

**EI-1349**

**MATTHEW L. WOJCIK**

**BIRTHDATE: MAY 20, 1920**

**INTERVIEW DATE: OCTOBER 13, 2004**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 84**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**PORT:**

**RESIDENCES: METASZ, JASLO, POLAND; PASSAIC, NJ**

LEVINE: Today is October the 13<sup>th</sup>.

WOJCIK: Yeah.

LEVINE: The year 2004. I'm here in Toms River, New Jersey and I'm here with Matthew L. Wojcik, who came here—well, actually, he was born here. He was born in Passaic, New Jersey. And the family, his mother and his brothers and his mother's sister and her children, and his mother's other sister and husband and children left for Poland and were there for a while and returned to this country in September of 1922. And so Mr. Wojcik was only two years old—

WOJCIK: One year, we think.

LEVINE: One. One y—

WOJCIK: I was two years old.

LEVINE: Okay.

WOJCIK: But one year, we only stayed in Europe.

LEVINE: Okay, stayed in—stayed in Europe one year and was two years old when they returned in steerage class of the Oscar II in September of 1922. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If we could start, Mr. Wojcik, by saying your birth date and where in Poland—I mean, where—we know, you were born in Passaic. So your birth date.

WOJCIK: I was born May 20, 1920—

LEVINE: Okay.

WOJCIK: —in Passaic, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Now, why don't you first say your mother's name and maiden name?

WOJCIK: My mother's name was Maria Marhefka. She married my father, 1908.

LEVINE: Okay. Can you sp—spell her maiden name?

WOJCIK: M-A-R-H-E-F-K-A.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father's name?

WOJCIK: Was Michael.

LEVINE: Michael.

WOJCIK: Michael Wojcik.

LEVINE: Wojcik. And the—did the name get changed anywhere along the line?

WOJCIK: Well, it did change because we used to—I remember going—Polish school, Catholic school. We used to spell it W-O (with a dot)-J-C-I-K. We eliminated the dot, being Americanized and spell it—we say Wojcik now. W-O-J-C-I-K.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, you mentioned before we had the tape player on, [clears throat] tell about your mother and father coming here before you were born and w—why they came, what happened, anything you—

WOJCIK: Well—

LEVINE: —you know.

WOJCIK: Mother met—met Dad here in New—in Passaic in the United States. They came here looking for better land and to make money and go back to Poland, buy some land and go back to Poland. That was their intention. Mother came here in 1906. I don't recall what—what year my father came. But he met—they met my father—she met my father in 1908 and got married. In 1921, we left for Poland. I couldn't figure out how could they make so much money in a short time to buy land in Poland. But knowing them, the way they lived, they succeed—they succeeded in saving all that money to go to Poland. But Mother found—don't find anything in Poland so Mother, myself and three brothers came back. And my aunt and her three sons came back. My third aunt stayed there in Poland and had a very difficult time during the Second World War. In fact, the atrocities is terrible. During the war, there was sniper fire and the Germans or the Russians took all the young men, put 'em in a barn and burned the barn. And my cousin was one of 'em. But, luckily, we came back in 1922.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, had—is—has anybody told—you were only two years old so I wouldn't expect you would remember personally, but did your mother or your father or your brothers ever talk anything about that trip, [chuckles] what it was like in Poland for them or the voyage? Anything at all?

WOJCIK: My brothers went to school there in Poland.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: Because—the two of them, two—one was ten and one was eight. So they went to school for a whole year. And they used to tell me something about going fishing in Poland and enjoying themselves, of course, being children. And—

LEVINE: The name of the town in Poland, we—we saw it here on your—on your ship's manifest. I think it's right at the end.

WOJCIK: It's Metasz.

LEVINE: How—

WOJCIK: M-E-T-S—M-E-T-A-S-Z.

LEVINE: And—

WOJCIK: J—Jaslo, Poland is where we stayed.

LEVINE: Jaslo? How do you spell that one?

WOJCIK: J-A-S-L-O. L is with a [unclear]. We used to make it a W. Jaslo—lo.

LEVINE: And that's where the family was from and that's where the family went—

WOJCIK: Yes.

LEVINE: —to buy the land.

WOJCIK: Yes. We stayed with her—my mother's brother in Jaslo. His name was Adam Bonherfgart [PH].

LEVINE: So did anybody ever say why she couldn't find any land or what happened that she didn't buy land or—

WOJCIK: No, I don't know the reason why she—she didn't buy anything. They—both of them. The two sisters didn't buy anything. I guess they weren't satisfied or something. I don't know. I don't—never heard.

LEVINE: Was she—was she from an agricultural family?

WOJCIK: Oh, sure. Oh, yes. Dee—deep in Poland, deep in a—on a farm.

LEVINE: Ah.

WOJCIK: Had always—

LEVINE: Ah. And your father too, was he a—an agricultural—was his family farmers, as well?

WOJCIK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. He, in fact, [chuckles] came to this—Pol—at that time, Poland was the pawn. It was back and forth, Austria, Hungary, Germany, Russia, everything else. That's the history of Poland. And he escaped the army, came to this country. He didn't want to go into Austrian Army and he came to this country. That's—that's all I know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. So they had settled in Passaic before you went back to Poland and that's when they came back here.

WOJCIK: Yes, I guess their friends were all settling there. That's what used to be. You settled with other people as—where the jobs were too.

LEVINE: What kind of jobs? What did your father do when he was here?

WOJCIK: That was very difficult. They worked in the—Mother worked in a factory in Passaic down the street where we—we lived, a woolen—woolen factory. They worked, like, 12 hours a day and my father worked in another woolen factory called Gera Mills.

LEVINE: G-A-R?

WOJCIK: G-E-R-A. Gera Mills. Germans owned it. And the—they worked 12 hours a day, very slave labor like. Slave labor. They couldn't—Mother used to—I remember Mother saying she couldn't even leave the machine or anything like that to go to the bathroom. They were very—worked very hard, very, very, very hard. And—

LEVINE: Well, like what—who took care of you when—when—

WOJCIK: Who took care of me? Nobody took care of me.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: I lived—I was born in 153 Haight [PH] Street, Passaic, New Jersey. And right down the street were the factories.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: So Mother—I was left all alone. I was—last recollection I have, we had nothing. We had wooden floors. I remember—I still remember skating in the house on wooden floors all by myself. There was n—to entertain myself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: And then every once in a while I would run down the street and, somehow, my father would see me through a window. He was in a second-story window, and he would throw me a penny to go and buy some candy or some—candy. And there are no babysitters.

LEVINE: Wow.

WOJCIK: I had no babysitters.

LEVINE: This was before you went to school then.

WOJCIK: Before I went to school.

LEVINE: Wow.

WOJCIK: Before. Also, in 1926, I was six years old. There was a big strike. Their labors struck. And I remember distinctly. I can still remember. I can still picture myself going in the attic and watching down below the milling of the crowds protesting and cops, policeman on horseback hitting people with a nightclub.

LEVINE: These were the factory workers on strike?

WOJCIK: The factory workers were on strike, 1926. I can remember vividly this is what happened. And—

LEVINE: Did they—d—were they successful at all in their striking? Do you know?

WOJCIK: Yeah, I think they got some concessions out of it. But the owners of the factory were lords. You—this—this was like slavery.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: The women—mostly women worked very hard. Very hard.

LEVINE: Now, Passaic was an immigrant community, would you say? An immigrant city—

WOJCIK: [clears throat]

LEVINE: —at that point?

WOJCIK: Yes, yes. Yes, it was. It was all different factions. Italians were on one section. Poles were in the other section. And the Jewish people had the—the businesses, the stores. And I would say they were—it was a immigrant—

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. So, now, did you know how to speak Pol—what was spoken in the home?

WOJCIK: Polish. I knew Polish fluently. I even went to a Catholic school, Polish school.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: We had to learn both Polish and English. And 1934, I graduated grammar school, Holy Rosary School.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: Church.

LEVINE: And does that mean that you were—were you strong Catholics?

WOJCIK: Oh, sure. Oh, yes. We were definitely strong Catholics, definitely strong Catholics.

LEVINE: So as a little boy, were you, like, an altar boy or did you do anything as far as church—

WOJCIK: No, I wasn't an altar boy. But I remember, Christmas play. I think I was in kindergarten and I was one of the soldiers re—reliving, you know, the—Christ's life. And I was studying my lines, studying my lines. And I would study 'em so much that—my mother was teaching me. And I would always say—I was the last one to speak and the curtain would come down. And I would see the curtain coming down.

LEVINE: [laughs]

WOJCIK: But that's—that's recollections of have of grammar school.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have any jobs? Did you—did you help out as far as financially? Did you have a job, like when you were boy?

WOJCIK: [exhales] In 1930, things were so bad. The Depression was on. My father didn't work in a factory anymore. He worked in the laundry. Years ago, people never had the wash machines. They used to have a man—a truck—drove a truck, come to the house once a week, pick up the laundry, take it to the laundry, a big place, big—they had big, enormous machines, wash machines, wash the clothes, dry 'em. The man would, four days or so, bring 'em back home and get paid. So my dad operated a wash machine. And somehow, there was discussion or something and he got fired. So with—now we had two others. I had—two younger sisters—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: —were born. We had nothing, no job. He had no job and we were still going to school. The boys and I were going to school yet. So they desperately bought a business, a grocery and butcher store in Wallington, which is right next to Passaic. And in Wallington was mostly Polish people. And this place he bought was only a year old. The fellow that had built it and owned it couldn't make a go of it. He had no good personality. And it was in a place where it was so—how can I say? There was no roads; it was dirt roads.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: So the truck drivers didn't want to come in because it was hard to drive. The road was so bumpy a—and it was only dirt. But my mother had a charming personality. She was the businesswoman. She turned out—she turned that place into, not a gold mine but a—a livable situation and built it up so much that my father was instrumental in getting the road paved for the truck drivers to come in. And the business was booming because there was no big store, no supermarkets. And people did not have refrigerators. All they had was iceboxes, pieces of ice put in. So Sunday morning was the biggest day. We had so much that we couldn't go to church. We had to sneak away. My father never went to church because he had to stay in the business. And of course, the people would buy the dinner, Sunday dinner (there was no refrigeration) and use it. And then in the afternoon, Mother and Dad would rest because this business was open from six o'clock in the morning till ten o'clock at night, seven days a week. And my brothers were—couldn't even finish—go to—couldn't even go to high school. They had to go to work.

LEVINE: In the store?

WOJCIK: No. In—at that time, Wallington was noted for florists, nurseries.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: There was two big nurseries. They would work there, get, I don't know, \$10 a week or something like that. And, well, anyway, Mother would rest—Mother and Dad would rest on Sunday morning. Sunday afternoon—afternoon was my business. I was run the business. There was no—there was ice cream, candy, things like that. And then, six o'clock at night, people would come, buy cold cuts for dinner—for a evening snack. And I would operate that. I would operate the machines and everything. I even have a scar on one hand; the machine did it. And so actually, I had very little child life, bored life.

LEVINE: Playtime.

WOJCIK: Playtime.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: I would have to sneak away all the time, because I would always have to sweep the floor or put up the shelves and everything else and stuff like that. And I would just, every once in a while, sneak away to go play basketball, to play a little baseball. But I can't hold that against them because the life that they had was—was no life at all. Seven days a week, they were—had to operate.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: So I was the only one—first one to go to high school. My three brothers didn't go to school. And then after my sister beneath me, younger than I was, went to high school also. But going to high school wasn't thrilling for me, because there was nobody to push me, nobody—I didn't know anything about it, about education, what education would mean. Because being from the family that you were immigrants, they didn't have no conception. They had no idea about education. All they knew was work, work, work to make money, make money.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: So I—I took a commercial course just to get through high school. And I graduated high school. And in high school, I—I was pretty popular. I was a—they called me the candy man. All the basketball games, I used to sell candy, lollipops and little things and joined a CYO and CI—CYO and was the treasurer of CYO and—

LEVINE: That's the Christian Youth Organization?

WOJCIK: Youth Organization. The high schools used to have that. Tri-Y [PH] was the women, the girls, and the Hi-W [PH] was—was the men. Hi-Y, we used to call it. And the—

LEVINE: I wonder why your—

WOJCIK: I was—

LEVINE: —parents—

WOJCIK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —made sure you went to high school. Or di—or did you—

WOJCIK: Well, it was sort of like automatic because they were a little better off than—with my brothers working at the store, they were a little better off. So it was like automatic, going to high school.

LEVINE: Now, just out of curiosity, did your mother get to buy land in this country?

WOJCIK: Well, they bought the—the—the business—

LEVINE: The business.

WOJCIK: —was with two-family store—two-family house.

LEVINE: I see.

WOJCIK: And it was a corner lot. In fact, the side of the house was all a big hole. That's how—the place was just booming up, just building up. The—the area just built up. Then later on, the—the supermarkets started coming in so then the business died down.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: But I remember going—I went to grammar school, Holy Rosary. We used to sit two in—in a bench and [sighs] it was entirely different. We'd go to high school; it was entirely different.

LEVINE: What was so different?

WOJCIK: The changing in classes. We too—I had—had to take a bus to go to Lodi [PH] High School. Wallington High School wasn't there at that time. And the first day, I remember made a fool of myself. I had no idea, big congregation. The auditorium was full of people, kids, first-year freshmen. And they started calling out names and then you would go and be assigned to the classroom. So I heard "Wijcik—Wojcik." And I thought it was me. And I went out and registered and found out there was another Wojcik in second years instead of freshman.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: So I felt kind of silly, kind of ridiculous. I was a total stranger. I had—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: —never—never seen so many students, so many—well, it was a different life than going to Catholic school. Of course, you had nuns and nuns were—nuns were very strict. I remember one time my dad bought that business. And in the store was some fireworks. The man previously had some fireworks. So I took some little cherry bombs. You know what little cherry bombs are?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: Took them to school, unknowingly to my parents, of course. And during recess, we were walking in the hallway and a friend of mine took one of the things and he threw the cherry bomb and exploded. And the—the nun was very furious. She got a hold of us and you wouldn't believe.

She had a plastic stick on her knuckles. That's—that's how they used to teach in Catholic schools.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: The nuns were—to me, right now, nuns were—used to be frustrated old maids. And—

LEVINE: Tell—were there—did your mother and father try to keep up their Polish ways, their Polish culture? Did they—

WOJCIK: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: —try to hold on to—

WOJCIK: Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

LEVINE: In what—what ways did they—

WOJCIK: Well, they met—

LEVINE: —keep up those kinds of traditions?

WOJCIK: They met with people of their own kind. And the holidays was especially very big, like Christmas—

LEVINE: What—

WOJCIK: —or Easter. Easter was very big, my mother. Easter was—a priest from the church would come and bless the food every Easter. And he would make the rounds with all the persons and bless the food for Easter. And it was all special food. It was—of course, my father developed a knack of making kielbasa. You know what that is.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: And he even built a smokehouse and it was so big he couldn't keep up with—it was so popular. It was so—his formula was so—so great because you had to put in so much of this, so much of this and so much of that, pork and very little beef and so much spice. And then you had to ferment it overnight and the—I used to help him. I used to cut the butts— butts of—the pork, [unclear].

LEVINE: So in other words, he was making the sausage. He wasn't just cooking it.

WOJCIK: He—he was making it.

LEVINE: Making it.

WOJCIK: Mother was cooking it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: He was making it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: And, well, that's what the Polish people liked. And they also liked the—so E—Easter was very big. Mother would bake a kielbasa and dyed eggs and the horseradish. I remember scraping the horseradish and then crying and tears flowing down. But the—that was the old Polish tr—tradition. That was very big.

LEVINE: Did you feel proud to be Polish?

WOJCIK: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: Oh, sure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: Of course, I didn't know any different. I didn't know any—any better, any difference, because being just in a—like a Polish community, you—we had no radio. We had no—we had a—a radio. In fact, I remember being a youngster. My brothers had a crystal set, a piece of coal, a crystal set with a piece of wire to it. And that's how we—had earphones and we got Pittsburgh, which was fantastic. This was in—in the '20s.

LEVINE: Wow.

WOJCIK: So, in fact, the—then later on, when television came out, Mother bought a nine-inch television. And then you had to buy a big magnifying glass before—in front of the television. But anyway—and it was a joyful time because you were satisfied. You didn't have too many toys. You didn't have nothing. I remember going to a garbage dump and picking up pieces and make myself a—a skateboard. Found a pair of roller skates and you took 'em apart, got a two by four, made the two by four, and on each end you would put the—the skate wheels. You set a big pear box, a b—wooden box and made two handles out of it, and you would ride.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: You—you would go skating with a skateboard. That was one way to entertain them because we couldn't afford a—plus, there weren't that many toys around. Not like now.

LEVINE: Right.

WOJCIK: There was very little toys. There was no Wal-mart. There was no K-Mart. There was no big stores.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: And we used to play—we used to call it shinny [PH], got a piece of wood, filed the edges, made it pointy and put it on the ground, get another piece of w—broom handle and strike it and try to hit it.

LEVINE: Oh. You mean it would pop up from the ground and then you'd hit it—

WOJCIK: Yes, because—

LEVINE: —with a broom han—

WOJCIK: —it was pointed. You would hit the point.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: And it would pop up and you'd try to hit it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: And that's one of the way—another way we entertained ourself. We got a—a can from—from beans and put it on the ground and stepped in it with the heel. And it was stick to your shoe. And you would run around like that, making these—to entertain yourself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WOJCIK: So—

LEVINE: So do you think your mother was happy that she had returned to this country—

WOJCIK: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: —and stayed here?

WOJCIK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Definitely. Definitely, because she—I don't know why she didn't buy anything there but she did—of course, this was the land of opportunity. There was so much here. It was just growing. It was just coming up. It was just blossoming.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: And you had to be aggressive and—to get ahead. And she was—she was a businesswoman. Father was—well, he was grouchy, you know, and working so hard and all. And—but her personality kept all the people.

LEVINE: Well, describe her personality, her temperament. What sh—what—what was she like? What was she like with you as h—as your mother?

WOJCIK: Well, it's—she didn't have too much time for me.

LEVINE: Oh, she didn't.

WOJCIK: Because of the store. She couldn't sit with me or read with me or—that's what I'm saying about high school, going to high school. Nobody to encourage me, nobody to see that I did the homework, to—to see, know what the homework was. Brothers didn't know—were busy too. I mean, they were—

LEVINE: And they never went to high school anyway.

WOJCIK: They never went to high school so we—they had no idea. We had no idea. I had no idea.

LEVINE: Well, you were probably the first person in your family to go to high school.

WOJCIK: Yes, I—

LEVINE: Including your mother and father and your brothers.

WOJCIK: Oh, yeah. Mother and Father, they must have just went to, maybe, third grade in—in Poland.

LEVINE: Right. I see. So you were really the first and it was all unfamiliar—

WOJCIK: Yes.

LEVINE: —territory.

WOJCIK: Yes, right.

LEVINE: Right.

WOJCIK: That's why it was so difficult to try to go to school.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, at least you did it. That's something, huh?

WOJCIK: Yeah, well, we—yes, I did. And it was difficult because, even going to grammar school, I was going to grammar school at Passaic when my father bought the business in Wallington, which was like maybe five miles one way. So I had to walk.

LEVINE: So you would leave school and walk to Wallington?

WOJCIK: Yes. I would leave Wallington, go to school, sometimes even come before lunch and go back, walking back and forth. That was—

LEVINE: So you could help at the store or—

WOJCIK: Oh, no, no. It just—not—not while I was going to school.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: I was still too young then.

LEVINE: I see.

WOJCIK: Because this was in the early '30s. Parents bought the store in 1930 and—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

WOJCIK: But what I was trying to say is I had to struggle to go to grammar school. There was no buses—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: —to pick you up and take you to school. You had to walk in the wintertime. And, luckily, once in a while—well, most of the time, for lunch I would go by my—my aunt, the other sister of my mother, who lived in

Passaic, and have lunch there. But sometimes, I would go back home but—but still, that was a lot of walking, a lot of walking.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you had to walk there because that's where you lived. You lived over the store?

WOJCIK: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: In—in back of the store.

LEVINE: Back of the store.

WOJCIK: We rented the top. They rented the flat. I remember the people that rented the flat up above the store paid \$26 a month.

LEVINE: Were they from Poland?

WOJCIK: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: Yes, and very nice people.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: In fact, they lived there so long that after I met my wife, we were getting married, Mother asked them to move. So we moved upstairs.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: But—

LEVINE: And your wi—the woman you married, how did you meet her?

WOJCIK: How did I meet her, my lovely wife?

LEVINE: Yes.

WOJCIK: Only 57 years.

LEVINE: Wow.

WOJCIK: I met her in the house where we lived. When I was wounded, I came back from Eur—France to Ch—Charleston, South Carolina. In Charleston, they asked me if I wanted to go to Atlantic City Hospital or to Pennsylvania Hospital. So I chose Atlantic City Hospital. This was 1945. And being so close [clears throat]—so close, I used to come home every weekend from the hospital. The hospital was [clears throat] English General Hospital and it was Hadden [PH] Hall Hospital, which is the resort's gambling room now. It's still—it's still up—it's still up there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: Hadden Hall Hospital. They changed it into a government hospital. Then they gave it back. So I used to come home every weekend. And living upstairs was a family with three daughters. And so one day, I—at that time, right after the war, after came to this country, I wore a patch because I lost one eye. So they were still waiting for it to heal and to make me an eye, artificial glass eye. So I used to come home with a patch. So one day, early part, the girls upstairs invited me upstairs. They had two other girls there, two other girls, were celebrating one of the girl's birthday. And they said, "Oh, we go out, celebrate." My lovely wife was in charge—where she works, she was in charge of ration stamps, gas stamps. So we had—I borrowed my brother's car. We went out that night, and we struck it up and got along and we felt for each other. And two years later, we got married.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: And lived hap—living happily af—

LEVINE: Ever after. [chuckles]

WOJCIK: Oh, we—we—we had a great life.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

WOJCIK: She's terrific.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Did you have a Polish wedding?

WOJCIK: Oh, a big Polish wedding. We had 300 people.

LEVINE: Really. Tell—tell what it was like.

WOJCIK: Well—

LEVINE: Compared to any old wedding, what was a Polish—

WOJCIK: Right.

LEVINE: —wedding like? [chuckles]

WOJCIK: My father was—the business was going down so he had more time. So he was—i—in Wallington, there used to be a Polish home where Polish dances and weddings and so f—it was a hall, auditorium. And he became a director of the pla—they became president of the place. So all in all, we had to get married there. We had to have our reception there. So about 300 people with long tables, catered. We had it catered and neighbors and friends and a Polish band.

LEVINE: The—

WOJCIK: Polish Dancing.

LEVINE: —polka.

WOJCIK: Polkas, of course.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: And it was really a Polish wedding because the custom, Polish wedding, the musicians used to meet everybody at the door that the people were coming in and playing for 'em. And people would give the musicians tips and—and we had a great time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, I guess it was a good omen that night [unclear].

WOJCIK: It sure was.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: It sure was. We got married in the Holy Rosary Church at Passaic where I was baptized, went to holy communion there, first holy communion, graduated school there. And we got married there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, why don't you tell—you went—you took a commercial course in high school.

WOJCIK: Yeah.

LEVINE: And you—you did finish. And then did you go right into the service?

WOJCIK: No. Things were still pretty tough with the family. The business was going down. So I went to work in a factory in Garfield, New Jersey—Jersey Wooling [PH], a wooling company. And I got a job there, [clears throat] midnight shift from 11 at night to 7 in the morning working in a woolen factory as a laborer, as a—they called it—they called it a twisting department where you had threads coming into one, making one cone, which would be later on used to make cloth. But this was twisting department, called, with old ladies. I was working there. And then it was all seasonal, worked there for a couple of months and then got laid off. Then they called me back, work during the day. And during the day, I was a go-fer, go for this, go for that, ran around, go for this. And one good thing, the German factory owners there, was 10 o'clock, they used to make coffee for—for the ladies. They had a special room with the big vats in there, one woman making coffee. And I would go out and distribute the coffee to the ladies. This is a high school graduate.

LEVINE: Yeah. How did you feel, working at the factories?

WOJCIK: Well, at that time, if you had no education, you always looked to go to work.

LEVINE: Right.

WOJCIK: To go to work. You never were a slacker. You always—I was only making \$12 a week. But it was always good—we had so many factories, so many—Passaic was known, an industrial town. There were so many factories there. That were rubber works. There was chemical works. There was woolen works. There was—it was terrific, all kind of—so we looked forward, always tried to better yourself, tried to get a better job, of which I—later on, I did. You want to hear about us?

LEVINE: Sure.

WOJCIK: So from there, well, that one j—that first job, [clears throat] I was accused of slacking by a younger fellow, son of the boss. I says, “You know what you could do with your job, don’t you?” And I walked out. I quit there. So things were starting to perk up a little, work. There was a big car seat factory, Ford car seats, made car seats. And there were hiring like crazy. They were booming. They were building all the seats for the cars in Detroit. And two politicians—my brother was involved with a little politics and two politicians—I job a job, because I was a small fellow. I wasn’t very big. In high school, I was, I think—was the first—first one in line. I was so small. And he got me a job there, again, nights. And I used to operate a big machine, a very dangerous machine, where would get two pieces of—a frame where I can put it together and a stamper. This thing

would come down and clamp in there and then it would clamp a stamper, make one instead of two.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: Very dangerous. You put your hand there, you—you'd lose your fingers. So then the war was perking up in the world. Germany was trying their might, taking all these countries. So airplane factory, Wright's [PH] Aeronautical—they used to make airplane engines. And they were starting to go furiously, working 24 hours a day. So I was lucky. I went to a school in Newark, night school, being—trying to be the airplane mechanic, six months. So then I put a application into Wright's. And being—they saw I went to—had a little knowledge, they hired me. And that was good because that's where you got real paid. You got good—made good money and you made a lot of overtime. And that's where—and [unclear] a mechanic, they put me into a department where these big engines would come off the li—test line dirty and filthy and awful, and have to put 'em in a, like a shed and wash 'em with [unclear]. That was a dirty job. That was very—but we were making money. And in fact, then the war broke out so I got drafted. So I got a—working at Wrights, I got a deferment for six months. After six months was up, a woman took my place and I had to go into the Army.

LEVINE: Hmm. So you—when you were—went into the Army, you really weren't—you would have preferred to stay working.

WOJCIK: Oh, sure, making money. That was the thing, make money, make money. You—you—you took all the overtime you can get to make money. And I was one—I was a mama's boy and I would give my mother the whole pay. My brothers didn't. They just gave \$10 a week or something like that. But I would give my mother the whole pay and Mother would give me \$5 a week. That was my spending money. So even right up to the day—day that I got drafted, that I was leaving for the Army, I gave my mother the whole pay.

LEVINE: Why do you think you did that? I mean, your brothers didn't do it as much as you did.

WOJCIK: Because I know Mother needed it and Mother—being mama's boy, I felt it was my obligation.

LEVINE: Do you think you were mama's boy because you were the baby boy?

WOJCIK: No—

LEVINE: I mean, I know you had younger sisters but—

WOJCIK: Well, no, because I was at home. The others were more—they were already—

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: —blossoming out. They didn't pay any attention to house, to the home, to the store. They didn't—they never—were never in the store.

LEVINE: I see. You lived at home.

WOJCIK: In the business.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

WOJCIK: I was the home boy. I was the—didn't go anywheres, just regular home boy, [unclear]. But—

LEVINE: So say a little bit about—about where you were sent a—and what you did in World War II.

WOJCIK: Okay. So from draft board, they took us to Fort Dix, New Jersey. And it was, like, three days before Thanksgiving. And I can still remember having Thanksgiving dinner in the mess hall in the Army, crying like a baby. And then we had to go outside and big barrels [clears throat], [unclear] barrels. We used to wa—wash our utensils in it, standing in line and crying like a baby, missing—missing the family, missing my mother.

LEVINE: Yeah, ah. So from Fort Dix, were you sent overseas right away?

WOJCIK: So, no. So then from Fort—from Fort Dix—I [unclear]—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: [clears throat]

LEVINE: Take your time.

WOJCIK: From Fort Dix, they sent me to Camp Polk, Louisiana. Camp Polk, Louisiana; I was there for two and a half years—

LEVINE: Mmm.

WOJCIK: —being trained. I had the best racket there ever was. I never knew—in Fort Dix, we used to pull out in the morning and do a little marching. I couldn't even march. [several words unclear] to the cor—"Take this guy

on the side and teach him how to march.” You know. Well, that’s how—I wasn’t in—what was life about.

LEVINE: Ah.

WOJCIK: It was so close to being home and to be secluded, to be in—like a shell. But then after that, it was all different. So I went to Louisiana, Camp Polk, Louisiana, and the captain says—you go before a captain and he says, “What’d you do in the Arm—in the mil—ci—civilian life?” I said, “Well, I”—I didn’t want to go in the infantry, so this was a armored division, tank outfit. So I said, “Well, I was—I worked in Wright’s by airplane engines.” He says, “Well, we got enough of those in the carpool.” He says, “What else did you do?” I says, “Well, my parents owned a butcher shop and I used to work in the butcher shop.” He said, “Oh, that’s good.” He says—exact words—“I’ll put you in the medics so you can butcher up the Army—the boys, help butcher up the boys.” So he put me in the medics. So in the mil—the first four months, three months—three, four months was basic training. You were just a recruit and you were just thought—they’re—they were breaking you down. You had to go march and you had to go, calisthenics. You had to do this and do that.

LEVINE: When you say “breaking you down,” tell—what—what is that? What—what—I know so many young men go into the service and they get broken down. Well, did you—

WOJCIK: Because—

LEVINE: —[unclear]?

WOJCIK: —they want you to think like Army think, not like you thought in civilian, not to be independent. You can’t be—you can’t be selfish. You can’t be one. You gotta be a crowd. You gotta be—stick together because in combat, you have to have friends. And I was—well, Louisiana in December was very damp and cold, very, very damp in Louisiana because we were in the swamps. So I wore what is called long johns. And I—the long johns caused a lot of friction. I developed—my private was all swelled up and infected. So they thought I had a sexual disease, which I didn’t have. But anyway, so they sent me to the hospital so I missed all this training, all that rigmarole. And there, they operated on me and so I come back from the hospital after about a week or so. They said, well, I can’t go out, do duty outside. “Go—go into—since you’re a medic, we’ll put you—go back and report to the dispensary,” where that was two doctors. And there, they would have everyday sick call and help ‘em out there. So, okay, everybody else was out doing—

LEVINE: Maneuvers, uh-huh.

WOJCIK: Basic training.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: And I didn't—I didn't go out there so I became very friendly with doctors, because doctors were civilians. They weren't military men. So these two doctors, two captains and myself—I was the only one, enlisted man there, and they were—two of them. Every day, we would toss for Cokes a quarter. Odd man bought the Cokes. So I would be in the front. They'd go in the back and they drank—they drank their Cokes. We were being very friendly. [chuckles] Funny stories. Basic training was still operating and, one day, the captain says to me—well, I was doing a lot of typing and, of course, I was commercial. I had a lot of typing and filing and all that stuff. And he says, "Put yourself in for a sergeant." I said, "Okay." I typed it all out, went to the headquarters. Master sergeant looks at it. He says, "What are you doing here? This is—basic training's not over yet. He's made you a sergeant?" Rejected it. [clears throat] So that's how friend—friend—friendly I was. But the—so then the basic training was over and then came furlough time or came promotion time. So, bing, I was one of the first ones. I put myself in for, called T5. That's a corporal, technical corporal. That was a—extra pay. It was upgraded. I made it. Then furloughs were handing out because basic was over, so furloughs—I was the first one to go home on a furlough. So then I come back from furlough; then maneuvers was supposed to start. Maneuvers, you go away from camp—

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: —for two weeks in swamps and actual—I didn't want that. So I was the clerk so I would get a report. They wanted somebody to go to school, medical school. I was one of them, me and another guy, another fellow went to medical school, went to Fort Sam Houston, San Antone, Texas, one of the b—Fitzsimmons [PH] General Hospital, one of the biggest hos—Army hospital there. And there, classes six days a week, eight hours a day. When I got out of there, then the next two weeks I was in a hospital, working in a hospital, heart hospital, take care of the fellows. And when I got out of there, I felt like I was a doctor.

LEVINE: Really?

WOJCIK: I knew all the veins and I knew all the—everything about it.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: And—

LEVINE: Well, could you say—we're getting close to the end of the tape but I'd like you to say about your war record, just the highlights of it.

WOJCIK: Okay.

LEVINE: What happened?

WOJCIK: I was in—we were in the 11<sup>th</sup> Army Division and we were under Patton. And we were in England and all of a sudden the Bulge, Battle of the Bulge broke out where the Germans broke through. December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1944, they broke through. So hur—hurriedly, we—they shipped us out to France across the channel, very bad weather, very bad. Thought the ship was going to split open—into France. And then Patton got a hold of us. We drove three days, all armored outfits, three days to get into border of France and Belgium, place called Swasson [PH]. It was a French Army village. And we pulled in four o'clock in the afternoon. We says, "Oh, well. Tomorrow's Christmas. They got to give us a Christmas dinner, at least." We pulled in four o'clock. Ten o'clock, they woke us up, "Okay, let's go." We were reconnaissance, if you know what reconnaissance is. Reconnaissance, you're first. You go first. And being mechanized, we never walked. We rode. And I had what you call a Jeep. We used to call them Peeps [PH]. And we had to go out, look for the Germans. Talk about being scared at nighttime, first time out. And then next day was Christmas. This was Christmas Eve. Next day was Christmas. Oh, we're on the open field. We're having out C-rations and all of a sudden our plane comes scooping down, jump into the—anyway. Well, that's [clears throat]—we had a lot of skirmishes because we were for—we always were looking for the Germans. We were always first.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: If we found out we couldn't handle it, we had to pull out and go back, pull up the tanks and everybody else would come up to fight. But we were looking for 'em. We were looking for 'em. So this was [clears throat]—one sticks in my mind, still remember it, April 15—14—15. That's where I got the Bronze Star. We're moving up to a little town on a road and we came to a crossroad, a house here and you had to go left or right. So the lead sergeant got out of his Jeep—Peep, and walking down the street to go reconnoiter, to look if it's safe for everybody else to go along. In the house was snipers and they fired at the sergeant. They hit the sergeant right in the stomach and he dropped right in the middle of the road. So we heard gunfire. We scattered. We sc—me and a lieutenant, couple guys went into a barn. It was a—no more gunfire. So the lieutenant says

to me. He says, "All right. Well, ge—go out and get him." I—"Who, me?"

LEVINE: [chuckles]

WOJCIK: Open. Middle of the road. I see [unclear]. He says, "Yeah, that's your job." I says, "Okay. All right." I was single, didn't give a darn. I—I never, never thought I would be injured. I never thought I—I'd be hurt.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: And I had another fellow with me because I was a corporal. I says, "You going with me, John?" He says, "Oh, no." He says, "I got a daughter back home 17 years old." He says, "I want to come home." I says, "Okay. I'll go." Opened the doors, standing up. I blessed myself. I go out to go get him. I take about five steps out there and all of a sudden I heard machine gun fire. I froze. And being in combat so long, you can dis—you can distinguish German fire and American fire, and I knew it was our boys, 50-caliber machine gun. They're firing above my head into the house to protect me. So for a split second then I got up and I ran up and I—pulling them back. And they brought up a tank, my—my fellows, friends. And right over my head, they shot right into that house. That house just fell apart. I could feel it. I still feel the concussion, boom, go into the house. So I grabbed him. I run back, put all my [unclear]—I drove back about five blocks. A doctor was there but he didn't make it because he had internal bleeding.

LEVINE: Hmm.

WOJCIK: So that—there was many more incidents but that one incident sticks in my mind—

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: —because tried to save him but I couldn't do anything. He was bleeding, internal bleeding. And his name was Biley [PH], Sergeant Biley, South Dakota.

LEVINE: Mmm.

WOJCIK: And—

LEVINE: When you look back on your war years, what do—how do you think about it now? Or how do you feel about—

WOJCIK: And then—let me—

LEVINE: Oh, go ahead.

WOJCIK: Let me just tell you the part—other part. So then, riding around and riding around and we're going—we knew the war was almost over, because we were heading straight for Berlin. But then, about 50 miles from Berlin, Patton stopped us. We were under General Patton in the Battle of the Bulge. Patton stopped us and gave us orders to go down to Austria. The—excuse me—to meet the Russians. So we knew we weren't—Russians going to take Berlin, so we're going down to Russ—we're going down to Austria to meet the Russians to keep the Germans coming up from Italy. They still had ammunition. Of course, in Germany, they had no ammunition, no nothing. We were riding, like nothing. So we just get on a borderline of Austria and Germany. We hit a roadblock, meaning he's coming up from Italy, still set up—in [unclear], they set up a roadblock. They held up—they c—we couldn't move the tanks as far as going on. And all of a sudden, one of the fellows got hit in the femur bone. "Medic, Medic." They called me up, medic. I—so I parked my Jeep on a big pile of manure over here in the forest over here. I thought I was safe. I parked my vehicle here. I got out of the vehicle. I had red crosses, red crosses, red crosses on my helmet, red cross flag flying on my Jeep and everything, big red cross on my roof. So he couldn't distinguish—s—say that h—he didn't know what he was doing. So I crawled over to the fellow and I gave him a shot of morphine, and I put a tourniquet on to stop the bleeding, because the femur bone is the leg.

LEVINE: Yeah.

WOJCIK: And I'm crawling back to my Jeep to un—unfasten a—a belt that held the stretcher for the fellow. I was on my hands and knees. I was ha—and a sniper fired from the woods. And if you know anything about a Jeep, you had the bar—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

WOJCIK: —with the canvas roof on top. The belt was tied to that bar and I was unfastening the belt. And he hit that bar.

LEVINE: Oh.

WOJCIK: Fraction of an inch either way, he would have got me right between the eyes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]