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MARY KOWALCZYK

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HEID: This Debra heid for the national Park Service. Today is march 21, 19, excuse me, 1992. I'm here with Mary Kowalczyk--

KOWALCZYK: Kowalczyk.

HEID: From Philadelphia. Good morning.

KOWALCZYK: Good morning.

HEID: I'm so glad that you could join us today. Mary, if I may call you Mary?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, that's fine.

HEID: Could you tell me about, Mary, could you state your

full name and your date of birth for us?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. My name is Mary Kowalczyk and I was born March 4, 1912.

HEID: And could you spell your last name for us?

KOWALCZYK: K-O-W-A-L-C-Z-Y-K.

HEID: Thank you. Mary, now when did you immigrate, when did you come?

KOWALCZYK: I, ah, I came to America on December 6, 1922.

HEID: From what country?

KOWALCZYK: Poland.

HEID: Okay.

KOWALCZYK: With my mother.

HEID: Could you tell us a little bit about Poland? What was the name of the town you lived in?

KOWALCZYK: Well, where I was born was Lochow. We come from the Lubin, the Lubelski State. Like they had different states, ours is Lubelski. And I lived with my mother, my father was already in America. And I was a baby when he came here.

HEID: How do you spell that name of the town?

KOWALCZYK: The town? L-O-C-H-O-W.

HEID: Okay, thank you.

KOWALCZYK: Where I was. And when I, a couple of years ago, when I seen it, there's a name over the taproom here with that name, I often wonder if they came from our village.

HEID: It might have been.

KOWALCZYK: My, that was something.

HEID: So tell us, how was the village?

KOWALCZYK: The village is according, if they got, people they have

a lot of land, they're richer. And there's poor people. So the poor ones work for the other ones. That's how they work. On the fields, and some of them go to the cities to work .

HEID: Tell me--

KOWALCZYK: Like my mother did.

HEID: So your family was poor?

KOWALCZYK: Yes. Well, we had no homes so we went from one relation to an other. My mother would work in the fields and they would tie a couple of cows on a rope for me and I would watch them, you know, when they would feed. You started early. As early as five years old watching the cows so that they don't go in the weeds and they would graze on it. But that was years ago maybe now it's entirely different.

HEID: So were you able to go to school when you're young?

KOWALCZYK: Well, we weren't allowed to have school at that time. The Russians wouldn't let us, so a rich lady from town used to come into the home and all the children would gather in one house and she would teach us. And I was five years old when I started and she used to come to my house

and my mother looked over my shoulder, that's how she learned how to write and read by, while I learned. And then in later years already they started the schools, so I went to school already. And I learned history, geography, and my language but when I came here they put me in the first grade and I, just English. They let me skip grades because I knew and I graduated with the others at fifteen.

HEID: Good. You mentioned the Russians wouldn't let you , why?

KOWALCZYK: No, they used to control Poland once in a while at that time. Sometimes, so at that time they wouldn't let us learn, you know, our language. You know, to read and write. Of course, at home you learned, your parents teach you. But then they started a school. They had no control over us. So that's how I learned reading, writing, Polish.

HEID: You mentioned you lived like from house to house--

KOWALCZYK: Well--

HEID: So your parents didn't own a home?

KOWALCZYK: Well, no, my father was here and he was, he was in the army. And he was here, I was six months old when he left but, I guess, I don't know if work or whatever it is didn't have enough to send for us.

HEID: So was it just you or did you have brothers and sisters

KOWALCZYK: No. It was only myself because my mother was by herself and I was six months old when, she save enough money to send him to America. And then I had uncles and then my grandparents, so she used to carry me on her back from village to village. Stayed maybe a year or more and then my grandparents, my father's parents, they were wonderful. That's where, I was going to stay with my uncle when he was going to come to America only my mother but then somehow it came out that the, my cousins find out that I, my father was there so he signed a name and they paid for my trip and I came with my mother.

HEID: That's good.

KOWALCZYK: But never knew that we were already American citizens, that's why we came like that. But by looking at the pictures how those people were without anything. We didn't, I don't remember. I remember all the women were sick.

HEID: Okay.

KOWALCZYK: And I used to go and bring them food from the cafeteria and I had bacon and eggs.

HEID: Okay. Why don't we wait a few minutes and let's get back, you said your grandparents were still alive, in the old country.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah, at that time, yes.

HEID: Was this your father's parents or your mother's parents?

KOWALCZYK: No, that's my father's.

HEID: So what--

KOWALCZYK: My mother's, they were dead.

HEID: What do you remember about your grandparents?

KOWALCZYK: Well, my grandparents, he was a man that, he used to, what would you call when he start a garden through the village or the trees he start. He had beautiful gardens, all different kinds of apples and pears. The other side of the road was all plums and everybody liked him.

If any beggar or traveler went from town to town, they would send him to his house let him sleep and even--

HEID: So they owned their own farm then?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah.

HEID: That's good.

KOWALCZYK: And then when we left my grandparents were still living. But I think he, you know, died in, later on.

HEID: That's hard.

KOWALCZYK: My father has a brother there, and any of my cousins that being born I wouldn't know them because I left already. They're younger. But the family's still there.

HEID: What about, what about religion? Did you go to church on Sundays or--

KOWALCZYK: Oh yeah, we always did. We had to go. We belonged to the church in the little town and I even had friends over here when they went to visit they brought my baptismal papers, birth certificate and the

church during the war never was burned yet. Even my mother's, she didn't know when she was even born and I got her birth certificate.

HEID: So, were you Catholic?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, yes. My mother was very religious.

HEID: Did they teach you in, was there a Sunday school, did they teach you in Sunday school?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. I was going to go to First Communion, I was going for instructions and then when the papers came and he went to Warsaw. So when my mother went to confession in Warsaw, to that Franciscan priest, she was telling them that we going across the water and I couldn't receive, you know, my First Communion because it was too late, could he take me for confession. And I remember I went to confession to him, Communion. When I came, into the house where we stayed with a lady, she made a fuss over me, that I was an angel (she laughs) because it was my first time.

HEID: So you made your First Communion?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, yes. In the Warsaw. Then when I came here, well naturally later on, there was already, I came in December 6th, December 8th is the Immaculate Conception, it was the first time in church that I was,

and I'm still in the same parish. Where I live the first house we had the express going through it. One side and I'm still in the same neighborhood in Philadelphia.

HEID: Now, another question for you, when it was time for you to come to America, what port did you leave from? From Warsaw?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah, from Warsaw to get us.

HEID: Now how did you get from your little town, your village to there?

KOWALCZYK: By train.

HEID: By train?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah.

HEID: Was it a long train ride?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, yes. And my mother told me that my uncle was a, the motorman that used this. So--

HEID: Do you remember the ride?

KOWALCZYK: I remember the train, the ride but I don't remember too much, you know how it ended, but my mother must have been pretty intelligent to get by with everything. Even coming here to America, when we got to the terminal, that used to be over there, Twelfth and Market, now they mostly on Thirtieth Street. But that's where we came.

HEID: So you had your uncle traveling with you then on the train?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, yes.

HEID: You had some company to help out.

KOWALCZYK: And at least we knew.

HEID: How long was the train, train ride?

KOWALCZYK: I couldn't remember. My mother never talked about it.

HEID: Then you got to Warsaw, right?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah, to Warsaw. We stayed there two weeks waiting for the boat.

HEID: Okay.

KOWALCZYK: I don't know what happened to the boat we were supposed to come because--

HEID: What boat did you come on then?

KOWALCZYK: I, I don't what it meant, whether it was Batory or I remember I have a name somewhere at home. You know the pictures because I never threw it out. It could be, I know it had one chimney only and most of them had three.

HEID: So it was a small boat then?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah.

HEID: So how was the ride over?

KOWALCZYK: Well, I never was seasick but the poor women in our room, you know how they have the both bunks, everyone was seasick. My

mother, she was so bad they were going to take her upstairs, you know, on top. And they couldn't even eat, so I would go to the kitchen and to the cafeteria. I couldn't speak English but somehow I got some food, you know, for them to bring. You know, to the women in, inside.

HEID: This was on the boat. So how many people, how many women were in the same room as you?

KOWALCZYK: Well, I could still see it. If there was two, four, six, I think about eight or ten. Because it was one room, there was others. So--

HEID: Did you have your own bed?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. We, I had a bunk that, my mother was this, (she gestures) I climbed up, you know on top. And, but it must have been a first class or something because when I look at the picture how those people were in the bottom of the, it wasn't like that with us.

HEID: So you had a nice ride over?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. So that was pretty nice and the cafeteria was different than what they were showing. They had to eat just anything.

HEID: Well, you were lucky, you weren't seasick.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah.

HEID: You were able to eat coming over.

KOWALCZYK; Yeah, I was lucky. Maybe I was too young to get seasick then. It is interesting.

HEID: How long of a boat ride was it?

KOWALCZYK: It was for two weeks.

HEID: That was a long time.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah, that's a long time. And they were sick all that time, like that. It was hard. And after that, you know how they transfer you to Ellis Island, that's why I say I remember the big room and what I done.

HEID: Well, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all?

KOWALCZYK: I don't think so, it must have been dark. You know, it

wasn't during the day because all I was in that one room with the people, like they were sitting more on the floor. But I'll never forget that where you have that porch upstairs, that's where they had the showers and stripped us, you know, our hair especially.

HEID: First, do you remember when you got off the ship how did you get to Ellis Island? Did the boat come right into here or did you have to take a little ferry?

KOWALCZYK: Well, there was a lot of people, so we must have come by boat.

HEID: Okay.

KOWALCZYK: There's one thing I can't think that far back. I never thought of it.

HEID: So you came into the big room?

KOWALCZYK: Room, that's, yeah, that's all the same because that's where they took us. But when I went visiting a couple of years ago I couldn't, it wasn't even fixed. They asked me if I remembered anything, the men that was showing us the place. I said, "No, I can't see nothing," but

when I climbed the steps and I seen that in the movie, the steps were different, it was going straight up.

HEID: So the steps were straight up then?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. They were straight up.

HEID: And what happened? Was there somebody on top or was there doctors--

KOWALCZYK: Then when we went into the room, when I went in, when I was older over here, everything came back to me and I start telling people over there I bought the fruit, was sitting on the floor and we had showers upstairs. And that all came back.

HEID: So you walked up the stairs.

KOWALCZYK: And we all got in the room with whatever we had.

HEID: What happened then?

KOWALCZYK: We just had to sit around and wait for us so that they could examine us.

HEID: Did you buy the fruit then or was it later?

KOWALCZYK: No. I don't remember, I could, I think it from the beginning because when we were sitting and we noticed that there was fruits and people were going so my mother and I went because we had the American money and we bought our oranges.

HEID: And tell me about the oranges. Was this the first time you saw them?

KOWALCZYK: Well, that's the first time that we seen an orange and we were hungry and people were buying it but the funny part of it we ate the skin, we threw the inside because we didn't know what was so, it so soft.

HEID: You didn't know that the insides was the best part.

KOWALCZYK: We didn't know the difference till later on when we came to live here and we seen the orange and people explain it.

HEID: So it must have been a little bitter to eat.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah, I guess so. And, but there was another man that

he would believe us, nobody want to believe, because he said he bought bananas and he done the same thing. He never seen a banana.

HEID: No, I believe you. Now after sitting in this room, they then took you upstairs. What happened after you were sitting in this big room?

KOWALCZYK: Well, we're sitting up there, individually they take us and they examine us, you know for everything. Eyes and ears, but then they examined our hair, there was nothing wrong with us physically. We were healthy my mother and I. It was the only thing, because we were poor and I think you get lice and nits from poorness because I know, I remember my mother used to comb my hair often but we had no medicine to cure it. But over here, when they put, when they washed my hair with some stuff and the iron comb. I still remember that iron comb. They got everything out and ever since there was nothing. They cleaned us out.

HEID: That wasn't a nice experience?

KOWALCZYK: Oh, no. But I remember them combing my hair. And then they gave us clean clothes after they

disinfected everything but then it could be my case different that we were healthy and we were American citizens already and we didn't even know it. But it was only within the months. If my father became a citizen after September, 1922. I don't know if he would be able to bring us over or maybe he could. Only that we would have to get our own papers, so--

HEID: Now, did your father come and meet you here at Ellis Island to take you?

KOWALCZYK: No. My cousins, they had the car, so they took us to my father's who was boarding here. And they left us with my father. And we stayed with my father and they lived in Hunting Park, not far away.

HEID: So how did you get from Ellis Island to your, where your father was?

KOWALCZYK: Well. they put us on a train. I remember a train. And from New York, I guess, they, from here, they put us on a train and we landed at the terminal, 12th and Market. And that's where they put us off and we waited for somebody to pick us up. And I didn't know,

maybe my mother would know that, know, she married him in America, my cousin because she didn't come, only two men. "cause we had, you know, the trunks to be carried so she didn't know him but when he said his name then everything was all right.

HEID: She remembered him?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. And then they brought us to my father but later on my mother paid everything back and they were nice to us. They were nice people. I still, they had a furniture store on 100 Park Avenue and when I got married, 1933, they gave us a cedar chest. I still have it.

HEID: That's wonderful.

KOWALCZYK: They both dead already, all our cousins.

HEID: Let me ask you, how did you feel when you first met your father?

KOWALCZYK: Well, I never met him, I was six months old--

HEID: Right. So--

KOWALCZYK: But naturally, I seen him--

HEID: When you got to Philadelphia you're meeting him for the first time.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. We met, well, we didn't communicate too much because there was other boarders. He had one room and we stayed with those people and when they moved, we moved with them because my mother started to work but we couldn't afford a house.

HEID: But were you happy to see him?

KOWALCZYK: I guess, I must have because we stayed, it was, it was nice, he was. My father, even if he was, or sometimes he used to, you know, drink anywheres but he never, never abused or laid a hand on me or my mother ever like I see any more now. He was good, he was, only thing he was young when he came here and he didn't like to stay in one place. He was in Canada, he was in Detroit, went all over where he met.

HEID: So what did he do for a living?

KOWALCZYK: Well, he was glazier, putting in the windows for insurance. And, he died, he died several years now, when he was seventy-six. He died before my mother and my mother was a couple of years older

than him. And we thought, she was still young enough, but she wasn't well enough, she was telling me, she said, "Maybe you're going to have a brother." But that didn't happen because I was only eleven but I don't think she was well because she told me then that she was not well and it's not going to be like that. So we stayed together until my father died.

HEID: So it sounds like you had a wonderful mother.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. Oh, my mother was wonderful. and my father, he was good, it didn't interest him but he never abused any of us. And he, and then when I married that's when I got the family. My in-laws, my husband was born in Coatsville and I married him when he moved next door. And he died, now it's going to be thirty, when he was forty-nine. He was bedridden for four years. He had two strokes. If his parents would have taken him early at that time he had deteriorating kidneys but we had four children and then he died when he was forty-nine. And now I'm eighty, we were, I was six months older than him. So I'm the same age, would have been in august, now eighty. So he died, nineteen, I don't know in forty-nine years. Well, we lived together say twenty-nine years, we had four children and three living but the little girl died when she was three and a half. That was my first tragedy. Never forgot it. She would have been fifty-three years old.

HEID: Well, let me ask you a question. When you came here you said you went to school.

KOWALCZYK: Yes, I went to school. They put me in the first grade at Christmas. and since I learned a little english I'd go to the library and I start reading any book I could get hold of and I studied. When we had a test for spelling I would get the box of candy from the priest. Why? I knew the spelling because I read the books. The other ones, I guess they didn't care. So then the following year they would put me in the third grade. Then I skipped another grade so I came to seventh and eighth, then I graduated from the eighth. And I was worried because I didn't speak such good english that I won't maybe pass. And, oh, I nearly cried when I was going to graduate. And you know, guess what happened, at that time from eighth grade when you have the highest, you get the American Legion Medal. I still have it.

HEID: Oh, that's wonderful. So did you go on to high school?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. I went one year to high school and I liked it. I should have because I liked studying but my father said he didn't work and then my mother got sick, she didn't work and I had to go to work. So I started, I went to work when I was sixteen.

HEID: And what did you do?

KOWALCZYK: I worked forty-five years in a cigar factory. We

worked forty-eight hours, we only got paid ten dollars. We had to learn, then later on all through those years, you know how, nowadays you know the difference. The money they make.

HIED: It's a big difference.

KOWALCZYK: We made only fifty dollars. So when my mother got sick, when I was sixty years old, there was nobody to look after her so I had to leave my work. They could give me no Social Security so I went on my husband and since he was sick so many times at work doing the work Navy yard, most of it, well he didn't get Social Security only when he was only a presser for sweaters. Then I started with One hundred sixty one dollars a month. on my husband's, but before they used to raise it, nowadays they don't. And if they raise our Social Security then they, the medicare takes everything.

HEID: That's true.

KOWALCZYK: But when you know when I'm on my Social Security, that three years I worked in a hospital, I was sixty-six years old, my doctor gave me, if I want to work in the physical therapy in the hospital, three years I worked, never dropped a day and that's what I'm on now, on Social Security brought me thirty-five dollars more than my husband's. And I'm

dong all right.

HEID: One question, in the cigar factory what did you do?
Did you make the cigars?

KOWALCZYK: Yes, I, by machine not by hand.

HEID: Okay.

KOWALCZYK: We made one, there was a girl feeding at that time. Later on there's only one girl that do everything but machine would go. But when I started one girl would feed the machine, the other one would lay the first binder, then I laid the wrapper. First the binder, then later on they transferred me to wrapper and then there was an examiner. Later on, they let the people go, only one. You had to do just this and everything was going automatically and you had to examine the cigars.

HEID: Oh, that's interesting. Well, one last question for you, Mary. I know you came over with your mother when you were eleven.

KOWALCZYK: Yes.

HEID: If you had to do it all over again and you say you had to make the decision would you come to America again? Do you have any

regrets?

KOWALCZYK: Yes, I would rather come here because I think if I stayed during the wars, what they were doing, I wouldn't have been alive.

HEID: So you're happy here?

KOWALCZYK: Yeah. That Auschwitz, what they had, and all that. No, I'm happy here. No matter what, of course, the way it is any more it's very hard, you have to watch on the street. You get mugged and they break in your house and you have to watch where who you let in.

HEID: That's true.

KOWALCZYK: And you have to, time change but people before they had, they had less money, they were all happy and they all helped each other. You know, if you were in trouble your neighbor would come out and help. Now even for money, the neighbors stopped coming out.

HEID: That's true.

KOWALCZYK: The times changed.

HEID: It's hard.

KOWALCZYK: But I'm happy here.

HEID: I'm glad to hear that.

KOWALCZYK: And then all my children are doing all right. Of course, naturally sickness and all that but to have four great grandchildren, it's something.

HEID: That is something.

KOWALCZYK: Yeah.

HEID: Well Mary, I'd like to thank you so much for spending this time with me.

KOWALCZYK: And I enjoyed talking with you because I hope you could understand, that really once, I'm just saying it the way it was maybe other people didn't have like that, but some people like me, they had it same, so everybody not the same.

HEID: Thank you. This is Debra Heid for the national Park Service and Mary Kowalczyk--

KOWALCZYK: Kowalczyk.

HEID: Signing off right now and today is March 21, 1992.

Thank You.

KOWALCZYK: You're welcome.