

**EI-122**

**SAMUEL (SCYMAK) WOZNICA**

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**RESIDENCES: POLAND: CHENSTOCHOWA**

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**SIGRIST:** Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, March 20th, 1992. I'm here at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in the recording studio with Sam Woznica, who was born in Poland, lived in Germany from 1945 'til 1951 and then, leaving from Paris, came to America in 1951. Good morning Mr. Woznica, and I want to start off by asking you your full name and your date of birth, please.

**WOZNICA:** I name is Scymak Woznica, S-C-Y-M-A-K W-O-Z-N-I-C-A. I was born in Poland 1926, February the 22nd.

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SIGRIST: And what town were you born in, sir?

WOZNICA: Chenstochowa.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

WOZNICA: C-H-E-N-S-T-O-C-H-O-W-A, Chenstochowa.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Can you just tell me a little bit about what kind of a town this was.

WOZNICA: It was a town about 180 to 200 thousand people. It was a mixed town, Poles and Jews. We didn't live in any separate sections for the Jews or the Poles. We used to live, we all lived together.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in Poland is this?

WOZNICA: It's about 180 to 200 miles from Krakow. It was in the center of Poland.

SIGRIST: So this is a big town, actually.

WOZNICA: It's a big town, yeah.

SIGRIST: It's like a little city probably, 150...

WOZNICA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is this an industrial...

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WOZNICA: Industrial section, yes. Mostly steel work, steel manufacturers.

SIGRIST: And this is, your family didn't work in the steel industry or...

WOZNICA: No, my father was a custom design jewelry designer.

SIGRIST: Did he have his own store?

WOZNICA: Well, he manufactures, about four, five people working for him, so.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. Can you tell me your other family members?

WOZNICA: I have three brothers and two sisters. All live together.

SIGRIST: And what was your father's name?

WOZNICA: Samuelayton.

SIGRIST: And your mother's name?

WOZNICA: Esther.

SIGRIST: And did she work?

WOZNICA: No, she was part of the business, people, woman.

SIGRIST: I see, I see. Can you describe to me the house that you lived in, that you

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grew up in?

WOZNICA: It was a two bedroom house and we all lived together and we were comfortable, very comfortable.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the house was made out of?

WOZNICA: It was big building, eighteen or twenty units. We lived on the second floor.

SIGRIST: So this is right in the city.

WOZNICA: Right in the city, yes.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe the neighborhood for me? What kinds of people lived in the neighborhood?

WOZNICA: It was a mixed neighborhood, Jews and Poles, you know. It was a business section you know, with stores, everything we needed in the neighborhood. There were quite a few temples and churches. It was a good neighborhood.

SIGRIST: Did your family practice their religion rigidly?

WOZNICA: Yes. My father was very orthodox.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about, say a Passover celebration when you were a kid. Just kind of describe it for me.

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WOZNICA: Oh, for Passover every year the house. All the family came together, mostly family like, the close family and some cousins sometimes and we observed very religiously, you know. Like I said, my father was very orthodox.

SIGRIST: Were there other members of the extended family that lived in this town?

WOZNICA: Yeah, I had uncles and cousins that, uh, I had two uncles and cousins living in the same town not far from us, about five, six blocks away from us. It was a close family, very close.

SIGRIST: So both sides, your mother's side and your father's side...

WOZNICA: Yes, both sides.

SIGRIST: They were very close. Did your grandparents play an important part in your life?

WOZNICA: No, I don't know my grandparents at all. They died before I was born.

SIGRIST: On both sides? ( Mr. Woznica nods in affirmation ) Okay, let's talk about school in this town. Was there a school in this neighborhood?

WOZNICA: Oh, yeah. I went to quite a few schools. We had a trade school that was well known and you had quite a few regular schools, public schools which was mixed, not segregated. It was Poles and Jews all together and you have to go for seven years to graduate and when you graduate

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you go to higher school.

SIGRIST: Did you attend the trade school?

WOZNICA: No, I didn't. I was too young.

SIGRIST: I see. What kinds of subjects did you learn in school in Poland at that time? What was sort of the general curriculum?

WOZNICA: Mostly you learn history, math and Polish language, you know. Reading, writing, arithmetic and those were main courses.

SIGRIST: Did you speak Yiddish at home?

WOZNICA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So you had to learn Polish in school, though.

WOZNICA: Yes, sir.

SIGRIST: Did they teach any other languages?

WOZNICA: No, just Polish and Yidd..., Polish.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you talk to me a little bit about the climate between the Poles and the Jews in this town. Did you have a good relationship with them? Did you have a tense relationship with them?

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WOZNICA: ( he pauses ) The relationship wasn't that great but you could get along with them. It all depends on the neighborhood you were living. If you were living in a Jewish neighborhood and the Gentile people come up to you they were fine. But if you lived outside, outskirts of the Jewish neighborhood, let's say, they were a little rough to handle them.

SIGRIST: So in general would you say it was a tolerant atmosphere, but not particularly warm.

WOZNICA: Yeah, it was tolerant, right. That's good.

SIGRIST: In the '20's and early 30's, before the German occupation, were there any incidents of physical violence against Jews in this town?

WOZNICA: Well, the pogroms, right. There were quite a few pogroms and I lived through one of them.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that a little bit for me?

WOZNICA: Oh, a pogrom is like violence. They coming in and knocking the windows off, they rob the stores, you know. They knock the temple windows out and whatever you have. Especially the store were damaged, a lot of them.

SIGRIST: And you said you lived through one of these. Can you tell me about your experience.

WOZNICA: Well, my experience is that I was going to school in the morning about

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eight o'clock and all of sudden I see the Poles with sticks and whatever they had in their hands and they knock out the windows of the Jewish stores. And I didn't realize what was going on. So when I got to the school the teacher said, " All the Jews have to go back home because we are having a pogrom going." So I was ready to go home, but I had no choice. The school was closed so I went home. We have to stay in the house and watch ourselves and see what's going to happen until the police came. The gendarmes and the police came and quieted it down.

SIGRIST: Generally were the pogroms in this town unorganized activities? Was it just kind of a helter-skelter attack or were the Poles very organized about this kind of thing?

WOZNICA: No, they were organized on it. They were organized. They had their own parties going, you know, uh, groups. And that's what they did, I mean, the pogroms.

SIGRIST: How old were you when that happened?

WOZNICA: Uh ( he pauses ), I was twelve years old at the time.

SIGRIST: So, it's a scare tactic.

WOZNICA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Very much so.

WOZNICA: We were scared.

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SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit, then, about the German occupation in '39. Why don't you start off by just telling me, from your point of view when you were that age at that time, what happened when the Germans came into your town.

WOZNICA: It happened in 1939 when the Germans occupied Poland. The first thing they did, they build a ghetto and put all the Jews in one section and then they made the selection. In 1940 they start selecting people, the young people and the old people. Now the young people went to one side, the older people went to the other side, separation. The kids were separated. The families were separated and the young generation went to special camps. They called them "labor camps," they used to call them. And we worked there. I worked in the Hassock, Hassock Company, which was the manufacture of shells and little ammunition and the other people went to selection like Auschwitz, Belsen, Treblinka or other concentration camps and never saw them again.

SIGRIST: When you say the Germans built a ghetto in your town, did they use existing buildings or did they literally construct....

WOZNICA: No, it was a neighborhood, a complete neighborhood, existing buildings and they put fences around it with guards.

SIGRIST: And you were not allowed to go through this fence at all.

WOZNICA: No, no. Not beyond the fence. You couldn't go through. The only time you went through the fence was when you go to work. They used to

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have the music playing in front of the gate and you went to work. They...

SIGRIST: The music playing in front of the gate?

WOZNICA: Yeah, they had music.

SIGRIST: Live...?

WOZNICA: Trumpets, live music, trumpets, to wake you up in the morning and get you to work. And you had the badge on you, which company you go to work and you went to work.

SIGRIST: And what did you do?

WOZNICA: I used to, we called it "delivering" in the camp.

SIGRIST: Which entailed what?

WOZNICA: Inside, moving merchandise, you know, from one shop to the other, like transportation.

SIGRIST: Can you just describe a little bit, now were you separated from your family when you were in the ghetto?

WOZNICA: Oh yes, yes, yeah, separate.

SIGRIST: Was it just simply a separation of men and women, or were you literally separated from all of your family.

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WOZNICA: All alone.

SIGRIST: You were alone in this...

WOZNICA: I was alone, all by myself. All my family went the other way. They went to Geschen, I guess.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what everyday life was like in this ghetto?

WOZNICA: Oh, you get up in the morning. There's a hundred, two hundred people in this, so many Germans, and you work, to camp where you work in the factories. And you work 'til five o'clock and then you go back to, to the ghetto.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own room or your own apartment or did you live with other men?

WOZNICA: No, we live together. There was about five, six of us in one room and you get ration food every day and that's it. That was your life. No education, no nothing.

SIGRIST: Were you counted? I assume you were guarded.

WOZNICA: Yes, we were counted every day, going in and going out as a group.

SIGRIST: What did that feel like to you? How did you feel in this situation?

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WOZNICA: There's no feeling. You just live with it. You have no choice.

SIGRIST: You're just numb to the whole thing.

WOZNICA: You were just guarded around twenty four hours a day. There's no way out and no way in, I mean, that's the style of your life. You just couldn't escape.

SIGRIST: And you had no communication with the other members of your family.

WOZNICA: No, none whatsoever.

SIGRIST: What happened? What was the next step in your life after the experience of being in the ghetto?

WOZNICA: It's sad to say. We want to be liberated. We want to be free. We want to live like a human being so we waited for some kind of relief from someplace.

SIGRIST: So how long were you in this ghetto?

WOZNICA: Four years.

SIGRIST: Four years. And you continued working in that same...

WOZNICA: That same manufacturer, right.

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SIGRIST: Well, talk about when it was liberated, when this part came to an end.

WOZNICA: Okay, 1945 the Germans took us to another manufacturer. It was Dora, D-O-R-A. We used to produce the two V-bombs at the time, atomic bombs. And I worked at the Tunnel. We used to call it the Tunnel, which it was a Tunnel. And I worked there since '41, '45, 'til April the 15th of 1945 when the Canadian Air Force bombed the Tunnel and liberated us in Bergen Belsen. And after the liberation we were free people so we tried to move around wherever we could. Some moved to Germany. Some moved to France, whatever, and being in camp, the camp, do remember the Red Cross from Sweden came to take all the sick people because there was an epidemic on typhus. People died. And at that time the Swedish government sent Red Cross trains in and took the sick people to Sweden and whoever had the power on his own just get out of camp, the camp and went to the city, which was about twenty eight miles away from the camp where I, Bergen Belsen. There was a big city named Celle, C-L-A [sic], and I lived in Celle about two years. And after that I started moving around. I move to Frankfurt-Am-Mein in Germany.

SIGRIST: When the Canadian Air Force came in and you were in, you said the Tunnel, I assume you were underground or, uh, that's why this was called...

WOZNICA: No, no. This was a camp. It wasn't a tunnel. You went for the tunnel to Bergen Belsen. The Germans took us to the camp because they bombed the tunnel. They couldn't do anything so we didn't do anything. We just went to the camp Bergen Belsen and that's where we stayed. That's where the Canadian Air Force came in.

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SIGRIST: And how long were you there?

WOZNICA: In Bergen..., in where?

SIGRIST: In, uh...

WOZNICA: In Celle?

SIGRIST: No, the uh,...

WOZNICA: In Bergen Belsen?

WOZNICA: Yes.

WOZNICA: Uh, from January to April.

SIGRIST: I see. So you were actually sort of moved around a little bit during the years of the war.

WOZNICA: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Because you started off in your town, in the ghetto in your town and then you went to where?

WOZNICA: Buchenwald, a concentration camp in Germany, Buchenwald.

SIGRIST: I see.

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WOZNICA: And in Buchenwald they separated us, took us to Dora. That's where the manufacturer used to be. And from Dora they took us to Bergen Belsen.

SIGRIST: I see. And so all this time you were always working, I mean...

WOZNICA: Oh, yeah, yeah. I work, sure. In Bergen Belsen I didn't work because it wasn't work. It was a camp. It was a death camp, so we were just lucky to survive. If we had another week or two probably nobody would survive.

SIGRIST: So the Canadian Air Force comes in and you are liberated.

WOZNICA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you feel?

WOZNICA: We don't know what's going on. I never went through a liberation like that. I don't know what's going on. The only thing we know is that they came in and said, " You're free. You can go," I mean, we didn't know. I never went through that experience in my life.

SIGRIST: When that happened, were you able to try and contact your family to see if they were still living?

WOZNICA: I was looking around. We talked to people from around us, if somebody knows or sees somebody or whatever, but there was no communication because there were so many concentration camps they wouldn't know

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one camp from the other if somebody survive. But it was hundreds of miles to travel to find out, so eventually people said, " Oh, I saw this one, I saw this one..." so you got to look around to find the people in the family.

SIGRIST: Were you lucky enough to be reunited with any of your family?

WOZNICA: Yes. I found a couple of my brother-in-law's brothers. They were living about four hundred miles away where I used to live in a town in Germany. And then I found out I got a sister who survived with my brother-in-law and my other sister, that she's in Poland, living in Poland. So after we got all together after a while, weeks, we tried to get the people from Poland down to Germany, which we did and we started living together combined, I mean.

SIGRIST: Was that an emotional experience, seeing her?

WOZNICA: Very much so, very much so.

SIGRIST: Well, well tell me a little bit then about living in Germany and eventually get us to Paris.

WOZNICA: Well, living in Germany wasn't easy because we used to have, the Jewish Federation used to support us and we made a living that way. They give us places to live and food if we wanted it and after a while we went on our own, you know. You start doing a little black market business with the GIs and...

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SIGRIST: Was the black market a great way to make money at that time?

WOZNICA: It's the only way we could make money.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you sell?

WOZNICA: We used to sell cigarettes and coffee and candies and PX cards, script money and we changed it. We sold it to the Germans and making a living off that way. And this was our main business.

SIGRIST: That's how you got back on your feet.

WOZNICA: Right, that's the main concept.

SIGRIST: And, uh, and how long, you were in Germany until '51?

WOZNICA: '51, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. And, uh, so how did you get to Paris to come to America.

WOZNICA: Oh, I had a sister living and two aunts in New York. And my aunt find out that my sister's alive and that I'm alive, so she start sending papers and everything we need for information to come to the United States, so...

SIGRIST: Did you want to come to the United States?

WOZNICA: At first I didn't. My sister left a few years before I did because my aunt sponsors her. And then my sister insists for me to come to the United

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States.

SIGRIST: Did she, were you writing back and forth with your sister?

WOZNICA: Yeah, we were communicating, yeah.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did she tell you about?

WOZNICA: Oh, "Why live in Germany, all that the things that went through, the Holocaust and everything, why support Germans? Why don't you come out to the United States and live here with us." So after a few years I decided I'll take, I got my, go to the United States. It's a better country to live in anyhow. And I didn't like the Germans and they didn't like the Jews. After the war it was the same way, so why should I live and support the Nazis? So I said to myself, " Yeah, I'll come to the United States and I'll love it." I kiss the ground everyday that I'm here.

SIGRIST: So you went to Paris specifically to leave to come to the United States.

WOZNICA: Yeah, I took the boat, yeah. The " Isle de France," yeah.

SIGRIST: How long were in Paris for?

WOZNICA: Just a week.

SIGRIST: Was that the first time you'd ever been in Paris?

WOZNICA: Yeah, yeah.

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SIGRIST: Was that an interesting experience for you?

WOZNICA: Eh, it's okay. I don't like the people. They're very snotty. ( he laughs )

SIGRIST: You had other things on your mind, too.

WOZNICA: Yeah, but they're not very friendly people, I would say.

SIGRIST: And what was the boat that you took?

WOZNICA: "Isle de France."

SIGRIST: And tell me about the boat ride a little bit. What was that like for you?

WOZNICA: It was beautiful. I enjoyed it. It was a nice boat and the food was great. The service was good. It was beautiful, I mean, no comparison to anything else. I mean, it's a luxury boat.

SIGRIST: Were you alone?

WOZNICA: Yes.

SIGRIST: How long did the boat trip last?

WOZNICA: I think four days.

SIGRIST: Did your sister pay for the passage or did you have enough money for

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the passage?

WOZNICA: No, I paid myself.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much it was?

WOZNICA: Two hundred and fifty bucks.

SIGRIST: And that's one way?

WOZNICA: One way, right.

SIGRIST: What class were your accommodations?

WOZNICA: Second class.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your cabin for me?

WOZNICA: It was a small cabin. Two people in it, me and another gentleman. And we had a good time, I mean, it was nice. It was comfortable.

SIGRIST: Didn't get seasick?

WOZNICA: No, no, no. I didn't get seasick, no.

SIGRIST: Did they have entertainment or, you know, something for you to do on the boat?

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WOZNICA: No, there was no entertainment at the time, no. Oh, we could play shuffleboard, you know, in the daytime or see a movie but there was no musicals or something like that.

SIGRIST: Did you know any English at this point?

WOZNICA: Not at all, not at all. I learn here.

SIGRIST: Nothing. So basically what you know about America is what your sister told you and that's about it.

WOZNICA: Oh, I know about America, that it's a great country to live in, you know. It's a hard country but it's great country because you have the freedom. You got everything you want to do and that's one thing money can buy. To me the freedom is the most important thing in life. To raise a family and be free and do things you want to do, there nothing else on Earth like the United States.

SIGRIST: When you came into New York Harbor, did you see the Statue of Liberty?

WOZNICA: Yes, sir.

SIGRIST: How did that feel?

WOZNICA: It's an emotional feeling, you know. When we came in, the boat stopped and the French flag comes down and they put up the American flag. And then the custom come around the boat on the little boats and

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they're taking over the ship to get them to the United States. And they stopped and they says, " Now that Statue over there, that's the Statue of Liberty. That's your freedom statue." You can't imagine. It's an emotional feeling.

SIGRIST: Yeah, because you're leaving such terrible, terrible experiences behind you.

WOZNICA: Experiences, that's right. Money cannot buy it. You have to appreciate it, to see the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: To really understand. Was your processing done in France before you left?

WOZNICA: No, Germany.

SIGRIST: Germany. That's where it was done.

WOZNICA: Yeah. I bought a pass in Germany and a ticket.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me how you ended up here at Ellis Island. Why?

WOZNICA: I don't know, I really don't know. I can't answer that question. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about happened when you were here.

WOZNICA: I just went through customs and nothing happened. I just...

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SIGRIST: What did they do at customs?

WOZNICA: Well, they look at my passport, opened up my suitcase and let me through the gate. Then my sister and my aunt was waiting for me and then went home.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people here at the time, do you remember?

WOZNICA: Oh yeah, there was quite a few people. All the people on the boat were here and people who were waiting for relatives, something like that, they were here. There was quite a few people. A lot of them.

SIGRIST: So a lot of people came here...

WOZNICA: Two hundred, three, two hundred people came on the boat.

SIGRIST: I see. And a lot of them were brought here.

WOZNICA: Right, right.

SIGRIST: That's interesting. So how long would you say you were here for?

WOZNICA: Maybe a couple hours, two, three hours.

SIGRIST: Did you eat while you were here?

WOZNICA: No, no, no.

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SIGRIST: What was it like seeing your sister and your aunt, because you hadn't seen them for a while?

WOZNICA: Oh, I hadn't seen my aunt since '39 and I hadn't seen my sister since '39, so it was an emotional feeling. It's a, you can't describe it, let's put it this way. You can't describe it. It's a happy feeling and an emotional feeling. It's a great feeling.

SIGRIST: Yeah. In our remaining few minutes, why don't you tell me a little bit about how you got adjusted to America, because obviously life is a little different here than it was in Europe.

WOZNICA: When I came to Los Angeles...

SIGRIST: You were in New York how long before you went west?

WOZNICA: Two months.

SIGRIST: You were here in New York two months.

WOZNICA: Two months. When I came to New York, I live with my sister all the time. One room, four people, very crowded. We lived in the Bronx and I don't like it from the beginning. I didn't like the whole situation. It's too many people, too crowded, too fast. And it was winter time. It was snowy. It was cold. But I had a friend who lives out in California and he called me up and he said, " Why don't you come out to California? You might like it here." And I had a cousin living out here so I took a, I called my cousin,

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said, " Look, I'm coming to California and I want you to pick me up." And that's what she did and I was living with them for a few years. And I find a job. I worked as a cabinet maker and I went to school to learn the language and...

SIGRIST: During the day or at night?

WOZNICA: During the day, during the day. And then I work, no, I work at night. I went to school at night and worked in the daytime. I work on two jobs to make a living and then I went to school and I adjusted myself a little bit to the United States. I start to like it.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing to get used to here in America? What was the thing that was the most different?

WOZNICA: To make a good living. It's very hard to make a good living without education, without profession. You have to have an education and profession to survive here. It's very hard.

SIGRIST: Did you find any kind of prejudice against you as an immigrant personally?

WOZNICA: No, none whatsoever, none whatsoever. I was welcome any place I was going, without my language, ever with my broken language people respect me as a human being. That's what I like about it. Nobody said I'm Jewish or Polish or German or whatever. I was a human being. This to me, the most important for me was to have my freedom, which no one can take away from me here.

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SIGRIST: When you went to California, did your aunt and your sister, they weren't in California, right? They were on the East coast.

WOZNICA: No, no. They were living in New York.

SIGRIST: Did they go out with you?

WOZNICA: No, I went out by myself, on my own and my cousin picked me up. I lived with them and I found a job as a cabinet maker and I worked at the job until I got married. I met my wife through, a friend of mine introduced me and...

SIGRIST: What year were you married?

WOZNICA: In '54.

SIGRIST: So not that long after.

WOZNICA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: You arrived in December of '51, correct?

WOZNICA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then you were in New York 'til February of '52...

WOZNICA: Right.

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SIGRIST: And then you went west.

WOZNICA: In '54 I got married.

SIGRIST: And then you married. What's your wife's name?

WOZNICA: Sue, Susanah. Lovely wife. I love her.

SIGRIST: And children?

WOZNICA: I got three kids. I got, my oldest son is David, who is with me here. And I got my daughter Janet and I got my son Michael. Janet lives in Los Angeles with us and Michael lives in Chicago.

SIGRIST: Wonderful. Well, that's a good stopping spot, I think. Mr. Woznica, I want to thank you for taking , you know, a few minutes out from your visit here and coming up and speaking with us.

WOZNICA: It was a pleasure. It was an honor that I can anticipate with the things that went through the World War.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it was a tough time for a lot of people.

WOZNICA: It was tough, it was tough.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

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END OF INTERVIEW