

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Wallace A. Witkowski  
September 13, 1990  
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## **PREFACE**

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Wallace A. Witkowski, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on September 13, 1990 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview cannot be used for sale in the Museum Shop. The interview cannot be used by a third party for creation of a work for commercial sale.

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**WALLACE A. WITKOWSKI**  
**September 13, 1990**

01:00:50

Q: Would you tell me your name please?

A: Uh. My name is Wallace A. Witkowski.

Q: What was the name you were born with?

A: I was given a name of \_\_\_\_\_. (ph?)

Q: And where and when were your born?

A: I was born in Kielce on January 12, 1928.

Q: Can you tell us first about your parents and what they did?

A: My father was a chemical engineering. (Clearing throat) And he worked before the war in the petroleum industry which was concentrated in Poland, southeastern region. My mother was a elementary school teacher and...uh...my childhood was I think characterized by the very few years during which my parents lived together because of the economic conditions in Poland. Uh...My father had a job in one town. My mother was assigned to teach in a school in another part of Poland and it was not until 2 years before the war when we were finally together.

Q: What did that mean for you? Where were you living as a very young child?

A: Well...uh...I spent my childhood in...uh...a little town...uh...village of Vilena, in Kielce region which is about 20 kilometers east of Kielce. My mother taught in the 7th Grade elementary school in the village. And only during the summers and occasionally during the holidays I remember seeing my father. I had a nanny, a village woman, who took care of me when mother taught until I went to school at the age of 6 which was...required special permission because children were not sent to school until they were 7 in those days.

Q: Why were you sent so young?

01:03:01

A: I guess I was able to read and...and was anxious to learn and...uh...but I guess they let me. (Laughing)

Q: What was those early years like? What was life like for you?

A: Uh...It was...uh...a very interesting life from the point of view of...uh...feeling, missing my father without realizing that I missed my father. Living in a village that was populated by...uh...typical Polish farmers, peasants, but curiously enough, there were several Jewish families that lived in the village. And one of the most curious things that remained with me is that there would be some of them who were farmers, along with Polish farmers. In one particular part of the village there was...uh...a family named Koch (ph) a Polish family, farming and right next to them was a Jewish named Katz (ph) and farming also. And, of course, only later that Koch (ph) and Katz (ph)...the Cat... the same name. And there were few Jewish...little Jewish stores that were...that were in the village. And...uh...but the village was obviously predominantly Polish. My childhood was exploring such things as...as baking potatoes in the fields in the fall after the harvest, going with other little boys and finding potatoes that people forgot to pick or didn't...missed them and baking them in the...in the field, burning my lips and on hot potatoes. To this day, my favorite food. (Chuckle) (Pause) I had a younger sister, Helena. No. Marga. Uh...The strongest memories are of holidays. Christmas tree. My father pretending to talk to the angel because in Polish Catholic tradition, it was the angel that brought the gifts at Christmas time. St. Nicholas came on December 6 and put things under the pillows of good children. Bad children got little twigs. We got both. So it was...uh...a rather confusing message that we were getting. I guess we were getting a message that we were alright, but we were not perfect.

Q: What happened as the war grew closer? You became older. Uh...As you became a young teenager, where did you go to school?

01:06:01

A: Well, I went to school in the village until 1937 and in 1937, after a long struggle, my parents managed to obtain a permission from the Polish...pre-War Polish authorities that my mother could be transferred and could teach in the same town in which my father was working. Uh...A rather unbelievable situation for us today in America, but it was common place in Poland. So in 1937, we moved from Vilena, the village near Kielce and we moved to Boleslawiece, which was a sort of a equivalent of Houston, Texas, of...of the United States. And we...there I lived with my father for the remaining 2 years before the war broke out. And there I went to a private elementary school which was called \_\_\_ (ph). And...uh...finished the last grade which I believe was 6th and took my entrance examination to what was called gymnasium, beginning of high school, roughly equivalent in the United States. And that's when the war broke out in September 1, 1939.

Q: Tell us about it, will you?

A: About a year...about a month before, obviously...uh...the adults were aware of what was

going on and we children were becoming slowly aware of the gathering clouds. And my father was a reserve...uh...uh...officer. He was a first lieutenant...I guess lieutenant in the Polish army, and in August...uh...the reserve company in that he was part of went on maneuvers. I was 11 and a half, and that was the last time I saw him until I saw him in the United States in January 1949. He never came back. The war broke out. He was fighting. Uh...Of course, we didn't know what was going to happen and about the tenor of the pre-war Polish press was...uh...we will fight the Nazis. We will not let them take over the country. So little did we know how powerful Nazis armies were. And the war broke out and...uh...(sigh) within a few days, first waves of refugees started coming,...telling hair raising stories about atrocities committed on the population by the Germany army, by the indiscriminate bombing, by the German air force of crowded roads filled with refugees, with...with men, women, children, possessions, animals.

01:09:11

Uh...It was extremely scary. It...Many times I said to my friends who are questioning me about this period that my childhood ended on September 1, 39. Uh...Within couple weeks, the threat of the advancing German armies were so great that all the able bodied men who otherwise were not in the armies started drifting east to escape the advancing German armies. To escape...to possibly join the Polish army somewhere. And that's where...I forget the date, but obviously it's known to history...uh...suddenly as...as.. as we realized we were stabbed in the back by the Soviet armies marching into Poland from the east and completely...uh.. destroying whatever little resistance there was to...to the advancing German forces. Only then we learned about the Molotov/Ribbontrop (ph) pact, dividing Poland and within a couple days after this event, the Germans marched into Boleslawiece and...uh..for some reason I remember the...the day very vividly because that was the day that I had to an optometrist to pick up my first pair of glasses. And they were little beady little things...uh..but I had to wear them and I walked out of the optometrist's shop and the sidewalk kind of looked crooked, but people were pointing out to...to the advancing...marching German. Actually men...Germans didn't march. They were riding trucks, and their green uniforms. People were reaching out to them, and the Germans were throwing cigarettes. That was my first impression of the German army. Uh...Within time that I cannot determine and now in retrospect I know that it was pursuant to some agreement between the Russians and the Germans. The Germans withdrew and the Soviet troops moved in. They were...uh...they were shabby looking, and they were...they were terribly looking...uh...neglected by our standards, un...unused to western facilities. Uh...Immediately in ...in private homes, Russian authorities quartered some officers or some other people.

01:12:07

They had to be explained about toilet bowls and things like this. They didn't know what they were for.

Q: What about you?

A: I guess the overwhelming feeling was of fear for my father, fear for what's going to happen to us. I had forgotten until a few days before our interview, as I started thinking about those years and those times, how terribly fear dominated our lives were. How easy it was to control whole populations by terror in those days. And I as a 12 year old kid was simply scared of what's going to happen to us. But as soon as the Soviets walked in, they ostentatiously opened the schools again. And we were...the same teachers were permitted to continue to teach and we were allowed to return to school, encouraged to return to school. New subjects were introduced. Russian. Ukrainian since this part of Poland was...uh...a majority of population was Ukrainian. And we were...back in school. Now in retrospect I see how terribly...uh...disturbed I was by the events because my grades plummeted. I was bring nothing but Ds and Cs from school, and I was an A student before. Uh...Psychologists will tell you this is the first sign that something is wrong with a kid when he doesn't get good grades in school. Uh...But obviously we were in...in...in great fear for what's going to happen. In the meantime, we received a post card from our father saying that he is interned in a little town in Hungary called Yur (ph) where Polish armies that after they could no longer fight the Germans and Soviets, they crossed to Hungary and were interned there under rather benign conditions because Hungarians, even though the government was collaborating, with the Nazis, the...the population...Hungarians were friends. We were permitted by the authorities to send a wire to my father...in German, and to this day I remember the text of the wire. Gesei Gesunt (ph). We are healthy. We are well. That's all we were permitted to say in that wire. And...uh...that's all we heard from my father for...for a very, very long time.

01:15:01

Uh...In the meantime, the Russian school continued. My mother was teaching...uh...sometimes some of our teachers had to be one lesson ahead of what they were teaching us. But we heard rumors that this is not going to last, this peace between the Germans and the Russians, although the Russians dismissed this propaganda and didn't...didn't allow it to...to...to be officially stated. And...uh...I may not recall anything from that period, except that I, of course, had many Jewish friends in school. And uh, we were so involved in our own little world. Uh...The boys were talking about sex serupticiously. We were organizing poetry circles. Uh...We were exchanging letters. We had school mail where we would write letters to each other and..uh.. And then (pause) in June of 41, Hitler attacked Russia. And within a day or 2, Soviets withdrew from the city, but first blowing up and devastating most of the important facilities in the city, such as a power house and a lot of other installations. And the German, Nazis returned. And that is really when the terror started in earnest. The rumors started circulated that the Nazis are going to declare a...a day of liberty quote unquote for the Ukrainian population to settle the score with the Jewish population. And to our horror one day came and suddenly there were pogroms everywhere with the Ukrainian peasants coming into town and beating and murdering Jewish families and...and...uh..and we, of course, stayed home petrified and

just didn't get out. Uh...At that time, the economic situation also changed. We started feeling a dearth of food and supplies. We started getting hungry. Everything was disrupted. The...the normal functioning of the society was reduced to the minimum and everything was being...uh..collected, confiscated by the Nazi authorities to help their war machine drive into Russia. (Sigh)

01:18:07

I heard numerous stories of what happened to my colleagues. Uh...I do not recall the details. It was too scary to even listen to, but I heard about my...one of my friends, Romack (ph), whose parents and...and sister were killed by the...and I'm not even sure by whom. And then he pleaded with them, "Kill me too. You killed the rest of my family." That's the only detail that I remember. We were getting...uh...progressively more and more...uh..desperate. The only way to survive was to take our possessions, whatever we had and whatever a Ukrainian farmer wanted and trade it for food. I remember through a friend we traded a bicycle that my father had for 20 kilograms of Swani (ph), the pork fat or whatever it was. People were trading furniture, taking them to the village and getting some grain. I remember a grinding, ordinary grain in a coffee grinder, mixing it with water and salting it a little bit and baking it on top of the..the gas burning stove and that would be our food. So it was really hard. So then we decided that we have to get back to central Poland where my mother's sisters lived and where it would be easier to survive and have help from the two...two sisters and their families.

Q: Before you move, you have talked about the pogroms in Kielce. Can you tell me, when you came out from your house, what was it like?

A: Pogroms in... in Boreslawiece?

Q: I'm sorry. In Boreslawiece.

A: Yal.

Q: Uh...What were the...what was it like? Did you have any Jewish friends at that time, any Jewish acquaintances. Can you tell us? What happened?

A: Yes. I had many friends. I had many friends. I visited one friend's house after that. Uh...And...uh...I came into the house and I remember talking to his mother who was in tears and saying to me...uh..., Look, Panjawatko (ph), Mr. Witkowski (ph), in Polish you would Mr., but you would use the first name as sort of a half way familiar term between first name and using the last name. They just ran into the house and ransacked it. Look at this beautiful Trammel (ph).

01:21:01

Trammel (ph) was a long, tall mirror that would have some sort of a pedestal on the bottom, and a little shelf in front of it like a mantel. They just came in and threw a stone in it and just shattered the whole thing. Fortunately, in this friend's family nobody was hurt or killed, but I have heard about numerous situations in which people were...were beaten up or killed by the...by the Ukrainian peasants.

Q: Please go on.

A: Uh...Those days are pretty much in haze. Uh...I have no other recollections of my days in Boreslawiece except progressive economic difficulties and fear what's going to happen to us and desire to get out of there and go back where the roots were, where the...my mother's family lived. So on a crowded train at night, I traveled from Boreslawiece back to Kielce some...some time before Christmas, probably in 41. Eventually, my mother and my sister joined us, joined me in Kielce, and the rest of the war was spent in Kielce, living first with one and...and then with another, having a room in their crowded house. In those days, it was very lucky if you could have one room to one family. And the following years until about 1944 was spent primarily Mother working in...uh...in...uh...in a factory and then eventually working her way to a food store that was next to the German controlled factory where she...everybody had rations and everybody was allowed to get only so much bread, so much butter, so much other things. I learned what ersatz (ph) coffee is. I learned many other things that I had not learned before in my life. Uh...Among us youngsters, there were roughly my temporaries among the children of the two aunts, we organized secret teaching. That is the older kids were teaching the younger kids to continue our education because the Germans, of course, closed all the schools and prohibited in the entire country any normal education except the first few grades of elementary school.

01:24:01

Uh...The population of those areas was destined only to be able to read and write so they would obey Germany orders in the future...uh..future world run by the German...by the Nazis. We knew that we had to move because in the part of the city where my aunt lived, the Nazis were organizing the Jewish ghetto. We had to leave the house and move to another part of town and that part of town was fenced in and all the Jewish population of Kielce were...was ordered to live in... in...uh...in that area. They were guarded by some sort of a uniformed police. They were not allowed to leave the quarters. They were required to wear either a Star of David or a arm band with a Star of David. Uh...The next few years...uh...were characterized by increasing terror, increasing executions, deportations of all the leading citizens of the town to concentration camps. Not only Mayor and the...and the prominent citizens, doctors, lawyers, teachers,...uh...but even anybody who would be a member of what was called in these days intelligencia, you know, people with higher education were being systematically exterminated by the Nazis, taken to concentration camps. At the same time, there was a gradual growth of underground, of resistance, of organizing, not only the adults into groups that would be



preparing for eventual struggle because that no one had any doubt that Nazi terror has to end one day. Not only to prepare for armed struggle but in the meantime to collect information about troop movements, about the...uh...the activities of the Nazis,...uh...documenting their atrocities against the population. Uh...Learning how to move around the city, including us youngsters who were organized in units of clandestine scouts. Before the war, Poland had a very active scouting movement and after the occupation many teenagers were organized into units to...to prepare for the eventual struggle against the Nazis, but in the meantime learning, reconnoitring...uh...moving from one part of the city...uh...avoiding main arteries, being able to cross...uh...through court yards and jump over fences and things like this.

01:27:15

And...uh...eventually learning the Morse alphabet and things like this and eventually we were...a few of us were designated as a unit to provide...serve as...uh... curious when I talk about these times, I'm forgetting some of the English words. I only remember Polish words. Word, warshanetza, where the...uh...the people who were runners from one partisan unit to another. Young boys were chosen for this purpose because they were not adults and they had a bicycle and they could avoid Germans in the country. But if...in those days, the partisan units had no way of communicating with each other, very few radios, so they were using youngsters to carry a message from one end to another. And a group of us, about a dozen or so, were sent into the partisan unit that was active in...in the area of Kielce.

Q: How was that like for you?

A: Uh, that was a most curious experience. We slept during the day. We marched at night. I had a bicycle. Each one of us had a bicycle. We had no arms, of course. We were dressed in civilian clothing to look inconspicuous. I learned how to walk and sleep at the same time. Walking with a friend, locked in arms, and just marching in a column at night and sleeping at the same time, or leaning on your bicycle and...uh...uh...somehow managing to...to sleep and walk at the same time. During the day we would lie low because the Germans, of course, controlled the countryside. Uh...I encountered some Jewish survivors of the ghettos that were in the meantime being liquidated by the Nazis. I did not know which town they were from but I remember two of the men that were...uh...employed quote unquote by the headquarters...uh...uh...unit of this regiment, that was called regiment. Uh,...I don't know what they were doing, but they were...they were there. I remember seeing them. They looked terribly neglected, terribly impoverished, terribly...uh...they looked like...like driven animals because presumably of the experiences they went through.

01:30:05

I don't know what happened to them. When most of the group was disband in the fall of

44, presumably they stayed with the group because we, in the summer of 44 were concentrating all of the underground forces to go to help the uprising in Warsaw which broke out among this time, but, of course, that was a unsuccessful attempt because the..the crossings of major rivers were guarded and these partisan units did not have heavy armor or artillery or anything. So after about 3 or 4 months I returned home to my mother and my sister, covered with lice, dirty, very, very...uh...skinny. Had some infection in my fingers. The skin would simply balloon around the fingers and fill with some sort of pus or some sort of fluid. The nail would come off with the skin when the thing started healing. I...I couldn't sleep in the bed. For weeks, I would sleep on...on the runner on the floor next to the bed. I was just used to sleeping on the ground uh...Just curling up and covering myself with the blanket when I was in..in the forests of Poland. But we remained in...in town, which was by that time totally terrorized by the...uh..by the Nazis. From early war...uh...from early days of occupation, the Nazis employed the...the infamous method of collective responsibility. One single act of hostility against the Nazis or destruction of German property or interference with the war effort would result in the roundup of 10, 20, 40 hostages. People who simply happened to live nearby where the event occurred, and they would be put against the nearest wall and summary executed. So the terror of those days and fear that drove us and concern for survival are something that...that only in the last days I brought back to..to my memory having tried to put it out of my mind all these years in the United States.

01:33:05

The war ended for us...the occupation by the Nazis ended for us about January 9 or 10, 1945 seemingly significant date for me because my birthday is January 12th. The Nazis withdrew. The Soviet offense had started after Christmas of 44 and within days, Kielce were under Russian artillery fire. A very curious thing happened to me then. I was...uh..living with my mother and my sister with one of my aunts who lived in a brick house, much sturdier than surrounding frame houses on the street. On the Yasna (ph) 27. Am I getting off the subject? Your fine, perfect.

Q: Excuse me. You want to pause. Can we do that. Barney, I would like to turn off the tape please. We're having hammering from upstairs. Can you see if you could find out what's going on? Thank you dear.

Q: Okay. Alright, we're back. January of 1945 and the Russians are...

A: The Russian artillery is bombarding the city. We are hiding in...in wherever we can against the brick walls of the house that only has crawl...crawl space in part of the house. There are fires everything. Uh...My mother is not with us because a few days earlier she struck out for the cousins that lived in the country and had a flour mill to get some flour for us because, as always, we were short of food. So she is somewhere, and my sister and I with the rest of my aunt's family are hiding there, plus a number of neighbors that came into hide in the brick house. Uh...The...the barrage stops. It's...uh...it's a beautiful, sunny,

but very cold January day. The...the snow is crunching under your feet, but the sun is bright, blinding. We briefly...two men walk out in front of the house, and I followed them and I stand between them. And they are looking around and saying, "Oh, look there's a fire near Kinga (ph) gymnasium building. Maybe it's the building burning. And there's a fire over there." And I just stand between them, a kid. You know 17 year old or...or whatever it is. 1945. Yes. And then suddenly I have this feeling.

01:36:01

I do not hear a voice. I sense a voice in me saying, "What are you doing here? Get out of here?" So I obeyed it. I get scared. I turn around, walk into the very heavy wooden oak gate that is in the center of the very old fashioned, one-story house, take about 3 or 4 steps and suddenly bells are ringing in my ears. I smell sulphur...uh..plaster from...the ceiling falls on me and it's all over me. I'm white. And I cannot hear anything. I hear ringing in my ears. And people were rushing by me. My cousin, Andrew, and others are running out there and dragging in two bodies of the men that stood on both sides of me. And...uh...one of them is...is dead. Totally mutilated legs dangle like rag dolls, and the other one just expires. Uh...That shook me. And when my mother returned...uh...a day or two later and my family told her what happened, she simply said, "You are not meant to die then. You are meant to go on until the time for you to die came," because these two men obviously were not meant to live any longer. She...she has great faith. But, for us, the war ended that January. Russian troops moved in. Some of the uh, Russian organized and controlled first army Polish troops moved in, recruit...recruited or drafted from eastern provinces of pre-war Poland, and trickling into town started coming back first Jewish refugees who were with escaped or got somehow saved by going to the Soviet Union. Uh...Most of them, of course, were either in the military units or in the first administrative apparatus of the communist regime that came in and took over Kielce. And...uh...my memories is very dim whether school started or not. I don't think the school... Yes, the school started. The school started within a month or two because I remember even before the war was officially declared over on May 9, 1945, our gymnasium was already functioning and we were going back and enrolling in classes and...and...uh...around that time, April or...or May, us youngsters who only lived this heroic, teenage involvement in...in patriotism and fight against the Nazis started resurrecting our pre-War...uh..boy scout units in...in gymnasium and I was one of the...uh...leaders of the...the troop I guess you would call it in English that was organized, being re...reorganized in gymnasium.

01:39:52

And we were, by the summer...by early summer of 45, we were planning our first camp even though we had nothing, but the enthusiasm of the young boys were such that we were just ready to even live without tents as long as we could get out of town and...and go somewhere and do our scouting thing. So we were planning a week's excursion into the...the mountains in Kielce region...uh..which were called Gory Swietokrzyskie, St.

Cross, Holy Cross Mountains. And my boys were...if you pardon me the expression, this is how I ever referred to them being their leader. You know, this just like in the old song...I'll take care of you. I'm 17, you're 16. But I was their...one of their leaders, so my boys were already in uniforms and were getting ready to leave the next day. And I think it was in July, but I'm not sure of the dates again. When we heard rumors that the...uh...that there is something funny going on, some kind of emotion, riot or civil commotion in...uh...along Shenetza (ph) which is a little stream that ran through...through Kielce and...uh...but I went there. And I started asking people what's going on...and people told me, "Oh, this is a house that is occupied by the Jews." And...uh and...uh... something funny is going on there because ...uh...a Polish, Christian Catholic boy was missing for a couple of days and...uh...and...uh...he was found and...uh.. he said that...that's where he was kept.

01:42:01

And of course one of the most pernicious...uh...stories about the Jews...uh.. for centuries in Europe was that they had to use Christian blood for religious rituals. And so, of course, this population of this...of this town, I'm not going psycho-analyze them, but here we are for the first time not really afraid of..of terror of the Nazis. This population restless, unhappy because communists are taking over and most of the people were anti-communist. Uh...These...I...I'm trying to understand what happened, but I'm not going to try to understand. I'm going to try to tell you what I saw. And the only thing I saw was a large crowd of people surrounding this house and rumors flying back that the...that the military were entering upstairs where the quarters of the Jewish survivors were and the shots were fired and nobody knew who shoot...fired first, but there were casualties and there were arrests. And I saw one or two of my boys in scouting uniforms in the crowd, gawking. And I said, "What are you doing here in the scouting uniform? How can you even be showing around? Don't you have any sense of responsibility? This is a mob?" And I remember sending them home. Next day, I think we were leaving, out of town, so the...so the...the events moved quickly. And only when we came back to town we read the official accounts in the local papers that...uh...criminal elements have killed or wounded several Jewish residents of this house...uh...obviously for...for criminal purposes. But then, 2 or 3 months later, and I'm not sure of the date, one of my boys in my troop and I only remember his first name, Genuard (ph), Gene or Eugene, came to me and said to me, Wallace, I have to tell a very strange story. My young brother...and I cannot remember the age, but I know it was a child barely 3, 4 or 5 maybe ...that would be a range age....disappeared from the house for 4...3, 4, 5 days. We were desperate. We didn't know what happened to him. We were searching everywhere. The child just wondered away.

01:45:01

And then the militiza (ph) came, the...the...the communist militia, the...the equivalent of our police and found him and brought him home. They never said where they found him,

but...and this is my boy from my scout troop telling me...when they started questioning him where he was and he could not tell, they took him to that house occupied by the Jewish refugees, survivors and said and asked him, "Is this where you were kept?" And the child said, "Yes." (Pause) I read in the papers later that there were trials and they were not only trials of perpetrators of the killings, but all...also trials or at least retribution by various factions in the communist government, within the communist authority that controlled the city. And I am sure there are others who followed the events better and have more insight or more contact with the people who participated in these things, but they were some other...some people were trying to use this event for...for other purposes. Maybe some international party...uh..politics. But what was curious to me is the fact that I remember what my scout told me. Distinctly that it was the militia (ph) that came and planted in a child's mind...the kid was probably scared. Undoubtedly the militia (ph) just questioning him, "Were you...that's...Is that where you were kept?" And the child said, "Yes."

Q: How did you react when you heard your scout tell you this story?

A: (Sigh)

Q: You're 17.

A: I was 17. (Pause) To...to be honest, I didn't know what to do with this. I felt that there was some skullduggery going on in the way the child was being manipulated.

01:48:01

Uh...But my main concern at that time was for the safety of my boys and that they do not in any way...uh...get in trouble. That's what motivated me to shoo them away from the...the crowd that surrounded the Jewish quarter. And I sensed the tragedy. But to a 17 year old, you cannot expect too much and I'm sorry to say that looking at myself from the vantage point of being 62...uh...even if we wanted to have done something with it, who were we to turn to? Perhaps that is why I am telling it to you today. Because that may just help unravel the roots of those events. (Long Pause)

Q: Okay. You should go on. What was Kielce like after these events. Were there a change at all in the atmosphere?

A: There was a tremendous reaction from the emerging...uh... civic organizations and church authorities. Uh...uh...Appeal to citizens to...to point out the guilty parties who participated in these events. And I don't even know how long the...the pogroms lasted, whether it was a day, whether it was 2 days. I have no recollection. I remember Bishop Katchmarick (ph) issuing a very strong appeal to people to uphold the law to protect the innocent, to...to report on...uh... commission of crimes to the authorities. Uh...Kielce to begin was...with was devastated by the war. There were ruins everywhere. There were

buildings that were lying in ruins. There wasn't a family that was not mourning a death of a son or a father or a brother that was either killed or executed or deported to the concentration camp.

01:51:09

Uh...Every family practically was under such enormous, physical and...uh...uh...hardship and...uh...emotional pressure that we were literally survivors in every sense of the word. All of us! And it was awfully tragic that victims started turning on...on other victims. And...uh...for some reason...uh...which I don't understand at all, it happened in my native town. (Pause) Kielce was trying to revive the pre-war community life. We were trying to catch up with our education. Some of us lost 2, 3, 4 years. We had kids graduating from high school who were 22 and 23 because during the war they had no opportunity to...to learn, to keep up with their education. We were, of course, survivors of a period in which every able bodied person, age 14 and up, had to work 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. Otherwise, we would be shipped to Germany to forced labor camps or to work in factories of the German war machine. We were given rations of food so...uh...most of us went often hungry. We were decimated by disease. Typhus, typhoid fever was prevalent. My mother...uh...survived typhoid fever. Us kids did not get sick. Uh...We were...uh...terrorized by continuous...uh...dragnets. Wyponokie (ph) we call it in Poland. You walk on a street from your house to your aunt's house, and suddenly the street is closed by the gendarmes on both sides.

01:54:04

And all the people are surrounded and asked to show their papers. Are you working somewhere? Who are you? What's your occupation? What are you doing now? And whoever appeared not employed in a meaningful way that involves supporting the German war effort was being singled up, put in a truck, shipped to the railroad station and put on a train and shipped to Germany. There were hardly any families that did not feel the...the tragedy of war. (Pause) My own family...uh...we lost two uncles. Uh...one a pilot and another a...uh...a military man who fought in the Warsaw uprising and died after the war because he was an invalid, wounded, persecuted by the communists in turn. Kielce was physically and emotionally devastated after the war, and on top of that the system was imposed on us that was against all the values of the society and that was a very bitter to swallow to learn the outcome of the Yalta agreement. They were not easy times. It was only...the only ray of hope for my family personally...for my mother and my sister and myself was that unexpected out of the blue came a postcard from Chicago, USA, saying, "I am Mrs. Wjaworski (ph), and I am looking for a family of Ludwick Witkowski, and if so, please get in touch with me. It was not even from my father. So, of course, we were elated. All that time we were fantasizing that he survived the war, that he was somewhere safely and thinking about us. And indeed he was. We wrote to this lady who was probably part of some organization that was trying to put families together that were separated by the war and we received the first letter. (Pause) It was good to see my

father's handwriting.

01:56:51

And he started sending packages and...uh...saying that he is in the United States, that he survived the September 39 campaign and was interned in Hungary, escaped from the internment camp to Yugoslavia, from Yugoslavia shipped to Marseilles, France; joined the Polish armed forces...uh...in time for the German attack on France; fought the Germans there; was capture; escaped German...uh...uh...captivity; walked at night through France until he got to southern France; crossed over the Pyrenees to Spain and to the Gibraltar; shipped from the Gibraltar to England; trained in military units in England; never gave up the fight; and was sent with the military mission to Windsor, Ontario, just south of Detroit to recruit volunteers for the Polish armed forces to continue the fight with the Nazis. That was, of course, before U.S. was attacked in Pearl Harbor. So there was volunteers signing up from the Polish-American communities, both in the U.S. and Canada. And...uh...uh...in the meantime, he met friends...made friends in Detroit and when the mission was disband after Pearl Harbor, he got an offer of a job in the war industry in Detroit and was permitted to migrate to the United States. Started immediate efforts to try to find out what happened to his wife and children. And finally by early 45, succeeded, found us, uh.

Q: At this point, we need to stop. We're going...it's a good place to stop.

A: Yes.

Q: We're going to stop and change tapes.

A: Okay.

01:59:04

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

0200:39

Q: Okay. Can you tell us how you left Poland?

A: My father, of course, immediately started efforts to bring us over to the United States. Unfortunately, the communist authorities, while giving permission to my mother to leave Poland officially, denied permission to children. Uh...We reasoned that this was because in those heady days with the communism they thought they could indoctrinate the young generation and...and use them and didn't want to lose them. A decision was then made that I would escape from Poland and if the road...route was successful, my sister would follow. So...uh...in the meantime I graduated from high school and made a successful escape from Poland to Sweden in the bottom of a coal freighter on December 31, 1948. And I was to be followed by my sister in a few months. I made it to a lovely, colorful, untouched by war, just fabulously looking town in Sweden called Goteborg. And from there I managed to...uh...to come to the United States within 3 days of my 21st birthday when my non-quota visa, immigrant visa was expiring. So I was lucky again. And, I met...I flew from New York LaGuardia Airport to Detroit Old Willowrun airport and looked up my father in the telephone directory and it's a very funny feeling to find your father's name in a strange directory in a strange city. And...uh...called his number. There was no answer and I stood at the counter not knowing what to do and I heard my name.

02:03:01

He recognized me from the back. And I was a big strapping 6 footer at the age of 21. Uh...My mother came in May of that year, 85 officially. But my sister trying the same route...uh...did not make it, was caught by the communists and imprisoned and eventually came to the United States in 1958 when the conditions in Poland under Gemolka (ph) underwent a famous fall so they would permit families to reunite. Went to school. Decided to study law. Graduated in 56, and started a law practice with then my father-in-law in Polish-American community on the west side of Detroit. In 62, I was contacted by a Congressman of Polish descent, John Dingle, and asked if I know of any identifiable Polish-Americans who would like to work on a foreign claimants settlement commission in Washington to assist in administering a program of adjudication of claims for properties lost in Poland. And after looking around I decided that I'm the one (laughing) for other reasons as well. So I accepted an appointment as a staff attorney on a foreign claims settlement commission and worked on a Polish claims program for about 3 years. Within 6 months...no, I came in August of 62. By Spring of 63, I was being sent to our American Embassy in Warsaw to help run our field office to gather documentation to support claims of the American nationals for properties. A lot of those claims were by the American relatives or...uh...survivors of the Jewish population of Poland...uh...who were claiming properties that were confiscated or destroyed during the war or after the war. And for 3 months in 1963, I traveled through Poland collecting documents...uh...seeking



evidence because our function was not simply to sit as a tribunal and tell claims...show me, prove to me, but we were actively assisting them in this effort.

02:06:14

And at that time I came in contact with a...a...personnel of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and obtained from them a number of valuable documents and...and publications, some of which I have turned over to you for the...uh...Museum. And it is that period of time that kind of gave me a broader perspective on the enormity of what happened between 1939 and 1945. Only then when traveling to little towns and villages of Poland, I was able to see the devastation, the...the tremendous...the tremendous losses that were inflicted on the population, especially the Jewish population. pause

Q: Do you hear personal testimony as well?

A: Yes. Testimony was, in most cases, limited to description of property, possessions, but in many situations the survivors of those years...uh...who came to the commission offices here in Washington testified as to their...uh...experiences during the Nazi's occupation. And I'm sure the records of the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, the so-called Polish Program have that testimony and they're probably in the U.S. Archives.

Q: How did you...you first. How did you handle all of this? How did you feel when you...your seeing these people and dealing with these people.

A: First, I wanted to do a good job. First, I wanted justice done. I did want to make sure that if there is any doubt, that doubt should be resolved in favor of the survivors. There were other families. We were, after all, involved in a rather futile attempt to at least compensate materially for the...the enormity of evil that happened to these families, both Jewish and Polish.

02:09:07

Unfortunately, under American law, we had the obstacles, such as citizenship at the time of loss. And many, many people did not meet the requirement of U.S. citizenship by the time of loss occurred. We could not grant compensation award reparations to peoples who were not American nationals or citizens at the time the loss occurred. I remember distinctly one decision which I, myself, was very pleased about...uh...because we applied a legal principal that permitted granting reparations to a much greater number of people rather than if we simply applied the official date of confiscation of the...of the property...uh...by the communists regime. We used the concept of loss of use and enjoyment. Very often, communists in their profidious manipulation of the records and...and the law would leave the title and people, but would so restrict the rights of the owners or the ...uh...benefits that owners would derive from ownership of the property that for all intents and purposes, these people had all the burdens without any benefits. A

rental property for instance. So we then developed the concept that it was the loss of use and enjoyment of the property rather than the passage of title to the state that determined when people lost their possessions. And that's how we were able to...to award compensation to people who otherwise would not have gotten it. On a deeper level (Pause) ....Dr. Kuzmack, it's very hard to think of those times without projecting on those times, what I feel today. We all evolve and we all become much more sensitized and much more aware of...uh...the measure of tragedy than at the time that we are involved in the mechanics or addressing this or that narrow issue. I cannot really tell how I felt about it because honestly the same goes for my life.

02:12:07

Today, I think I'm a much more aware person. I'm much more in touch with my emotions than at that time. That's an honest answer.

Q: Is there anything you would like to add?

A: I felt a regret at times and I have tried to put it to rest because it was a naive regret that had I been older maybe I would have been able to do more when I saw inhumanity and evil of those years. At the same time, I'm...I'm honest enough to admit that it's a...it's a hope tinged with fear because I wonder how many of us would have lived up the ideal of really disregarding our own safety and our own obligation to our loved ones to help a fellow man. How many of us would really live up to this principle when tested? I think there is a awareness in Poland today which I sense from letters from relatives and friends and visits from friends and relatives...uh...what...what a great loss Poland suffered because of the extermination of its Jewish population. As a child, as a youngster, I read...uh...some of the greatest poets and writers of Poland who were Jews, Julian Tooly (ph) and...and so many others. Uh...Poland is impoverished. To what extent it could have been prevented or its...its enormity limited, who's to judge? I just hope that in my own generation and in my own family and in my own children...uh...not only I hope but I make sure that there is awareness of the fact that we're all brothers and sisters, that we're all...to the extent that we discriminate or deprive of rights another human being, we do it to ourselves.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

02:15:33

End of Tape #2  
Conclusion of Interview