

Synopsis of interview with
Kocewicz, Edward

00:00:00 Introduction

00:00:30 Q" Where were you born and when?

A: Carnegie, Pa, in Sept. 1922 Obvoipusly of Polish origin.

00:01:00 My parents were illiterate immigrants. My father was a coal miner. I was the youngest of nine children. Grew up in Carnegie.

00:01:30 Until I graduated high school, and then I mived to Cleveland for a year. Lived in a predominantly Polish section of town.

00:02:00 Attended a Polish parochial school. Spoke English at home, and on the street. No longer speak Polish well.

00:02:30 I have no reason to use it now. Strong ethnic background. We still observe many of the ethnic formalities.

00:03:00 The celebrations. My wife is of Polish origin, so there is the food. Strong religious background - parochial schools with the nuns.

00:03:30 Parents lived in prdominantly Polsih neighborhood so they didn't have the problem with the language. They had to find laboring jobs, but they bought their own house and raised nine children.

00:04:00 My father was a coal miner. but none of my sibilings went into mining. I think that because my parents had no education, we were all educated.

00:04:30 Most of us went on the GI Bill, because eight were boys. One is a doctor, another a real estate developer, another a tool and die maker, another a chartered accountant - indicative of the American dream.

00:05:00 That's why I was happy to be on this side. Parents came to this country

00:05:30 Probably in the 1920's or earlier.

Q: Were your parents political people?

A: no

00:06:00 My father was very interested in the union movement. I remember him coining home beaten up by the iron and coal police.

00:06:30 There were times when the police would seep through town and put all the miners in jail in Allegany County. (Interviewer now gives us a history lesson re coal mine operators.)

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00:07:00 (Interviewer continues to show off)

00:07:30 Q: How did your family do in the depression?

A: We all knew hunger. Cabbage soup was a staple.

00:08:00 One thing that I recall is that occasionally the government would give Argentine beef or the staples. I remember my brothers came home with

00:08:30 Stuff and my father kicked them out saying what did you do to earn that. He made them take the food back even though we were hungry.

00:09:00 He was a big tall person, my mother quite small. Its indicative of pride or stubbornness/

00:09:30 He didn't take anything he didn't earn. My mother held the family together through love.

Q: Your father passed away when?

00:10:00 I was about 12. He was relatively young. He had an accident. He fell down stairs. I was the youngest - some of the older brothers were able to support the family.

00:10:30 Three brothers moved to Cleveland because jobs were better there. One stayed AND WORKED IN A STEEL MILL. That's why I moved to Cleveland when the war broke out.

00:11:00 Four brothers served in the navy. I tried but my eyes were not good enough and I served in the army. (Personal experience from the interviewer)

00:11:30 My other brothers weren't in because they were older already. Didn't know any Jews until I went to a public high school.

00:12:00 I met Jewish people and Protestants, who I didn't know existed. It was good because I didn't feel any prejudices or animosities, because we weren't taught that at home.

00:12:30 (Interviewer speech.)

00:13:00 Enlisted in the army in 1942.

00:13:30 They sent you to the unit they were filling at the time. I went to Camp Perry in Ohio, and then the 150th infantry Division which was being formed.

00:14:00 I was with the field artillery. They were setting up the ASTP program. I was picked to go

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- 00:14:30 I went to the U. of California at Berkeley for a year. In engineering. It was an excellent program. Then I was transferred to the 11th Armored Division.
- 00:15:00 Before the war I was an apprenticed machinist. I always loved art and was self-taught until I went to CMU, Carnegie Institute of Technology.
- 00:15:30 The Fine Arts Department. It was a wonderful experience because I had no preconceived ideas then.
- 00:16:00 I went into education in the teaching art.
- 00:16:30 It was a four year program in teaching arts. I learned ceramics and other arts. I taught for 30 years in a high school and retired recently.
- 00:17:00 We are a close family even though I have brothers in California and Idaho. We keep in touch.
- 00:17:30 My mother died 30 years ago and that's why I lost my Polish. Went to England in September of '44, and landed in Europe in December.
- 00:18:00 They shipped us to Cherbourg. It was the time of the Battle of the Bulge. That is when they shipped us across the channel.
- 00:18:30 They rushed us across France.
Q: Describe the particular kind of unit you were with?
- 00:19:00 It was armored ordinance. I was assigned there because I had the skills. We maintained all the moveable equipment.
- 00:19:30 We did the very skilled parts of maintenance. We worked out of a truck. We had one man who was a watch maker. He was 65 years old.
- 00:20:00 He repaired the watches. He was quite spry.
- 00:20:30 You couldn't get a watchmaker in his teens. Once we got into France it was a continuous run. Rarely did we sleep until we got into Belgium and Luxemburg.
- 00:21:00 We were there during the winter. I have no idea how far we travelled in a day. I kind of envied a colleague of mine after the war

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- 00:21:30 He could recount in great detail where he had been and it was all garbled to me. The only time I knew where I was was when I saw a road sign.
- 00:22:00 We were moving so fast. I was surprised when the war went on day and night.
- 00:22:30 The planes and the artillery. I thought they called a gtruce overnight. So we could sleep and start over in the morning.
- 00:23:00 Can't recall how long it took to get to Bastogne. I remember we were in a small French village Xmas eve. Another thing that surprised me was that there was no way to keep warm. You couldn't light a fire. You just wore all your clothes.
- 00:23:30 Very much like Pittsburgh in the winter. Very cold. We kind of hoped we would get pneumonia or something. But I didn't even get a cold living outside for two months.
- 00:24:00 Outside on guARD DUTY YOU HAD a little pup tent with a friend . You found it encrusted with ice from your breath in the morning.
- 00:24:30 I was part of the relief of Bastogne.
- 00:25:00 Q: Did you and the people in your unit have any idea what you might find in Germany?
A: The only time I heard about the barbaric treatment
- 00:25:30 Was when units were overrun. I was surprised at how many of their allies they had interned. We heard rumours when we were about 100 miles inside Germany.
- 00:26:00 We didn't believe it until we got near Austria, which was my first glimpse of it. We were moving so quickly they didn't have time toi bury a lot of the bodies.
- 00:26:30 They were left in open graves. The closer we got to Austria, evidently they gad taken a whole group of prisoners from Bergen-Belsen
- 00:27:00 There was a section of about 25 or 30 miles, where along the ditches there were bodies in striped prison uniforms that had been shot.
- 00:27:30 We first saw them abiut 40 or 50 kilometers before Lintz, where the stragglers had been shot by the side of the road.
- 00:28:00 I didn't count, but I imaGINE THERE WERE HUNDREDS. This was the first blow, and it may have helped cushion the shock of ~~Mentha~~hausen (ph)
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- 00:28:30 What really is horrible is that a lot of the people were tortured before they were killed. Most of them were men but there were some women, they slit from below all the way up.
- 00:29:00 I don't know how to explain it. No human being does this to another. That was my thinking at the time. The others felt the same way - this can't be happening.
- 00:29:30 When we got to the camp, some of the men who escaped being shot were there and wanted food, but I had none. We had thrown our K-rations
- 00:30:00 to others, and the further in we went, the more they asked and we had none left.
- Q: Thus photograph that you have here? (At the bottom, is written "Matthausen". Picture of naked prisoners.)
- 00:30:30 When you came into these towns, the Burermeister had to collect all of these fire arms. The officers had access to cameras but we did not.
- 00:31:00 But I found a camera in a house in Austria and there was some film in it. I used it when I could.
- 00:31:30 I assumed that your visual image was the best memory. But about 5 kilometers there was this stench unlike any I had smelled before.
- 00:32:00 It got stronger and stronger -, the smell of death - until we got to Matthausen. When I saw this picture I took it because it was so unbelievable. All the people there, they covered their genital areas.
- 00:32:30 I felt I couldn't take away their last shred of dignity so I put the camera away. This was April or May which wasn't so bad unless you had no clothes.
- 00:33:00 The bodies were stacked like cordwood along the barracks. They had bulldozed some areas. put bodies in with lime but they didn't have time to cover them over.
- 00:33:30 The Germans had escaped; they knew we were coming. The prisoners knew we were coming. Our cooks made something for them and it killed them - even though it was a soup.
- 00:34:00 I was able to talk to some of the prisoners because of my Polish. They were Polish and Jews.
- 00:34:30 The Jews had the yellow star. The one thing that they were the most afraid of
- 00:35:00 was what they called the water death - they put a hose in their mouth and actually drowned them. The tortures - they would put things between their fingers and squeeze them in a vice. Not for any information.

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- 00:35:30 Just for their own enjoyment. I saw one man who had like arhritic hands. The pulling of the teeth for their own amusement.
- 00"36"00 It really was sickening. This convinced me that civilization is just a thin veneer.
- 00:36:30 With the proper retraining, you can revert to being an animal. Culture and upbringing can be stripped away so easily.
- 00:37:00 There were two Jewish-American soldiers who were buddies of mine. They were from New york areas and they were appalled.
- 00:37:30 They were more sensisitive than I with my Polish upbringing. About two weeks later we were setting up DP camps and
- 00:38:00 The CO took me along to translate. I would talk with the Polish Jew in charge, about supplies.
- 00:38:30 We helped them as much as we could with suoplies and transportation. The American officers that I knew felt the same way that we did.
- 00:39:00 They were very humane in helping where they could. I felt that none of them showed any animosity toward them. They saw them as victimes.
- 00:39:30 Our units captured some guards but I didn't see any. They always told us that if we saw any young Germans to strip them and look at their underarms for the SS tatoo.
- 00:40:00 Q: Did any of the prisoners get hold of guards?
A" I heard of a strange incident, not at Matthausen
An Italian friend and I took a walk, probably looking for souveniers.
- 00:40:30 It was probably the Italian commune that they used for farm labor,, it had a little stream they had just finished eating this horse, in a stew.
- 00:41:00 I saw three trees, with three people hanging, tied at the anklesand they had little fires going under them. They were wearing dark uniforms so we realized they were Germans .
- 00:41:30 My friend Dominic talked with them and they said that they had been their guards. and they were getting revenge. Dominic wanted to shoot them but their CO wouldn't permit it.
- 00:42:00 He said it was their revenge. And they would stoke the fire a little more and you could smell the burning hair. They were sying, "Heil Hitler" all the while. We left because there was nothing we could do.

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- 00:42:30 That was a vivid memory - of them slowly roasting. I was surprised because I thought Italy was an ally of Germany.
- 00:43:00 I thought they would be returned, not put into bondage. This was their measure of revenge.
- 00:43:30 When I came back and studied art under the GI Bill, the first two years I would do studies based on my experience. I kind of purged my mind - after I did them I destroyed them.
- 00:44:00 Your mind is kind that way, it allows you to do that/
- 00:44:30 I remember the war and I remember all of this but the camps are the most vivid, they are what bring on the nightmares.
- 00:45:00 It's like a bad memory you store in the attic of your mind. You just can't get rid of it.
- 00:45:30 It gave me a different perspective on life.
- 00:46:00 A lot of things that bother other teachers about pupils didn't bother me because I always looked at it on a comparative basis. A bad kid was not bad in comparison to what I had experienced.
- 00:46:30 It did temper my view on a lot of things. When I read about this I thought I ought to participate because too many deny that it existed.
- 00:47:00 You want to open this up again and I thought I had better participate. About the Germans, I don't feel any animosity towards them as a group still, I think it was a matter of individuals.
- 00:47:30 They deny any knowledge but I don't see how that was possible. The people who worked in labor groups on the farms around there, they had to know.
- 00:48:00 The Russians too, could not understand the torture that went with the camps.
- 00:48:30 The Russians had a very deep hostility towards the Nazis. After the war, in Austria, we were in a little town near Linz
- 00:49:00 A whole division of Germans was coming over to surrender to us, and they were all armed. They wanted to join us for a march on Moscow - they thought that was what we were going to do. So we put them in a valley
- 00:49:30 Surrounded them with tanks, disarmed them, took their watches, and valuables, and called the Russian division in to take them as prisoners.

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- 00L50:00 When the Germans saw this, they were aghast. I stood in this little village for a whole day and watched the whole procedure.
- 00:50:30 I remember this one who had on a pair of Russian pants that evidently he had taken from a Russian, and the Russian soldier yelled at him, and he rushed to take off the pants and he fell, and **he was shot**.
- 00:51:00 The Germans didn't want to surrender to the Russians because they knew what kind of treatment they would receive. They exacted their revenge in any way possible.
- 00:51:30 That whole experience was one I was put into and I would never choose. But since I was put into it and I did survive I am glad that I was an eye witness to history.
- 00:52:00 It seems that its in every kind of ethnic area. I was in Mexico for a year on a fellowship, and I could see the Indians being treated as lesser beings by the so-called Spanish Mexicans.
- 00:52:30 It seems to be universal, sad to say. I see it in the schools where the handicapped are victims of the bully.
- 00:53:00 They would exact lunch money or something; a lot of my work was in protecting them.
- 00:53:30 The prisoners at Matthausen were very docile on seeing the American troops. They were very weak. All the enthusiasm they could show was to raise their hands.
- 00:54:00 Speaking in Polish they would say "Welcome, welcome." Or, "Thank God." There was one sad part a lot of women with babies, this was not in Matthausen itself,
- 00:54:30 When they heard me speaking in Polish, they would ask me to get milk for their babies, and there was no way I could do it.
- 00:55:00 Maybe its my artistic soul because I feel very strongly
- 00:55:30 It should not have happened.
- Q: Was there ethnic outrage at what the Nazis had done to the Polish people?
- 00:56:00 I didn't think of it as what had been done to Polish people. just what people had done to people. I didn't feel any outrage because they were Polish or Jews or Italians.

- 00:56:30 I felt that these were people like myself but they were in circumstances beyond any control. If I had been over there, born into this peasant family, I would have been gone.
- 00:57:00 I always put it on that personal basis.
- 00:57:30 I was amused many times , in the 60's, when my students were blaming everything on the older generation, I had a lot of Jewish students at $\frac{1}{4}$ eabody, and I told them they wouldn't be here if we hadn;t stopped the Germans.
- 00:58:00 I told them their parents would be dead and they wouldn't be here.
- 00:58:30 (More preaching)
- 00:59:00 People now don't want to hear about it.
Q: Do you think they disbelieve it?
A: They just don't want it imposing on their comfort.
- 00:59:30 I haven't told anyone beyong my own family about my experience because they don't want to hear it. They just turn you off.
- 01;00:00 Q: So your experiences affected your painting?
A: Well, once I got them out of my system , I started doing things that were humorous, light, that were totally different from my experience.
- 01:00:30 I do universal things. I do children, Bible things, animals. Totally different from my experience.

END OF TAPE 1

BEGINNING OF TAPE 2

- 00:00:00 Its kind of an escape for me. To nurture them in any way would lead to a kind of madness. My own children don't want to hear about it, but I have told them.
- 00:30:00 Q: Do you think your children, on seeing this tape, will begin to understand in a new dimension?
A: I hope so. Recently they have been asking. The're through their teens now.
- 00:01:00 They're more mature I've shown them papers and things that I have. Now they are interested in the experiences that I have undergone.

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00:01:30 (More by so-called interviewer)

00:02:00 My experience was vicarious. I was just an observer. My experience is nothing to be compared to the victims.

00:02:30 I hate to think that this is going to go on. I hope that men will come to think that this is counterproductive. That some people want to acquire wealth from other people's misery, I hope that that dies.

00:03:00 But there are examples of the mass murder of people where they wipe out almost a whole generation.

00:03:30 Fatalistically, I say this will never stop.

00:04:00 Killing people for a political goal is bad enough, but torturing them before they die is inconceivable.

00:04:30 I don't think we should just be observers. They talk about human rights in the government, where they try to instill it. It will take many years to accomplish.

00:05:00 Q: How do you feel about the recurrences of anti-Semitism?
A: It seems to me a resurgence of what went on before. I have no such feelings. Many of my patrons are Jewish people. I understand them as people.

00:05:30 It bothers me to see it in any form or any country. I feel no animosity and it bothers me to see that other people have it.

00:06:00 It's everywhere. My trip to Mexico showed that. Or in Canada it's the French and the English. There seems to be something in our makeup that makes us feel better if we can look down on someone else.

00:06:30 (more by the interviewer)

00:07:00 (mostly the interviewer)

00:07:30 As a teacher, I would point out to people, not their differences but their similarities. It was wonderful at Peabody because I thought it was democracy in action.

00:08:00 It was a kind of melting pot, and yet these - at one time there was a Jewish head of the student body, at another time, a black/

00:08:30 An Italian another time; then they go back to their own neighborhood and there is where it breeds again. I hope what they learn in school carries over in some way.

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00:09:00 (monologue by interviewer)

00:09:30 (Interviewer expresses thanks)

00:10:00 I hope this helps as a kind of testament to what did occur.