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JOHN GAJDA
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RESIDENCES:

- **AUSTRIA: SCHLUSBIN**
  US:
  - **NW CHICAGO**
  - **NORTH CAROLINA**
  - **KENTUCKY**
  - **ALABAMA**

Oral Historian's Note: The introduction and the first few questions were not on the tape.

LEVINE: --Where you lived until the family left?

GAJDA: Yes.

LEVINE: Yea. Ok, now what was your mother's name?

GAJDA: My mother's name was Johanna or Yohanna. Her maiden name was Stocker.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

GAJDA: S-T-O-C-K-E-R.

LEVINE: And you said that her fam – that she – that she came from Poland, her family and herself --?

GAJDA: Her family – she was born in Austria, she's Austrian. Her family is all in Austria. My father was the one from Poland.

LEVINE: Oh, ok.

GAJDA: And my father, his name was Jan, J-A-N Guidah.

LEVINE: Okay, so did you ever – did you ever – well why don't you give me your father's name.

GAJDA: Jan.

LEVINE: Jan, and was his family, for generations in Poland, do you know?

GAJDA: There was, when we arrived here there was family already here and I've not talked to - a lot of the family is no longer here, I mean they've passed on. So, when we came here it was to stay with the family that was already here. And they had been here, some had just been here maybe a couple – two, three, four, five years before. Some had been here longer and I don't know when they came

through or where or anything like that but --. And a lot of that family is already passed on, so.

LEVINE: Well why don't you say why it was that your family came here.

GAJDA: They came – both my parents – were - my father was in Auschwitz. He – then when he got – when the Americans re - , you know released. he got out of Auschwitz. My mother was in a communist concentration camp and – some how, it gets very sketchy with my parents when I was growing up. It was very difficult for them to talk about anything - that they experienced in terms of the war. However what they did tell me was that they had lost everything. My mother owned a delicatessen -- in, Austria and the Nazi's – no I'm sorry, the communists took it from here and destroyed everything. So she lost that. My father lost everything he had in Poland. And - they decided to come to America just to start over.

LEVINE: Do you know how they met?

GAJDA: You know, I don't.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

GAJDA: I really don't know.

LEVINE: Did your father ever talk about how he ended up in Auschwitz?

GAJDA: The only thing he said was that – I'm thinking – something about him being Polish. I don't know if it is all part of the mess going on in Poland at the time and – I don't know if it was for health reasons. I have no idea why he was taking to Auschwitz, but he was there.

LEVINE: Was he – was he a Catholic Pole or was he Jewish?

GAJDA: He was Catholic.

LEVINE: He was Catholic.

GAJDA: And my mother was Catholic. So, like I said, I'm not sure if in the, the cleansing or whatever – if they thought he wasn't fit for whatever reason. He never would say, he just said that they took him, so I don't know why.

LEVINE: Do you think your mother and father suffered - ramifications of having gone through Auschwitz and also the concentration camp.

GAJDA: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, as I grew older I began to realize how much pain and suffering they've been through. With out them really telling me, just in ---

LEVINE: How did it show up? How did you get that from them?

GAJDA: How did I get that? Well – my family history with my parents was not, necessarily, the most positive experience. It was kind of tough. They had come here with nothing and they – they tried, well they did better their lives compared to what they had. But he worked at Englander Mattress Company in Chicago as a mattress cutter. And he spent his entire working life in America at that company. He was also a drinker, so through the alcohol is when – is where I heard any of the information because the pain would come out and things like that. So they were very ---ah--- my father had a real hard time with my mother – my mother told me that when she was

in the communist concentration camp, you know, that she had been repeatedly raped daily – by more than one soldier. My father talked about the abuse he got in Auschwitz and when they would have their arguments, and there was many, that's when they talked – it seemed like that's when things from Europe surfaced. Because I knew they weren't talking about things that were going on at my life, or my experience, or in America. They were talking about things back in Europe and my father was bitter about – I don't know I guess its funny, I guess like a husband whose wife was raped even though he's sympathetic – but then it almost, sometimes they turn on the wife, even though its not her fault. And that's kind of what – and because of that – so there was a lot of discussion or arguments about the concentration camp – especially my mother. She would always – and he was not too pleased with, a lot of name calling and all that kind of stuff.

LEVINE: Did your mother work here?

GAJDA: She worked for Zenith Radio Corporation. So, they were both factory workers when we moved to Chicago. Or got to Chicago and that where they started working and they stayed with it. And then, well I say they were both factory workers, but my mother started off as a factory worker and then she became a practical nurse and she did private patients. She was hired through an agency to stay with different patients in their homes and what not. Or sometime she worked at Whitehome Nursing home in Chicago. I'm not sure if that's still there or not, I think it is. But then she went into - took care of patients privately through the agency and they would place her –

LEVINE: Were you the only child?

GAJDA: Up until 1958 and then I had two brothers ; one born in ’58 and the other one in 1960. And then – my-my second brother is still living today but the youngest brother died of cancer in 1979.

LEVINE: Uh huh, uh huh.

GAJDA: So –

LEVINE: So –

GAJDA: I’m sorry, ’81, ’81.

LEVINE: ’81 So, what language did you speak at home when you were growing up?

GAJDA: Polish and German. Polish to my mother and German to my father even though that was –

LEVINE: The reverse –

GAJDA: -- opposite native language. But they just – they felt that it was important to maintain that native language in the family so this was they way we talked. And my father would correct me if I talked to him in Polish. He wouldn’t answer me. And then – I realized he wanted me to speak in German even though the spoke Polish – that was his native language. It was an interesting experience.

LEVINE: Yea, I would say.

GAJDA: I didn't speak a word of English until I went to grammar – or kindergarten. It was a Catholic school in Chicago that took immigrants – Polish speaking people. And it was a Polish church, a Polish Catholic church –

LEVINE: Polish mass? Mass in Polish?

GAJDA: Polish and Latin both and they had a school, a parochial school, and this school taught the Polish immigrants in their native language but they also taught them English and then eventually – I think it was in second grade, it became all English. But up until then you learned the language – the English and the – my parents never went through that. They picked up the language but it was broken. They both spoke broken English. My mother more – spoke better than my father. My father just never. He – he could speak it, I mean very broken but my mother finally picked it up a whole lot better than my father ever did.

LEVINE: Did you feel like an immigrant when you were living in Chicago, when you were young?

GAJDA: Very much so. ---- There were - we lived in an ethnic neighborhood that was predominately, well –predominately Polish but there were very many other groups within the Polish neighborhood. Even on the street that I lived on I recall, there was an Italian immigrant family, there was an Irish immigrant family. There was a German immigrant family. A Polish – you know a lot of Polish immigrant families. A Greek immigrant family and all within just a city block. And where I noticed it was – as I got older – or able to walk outside, I do recall as a child, the distinction within this little block. Oh, you're Polish – you're a DP, you know and a lot of DP name calling.

You're just a dumb DP or you're a DP, I remember that, I remember that a lot.

LEVINE: Did you – was your family in a Displaced Persons camp?

GAJDA: Mm hmm.

LEVINE: -- prior to their leaving?

GAJDA: Well, that part I don't know. They may have been. Because I heard the term DP used a lot. Well of course I heard it from the other kids in the neighborhood and that was just really –

LEVINE: That was a bad thing to be – according to the kids.

GAJDA: Yea, it was and I – I remember that. That was – that was very vivid. Even in – I didn't hear it so much from the Polish kids, but definitely from all the others. And especially the American kids. There was also native American– well not Native American but –

LEVINE: Kids who were – families were born –

GAJDA: Yea, born – families that lived on that block too. And they in particular also, but they did that to all the immigrant families living there – they were all DP's.
[both lightly laugh]
And that was, I mean - didn't care whatever – truth or not, I don't know, but in their eyes we were all DP's.

LEVINE: Well you must have – you must have – I mean you had it rough. I mean first of all your mother and father had their issues and then

you were in a community where you were called DP and you were kind of an outsider. Did you have anything growing up that gave you, you know strength or made you feel good about yourself?

GAJDA: What made me feel good about myself – when my father didn't drink he was a very happy individual – well I don't know if happy is quite the word but – he was much more loving, you know and he was much more loving to my mother. And we did things together. I remember walking to the grocery store, the A and P grocery store on the corner and that was a big deal. And I remember Sundays and my father would always say in German, you know that we're going to go sch – schp – I lost my upper teeth – ph[*schpetzerim*] – which means, just to take a walk. And Sunday was a big deal. You got dressed up, went to church and you walked. You walked the sidewalks of Chicago and when our – just in our neighborhood – and there was an Andes candies store that also had a fountain, you know these old soda fountain place kind of thing. It had that, there was a restaurant. There were – and we'd go window shopping. And we would just walk, the three of us and you know. They would hold my hands, both of them would, and I do recall that. I think that was so special because you had to get dressed up. You couldn't go out – you know today you wouldn't even dream of that. You want to go for a walk - first of all, in Alabama they don't have sidewalks an I think that is the saddest thing in the world because you loose connection. There is something about sidewalks that make –

LEVINE: Isn't that interesting. Why do you think? I've never heard that before. That's a very interesting observation.

GAJDA: I really honestly believe that –personal, that sidewalks are-are what keep people together and if you don't have sidewalks, you don't have that connection anymore.

LEVINE: Do you think –

GAJDA: -- both literally and figuratively [laughs] but I think -- we live in an apartment right now. We sold it – we downsized, we had a big home in Alabama and so we – we decided we wanted to downsize so we moved into an apartment. We decided at our age now we don't want to fool with owning a home and all that so – so we have this apartment which has sidewalks and its like coming full circle. I tell my wife – we sit on the patio and I love it and she didn't know what I was talking about because we had this one acre lot and driveway, and then there was just a road. And the next house was an acre away, that kind of thing –---I love it. I absolutely love it. And she finally said to me, maybe about a month or go, I finally understand what your talking about. She had not realized how important – or what that does to your own – when you sit on your patio and people come in and out of their apartments and they talk to you. And that was my growing up experience in Chicago, you know. Sitting on the stoop or the sidewalk - I mean on the front steps to the house and just - the sidewalk was a meeting place, a gathering place. Its where you walked. That was my fond memories, 'cause you walk with people and you hold hands with people and you greet people. And you smile, I remember that. And – and sidewalks were just an integral part of that. And going to the grocery store was a big deal. It was not a chore, you know. I remember getting the little shopping carts, the old shopping carts, you know with the fold down shopping carts. I guess you can still get them now. But pulling that and just, you know. My mother

would say we're going down to the A and P and fill the cart up. We didn't have a washing machine in the house or a dryer or anything so we'd go to the Laundromat , you know. That was a big thing. Take our little carts, fill it up with laundry and go – and everybody talked to everybody and I – I miss that. I've always missed that. Once I left Chicago and I went to cities like – I lived in North Carolina, I lived in Kentucky, and now I live in Alabama. And everyone of these places, sidewalks have been removed. What I mean by removed I mean, is where we lived and the whole city structure and the set up is now geared towards sidewalks and its like, how do you people connect [laughs]. Anyway so, I just thought that was I just think that's very important. And I do – that's one of my fondest memories growing up as a child – was – being able to be in the neighborhoods.

LEVINE: That's wonderful, now I'm gonna pause [break]
Ok, we're resuming here. Lets see, we were talking about sidewalks, right?

GAJDA: Right.

LEVINE: So you've said that you've been in a lot of different states in the United States, was that from work? Is that how you happened to change where you lived?

GAJDA: School – I went for – I got some college from the uni – at that time it was the University of Albuquerque so I left Chicago to go to the University of Albuquerque which is now the University of New Mexico. For – which was college of St. Joseph, which was a teaching college. So I went there for a year and then moved back to Chicago.

LEVINE: You mean you studied to be a teacher? Is that what you mean by teaching college?

GAJDA: Right. It was initially a teaching college. It was a Catholic school. I went all Catholic school except for two years of high school. For two years of high school I did go to a public school.

LEVINE: I take it that your parents were strongly religious?

GAJDA: Yes, very much so. Well my mother more so than my father. My father – he would go and do his obligation that is required of Catholics but other than that – but my mother was very strong, very strong.

LEVINE: And how about you?

GAJDA: I'm a very strong believer in god because he's been an integral, integral part of my life – and I'm not a necessary a religious –

LEVINE: Churchgoer.

GAJDA: Churchgoer. Although, you know. I'm Methodist now. So [laughs]

LEVINE: Same god, right? [laughs]

GAJDA: Same god, different location [laughs] so –

LEVINE: Could you talk a little bit about – do you think your mother and father were happy they had come to this country?

GAJDA: My mother defiantly was.

LEVINE: Why do you say that?

GAJDA: Because she saw the benefits that America had to offer. Her dream, for me and for herself, but for me was so that I could be educated. I could be somebody or whatever. As every parent has for their child. You know, a dream that their child is successful and has good things in life and is happy…blah, blah, blah. My father wanted the same thing but he wasn't as open about it. He worked – where we lived in Chicago on the North side of the city, he worked on the Southeast side of the city which was almost in Indiana. We never had a car. We never had a car until I turned eighteen. So he would take public transportation and the – to get from our house to get where he worked took a good two hours, one way. And plus he'd put in a ten/twelve hour day cutting mattresses. So he was gone, just in the travel part, in the work part. Sometimes he'd work six days a week. My mother would work five days a week. When she first came here she worked for Zenith Radio Corporation but that was close to where we lived. Much closer to where we lived to where my father worked. And – the saw the – I remember them – you mentioned some stuff now I ---- I remember when we'd go to the store and how thrilled they were, of things they could get – and pay for. How thrilled they were about the choices. How thrilled they were – we lived in a basement apartment in Chicago when we first moved. It was a three story frame house and my father's Aunt lived on the first floor and his cousin – their – their daughter I guess it was, lived on the second floor or third floor, whatever. And we lived in the basement and it was just a two room place, you know – three – two bedrooms and a kitchen and a small bathroom. And it was half the basement because the other half

had the boiler room at the time, you know. So, you had to walk to the boiler room to get to this door that had a little couple rooms in back there and that's where we lived for a long time, a long time. And we had an angora cat , my mother just adored and she's frequently talked about --- both of them would talk about Europe but only in an abstract way. Not necessarily specifically. When they would talk about Europe in maybe their families and who's still there kind of thing, but there's very little talk about what people had because they had lost, you know. My mother would very seldom would talk about – there would be times where people would come to the apartment – other people that came to America and they would talk, but that was not conversation for me to hear. So they - I had go into my room. And that's when they would talk about their experiences of coming here - of whatever had occurred over there. I could never hear that. And even the people that came over didn't want the children to hear that so—

LEVINE: Was your -- I'm sorry, was your mother in a camp in Austria?

GAJDA: Yea, a communist, she said it was a communist camp in Austria.

LEVINE: So I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

GAJDA: But they – they were very – with me—they would not share the stories of – they did tell me that there was somebody that they had met in Europe that gave them the opportunity to come to America, that helped them. They didn't think they would ever be able to come to America and it was a priest, from what I understand. And helped them escape and get out from under. And that's why England seems to come to mind. I think they said they went to

England to catch the boat, the ship to come here. But they did say that they came to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now was the Displaced Persons camp in Austria? Do you know? Or was it --

GAJDA: I'm just saying that they called us DP's. I don't know that they were actually displaced persons. I don't know –

LEVINE: Well its not unlikely that after they got out of these camps –

GAJDA: See I've lost the alien registration cards that were issued so—I think there was a status, if I'm not mistaken I think there was a status on that card. What I can recollect.

LEVINE: Oh, ok

GAJDA: And I believe there might have been a DP status on there, I'm not sure. And I don't know if everybody that came over here had --- I don't know how that worked, as a child. I don't know if when people came here they were automatically –

LEVINE: Yea.

GAJDA: -- what classified a DP? You know, does that mean they came here with no family and no connection?

LEVINE: I think it just means that they came out of Displaced Persons camp which a lot of people were in after the war.

GAJDA: And that might be . See that – that whole history of my parents was not something they wanted to share.

LEVINE: --didn't really want to share. But I guess it came out unfortunately in – in ways that were destructive.

GAJDA: Well it was difficult because I would hear about these things and then want to know what they were talking – or arguing about. Because I knew it was nothing that had to do with our current surroundings. What were you talking about? And they wouldn't – they never shared that. My mother – my mother just talked about how awful it was and she just didn't want to talk about it.

LEVINE: What was she like? What was her personality?

GAJDA: People that knew her, loved her. She was very outgoing. Loved to sing, loved to yodel [both laugh] loved to dance. My parents – my father belonged to a club called *Parafi Brzszyka* which was a Polish club that was set up – that had been in Chicago and through their fundraising --- because they would always have – I remember this so fondly, you know. Every Saturday night was the social and they would have the whole Polish menu, you know, the kielbasa, the kapoos, all that wonderful food and then they'd have a polka band and music and dancing and everybody just had a wonderful – everybody was just so happy. And whatever moneys they raised were sent back to relatives in Poland to either come back here or to help them through whatever there going through. But the club was very active in sending packages back, clothing, because I remember my – [break]

END OF SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

GAJDA: ---- he was treasurer of the club.

LEVINE: Can you spell the name of that club?

GAJDA: P-A-R-A-F-I and then the second word ….B-R-Z- its either S-Z-Y-K-A or Z-S-Y-K-A

LEVINE: And it's – and it's –

GAJDA: *Brzszyka. Parafi Brzszyka*

LEVINE: And it means?

GAJDA: You know I don't know what it means.

LEVINE: [Laughing] Now did that club or any other social organization that your parents belonged to, did they ever do things like have cemetery clubs or, you know, money that could be used to help a family that needed it? Or were there kind of welfare benefits to the group that the club embraced, was there anything like that – that you can think of?

GAJDA: My – because my father was secre – or treasurer – oh was he secretary? Oh, lord – he was one of the two now. I'm sorry I thought he was – I'm thinking back now maybe he was secretary. I remember this other woman – maybe she was the treasurer – Mrs.

Danish. I remember her name, Mrs. Danish. But they would meet at our home or we'd go to their home. And they would talk about – I would hear that – they would talk about how they were going to take the money and send it. We've got to get all the clothing we've got and all this and were going to send this back to Poland because there was so many families in Poland that had nothing. Because they lost just as much as they, you know. So I heard them say that we've got to help these people that we've left behind because, you know, we're not there to help them. And we have this opportunity here that America has given us and we've got to help those that have lost as much as we have or more and aren't able to enjoy what we have here.

LEVINE: Well it sounds like the attitude of the Polish immigrants was that they were lucky.

GAJDA: Mm hmm. Very much so.

LEVINE: That they were privileged that they got out and –

GAJDA: And – and to be able to start a life here, very much so.

LEVINE: Yea, so did the family – did the family – what do I want to say – did the family mood or did the family change much when you had your two brothers some years later?

GAJDA: Yea, what was very important when I was growing up was the heritage. The Austrian heritage my mother really, you know, thought it was – that was important. You don't forget and my father would say, don't forget who you are. And – when – by the time my brothers came along, we had been in America for ten years

already. And that continuation of heritage was not put on to them, it was just put on to me. Because my father was and my mother both – because you're the first born and you have to carry this out. So they didn't get as much, you know, - about the heritage as I did. Because I was first born, I was the only child for ten years, all of that, so yea. It was really important for them. But it changed – I noticed a change because – you know I thought how come they're not sharing some of the things with them. And now, its funny how you go through life because you hear this all the time about going full circle – and I am back to where I was. Not – its very unusual right now. The things that are going on in my life right now are back to the beginning of almost who I was here with the added benefit now of having gone through life and achieved what I have achieved and that kind of stuff, but now I coming back to where I was and its amazing.

LEVINE: How do you mean –

GAJDA: And this whole experience here has been – I didn't expect it. I thought, well this would be nice, you know. Its just very –

LEVINE: When you say coming full circle, you mean coming back to your heritage? Is – is – or how do you mean it?

GAJDA: You know you go through life finding yourself, kind of thing. And when you come full circle you find out that you are who you were when you started out.

LEVINE: Who were you?

GAJDA: And –

LEVINE: -- who would you say you were when you were growing up?

GAJDA: You know, I was a poor little immigrant boy [laughs]. I – and that's not the case now. I'm not wealthy but I'm not in destitute – not that we were completely destitute then but we didn't have much. And – you spend so much time as you grow older finding yourself and yet it was all there. When people talk about the formative years – the first seven years of your life – well that's where I'm at. I recognized who I was – who I became at seven, only now I've matured but in my heart I've come full circle in that respect. I'm back to who I was – or who I didn't think I was or who -- , you know. I cant explain it. I was a person that thought I had to be something – different. Part of that was because of the DP, you're a DP, or a dumb Pollock. You're a –

LEVINE: Oh, DP stood for dumb Pollock?

GAJDA: They also said dumb Pollock, displaced person, but most of the time it was DP or dumb Pollock. And I would hear that so much and my parents were very strong on education for me. They didn't have the education and they saw the opportunity that I had, coming here. So, boy they beat education into me. You get an education, you get an education. You can be somebody, you know. Don't be like us. We have nothing, we've lost everything. You can be it, you can be it and – so—

LEVINE: So you thought you had to do that?

GAJDA: I did and I was a very, very good student all through grammar school, high school. [Pause] Only because I didn't want that

stigma of being a dumb Pollock or just you know, disappoint my parents. Even though it was tough growing up with them and the way they were, in my heart I really, really felt sorry for both of them because I – what I would pick up – bits and pieces of what I heard. How much of it was truth, lies, I don't know, but it was part of what shaped me. And I thought, especially as I got older and when I was going away to school that's when it really dawned on me. What a monumental effort, that is for somebody to go from, not only having lost everything because that's bad enough, and to try and rebuild ---- we can look at our own history here with Katrina and all that and World Trade Center and try to rebuild from that. But coming to a place that isn't even – that's totally foreign to them and not speaking the language and, and – you hear that but until you experience it yourself. And – and I was going to New Mexico which was foreign to me, you know. I mean it wasn't outside the United States but I was going to a culture that was totally different. And I thought, how did my parents do it. And I think to myself now, you know, the forgiveness is there and all of that hurt and pain its – its just about gone. Because I did have a lot of hurt and pain growing up. And its, you know, the memory is there but the pain is not as great. I've overcome that aspect now. But I think to myself back to when I was going to college – leaving – how did they do that? How can somebody – yes, you have to do what you have to do, but to leave the country that you're in and to go totally – I admire them now for just that because I -- I think what they've accomplished here – oh they had their faults. Things were tough, all that good – you know all that stuff. But they had a work ethic and they never – it was just expected, you just do it. You don't bitch about it, you don't – you just do it. No, it may not be the thing you want to do but you do it.

LEVINE: Do you think you learned that? I mean is that a way you've conducted your own life?

GAJDA: Pretty much, pretty much, you know. And I have them to thank for it because - I did love them very much although I couldn't express it to them and do it properly.

LEVINE: Well, and vice-versa, right?

GAJDA: Right and vice-versa. So there were cultural differences and there was attitudes and things that they had – I remember my mother telling me that my grandfather was a very stern individual and that he was a strict disciplinarian kind of thing and he would tolerate -- . If I ever did anything that would upset her, she'd always bring up my grandfather. If your grandfather were here, you know, you think I'm tough.

LEVINE: Was she tough?

GAJDA: Well, they both were, they both were. But they – they didn't want me to suffer in terms of they didn't want me to need. They wanted me to have, so they were very generous in that respect. And I'm sure as I've gotten older and I think back to those times and as any child, you learn how to manipulate. You find out -- oh, if I do this, I get this [laughs]. So I – I – they've been very – they've been very – well I'm just very thankful for them, very thankful for them.

LEVINE: How do you feel about your Polish and Austrian side and your American side? How do you put -- weigh that in the balance?

GAJDA: In this day now with all this immigration issue going on and my wife – she was born and raised in Alabama – and I - it pains me right now as an American to hear the things I'm hearing. It pains me when were coming over here on the ferry and you hear the tour guides or the people talk about that beautiful statue out there. It pains me what this is all about. That now they've taken and this welcoming beacon into the United States and now they're talking about putting a wall across the southern border, you know. It pains me to think that they are people in this world that are in the same situation today as my parents were and they're not welcomed anymore. I don't care – politicians can talk about illegal aliens but when your faced with that kind of desperate situation and you have an opportunity to come. Yes, you do have idiots that come here, but it pains me. Then now that part to me is a black spot because we have completely turned around what we are. What this country was founded on. We, you know, we are not better than the rest of the world in that respect. And we've lost our ability to be compassionate and that – that scares me. So from an American standpoint that's the only things that I'm really upset with right now. It truly means a lot to me to know that people have the opportunity to come and now people are shutting the doors. And they're saying you're not welcomed anymore. And then – and why do we have the statue out here? Why is it here? We should take it down or put a black shroud over it. It – it – having – being a first generation immigrant – my kids will never know what I'm talking about. They will never understand it. My grandchildren wont, they really wont because there's no – there's no community of immigrants around them. So as long as you have a community of immigrants, you can understand it. And you know, I was raised as an immigrant, among immigrants. And so this was –

LEVINE: What does that give you? -- that being among other immigrant people – what do you think? –

GAJDA: See I know I sound like a total outsider in that respect because I do recall – yea, like I said before the DP and the dumb Pollock name calling and all that. But there was still a sense of community amongst the immigrants. I would go to the Greek family's house. I would go to the Irish family's house. They'd come over to our house, you know, and our cultures blended.

LEVINE: And your parents as well as the children?

GAJDA: Yea, yea. And there would be times where the Greek family would have a Greek celebration at their home and they would invite us. There would be al the Greek food and culture, whatever and music. The same with the Italian families that lived next door – the Irish families. They were literally – this house was Irish , this one's Italian, this one's Greek, this one's Polish, this one's German, you know. And there was such a sense of community amongst people of different cultures. And now the community – the sense of community is of like kind. You know, if you're – if you're our kind, meaning that you're a citizen – you're welcome.

LEVINE: Yea.

GAJDA: But if you're not like us or you came here – and we forget the compassionate side, you know. Then they're talking, you're a blow heart liberal and all that stuff and that's not it. It's not a question of liberal. It's a personal -- for me it's a personal – it bothers me to see that that's the direction we are headed, because all of this has meaning.

LEVINE: What have you done in your life that gives you great satisfaction?

GAJDA: Wow. [laughs] I'm very satisfied that I had gone – had stayed in school. Had pursued – I never got a degree – but pursued an education. I'm looking to do – to get that degree – that is my ultimate goal. And that's ok, whether I can use it or not. Its just – I think it's important. And having a family – and having grandchildren gives me great satisfaction.

LEVINE: Do you think you've passed along some of the attitudes that you got from your mother and father?

GAJDA: [Deep breath] Now – yea, I have, to some degree. Now – I – we're going through a phase – we meaning my son is twenty-eight and he has two children. My son was learning disabled. His ability to learn was different than mine. So he went to LG classes in high school, you know, and in grammar school. He is happily married and has a good paying job but I see my father when I look at him. Not in a bad way. I see my father in a sense of I see him work everyday – he doesn't miss work. I see him devoted to making sure the family has money. So yea, I guess I have because I see my father in him. And I se my mother in my grandson because he's a very caring – my mother was very emotional, a very loving individual and my grandson is like that. And just feel like I see my mother in there. And – so yea, the only thing I regret now and I want to change that. We're in a process now and because my son got married – there's all this questions about who is my son, you know, from his wife, from my daughter-in-law. She's asking him, who are you Jeffrey in terms of where do you come from and your family history and the whole nine yards. And now we're in this process that she comes to

me and wants to know about his grandmother – Jeff's grandmother – my son's grandmother – or my mother.

LEVINE: Yea.

GAJDA: And – so that's why I say that I've come full circle because I'm back to where I need to find out again. And that's what's so bizarre and its because my son got married. And now the cycle starts all over. And so now I'm talking to my daughter-in-law about my mother and father and I recognize that I'm still looking for some answers but I also know to learn to let go of things that – I've no use, in terms of knowledge. But in terms of knowing who – the heritage I think is important and so I want my son to know about the Polish heritage. I want my daughter-in-law, I want my grandchildren. I want them to know what the Polish heritage is. I want them to know what the Austrian heritage is. And that – before I die I definitely would like to take them to Europe. And take them to Poland, take them to Austria and it will – I've never been back, never been back. There's this lady who just got back from Austria about a month ago and you know, I hear people every time over and over about how beautiful Austria is. That it is one of their favorite countries in the world. I just know that ph[Schlusbin] is about – I don't know- thirty miles outside of Saltsburg. In that area of the country and I've never been back. So I've – and I think there would be nothing more beautiful to say to my children, be proud of what you have here. Be proud of – that you are part of a great country but also be proud of where your bloodline is – where your family is. Proud in a sense of knowing your heritage and there's not enough of that going on, I think, anymore, because that was real important when you came here. First generation immigrants, it was very important. Second generation – I'm an American. What do I care about the old

country – I don't live there. And there's so many people in this country now that feel this way. You are an American. Let go of everything but that's not true. That's like saying let go of who you are. You don't let go of who you are. You're always who you are. That's real important.

LEVINE: Well I think that's eloquent and a great place to end. I want to thank you for a wonderful interview.

GAJDA: Well, I hope – I appreciate you giving me an opportunity and this has been a really good experience for me.

LEVINE: Oh, that's great. And I wanna just say that we said your name was John Gajda, but it started out as Hans –

GAJDA: Hans –

LEVINE: -- when you came to this country.

GAJDA: Well I was naturalized in '66 I had it changed to John.

LEVINE: Ok, well this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.