EI-1420
WANDA GOZDZ
BIRTHDATE: OCTOBER 2, 1949
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 5, 2006
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 56
RUNNING TIME: 53 MINUTES, 26 SECONDS
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
RECORDING ENGINEER:
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

GERMANY, 1952
AGE: 2

SHIP: *GENERAL SS HERSHEY*
PORT: HAMBURG
RESIDENCES: RAMSEY, PASSAIC, LODI, NEW JERSEY

LEVINE: Okay, today is July the fifth, the year 2006. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Wanda Gozdz, who came here in 1952, when she was only two years old. She came with her mother, father, and brother, who was only six months, I think.

GOZDZ: One year.

LEVINE: One year, okay. And they were coming from Germany. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If we could start at the beginning: your birth date, and where you were born?

GOZDZ: My birthday is October 2nd, 1949, and I was born in Langendiebach [PH], Germany.

LEVINE: Okay, and where is that?

GOZDZ: Outside of Frankfurt; about thirty kilometers west of Frankfurt.

LEVINE: Okay, and you, I would assume, have no memories of life in Germany?

GOZDZ: No, none.

LEVINE: Okay, what was your mother's name?

GOZDZ: My mother's name was Maria Gozdz, but her maiden name was Macko, M-A-C-K-O.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

GOZDZ: My father's name was Anthony Gozdz.

LEVINE: Let's see. Did you have other family members in Germany?

GOZDZ: No. Actually, we're Polish citizens. We were from Poland, and during the war, my parents, my mother, was taken by the Germans by Germany, and worked in a labor camp there. And then she met my father in Germany, and they got married. And after the war, the allies basically said you could go back to your country of origin, or you could stay in Germany. So because where my mother was born now became Russia, they stayed in Germany.

LEVINE: I see. Now, was your father from Poland as well?

GOZDZ: Yes, both my parents were from Poland.

LEVINE: But was he also in a labor camp?

GOZDZ: Well, he was—he escaped Poland during the war, and went to Germany, and worked there, also.

LEVINE: But was he working in a camp, or he was working outside a camp?

GOZDZ: You know what? I don't know where my father was working.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: I don't know where my father was working. I'd have to ask my sister.

LEVINE: Oh, your sister knows?

GOZDZ: Maybe she does.

LEVINE: Even though she was a Yankee baby? [Laughs]

GOZDZ: Even though she was a Yankee baby, she might know!

LEVINE: Okay, so in other words, they met, I guess, after the liberation, in Germany?
GOZDZ: Right.

LEVINE: And so, do you know if they were in a displaced persons camp?

GOZDZ: We were in a displaced persons camp. Yes, we were. And my parents wanted to immigrate to Australia, but my mother had a health issue, and they rejected us. So in, I think about that time, the Displaced Persons Act was in place, so we were able to come, under the Displaced Persons Act, to the United States.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and did you have any family, or--?

GOZDZ: Nothing. My parents just—well, my mother, my mother's father came to the United States twice. And he worked, I believe, both near Chicago, and then near the town of Lodi, in Lodi, where we resided, my mother resided, for fifty years. So he told my mother about the United States, and he told my mother about the places that he had been. So I think that might have been how we might have migrated there, over time.

LEVINE: I see. So did your mother ever tell you other things that her father told her about his experience? In other words, he came from Poland?

GOZDZ: Yes, he came from Poland, and he worked there. And he had the opportunity, my mother said, to bring his family to United States, but he chose to stay in Poland, because that was Poland. You know, when my mother was young, that was Poland, and he worked in the United States, and then he went back. And his wife died, and he had to return back to Poland, because he had children there, of course, so he returned back. And then he remarried, and he stayed in Poland.

LEVINE: How did your mother's family fare during World War Two?

GOZDZ: Well, my mother's family, the place where she was born, Lupc [PH], became Russia. And she had four brothers there, and a sister, so they survived during the war. You know, it was a small village, and so they were farmers, and they farmed there. We really—my mother kept in contact with them by mail, and then about 1974, in the early seventies, my mother went to Poland. And then her brothers were able to come and see her, from Russia to Poland, to visit her. But she did not go to Russia. And in the early nineties, then when the Russian border, you know, our relations improved, our cousin contacted my mother and invited her.

LEVINE: And she went to Russia?

GOZDZ: She went to her village.

LEVINE: Wow, yeah, uh-huh. That must have been touching. Do you remember that, when your mother went?

GOZDZ: Well, my sister Lucy took her the first time, and she got to see all her brothers, and her sister. And then I went the second time, to take my mother there, back to her village.

LEVINE: Wow! So do you have any communications now with your mother's family?

GOZDZ: Oh, yes, yes. I went there twice—I went there two more times. I went there one more time, back to Russia, back to the village again. Our cousins were living in Minsk, in the city, but their parents still lived in the village. So the parents stayed there, but the children migrated to different parts of the city, and were professionals. My cousin was a scientist. His wife was a teacher. One was a chef, the other one, you know, was an entrepreneur. So we got to see them, and it was really surprising, because we had no relatives, so we had no living relatives in the United States. So when we went there, to see that they actually looked liked our parents! You know, "Oh, you're my grandfather," or "You're my uncle." And to see my mother's brothers and sisters—that was a very moving experience for all—for my sister and I, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And how about your father's side? Do you have any contact with his side, too?

GOZDZ: Yes. My father was born in Poland, and we went to Poland, and we found his brothers. He had seven brothers, so we found some of them. We went particularly to—let me see, it had to be the eastern side, near the Czechoslovakian border, my father had a brother. And so we went there and we visited his family. And it was quite a shock to see that he looked exactly like my grandfather! And our grandfather immigrated to Australia with an older brother and a younger brother, with two of his children. And my grandfather came to the United States when I was in about eighth grade, so that might have been, like, 1962. And he lived with us for a year, and then he went to Poland and visited his children in Poland. And he passed away in Poland. But we got—that was like the first time we actually saw, like, a living relative of ours. But my grandfather was older than seventy, so when he came to the United States, he was seventy. And then when we went to Poland, my uncle was probably about that same age, so he looked just like—spitting image of my grandfather! Except he didn't have his handlebar mustaches that were very, very long. But we asked him, like we asked our uncle in Poland, you know, why he never came to the United States. And he said because he felt that if he could provide for his family, then that was okay for him. So he basically stayed in Poland, and had a farm, and you know,

farmed it, and was like the mayor of the little village, and did very well with his family. So my father was—my parents were like the only people that actually left their country, their homeland.

LEVINE: Why do you think they left? Why do you think their attitude was slightly different than--?

GOZDZ: Well, I think my father—my father originally, when he wanted to go to Australia and couldn't, I think that they came to America mostly for the religious freedom, you know, that they could worship. They were very Catholic, you know, and they were persecuted during the war in Germany for their beliefs, and they wanted to come to a place where they could worship. And have opportunities, I believe. But my parents were—nineteen—in their late twenties, so they were very young to take their two small children, pack their bags, and leave.

LEVINE: How would you describe them, their disposition, their temperament?

GOZDZ: Well, I think that they were very forthright, and very brave, you know, to pick up and come to a foreign country where they didn't speak the, you know, the English language, and to pursue, you know, the ultimate dream of giving their children a different life.

LEVINE: Now, did they speak German as well as Polish?

GOZDZ: No, yes. They, yes, because during that time they spoke Russian, German, and Polish—three languages.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and so they really didn't have anyone here? Did they have friends?

GOZDZ: No one.

LEVINE: No. And you think they went to around Lodi, New Jersey because--?

GOZDZ: No, what happened was when we came under the displaced persons act, you were like an indentured servant. So somebody sponsored you. So my parents were farmers, and so a farmer in Ramsey, New Jersey sponsored my family. And they sponsored us, so they either paid for our—we don't know if they paid for our passage, or they just gave us housing. And so you had to go there, and you had to like work for them for a year. So I parents from here to Ramsey, New Jersey. They stayed there for about a year's period of time, and then prior to that—then right after that they left, and they went to Passaic, New Jersey, was the first place that I know that we actually migrated to. And it was a Polish community, so you know, it had a Polish church. You know, so they were familiar with the native language and the

people there, and became friendly with the people in that community. And then later we moved to Lodi.

LEVINE: I see. Did your mother and father keep up many of their Polish traditions?

GOZDZ: Traditions? Oh yes, very much.

LEVINE: Like what? What did they keep?

GOZDZ: Our Christmas Eve, which is [Polish], is one of our traditions that we have. And that's the waiting for the coming of Christ. So in Polish tradition, the family gets together. We have a seven-course meal; it's a meatless dinner. We break a pwateck [PH], which is wafer, in a ceremony. My father, I remember when I was a very small child—I probably remember from, like maybe when I was four? And he would bring home a Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, and we would decorate it. And then we would start our dinner, and we would shut off the lights, and he would tell us about the waiting for the coming of Jesus, and then we would sing a Polish Christmas carol. And then we would break a wafer, and the wafer was symbolic of taking, and you shared a good wish with somebody, so you either wished them good health, or prosperity, or good fortune, for the coming year. And you went around to each family member and you shared the wafer. And then we would sit down, and we would have our Christmas dinner, Christmas Eve dinner. And then the next morning—and then we would go to church at midnight mass. And then the next day we would have Christmas morning. And we still do that today.

LEVINE: Wow. When you were young, was that midnight mass in Polish?

GOZDZ: Yes, my father would drive us to church, to the Polish church, and we would—we went to that Polish church, well, I remember going to it all the way through, like, almost through elementary school, and going into high school. And my parents went to that church. We lived in front of a church that was a Catholic church, and it was English, so we went there, but my parents went to that Polish church for quite a number of years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and they continued to have the mass in Polish?

GOZDZ: Yes, this was a Polish church that had Polish mass on Sundays. And they later, I'm sure, had English mass, but when we were growing up it was mostly a Polish community, so the church was Polish. And you know, I remember going to Polish school. Matter of fact, I found my brother's report card today!

LEVINE: [Laughs]

GOZDZ: I was trying to see if I could find any documents. I found my brother's report card from Polish school. We would go to Polish school on Saturdays. And my mother did share our experience of coming here by ship; she always told me about that.

LEVINE: Oh, good!

GOZDZ: We came on the General S.S. Hershey, which was a military cargo ship. And that ship brought supplied to Europe, you know, to Germany, and then it was empty, so then it brought immigrants here. And so we were on—she told me we were at sea for two weeks, two weeks at sea, and that we were in a storm, like probably, you know, heavy seas, and that the men and women were segregated, so women and children stayed in one place in the ship, and the men stayed in the other, and that from the rough seas, she sat at the foot of the cots, so my brother and I wouldn't fall off the bed.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. You wouldn't fall off the bed—she was sitting there, uh-huh.

GOZDZ: Yeah. So—

LEVINE: Would you like a tissue?

GOZDZ: Yeah, that would be fine.

LEVINE: Thanks, Kevin. Wow! So do you remember where the General S.S. Hershey left from, what port? Did she ever say that?

GOZDZ: No, no.

LEVINE: It must have—it was probably Hamburg, or--?

GOZDZ: It was probably Hamburg, because we found my father's documents, which gave him the pass to get onto the base, the German base. So it had to be from Hamburg. But we were never able to find that, General S.S. Hershey.

LEVINE: Oh, well, I'll see if I have any clues. Okay, or we can ask in the library.

GOZDZ: And we arrived here on Christmas—we arrived here on New Year's Eve, because my mother said that everything was closed because it was a holiday, so the ship had to sit in port for two days.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: Probably New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, before we got processed.

LEVINE: I see, and do you know if the entire ship, the passengers, came here to Ellis Island?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] I don't know. That I don't know. I'm--she said the ship had immigrants on it, so I don't know if all of them came here.

LEVINE: Now you said she had a medical condition that led her to believe that maybe she couldn't get to Australia?

GOZDZ: She had a goiter, and that—a goiter. And so in order for us to go to Australia, she would have had to have surgery. And so, because my brother and I, I guess, were small, she had no one to care for us. So she wouldn't have the surgery. So, you know, so we were denied passage. So my grandfather and his two brothers went to Australia, and we stayed in Germany.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, because I assume you had some kind of a—what do I want to say? There was a list of—a waiting time for people to be able to leave?

GOZDZ: Where? To come to the United States?

LEVINE: To come to the United States, or to go to Australia?

GOZDZ: Yes, I'm sure, but I think that prior to the Displaced Persons Act, you could come to the United States if you were just married. But they didn't have it open to immigration for married with children, and that's when the opened it to immigration: married with children. And that's how we came, under that criteria.

LEVINE: I see, so from the time the war ended, until 1952, you were living in a displaced persons' camp? Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: Yeah, it was called Wilflecken [PH], in Germany.

LEVINE: Do you know how to spell it?

GOZDZ: You know, I just saw the spelling of that. I'll send that to you.

LEVINE: Okay, okay, and you said your father was working in Germany. What was he doing?

GOZDZ: A laborer. You know, when they were helping to rebuild, he was just a, you know, like a carpenter, a laborer, because they needed laborers, I guess, people to help to rebuild, to restructure. So the United States Army hired, I guess, just laborers, or people, to work there. So he had a—you know, they hired him. All we know—all I have is this past that he had.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so this displaced persons' camp was maintained, or run, by the United States?

GOZDZ: I think by the Allies. It was run by the Allies.

LEVINE: Okay, but so your father was essentially a farmer, by--?

GOZDZ: Yes.

LEVINE: That was his occupation before?

GOZDZ: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and after?

GOZDZ: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well, so you got here, and your sponsor—do you know, like, did that person come and meet the family, and take them to the farm? Or, you probably—you wouldn't remember personally.

GOZDZ: We don't know. We don't know how they got there, whether, you know, they got a train ride, or somebody came and got them. I don't know, other than we know it was in Ramsey, New Jersey. You know, the farm was there, and that's where they stayed.

LEVINE: Now, did your mother or father ever talk about how the sponsor treated them, during that year on the farm?

GOZDZ: My father did say that—I don't know where we lived there, but I'm saying, I'm presuming it was not in the house. So maybe it was, like, in another, like—

LEVINE: Separate building?

GOZDZ: --separate building, or something?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: But it wasn't ideal conditions—put it that way. And then we understood that they had a fire there, and our documents got burned, whatever documents my parents had, because we didn't—I remember that I didn't have a green card, or I didn't have any documents. We didn't have any documents. So they had a fire, so some documents that my parents had were destroyed. And maybe some of the ones that we were looking for, like our original papers that came, they might have been taken. But, my father wanted to

leave, and the farmer told him he couldn't. And my father insisted that he was going to leave, and the farmer said that he was going to, you know, harm him. And my father said, "Well, you can't harm me any worse than I've already been harmed, so I'm taking my family, and I'm leaving." So he left.

LEVINE: What kind of a farm was it?

GOZDZ: I don't know. Northern Jersey, you know, like around Ramsey, I'm assuming that it had to be, I don't know what kind of farm. It had to be, like—it can't be corn, because corn is in the south of Jersey, so—

LEVINE: How about animals? Were there, I mean, like, chickens?

GOZDZ: Well, I remember that we did have chickens when I was growing up! I don't know; it might have been. I don't know what kind of farm it was. We really don't know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: But I do remember that when we used to go there, we always used to see farms when we used to go, like, to Lake George, and traveling up that area was very farmland. We don't know what kind of farm land.

LEVINE: I wonder if you were like in a--?

GOZDZ: Agriculture. I think it was more agriculture, so it had to be, you know, maybe fruits and vegetables.

LEVINE: Yeah, but I'm wondering, like the house that you live in. Was it a house that was meant for humans to live in, or was it like the chicken coop?

GOZDZ: The chicken coop. It was probably the chicken coop.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GOZDZ: Probably the chicken coop. I don't know what standards they had to provide, you know, that they had to provide us. It wasn't conditions, I'm sure, that were comfortable.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, I guess it was a good way to get labor.

GOZDZ: At least it was a good way for us to get here.

LEVINE: Yes, yes.

GOZDZ: But I do remember that we moved to Passaic, and we lived in a, like a big apartment building. You know, it was like an apartment complex, because I do remember stairs, walking up stairs. But by 1954, when my sister was born, Lucy was born, my father had already bought a house. And when she was born, we moved from Passaic to Lodi, New Jersey.

LEVINE: So you were in Passaic a few years, you think?

GOZDZ: Yeah, we lived there, I would probably say, less than two years, because I think that we had to be there one year. So I don't even think my parents lasted one year in Ramsey, New Jersey.

LEVINE: Oh, really?

GOZDZ: Yes, and then they went to Passaic. So if we came here in '52, Lucy was born in '54, so it was less than to years than that. But I do remember, you know, my parents—like, my father worked two jobs. He worked as a—he worked as a laborer, and then he worked like in a die factory. And my mother worked in a factory, in a handkerchief factory, when we were growing up. So both my parents worked. My father worked two jobs, and my mother worked, you know, to take care of their family.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was—can you say anything about the Polish community that you moved into?

GOZDZ: You know, my parents participated in that community. You know, they were, you know, I remember that we went to Polish school. We went to Polish functions, like if the church had functions, because the church had community functions. We participated in the Pulaski Day parade on, you know, in New York City. We went to Polish school.

LEVINE: When you went to Polish school, I assume it was taught in Polish?

GOZDZ: Yes.

LEVINE: And you learned about Poland? Is that what you learned about?

GOZDZ: Well, we learned to read and write.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

GOZDZ: We learned to read and write. So yes, we did have our history, and then you know, my father send us, like, to Polish camp. So we went to Polish camp in the summer time, where you learned. My brother and I went there as children. I remember that we went there. And then we also went to, you know, we did a lot of activities in that—in our, because my parents' friends,

from, that were in Germany with them? My parents helped them to come here, too. So, some of them, they established. We had friends in Canada, and then we had friends that they brought here, to the United States, and we sponsored, my parents sponsored them. So then they came. So, we kind of became a, you know, our extended family. Those were our extended family.

LEVINE: And were they Polish people?

GOZDZ: Well, some—yes, they all either—they either came from Poland, or they met—like one of my Mom's friends that I talked to this morning, her mother was from Belgium, but she worked in the same labor camp as my mother did.

LEVINE: I see.

GOZDZ: And then, they were from Belgium, but then they came. We sponsored them, and then they came to the United States, and they settled in Passaic. And they spoke Polish, too, so you know, they kind of built up their relationship of their friends that way.

LEVINE: Well, it sounds like your mother and father were, like, the beginning of a movement to come here? I mean, in other words, they weren't coming to anyone, but then they brought other people?

GOZDZ: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: So, uh-huh.

GOZDZ: And then, you know, later on as, you know, we got older, my father's brother came from Australia, you know, to visit my father, and he stayed here for a year. My mother's sister came from Poland; she came and visited, and she stayed with us for like a year. So some of those—and then the cousins, you know, the grandchildren of my mother's sister, came, and they visited us. So we got to see them. I think it was not 'til like, the nineties, that we actually got to go visit them. And you know, you had more availability for mobility and transportation to come and see people that way.

LEVINE: Yeah. It sounds like your parents wanted to hold onto the Polish traditions? In other words, their attitude was not: become American. It was more to keep your ethnicity intact?

GOZDZ: Yes, yes. Our parents really held on to their Polish traditions and to their Polish values, and I think that the important thing was they taught us as children, you know, to honor our ethnicity, and also to instill in us our deep sense of faith. Education was really important. You know, my father [laughs] walked around with our report cards in his pocket, and he would always show them to everybody. He had seven children. Seven children finished high

school; seven children went to college. You know, we went to graduate school. My parents never got past elementary school, but yet they instilled in us the value of education.

LEVINE: Wow!

GOZDZ: So, and we all put ourselves through college, because my parents really didn't have money to help us. But somehow we had that instilled in us, you know, the importance of education.

LEVINE: Okay, we're going to pause here. Kevin's going to turn the tape over, and then we'll keep going.

GOZDZ: Oh, great!

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Okay, so when do your memories start? What were the things that you—were you in Passaic when you first started to--?

GOZDZ: Yes, my earliest memory is—the earliest memory I have is probably maybe like when I'm about four years old. I do remember living in Passaic. I do remember my parents, my father, you know, always taking us to the park, swinging in the park, and going to the church, visiting his friends. And I do remember moving to Lodi, so when we moved to Lodi I was just about four years old.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: I was just about four years old. Lucy was born, so yes, I was just about four years old when I moved there.

LEVINE: I see. And what was your father's personality? How would you describe him?

GOZDZ: He was a very—I think that he was a very active person. He loved nature. He loved the outdoors, so I have great fond memories of going to the park, you know, ice skating. We used to go to Paterson Mountains, going to the mountains on the weekends, you know, going to the park, camping. So he

was a great lover of nature and the outdoors, and so he kind of promoted all of that in all of us, instilled all of that in his children. And he had a fierce, you know, belief in, you know, doing things the right way, and also making sure that his children did everything the right way. My brother's a year and a day younger than I am, and I have no memory of him ever telling me that I couldn't climb a tree, that I couldn't hit a baseball, that I couldn't ride a bicycle, or that I couldn't build a river raft. So he never said that I couldn't do anything that my brother couldn't do. So there was no boundaries. Now, I didn't know that girls went to ballet, and did those kinds of things! But you know, as far as being able to teach us what we were capable of doing, he always said, "You can do this, and you can do that. As long as you set your mind to it, you can accomplish it." So we just, you know, we just did it, just because no one said you couldn't do it, just because you knew that, hey, you know what? If you had to carry this or you had to do that, you just set your mind to do it, and you accomplished it.

LEVINE: Wow. And how about your mother? What was her personality like?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] My mother was a much more quieter and reserved person. You know, she worked all day in a factory, and she came home, and she cooked dinner. And she had to clean the house, and we had to help her. So she was much more—I don't have a memory of her being an outdoors person, but when we went camping, you know, we took the pots and pans, and my mother had to—you know, took the little fire out, campfire out, and she had to cook for all of us when we went there. So she participated, but I think she played a much more passive role.

LEVINE: What do you think she tried to instill in you, either overtly or just by her ways?

GOZDZ: Well, she—you know, I think that she taught us, well, she taught us a lot, you know. We learned how to cook, we learned how to sew, we learned how to clean house. We learned those domestic chores, you know, that you had to do in order to survive. So, and you know, all of our sisters, we all have clean houses, because you know, we always had to clean the house on Saturday! We had to iron; we had to wash clothes. So I think that we learned by doing, and by modeling. My mother was, you know, learned, taught us how to cook, so you know, we learned how to cook. She had seven children, so I think that it was much more difficult for her to be a much more, say, outgoing person, or much more cultured. But she had her little circle of friends. She basically stayed in her community of her Polish friends that she visited, and that she stayed in communication with. But you know, she went to the Polish activities, you know, they had a bus trip to [Polish], which is a Polish place, a shrine. So she would get on the bus with her Polish friends, and she would go there. So she kind of taught us, you know, that we had to be independent and take care of ourselves.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now, she would get together with the women. Would your father have, like, a group of men that he palled around with?

GOZDZ: Well, you know, my father was a laborer, so, you know, he worked like as a carpenter or as a builder. So he had his group of Polish friends, but I do remember that like on Sundays they would come and visit us. You know, the families that my parents brought over would come to our house, or he would take us in the car, and he would take us to their house. And then we would have a big Polish meal, on Saturday afternoon, and we would be, you know, the kids, us children would play together. And I didn't even speak English 'til I was—went to kindergarten. So I only spoke Polish 'til I was five.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you feel, like, outside, or did you feel like an immigrant? Did you feel somehow different?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] No, but I do remember my first day of kindergarten.

LEVINE: Oh, good. Tell about it.

GOZDZ: You know, that I—my father walked me to school, and I had a yellow dress on. And when I went into the classroom, all these people were talking, and I didn't understand what they said. And I remember telling—having to tell the teacher I had to go to the bathroom, and somehow she figured it out, you know, that I had to go. And then I went home. But she did tell me that I did get to speak—I learned to speak English in three months, that I picked up the English language. Because, you know, we lived in a very small community. It was a very small neighborhood, so we did have people that lived in our neighborhood. It was—I don't remember, I remember playing with the children next door, but not all of them were my age. They were more my sister's age, and my sister played with them, and my brothers played with them.

LEVINE: Were they speaking Polish?

GOZDZ: No, no, because they weren't like my age. They were more my sister's age, so when I sister got older, you know, they played with them. I really didn't have any playmates 'til I was maybe like in fourth grade, because we were—you know, we were like the only house on the block, in the neighborhood. And there was all fields there. You know, I remember crossing fields in order to go to school. I mean, it was very, very rural, where we lived.

LEVINE: So would your mother and father speak Polish at home?

GOZDZ: Oh, yes. My parents spoke Polish to us. As we got older, my brothers and sisters, they would speak to my mother in English, and she would speak to them in Polish. So they all—we, they all understood what she said, and she

understood English. She just didn't always speak English well, but she understood English, because that, you know, that was how we communicated. I always spoke to my mother in Polish.

LEVINE: And how about your father? Did he speak English?

GOZDZ: He spoke English better than my mother did, yes, because he went out and worked, and so, you know, he—my mother, when she worked in the factory, probably had Polish women that worked there, too. So you know, they talked Polish during the day. My father also worked with Polish men as a laborer, or as a carpenter, and then in a factory, but he spoke—he always walked around with a dictionary. He had a little dictionary, and he always walked around with a dictionary. So he was always challenging himself to learn English, and he always, you know, would write the words down, and he would practice them.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Where do you think the drive of your parents came from, that all of their children should be educated? I mean, they were from farm families, and not educated themselves, as most people weren't in those days. But, what do you think—where do you think that came from?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] You know, I don't—I do remember as a child sitting, and—of course, my parents had minimal education. But I remember when I was in third grade and had to learn my multiplications, I remember my father sitting on the floor and practicing with me my multiplications. So, as much as they could help us, they did. I think that later on, you know, as I grew older, I helped my brothers and sisters, too, because I'm the oldest of seven children. So I helped them, and we helped each other.

LEVINE: Yeah.

GOZDZ: But I think I was the first person—I went to college first, and then we kind of all helped each other to make sure that we got to college, and to school.

LEVINE: As the oldest child, did you certain privileges and/or responsibilities?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] As the oldest child, it was—yes, I was responsible for taking care of my brothers and sisters, helping them with their homework, or I remember being the spokesperson for them, like when my parents had to go to school, you know, I would translate, and speak for them.

LEVINE: How did you feel about doing that, as a child?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] I resented it. You know, it was very difficult, as a child, to be given that responsibility. You know, what I will say is: I learned to be a responsible person [laughs] because of having all that responsibility. And my sense of

independence, and my entrepreneurship came as a result of learning all of those things, and having to do all of that. But I do know that I really didn't have a childhood, you know, from about the age of nine. You know, I went to school, came home, had to look after my brothers and sisters, help them with their homework, do chores in the house, you know, 'til I got out of college—'til I graduated.

LEVINE: Was there any feeling of embarrassment that your mother and father didn't speak English? No?

GOZDZ: I never felt that way. You know, I do know that we were, like, you know, it wasn't customary for my parents to, like, invite your friends over. So I do remember, like, I didn't bring friends home until I was, like maybe in high school. But it wasn't customary, that kind of tradition. Or, you went to your friend's house to sleep over—we didn't do those kinds of things, because that wasn't, I guess, part of our family values. But you know, we went and did everything. I mean, my brothers and sisters, we all spoke fluent English. You know, we all—so we never felt different. We just did everything that everyone else did. Because in our community, where we grew up in Lodi, was an Italian community, so there were a lot of Italian immigrants that lived there. So we just felt part of, you know, that community.

LEVINE: And you all got along?

GOZDZ: I mean, my best friend was Italian. You know, her grandmother would talk—you know, she only spoke Italian. So they were all immigrants also, so I think we all came as a melting pot. We all came together about the same time, and we kind of all grew up together. Now, I spoke—you know, I spoke English from the time I was five, so I didn't have an accent. You know, but it was different. I remember that I had, you know, I didn't have a lot of clothes. You know, I had only pair of shoes, or one coat, you know, or two nice Sunday dresses. I mean, we didn't have a lot, but what we had was, I think we had each other. So that was more important.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah. So, you mentioned that you went through school. Did you go then straight to college, or did you work for a while?

GOZDZ: No. I grew up in Lodi; I graduated high school there. And then I went to Felician College, which was in all-girl Catholic college in Lodi. So it had just become a four year program. It was a Catholic college for nuns, and then they converted it to four year college, and I was the first graduating class. So I went to that school, and I walked to school. So, it was in my community. I got a scholarship, a two hundred fifty dollar state scholarship! That was what paid for my tuition for the four years that I went to school. I worked a part-time job, like twenty hours a week, and I worked at the college. And I had a scholarship, so whatever money I needed for books or tuition came that way.

I think that, for the two hundred fifty dollars, that paid for my tuition and my books. So anything else that I worked for was to buy clothes, or anything else that I wanted to do. That was, you know, that college now is twenty-five hundred dollars a credit, you know, compared to two hundred fifty dollars a semester when I went there! But I will say that, you know, and it was an all-girl Catholic college, so when I went there, I got an education. You know, it was strictly—didn't have sororities or those kinds of things, but I got an education out of that school.

LEVINE: So, what did you study, or what did you prepare to do, and what did you do?

GOZDZ: Actually I went to become a teacher, an elementary school teacher, so I got my undergrad, I got my degree in elementary education. I got married when I was a senior in high school, and when I left school I taught. My son was born when I was a senior in college, and I taught for a short period of time, and then I realized that the students were bigger than me. So I left education, and I went into the business world. And I became a chemical purchasing agent. I worked there for seven years, and got my business—I would say, my business experience. And then I divorced shortly after that and I moved to Florida with my two children. And I started my own business there, and I've had a business for twenty-five years.

LEVINE: Oh, what's your business?

GOZDZ: I manage private libraries—I'm a librarian—private libraries for accountants and attorneys, and institutions. So, yes.

LEVINE: Wow, that's very impressive, yeah. Okay, well, thinking back, how do you think the immigrant experience—not that you remember it yourself, but that your family had—you actually mentioned it earlier—affected you in your approach to things, in the way you maybe think about things, because of that?

GOZDZ: My family? I believe that we had an opportunity. You know that United States was a place where you could come to live your dreams. And whether it was that my family came for their religious freedom, you know, to be able to worship the way that I wanted, led to the ability to see that if you work—what I saw, or what I think we, was seen from our family was that if you worked hard, you got what you wanted. So, it was a matter of putting in your time and your effort and energy into it. And we didn't believe that we had any kinds of handouts, you know. There was nobody taking care of us. And we saw that families helped each other. You know, my father helped another family. They helped someone else. So we all helped each other, and it was built on that ability to be able to say, "You know, you can achieve what you want, as long as you work for it." And if you have a sense of faith—I think if you have hope, because that's what we saw in our parents. We saw that

they had a sense of hope, you know. We still had the little luggage that my mother had on the ship, you know, a little suitcase. And I thought, "Wow, she came with this little suitcase!" And they only came with two trunks. They didn't have much, but what they had was, they knew that they had a sense of hope, and a sense of faith. And I think it was that sense of hope, and that sense of faith, that they could achieve what they wanted when they got there, that gave them the ability and the drive to continue. And that what they left behind—this couldn't be worse than what they left behind! So coming to America was not worse, could not be worse, than what they left behind, in Germany.

LEVINE: Do you think they second thought about—had second thoughts about it when they were in Ramsey during that time?

GOZDZ: No, no, because my father said, you know, "What worse possible thing can you do to me? I'm just going to leave." Because I think he always had the drive, and the ability to see, or maybe the vision to see, well, maybe there's something better there, and I'm just going to leave for something better. So he just left! You know, he just said, "I'm just going to leave, and take my family and leave." He was a very—he was very, sometimes, single-minded and very focused, so he knew exactly what he wanted, and he just went and did it. Sometimes he broke the rules doing it, but you know, he did it.

LEVINE: Was he strict with his children?

GOZDZ: Very. Very strict with his children. I mean, he had a certain set of values that he commanded and he needed, and we needed to follow the rules. You know every Sunday we went to church. You know, he helped us as much as we can as far as school work was, because I'm sure his education had its limits. And we did do those kinds of things. You know, we did do our homework; we went to school. You know, not all of us got perfect grades, because I remember one year I failed arithmetic, the whole grade, in fifth grade, you know. And my father wasn't happy about that, but there was just so much that they could do. But we weren't bad, you know. We were just like the rest of the—rest of the people in the community. We just did what needed to do. But, you know, if you consider in 1954 my father bought a house. I remember in 1955 he bought a brand new car. He didn't even know how to drive the car, because my neighbor had to teach him how to drive. And I sat in the back seat, and I translated for my neighbor, show him how to shift gears. So the ability to be able to achieve what he wanted, in a short period of time, he was able to do that. You know, he just worked! He just knew that if he went out and worked, he would get what he wanted. You know, we had a garden; we had chickens. You know, my mother canned and preserved food. You know, I remember that as a child. So, but I think that if we looked at all the rest—if I looked at all the rest of the people that were in our community, they did all the same thing, too. You know, whether

it was my Italian friends, my Italian best friend—her father had a garden in his backyard, and they did the same thing. You know, they grew a garden, they pickled their food. They preserved that stuff. So we all were in the same place at the same time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GOZDZ: But the nice thing is is that as we grew up together, you know, we were able to improve the quality of our lives, and each of us were able to improve the quality of life. The house in which my parents, you know, bought, is still standing there. And we still have that home. But you know, you saw your community grow around you. You know, we were the only house on the block, and now, you know, it's a whole entire city. But it's nice to go to that town, and still see the people that remember you! [Laughs] You know, the people in the neighborhood still know who you are on a first-name basis. But as a child, I remember that I went to the library. I mean, we didn't have a TV until I was in fifth grade; we didn't have a telephone 'til, you know, we were in high school. I went to the library, and I checked out books. And I think I brought a book for each day, and I would read every single day. So as kids we were inspired. My father loved to read, so he instilled in us the ability to be able to love books and to read. All of us read in our family, because we didn't have that. And the other thing is, I think that we learned, was more so self-reliance and critical thinking skills. I, you know, I remember building a river raft with my brother. So you know, you had to figure out how to do that. You know, you had to take the nails and the hammer, and you know, we played outside from the time we woke up to the time we went to bed. So you learned those kinds of things, of how to get along in the neighborhood, you know, how to—survival skills. I mean, I remember climbing on the roof to get the ball at least a hundred times a day! And then I'd go and go, "Oh, gee, that's the roof and I climbed up there? Up that tree? A hundred times a day?" And I'd look at that tree and go, "I can't believe I climbed up that tree a hundred times a day!" But when you're nine or ten years old, you know, the tree was just another tree to climb. So, you just—he didn't say you couldn't climb the tree. We just climbed the tree!

LEVINE: How do you think about your American side and your Polish side, when you think of the two in yourself? What kind of perspective do you put on that?

GOZDZ: [Sighs] From looking at both sides? Well, I'm very attached to my Polish roots. I think that that's really important, you know, from my heritage point of view. And as an American, you know, I see myself as an immigrant. You know, I came to the United States, and I'm an immigrant. I gave my gift to my children, which you know, they're the first generation from me that is actually an American. But, you know, they're very grounded in their roots, in their Polish heritage, you know, in our family. And we're a very, very close family. You know, of seven of us, we all get together. We have a close

relationship with each other. You know, all my brothers and sisters and all their children—we all interact with one another. And if I look back and look at families today, I could say that it's such a great gift to have such a beautiful family, because you know, you might not have a lot of material things, but if you have family, that is, I think, such a great gift.

LEVINE: I think that's a beautiful place to end, unless you have some other thing you'd like to say?

GOZDZ: Well, you know, I think that what I would just say in closing is that as—I think that it's a great honor and privilege to be an American citizen.

LEVINE: Okay, well thank you very much. I'm speaking with Wanda Gozdz, who came here as a two year old in 1952. And I should ask you for your children's names, just so we have it on the tape.

GOZDZ: Oh, sure! My children's names is James Emil Wertman, Junior. He is thirty-six years old. And his brother is Ryan Anthony Wertman, and he is thirty-five years. And they each have children. James has a son, James Junior, and a stepson Jake, and Ryan, his younger brother, has four children. My grandchildren: Mason, Max, Sophia, and Charlie!

LEVINE: Okay! Okay, thank you very much. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW