

DP-41
WILHELMINA MILLER
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AGE 11
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PHILLIPS: This is the, excuse me, Wilhelmina Miller, and this is Andrew Phillips. Interview on the 28th of August , 1989. We're beginning this interview at about 3:00 PM. And Mrs. Miller is from Poland originally, but she'll tell us all about that. Could you start by telling us your name, and the name where you immigrated from, and what year you were born.

MILLER: Well, I was born on April 27, 1912 in Wrotzlovic [PH], what was then Poland, I think. And--

PHILLIPS: And what year did you immigrate to the United States?

MILLER: In 1923 we landed at Ellis Island. I believe it was the 10th.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Could you take us back to your memories of your early childhood in Poland, perhaps telling us what your father did for a living.

MILLER: Uh, my father was a farmer and when I was about two we moved further north which is now called Thorun. In those days it was Thorn, T-H-O-R-N, something like that. And there I went to school. Of course, I had a lot of fun. Farm kids usually do, (she laughs), playing hooky and stuff. (She laughs.) Both summer and winter. Winter we'd be sledding, and summer we'd go swimming.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us, give us some sense of the atmosphere, of what it was like for you as a little girl in that farming community. For instance, what kind of farm did you live on?

MILLER: Ah, just a general farm. We raised our own crops and our own food. Very little that we had to buy. Kerosene and spices, coffee, salt. That's about the only thing we bought. We raised the rest. So we were well fed.

PHILLIPS: You say you were well fed. Can you tell me what kinds of animals that you raised on this farm?

MILLER: Well, pigs, uh, chickens, rabbits, uh, we had our own milk and farm machinery was taken care of, the mechanism of was taken care by horse. And we raised their own grain, took the grain to mill. One of those, uh, you know, like they have in Holland? (She laughs.) To, uh, grind into flour and stuff. So, you see, we were well fed. But the city people had it bad. Because I know about once a week my father went to town to take vegetables and stuff like that, butter and eggs. And the, he sold everything before he even hit town. The town people would go out a mile or two to meet the farmers and buy the produce. Of course, this was wartime.

PHILLIPS: First World War?

MILLER: Well, uh, which one was the one that ended about '18?
(She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: So what was it like for you in the house. Describe this house for us.

MILLER: Uh, well, to me it was a beautiful place. It was built

of brick. The roof was straw, which didn't cost anything to replace. Whenever it got worn down a little my father did his own fixing. And there was, let me see, one, two, three, four, five rooms to the living part, and then there was the corridor all the way across the house. and then there was the stock, where they kept the stock, you know, the pigs and horses, cows and so on. And then there was a thrash floor, and then barn on from there.

PHILLIPS: What kind of floor?

MILLER: Where, in the house?

PHILLIPS: You described a thrash floor?

MILLER: Yeah, thrashing floor. That was cement.

PHILLIPS: Explain that to us.

MILLER: Well, to me it was just cement. It was just flat, you know, where you could hand flay the grain to get you know, grain. Or they did, in a few villages there they had a thrashing machine that would go around for the main thrashing. And that was this way.

PHILLIPS: Did you help with the thrashing?

MILLER: Yeah. (She laughs.) It was run by horse power and it was, well, here was the main thing, and then arms out where you hooked horse to, and they would go round and round . And my dad fixed a seat on one of those arms, and I made sure the horse kept going. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: I'm just going to stop the interview for a moment because I can hear a bit of a thumping sound. So, just one moment. (Break in tape.) We stopped the interview for a moment. There was a slight thumping sound, which I think we've eliminated. Yes, you were telling us about thrashing and thrashing the wheat on that concrete floor.

MILLER: Usually rye, because that was the main one. Of course, wheat was raised too, but that was used to more, using the rye in the family, you know, for bread and stuff.

PHILLIPS: And your mother used to bake the bread, I suppose?

MILLER: Yeah. We baked our own bread, smoked our own meat.

PHILLIPS: Tell me how many were in your family?

MILLER: Well my mother. I mean my stepmother, that time, by that time my mother was dead. My stepmother and my father and my brother and I, there were just the four of us.

PHILLIPS: How old were you when your mother died?

MILLER: Seven.

PHILLIPS: How did she die?

MILLER: Uh, flu epidemic. We had it over there, too. And, uh, she had asthma bad, and between the two of them she couldn't, didn't make it.

PHILLIPS: And when you say there was an epidemic, did many people in your village die?

MILLER: No. There was only, I think, two in the whole village.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us a little about, uh, a little bit more about your house? You said the barn was close, so that the animals, I think, were living almost in the house.

MILLER: Well, the building was all one and it started with the family, then the animal house. (She laughs.) So that in the winter you didn't have to go outside to feed the stock or anything. You'd just go from one section to the next.

PHILLIPS: So, in fact, you must have got to know the animals very well.

MILLER: Oh, yes. (She laughs.) And they were pets to us. Of course, they weren't pets to my father, but for my brother and I they were our pets.

PHILLIPS: Did you have to help in the killing of these animals?

MILLER: No. Uh, the killing of the pigs I did because my stepmother was afraid and, a, so I had to hold the pan to catch the blood after, you know, it was killed. Of course, that was used too, for blood sausage. And it was good.

PHILLIPS: And tell me about the vegetables you used to grow.

MILLER: Well, they had a regular, mainly potatoes, carrots, lettuce. I don't remember any tomatoes. If they had them, I don't

remember. But cucumbers, most like any place else.

PHILLIPS: What about going to school? Tell me about the conditions that you went to school under.

MILLER: Well, the school, one room schoolhouse, which they had in this country too, and you started in the first grade, you know. And you could start at five, which I did. And, uh, they were all taught, you know, because there wasn't that many children in the one village. Our, where we were there were two villages close together. So they used the same schoolroom. And, uh, it was fun, the best schooling there is because, uh, with myself, I learned awfully easy. So by the time I got through with the first grade I knew the second, third, and part of the other grades, what they were teaching. And by the time I had, let's see, there's about six years, I was through that school. It's equal through here through junior high school.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me what it was like, how you got to school?

MILLER: We walked, and got lost in the forest every so often, accidentally , on purpose. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: What did you do when you got lost in the forest?

MILLER: Well, in the summertime there was nice fishing holes. Because the vacations there was in the spring and in the fall so the children could help in the planting in the harvest time.

PHILLIPS: It was planned that way.

MILLER: Yes.

PHILLIPS: And what else did you do un the forest?

MILLER: Well, usually we found enough mushrooms to bring home, and had a lot of fun, you know, like kids will, playing tag and everything else.

PHILLIPS: And you used to help with the harvesting. Do you have memories of that?

MILLER: My father was different from some of those. He said we were only young once and we could enjoy our life.

PHILLIPS: So, you--

MILLER: In some of those other the kids really were working from morning to night.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me a little bit more about your father and his life, the kinds of things he did. Did he ever go off to fight?

MILLER: He never was in the war, in the fighting part of it, but he told us, when I was a baby, that the part where we and them, and the Russians and the Germans were fighting, and if the Russians were in the village in the morning, the Germans would be there in the afternoon. They were there pushing each other back and forth. So, uh, then whichever one, you know, took over, the first thing they'd do, they'd search the property to see if there was any enemy and then they'd bring their food in and fix a good meal and the family ate with them. Different than later wars. (She laughs.) But dad could speak those different languages. In fact, he was pretty fluent in five of them. He never could read or write, but as far as language he knew them.

PHILLIPS: Did he--

MILLER: He was a wonderful father. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Did he tell you more about those experiences, sitting down for breakfast with the Russians and dinner with the Germans, maybe?

MILLER: (She laughs.) Well, somewhat. But he said he never had a bit of trouble and didn't lose so much as a chicken. But he was told to keep the stock in the barn because they couldn't be responsible for it then. But, uh, well, they just liked my father. Some of the people lost everything they had, you know, because they took sides. And you can't take sides when you're fighting against each other.

PHILLIPS: Any other memories of your father and the kinds of experiences that he had?

MILLER: Not too much because, uh, you know, like I say I was eleven years old when we came to this country and he worked too many hours then, twelve hours a day, and he'd be tired by the time I got home. So we lost that closeness. And then when I was seventeen he went back over to that country.

PHILLIPS: Okay. And so, we're now talking, you were in Poland, right?

MILLER: Yeah. But when we came to this country, in 1923, see dad worked hard. He wasn't on a farm then where I could find him.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me, in Poland, for you what life was like during the war?

MILLER: Well, it didn't. it wasn't any different than any place else because where we lived, at that time, when the war was going on, the only way we could even hear any of it, we'd lay on the ground with our ear to the ground and, you know, the vibration and noise of explosions could be heard then. But just ordinary, you couldn't even hear any of the fighting. We were far enough behind the lines.

PHILLIPS: On which side?

MILLER: (She laughs.) I don't know. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: I suppose it depended.

MILLER: Uh-huh. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: So you never actually experienced the soldiers coming through your village?

MILLER: No. We had some prisoners there in one of the big farms, and they used to come to our house because dad could speak their language. They were Russian. And, uh, dad asked them, he says, "You haven't got any guards or anything. Why don't you go back home?" They says, "Heck, why should we? They'd put us back in the army, next time we might get killed." So. And they wouldn't even go to a store to but tobacco or anything. They'd give us kids the money and tell us what they wanted and we'd go get it.

PHILLIPS: So how did they, who fed them?

MILLER: The farmer that they were doled out to.

PHILLIPS: So the government, in other words, gave you these prisoners to feed and look after. Is that what happened?

MILLER: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And did the prisoners have to do some work for you?

MILLER: Oh, yeah. Not for my dad, because he was too small a guy, but there were some big, like they call ranches here, you know. And they'd have big fields of grain and stuff, where they did need help. So these prisoners were doled out to them. And on their honor they stayed there.

PHILLIPS: These Russian prisoners.

MILLER: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Did you get to befriend any of them?

MILLER: Oh, yeah. Practically every evening there were some one of them in our house.

PHILLIPS: And what did you do during those evenings?

MILLER: Just, they were talking to dad, because us kids couldn't speak their language.

PHILLIPS: What did they talk about, do you know?

MILLER: I don't know. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Did your father ever tell you?

MILLER: I never asked.

PHILLIPS: Was there any other social life that went on? Did they carry on in any cultural ways? Was there singing and dancing?

MILLER: Oh, no. They were pretty well, you know, had their rules and regulations that they, you know, were supposed to be allowed to do. And they made sure that they didn't do something where they'd be sent somewhere else where they wouldn't be treated as nice.

PHILLIPS: When the war was finished these men, I suppose they went home. Is that what happened?

MILLER: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And then what was life like for you then, after the war?

MILLER: Didn't change any.

PHILLIPS: And how was it that you decided to leave Poland?

MILLER: Well, dad decided to come back to the United States which, this was his third trip over here, because he came over before he was married, and then he went back and got my mother, come back again. And then before I was born my brother was born in this country. Before I was born they moved back over to that part of the world again.

PHILLIPS: Why had your father come here in the first place?

MILLER: Footloose. (She laughs.) No, it wasn't really that. He wanted to make some money so he could buy, you know, a nice place. Raise his family in better conditions than what he was raised.

PHILLIPS: But he wanted to raise his family back in Poland.

MILLER: Uh-huh. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: So he came here at first unmarried, he worked, and then returned. Is that what happened?

MILLER: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And the what happened?

MILLER: That's about it.

PHILLIPS: Then he got married.

MILLER: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And, uh, when was it that you learned that you were going to come to the United States?

MILLER: Well, uh, my aunt, his sisters and him, had been corresponding, and he decided he wanted to come back to this country to make some money and go. And, well, he planned on staying that time. But my stepmother, she was too damned lay to do anything, she wouldn't move on the farm. He wanted to buy a farm and she wouldn't. And I know that if they went back, that would be the only out. He'd get his farm again. He was just a born farmer.

PHILLIPS: So tell me about leaving Poland. Tell me how that felt.

MILLER: Well, it didn't bother me any as far as feelings. It

was an adventure. (She laughs.) We had to go to Warsaw first to get our, you know, get all our papers fixed and everything, and then we went to Danzig which was, you know, the free city of Danzig. And then from there we got on a ship and went to Hamburg and we had to wait there for a little while to get the ship that was going to take us to this country. And like kids, we got into a little trouble there. We lived on, in a hotel on the fifth floor, and they had one of these spiral staircases. And we didn't use the stairs going down. And this one time, there was an old man watching us, and he squealed on us. (She laughs.) Because he was too close to the end of the railing and we got to the head before he noticed it and knocked him down. He didn't like that. (She laughs.) So he squealed to my dad, and that ended our fun.

PHILLIPS: So you got on the ship from Hamburg?

MILLER: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: How was that?

MILLER: Well, it was pretty nice. It took, I believe it was eight days from there to New York but there was three days we were riding a storm where in those days they didn't have the stabilizers on the ships like they do. That ship was going like this (she gestures). You know, tipped to

one side. And we got in trouble there. We was not supposed to be on deck because you get washed overboard. But that was the fun part, hanging onto those ropes.

PHILLIPS: What did you see when you ere topside?

MILLER: A lot of water and big waves, you know. Of course, the waves were washing across the ship. We could have easily been washed overboard, but kids, by eleven and thirteen, don't think about things like that. It was fun. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Do you remember, were you sleeping in what class on the ship.

MILLER: Third class.

PHILLIPS: Not steerage.

MILLER: No.

PHILLIPS: In other words, there's the steerage class yet, isn't there. Did you meet many people on the ship?

MILLER: Well, in a way, yes. But, of course, we were just interested in the children. There was another couple of children like, about our age, but they were going to Halifax. Their father was already there, and that's as far as they were going. And, like kids, we didn't get each others addresses, so just the trip is all we knew of them.

PHILLIPS: And you arrived in New York. Tell me about it.

MILLER: Well, we got off tat Ellis Island and dad being able to speak fluent English we got in a line to go through a check stand. And, uh, being, you know, we had our aunt there in Hudson, New York that we were going to. So they checked us through and we left the same day. Go t on a train and went up to Hudson. That was the end of the adventure.

PHILLIPS: How did it feel in this new country?

MILLER: Well, in one way we didn't know the language. Dad tried to teach us English, but to us it sounded funny. So every time he tried to teach us, we started laughing at him. And when we got here, of course, my aunt spoke German, but her family didn't, and nobody else did except our family. So it was either learn it or else. It took me a couple of months, and I got by on

it. So, uh, from there on it was nothing but, you know, polish up the language. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Were there any other children from Poland with you, around?

MILLER: No. Uh-huh. And I didn't know the Polish language anyway, because we just started learning that after the war.

PHILLIPS: So what language did you speak at home?

MILLER: German. Like I said, they were really all German in the village that I was born in, and in the villages I went to later, you know. It was always German, the language. But after the war, then Poland was allotted that part of the country, so we had to start learning it in school. If I had been there another year or two, I probably would have known Polish too.

PHILLIPS: So what happened to you in regard to schooling when you arrived in the United States?

MILLER: Had to start in the first grade. But there was, uh, myself and my brother and another German, a girl and her brother, and a Chinese boy, all starting in the first grade and all, you know, older than what should be in there. So, uh, we kind of incorporated the Chinese boy into our German group. And that poor teacher, that first one we had. We'd get mad at her and we'd start talking German. She couldn't understand. But it wasn't really too hard to learn. That's why I can't understand why they have to have these bilingual school, you know, for kids. They're better off if they learn English from the start when they go to school instead of having another language that they can work in in the school class, because it takes longer that way.

PHILLIPS: It takes longer in school to learn.

MILLER: Uh-huh, if they have their own language there, you know, that they can depend on. If they had to depend on English they'd learn a lot sooner and a lot better, I think. I know the four of us did.

PHILLIPS: What you're saying is it was better for you to learn English rather than to be taught in German.

MILLER: Right.

PHILLIPS: But you had to teach--

MILLER: And this is the country that these people claim to be theirs, so learn the language and learn the ways.

PHILLIPS: So what happened to your parents in the United States? How did they survive? What did they do for a living?

MILLER: Well, dad worked in a cement mill, you know, where they made the cement, because my Uncle John worked there and, you know, he had the job for him. And it was good money, but it was hard work. And then us kids, in the summertime the farmers would come into Hudson there and we'd go out picking fruit, get so much for each basket, and we could earn our own money that way.

PHILLIPS: Okay. I'm going to turn the tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

PHILLIPS: This is side two of our cassette interview with Mrs.

Miller, Interview Number 415 [DP-41]. It's about coming on to 3:30. Um, yeah. So we're now in the United States. You were going to school, and your parents, your father is working in a cement factory. What was your mother doing?

MILLER: She stayed at home.

PHILLIPS: What happened leading up to the years to the Depression, between the time you arrived and the Depression, and perhaps we can lead into your experience during the Depression.

MILLER: Well, as far as we were concerned there wasn't one. My father worked, you know, steady. And, uh, when I was sixteen I quit school and I was lucky, I got into a family, a large family, you know, household help. And I started as a babysitter, the youngest one, which was the eight. (She laughs.) And I was always, that didn't keep me busy because other kids, the kids in the family, they kind of took care of the baby too, and so, I was always hanging around the kitchen. Uh, Mrs. Largay [PH] wanted to know whether I'd like to cook. I says, "I sure would." In a month's time I took over the kitchen. It just came natural to me. Of course, if I ran into something, you know, I couldn't do, I had her to back me up. So that

was my, uh, job from then on. And we, uh, I stayed with them I think it was three years, and I decided I wanted to see what New York City looked like. *She laughs.) And I did the same kind of work there, but restless. Went back home, got, went back to the same family, and we'd spend summers in Cape Cod and winters in Hudson. And then they, uh, after Prohibition was repealed he opened up a brewery in Waterbury, Connecticut. So, of course, I went with him. And then eventually I met my first husband. We were married in '34. That's the one thing I shouldn't have done. But I had three children by him, and I'll never regret them. And then I finally got tired of his carousing, so we got divorced when my kids were in their early teens. So when I married again, I just buried him. That's my life.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me a little bit more about that aspect of your life, working for these families, what that was like. You were cooking for these families?

MILLER: Uh-huh. Yeah. The only thing I couldn't cook, I still can't, I can't make pie crust that tastes like pie crust. It's like show leather. But everything else come out fine.

PHILLIPS: And you enjoyed that work?

MILLER: Yeah. I really did.

PHILLIPS: How long did you do it for?

MILLER: Well, I was married at twenty-two and then had myself and my old man to cook for.

PHILLIPS: So you only did it for a short time.

MILLER: Uh- huh.

PHILLIPS: Okay. You've told us about coming through Ellis Island. You've told us about moving on up to Hudson in New York State. Tell us about how you came to settle here in Denver.

MILLER: Well, my first husband was footloose. He couldn't stay in one place long. He went all the way out to California and there he worked different jobs, never stayed in one place very long. Then we, our middle one, had asthma, and he had a bad spell when he was about five years old, five, six years old. So, uh, the doctor recommended to get him out of that dampness and, uh, so we asked him about what he thought Colorado might do for him. And at that time they were building that tunnel between Grand Lake and Estes Park, the water tunnel. And he'd heard about that, so we

came there. And this climate was good for Fred. So, uh, we stayed there for a while and then he wouldn't stay put so we went back out to the coast and he didn't, well, we started building a house and stuff, but he wouldn't stay put and he says, "Well, let's try Colorado again. Maybe I'll--" So we came to Colorado. We lived in Grand Lake and I had a small restaurant there, and he was working on the dam at Chatter Mountain when they were putting that in. But it didn't last long. And then I told him, well, that's it. We're through moving. He went one way and I went the other. And I came to Denver here because they couldn't get a decent paying job up there and we lived here, the kids and I. And after the divorce I met the one I married, and that's it.

PHILLIPS: You've lived here ever since.

MILLER: Uh-huh. And I'm going to stay here.

PHILLIPS: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us? Any stories you think that would be valuable to share?

MILLER: No, not really, although my kids are scattered now. I have one in North Bend, Washington. One in Fairbanks, Alaska, and my daughter just down the street a block.

PHILLIPS: Okay. So that finishes at 3:35 our interview with Mrs. Wilhelmina Miller. It's Interview Number 415 [DP-41].