

EI-788/WILGUS

EI-788

KATHERINE (KITTY) EIDINGER WILGUS

BIRTH DATE: NOVEMBER 19, 1898

INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 16, 1996

RUNNING TIME: 1:00:00

INTERVIEW: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: HERITAGE HALL NURSING HOME  
AGAWAM, MASSACHUSETTS

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 1/1999

POLAND (BORN OF GERMAN PARENTS), 1907

AGE 8

PASSAGE ON A CUNARD LINE SHIP, EXACT NAME NOT RECORDED

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National  
Park Service. Today is Friday, August 16th, 1996.

I'm in Agawam, Massachusetts at Heritage Hall,  
which is a residence. And I'm here with Mrs.  
Katherine Wilgus.

WILGUS: Right.

SIGRIST: And Mrs. Wilgus came from Poland...

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ..in 1907.

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And we think that she was eight years old at that time.

WILGUS: That's probably right. I didn't remember whether it was, whether I was eight or what. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Also I should say for the sake of the tape that her daughter-in-law, Beverly Wilgus, is also present with us. And we may hear a lawn mower in the background. Mrs. Wilgus, can we begin by, by you saying your birth date for me?

WILGUS: My birthday? November 19th, 1898.

SIGRIST: And do you remember where you were born?

WILGUS: I was born in Poland.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the town?

WILGUS: Oh, that's something I cannot answer. I do not know

unless you got it on there. (she gestures to some  
personal papers)

SIGRIST: Yes, we're looking at a document. I don't speak  
Polish. It, this, the name of the is on here  
somewhere?

WILGUS: That's, I guess so. (she looks at the document)  
That, that's my birth certificate. (she reads)  
Katherine Eidinger, nineteen (Polish, they  
laugh) You know, I can't speak Polish, either.

SIGRIST: What, what was your, your maiden name before you were  
married?

WILGUS: Eidinger.

SIGRIST: Can you...

WILGUS: E-I-D-I-N-G-E-R.

SIGRIST: Wait, can you do that slowly, please? E-I-D...  
(he writes)

WILGUS: D-I-N..

SIGRIST: I-N...

WILGUS: G-E-R.

SIGRIST: G-E-R, Eidinger. (he pronounces it with a soft "G" and then corrects himself using a hard "G"), "Ger," hard "G."

WILGUS: They, yeah, they call it Eidinger. (she uses a hard "G") They never called it Eidinger. (she uses a soft "G") Everybody used to think that but it wasn't. It was Eidinger. (she uses a hard "G")

SIGRIST: (imitating her pronunciation) Eidinger.

WILGUS: See, I come from German descent. My father and my grandfather were German. They came from Germany. So right after we come to Poland, I was born. So you see, I can't remember all of that.

SIGRIST: Was your mother, where was your mother born?

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WILGUS: In Germany.

SIGRIST: So your mother and father were both born in Germany.

WILGUS: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the town...

WILGUS: Her name was Augusta. I don't remember the town. I wish I could.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it looked like when you were a little girl?

WILGUS: Right after I was born, there was a big farm. That's why we emigrated from Germany to Poland. Right after we got into Poland, I think my mother was carrying me then, so I was born in Poland.

SIGRIST: Did, did anyone ever tell you a story about the day you were born?

WILGUS: Well, my mother told me she was (she laughs) digging, harvesting potatoes. That's the only thing I

remember her telling me. She said, "I was digging potatoes. All of a sudden I got a (she laughs), a pain and I had to leave the hole and run home," where I was born.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) That's a great story. (Mrs. Wilgus laughs) Here, let me take this from you. (he takes the birth certificate from her hand and places it on the table) Do you remember the house that you lived in, in Poland?

WILGUS: Yes...

SIGRIST: Can you describe that, please?

WILGUS: It was a big farm house.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of? (a knock on the door can be heard in the background, a reporter and photographer from the local newspaper enter the room) Oh, we're going to pause just for a second. (break in tape) All right, we were talking about the farmhouse that you lived in, in Poland.

WILGUS: Well when we emigrated from Germany, see, I wasn't born then. I was born right after we got to, it was a big farmhouse with a lot of cattle and all because the people from Germany or from Poland need more, I, I would say cattle and stuff because they didn't have enough people farming. So that's why they got us from Germany to Poland. That's all I, and my mother was already carrying me so I was born right after we moved into the house. As I remember as I grew up in it, it's a big house, big farmhouse.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

WILGUS: I think it was made out of wood that, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how many rooms it had?

WILGUS: Well, I remember the, the big living room and then the kitchen was like a dining room or you'd call a bedroom. They had these tile things where they used to grow, I mean not grow but dry beans and peas and other, it was like a table made of

tile. And it went all the way up high. I don't know how many feet high. But, anyway, that's where they used to dry their peas and beans and all that. So that was like a, a little corridor and then it went into the, the kitchen. And that's where the ovens were to heat this thing to dry the beans. They had the kitchen and that oven and that's where they baked and cooked. That's what the kitchen was, 'cause I remember my sister got me out of the bed and she got me on this table which was all tile. And she was dressing me up and I didn't behave, so she gave me a jerk. And my father was a tailor and he had his iron. He must have been ironing something at the time and he put it down on the floor. And as my sister shook me, I fell over and I hit my forehead. I got a spot here yet. (she gestures to her forehead) So (she laughs) that was part of my story.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the furniture in the house?

WILGUS: Well, that I remember, it was just regular chairs of wood. The oven inside was brick and just like a regular oven. But we had a big living room

that I remember because later on they were having like an open house. They put new floors, it was an old farmhouse, they put in new floors. And then they had an open house. And I remember my Uncle Karl took me to dance with him, so I must have been about five or six years old. (she laughs) That I remember. From then on it was just farm work. They used to send me out watching the geese when they cha--, chase the geese out to the pond. They gave me a twig and I had to go and watch them and when they go astray I had to watch them, turn them back. So that's one part of me. And, and I remember sitting on a little pile of clay making little dolls while we were watching, watching the geese. Then I had to bring them back. When it was time for them to come in, I had to chase them all, round them up and bring them back. And after that, well, I had chores to do. My mother, in the barn she used to, when they cut, shear the sheep, we had to pick up the, the, the wool, put it like in baskets and then we had to pull it out and, and kind of twist it in our fingers so my mother could just spin it. Put it on a, like a, I don't know, wad anyway that's around it. We'd

turn it and put it around for her when she was spinning the yarn. And then they had these big machines and I used to watch the shuttle go back and forth. That's when they were weaving. Another thing they done, in the winter mostly, is thrash the wheat with big poles about that big. (she gestures) And on the end they, in the middle they got a, a leather part and then another big stick like. And they just would keep thrashing at that. That's the way they thrashed the wheat. And then I watch my mother going to the pond to wash clothes. She, they have like a board on a pond and they, another paddle, and they used to hit the, hit the clothes and take and dunk them in the water again. That's when my first dip in the water was. I slipped and fell in. My mother hollered, "Quick." It's a good thing my father was near the house. So he heard and he come running in with a hoe or a rake or something and he just got me with my clothing, got me out. That was my first encounter with water, (she laughs) dips, swim, whatever.

SIGRIST: What kind of clothes did people wear in Poland at

(Mrs. Wilgus laughs) at that time?

WILGUS: Well, most of them is what they wove. They didn't go out buying clothes. Once in a while, maybe. Because I remember coming over, my father was already in America and he wrote to my mother so that she'd dress us up good and (cold?), get some nice clothes. So I remember the nice dress I come over. (to her daughter-in-law) It reminds me of that nice jumper that you bought.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it in words, what it looked like, the dress?

WILGUS: It was just a plain dress like a jumper and it had a white collar on it. And I liked it and I wished that my, my aunt, when we come to America, she took all the clothes and she put them in a bundle and burned them. I don't know why, and I was kind of sorry. I said, "I wish you didn't destroy my nice, new dress. I just got it." The clothes at that, most of the clothes and like sheets for, for beds and all was woven by themselves.

SIGRIST: And who did that in your family?

WILGUS: My mother. She was always, in the wintertime mostly they had time because in the summer she had to go out and watch, watch the, the vegetables and things, where my father was out with the cattle and stuff.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

WILGUS: Frederick.

SIGRIST: Frederick. And tell me, tell me what he was like as a person.

WILGUS: You know, he looked a lot like you, only dark hair. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) He had really dark hair and none of my kids got 'em. Well, Bobby did, sort of.

SIGRIST: And, and what was his personality like?

WILGUS: Well, as I can remember (she laughs), you know how a father. He's always telling you, "Don't do this and don't do that." Send you out to do something.

But he was, he was good.

SIGRIST: And he was a farmer? Was he, he was farming in Poland? What did he do for a living in Poland?

WILGUS: He didn't stay in Poland long when we emigrated from Germany because he was a tailor by trade.

SIGRIST: That's right, you said that.

WILGUS: So he didn't stay long in Poland because he didn't like farming. So he ups and goes to Pennsylvania. I had an uncle living there, my mother's brother. He wrote and told them they need men in the mines, so my father hurried up and packed and went to Pennsylvania.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you did that?

WILGUS: Let's see. I must have been six.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your father leaving to go to America?

WILGUS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about him leaving?

WILGUS: I remember my mother crying and she says, "If you're going, why don't you take us?" 'cause we come in to my uncle's farmhouse. And we lived in there and, and he didn't like, my father didn't like farming. So he said, so my mother said to him, "If you're going out, if you think you're going to stay out there, why don't you take us with you?" (microphone disturbance) And he says, "Oh, well, I don't know whether, whether I'll find a rent for you right away."

SIGRIST: (adjusting the microphone) I just want you to bring your hand down.

WILGUS: "I have to find a rent for yous [sic] to come out there before, so when I go out there I'll see if I can find a rent. And I'm back to work in the mines. Then I'll send for yous [sic]." And that's how we happen to come to Pennsylvania. That was our first landing after we landed in America.

SIGRIST: Tell me, when you were still in Poland, what games did you play as a little girl?

WILGUS: There was no playing games. You had to always have a chore. I used to sneak out. I loved peas, green peas when they were growing. I used to sneak out, hide in the bean patch or peas patch. They'd have to look for me. "Where's Katherine? Where's Katherine?" (she laughs) My mother would laugh and she'd say, "I know where she is." (she laughs) So they'd find me in the bean patch. So most of the time we had, us children, was to watch the geese when they put them out to the ponds.

SIGRIST: What other animals did you have on the farm?

WILGUS: Oh, God. We had sheep. I used to watch them shear them in the barn. They do that mostly in the fall, the fall or winter. And we had goats. (she laughs) We had cows, horses and cats and dogs. You could name them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the names of any of your cats and dogs? Do you remember their names?

WILGUS: No, I don't think, I wouldn't remember.

SIGRIST: Okay. You laughed when you mentioned the goats. Is there a story about the goats that you remember?

WILGUS: Well, the only thing, when we go around anywhere near them, they go to buck you. You had to be careful, either had a twig or something to shoo them away from you. The, the cows I liked. I used to go pet them. But all the animals, we had a boar but it wasn't ours. It come from the woods, you know, the farms around.

SIGRIST: A boar, like a wild pig?

WILGUS: Pig, yeah. And he was on top of the roof and we kids were out there and he jumped on my brother and I lost my brother that way. He died. The boar killed him. And the men come running out and they killed the boar because he, if he had gone loose he would have got more kids in that way around the neighborhood.

SIGRIST: How old was your brother when he was killed?

WILGUS: He was about four years old.

SIGRIST: And, and what do you remember about what happened in the family after your brother died?

WILGUS: Well, there was the funeral. And another thing happened. They had the boy in the room in the casket for like visitors come, you know. And at night, when everything was quiet, they closed the door. They thought they closed the door. Either the cat got in there before or he sneaked in afterward. He bit the fingers off my brother in the casket. That I remember because I remember my mother standing against the casket crying. She says, "I wonder who left the door open or what." I don't know whether it was three or four finger the cat ate off. So you have to be careful of all those things.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

WILGUS: Augusta.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember her maiden name before she was  
married?

WILGUS: Her maiden name was Augusta...(she pauses)

MRS. WILGUS' DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: Was it Klimach? No? (looking at  
the document) It's here, if  
you can read it.

WILGUS: Yeah, I think it's, her maiden name is Augusta  
Klimach, yeah.

SIGRIST: Klimach. How do we spell Klimach?

WILGUS: (she laughs) You got me.

SIGRIST: (reading the document) K-L-I-M...

WILGUS: C-H...

SIGRIST: I-M-A-C-H.

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: It looks like something else after that. We're  
looking at the certificate again. Tell me what  
your mother's personality was like.

WILGUS: My mother was very gentle, very quiet. That's all I  
can remember about my mother.

SIGRIST: What, you mentioned that she had to do the laundry  
and that she wove the cloth. What were some of her  
other chores around the farmhouse?

WILGUS: Well, she had to go in and tend to the milking the  
cows. And whenever a cow or a horse had to come  
with a cold or whatever they call them, she had to  
be there to tend that, to see that it come out. She  
got lost in the wintertime. The, the horse was  
coming in and my father wasn't around. Nobody  
around and she was afraid to tend to it alone, so  
she got up and went to the neighbor, which was a  
about mile or a half a mile, to get help. And she  
fell in the cranberry bog when she, when she was  
coming back because it was snowy and she didn't  
know. So somehow she got out. I don't know who

got her out. She said she got herself out somehow. When she come home, she was all snowed in, you know, frozen over, but she got home. How she got home we don't know.

SIGRIST: What, who did the cooking in your family?

WILGUS: My mother.

WILGUS: What kind of food did you eat in Poland when you were growing up?

WILGUS: Oh, mostly vegetables. Beans, all their products, potatoes. They had to plant the potatoes. They had to dig them after. All the different vegetables, except I don't remember corn. I don't remember whether we had corn or not. I don't remember eating it.

SIGRIST: Did you eat any kind of meat?

WILGUS: It was all whole meat, cattle cut and killed or whatever. A cow or a bull or whatever. That's all. And then they'd store the meat when they

killed them. For the winter they store them in attics. They hang them up to dry. And after they dry, they take them down and put them in these cold cellars made out of mud like a hut. That's where they kept it cool. That's where they kept their milk cool.

SIGRIST: And what, what kind of food would your mother make for a special day, like for a holiday celebration, what?

WILGUS: (she laughs) There was no special. You had either beef, beef or veal and lamb, which they take down. Sometimes it's fresh when they kill, first kill it. You know what I didn't like? (she laughs) When they used to slaughter the pigs. They'd have it on the other side of the wall of the house. Two men hold the pig down and another man with a knife there. And us kids used to, were trying to watch. But when the pig began to squeal and I saw that knife gone down, I don't know why I eat pork because that, (she laughs) I couldn't stand pork for a long time. I couldn't eat it, to think of that. I saw that knife going down to his

throat. (she laughs) And there was my mother  
standing there with a little pan catching the blood  
and they made soup out of it after. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you celebrated Christmas in  
Poland?

WILGUS: Oh, we celebrate it nice. We used to go, dress, my  
mother would get us better dresses and we'd go to  
church. And we didn't ride. We had to walk  
maybe one or two miles, unless they had the sleigh  
and buggy that wasn't being used for something.  
We had these little, (addressing her daughter-  
in-law) what did they call them, Bev? Sleights,  
little sleighs?

SIGRIST: Like a little sleigh of some sort?

WILGUS: Yeah.

MRS. WILGUS' DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: Just, with a horse that pulls?

WILGUS: Yeah.

MRS. WILGUS' DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: A regular sleigh.

WILGUS: Well, they took us to church that way. And one Sunday, I remember then because there were, Russian Cossacks used to go by there a lot. They'd stop in the Christian churches and make a ruckus, either get a hold of somebody and start fighting with men. And I remember holding on to my mother when these guys come in. And they'd start fighting with the men. They want to break up the church. So I don't know how it happened after. My father must have taken us back in the sled, in the little bobsled or whatever.

SIGRIST: How did that feel, as a little girl, to be, to be in the middle of that?

WILGUS: Oh, it felt terrible. Crying, screaming, and these men fighting with the men because the men had to protect the church. They want to bust up everything.

SIGRIST: What kind of a church was it?

WILGUS: A Christian, a Lutheran church.

SIGRIST: It was a Lutheran church.

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was your family, they were Lutherans?

WILGUS: Yeah, we were Lutherans and we belonged to the  
Lutheran church. But we had, we didn't have it  
right in our town. We had to go out of town a  
little bit.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

WILGUS: Oh, my mother used to teach us the prayer mostly.  
What's the other, in the winter they used to have  
a tutor come and try to teach us children. I  
don't know we, because when I come to America, I had  
to go to catechism here.

SIGRIST: What language did you speak in Poland?

WILGUS: Polish.

SIGRIST: Polish. Did, did your family speak German at all?

WILGUS: Oh, yeah. My mother and father did. And my  
grandfather lived with us. They all spoke German  
and little by little my mother learned how to speak  
Polish. And that's how we learned. When I  
come to, we were somehow connected with the  
Russian, or we lived near their town or  
something because they used to come around and,  
you know, bother us people, so.

SIGRIST: Tell me, uh, do you remember any of the prayers that  
your mother taught you when you were a little  
girl?

WILGUS: Yeah, I remember the Polish prayer, the Creed.

SIGRIST: Can you say it in Polish?

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you say it for us on tape, slowly?

WILGUS: Sure. The first thing, I always bless myself. (she gestures and then she prays in Polish)

SIGRIST: Thank you very much.

WILGUS: I get out of breath. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: It's a lot to say. Well, tell me, when you were a little girl and your father had gone to America already, what did you know about America?

WILGUS: Not very much, only what, see, he was in Poland. He went to America. Then he come back from there. They had a strike in the mines, so he come back to Poland. And then, of course, my Uncle Karl wrote and told him, "The strike is over. You can come back." My father didn't like farm work. (she laughs) He liked his tailoring better, I guess. So, anyway, he worked in the mines already, so he went back again. That's when my mother told him, she says, "If you're going back, why don't you take us with you now?" And he says, "Well, the strike is over but then I'll have to look for a house and I, I'll wait till I see how things are

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going there. And then I'll send for you." And that's  
what he did.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the process of getting to  
leave Poland?

WILGUS: (she laughs, then pauses) Not very much. The only  
thing, I was, you know, kind of glad we were  
leaving, going to a new country, riding over the  
big ocean. That was it. (she laughs)

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your family packed to take with  
them to America? You mentioned the new dresses  
that you got. What else did you take?

WILGUS: Oh, my mother had woven cloth for beds, bedding and a  
lot of that, feathers. My father said, told her to  
bring a lot of tobacco from Poland. So we had a

big bag. I remember my mother tightening it. It was about that high (she gestures) with all the clothes. My aunt wanted a, a big stole, like a shawl, a great big one, cashmere. So my mother got two of them; one for my aunt and one for another friend. She had all that stuff, which we lost on our trip.

SIGRIST: May I ask why your father wanted tobacco from Poland?

WILGUS: Well, I guess he liked it better than the American.

SIGRIST: How, how did your father smoke? Did...?

WILGUS: He used to roll his own. He used to buy little packets of these papers and he used to roll his own. He done that for a long time. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about, did you have to be examined before you left Poland?

WILGUS: Oh, you went through all kinds of examinations, everything. I had an older sister, Helen. She was about thirteen or fourteen years old.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

WILGUS: Helen.

SIGRIST: Helen.

WILGUS: She couldn't stand the, the ship waving. She was sick all through the trip.

SIGRIST: Well, don't, don't tell me that yet. We haven't gotten you on the ship yet. Let's get you out of Poland first. What, what do you remember about leaving the farmhouse and leaving your family?

WILGUS: Well, I remember crying that we won't see all the horses and cows, all the other animals, of course, chickens and geese (she laughs) and what have you. When we were packing, we were crying near every one of the animals. You know how you feel losing them. We knew we'd never see them again. And then I remember my mother packing all the stuff in the bag. And then I remember them taking

us, see, it was kind of in the winter. They took  
us in these little sleds, bobsleds. I remember I was  
looking around and around to see the ground and  
all, although they were covered with snow. And then  
I remember them getting us into the train. When  
they threw the bag in, as small as I was, I  
thought to myself, "Gee, they're handling us like  
dogs." You know, they didn't have no sympathy, say  
you're going sit here, you're going to sit there.

They just through everything thing in. And then they  
pushed us in with our baggages and that's the way it  
was until we got to the train.

SIGRIST: Who is traveling? It's you and your mother and who  
else?

WILGUS: My sister Helen, my brother Marty, and myself.

SIGRIST: So is, is Helen, Helen is older than you?

WILGUS: Yeah, she was about eleven or, eleven or twelve.

SIGRIST: And how, is Marty older or younger than you.

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WILGUS: He's younger.

SIGRIST: Okay. So your mother and three children. Your  
father is in America...

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ... (he clears his throat) waiting for you. What do  
you remember about the train ride? Once you got  
on the train, where did the train go?

WILGUS: I don't remember when they stopped and started taking  
us out, whether that was right, whether we had to  
ride on a train again. I don't remember that part.  
But I know, I remember when we got on the ship.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to get on the ship? Do you remember  
that?

WILGUS: No. I thought it was right off the, the train that  
they brought us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the town where you, where  
you got on the ship? Where did you travel to

actually get to the ship?

WILGUS: That I don't know. You know, when you're a kid your mother is hanging on to one, hanging on to the other, so I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

WILGUS: Cunard, I think it was.

SIGRIST: It was, it was a ship from the Cunard Line.

WILGUS: Yeah, or the name of the ship was Cunard, no.

SIGRIST: That was the company, the Cunard...

WILGUS: The company, yeah.

SIGRIST: ...company.

WILGUS: The Cunard Line, or whatever, yeah.

SIGRIST: Right, the Cunard Line. What did you think, as a little girl, when you saw the ship?

WILGUS: I don't know. I can't remember how I did feel. All I, you know how kids, you're going to ride on a big ship and cross the ocean, so you're all excited. But after we got on it, we didn't, we wasn't so excited. My sister Helen was sick all the way through the whole trip. She couldn't stand that. All she'd do, she'd throw up every time they bring the meal. So she changed from one bed to the other so they wouldn't find out. They'd put her in the hospital and she didn't want to go so she'd change in my bed. The next morning they'd find her in another bed. And she'd do the same thing so they couldn't do nothing with her.

Uh, when we got the ship, big ship...

SIGRIST: Well, let, let me talk some more about the ship. Can you describe for me what the ship looked like where you slept in the ship?

WILGUS: Well, it was just like any other room with these cots and a lot of people, you know, here and there. And they had a place to go for your, uh, toilets and things like that. My brother Marty and I, of

course, we were kids so my mother couldn't keep track of us. We'd go way down. We'd stand and we walked all around the ship. We'd stand in, in front of it and watch the water going, twirling. And then one of the captains come around and he chased us away. he said, "You kids better get out of here because you can, when the ship comes on big waves or something you'll fall in." So he explained all that to us. Then the, the only thing we were afraid is in the bathroom. We were afraid to sit on the bowl because (she laughs) we thought we were going to fall in. And then, of course, we, when you're getting ready then you've got to start packing to get off the ship. When we got off the big ship, we got on another small one. Then, even as young as I was, I was wondering, "Now where are we going?" because going from the big ship and on the little one. I think that's when they brought us to Castle Garden [i.e. Ellis Island] from that, uh, they don't say "Castle Garden" no more. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Castle Garden is the old, the old fashioned name for Ellis Island.

WILGUS: Yeah, Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

WILGUS: I only remember when we got into Castle Garden, uh,  
Ellis...

SIGRIST: That's okay. You can call it Castle Garden.

WILGUS: They brought us a brown bag with a sandwich in it, a  
banana and an orange, which I never had before. I  
didn't know what to do with it. Then a, a, a, I  
think it was a Jewish man, was right next to me and  
he said, "Go ahead and eat it." He told us to peel  
it. (she laughs) And I didn't know whether to  
eat it with the peel on or what. (she laughs) That  
was our first meal in America.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what it looked like inside of Castle  
Garden?

WILGUS: You can't really think because there's so many people  
mixing, you know. Everybody is looking for their  
spot where they have to get, pick up their luggage



tag, put her own tag on and took it. So she was one of them that went with us. She even borrowed money from my folks to come to United States. But no, she says no, she didn't see it. And she went on the first ship. There was one that left before us. So we thought she might have taken it, put her tag on and took it and went off.

SIGRIST: Did your father meet you at Ellis Island? Did anyone come and meet you there?

WILGUS: No.

SIGRIST: How long do you think you had to stay there?

WILGUS: Not very long because a truck came and, a train rather. We got on a train and we come to the Pennsylvania station and there there was a truck waiting for us. See, my father was working so he had it all arranged for the truck to pick us up.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of that train ride to Pennsylvania?

WILGUS: Oh, not much. Just looking out the window and that's all, wondering what it's going to be like. And we come to my Uncle Karl's and I had cousins there I remember. The first thing I saw was this little, trucks going up and down. I looked through his window and that was the mine, uh, there was a breaker there. They have cars going into the, the breakers that the men in the mines, see, they blast it. That's how they get these big chunks. They put it in the car, in these little cars and they take them to the breaker where they trash them. See,...

SIGRIST: That breaks them up.

WILGUS: Yeah. Three different sets where the little, uh, cars I saw was the, it was like sand. It, it sifts through, as they crack the coal this sifts through and falls through a screen. And these little cars fill up and they go up and down. They go up and empty and come back. They have a big, like a big mountain of this, uh, like ashes that in the winter time when you're traveling on the



WILGUS: Well, see, we were, I was little so I spoke Polish and all my cousins, my Uncle Karl's children, spoke German. But I know I wanted to, you know, the kids were saying, "Let's go and get some candy for her." So they took me to a little Jewish store, you know, like they have those little stores. And I, and the lady says to me, "What do you want, little girl?" And I didn't know how to answer, see? I'm pointing at this (she laughs) and that. Then she realized that I just came over because she didn't know it. And then we stayed there I don't know how long, a week or so, at Karl's, Uncle Karl's because he had a family of his own. So my father got a rent for us so we went to, uh...

SIGRIST: Did they put you into school right away? (she shakes her head "no") No.

WILGUS: They didn't do that like they do now. Years, five, six years old or four, you got to be in school. They didn't. I didn't go to public school at all. I went to parochial school for a little while and

I was just studying catechism and ABCs. (she laughs) They showed me the map and I was trying to point out, (she laughs) I didn't know one from the other. They says, "Where's America?" (she laughs) And I couldn't. I remember that was my first lesson. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: How did you learn English?

WILGUS: I don't know. It just come natural, I guess. (she laughs) So quick. You know, I remember playing with the kids Ring Around The Roses and all that. I remember I ate some poppies at a christening. I don't know if it was my younger brother's christening. We were playing out in the back field. They had a back field in back of the house. We were playing there and I picked some of them poppies. I didn't know what they were. And I ate them. I, I got hallucinated. I was climbing the walls. They said, "She must have ate some of that." So they had to get the doctor or, or whatever they done to me I don't know but I, I remember the kids trying to help me out of the field that we were in. And then they got me home so the

people took me to the, whether it was the hospital  
or what I wouldn't know.

SIGRIST: Was, was your father working in the mines at this  
time?

WILGUS: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Yes, he was.

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And did your mother get a job when you first came to  
the United States?

WILGUS: No, she didn't. She stayed home to take care of us.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your father's job was in the  
mines?

WILGUS: Well, he had several. When they're in there, they  
make these little holes in the walls of the mine.  
Then they put these scribs [ph], they're  
something like, uh, you know, and they have,

what is it? Well, anyway, they're like  
firecrackers. They put them in the holes and they  
have to get away quick because when, when they  
start burning and they blast. And that's when  
they loosen up the coal. It comes on, down from  
the top and it comes from all sides. And that's,  
that's when the men pick that coal up and put it in  
the cars. And they got a man taking and pulls out  
cars, taking them to this breaker where they crack  
it up, you know...

SIGRIST: Right, which you explained to us...

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember an incident when there was an  
accident in the mines?

WILGUS: Oh, yeah. They blow a whistle when, when one of  
these explosions, you know, if the person is already  
dead it blows three blows, the whistle. If it is  
one or two, then the person who is there might be  
just hurt. But then all the men around the mines,  
you know, rush in to get the person out. They

have to come out in these shafts and elevators like.  
All the men run out of the houses, run out to see  
because each one has a man working there. So  
they know that if it blows once, they're only  
hurt. And we all used to run out of our beds at  
night to go to the shaft to see who they're going  
to bring up. That was one part of it. And we  
used to, when they filled the cars up, the big cars,  
you know, with the coal, it's already divided, the big  
(P?) coal and the (A?). So we'd all run out to  
pick, some of the kids, right under the car. Pick up  
buckets of coal, pile it on the side of the creek,  
the creek was right across, save it and then my  
father, when he's home from work, help us to pick  
it up, carry it home. That's how we got our fuel.  
We used to pick it, and wood the same way. If  
they're doing any carpentry work around in the  
shaft, then whatever thrown out, the wood is  
not very good solid. So we'd go and pick it up,  
carry it home for fuel. That's how we used to  
supply our fuel for heat.

SIGRIST: And that was in the apartment or the...

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When you say he found a, a rental place for you, what kind of a, what kind of a building was that where you went to live?

WILGUS: That was like a regular building?

SIGRIST: Was it, was it a house or an apartment?

WILGUS: Yeah, no, it was a house.

SIGRIST: How did you...

WILGUS: We had to rent the whole thing.

SIGRIST: And you heated it with the coal and the wood.

WILGUS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you burn the coal and the wood?

WILGUS: In the stove. They have the old fashioned stoves.  
And, uh...

SIGRIST: And how did you light the inside of that house?

WILGUS: Lamps.

SIGRIST: What kind of a lamp?

WILGUS: Like, uh, kerosene lamp.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you have a story associated with the kerosene lamps at all? Do you, what sticks out in your mind about lighting the house with lamps?

WILGUS: Well, you had a lamp in every room in case you need it. But you always carried, if you're going from the kitchen, you had to have the lamp lit to go in the other room if you want to find something. The house inside was not much different than the houses here before. Of course, now they're different kind of houses but there's a lot of the old fashioned houses here yet.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing for you to get adjusted to

in the United States?

WILGUS: I didn't seem to mind it at all. I think they adjusted pretty well. Me, I had the kids to play with until I was old enough to go out to work which was thirteen years old.

SIGRIST: And what was the first job that you got?

WILGUS: (she laughs) Weeding carrots and vegetables on a farm. My next job was working in, because my sister already got a job in a cigar shop, so she got me the job, the leaves. You know how they are, and they have a stem in the center. So I got a job doing that; strip one side, take the leaf, put it on one side, strip it again and put it on the other side and then throw the stem away. So I was doing that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you got paid for that?

WILGUS: (she laughs heartily) I don't remember. I know it wasn't very much.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember what you did with the money with  
which you got paid?

WILGUS: Of course. Give it to my father and mother. They  
had to feed us. (she laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing for your mother to get  
adjusted to?

WILGUS: I don't know. She never said. She didn't seem to  
mind it. She seemed to like it because she didn't  
go out to work or anything because she only stayed  
home for the time.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to go back to, to Europe?

WILGUS: No.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever go by himself?

WILGUS: Oh, he went twice back and forth before he even  
brought us, so...

SIGRIST: Right, but after you were here did he ever go back?

WILGUS: No.

SIGRIST: No.

WILGUS: Neither of us. I don't think any of us want to go  
back. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Did, did your family become United States citizens?

WILGUS: Not right away. For quite a while. I got my... (she  
reaches for her papers on the table)

SIGRIST: Right. After we're done we'll take look at, at your  
papers here. What, who was the first in the  
family to become a citizen?

WILGUS: Both me and my brother because, see, we didn't know.  
When they tried to get our certificate from the  
Ellis Island and it burned, part of it. So all  
the, we got, all our records were gone. But then,  
when my brother and I were going to get, try to get  
our citizen papers, my brother went to Boston  
and he searched around and he found them. He

said they, when the fire was there, some of the records and things they saved and sent them to Boston, (though they were from Boston section?). So that's how we got, my brother Marty, he got the papers from Boston and then we went for our citizen papers.

SIGRIST: And how old were you?

WILGUS: Thirty six.

SIGRIST: You were thirty six. And how did it feel when you became a citizen?

WILGUS: It felt good. My tears were running when I held the little flag. (she laughs) It was very nice. I was proud of it and I like every bit of it.

SIGRIST: Well, we, we just have a couple minutes left and I want to ask you when did you get married?

WILGUS: 19, October 19th. What year, I don't remember.

MRS. WILGUS' DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: Must have been 193--...

WILGUS: 1935.

MRS. WILGUS' DAUGHTER-IN-LAW: 5.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the man that you married?

WILGUS: Wilgus.

SIGRIST: Wilgus. And what was his first name?

WILGUS: Well, according to his mother it was Albert but everybody called him Henry. Now why, his step-father took him to school and he couldn't pronounce Albert so he gave his name as Henry. And from then on it was always Henry because that's where it was given in school.

SIGRIST: And how many children did you have?

WILGUS: Two boys.

SIGRIST: And what were their names?

WILGUS: Robert and Henry.

SIGRIST: I guess my final question for you is how do you think of yourself? Do you think of yourself as being American or do you think of yourself as being Polish? How do you think of yourself?

WILGUS: I think of myself as American. (she laughs) I would never think of going back there. (she laughs) Not that it wasn't I had any hardship because my folks were good to me when my father was sewing, tailoring. But he never liked that. His grandfather lived with us and he had a big beard I remember. We used to comb it out for him and, uh, my father would say, "Well, I'm not going to be here very long. I don't like this job and I'm not going to stay." And that's how, he was always writing to my Uncle Karl to let, give him the information how they're doing in the mines.

SIGRIST: And that's how he got you all to America.

WILGUS: And then, yeah, he had his mind made up on the mines.

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SIGRIST: Mrs. Wilgus, thank you very much for letting me ask  
you these questions. You've been absolutely  
wonderful. (Mrs. Wilgus laughs) It's been a  
great interview.

WILGUS: I gave you what I could. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Katherine  
Wilgus on Friday, August 16th, 1996 here in Agawam,  
Massachusetts.