

EI-1390

NICK WULFERT

BIRTHDATE: MAY 28, 1939

INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 2005

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 66

RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: LEXINGTON, TENN

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: IRV SILBERG

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

GERMANY, 1954

AGE: 14

SHIP: GRIPSHOLM

PORT: BREMERHAVEN

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: I am at the home of Anna and Glenn Kirk and I am going to be speaking with Nicholas Wulfert, the son of Vera [voice in background interjecting names] and Nicholas, So this is one more member of the Wulfert family that's going to be on tape at the Ellis Island Oral History Listening Room. Let's see. So Nicholas came here with his family in 1954. They left in March and arrived in April of 1954, and Nicholas was 14 and would be turning fifteen the next month. [voice in background confirming facts, as stated]. OK. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and , if you would say it again, please, for the tape --- your birthdate

NICK: May, 28. Was born in 1939.

LEVINE: OK. And, again, would you say where you were born?

NICK: I was born in Kiev, in The Ukraine, USSR. In a small village named Felsenthal.

LEVINE: Why don't you spell that for the tape.

NICK: F-E-L-C-E-N-T-H-A-L.

LEVINE: And you mentioned earlier that translates to boulders.

NICK: Boulders – on a big boulder [not understood]

LEVINE: So, was that a rocky, a rocky ---

NICK: It was very rocky, southern Ukraine is kind of rocky.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. So the southern Ukraine is where you were born and you were part of the German community there.

NICK: Yes

LEVINE: Now was that German commun ----was that along the Volga – river?

NICK: It's – it's close.

LEVINE: Close to the Volga. There's actually written about "Volga Germans".

NICK: It's called the bread basket of the Soviet Union. It was [not understood] and farming, business, just different things.

LEVINE: Yeah. Why don't you give –you're the historian of the family, I see. Why don't you give a little bit of the history of how the Germans came to settle where you were.

NICK: Katerina --- we are Prussians, close to Königsberg, East Prussia. That's where my people originated. At that time the ruler of the Soviet Union was Katerina the Great. *Un'* it happened in the later part of 1700 , start 1820 somewhere there. She wanted the German ---Germans could come to the Soviet Union und teach them how to farm –they couldn't even feed themselves –how to feed themselves and be industrial.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So it wasn't just to populate ----

NICK: No, Ma'am

LEVINE: this area. ---it was to teach.

NICK: It was teachin', teachin'. That was our purpose. We was given large land grants which was ours –German Community –middle of Russia. We was allowed to speak our own tongue un' everything. That lasted until Stalin came to power. It was abolished, Russian only.

LEVINE: So that was actually before you were born.

NICK: Yes, Ma'am before I was born.

LEVINE: So when you were born –

NICK: Stalin was ---

LEVINE: Stalin was reigning and no more German.

NICK: No. I was raised speaking Russian.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Whereas your father was raised speaking German. ----

NICK: Uh, huh.

LEVINE: having been born there, too. Let's see. How long were you in Felsenstadt?

NICK: I'll been in --- when the German armies invaded Russia, it was there on the Ukraine. We -- they gave us 24 hours to leave, leave the Soviet Union. I was three years old at the time.

LEVINE: Oh. So, do you have any memories

NICK: Yes, Ma'am. I do.

LEVINE: Really?

NICK: It's, it's amazing ---

LEVINE: [Laughs]

NICK: how my Grandmother [not understood] Granddaddy -- my Daddy say he was killed by the Communists.

LEVINE: Now that, you would have been told. What were you told about your Granddaddy being killed?

NICK: I supposed to be present when that happened, but I do not remember that. I think it was around supper time, they just come in and shot him. Because he Prussian German, he was outspoken, and that was forbidden against them. You know. [not understood]

LEVINE: So, in other words, the Soviets came in –

NICK: they were Communists come in

LEVINE: Communists came in and he spoke out . I suppose they wanted ----

NICK: He spoke out in public und they finally just called off him. You know.

LEVINE: So you don't remember that.

NICK: No.

LEVINE: What do you remember?

NICK: I just remember that the Granddaddy wasn't around anymore. .That he --- he d ----- I didn't have no Granddaddy.

LEVINE: Do you remember him? Did you remember anything?

NICK: No, Ma'am. I just seen pictures of him. As a kid, I always wondered how come I don't have a Granddaddy, you know. That's what I was told happened. I was very young when that happened.

LEVINE: Now, how about you Grandmother? Do you have any memories?

NICK: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: You do. And what –

NICK: She kissed us and put us on the wagon. See, we formed a wagon train. Similar like the American people did in St. Louis and Independence, MO to go to Oregon, Washington, go West.

LEVINE: Go West, Uh, huh.

NICK: We was goin' west, too. It was back to the *vaterland* Germany.

LEVINE: I see. So tell me -----

NICK: Grandmother stayed behind. She wanted to be by her husband. Grave. – You know what I mean? All the people, their own cemetery ---- she just didn't want to leave. Hundreds and hundreds of people didn't leave. They all got shipped to Siberia, afterwards.

LEVINE: Ohhh,

NICK: That's where she died.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

NICK: [not understood]

LEVINE: So, what happened ? You were told you had to leave immediately.

NICK: Immediately. I remember Daddy didn't have time to drop off – we had a stable of fine horses and everything. They give us a lame Morgan and a blind one. [not understood] .

LEVINE: YEAH.

NICK: That's all we had to put on the wagon. I remember one was real tall, and one was little.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

NICK: This [not understood]

LEVINE: Well, what do you know from being told ---- like your father's position, he had a farm?

NICK: We owned land but my Daddy was a book keeper . He didn't farm, he farmed some. 'Cause, after Granddaddy got killed, he took his place. He was the oldest. He helped Mama, we had many--- he had many brothers and sisters. He helped raise --- he just took his Daddy's place.

LEVINE: I see.

LEVINE: If he was smart enough to be a book keeper so we [not understood] 'cause things was lookin' bad at the time of the Communists. They didn't pay no attention to us, we be like nothing.

LEVINE: Now, do you remember anything about your experiences with your Mother or Father before you left the Ukraine?

NICK: Russia,

LEVINE: Yeah

NICK: No, Ma'am. No, no, that is blank.

LEVINE: Yeah.

NICK: I just know about being loaded up. And we tries to get away und far away as we can, because the Russian winter is goin' to set in, see.

LEVINE: Uh, huh. Oh so I think your Mother spoke about packing a lot of food and putting it on the wagon.

NICK: I don't remember.

LEVINE: OK. So, some people stayed. Do you remember leaving?

NICK: Um.

LEVINE: You do?

NICK: They all was lined up including the kine---- kids and I'm involved in.

LEVINE: Uh, huh.

NICK: Then it's blank all of the rest. Then I just remember some went down the road.

LEVINE: Down the road, On the wagon train?

NICK: Uh, huh.

LEVINE: And I guess, it must have been a long trip.

NICK: Long trip, Ma'am, it took us quite a bit. See, we stopped in Poland. That's where Anna was born; Galitzi, or something like that.

LEVINE: Galicia?

NICK: Uh, huh. That's where Anna was born.

LEVINE: I see ---

NICK: [interposed] See they give us a home un' a garden and everything that was originally. I think, owned by Ger – Polish Jews, Jewish people.

LEVINE: And they had been taken off?

NICK: That they probably eliminated or somethin' It's –is a sad situation. But, all that was given to us., because we're [not understood] You know. There was such a big difference in those day, you know.

LEVINE: Now who would have given you that? The Poles?

NICK: German administrator

LEVINE: Oh, German administrator

NICK: See, it was under German administration

LEVINE: It was under German administration.

NICK: And see, the Germany, all ready got through *mit* Poland. The armies already charge into Russia.

LEVINE: I see. So the Germans had taken over Poland, but they were going to be kind because you were German.

NICK: Yes, Ma'am. We was Prussians, see. We was given top priority . My mother was forgiven because she was Greek. She was pardoned, otherwise, mean death sentencing.

LEVINE: Because she was married to a German.

NICK: Uh hum. They was valuable to the Germans because he spoke million languages See, he started to be a translator, then

LEVINE: In Poland?

NICK: Uh, huh.

LEVINE: Oh. I see. So how long did the family stay then in Poland?

NICK: Ma'am, I cannot answer that I don't remember that.

LEVINE: Yeah, Yeah. [not understood]

NICK: [superposed] Yeah. Rumor was that we done bad in Russia. We got defeated in Stalingrad. Remember Battle of Stalingrad?

LEVINE: Oh. Uh, huh.

NICK: And the rumour reached us. And the rumour was after ---*Partisans* , what they called the Russians, the [not understood] fixin' come to Poland. They were --- they was pursuin' the German army. See, we was goin' down hill. So we packed up again and head to the Fatherland, this time, Germany.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember anything about your life in Poland?

NICK: Yes Ma'am. It was good life.

LEVINE: It was?

NICK: They treated us decent . We had food , and [not understood] . The German army, even --- they was -- the majority was good people. Fathers and everything. It's just a certain kind like the SS, you know, but the majority German soldier was as kind as they could be. They fed us. They give us things. Even when the war, when we got back to the fatherland , we bein' bombed severely during the night by the English, and by the Americans. But yet the children had top priority as far as food goes.

LEVINE: I see.

NICK: It – until the very last.

LEVINE: From the German army?

NICK: Uh, huh. German administration.

LEVINE: Yeah. I see. So when you were in --- what memories do you have of your everyday life in Poland? When you were there for --?

NICK: We was in Southern Poland. It was beautiful country. I remember everything being so green and I couldn't --- we, we was hungry on the wagon train. You know, time we reached Poland, food was short . And I couldn't --- I remember this part. I couldn't believe them beautiful apples and pears hanging on the trees. We was allowed to pick 'em and eat 'em,

yeah? 'Cause they was ours. I remember that part. And I remember the rumour that the Russians come.

LEVINE: So that's why you had to pick up and leave, again. Now, do you remember anything about your little brother, were you kind of in charge of him?

NICK: Anton? Yes. I always was in charge of him, but, at that time, not as much like after we reached Germany.