I guess, it was antennas for the TV and then he works at Tootsie Roll, he works a lot of years there and then he went to become a presser in West New York and then they moved that out to Ridgefield and he kept working there as a presser. They kept moving and moving to where it's a little bit more money, they keep moving, he worked around 19 years as a presser.

I don't have any other questions, if you can think of anything else about your church experience I would love to hear about them.

Crespo: Well, the only good memories I have of Father Eugene was that he was so sweet to us, he was strict but he was sweet and he was always looking for a reason to have a party for us, like say every month or every two months and he would always follow us with the camera, that's why we have a lot of pictures in St. Joseph's Church, they have a lot of albums and I know [Angel] Padilla, he's the one involved with those pictures.

Did Father Eugene know a lot about the church in Puerto Rico, in terms of what kinds of saint's days, etc.

Crespo: Oh yes, he knew that, and he used to visit us in the house, he used to go, let's say on Sundays, to my mother's house, when I got married, he used to go to my house also.

Is that typical for a priest?

Crespo: Well, yes, because he wants to know and to see how the family works.

Rivera: He also used to travel back and forth a lot, he went to Puerto Rico.

Crespo: Yes, he went to Puerto Rico and he used to have a lot of people who loved him, since he came here and he helped and we know him and he was with us for so many years and after a while, it was that they celebrated one of his birthdays, I was in Puerto Rico and didn't come, and he was surprised, it was a surprise party, it was a big, big party.

Rivera: People came from all over.

Crespo: From all over, I didn't go either because I was at that time living in Puerto Rico and I couldn't come at that time, but it was a big party.

And this was when, in the 1960s, 1970s?

Crespo: No, way before.

Rivera: The birthday party? No, it was after, I would say maybe...

Crespo: Maybe the '90s or 80s, yes.

Rivera: He was up in age, I know.

Crespo: He died and I didn't see him, they told me, but I didn't have the chance to see him, he was in Newark at that time. But I remember him, he was like a blessing that he came down to Hoboken because he could stay in the church with the American or Italian, he was Polish, but he just came to help the Spanish community, he was very good.

Anything else? I'm sorry I don't have more questions.

Crespo: I remember so many couples that got married there, so many, many, many.

[end]

Hoboken Historical Museum catalog information

2. archives catalog 2010.019.0001.02

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Single cassette tape; dubbed to digital file.

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