EI-813
JERRY ZIELONKA (JAN ZDZISLAW)
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST
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POLAND, 1926
AGE 3.5

SHIP: THE MAJESTIC
PORT:
RESIDENCES:
- POLAND:
- US:

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, September 28th, 1996. I'm in Chicopee, Massachusetts, and I'm here with Jerry Zielonka. Mr. Zielonka came from Poland in 1926. He was three years old at that time.

ZIELONKA: And a half.

SIGRIST: Three and a half.

ZIELONKA: Three and a half.

SIGRIST: Mr. Zielonka, can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

ZIELONKA: May 17th, 1923.

SIGRIST: And can you give me your name as it was in Poland?

ZIELONKA: Zdz-islaw Jan Zielonka.

SIGRIST: Can you spell all that for me please?

ZIELONKA: Ah-

SIGRIST: Actually, I have it written down. You can just read it off.

ZIELONKA: In Polish it's a Z-D-Z with a hyphen I-S, L with a curved line on the top, A-W.

SIGRIST: Yes, and Jan?

ZIELONKA: J-A-N.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Were you named after anyone in your family?

ZIELONKA: Not in my family. I think my mother went to a bank or something and heard the name and fell in love with it and she saddled me with it for the rest of my life. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: And when did you begin calling yourself Jerry?

ZIELONKA: Ah, I went through two-thirds of my life being called Zeke and people stumbling trying to pronounce my name and finally I settled on Gerry because supposedly Zdz-islaw is supposed to translate to St. Jerome. So I thought that would be the easy way out.

SIGRIST: I see. How old were you when you-

ZIELONKA: Decided to change?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ZIELONKA: Oh, I would say thirty-five.

SIGRIST: Quite a long time. [unclear]

ZIELONKA: I struggled a long time with that name.

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Where in Poland were you born?

ZIELONKA: Poznan in Polish, Posen in German. That's a German sector of Poland because Poland was partitioned in three sectors. There was a German, a Russian and an Austrian sector. That was strictly a German city. So in German it's Posen.

SIGRIST: P-O-S-E-N.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where in Poland is that city? [unclear]

ZIELONKA: It' not too far from the Pole-Polish German border -- maybe, I think, a couple hundred miles. Because the Germans hit that first in 1939 and wiped out my birth certificate records that were in the administration buildings there.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. So fairly close to the German border, probably. Excuse me?

ZIELONKA: Can you hear me?

SIGRIST: Yes. Oh, yeah. So far the tape recorder's working, the microphone's working. It's great. Do you know anything about your birth? Did your mother tell you anything about the day that you were born? A story about when she delivered you?

ZIELONKA: No. I know the witness because it's in my Polish birth certificate. That's about all I know of my birth.

SIGRIST: Well, why don't we begin by talking about your father? What was his name?

ZIELONKA: His name was Frank Florian Zielonka.

SIGRIST: Can you spell-is Frank spelled any differently?

ZIELONKA: No, just the normal Frank. Francisek in Polish.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ZIELONKA: Ah, I'll have to write it first.

SIGRIST: All right, write it and then spell it. You can write it right there.

ZIELONKA: Here? No.

SIGRIST: You can write it right on the left. Fine. [pause] Okay, if you can just say that out loud, spell it.

ZIELONKA: Okay, his name was Francisek, F-R-A-N-C-I-S-E-K; I believe is the Polish spelling.

SIGRIST: And his middle name was Florian.

ZIELONKA: Florian, F-L-O-R-I-A-N.

SIGRIST: Okay. Let me grab the pen [unclear]. And what do you know about his family background?

ZIELONKA: I don't know too much. I get little odds and ends here, but I imagine that they were farmers. I'm quite sure, rather than other types over there. I believe so. I never knew my grandfather and that's about all I know about my father's relatives.

SIGRIST: Did your father ever talk about his own childhood or his own growing up at all?

ZIELONKA: I can't recall some of the little incidents about him being in the old country. I guess maybe my sister would be more cognizant of those little tales.

SIGRIST: I--I guess what I'm asking you is, did he ever-did he like to talk about the past, I guess is the question?

ZIELONKA: Not really. Not really. My father was not much of a communicator, anyway, so.

SIGRIST: Well, why don't you tell me a little bit about how he ended up in America in the first place and-

ZIELONKA: Well, I don't know what the instances were, but he came over in 1905 at the age of either fourteen or fifteen, he told me, and I believe he came to Jewett City, Connecticut.

SIGRIST: Jewett City, that's J-E-W-E-T-T.

ZIELONKA: Correct.

SIGRIST: C-I-T-Y.

ZIELONKA: Because they had what they called cotton mills there run by Slater. That was-he was one of the first to put cotton mills in New England and in the process he met my mother. She came over I think a year or so later, probably at the same age, fourteen or fifteen. They met each other and they got married in that church, St. Mary's in Jewett City, but the interesting fact is that I got married in the same church twenty-six years later. So I guess there was more opportunity here in Chicopee, so he came to Chicopee-or they came to Chicopee.

SIGRIST: Not twenty-six years after they were married?

ZIELONKA: Yes, I got married twenty-six years in the same church that they got married in.

SIGRIST: Twenty-six years.

ZIELONKA: Twenty-six years. That's a little interesting story there.

SIGRIST: Okay.

ZIELONKA: About how I met my wife and thing.

SIGRIST: Wouldn't you-twenty-six years from 190-

ZIELONKA: Oh, they got married in 1911.

SIGRIST: 1911.

ZIELONKA: I got married in 1948, but in the same church.

SIGRIST: I see. Okay.

ZIELONKA: I confused you.

SIGRIST: Just wanted to clarify that.

ZIELONKA: Yeah. Okay, where am I? So I guess-

SIGRIST: They got married in Jewett City.

ZIELONKA: They went-yeah, and they came to Chicopee. I guess opportunities were better so he went to work at Fiske Rubber. It's now US Royal or something. And he spent the rest of his time-life there working in the same place. In the meantime, they still had interest in the old country. So they went back, and I don't know under what conditions. But the first two times that they went over, but the second visit I guess my father went over with his family. There was only two and my mother, but he had to leave her there and she got trapped in a little village in southern Poland in World War Two alone.

SIGRIST: World War One.

ZIELONKA: I mean, I'm sorry, World War One. Thank you, and very interesting story she recounted about-

SIGRIST Can you tell me some of those stories that you remember?

ZIELONKA: Yeah, they were in a village, there's mountains on each side. Okay, the Russians are on one side, the Germans and Austrians are on-on the other. And it was always they'd have a push and they'd take the village, the Russians --- and a couple weeks, a couple months later Austro-Austro-Germans would take the village. And it was a process. And during the center -- and the shells (artillery shells) are going overhead. And then one factor would come into the village and she recounts where they brought Russian wounded into the house and laid 'em on the kitchen floor. One poor person was shot through the mouth and kept pointing to his pocket, and what my mother gathered was he had a picture of his wife and children and he wanted her to write 'em. I don't know what happened to the individual.

Another story was the Russians came in again and they had been up there for months and didn't get much to eat. And she had some milk heating for one of the infants and a Russian soldier came in, enlisted man, and grabbed the milk and out of the pot. It was just about scalding hot, and started to drink it and a Russian officer came in and they had these whips, whatever you all 'em. And he saw that and laid his cheek open from his forehead to his chin. That was-that was what the relationship was then between the officers in the Russian army and an enlisted man. In fact, a Russian could not personally touch a Russian officer. That's another thing.

And then she recounts where the most dreaded thing in the Russian army were the Russian Cossacks. You know, they were-had a bad reputation and they heard that they were coming into the town. So the whole village went out and hid out in the woods. They feared 'em so much. They figured they'd kill 'em and butcher 'em and everything else. But my mother said that, "Whatever's going to happen, I'm not going out in the woods." So she just crawled into bed with her two kids, Cossacks came in, came in the house, looked at 'em, never touched 'em and that was it. At least she was comfortable by being a fatalist.

And then she recounts how one or the other armies would come in and get all the live animals. They had chickens and a pig and they'd roast 'em over the fire and the Russians would dance and play music and, you know, normal people that had a break. And let's see, that's about all I can recount.

Oh, the one million men. She claims that she saw close to a million men walk by that village constantly. She says, "You cannot"-when they had a big push at one time here --- she says, "You cannot imagine how much a million men is." She said they walked constantly in companies and formations for three weeks. That was supposedly close to a million men. I can believe that. You can't imagine how much a million men are. That's about all I can recount for now.

SIGRIST: Had your father gone back to Jewett City? Was he there during World War One or had he gone back to America?

ZIELONKA: No, no, he went back to America.

SIGRIST: He did.

ZIELONKA: He may have been afraid of being drafted.

SIGRIST: Sure.

ZIELONKA: Maybe that's why he came back.

SIGRIST: Sure.

ZIELONKA: But anyway.

SIGRIST: You mentioned your mother had two children at that point.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: These would be-are these your two oldest siblings?

ZIELONKA: The two oldest, yeah.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

ZIELONKA: Oldest was Stanley and the girl was Cazzy, Cashmira.

SIGRIST: Your sister who lives nearby.

ZIELONKA: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

ZIELONKA: Ah, Stella Elizabeth Konarski is her maiden.

SIGRIST: Can you spell K-her maiden name?

ZIELONKA: K-O-N-A-R-S-K-I.

SIGRIST: Thank you, and is Stella-is that an English version of a name or is that-was that her name?

ZIELONKA: No, the Polish is Stanistawa.

SIGRIST: Oh-oh.

ZIELONKA: You going to make me pronounce that? I mean, write-yeah, I can do it.

SIGRIST: Give it a shot and see if you can do it.

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah. I got it written down everywhere.

SIGRIST: See, we take these interviews and we type 'em up so they can be read and we just like to make sure everything is spelled correctly.

ZIELONKA: This thing with the little thing on there, it looks like a T, it's actually a W.

SIGRIST: Ah.

ZIELONKA: I don't know if you're familiar with the Polish alphabet.

SIGRIST: No, I'm not.

ZIELONKA: But it's completely different from-

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So you basically have to spell a Polish word using English letters. [pause]

ZIELONKA: So it would be Stanistawa Eliziebeta, which is Stanis S-T-A-N-I-S, the T with the wing that looks like a-that's pronounced a W. A-W-A. Eliziebeta, E-L-I-Z-I-E-B-E-T-A, I believe. That's the closest I can come.

SIGRIST: Thanks, and you already spelled her-her maiden name for us.

ZIELONKA: Konarksi, yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your mother's background? Her family background.

ZIELONKA: Nothing just about. I don't-I can't trace-she talked a lot about her father, which is remarried again and she had a lot of stepchildren. I mean stepsisters over here. She told me that the name Konarski translated K-A-N-R. Kanr is a branch. Sometimes in the Polish dynasties in the past, S-K-I, that meant it was aristocracy. So supposedly Konarski was a branch of the aristocracy. This is what my mother told me. I don't know if it's true. Do you have any idea how people were named over there then?

SIGRIST: No, but explain it. Explain it on tape.

ZIELONKA: All right. You know what my name Zielonka means?

SIGRIST: That's your-your last name is Zielonka. No, what does it mean?

ZIELONKA: Okay, ziel is green and onka is meadow. So it's probably green meadow. Or it could be zielon is green and you put a K-A on there, which means just green. I was considering change my name to either Green Meadow or Green.

SIGRIST: Now-

ZIELONKA: Do you know how? -

SIGRIST: Can I just ask a pronunciation question?

ZIELONKA: Sure.

SIGRIST: The Z that Zielonka begins with.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I'm saying a Z, but you're really doing more of like a J sound, a J.

ZIELONKA: That's the Polish heavy Z. Instead of Zielonka, it's Jielonka.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, okay.

ZIELONKA: Jee instead of Zee.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZIELONKA: But anyway, how they named 'em. This was the old society where all there were was landowners and they had serfs or whatever you want to call 'em. Actually, those people, peasants, belonged to the landowner or the aristocracy. So how did they name people? Well, if a guy lived in a meadow, they called him Onka, with a K-A or something. If the guy reminded the aristocrat of looking like a rat, they named him Sczur, which means rat.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ZIELONKA: You're a difficult man.

SIGRIST: Didn't know this would be a spelling test. Someone some day will be very thankful that you're explaining all this.

ZIELONKA: I believe it's S-C-Z-U-R, which means rat. He was my oilman for a long time. Very well known family here. Or like my step cousins, their name is Tluscz. Tluscz, which means fat.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

ZIELONKA: T-L-U-S-Z. I mean, excuse me, T-L-U-S-C-Z. Tluscz, fat. Or the man or somebody reminded the aristocrat of a pot, so they call him Potma, or maybe he made pots.

SIGRIST: When you-so the aristocrat, am I to understand then that-that-the peasantry all sort of lived under the authority of-of a regional landowner, aristocrat.

ZIELONKA: Definitely.

SIGRIST: And that it was-

ZIELONKA: I mean this probably father back about your talking about the twelfth to the sixteenth century or something like that.

SIGRIST: And then it was-

ZIELONKA: Just like in England. Just like Smith got named Smith because he-he did that for a living or whatever, you know. But whatever it came into their mind they reminded 'em, that was-it was his prerogative to name the people. They actually did-did it that way.

SIGRIST: Let's get back to your mother.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like? When you think back on your mother, what are some of her distinguishing-

ZIELONKA: How can you describe a mother in so few words?

SIGRIST: Well, just-just a few-just a few reflections on what she was like as a person.

ZIELONKA: All right, intelligent, energetic. Very intelligent.

SIGRIST: Had she been schooled in Poland?

ZIELONKA: Not much. Not much. Not much. But she read a lot probably. I don't know what her schooling was. I have no idea. She was outgoing, loving. What are you going to say about a mother? [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Just trying to get an idea of what she was-

ZIELONKA: She was a go-getter, yeah. She was the driving force, rather than my father in a relationship.

SIGRIST: When World War One ended.

ZIELONKA: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: What was the communication between your mother and father after the war?

ZIELONKA: Well, I guess he came over and brought her back.

SIGRIST: Brought her back to the US.

ZIELONKA: Then they went over back again and that's when they went-well, they were in-somewhere in southern Poland. Then they want to Posen. and I believe that they had-they owned a tenement building and what do you-how do you call it? A bar or place of-pub, whatever you call it. And this is the interesting part. In 1923, the year I was born, they had decided that they would go back to the United States. So they sold their bar or pub and their tenement and they got cash for it in German marks. In 1923, I don't know if you know your history, but the German mark inflated to where it was exactly nothing and she makes the comparison like-it was like taking money and throwing it into the stove to keep warm. That's how absolutely useless it was, all their money. They lost everything before they came over here. In fact, I think I got a hundred thousand German mark up there or something that's worthless. But that's interesting.

SIGRIST: Did they have any other stories about coping with that kind of inflation, just on a day-to-day basis? Did your mother-'

ZIELONKA: That was the outrageous instance. I don't know about the other.

SIGRIST: I just wondered if she had a story about trying to buy bread at that time.

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah. You needed like ten wheelbarrows for a loaf of bread of German marks. High denominations, besides. That was that 1923-year. That's the year we came over and then when we came over, we wanted to come over as a family sans my father because he was already over here. But one of my sisters had infantile paralysis and they wouldn't even consider her coming over. So we had to leave her over there and she finally came over here in 1931.

SIGRIST: So were there more children born, other than Stan and-and Cashmira? Were there other brothers and sisters?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Oh, could you name 'em for me, please?

ZIELONKA: Okay, the five were Stanley, Cazzy, Francis, Wanda and myself -- in that order of birth.

SIGRIST: I see, and your father when-when you came to the United States in 1926, was your father here already again?

ZIELONKA: Yes.

SIGRIST: He was.

ZIELONKA: In fact, I just found out this week looking different things up that he got his citizen--- citizenship papers one month before we came over. I guess that's why-how we got over here because he was a citizen. And there's this nice little story I got for you later on about the-we were citizens when we came over from the fact that my father was a citizen before I was born. I think-wait a minute. I made an error. I think he was-he had to be a citizen before I was born, because I was a citizen when I came over by that factor. And so he came and picked us up. I recount some things from Poland. I recount some things coming over on the boat at three and a half.

SIGRIST: That's what I'd like to talk about next.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What you actually remember from being in Poland and what you remember or were told about the experience of getting to America. Let's start with what you remember about Poland.

ZIELONKA: Well, very little at three and a half, but I remember coming. I guess it was New York. Of course, I didn't know at the time and I was fascinated by one of these buoys with a bell on it and a horn, and it was very foggy. And in Poland, all I recall is vaguely. I remember my mother made me a white Easter suit and I was walking along and this must have been somewhere out on a farm and they had these pits where they put manure, and I fell in the manure pit with my white Easter suit. That I recall. I remember we had somewhere a nanny goat and I was deathly afraid of that little nanny-nanny goat. But that's about all I can remember at that age.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the actual place where you lived?

ZIELONKA: No.

SIGRIST: The apartment or the house?

ZIELONKA: My sister got all-has all the details. Believe me, she has.

SIGRIST: Well, I'm interested in what you remember, too, though. Well, tell me what you know about getting on the ship and-and coming to this country. Do you know what the name of the ship was?

ZIELONKA: No, but my sister certainly does.

SIGRIST: Okay. Did your mother ever tell you any stories about-about dealing with you as a baby or the other children during the whole immigration experience?

ZIELONKA: Outside of the experience with the World War Two, not much but I do remember her-

SIGRIST: World War One?

ZIELONKA: Huh?

SIGRIST: World War One.

ZIELONKA: I'm sorry, I keep thinking of where I was in World War Two, so I got a block. Ah, she recounts what-I guess she lived in southern Poland up near the Carpathians. Because when my father married her, they used to joke with each other about he was a flatlander and she was a mountain-mountain girl, and that was a thing going between 'em. So that was kind of interesting. But evidently she lived there, the mou- bottom of the Carpathians. She used to say how beautiful the land was, especially the birches. She mentioned birches.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your mother packed to take with her and the children when she came over in 1926?

ZIELONKA: I can't help you much because I was only three a half, but if you want details like that, oh, Cazzy's got tons of 'em. It would be -- it w-- be --all depend on how much time you have for details.

SIGRIST: Well, it's worth-

ZIELONKA: She'll keep you going for hours.

SIGRIST: It's worth asking because-

ZIELONKA: Oh, certainly.

SIGRIST: You never know, you might-

ZIELONKA: Certainly.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, so your memory pops in when you're in New York and you see the buoy in the harbor when [unclear].

ZIELONKA: [Superposed] Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What's your next memory? Do you remember anything about being at Ellis Island for any reason?

ZIELONKA: I recounted the only thing I remember.

SIGRIST: You did, but that was before we turned the tape recorder on.

ZIELONKA: Oh! I think I remember being in a large room with a lot of people, very high ceiling or something. And I was-I think I remember pillars or columns. That sticks in my mind vaguely. I remember having to take a shower with my mother. That's all I can remember about that. All I could remember was there was an awful lot of mist and water and that was it, and I think that's about all I can tell you about Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Well, then, where does your memory pop in? What's your next memory?

ZIELONKA: After that?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ZIELONKA: It's almost continuous.

SIGRIST: Go ahead. Tell me what you remember.

ZIELONKA: Okay. I remember coming over on a train to come from New York City to Chicopee because I was fascinated by these green insulators on the telephone poles. I remember the train. I remember our first place of residence. We moved quite often.

SIGRIST: What can you tell me about the first residence? Can you-can you walk me through it somehow?

ZIELONKA: I think it was right in the center of Chicopee on Center Street. There's a furniture store there now or something.

SIGRIST: Was it a house? An apartment?

ZIELONKA: Ah, we rented.

SIGRIST: But was it a house or an apartment?

ZIELONKA: It was a house.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ZIELONKA: Yeah, we rented. It was next to the Polish National Home. That's the very famous Polish place in Chicopee.

SIGRIST: You smiled when you said that. Is there a story that you have about living next door to that place?

ZIELONKA: Not really, but you know how children's minds work? I remember somehow out in the yard I found a roll of fine wire, copper wiring on a spool and that was my treasure. So I buried it and all I can remember is I know where I buried it. It's under that furniture store still there. I mean. It's odd how things go through your mind.

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about living in that-that first apartment? How long were you there for, do you know?

ZIELONKA: We moved a not--- a lot. I can't count how many months or years or something like we moved. I think every year all over Chicopee.

SIGRIST: Why was that?

ZIELONKA: I think my mother was displeased with either locations, neighbors or something and when she didn't like something, she did

something about it. Oh, the interesting-the trolleys coming down Center Street. They were all trolleys. I remember they had the overhead rail (electrical pickups) and I used to stand out there and watch it when the rollers went through the junctions and they would spark. It was fascinating when I was a child. That something that you're after, or is that dumb?

SIGRIST: Sure, any of these glimpses of memory are very-very interesting.

ZIELONKA: And of course holidays. God, like Easter and Palm Sunday, that was a big, great big affair then.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

ZIELONKA: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And in America, how would you celebrate Easter here in Chicopee when you were a kid? What was the-

ZIELONKA: Well, first there was Palm Sunday and then-what did we have for Easter to eat? I can't remember. I certainly remember Christmas, but it was a big affair. Everybody bought new clothes and dressed up and certainly had to go to Easter mass and you greeted everybody coming out and it was a big affair.

[END OF SIDE A]] [BEGIN SIDE B]

SIGRIST: Did the priest ever come to your house for any reason?

ZIELONKA: They used to come every New Years or something. They used to come here. I forget what they call it, but they blessed the house and they put this crayon up on top of your-top of your door and it would stay there. And then you pay voluntary-voluntarily something for the organist or something, a donation, but that was -- they used to come to the house and call.

SIGRIST: Who was the more religious in your family, mom or dad?

ZIELONKA: I think they were pretty close to the same.

SIGRIST: And how would that-

ZIELONKA: They were Catholics.

SIGRIST: How would that-?

ZIELONKA: They weren't-oh, what's the word? Yeah, they're just Catholics. They followed the normal Catholic. They didn't pray constantly all day or nothing like that, you know, but they prayed and they went to their thing and raised us up as Catholics.

SIGRIST: How did you practice your religion at home?

ZIELONKA: Not that stringently. We did not pray at meals or stuff, I don't think. We did at certain holiday functions or stuff, and at Christmas you had this thing where-. Oh, great, this is for years. I think it's still done. You have what you call the food and all, everybody gets around and you leave a chair open for the one that isn't there. They might come in as a visitor, and then you got what they have a call Oplatek. It's a flat unleavened white thing and you go around, you break it and one has a piece and the other person has a piece and you wish the person all these good wishes for the year. That's called a Oplatek breaking.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

ZIELONKA: Very difficult man.

SIGRIST: Almost like a-it sounds like it's almost like a flat communion wafer, big?

ZIELONKA: Very, very thin. You can almost see-

SIGRIST: Very thin, uh-huh. And this is a Polish word for it.

ZIELONKA: Oplatek. All right, there's O-P, that devilish T that's a W, A-T-E-K.

SIGRIST: Huh, that's interesting. That was at Christmas time?

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Were there other Christmas traditions that-that your family maintained, also? Like maybe certain kinds of decorations or-

ZIELONKA: Oh, well, you had to have the whole baked fish. That was one thing which I hated.

SIGRIST: What kind of fish was it?

ZIELONKA: Baked. I don't know. I have no idea. The other thing was-oh, yeah, pierogi. You had to have pierogi. That's a dumpling, either with cabbage or cabbage and meat or cabbage and mushrooms or mushrooms or prunes or there were several different kinds that they used to spend hours and hours making by hand. Then you boiled 'em and put butter on 'em and delicious. I still make 'em or I don't make 'em, but I buy 'em now. We used to make 'em up 'til a few years ago.

SIGRIST: So that-that was a traditional Christmas thing.

ZIELONKA: Yeah, that's like-

SIGRIST: Pierogi.

ZIELONKA: Two of the things I can recount. The big fish and the pierogi and you ate no meat on Christmas meat. Definitely, that was a no

-- very stringent no-no. So I couldn't wait until the next day when actually besides the presents, I could get-eat some meat.

SIGRIST: Is there a Christmas present that sticks out in your mind from your childhood that you received?

ZIELONKA: Not at that time. But later when I was about ten years old, I recall this vividly. Well, I guess when I was about ten years old. I used to go to school and I passed Little Frank's Hardware Store and this was like a month, six weeks before Christmas. I admired this two dollars and a half chemistry set. It had a microscope and some chemical bottles and stuff and I said, "Gee," I said, "I wish I could have that for Christmas." I says, "We can't afford that. I'll never get it. I'll never get it." Well, comes Christmas eve and my sisters and my brother, I guess they scraped together the money and I guess five minutes before the store closed they went down and bought it and I recall getting that (laughs). It was quite a gift. That was during the Depression. Things were really tough. Very bad. But that was a pleasant surprise.

SIGRIST: What language did you speak in the house?

ZIELONKA: Polish.

SIGRIST: Polish. Could your parents speak any English?

ZIELONKA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Either of 'em?

ZIELONKA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Because they had been back and forth.

ZIELONKA: Yeah, they could speak, but normally until after I got married we spoke Polish because the first time I went to kindergarten, I couldn't speak English.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that?

ZIELONKA: Kindergarten, I remember I had to go a year earlier because my father and mother were both-both working and they had nobody to baby-sit me. They couldn't get babysitters. No gram-Babcia or grandmother around. So they didn't know what to do with me, so you're supposed-

SIGRIST: What was the word you used for grandmother?

ZIELONKA: Babcia.

SIGRIST: Babcia. Do you know how to--

ZIELONKA: Yeah. Want me to write it down? [Laughs] I'm going to give you a Polish-English dictionary.

SIGRIST: Really. We're getting our Polish lesson here.

ZIELONKA: In fact, all the kids still call their grandmothers Babcia or Dziadziu. In fact, my grandchildren call me Dziadziu.

SIGRIST: Okay, can you spell this for us?

ZIELONKA: Dziadziu, oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: And then we'll do Dziadziu. Spell Babcia first.

ZIELONKA: B-A-B-C-I-A. That's grandmother.

SIGRIST: Yes, do grandfather.

ZIELONKA: Dziadziu is D-Z-I-A-D-Z-I-U.

SIGRIST: Thank you very much.

ZIELONKA: And none of my kids, grandkids can spell it. All right, so where were we? I forgot the trend of thought.

SIGRIST: We were talking about-oh, dear. Oh, the language you spoke in the house.

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: And-and-

ZIELONKA: I'm going to school.

SIGRIST: Right, kindergarten.

ZIELONKA: And you have-you have to be five years old to go to kindergarten. I was only four, so my mother went, explained the situation to the principal at Patrick E. Bow School and said, "Nobody to watch this child." So they agreed to let me go to kindergarten at four years old. So I recount going to kindergarten at four years old and all through my school and high school I was a year younger than everyone else.

SIGRIST: Talk about what it was like not being able to speak the same language that the other students spoke.

ZIELONKA: I don't recall any problems, but one thing I recall definitely. When I went to register for first grade -- I recall this vividly -- the teacher asked my mother to spell my name and it's kind of difficult. So the teacher says, "Well, that's too difficult to pronounce. I can't pronounce that." She says, "I'll just call him John." You know, even then there was some pride and I did not like it. So that teacher did call me John and I didn't like it. All right? Where were we? What else do you want to know?

SIGRIST: I'm just trying to get a sense of-of the language. The problems that you might have had as a child coming from a Polish speaking

home to an English speaking outside world. That's what we were talking about, going to school and-and discovering that you couldn't speak English when you wanted to [not understood] home.

ZIELONKA: Necessity is a great thing. Through necessity you learn fast. My mother and father did. They came over; they couldn't speak a word of English. They learned very fast to get along, make it in this world. So did I. In fact, I don't have any recollection of having problems learning English. That's how fast it must have gone.

SIGRIST: Can you still speak Polish?

ZIELONKA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Is there some, maybe a poem or a prayer like the Lord's Prayer that you could say for us in Polish on tape? Something that you remember?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah. Lots of things. Prayers.

SIGRIST: Could you say the Lord's Prayer in Polish?

ZIELONKA: Ahhhh.

SIGRIST: Or a prayer? Maybe not the Lord's Prayer, but one that you remember learning maybe as a child.

ZIELONKA: I don't think I'll attempt it because I'll probably screw it up. I haven't spoken a word of Polish hardly since my wife died. We used to speak together.

SIGRIST: What about a song? Maybe a-a song you learned as a kid.

ZIELONKA: I'm trying to think too hard now. If I think of any, I'll-I'll recount it. I can't right now.

SIGRIST: Fine. Well, we'll keep talking and maybe it will come.

ZIELONKA: Yeah. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Come to you. Did any other families-

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah, I knew a lot of 'em because I listen to Polish music on Saturdays from the University of Massachusetts.

SIGRIST: But something that you would remember from your own growing up.

ZIELONKA: Eh, I got to-

SIGRIST: Like a Christmas song.

ZIELONKA: I got to go on another-yeah, lots of Christmas songs. Maybe if my sister comes over, we'll sing some for you.

SIGRIST: Okay.

ZIELONKA: We'll make it a duet.

SIGRIST: Were there any other family members, other than your mother, father and children living in the house with you? Like extended family, aunts, uncles, grandparents?

ZIELONKA: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

ZIELONKA: Not that I recount ever.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me a little bit about the Polish community in Chicopee at that time, in the 1920s and 1930s? What-how important was the Polish community in Chicopee? Maybe how large was it?

ZIELONKA: It was very important. The Pollocks stuck together as Pollocks. The Irish stuck together as Irish. And what I recall, Yankees -- the ones that were here before the Irish and the immigrants --- had their own society. I'll tell you how mad it was. On the West End, let's say in the '20s-that's the West End of Chicopee I'm speaking of. There was a park there. I forget what the name of it. It's still there. And there was a dividing line between the Polish and the Irish and no one dared to cross it on pain of death. That's how segregated things were then. So if you want to real little item there, that's about what it was like. Oh, they had the Polish National Home where you had the dances, the polka dances and stuff. And I'll show you something. Do you want to turn that off a minute? Can you?

SIGRIST: I'd rather not because I won't be able to get it back going.

ZIELONKA: You can't? Afraid you won't-

SIGRIST: We can-after we're done we can look. Can you talk a little bit about how that may have affected your own life?

ZIELONKA: Yeah, I think-I think that it might have started some sort of a inferiority complex, as being-well, first the Irish weren't looked upon as being the best people -- society in the world-- in this country when they came over. And then the Irish got a little established and then the Polish came over and we were the dirty, uneducated Pollocks, and of course after, the Puerto Ricans or whatever have you came over, and I don't want to get into any kind of an-

SIGRIST: There's always a group.

ZIELONKA: Ethical problem.

SIGRIST: There's always a scapegoat group.

ZIELONKA: Yeah, it might have given me a little bit of inferiority complex until you get mature enough to live above it and know that you were as good as the next individual and you have to show that you were.

SIGRIST: In your own recollection-now you talked about this divider line in the park.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But that's a very kind of non-aggressive way of dividing the groups. Do you remember there being perhaps some fights between-

ZIELONKA: Violent, oh, yeah. You don't dare-

SIGRIST: Can you tell a story about that?

ZIELONKA: No, because I didn't live through it. My father did. He told me about it.

SIGRIST: Can you talk about what he told you?

ZIELONKA: I don't-

SIGRIST: I'm just trying to get a sense of how the different groups got along.

ZIELONKA: I'm not sure of the exact conditions, but I think there was to the point where I think firearms were used, he might have said. But I-I'm a little-

SIGRIST: Were all the-were all the Polish people in one part of Chicopee? I mean, was there-was there an area that was primarily the Polish area in Chicopee when you were a kid?

ZIELONKA: I think three was. Probably the West End of Chicopee was predominantly Polish.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me-?

ZIELONKA: For a very short while and then they branched out all over. And I think the upper Springfield Street area was Irish and there are still ethnic sections in Chicopee.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Could you-I-well, I noticed the mills when I drove in.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: This is really the first time I've ever been in this area.

ZIELONKA: Well, they don't operate any more. There isn't a single one operating there really.

SIGRIST: But it made me think that there's probably an enormous immigrant population here. I was going-what was I going to ask you?

The-can you talk about the businesses, the Polish businesses that your family patronized? What businesses did the Polish people go into here in Chicopee?

ZIELONKA: They were predominantly neighborhood grocery stores. They were usually run by Polish people. Polish people went to-to Polish grocery stores because they had the type of food they probably liked and they could get along better and feel more at ease with the proprietor. And then during the Depression, people had no money, the grocery stores and businessmen, small businessmen, carried the people for a long time. You put it on what they called the cartka.

SIGRIST: On the what?

ZIELONKA: That's cartka. That means credit. That's a card -- card. You told 'em whatever you took and you say, "Put it on the cartka." I used to do it when I was a kid.

SIGRIST: Cartka.

ZIELONKA: Cartka.

SIGRIST: C-A, C-A-R.

ZIELONKA: I think my sister would love to recount these things.

SIGRIST: I look forward to talking to her.

ZIELONKA: Cartka, K-C-A-R-T-K-A.

SIGRIST: And that's sort of credit.

ZIELONKA: That is the credit thing. The guy used to write it down. You never even knew what it was half the time, you know, and a lot of dishonest groceries used to charge you double for what they-what they-. And you know, even after the Depression, people had these credit balances in the grocery stores and the businessman would either die or say, "Hey, those are the breaks," and they never paid 'em. In World War II my mother went to work at the Armory.

SIGRIST: That's okay.

ZIELONKA: At the Armory and she went to every creditor we had during the Depression and paid 'em off and they were amazed. They said it's never hardly happened before that somebody would come and pay a bill that was here for ten years or eight or six or whatever. But she told me; it's a matter of pride with her. "I went to every creditor we had and I paid 'em off." That amazed them, too. So we're talking about neighborhood stores and stuff.

SIGRIST: Actually, I was wondering, did your mother ever work outside of the home when you were a kid? What-

ZIELONKA: She worked because she had to send me to school, I recounted. Remember. I don't remember where, but she-during the war she worked at the Armory.

SIGRIST: But prior to World War II, like in the twenties and thirties, did she ever work outside the home?

ZIELONKA: She must have worked in the mills some place here.

SIGRIST: What was your father doing at that time?

ZIELONKA: He was a tire builder at Fisk Rubber. He was for forty-six years.

SIGRIST: Tar builder?

ZIELONKA: Tire.

SIGRIST: Tire builder. Do you know exactly what his job was?

ZIELONKA: Automobile tires.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZIELONKA: I don't know, but he used to come home covered with lamp black every day.

SIGRIST: Lampblack?

ZIELONKA: Lampblack.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZIELONKA: That's what they used for finishing off the tires and some of the extraneous material that comes off the tires. But I didn't realize what kind of a job he did until I got older, after I came out of the service. And I used to watch him come home from work every day, and I said, "That's quite a feat to do that."

SIGRIST: Did a lot of the Polish people of your parents' generation do mill work here in Chicopee?

ZIELONKA: I think that they mostly all did, until they worked out of it.

SIGRIST: Except for the few that had their own businesses.

ZIELONKA: Right.

SIGRIST: Like the grocery stores.

ZIELONKA: That started a business or a little auto franchise or something.

SIGRIST: I want you to talk a little bit about the Polish Club, the home. What-the Polish National Club.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: That you spoke about before. I'm curious how important that was as a social outlet for the Polish people in Chicopee.

ZIELONKA: Outside of the normal neighborhood friend society, that's where you went.

SIGRIST: What did you do when you went there?

ZIELONKA: Dances, weddings. That type of thing. It was always in the Polish National Home. They had grocery stores on the bottom, a confectionary store on the bottom. A bar on the bottom and on top was the hall. They used to call that the "hall." There was dances there, polka dances and all the affairs that they rented out for all the different things, the rituals, weddings, all that kind of stuff.

SIGRIST: And how frequently-

ZIELONKA: It was the center of Polish society I could-might say. That and the church.

SIGRIST: Those are the important-

ZIELONKA: The two important things, yeah.

SIGRIST: Where the Polish people could mingle with other Polish people and-

ZIELONKA: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: The-the clubs. In Chicopee, at that time to the best of your recollection, was there some organization that supplied training -- for instance, like giving English lessons to the immigrant population that was in Chicopee?

ZIELONKA: I don't think so. There were organizations. There was Polish bands, the White Eagles, marching bands. There was the gymnastic thing. I forget what they call 'em. Something to do with white eagles again. There was Polish school, which I went to on weekends, on a Saturday morning.

SIGRIST: Polish school?

ZIELONKA: School, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you do there?

ZIELONKA: Learned to-to-to read and write.

SIGRIST: In Polish.

ZIELONKA: In Polish.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting.

ZIELONKA: It was a very, very strong-what's the word? Old country tie, very, very-

SIGRIST: I guess that's what I'm sort of asking you is how-how strongly did the Polish community in Chicopee hold onto its Old World roots, or get rid of 'em? And it sounds like they were really holding on very tight.

ZIELONKA: They were holding on for a long time.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

ZIELONKA: Very long time.

SIGRIST: Are there things that your mother and father did in the house that-that were ways that they were holding on to their old world culture? The food prob-is one way, of course, but were there other ways?

ZIELONKA: Everything they did was from the old country. Just the word-the few curses or everything were in Polish. Everything was in Polish. They thought as Polish. Everything like was from the old country. They adapted like people do --- with different conditions, changes like modern conveniences. Like I remember the first radio and my father's first car in 1913, which he didn't have to buy a license fo-get a license for. You bought the car, which was a Model-T, and the man showed you how to use the clutch and shift and off you went. And-

SIGRIST: You said 1913. Did you mean 1930?

ZIELONKA: Yeah. 1913 he bought his first car.

SIGRIST: 1913. That-

ZIELONKA: My father. I was talking about my father.

SIGRIST: Right, before you were born.

ZIELONKA: And-

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you remember about getting the first radio? Were you-do you remember-?

ZIELONKA: Wait, wait. First I got to tell you about the car. So he got in I guess shortly after and he took my brother, which is Stanley, out somewhere. And it was in the wintertime and he went to make a turn and slid on a trolley track because they're exposed, and tipped it over. And my brother got kind of pretty badly hurt, carried the scars on his forehead all his life. So my father threw the keys away and never drove after that. The first radio. Oh, yeah, that must have been about '29.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZIELONKA: 1929. It was a huge thing. I remember it being very large and there was tons and tons of batteries on the bottom, and on top there was a crank up phonograph with a horn. This was a combination. This was deluxe stuff, I'll tell you. But the batteries didn't last very long and you only turned it on for very special things like fifteen minutes or a half an hour. And then I remember it didn't last long. The batteries corroded and went to heck. And the batteries were too expensive, so they never bothered to get that. But I remember the thing was very huge.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you listened to on the-on the radio? Or what your parents chose to listen to?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah, Polish music on Saturdays and-

SIGRIST: All right. Do you-

ZIELONKA: They had these commentators on Saturdays, Sundays.

SIGRIST: Where was that Polish music coming from? Do you remember where it was being broadcast from?

ZIELONKA: Well, not on the first radios there weren't any Polish music, but later on-all my life I remember there was Saturday and Sunday Polish music on the radio. They came from radio stations.

SIGRIST: Local?

ZIELONKA: Pushing local businessmen. Maybe they were from Springfield or somewhere, Chicopee couple of 'em. Pushing different local business endeavors, so to speak.

SIGRIST: It's interesting to me that-that this particular community really held very tightly to its-

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Really had very little interest in Americanizing, quote-unquote, but really held so tightly to-to the old world.

ZIELONKA: I think it was a very great natural change that they went from Polish to American. They didn't go totally American. Maybe I-maybe I did and my wife, but she was-she was-my wife was very strongly Polish oriented. Everything Polish was, oh, that was great because it was Polish.

SIGRIST: Was she born in this country?

ZIELONKA: She was born here, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. What year did you marry?

ZIELONKA: 1948.

SIGRIST: And what was her name?

ZIELONKA: Madeline Carolyn Stadnicki.

SIGRIST: Spell Stadnicki please.

ZIELONKA: Do you want to know how I met her and how I got married in the same church as my father and my mother?

SIGRIST: Spell her name first for me, out loud.

ZIELONKA: S-T-A-D-N-I-C-K-I.

SIGRIST: All right, you have five minutes left until the end of the interview. Tell me how you met her and how you ended up marrying in the same church your parents married in. In five minutes.

ZIELONKA: 1946 after I got out of World War II, my mother had a cousin in Jewett City --- that resided in Jewett City. So she asked me to drive her down there to see her cousin. My cousin happened to be working in a grocery store that was owned by my wife's brother. So I drove there to see my cousin, which was at work in a grocery store. And my wife was working in there for her brother and she saw me outside and she asked my cousin for-to fix me up with a date that night. So I went on a date with her and we got-went to a bowling alley and that was it. I courted her for two years and then I got married. Well, I told you my father and mother had been married in Jewett City in St. Mary's Church.

SIGRIST: In 1911.

ZIELONKA: In 1911 and I married my wife in St. Mary's Church in Jewett City in 1948.

SIGRIST: Were your parents present?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Oh.

ZIELONKA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you have children?

ZIELONKA: Do I have children?

SIGRIST: Did you have children, yeah?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah, six.

SIGRIST: Can you name 'em please?

ZIELONKA: Ah, from the oldest: Ellen, Karen, Carol, Karen [sic], Mark, boy and Lauren, the baby. She just got married last year. You-a lot of people I tell I have five daughters and a boy and they say, "Why do you-why did you have so many daughters?" and I say, "That's the easiest question in the world to answer because I don't have to take 'em to the bathroom when they're small. Mommy does."

SIGRIST: Tell me about-have your parents-have your children-are your children interested in holding onto their Polish heritage in any way?

ZIELONKA: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do they speak Polish or are they interested in it and-

ZIELONKA: No, but they never forgave me for teaching-not teaching 'em Polish. They are interested. They like-we have our holiday ethnic little procedures and ethnic food and they come over and they say, "Oh, goodie, ethnic food. I've been waiting for this kind of thing," you know. They're very interested in it. In fact, they're --- I'm getting more and more questions now about exactly what you're asking me.

SIGRIST: Sure. Wait until they hear the tape when I send you the copy. Your parents, of course, had-had spent so much of their early life going back and forth across the Atlantic.

ZIELONKA: Yeah.

SIGRIST: In 1926, when they came here, did they ever go back after that?

ZIELONKA: No.

SIGRIST: Never?

ZIELONKA: Never.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to Poland?

ZIELONKA: No, they didn't. I didn't. My sister did.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

ZIELONKA: The one that's alive.

SIGRIST: Did you ever want to go to back to see the place where you were born?

ZIELONKA: Yes. I don't really know why I didn't go. I don't know.

SIGRIST: What have you done in your life that you're the proudest of? When you look back on your life, what-what gives you the most pride? Something that you accomplished or that you did?

ZIELONKA: Oh, that's a very easy question to answer for me. The greatest accomplishment of my life is right now, if I'm correct-I believe I am-I've been loved by a few, liked by many and hated by nobody. That's it.

SIGRIST: And how do you think of yourself in terms of nationality?

ZIELONKA: American, definitely. Totally American. I'm proud of my Polish heritage, but I am an American.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, that's a good place for us to end. Mr. Zielonka, thank you very much. You did a great job. Don't pull that off just yet. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Jerry Zielonka, on Saturday, September 28th, 1996, in Chicopee, Massachusetts. Thank you, sir.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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