

EI-1377

CASIMIR BRODAK

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LEVINE: Today is April the 27th, the year 2005 and I am here in the Oral History Studio at Ellis Island with Cass Brodak, who came here—he is Polish—came here from a camp in Germany in 1951. He was 14 years of age when he got to this country. And he came here on the SS General Greeley. Okay, if we could start—if you would say for the tape your name, when you were born.

BRODAK: When I was born I was christened as Kazimierz Michel [PH] Brodak.

LEVINE: Why don't you spell Kam—Kashmish—

BRODAK: Kazimierz is spelled K-A-Z-I-M-I-E-R-Z.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

BRODAK: I was born in a village called Szwajcaria, which in—in—in translation means Switzerland. And—and it's near Lwow, which now—as a matter

of fact, now it's part of the Ukraine. But pre-war, it—it was still Poland. It's southeast of Lwow, if you look on the map.

LEVINE: Could you spell the name of—the village name?

BRODAK: Yeah, it's—it's S-Z-W-A-J—okay, [unclear]—S-Z-W-A-J-C-A-R-I-A, Szwajcaria. And that's a village you can't even find on the map. But the nearest would be, like, what would you call it?

LEVINE: Lvov [PH]?

BRODAK: Well, that—Lwow is L-W-O-W in Polish. And the O has a—like, pronounced as a U. And now they call it Lviv, the Ukraines. That would—the—the capitol city. But, like, the—how would you say, nearby would be—Tarnopol would be like the county—county place. And it was near a river named Strypa. The—

LEVINE: Why don't you spell all of that? Tar—

BRODAK: Okay. Tarnopol.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: It's T-A-R-N-O-P-O-L—Tarnopol.

LEVINE: And—

BRODAK: And the river is Strypa, S-T-R-Y-P-A. And it's a small river but a—not that small. And it would be—we would be, like, maybe three kilometers, four kilometers from the river. We had a—we had a small farm. As a matter of fact, my father and his family helped him to build the house. And the house was still made as you would use wooden sticks and clay and put it in between for the walls. And the—the top was made out of straw. We never had finished the floor yet. It was just a one-room house with a—with a stove, as I remember. And of course, we had the oven. As a matter of fact, the winter we would play on top because it was warm. We—that was the only thing. And we—outside, we had a big barn. We went—had one horse, one cow. And in 1944, the Germans were fighting with the Russians. Okay. So there they said that we have to move you because we're going to have a big—big fighting in this area. So they told us, "Take all your possessions, whatever you can, put it on the"—so we put everything on a horse-drawn, like a wagon. So whatever we could, we put it on there. And they took us to the wagons and they misled us. They put us on these cattle trains, locked us up like—like, literally, cat—cattles and took us to concentration camp.

LEVINE: So it was the Germans who came and said that—

BRODAK: Yes.

LEVINE: —you—this is going to be fi—they're going to be fighting here—

BRODAK: Yes.

LEVINE: —and you—wow. Okay. Well, before we got to that, which is so dramatic, really, if you could say the early part of your childhood—I guess until you were seven—

BRODAK: Well, [unclear]—

LEVINE: What was that like—

BRODAK: It was—it was very, very, to me, from what I remember as a small child, I just remembered the farm a little bit from—you know, it was a very good ground over there. Everything grew very well and it was—I—I had—
from—in Poland, I had an older sister named Maria—M-A-R-I-A, Maria. She's, like, two years older than me. Then I had a younger sister named Helana—H-E-L-A-N-A. And later on, I have a little brother, Michal. [chuckles] M-I-C-H-A-L. And that was—we were all happy family and not too far was my grandfather's and grandmother's house. And my grandfather was, like, the—like the—well, they didn't have a mayor there. They—it was like a tax collector. He was the only guy over there that could literally write and—and he was a little bit educated. It wasn't too far, and he was like considered the well-off person from—from the—from the village. But what happened to them, I would have to go back to 1939. And this is strictly from hearsay because I was too young. I was only two years old. Same thing happened to them. See, the—but this time was the Russians came and said, "We're going to take all of you out of here because they're going to be fighting." They took 'em to Siberia. But us, for some ungodly reason, because we were on the outskirts of—of the village, kind of away where they took the middle of the village, went primarily to the—as my—my grandfather was known as soltys, which is, you know, like a guy that's in charge of the village, in a sense.

LEVINE: How do you spell soltys? That's a Russian word? I mean, a—a Polish word?

BRODAK: S-O-L-T-Y-S. But the L has, like, a little dash on top.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: Soltys. Anyways, they—

LEVINE: So they—

BRODAK: They took all of them—all of them and shipped them so far into the Siberian forests. I mean, it was so—so cold over there. I'm just saying this. And then later on, if you want, I can tell you because I visited my aunt. I found my—one of my aunt survived. And I visited and they would tell me stories, you know, how they did. And they spent six years in Siberia. But from the whole family that went out there, only a handful survived. The rest all—it was so easy. All you had to do is fall asleep, you know, and you freeze. You just sit down and you get real comfortable and you fall asleep and you die. So first went my grandpa and my grandma.

LEVINE: Did you ever hear from them—

BRODAK: No, I did not.

LEVINE: —once they were taken there?

BRODAK: No, I did not. But I—like I say, my aunt came back from—from Siberia. Because we lost contact during the war. We—we—we lost—see, when—when we were still in Poland between '39 and '44, a little bit, there was, like, a letter maybe once a year or something—

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: —like that. But then when we got deported to Germany, they were still in Siberia and then we lost contact. So then after the war—I believe it was, like, in 1945, '46, somewhere around there, we finally found out that—that my aunt, you know, somehow found out where we were, or through the Red Cross or through something, they made a contact with us. And that's how we kept corresponding.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: As a matter of fact, now, since I've been there in 1994, I correspond with my cousins. [chuckles] I'm really surprised. She wr—and my cousin does [chuckles] not I—like to write so she calls me. She calls me on the telephone. She talk to me, like on our anniversary. She found out when we got married and my birthday. She would call me and I [chuckles] do vice versa.

LEVINE: And you speak in Polish?

BRODAK: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: Yes, we do. I'm not as fluent as she is. And then, again, there is a lot of change, you know, from when we—when we grew up to what they are now. Plus, when they came back from Siberia to Poland, they didn't get—they—they did not give them the same area. They put them on the land that we received, you know, the—the—during the post war—I don't know if Stalin, Hitler and—and—who was the—

LEVINE: Churchill?

BRODAK: Churchill—the three divi—divided the boundaries.

LEVINE: Right.

BRODAK: So what—what we got from—from Germany, that portion, that's where they—they gave them a part of—or give them, like, the housing. You know, they live over there so—

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: Originally, you know, like pre-1939, that was Germany, [chuckles] which now is Poland. But then pre-1939 where we were, that's now the Ukraine. See, because whatever—whatever Stalin said, those two agreed. In other words, and this is my own interpretation, you know, of Poland. At least that's the way the Poles feel about it, that why didn't Churchill and—and—and Roosevelt fight for us a little bit more? Because as—as you well know, the Polish—if it wasn't for the Polish pilots, London would have been down the tubes. See? So we—we did spend a lot of Polish blood there and we had one of the best pilots, best trained, and then they turned our—backs on us. But—

LEVINE: That's right. So in other words, when they were—when they were, I guess you call it, repatriated? What they were brought back—

BRODAK: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —they—what—who owned the—where they were?

BRODAK: Their—their—this was the—the land that they got repatriated—when they came back to Poland, they—in other words, see, the—they—they—the Ger—when they took away from Germany, that part of the land

became Polish. So all the Germans moved out and then there's homes. So they just assigned the house and that's where they lived.

LEVINE: And was it near where they had lived before?

BRODAK: No.

LEVINE: Oh, no.

BRODAK: No, it's miles and miles away. But, see, Poland—it—when you go to Europe, I don't know how you see—I see Europe like—like each country like a state.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: See, like if—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: If I went to Europe for a visit, I went to—we went to Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland. It's like going—Michigan, Ohio, Indiana.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: That's about it. You know, you can do it in hours, especially traveling if you rent a car. So—

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Well, let's just back up a minute. Why don't you say your mother's name?

BRODAK: My mother's name is—in English, it's Stella but in Polish is Stanislaw.

LEVINE: And maybe you could spell that one.

BRODAK: Okay, it's S-T-A-N-I-S-L-A-W-A.

LEVINE: Okay. And your fath—and her maiden name?

BRODAK: Resik. It's R-E-S-I-K. Resik.

LEVINE: Okay. And your father's name?

BRODAK: Just like mine, Kazimierz.

LEVINE: Okay. I'm going to take this—

BRODAK: I don't know if you know but in—in Poland, when you are born they try to name you to the nearest saint to your birthday, because they do not observe so much on—

LEVINE: Birthdays.

BRODAK: —birthdays but names days. So my—I was born February 27th. My saint's, St. Kazimierz, March 4th. So it's like a week away. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BRODAK: But, see, in—but now, since it's more modern, they do celebrate both.

LEVINE: Well, now, these name days of the saints, what did you do in Poland when it was, like, the name day of—

BRODAK: See, like—like Kazimierz is very famous in Poland because there was a king, Kasibesh [PH], you know. Kaz—there was a few of them, like Kazimierz the Great, Kazimierz this and Kazimierz that. So they celebrate that day on March 4th like Kashuky [PH] Day. You know, like Kazimierz Day. You know, and all the Kazimierz, you know, they just are recognized.

LEVINE: And how—what would you do? Like, say it's St. Kazimierz Day—

BRODAK: I—as far as I know, it was just recognized and old people got happy and probably just got some happy juice, you know, in their old age. But those that they were not, they probably got cookies or something like that.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BRODAK: Because, see, Sa—big day in Poland is also Saint—Saint Joseph, you know. March 19th. And, you know, they celebrate. And they more p—the more names they give you—see, like they gave me Kazimierz Michael. Then I had, like, a protector. You know, I'm under this saint—

LEVINE: And that saint.

BRODAK: —and this saint, you know. So they're very religious. And Poland is, as you know, 96 percent, I believe, calls themselves Roman Catholics. [chuckles] So—and now, since our pope, John Paul the 2nd, was so long in—in [unclear] even more so recognizable. But—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: —I don't know.

LEVINE: Was your family very religious?

BRODAK: Very religious. To this day, and we still are.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BRODAK: And very superstitious, in a sense.

LEVINE: How—

BRODAK: You know, they believe—they believe, you know, you got to say your prayers or something's [chuckles] going to happen to you or crap like that. So—

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

BRODAK: They're very, very religious. We—you know, there is—it's a mortal sin if you don't go to church on Sunday. And it's that way; it's kept that way.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, do you remember any grandparents growing up?

BRODAK: Very little. I just remember, you know, like visiting, going to their house as a little boy. You know, just about—that—that's about all. I remember a little—little bit. I remember because my dad lived—family or grandparents lived right on that river strip. You know, right—their house was, like, on top and then the bottom was the river. And my dad was a very good swimmer and he used to break horses in as a youth—as a youngster. In other words, to break a horse, like a wild horse, the best way to do it is in the water.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: So he would go with the horse in the water and break them.

LEVINE: Then what would he do? I'll take this away from you so you don't wrestle it. [chuckles] Tell me about what—how you remember as a little boy seeing your father—

BRODAK: Well—

LEVINE: —break a horse in the water.

BRODAK: Well, I—I didn't see this because this is after. See, my dad was already farming. But what—what I've been told, see, my dad comes from a

family. I believe there was four brothers and one—one sister. And there m—my grandma was—something happened to her legs and she could not walk. She had some kind of a sickness, you know, but this is going in the 19-something. 19—whatever year it was. And my father was the youngest boy. And so she would be—I remember, like, the same thing. You know, it's just the little farmhouse. And she'd be bedridden. But she would be telling my father how to cook. See, my father was—but this is not for my ma to know about this. But it doesn't matter now. He was a better cook than my ma. Well, of course, my father married my mother when he was 24 and she was 16.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: So—and he would cook and everything but if somebody came over, she did it. [chuckles] So he taught her how to cook. He taught her everything. But it was a tragedy, in a sense, because he was so close. See, his brothers would work the field and they were a close family. So in 1948—because we didn't know what happened to him on his birthday, to be exact, March 18th. He died of a—they said over a heart attack—on his birthday. He was 36 years old. And he left my mother with six children, the oldest being my sister, Maria. She was 13, and my younger sister, Patty, or Yantika [PH], three months old. Here's this widow, my ma, 29 years old with six children in displaced person camp. You know, what am I going to do? So he—I don't know. I'm jumping from one thing to the other, but anyways, my—my—my friends of my father, these three people that he—we met up—that they supposedly from around the same parts where he was from, actually made him the coffin, dug the grave and buried him. And I was—like I say, I was, I believe, 11 years old when my dad died. We had to literally take my ma out of the grave three times.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Well, now, where were you? Where was the family when your father died?

BRODAK: We were in a camp called Altenstat [PH], which is in Germany, Bavaria. Near Munich, Altenstat.

LEVINE: Can you spell it?

BRODAK: In German? The—the—A-L-T-E-N-S-T-A-T. And that was near—if you can't find this—you can find it on a German—on a Bavarian map. It's, I think, near Schongau—S-C-H-O-N-G-A-U. That was the bigger town.

LEVINE: Okay.

BRODAK: Because, see, after the war, I have two more—a brother and a sister born. See?

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: In 1945, my brother, Joseph (Jusef) [PH] and then my sister in 1947.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: And that's how we—because originally I told you only—give you the four, the Polish ones.

LEVINE: Right. Okay.

BRODAK: I can tell you a real cute story because—

LEVINE: Okay.

BRODAK: —one of my friends—one of my friends—because I have no birth certificate. So I—I received everything, no problems getting Social Security and stuff like that, because I have marriage license. I have the citizen papers and I have my DD-214 from the Army. But anyways, he said that he—he's from around the same part of Poland that I am. He wrote to Warsaw. He give me this long address. And he got his—they found his—his birth certificate. If I would write over there, they would get it. So I wrote it, like, in January of 2004. And, you know, he says, "Make a money order for at least \$20." I made 30 and I sent it and I says—I explain everything down the line, [unclear]. Nothing happened. Nothing happened. I wrote another letter asking, "Either tell me you can or you can't." Nothing happened. Here about a month ago I get this official letter. I had to sign for it from Chicago, Polish Consulate. Whew! My eyes lit up. I says, "I'm going to get my birth certificate." They say, "If you want this paper, this Polish paper and all this, you have to pay \$41. Send us a money order." So I made money order, send it to Chicago. Four or five days later, another registered letter. I'm so happy; I'm opening this up. Everything's on there. It tells you no record of me but they found record of my sister, Maria. In other words, the records, like, from 1930—'36, '7 and up the line, destroyed. But 1935, still record. That's my friend's year of birth. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: So—

LEVINE: Oh, so he got his—

BRODAK: That's why he got his. I don't have it. But now, I know my sister can get it.

LEVINE: Ah, wow.

BRODAK: So we were so happy.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, just to talk about how it happened that the family was told that they had to leave—and—and then, like, what happened? I mean, w—what did the family—

BRODAK: You mean—

LEVINE: —do?

BRODAK: From—from—

LEVINE: From your original home?

BRODAK: From my original home. What happened is this. We—we were sent to a concentration camp in—in—it was still in Poland. There's a—call—called Przemysl. I don't know if I can—

LEVINE: Here, you can use this if you're running [chuckles] out of space.

BRODAK: P-R-Z-E-M-Y-S-L. There was a concentration camp where mostly they were keeping us in there. As a child, I remember, you know, they took us in there, you know. We had the regular showers, the hair cut—cut off. You know, you just got the uniform, you know, the stripe uniform. And you were there. During—during the night, my dad had to go and dig graves. They were burying people. That's all I remember from that camp, other than how the camp was. You know, like it was just boards. I think it was like four tiers or three tiers of boards and hay. That's it. So they'd give you one—like, it would be like a shelf. You would be—this was yours. Next family, next family. What—

LEVINE: You mean a whole family just had one shelf?

BRODAK: Yeah, one shelf. That's it. And that was ours. Well, if the family above you—if the boy or the girl had an accident, then it came just on you. And I remember fleas biting. I remember very—maybe very poor eating. And we were surrounded with barbed wire. And in—literally starve. You know. But the war was getting to the end. So they started looking into the camp for farmers because, see, Hitler would leave one guy on the farm to farm. But then he was desperate so he even took the last guy off the farm. So that's what saved us from the furnace. In other words,

if we would have stayed there maybe another six weeks or so we would be ready because, you know, the body—the skinnier, the better it burns. [chuckles] Putting it literally. So anyways, they took us up to this slave farm. You know, way in—near—near a town called Kempten.

LEVINE: K—

BRODAK: K-E-M-P-T-E-N. Kempten. It's a pretty big town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: But we were away from it because we could see—when the planes were coming, you could see, like, you know, flashes and—because they did bombard heavily onto the city of Kempten. But we were on the farm. On this farm, when they brought us from this—from this camp, they literally give us a room probably twice the size of this, which was a chicken coop, in a sense. And they says, "This is where you're going to live." So we had to clean it all out and that was our room. In the meantime, they did not have automation so my dad had to milk the—my ma milked cows, take care of the cows, the horses, whatever was—had to be done on the—on the farm. But for us children, we had nothing. We—we—we were more or less, you know, waiting for ma and dad from sunrise to sundown seven days a week. That's all they did.

LEVINE: So were your mother and father the only farmers on that farm?

BRODAK: We had also—we had two—two Russian women also helping on the farm and one Russian man. It was—so they—because it was pretty big farm. Pretty big farm.

LEVINE: And it was mostly animals?

BRODAK: Mostly animals, farm animals and—but that's—chickens and pigs, goats, whatever on the farm. But mainly, it was cows. They had a lot of cows and it was all done by hand. So first, we got liberated in '45, I believe, like at the beginning of '45 or at the end of '44. We got liberated by French. And naturally, you know, French were asking—asking this and that. And some of those Russians, I think, said that they were mistreated. So then and behold, the front moved. The Germans [chuckles] moved the French. And here, they took these Russians who—who never seen them. So they must have took them away, either killed them or put them in a camp or what. But—

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: Another thing, I—I do vaguely remember a couple times, you know, planes that would be flying, those that were bombarding the city of Kempten. Well, maybe the—from the ground got 'em and the pilots be coming—I think, as a boy, either I'm thinking of it or I literally saw it. But the pilot'd be coming down at a chute and got pitchfork.

LEVINE: Oh!

BRODAK: So that's—that's about all I remember. So then—

LEVINE: Wait. Whose planes were they?

BRODAK: Well, these were either British or American.

LEVINE: Ugh.

BRODAK: They were—you know, they were bombarding the cities because I think Kempten had some kind of factory over there that they wanted to destroy. Then in—then the—you know, we stayed on the farm and maybe a couple weeks later the Americans liberated. Americans liberated the—the farm. Well, now, the Americans are asking, you know, all kinds of—nobody's saying nothing [chuckles] because they know those people disappeared. Suppose the front goes back. But after that, the front has never changed. So then from the farm, they took us to Kempten. And of course, they had these displaced person camps, which was one of the big ones there right in the city, which was actually a—soldiers were—German soldiers used to live. You know, this was like our camp and, in those camps, you had your—your—you know, so many people in the camp. As a matter of fact, that's where, after the war, [chuckles] I made my first holy communion. You know, there were some priests there. There were some learned people. There's some people who came over that were teachers, professors and stuff. Inside the camp, they would organize schools. They would—literally, they would change, like, a big hall into a church and—and just started progressively—meantime, in 1945, '46 there was a very big push to go back where you came from. Well, we were almost on a train to go back. But the locomotive couldn't pull it so we got off. And after that, somehow, my dad found out that—"Do not go back to Poland. It's communism; it's bad over there. Don't go." So my dad always wanted to immigrate to Argentina because he loved horses. He wanted—you know, when they said, "Where would you like to immigrate?" "Argentina, Argentina." But that's—this misfortune thing happened to him in '48. The only thing—see, because there was no [unclear]. There was nothing done, you know, when he passed away on his birthday. But then we found that letter in his pocket that his four brothers or three brothers got their necks cut off with sickles, like, you know. So that

could have broke his heart because how the youngest. He took care of 'em, at least to this day, because there's no history. You know, now, since I'm from the Brodak family, right now the oldest. [chuckles]

LEVINE: I see.

BRODAK: And I have perfect ticker so far.

LEVINE: So in other words, you think that he got that letter—

BRODAK: And he was reading—and—and—and reading it over and over and maybe that's what did it.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: Then again, maybe it was from the diet. Maybe it was from the tension and all the work he did during the war.

LEVINE: Or the combination of everything.

BRODAK: Combination of both.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

BRODAK: But then we—see, from that camp—from that camp, they kept moving us because, see, they started to immigrate, started opening up—opening up avenues. A lot of—a lot of young—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

BRODAK: Like if—if you were 18, 19, 20, a lot—a lot of those immigrated to Belgium to the coalmines, to—

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: —to England, to the coalmines. You know, they were coming around—France took a bunch of them. So they were immigrating but nobody wanted a widow with six children. As a matter of fact, we went—we went everywhere. We tried—we tried—even to Australia, you know, being such a big country. We went all the way up to the counsul—consulate.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: And he says, "I can't let you go. How's—I have enough welfare." You know, so he would not. So then towards—like I say, towards '50—'50, '51, we were just about the last people left in—in—in Germany in those camps. We probably would have had to stay there. But we—it was this NCWC, I believe, National Catholic Welfare Committee or something like that, that was looking for people to help 'em out. And we were real close with this one, Father Latrieske [PH], who—who was like our camp priest. And he wrote to the group, I—I believe in—in—in Detroit. And they said they found a sponsor but the sponsor was strictly on the paper. It was—he—he would have nothing to do with us. So anyways, now, I tell you, we—we got—everything we passed. And the American Consulate was a little bit leery too. So when we went in front of him, my mother—and he looked at us and he says, "You have three boys and three girls." He says, "These are potential draftees," [chuckles] for myself, my brother, Mike and my brother, Joe. And you know, "When your time comes, you guys going to have to do it." Well, my ma says, "Yeah, whatever. Whatever"—anything just to come here. So anyways, when we—when we came to America, see, this is the part that I am a little bit fuzzy because, being 14—I remember seeing the statue. That's the first thing you see. Oh, on a ship—let me tell you, on the ship, they separated me from the mother because I was already 14. I couldn't be with the women. So my ma and the rest of the clan was [chuckles] in a nice cabinet. They—they put 'em in—up front, like—me, with the men, well, first, you know 14-year-old. I don't know too much. So I picked the bunk on top. Well, at night, I got up; I hit my head. So I'm looking for another bu—I couldn't find one. I found a bunk right by the door. Bad news. You know, by the door, because everybody's walking out the door and some of them had the heaves and hives and smell. But I survived. I survived on the ship. But my—the rest of the family, even though I don't understand why they have the good cabins up front because, you know, your ship as it goes, it bounces. They all got sick. [chuckles] I was the only one [chuckles]—

LEVINE: One that didn't.

BRODAK: —that didn't get sick.

LEVINE: And this is the General Greeling [PH], right?

BRODAK: Greeley.

LEVINE: Yeah?

BRODAK: What did—the General Gray—Grayling [PH] or Greeley—

LEVINE: Greeley, I think.

BRODAK: It's a troop carrier. You know, they would take troop to Europe.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: Bring some of them with us and some of the displaced persons to immigrate over here. Now, see, this is the confusion that I have. I thought that we were parked right here at Ellis Island, but I understand, no. I—I understand—

LEVINE: You have to take a ferry.

BRODAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: But see, I don't remember that part.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: But I do remember the part, us going through the lines. I do remember having the number and I do remember carrying all the stuff and, you know, having the pay person, all the questions asked and—but then, the next thing I remember is being on a—on a train going to Detroit. So we arrived at Detroit and they have an organization in—in Detroit, Polish organization, that a lady picked us up, this lady, Clara Schutzkoskow [PH], whatever her name was, and took us to what they called—we had actually, in Detroit, St. Alberta's [PH] DP Shelter, [chuckles] displaced persons shelter.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: What it was, it's a school, St. Alberta's School. And across the street is the convent and the third floor was empty. So again, we're almost like being in Europe in barracks, you know, and [unclear]. We're having a room for the family. But over there, right away, my sister, Mary, they come. You know, they announced on the Polish radio that there's a widow came with six—six children. Well, naturally, my sister was already 16 so there was few fellows that would like to date her and all this. But from day one, my sister right away went as a—like a—like, to watch children.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Like a nanny?

BRODAK: Like a nanny. She worked for a florist upstairs. She took care of two girls. Next thing, she got a better offer so she went and worked for a

doctor, got more. And from there, she went and got a job—when she turned 18 she got a job skinning hotdogs. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, my.

BRODAK: And we had a hard time getting rent. Anytime you went anywhere and you said six children, they slammed the door in your face. Nobody wanted to rent. But again, organization was looking out for us. So we spent six months up in this school, living there in the school. My ma, in the meantime, got a job at—in the cafeteria doing back sink, dishes and stuff like that, which was all right. She—at that time, we had streetcars yet in Detroit and buses, where now we don't. She was to commute on the streetcar. Then we—what happened is a family left the house to this Polish organization. And that's how we got our first renter. It was next to a, as they call Polish house, dumpolski [PH]. It was a house. Half of it was ours and half another family and we had to rent. And I believe it was like \$30 a month.

LEVINE: And what did you say the—the family who had been living there? What happened to them?

BRODAK: They donated. That—that family—

LEVINE: Oh, they donated.

BRODAK: —donated the house to the org—they had—I guess had no relations so they donated it to this—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BRODAK: —to this organization. And they rented the house to us or people would—they didn't care how many children you had. And I—I—to this day, I cannot know how in heaven's name—this is 1952—that they didn't even have toilets in the house. We had in the—like, in the garage, like an outhouse. And [chuckles] the toilet—the—the water flushing from the tub was going under the house. That wasn't connected to the sewer.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: But then, eventually—eventually—I don't know how many—a year or two—my mother did meet a fellow in camps yet. But he was of Lithuanian descent. So he immigrated on his own. He paid his own ticket. But he came to New Orleans.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: And I guess over there somehow he got a sponsor. Then he worked his way up back to us. And mother remarried. She had—I had a step dad, Anditius Cepatauskas.

LEVINE: Oh! Spell that one.

BRODAK: Oh, my God! [laughter] Anyway, that's a mouthful.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: A-N-D-I-T-I-U-S—Anditius Cepatauskas—C-E-P-A-T-A-U-S-K-A-S.
Anditius Cepatauskas.

LEVINE: And that's Lithuanian.

BRODAK: Lithuanian.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: As a matter of fact, I learned a few words from him in Lithuanian.

LEVINE: So what kind of a dad was he?

BRODAK: Well, he was, in a sense, now—see, when—when he married my ma I was 16, 17, so I was already, like, the father figure.

LEVINE: Yes.

BRODAK: You know, I—we clashed a little bit. But after I got to know him, you know, he was—he was good. He was very good to my mother because [chuckles] can you imagine a guy marrying a woman with—with—actually, it would be already—

LEVINE: Five.

BRODAK: —five because you don't count my sister, my older sister and then me.

LEVINE: No, no.

BRODAK: But he was good. Went—right away, he was very skilled, in the sense, skilled as a blacksmith in—in his native land of Lithuania. But here, there was no blacksmith work. But down in Behokie [PH], he found a job in—where they make these, like, not prostheses but those things that fit—that people have polio. You know—

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: —they have to have those—

LEVINE: Braces?

BRODAK: —braces, to make braces. Those are all hand fitted.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: And then they put the leather over 'em.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: So he hooked up with a guy—with a guy. He spoke—he spoke fluent German, Lithuanian, Polish. So he got with some German fellow and he was working there and he was in demand s—six days a week. So we lived on our rent. Maybe a year, year and a half, he saved enough for a down payment for a house.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: A couple blocks, three blocks. [chuckles] Bought a house and ever since then—well, from there, I got drafted in the Army because as soon as you turn 18 you get the greetings. But I was still in high school. That's another thing. In those camps, I finished—in camps, you go to school on a daily basis. But I finished my eighth grade already when I was 16. You know, 15. But when—when—I should say, when I came here at 14 I was already finished with the eighth grade.

LEVINE: Finished eighth grade.

BRODAK: So what—what happens now? I come to St. Alberta's and the nuns going—can't put me—see, it's December. It's like half a year. They can't put me in eighth grade because in May I'll be graduating, not a word in English.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: How can I go to high school? So the nun says, "Well, we'll put you in 7A, which would be the—finish 7A, then finish 8th grade. So I was one of the oldest in class, which wasn't my fault. I could do math like nothing but the English was giving me a hard time—giving me a hard time till I finally conquered the—the language. See, like right now, I speak to you. My brain's English. When I—if I want to talk to you in Polish, switch my brain to Polish. Comes out so easy. Prior to that, everything—I was

thinking in Polish and trying to translate it into English, was coming out backwards.

LEVINE: How did you ever arrive at that?

BRODAK: Wh—

LEVINE: That you had ta—

BRODAK: It just—it just hit me.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: And ever since then—

LEVINE: Wonderful.

BRODAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: Ever since then. Well, don't forget, when I came here, not only did I speak Polish, I spoke German, because in Germany, you had to learn, you know, to [unclear] for yourself. Plus some Russian, some Ukrainian, you know, so—

LEVINE: Well, let me just see if I understand. [clears throat] How—you were about seven when the family was uprooted?

BRODAK: Yes.

LEVINE: So you were in camps, not—not the displaced persons camp. Before—before—

BRODAK: During the war, the—during—the worst part of the camp was in that przemysl, you know, when they took us on the—on that train, that cattle train and brought us into that camp. That was the worst camp. The farm, the slave farm was already better. See, on the slave farm, the farmer—the overseer was an old guy because the younger guy, they took him, you know, to the army. The old guy, he doesn't know how many chickens lay eggs, or you go under the cow and get some milk or you get some food. One German would beat you; another one would hand you a bread under the table, you know. So there was already better.

LEVINE: Better.

BRODAK: Already—

LEVINE: How long were you in the first one, the awful one?

BRODAK: I would say we were there probably six weeks, maybe eight weeks.

LEVINE: And then how long were you on the farm?

BRODAK: Till we got liberated.

LEVINE: S—

BRODAK: So it would be—would be till, like, I would say till May, '45. Somewhere around there.

LEVINE: So it was—it was—it was '39—no. No, no.

BRODAK: No, no, no. '45.

LEVINE: It was '45.

BRODAK: Till I think either May or August of '45. So from '44—from '44, I don't know what month exactly it was that we got, you know, taken—taken from the—because of them telling us that this is going to be the front. You know, this was a big—

LEVINE: Yeah. You—you might—do you re—

BRODAK: [unclear]

LEVINE: Do you remember when it dawned on you that [chuckles] it wasn't what they said?

BRODAK: Well, for—for—see, for—for a youngster of—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: At that time—

LEVINE: Right, right, right.

BRODAK: Nothing—you know, as a child, nothing bothers you. I—I don't think. Like same thing, people always saying, "How was your ride to America on the ship?" [chuckles] I enjoyed it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: You know, 14 years old.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: I had freedom, first time. First, I was kind of lonely because I was always with the family. But once I—I—they give you, like, a pass, for meal pass, for—for anything you can get. They'll also give you some change on the ship. I don't know if you know this. Because on the ship, they give us some nickels. You could—for a nickel, you could get a bottle of Coke. You could—meal, you had to go and they had to stamp, you know, because they fed, like, in shifts, standing up. You ate standing up because this is Army or Navy, merchant marine ship. I think—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: —that's what this was, because I remember it's the—it's the table that has, like, ends, so anything slide won't fall off. And you eat. So for a while there, I had my whole family tickets because none of them could come up because they were too sick. But I used to bring them, like, an orange. They would give us an orange on the ship, which we—

LEVINE: Never had.

BRODAK: —never had.

LEVINE: Right.

BRODAK: They had—and Cokes. They would survive on Cokes. I would take Cokes over there and eventually—but it was a happy time because there was a few Italians. There was a few—different nationalities on the ship. And I remember the Italians because they would be going way on top of the ship, and they would be laying there and playing and singing.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: That's how I remember. You know, just roaming around. It—it was a happy—happy tour for me on the ship because I never got sick. But the rest of the family—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: —well, they—they suffered. It took us 14 days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: And out of the 14 I think we had three days of storms. So it—heavy storms—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: —which everybody had to go in and lock the door from inside.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, [clears throat] do you have any repercussions? Do you think—like today, do you have any ill effects of—of the ordeal, of—

BRODAK: Not really.

LEVINE: No?

BRODAK: Not really. I—I feel fate has its course.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: You know, whatever they did to us, they'll pay for it eventually. But as far as, I—I have no—I—you know, like, I went back with my brother, Michael. We both went to Germany. We enjoyed ourselves to the fullest. The Germans were real nice to us. We went—we had a little hard time in Czechoslovakia on the border but we made a mistake. We turned into the wrong—wrong lane and we got stuck between trucks so we got detained a little bit. But we had our American passports.

LEVINE: I see.

BRODAK: But I am very proud to—as an American. I feel more—more so, because I'm already here over 50-some years. I feel more American. And then, how in the heck would I ever meet my wife?

LEVINE: Ah.

BRODAK: Almost 44 years.

LEVINE: How did you meet her?

BRODAK: I—how I met my wife, Anna, was through my friends. See, my friends, they didn't finish high school. They went and volunteered for the draft. When they turned 18, they volunteered for the draft. And they went in the Army and they got shipped overseas. Well, I—they wanted me to go with them because we were all the same age. But I says, "No, I have to finish high school." I had to show my younger brothers. I was the—the

figure, you know, so I had to finish high school, which I did. As a matter of fact, I'm proud to say I finished with honors. You know.

LEVINE: Ah, good.

BRODAK: I—I got to be Honor Society and all this, plus, I worked for—full time. I went to school and I worked full time. And I'm real proud of it. And like I say, it—if it was anywhere else, I wouldn't even get that opportunity or chance. So anyways, when—when—I was already in the Army and I had two week—two weeks furlough left and towards the end of the Army. See, I served in—from 1957, '58 and '59. They were kind of pushing so you would take up your furlough so they wouldn't have to pay you. So I took—took a ride to Detroit, back to Detroit. I had a friend from Bloomfield, New Jersey. [chuckles] We went back. He had a car. I was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. So he had a car and we drove. He'd never seen Detroit, so we drove in to meet my buddies that I haven't seen because they were overseas. And of course, two of us come, Army guys, and my buddy had a girlfriend on the same street that my wife lived, only she lived here and she lived there. So two guys from—came on a furlough. They said, "Let"—the—the girlfriend there says, "I know a couple girls." So she called and that's how we met.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: But I had to go back. My wife didn't want nothing to do with me. [chuckles] First of all, she says I'm older than her brother. We're fi—I'm five years older than my wife. And she didn't want nothing to do with me because, you know, being in the Army I was a little bit wild. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Huh.

BRODAK: You know, a shot and a beer guy. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

BRODAK: She didn't go for that. But eventually, I convinced her. Her parents loved me. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh, there you go. [chuckles] Well, how do you feel about your Polish side and your American side? I mean, how—how do you put that together in your own way?

BRODAK: Well, in my own words, I would say I—I am proud of the Polish heritage but I'm more American than Polish. But I would not disown my—where I was born.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: You know, that's still my—my native land. But I can't really say I am Polish because I'm not. You know, I haven't been there that long.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: See, a lot of people might think different than I do but I—I'm just American and—oh, and the other thing I forgot to tell you, when I was being drafted, when I was—and my buddies were already overseas, [unclear], all they had to do was wait a year. We could have been all together. But anyways, when I finished my basic and I finished my advanced, I says, "I—how can I get to go to Europe?" They were both stationed in Germany. They says, "Join the Airborne." I volunteered for the Air [chuckles]—so I go through all this training to become—to go to—to—to go to Europe. Well, you finish your basic. You finish your advance and then you finish y—y—your Airborne training. Your time's gone. You know, you don't have hardly any time left. So I go to my first sergeant. I says, "How come I'm—you're not calling me to go to—to Germany like you promised?" He says, "Private Brodak. You only have 13 months. We can't send you overseas. If you want to take a short"—which means stop this and take 36 months, you know, three years—"we'll send you anywhere in the world." I says, "No, sir. I do not." So—

LEVINE: So why did you want to go to Germany?

BRODAK: Because my buddies were there.

LEVINE: Oh, 'cause your buddies were there. Ah.

BRODAK: Of course, you know—

LEVINE: But you didn't have such hot memories of life in Germany.

BRODAK: I know, but—but because my friends were there and—and—and I—then I thought maybe I'll go revisit, you know, the camps where I was and all this.

LEVINE: Well, it doesn't sound as though you have memories that are so painful—

BRODAK: Oh, no.

LEVINE: —that you want to forget them or—or—or—

BRODAK: No, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: I—I—I do not hold grudges. That's for one.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: And there's somebody higher that will take care of it—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: —[chuckles] besides me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BRODAK: So—

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: —what can I say? I—I—as a child, as growing up, I had a good time.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: So I can't have—and everybody treated me so good over here, I have nothing bad to say.

LEVINE: Well, that's wonderful. Tell me what you're most proud of th—th—what makes you feel very satisfied that you've done in your life?

BRODAK: Well, that I finished high school. I finished college. I served the country and, upon discharge, I became a citizen. As a matter of fact, I had—when I was in the Army I had secret clearance.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: I was handling foreign weapons and doing some interpretation. I'm real proud. I have a family. I have, you know—I have five children, six grandchildren. You know, I have a very good wife and a nice home. My younger son right now has got a fellowship, a scholarship right here in New York City because he couldn't find anything over there. I sent him—sent him to college in Chicago and became interior designer, couldn't find a job. All he could find is display in a store.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: Which, that wasn't his—but now, he's learning how to be a special education teacher and, hopefully—he's only been here since January.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: I mean, he's been a couple times for interviews and stuff, but since January, two year—in two years he'll have his master's. He can teach anywhere he wants. I'm—

LEVINE: You have a lot—a lot to—

BRODAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: —recommend.

BRODAK: I have my health.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

BRODAK: Even though, you know, I have my regular problems, like any—

LEVINE: Sure.

BRODAK: —person of my age. But what else can I say?

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, I wanted to ask you also—this is a little throwback here—Ellis Island.

BRODAK: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Wh—what did you see when you were here? I mean, that was a time when people were being deported.

BRODAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wh—first of all, were there a lot of people? And what—

BRODAK: It was—it was crowded. It was—it was—it was—Ellis Island was very scary to me. To me, it was very scary.

LEVINE: How so?

BRODAK: Because I've seen people they've pushed aside—in a sense, you know, pushed aside and looked like they will not be allowed to come. I—Ellis Island was also a happy place because, you know, finally, we landed. [laughter] After 14 days of—of water, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

BRODAK: Ellis Island, to me, was scary because, like I say, over—over in Europe, you know, when you see policemen or if you see anything to do with the government, you kind of shut up. You know, you—you don't say nothing. Where here, they ask you questions. They—they—they do all the—whatever they—they had to do, they did. And we had—as far as I know, we had no problem going through.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: You know, as far as—there was nothing political. We had no political affiliation, involvement. So that—that was nothing. Health wise, we were all—got—you know, given good health, even though, you know, for being maltreated, you know, not having any [unclear]—

LEVINE: Malnourished, maltreated.

BRODAK: Yeah.

LEVINE: Right.

BRODAK: To tell you the truth, 14 years old, I never saw a dentist.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: I never saw a toothbrush. And yet, for some—I still have my own teeth to this day. Now, there's a few crowns and stuff. And everybody in the family, you know, nobody had any health problems. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: —to me, Ellis Island was the—the gate to my future. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, tell me what you did then, as for work before you retired? What—what—

BRODAK: Well—

LEVINE: What did you—

BRODAK: What I—what I did is I went—you know, from—when I told you at first, I went to St. Alberta's Grade School.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: And then I found out—you know, back in the '50s it was very heavy in Detroit into tool and die. Tool and die.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: Tool—so I decided I want to be tool and die maker. So I went—found out there's a school, vocational school, Wilbur Wright [PH] Vocational High School, which was not in my district. But you had to maintain a B average—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: —to be accepted for out of district. So I went from St. Alberta's, finished eighth. Then I went to St. Joseph, finished ninth grade. And everybody, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to Wilbur Wright, Wilbur Wright." So Wilbur Wright is a vocational school where you start, like, in—I believe it's late August and you go all the way to middle of July. It's a vocational—what they do is you—six weeks, you get your high school curriculum and six weeks, your vocational curriculum. But if you're real good—you're real good, you can get a co-op. In other words, you can find—or they will find it for you or you can find your own—a shop that does what you're learning. So that you could learn administrative work, like office work. You can be an electrician. You could've been automotive mechanic. Or you can be manufacturing, which is tool and die. I chose the manufacturing. They teach you—the six weeks, you got your regular curriculum, plus you get more heavy into math, more heavy into—into drafting and—and science. And I did—I did real good—English was my weak—weak, but till I—like I told you, till I started—that brain kicked in from—from Polish thinking to English thinking when you speak English, it was a breeze. So—

LEVINE: So you skipped the step, the—the translation step.

BRODAK: Exactly, exactly.

LEVINE: Huh, interesting.

BRODAK: And—and then, once—in school, I always wanted to show my brothers that I want to be good.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: So I went to school and I used to go—go on a—to go to school to go on a bus, called cross town bus in Detroit, you know. And it—it would be one way going this way, cross town. The other went this way and

always stopped at this one stop. And I could see inside the window they had machines like I'm learning at school. You know, they had the lathes, the mills, the bridge ports, the—the—the drill presses. So I had to go a little further on the—on the—on the bus because I had to transfer. And usually, during those—'50s, they give you a transfer, you had, like, 30 minutes to use it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: Otherwise, it expired. I would stop over there and I would ask the—if they're hiring. "What—what do you want, kid?" I says, "Are you hiring?" "No, we're not hi"—"How about in the future?" "Well, we don't know, son." "Can I come over, like, in a month?" He says, "Come on over. It doesn't matter." So I get off, like, in a month or so. "You hiring?" Well, then and behold, one day—

LEVINE: They were hiring.

BRODAK: —they were hiring. [chuckles] They hired me. Or my persistent—persistence—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BRODAK: —paid off.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: So they hired me as a—as, like, a helper, you know, with drill and tap and [unclear]. You know, stuff. But [chuckles] here's my Polish and my European problem. They would line me up. They would give me all these—and the guy says, "I don't want you to work more than three hours a day because you're still going to school." The boss. So he put so many pieces and told me, "Do this. Do this. Okay. I'll be over there. Do 'em. Do 'em"—next day, I come in, punch in. There's a little bit more. [unclear] finish. Well, after a while, he put a little more. So I go in and I punch out, go back and finish, put it all together. You know, this was going on for about two weeks. And the guy says, "Kid, what are you doing?" You know, it took me sometimes an hour longer, sometimes even longer. I says, "Well" —"No," he says. "The reason I give you all this—you don't have to finish. I just didn't want you to run out of work." [laughs] So then, from then on, I had a job when I got—when I—when I went back to school, I told them what I'm doing. So then, through the school and through this owner, I got a co-op job. In other words, I didn't have to go for six weeks to school.

LEVINE: Right.

BRODAK: They would teach me.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BRODAK: And I would actually do the actual work.

LEVINE: Work.

BRODAK: So I would get—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

BRODAK: —paid.

LEVINE: Paid?

BRODAK: So then, when I—

LEVINE: Wait. Let me just interrupt you—

BRODAK: —left it—then when I came out of the Army he gave me apprenticeship. Then I became tool and die. And then, same thing happened to me to General Motors, to get to General Motors. They said, “You—you have to have 10 years experience.” Same thing. I went and got 10 years experience, got to General Motors same way. And I went to college and I became a—a—a buyer. I was a buyer, a process engineer, manufacturing, did all kinds of traveling and stuff.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BRODAK: So I—I did well for myself. And then they—at the end, [chuckles] they offered me a retirement when I was 58. They made me 62 and they compensated me for the two and a—actually, three and a half years. Because I was 58 and a half. See, at General Motors you can retire with 85 points, which means how many years you have and how old you are. You add those two together. You come up with 85 and would go.

LEVINE: Oh.

BRODAK: So I was—I was 58 with 27 years. [chuckles] So I took it. And like I say, I’m al—almost 10 years. September 1 will be 10 years.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, I want to thank you for a wonderful interview. [unclear]

BRODAK: Anytime. I'll give you my phone number. You can call me.

LEVINE: Yes, and—

BRODAK: [unclear] I'm home.

LEVINE: I mean, you really have a—a wonderful attitude toward—toward life and a—and a beautiful spirit. So I thank you very much.

BRODAK: I appreciate it, appreciate your time too. And, you know, on the spur of the moment like this.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

BRODAK: But my—my—my children want me to put all this in on tape and then put it on the computer, make like a—like a little thing about myself. You know, because I'm actually the first—first to—to—in the family, you know, to have something like this. And with five of them, you know, like, he's—he's 25—yeah, he'll be 26, the—the youngest. My oldest, I think she'll be 42 or 43 in December.

LEVINE: Huh.

BRODAK: So—

[END OF INTERVIEW]