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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Wallace Witkowski
September 1, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of an audiotaped interview with Wallace Witkowski, conducted by Margaret Garrett on September 1, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Rockville, Maryland and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's volunteer collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

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WALLACE WITKOWSKI
September 1, 1998

Beginning Tape One, Side A

Question: This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Wallace Witkowski**, conducted by **Margaret Garrett** on September 1, 1998 in **Arlington, Virginia**. This interview is part of the museum's project to interview Holocaust survivors and witnesses who are also volunteers with the museum. This is a follow up interview that will focus on Mr. **Witkowski's** post Holocaust experiences. In preparation for this interview, I read a transcript of the interview you conducted with the museum on September 13, 1990. I will not ask you to repeat everything that you said in that interview, instead, I will use this interview as an opportunity to follow up on that interview and focus on your post-Holocaust experiences. This is tape number one, side **A.** Would you state your name at birth?

Answer: **Wallace –** ah, at birth. **Vodjemiusz**ph) **Arkodiusz**(ph) **Witkowski**, that is the full Polish name.

Q: And your name currently?

A: **Wallace A. Witkowski.**

Q: And the date of your birth?

A: January 12, 1928.

Q: And place of birth?

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September 1, 1998

A: I was born in **Kielce, Poland.**

Q: In the previous interview, you spoke briefly about leaving Communist **Poland** to join your father in **Detroit.** Could you talk about what you remember that it felt like to leave **Poland**?

A: Yes, if you humor me for a second, it just struck me as you were introducing this interview, that today is September one, and to me it is a very emotional date, for more than one reason. First of all, as I may have put in my earlier interview, this is when my childhood essentially ended. I was 11 and a half and the German armies marched into **Poland** in 1939. By a curious coincident, although I don't believe there are coincidence in – in creation, last September one my mother died at the age of 94. Now –

Q: That was just one year ago?

A: Yes.

Q: So this is the first anniversary of her death?

A: Today is the anniversary, yes. My father came to the **United States** about 1943, he was an officer in the Polish army and participated in the effort to recruit volunteers during the war, prior to **Pearl Harbor.** But of course – and he was located with a mission in **Windsor, Ontario,** across the river from **Detroit,** but obviously with the advent of American Japanese war, the mission lost its purpose

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and liquidated its activities and most of the people returned to **England** and **Europe.** However, my father was offered a job in the war industry, he was a chemical engineer and they were highly sought at the time, so he was admitted to the **United States cell**. By the time the war ended, he was making all sorts of efforts to try to find whether we survived the war and where we a – where are we and obviously trying to bring us over. Us meaning my mother, my younger sister and myself. Th-The first and obvious step was to apply for passports and permission to leave the country. My mother received that from the government, who – which at the time was a purportedly government of national unity, but it was only a transitional period before the communists could solidify their grip on that country and on the government, and they gave permission to my mother to leave **Poland** and join her husband in the **United States,** but did not give a permission to the two children, ages at that time, what was it, 1948? I was 20, my sister was 18. So I determined to escape from **Poland** and through contacts, family contacts, underground connections, I managed to get on a Swedish coal freighter, which was leaving Polish port city of **Gdynia** and was going to **Goteborg, Sweden.** I guess the excitement of actually trying to escape and join my father was so overwhelming that I did not have any nostalgic or any reflective thoughts about leaving my native land. To me it was escape from a prison, which was becoming worse and worse.

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And I was going first so that my sister could follow me on what we thought naively would be a safe route. And of course, I managed, I succeeded, my sister didn't and was caught by the communists and briefly imprisoned. So, the feelings were not dramatic at all, except in terms of excitement and going to my father, whom I had not seen for 10 years. And I think I described in my previous interview, some of the feelings that I had when I was arriving in the **United States** and trying to locate my father. But that, pretty much, I think should answer your first question.

Q: Mm-hm. So, then you were in the **United States** with your father and later joined by your mother and your sister.

A: Sister having to wait several years before the gradual mellowing of the communist government permitted her to leave legally.

Q: Did you speak English when you arrived?

A: I had two years of high school English, so you can appreciate. A similar experience to American kids learning foreign languages in high school. It is essentially a very, very superficial knowledge of – of language. I walked around with a dictionary in my hand wherever I went, so that I – you could – I could look up words and communicate.

Q: You were how old?

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A: I turned 21, you may recall from the interview, I managed to arrive in the **United States** three days before my birthday, my 21st birthday, on which the then American immigration law would cut me off as a minor child of an American citizen and would make me wait for a number of years before I could get under a Polish quota. But up until January 12, 1949, I could come in non-quota, and I made it within three days before the deadline. I was very fortunate.

Q: So you were able to become a citizen?

A: In due time. I – I – in thr – the law at that time – I was married in 1951, two years later, and as a husband of an American citizen, I didn't have to wait five years, I could become a citizen after three years. But I did not automatically become a **U.S.** citizen as a minor child.

Q: So, you arrived, you're living with your father, and you don't s –

A: In **Detroit.**

Q: In **Detroit.**

A: Yes.

Q: You don't speak very much English.

A: And I am several years older than my contemporaries, because the first thing that I did is to enroll again in an American high school, and had **[indecipherable]** to be sure, and try to graduate from an American high school, even though I was already

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a graduate of Polish gymnasium, and I had attended first semester of a polytechnic in – in **Gdansk.**

Q: Okay, what year did you enter high school?

A: American high school?

Q: I mean, what year of the high school, what class were you placed –

A: O-Oh, the senior year, senior year.

Q: Senior year.

A: Yes, yes. The following – the following May I graduated, or June. And I went through the American high school rituals, including the prom and – and all the attendant other traditional activities.

Q: And how were you received by other kids?

A: The other kids were very, very nice. Curious, open, positive. It was especially more – more reflective, more thoughtful. Kids tried to befriend me, tried to learn something from me. I-It was very interesting and very positive. I have encountered absolutely no – no negative reception.

Q: Were there other refugee children in your high school?

A: In my particular high school, no. I found some other people who survived the war from **Europe** in my college years at **Wayne** State University.

Q: Mm-hm.

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A: I had one particular friend, whose name of course, now escapes me. But at the time, I discovered that he was a young Jewish boy, maybe a few years younger than I, but who attended the **Wayne** State University, who told me about his war experiences, and he was Jewish and his mother, in the last couple years of war, kept him in a barrel somewhere. It – and he lived in a barrel and that stayed with me. But in **Hamtramck** High School, it was just the typical American high school.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Proud, and loafers with pennies in them and stuff like this.

Q: What appealed to you in particular about being in that high school, having those friends, being in that teenage – well, you weren't a teenage – but being – it was a teenage culture.

A: Oh, the girls were very pretty by my standards.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

A: And I – that was probably the most positive thing and – and I remember – I was just reflecting on it recently that I took to the prom a lovely Hispanic looking girl that was just absolutely beautiful and I barely knew her, but I asked her to go to the prom with me, and she did. The negative feelings were awareness of great loneliness, because I didn't really fit with the crowd, didn't do anything with them, e-except encountered them in – in the school. And I did achieve a sort of a fame

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when in the speech class, by good old – run by good old Mrs. **Homestead,** I was given an assignment to learn and recite a poem, and I did. And in perfected English, which came with considerable difficulty at the time, I managed to impress the class. Forget what it was. How do I love thee, I think.

Q: And so it took awhile before you were comfortable with English?

A: There are two curious stages that I believe not only I, but a number of people that I spoke, who – to – to who were in a similar situation, go through. One is, you begin to – I – I forget which came first. You begin to dream in English and then you begin to think in English. Maybe thinking comes first and then you begin to dream in English. And then you make this great, slow transition that is so wonderfully described by a woman who became quite a celebrity, the author of the book, "**Lost in Translation," Eva Hoffman**. I enjoyed that book very much. Very, very similar experiences in some ways, and in some ways different.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: Within two years, because in spite of the – in spite of being with the father, I felt estranged from him. He wanted me to be 11 year old that he left behind, and I was 21. So that may have contributed to my th – early decision to – to marry, and I met a lovely Polish American girl who spoke Polish and whose parents were very, very interested in her marrying a – a Polish fellow, of course. So I did that, sort of – well,

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this was the first girl I knew really intimately and so I married in 1951, and th – even though we were both in college, the children came. First my son, born in ’52, then my first daughter, born in ’53.

Q: And what are their names?

A: **Matthew** and **Elizabeth.**

Q: So those are not Polish names?

A: Well, he was called **Maczik**(ph) and she was called **Elzunia**(ph), which is in a diminutive form, **Elizabeth**.

Q: But their actual legal names were?

A: Oh, **Elizabeth** and **Matthew.** Which is curious because the two girls born of the second marriage, 20 years later, have their legal names in Polish, even though their mother was not Polish at all.

Q: So was that mainly your idea, or mainly your wife’s idea?

A: No, I – I went along with the – with the – it was a joint decision of the wife and – and myself to – to give them that – that identity, which first they hated and then they loved it when they discovered – my daughter, my middle daughter, **Krisha**(ph) got into the University of **Virginia** in **Charlottesville**, I’m convinced, by writing a very beautiful essay on how to – how it feels to be a child of – of the Polish immigrant. And that was a very impressive piece of writing.

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Q: So, with your second family you were more focused on your Polish roots, would you say?

A: I wouldn't say that that was the case. If anything, in the second family, I was more focused on being a better father, because the second family – the first family was – and life of the first family was characterized by an intense effort to become Americanized. To learn the language, learn the language well, be able to command it. After all, I decided to become a lawyer. And the second and – and the – and the fathering or the parenting was largely traditional in the first marriage and – and largely unexamined. And so I now, in retrospect of 70 years of age, I think that I was a much better father second time around.

Q: Going back to your earlier years in **America**, how did you decide to go to law school?

A: Hm. I was first interested in speech and government and I studied a number of courses. But by chance again, which I don't believe in, I was offered a job as a young assistant to two elderly gentlemen who were conducting a Polish radio program on **WJLB** station in **Detroit**. At that time this was one of the **booth** stations that specialized in ethnic programs. And every morning there were one or two hours of Polish language programs. Music, news, advertising. And I started as a

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– of what you call today, a disc jockey. And then finally wound up, while already in law school and using a **nom de plume**, giving news commentaries.

Q: What was your **nom de plume**?

A: Well, **Jan Alexander**, which was sort of a compromise. It could have been Polish, it could have been some other nationality, so we – we – I deliberately fudged it a little bit.

Q: Did you – you choose the name?

A: I think – I think I did. Some – something struck me. I seem to recall that the reason I chose it was deliberate, but it was a connection to either the Polish – first Polish newspaper which – which was published in **Poland** over 300 years ago, or s – in – there was some reason, there was some rational – there was some rationale behind choosing that particular assumed name to broadcast under. So that was, at that time – however, I looked at the broadcasting and I did not see much future for the ethnic broadcasting, I felt that it would keep me a little bit too much in the ethnic community and I wanted to – not to limit myself. And I married –

Q: Wh-When you were broadcasting, were – were you broadcasting in Polish?

A: In Polish, yes, so I continued my Polish and that's why I was – I was picked by the owners of the program because I had good diction, good ra – what we called the radiophonic voice and therefore they thought that was a good addition of a good,

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fresh voice to their broadcast. And the young lady that I married, her father was a lawyer. And so I worked part time in his office as a clerk, and then I thought hm, I like dealing with people, I like helping people, I – why not? And so I – by that time I was in the third year of my college education at **Wayne.** And at that time **Wayne** State University had a so-called combined curriculum. If you could maintain a certain level of grades, **B** minus I think it was, in the first year – first three years of undergraduate studies, you could go to law school, and assuming that you maintain your level of grades in the first year of law school, you would then receive credit for the f-fourth year of undergraduate sta – study and get your **B.A.**, which is what I did. And then two more years and then I had my **L.B.,** which was later changed retrospectively to **J.D., juris doctor,** doctor of laws.

Q: And where did you go to law school?

A: Same **Wayne** State University, since I lived in **Detroit.** I graduated from **Wayne** State in 19 – from the law school in 1956. And for the next six years, I joined my father-in-law in private practice, which was mostly probate and real estate and very simple neighborhood ethnic – ethnic practice because obviously we turned our bilingual skills into assets by – by working with the Polish community.

Q: So you often dealt with your clients in the Polish language?

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A: Oh yes, oh yes. Towards the last two years in **Detroit**, around 1960 or so, I was even appointed by two successive mayors of **Detroit** as a member of the community relations commission, which was a so-called racial commission. **Detroit** had a very checkered history of racial relations and they wanted some – they – they – people appointed people to these commissions. They wanted representatives of ethnic communities to kind of dialog and – and work together on racial problems of the city. But then, of course, I had to resign from that commission and give up my practice when in 1962 I was offered a job in **Washington**, which was to last three years, and it was again in – in the area of both languages, because it was handling the claims for World War II losses by the – by the American nationals who suffered these losses in **Poland** and it required knowledge of Polish.

Q: Now these would be American citizens, probably of Polish descent who had property **[indecipherable]**

A: Most of the claimants, interestingly enough, were survivors of the owners of property in **Poland**, very often relatives, a substantial number of them Jewish, who laid claims to compensation for reasons that the whole family in **Poland** was wiped out by the Nazis, that they were the next of kin now. But there were a number of requirements. The ownership of the property in **Poland** had to be established to – ownership had to be established that it – let me start again. Owners had to be

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American nationals at the time of loss, they could not have had it – it's a legal issue that I don't go into because it – I don't think it's – it's too technical. If someone subsequently became an American citizen, it didn't count because he was not a citizen of the **United States** at the time of loss. The language of the agreement between the **United States** government and government of **Poland,** communist government of **Poland** specified that these losses, these claims will be compensated only to the extent to – to – to – to which the owners were Americans at the time of loss. Do dogs bother you, **Marcia**?

Q: And what appealed to you about taking this job, this position?

A: Well, two things, **Washington**, the capitol of the **United States.** An opportunity to broaden my experience as a lawyer, and a certain prestige that went with being selected as an identifiable Polish American to work on – on the Claims Commission.

Q: And the content of the work, did that have appeal for you?

A: That was very, very appealing from the point of view, not only being interesting, but also permitted me to utilize my knowledge of the country, my knowledge of Polish history, my knowledge and insight into – of character of many of these losses. Maybe not so much the character of the losses as being able to deliver to my government a – a f – a – a sort of a sober objective, hopefully, assessment of not

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only the possibility that these people really lost claims. There were a lot of outrageous claims that were based on total fiction sometimes. And being able to – to assist my superiors in saying that this is not probable, we better check this through our field office. And in fact, in 1963, within a year, I was sent to **Warsaw** for three months to help run the field office that was verifying claims of American citizens by going through the country, checking the land records if they existed, checking, investigating with the neighbors and people who still lived there, whether such and such family really owned the bakery or really had the butcher shop or – or – or owned the – an apartment house, and that was very rewarding, I-I think.

Q: And what did it feel like for you to be back in **Poland**?

A: It was also very gratifying because I went on official passports, so it's a native boy who – who did well, comes back with the official **U.S.** passport, not the tourist passport. And I was given all the privileges of the American embassy in **Warsaw** and I – i-it was an accomplishment.

Q: Did you have friends and family in **Poland**?

A: Oh, I had many, many aunts and first cousins and we got together, it was a great time. It was also a lot of fun, in addition to working very hard and trying to – trying to adjudicate – not adjudicate, but recommend an adjudication of these claims. So it was a very good experience, from a professional point of view, which later qualified

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me to be offered a job in **Western Pacific** when – when I went to **Micronesia** in ’70, which I men – may have mentioned before.

Q: I don’t think that’s on your previous interview.

A: Maybe I skipped that altogether. I was already working for the Federal Trade Commission, when a general counsel from the foreign claims settlement commission called me and said, we would like to offer you a job in **Micronesia**, and I said micro-where? And of course I agreed, provided they borrowed me, as one agency borrowing an employee from another, so I could return to my steady job. And for three years I worked in the western **Pacific**, on the island of **Saipan.** I was a member of the Claims Commission at one time – well, I was a vice-chairman of the commission and at one time even an acting chairman when the prior chairman was sacked. But that permitted me to still extend my experience to a rather exotic location and assignment and – and continue my – my – my mosaic of – of legal experience. I was dealing with very – what we would call in this society, primitive societies. But I discovered it just because it was not a society that maintained good written records. Claims and stories that they gave us were absolutely accurate and we developed a system of – of dealing with claims similar to the one that we did when we were dealing with **Poland**. What stuck out of the profile of a typical claim

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required greater scrutiny than – outrageous claim required considerable degree of proof.

Q: Do you think that your experience during the war had anything to do with your feeling about working for fairness and justice?

A: I felt very righteous doing the right things. I was not involved, thank God, in any le – any professional activity that would really be testing my values, or causing a crisis to me in what I believed in. I felt very righteous. In fact, I remember on a very crucial precedent decision that the commission issued, I sided with two native commissioners against two American commissioners. And because there were five members of the commission, the – the majority prevailed and – and I was the swing vote. I felt very good about it, when trying to look at the values from the point of view of the island culture and not from the point of view of American society's values and – and – and culture, because the loss that these people suffered was a loss in their minds, in – in – in their terms, on their terms – no, in their terms, a-and that had to be addressed.

Q: Mm-hm. We're getting near the end of the tape, so let's stop here and turn it over.

A: Very good.

[break]

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Q: – continuation of a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum volunteer collection interview with **Wallace Witkowski**, tape one, side **B.** Mr. **Witkowski**, could you continue to talk about your professional career? You were in **Micronesia**, and then what?

A: I spent three years in **Micronesia** and like people who come to **Washington** get **Potomac** fever, I too had a very difficult time leaving the **Micronesian** experience behind. I think it was a turning point for me in the sense that I saw a very simple society, with very simple needs, very simple ambitions, that – whose members appeared to be very happy and very content. We did corrupt them a little bit with the ease of agricultural surplus commodities, availability. Using our standards applied to the island star – standards, most of these people were below the level of poverty, but they lived off of subsistence agriculture, and they didn't know how little they had until the Americans told them. That was a turning point in the sense that I admitted to myself and discovered that I no longer need to try to be any more American than I became, and I can be just simply myself.

Q: Well, how were you trying t – previously to be more American?

A: It's very hard to articulate, but any person born abroad, coming to **America**, tries very hard to become Americanized, at least it's a typical, let's say, pattern. I mean, there will be staunch individualists who will refuse to become American, they will

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be French or they will be German, or they will be this and that, for reasons of either because they think that their ethnic background or cultural background is superior to the American – many, many foreigners come to **America** with a rather superior feeling about their own culture. It's a defense mechanism of sort, I believe. Here, I was trying to absorb American values, American customs, American tradition. I wanted my children to be American, after all, they are my roots in this country. I simply wanted to be able to live in this society and function in this society the best I could. Returning from **Micronesia** made me aware that I don't have to prove to myself anything, or climb yet another mountain, or – for example, when I returned to **Washington**, I resumed my career at the Federal Trade Commission, and there I discovered that I really don't care about the antitrust in which I was working at the time, that it dealt with economic and shifting issues. I spent two or three years battling a – a ca – in – in – fighting in a case in which the law was changed after – after a couple years and I felt the – like standing on a shifting sand. I realized also that I'm not happy not dealing with people. So then I switched in my career to consumer protection, because the Federal Trade Commission has two main functions. The antitrust – enforcement of the antitrust laws, which it shares with the justice department, and the consumer protection fo – mission. And I felt much more comfortable in the consumer protection area. And in fact, I continued from a year or

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two after I returned from **Micronesia** until I retired in 1994 – four. So that was the rest of my career in the government. I – I was an enforcement attorney, and a senior attorney, thought of well, getting good reviews. But I realized that I came to **Washington** for three years and I stayed in the government 32 years. I was qualified to retire, and I was getting – I was ready to move on, and in the meantime, personal crises, my second marriage failed also. I started worrying about myself, who am I and what am I doing with my life and what's going on? And I started examining my life probably around the age of 50, not before. By that time I was a father of four. I was bravely putting them through school and supporting them and giving the older children educations. Thank God the two younger ones came 20 years later, I was able to take a breather before the – the last two daughters went to college. But I gave all of them education, except that I was examining and beginning to question all the values in which I grew up. I was a churchgoer, I actively participated in a number of activities in the parishes to which I belonged to. But as many contemporaries will tell you, not all of my needs were satisfied. I went into therapy, first of all, because I really got scared when my second marriage failed and I felt unhappy and I felt alienated and I felt a failure. And so, started my spiritual journey with reading such semi-spiritual but still thought provoking books

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as memoirs of **Carl Jung, "Memories, Dreams, Reflections,"** or even **M –** what's his name, ems – **George Peck** or **Scott Peck**?

Q: **Scott Peck.**

A: **Scott Peck, "The Road Less Traveled."** One of the unfortunate developments caused by the age that I – I forget names, places, things. We call it senior moments, but I'm sure you've heard that name before – that term before. **Peck** was an influence. A number of other things that I read were also very helpful in beginning to turn to – to what do I believe in and where am I going and what's happening. And in the meantime I also discovered in therapy, both individual and group that a number of years may have passed since the war, but the experiences, the feelings, the emotional and psychic wounds remained from that period. Not only the fear that absolutely paralyzed many of us for a long period of time during the years of very brutal Nazi occupation, but also a feeling of total helplessness, that there was not much we could do about it. I spoke about the feeling of helplessness when I saw and heard that my friends from grade school were killed or murdered wa – together with their parents. I witnessed situations in which I stood there and couldn't do anything while some people were brutalized by other people. I personally cowered when – when a man in a uniform with a gun in his hand told me to do things, and I had to obey him. Open up my briefcase, show him what I had. That was, by the

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way, a briefcase in which I carried music. I was, at that time trying to study piano a little bit, didn't last very long, but I was stopped by a German patrol and the same feeling of being absolutely helpless and violated. These things stay with us and the sense of injustice, a sense of outrage at the power being imposed on you against your will. So perhaps that explains why I chose to work for the government and maybe make less money than in private practice, because eventually in private practice I would have made a lot more money than – than working for the government, a rigid grade system and all that stuff, you just got so much money and that's it. Although I am not complaining, I was – I was a high grade and I have a nice, comfortable retirement, which is – totally satisfies me. Spiritually, I went through a sort of a – I don't know how to describe it, awakening. I searched for a system of beliefs that would more be responding to my instinctive need to correct something that is wrong, because at times I did not feel sinful, at times I did not feel guilty. Although by the presets of my church, I was a sinful, guilty lost soul and I had to really try very hard and sacrifice a lot before I would maybe gain salvation.

Q: Now, you were Catholic?

A: Yes, yes. Catholics are very good on guilt and – and sin and sacrifice. I'm saying it somewhat sarcastically. I discovered a teaching, which is called a Course in Miracles, about 10 years ago, and I read the introduction and I said to myself, these

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are the words that I have always searched for, and these are the words that are saying what I have been craving to hear and to – to learn, to know. And started studying it, and I reached the point that the teaching was so powerful and so persuasive and so deep, that I started – I felt the need to share it with two closest beings to me, my mother and my sister. At that time my father had died, died a fulfilled man, because he managed to bring his family together, managed to give me and my sister education in spite of the horrible ordeals of World War II. So I started translating some things into Polish that really moved me, really reached me. In the course of subsequent years, it –

Q: You tra – excuse me, you translate –

A: Into Polish.

Q: – into Polish –

A: Yes.

Q: – for what reason?

A: To share it.

Q: To share it with?

A: With whoever doesn't know English enough –

Q: Okay.

A: – to – to study it in the Polish language.

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Q: Okay.

A: I then discovered that there are other people who seriously want to translate the text of this teaching into Polish. There were already at that time going on, translations into a number of other languages. And to make the long story short, through a process of submitting samples of translations and reviewing them and commenting on them, the Foundation for Inner Peace, which is a publisher of the course, chose a young man in **Warsaw**, young man from my point of view, relatively speaking, the man in his 40's, and – as a translator and me as an editor of his translation. We essentially were translating and making sure that the trans – the substance of each sentence, each paragraph and chapter is – is correctly rendered in Polish. And we just completed the task of translating 1200 pages of a very, very deep metaphysical work. And Friday I will be in the state of **New York** in – in a teaching foundation, where we will be talking about the publication of that. So that was my great, great project of translating, of course, volunteering, and what happened is – and I'm rambling, even though I thought that I would be doing more legal work of some sort after I gra – after I graduate – after I retire from the government, I discovered that practice of law is so bureaucratically impeded by various bar associations and I need to join and I need to l – be licensed that – that I na – just naturally evolved that I am a translator today. In the meantime, I picked up

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other pe-people and other projects that I acted as a translator or an interpreter. There was a period when the American labor movement was deeply interested in the evolution of the independent labor movement in communist **Poland,** the solidarity movement. And when the first representatives came to the **United States**, I was asked by **UAW**, United Auto Workers to be their translator and escort interpreter and I traveled with them. And I also attended a number of their constitutional conventions, whenever they have a delegate from **Poland**, to escort him and translate for him, and also what he says to the convention. And then, also came volunteer work for the Holocaust Museum. That had deeper roots. I sought this work out myself. I felt –

Q: And when was that?

A: You know, I don't know. I don't remember any more, but I know –

Q: Had the museum opened when you sought **[indecipherable]**

A: Yes, oh even when the first efforts at the museum – at the organiza – or-organizing the museum took place, I was, as you can tell from the interview in 1990 – first of all, I donated a number of books and pamphlets and materials to the museum, because when I was handling the American claims for property lost in **Poland,** when I was working for the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission, and when I was stationed in **Warsaw**, I managed to reach the people, the survivors who

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are running the Jewish Historical Institute in **Warsaw**. And I obtained from them a number of unique publications, such as witness accounts of liquidation of ghetto of **Sosnowiec** or of some other – **Bialystok,** rather obscure publications, of which there weren't very many, you know, issues available. You couldn't find it in a library. But I brought all of these things with me. And when the museum opened, I thought I would donate all of these things to the museum and that's how my cooperation with the museum started. I turned over all of those things. There weren't very many, 10 - 20 books maybe, pamphlets, but they are today in the library. And then I think you then come in and you have read my interview in 1990, so you know where I felt that I needed to testify as a witness to what I knew from a unique perspective of being this boy scout troop leader who had a boy in my troop who told me the story about his brother being lost and then militia taking him, communist militia taking him to the house in which the Jewish survivors lived and saying to the little boy, it – is – were you kept here? And the kid said yes. That's – that's the version that I received from my – from my member of my troop. So I felt duty bound to give testimony to the truth as I know it. So that's how the interview came about. And then I realized that I can be of help in the oral department. And I no longer remember – but I know that I submitted my offer to – to translate. That was lost somewhere and somebody – on somebody's desk for a year, then I –

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nothing was done about it. One day I enquired, aren't you interested in somebody who knows both languages and can translate? Yes, yes, submit an application. Well, okay. I don't know what happened to – finally I – I was put in touch with the oral history department and was asked to help them in translating more significant key testimony of witnesses who were testifying in Polish. And over the last two, three years, I lose track of it because these were long translations, long projects. I worked on the **Mordowicz** translation, which is an incredible story of a man who twice escaped from **Auschwitz** and lived to tell. And another long and dramatic testimony of a woman who n – was one of the early inmates in **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, **Ozhrenczim**(ph) **Druzhinikov**(ph), and also lived – and what was particularly moving about it was the fact that she admits in the course of the interview that in crucial moments in her life in the camp, or after the camp, it was her Jewish girlfriends who saved her life. That was a very wrenching job to do. It was a type of work that I could work on, and then I had to go away from it for days sometimes, sometimes a couple weeks before I could return to it. It was just too devastating to relive with this person, what she had to say. I'm delaying giving you the name because I – I have a mental br – block right now, and I cannot remember her name, but of course, **Amy Rubin** knows because these are la – my two primary claims to fame as a translator, a volunteer translator for the museum. Why, the most difficult

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question to answer. Because you see, more than 50 years may have passed since those years of Nazi occupation in **Poland**, but the events and the feelings stay with us and somehow I feel that this is my way of doing something, because then I was not able to do anything. And secondly, on a deeper level, it is my feeling that in some way I am engaged in some act of expiation or – or contrition on behalf of my countrymen, for things that they did, or failed to do when they could have. Now, I do not minimize the mutual accusations between the Christian Poles and the Jewish Poles against each other. Anti-Semitism certainly was and is alive, unfortunately, which is a curious phenomenon because there are no more Jews in **Poland** and yet, something in – something has caught both groups in – in – in this vicious circle. Now there is a controversy about Poles putting up Christian crosses in – in the place in which both Poles and Jews died, and Jewish tradition, of course, requires that nothing be done there **[indecipherable]**. And – and there are radicals in both groups that foment discord. So I – somehow I – I just feel that whatever I can do to just assist the museum in its mission, I'll do it. And even though I am now in the process of moving to **Michigan** and I will be spending most of my time in **Michigan,** I will be connected by modern technology with **Washington,** with the museum, and **Amy Rubin** knows that any time she needs something from me, she can do it just like she did here. Give me the video of the interview of a witness in

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Polish, give me a transcript, and I will sit down and I'll translate it and give it back to her, as long as I'll – my mind is still working.

Q: And you said you want to help the museum carry out their mission. What do you see as the mission of the museum?

A: Well, it's been asked of me a – a number of times previously, including some video interviews. This ties in very deeply with my spiritual values. I think – think that not only the mission of the museum, of teaching people that intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, all these ugly phenomena that characterize our life on earth, have to be eradicated, eliminated. But we have to, ever so slowly, try to awaken to the fact that we are all members of oneness, we are all children of God, we are all brothers, we are all oneness, and as long as we continue looking at other people as separate and distinct from a – from us, we – we are not going to find our way back to our creator. And I am a firm believer in that. And I, in this sense too, I see my work for the museum as – as possibly indirectly contributing. I am extremely impressed with the skill and enthusiasm and – and – and – and energy with which the museum was created, is being supported, is being developed and continues its work. And I want to be a part of it, but I also want to be a part of the general effort to teach all of us, and the museum is doing its share, showing other, equally egregious holoca – Holocaust-like experiences of other ethnic groups, be

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they Armenians or – or just because some county is in **Asia**, that should not matter less than a mil – million people were killed because they were Asian rather than they were other group, religious or ethnic. So I guess this is the best I can articulate at this point, why I committed to – to – to work for the museum.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to talk about?

A: I only have concern that a lot of what I said is not going to be of – really of – of – well, maybe it will be of peripheral value, peripheral value to you to – to – to see what kind of people volunteer. But I think the – that – that I volunteer for a slightly different reason than let's say a – a typical, if I may use that word, survivor volunteer works for the museum. There is a deep, tragic, desperate effort to make sure that the people who died, didn't die in vain, without any – any lessons to be learned from it. So I can – I respect my – I – I – I – I am in awe of these people who come and travel a long distance sometimes, to spend a couple hours in the museum, just being escorts, or – or guides. My commitment is the same and yet somewhat different, because even though all the men in my family died as a result of the war, except my father, who survived the war, but I had uncles. One, a pilot who died in **England**, another persecuted and – and killed by the communists, I feel that I have the need to assist in preserving the story of the Holocaust and teaching. In one of the interviews I said six million or seven million died, and they're silenced, so

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somebody has to speak in their place. Even if I am just translating little pieces of the – of the story, I – I hope that I am making a contribution. And I'm waiting for them to give me more while my brain is still functioning. After all, I am 70.

Q: So you're planning to continue?

A: Definitely, if – if they just don't mind sending the stuff to **Michigan,** to rural **Michigan** rather than calling me to come in, or sending it to **Arlington.**

Q: Anything else, before we stop?

A: No, I cannot think of anything. The difficult part of it is that even though that interview in 1990 was a two videocassettes long, I can still not – I still cannot make myself look at it. Like I probably will not be able to listen to this interview that you're conducting with me today. It is helping me in a sense that somehow I unburden myself, that I – that I lessen the weight of memory by talking about it, but I don't want to review it. No, I cannot think of anything else that I would like to add.

Q: Well, thank you very much for your contribution.

A: My pleasure, in a new sense of the word.

Conclusion of Interview

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