

EI-822

EDWARD RUTKOWSKI

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE, GREGORY RYTEL-
(POLISH)**

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RESIDENCES: POLAND: ŁYSE

U.S: WORCHESTER, MASS., PALMER, MASS.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is October 12th, 1996, a Saturday morning. I'm in Palmer, Massachusetts and I'm here with Edward Rutkowski. Mr. Rutkowski came from Poland in 1912 and he was four when he came.

RUTKOWSKI: Not quite.

SIGRIST: Not quite four.

RUTKOWSKI: No.

SIGRIST: Hadn't turned four yet. So three. Were you almost four or—

RUTKOWSKI: [pause]

SIGRIST: Go ahead. You can talk.

RUTKOWSKI: Well, that birth—birthday is—I was about three and a half, three years old when I come over here.

SIGRIST: I see. I see.

RUTKOWSKI: And that's about it. [laughs]

SIGRIST: [laughs] Okay. L—let me also say for the sake of the tape that Mr. Rutkowski's daughter-in-law, Fran, is with us. And his dog, Sebastian, is with us—

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —also.

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs]

SIGRIST: Mr. Rutkowski, what birth date do you use?

RUTKOWSKI: Bir—birthday?

SIGRIST: Birthday.

RUTKOWSKI: April 23rd, 1909.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And can you say your name as it was when you were born in Poland?

RUTKOWSKI: Władysław Rutkowski.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the first name, please?

RUTKOWSKI: W-L-Y- (pause) D-Y-S-L-A-W.

SIGRIST: W-L-Y-D-Y-S-L-A-W.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. Now, [laughs]—

SIGRIST: Say it one more time for me.

RUTKOWSKI: Władysław Rutkowski.

SIGRIST: Rutkowski—

RUTKOWSKI: That's right.

SIGRIST: —is how you'd say in Poland. Where in Poland—oh, did you have any other names? Like a middle name or—

RUTKOWSKI: Joseph.

SIGRIST: Joseph. Where in Poland were you born?

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] You never heard of it. In Łyse. You want me to spell it?

SIGRIST: Can you?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. W-Y-S-A-L. Łyse. And it's—and it's—in Polish, it's Łyse — Łyse. In English, it's—ah, I wouldn't even know—attempt to—and do you want me to tell you what it means, that last name I just told—

SIGRIST: Sure, please tell me what that means. You—your last name, you mean?

RUTKOWSKI: It means no hair, bald. That's the name of the town.

SIGRIST: The name of the town means bald.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. Łyse. Łyse — means no hair.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

RUTKOWSKI: No—and boldly saying, "You're bald."

SIGRIST: So that means everyone who came from there has no hair.

RUTKOWSKI: Well, I wouldn't say that because [laughs] everybody—everybody that—everybody that I know of had hair. [laughter]

SIGRIST: Where in the country of Poland is that?

RUTKOWSKI: I—I really don't—really didn't study into that or inquire into that because there was complications why we had to drop everything, you know. If you want me to continue telling you—

SIGRIST: Yes. Please, go ahead.

RUTKOWSKI: Well, at—at—at the time when—when all this started, I started—got old enough, I figured on getting my citizenship papers. So we went through the thing and I hired a fellow from Boston or New York, one

or two places to check on my passage, my—how and who gave me the passport, you know. And nobody—I didn't even exist on the paper. There was no—they—they couldn't find it. And naturally, they figured [laughs] I was one of those wetbacks, you know. And—and it wasn't so. The trouble was that the—the ship that I come in with my mother and my d—my sister, it was sold to Poland, I think. And they remodeled it, rebuilt it and gave it a different name.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the name was when you came in 1912?

RUTKOWSKI: No. I'm not sure but I—I think it was named after—I'm—I'm not—I can't say I'm positive—after some kind of a king, Batori [PH]. I think it—

SIGRIST: There was a ship, the Batori.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, I think it was a name, Batori. And so we dropped everything because—you know what I mean. We kept pursuing it and nobody seemed to know the answer to it. So I forgot it. Then when I turned 24, I—I was applying for my citizenship. And a judge told me that I didn't have to get the first papers. We used to have to get two papers, first and second. So he told me, "If you married a citizen, that's your first papers." So I didn't have to get the first ones and—and then I waited much less—shorter time then. In about six months, I got an application to fill in and go and get my—that's when the judge asked me the same thing you did, about my name. And I told him. He said, "Is that your English name?" I says, "Yes, exactly," because the teachers changed my name. When I went to school and I told the [laughs] teacher my name was Władysław Rutkowski, the scratched their head. They didn't know. So from then on, I was Edward Rutkowski. So—and I wasn't the only one. There was a whole mess a—of boys that had Władysław that were Edward after. So that's how I g—got that name. And then in bap—not in b—confirmation, I got the Joseph. You know, that's later in—in y—your—when t—the bishop came down and confirmed a lot of young people. And that's when I got my name, Joseph.

SIGRIST: I see. So Joseph is actually the confirmation name.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Why don't we start by talking about your mother and father? What was your father's name?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, same as mine. [laughter] That'll stop you right there.

SIGRIST: [laughs] All right. Well, say it for me one more time.

RUTKOWSKI: Władysław Rutkowski.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about his family background?

RUTKOWSKI: Not much at all. Not much at all. All I knew is he was a sawmill worker. He [laughs] sawed wood. And when I say sawmill worker, you think it's all machinery. It was by hand. Two guys were on a platform and two guys were down below. And they'd cut the log. There was—

SIGRIST: You're making gestures of going up and down.

RUTKOWSKI: Just by—one guy'd pull it up. The other guy'd pull it down. The guy pulling down would have the most work because, naturally, that's where they sawing. So is not much more I know about him.

SIGRIST: Did he ever speak of his childhood experiences?

RUTKOWSKI: No. It's amazing. The—the only one that knew the most about us is my oldest sister and she's passed away. But she knew more and she could read and write. And she knew more about us than anybody. But we never in—it's amazing how we didn't inquire. We forgot about Poland entirely. We—

SIGRIST: Do you know why your father came to the United States in the first place?

RUTKOWSKI: Yes. He—he didn't—there was no work and, naturally, they were looking for work. And the opportunity came. I don't know how he financed this, because it—it was a family of six at that time. Six—

SIGRIST: Your family was six.

RUTKOWSKI: Six children.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RUTKOWSKI: And the mother and father at that time. And wh—when—when you had to finance, t—they—we came [laughs] two at a time. It was first two and then the rest of them came. And that—that's how we—but I can't understand how they financed it. I don't know who or when or what, but we made it.

SIGRIST: Did your father come first?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, my father and mother came first and we came—it—first two and then four.

SIGRIST: Do you know at all how soon before you came had they come?

RUTKOWSKI: Why?

SIGRIST: How—how long had your mother and father been in America before you were brought over?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, I wouldn't—I wouldn't know.

SIGRIST: Do you know where they were in America? Where were they living?

RUTKOWSKI: I—I think we first—when we first moved, I can't remember that hardly at all because I was—but I'm pretty sure we lived in Worchester first. And—and as far as I remember Worchester, I think it was—was the place that we—

SIGRIST: That you went to when you arrived—

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —in the United States.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. But the year I—see—you see, that—that didn't bother me at all, because of my age, I guess, how we financed, how we lived here, the way—whether we came with cousins or—or something. But evidently, we must have come to somebody that knew us because there was quite a group.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, or did anyone tell you when you were—when the children were left in Poland, whom did you live with Poland? Who took care of you while your parents were in America?

RUTKOWSKI: My sisters. My—oh, must have lived with their grandmother at that time. She died at a good old ripe age. So evidently—I am pretty sure that they lived with their grandmother.

SIGRIST: Now, you said you were six children.

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] At that time.

SIGRIST: At that time. Can you name the six children?

RUTKOWSKI: Sure. Rose, Agnes, Mary, Sophie and Stella and Edward, me.

SIGRIST: So you were—at that time, you were the youngest.

RUTKOWSKI: No, no.

SIGRIST: No.

RUTKOWSKI: No, Stella.

SIGRIST: Stella was the youngest.

RUTKOWSKI: She was at my tail. She j—she was after me. Everywhere I went, she—she was—my mother used to say, “Stella used to follow you everywhere you went.” Couldn’t get rid of her. She’s still living [unclear] up in Stratford, Connecticut.

SIGRIST: What was your mother’s name?

RUTKOWSKI: Sabina Rutkowski.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Sabina for me?

RUTKOWSKI: S-A-B-I-N-A.

SIGRIST: Do you know what her maiden name was?

RUTKOWSKI: Sabina S-A-W-I-C-K-I. Sawicki.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Do you know anything about her background?

RUTKOWSKI: No, not much.

SIGRIST: Y—you know, from Europe.

RUTKOWSKI: No, no. I was—as I say, I was too young to think. [laughs]

SIGRIST: Well, where does your memory begin? Do you remember anything about being on the ship, for instance?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh. [laughs] Yes, I remember a few little things. But I—one time, I asked my mother, “Why is it that I remember they grabbed me and they were washing me up, you know?” And she says, “Do you remember that?” I says, “Yes.” I says, “What—what was it?” She said, “A guy got seasick over you.” [laughs] So—so they had to wash me up. And then another thing, we came across in stormy

weather. Awful stormy, because ,vaguely, I remember the dishes flopping off the tables. And they had to pick them up, put them— and—and tie ‘em in a—in a—they had cloths, you know. Tie the four corners and leave them there. Th—the—it was awful story weather and—as—as you know, the Poland people, they were quite religious at the time. Everyone was on their knees [laughs] praying so this subsides. You know, this—because it was—they—they tell me it was the stormiest weather for a long time that the ship hit.

SIGRIST: Do you know what time of the year it was that you were traveling? You said you were three and a half, so I assume that’s before April.

RUTKOWSKI: Gee, I don’t remember when—

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RUTKOWSKI: What time of the year. You see, that’s what I don’t—that’s the thing that’s furthest away from my mind is where we lived when we first came here.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories—little glimpses of memory about being in Europe at all?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, a little bit. Not very much.

SIGRIST: What? What do you—

RUTKOWSKI: Very, very little.

SIGRIST: —remember about it?

RUTKOWSKI: Just—just before—just before we came here, we made visits, you know. And she—my mother took the—I don’t know how many kids she took with her, but she took—made this visit to this fellow that had beehives in an apple orchard. And it was always a quiet home in there, you know. And the guy that the land belonged to and the hives belonged to was a close friend of ours. So he went and he took honey, raw honey, in the wax, you know. And he gave each one of us a—a piece of it, you know. And we chewed the honey out of it. And then we get all done, throw it away, take another bite. And the guy—my mother was thanking him for it and all that. And the guy said, “Them kids’ll never forget this.” Can you imagine that? And I—I didn’t forget it. I remember a quiet beehive hum of the drone of the bees, you know. And—and the—the honey was sweet. We didn’t—there’s no such thing as candy when—when we were young. [laughs] Honey was good. It was good, though. And then

another thing [laughs] I remember very, very, very good was when my sister was preparing her bath. You know, we didn't have running water at that time. You had to heat it top of the—whatever it was, the heat. And—and the homes were not wooden floors. They were sawed w—they were dirt floors. And I remember we were all sitting around the stove and my sister was—picked up a—the water. It was hot. And as she stumbled, she stumbled and she spilled it over my b—back. You can still see the mark.

SIGRIST: Yep. You're pointing to your neck.

RUTKOWSKI: And she burnt my back for me. And mind you, this was just before going on the ship. You know, a few days before that. And naturally, it was—it looked awful. It was burnt. It was blisters and everything. So wh—when we had to go report in the office that we're going to go, well, the guy saw me with all them scabs and everything on my neck. And he says, "Hey, this is—may be contagious. You can't go." So that's—it detained us for a—a little while because I was healing. And they saw it was what we told him it was. And they let us through with that. And that was [laughs]—that was an experience I didn't for—I remember trying to sleep and it was—it—whatever they put on it was either starch or something, because it was making noises. But anyway, I—I healed and we made it. That—that, I remember. But after that—and—and I remember them—and—and another thing I want to tell you is the Polish people didn't call the Statue of Liberty a statue of any kind. Do you know what he was? He was Columbus. That's who—all the people figured he was Columbus. I don't know why but I imagine they—they read about Columbus discovering America. So they—they said a prayer for him too.

SIGRIST: D—do you have any glimpses of memory about the actual building that you lived in in Poland. You mentioned the place had dirt floors, because you remembered that from the—

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, that—that, I remember.

SIGRIST: Are there any other details?

RUTKOWSKI: That, I—but—but I don't remember—yeah. Oh, yeah. And another thing I—what I remember about—everyb—every—kids should have a comfort—comforter, down, you know. And it was a big, puffy thing. And that's where we—we had—well, the—the girls had two rooms and I had—and the boys—the one boy, myself, had one room. And that's—that's how we—and the heat—as far as heating

the place was—the comforter was the heater at night. And it was comfortable. It's a good name for it.

SIGRIST: Do you know what your family might have brought with them to America?

RUTKOWSKI: No. Noth—not—not a thing. They brought—I don't even—I don't—I—they brought some clothes but it wasn't in a—a case of any kind. It was in a—one of those bags, just like they all had, a bag of clothes. And they were altogether different. So they didn't take too many because you had to change to the style of the people that lived here. And you could always tell the—almost the difference between the nationalities when you see them dressed. The Poland woman—it—it was a sin to have a skirt above the ankle. [laughs] And you had to—and—and then the Italian people and the Swedish people, and the food they ate, it was a big difference. And so that's why I imagine they didn't come with a lot of stuff, because they had to get rid of it anyway. And then the—the transportation was quite difficult.

SIGRIST: Did anyone ever tell you—getting back to being on the ship—you mentioned transportation, being back on the ship, you remembered the—being washed. And you remembered the storm at sea.

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Did—did your sisters or mother, father, anybody ever tell you how long the ship took to get to the United States?

RUTKOWSKI: No. No, they didn't.

SIGRIST: Do you have any other memories of being on the ship that you can think of? Maybe being up on deck?

RUTKOWSKI: No. No, I don't. I don't. That—as I said, I—I'm digging it up but I thought of it a lot of times, but—but I don't remember. I don't remember much—too much of that. I—I remember I didn't like water because I remember in Worchester, Lake Quinsigamond. That lake is still there. There's a big bridge there.

SIGRIST: What is the name of the lake?

RUTKOWSKI: Quinsigamond.

SIGRIST: Quinsig—

RUTKOWSKI: It's—it's—I can't spell it. It's a Swedish name. Anyway, there's—

SIGRIST: Swedish.

RUTKOWSKI: There's a lot of Swedish out—people over there. They have regattas there now. They have the boat race in there, colleges. And it's Holy Cross and the rest of them do have outings there. It's a long lake. Anyway, we come to this bridge and there's this water. I didn't have—I didn't want no part of the bridge or the water. Evidently, I must have got scared on the ship because I couldn't stand the sight of water out ahead of me, you know. So I just took off and they had to come [laughs] running after me to get—to get me to cross the bridge. But I did. Evidently, I got scared when I was on the ship. Because I couldn't see no other way of get—frightened for nothing.

SIGRIST: Right, because you were so young. Sure. Do you have any memories of the ship coming into New York harbor?

RUTKOWSKI: No.

SIGRIST: Or Ellis Island or any of that?

RUTKOWSKI: No, all—all I remember is when it was passing through, coming and you could see the Statue of Liberty. That's when the—the women all got on their knees. And they brushed themselves [laughs] and thanked for—for—for whatever they were praying for. They did it. I remember that a little bit. But o—I—as—as—I don't remember Ellis Island or—I—vaguely, I remember people sitting on their sacks, you know, on their bags there waiting for something. That's all I—

SIGRIST: Did someone come to New York to meet you?

RUTKOWSKI: Huh?

SIGRIST: Did someone come to New York to meet you and take you to Worcester?

RUTKOWSKI: I don't—I—must have. I don't remember. I don't know.

SIGRIST: What's your next memory? What's the next thing you remember in that sequence? Do you remember being in Worcester?

RUTKOWSKI: No, not—no, I don't—don't remember much of anything because I started Americanizing. [laughs]

SIGRIST: [laughs] Well—

RUTKOWSKI: An—and—and going to school.

SIGRIST: Well, where did you—where do you remember going to school for the first time?

RUTKOWSKI: School? In Three Rivers.

SIGRIST: In Three Rivers. So at some point you went from Worchester to Three Rivers.

RUTKOWSKI: We—we moved from—from Worchester evidently—well, I—I wouldn't say for sure but I—that's the longest—that is, Three Rivers and Palmer is one unit, you know. And I remember most of all was in this—this town of Three Rivers.

SIGRIST: How—do you know how old you were when you were in Three Rivers?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, most—

SIGRIST: I'm just wondering how long you stayed in Worchester before you moved.

RUTKOWSKI: I was old enough to go to start school.

SIGRIST: So you probably were only in Worchester a couple of years?

RUTKOWSKI: So I was about six years old.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Tell me about starting school. What do you remember about that?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, that's what I say. The first was the—first was the trouble with the—with the name. "What's your name?" And you told them, "Władysław Rutkowski." And she says [laughs], "How do you spell it?" I didn't know how to spell it. You know what I mean? I was a—I was going in to learn spelling. And Władysław was pretty hard to spell. So anyway, I didn't know which—so she shortened the whole thing. And she says, "From now on, your name is Edward." And that's how I become Edward Rutkowski." And the judge—judge asked me the same thing and I had to tell him the same thing I told you. That's how—because that's really how I got my—Edward.

SIGRIST: What—what other things do you remember about starting school that stick out in your mind as—as making an impression on you?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, we were a—I remember a—a lot of—I—I don't hold it against them. But there was so much prejudice against the cabbage eater. You know.

SIGRIST: What is a cabbage eater?

RUTKOWSKI: That's all we had to eat is cabbage or something like that, you know. And it was a cheap food and everybody's laughing but it was a—a good source of some kind of vitamins because they say so. And everybody would—would laugh at you. You know what I mean? And you were a—a little guy. You—you just couldn't fight back. So I remember that. And—and then when—when it comes to—some teachers weren't as patient as others. You—you know what I mean? They—they'd—they'd all, "You Polack," and something like that. So the principal heard one [laughs] say that and boy, did he lay it into her. He told her, "If I ever hear you say such thing again," she—"you're going to be looking for another job. And it won't be teaching." So that's—that—that hurt. You know what I mean? You—you—you went to school and you couldn't s—you'd be—you know yourself, when you're ashamed, you can't think properly. And that was—most of the time you went to—at my time, was when there was this conflict between the groups, like the French and the Irish and the Polish and the Italians. We all—we all had this right in this town.

SIGRIST: So there was a lot of tension between the different ethnic groups.

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, there was a lot of tension between them. But it never was that violent, though. There would be a good fight. Somebody would have a good black eye but [laughs] there wasn't that point where they'd beat you up to hospitalize you or anything of the kind.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

RUTKOWSKI: —to keep your job. And most of 'em—most of 'em were pretty good workers. They wanted to keep their job. So—but then there would be this undermining business of going to work and not doing the wrong thing. They're getting blamed for it. That—

SIGRIST: Had this happened to one of them?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, that happened all the time.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, yeah. There was always somebody that wanted something that you had. [laughs] But i—in time, I remember when I was about 15, 16, it started to ease up. And then, oh, how—how—I remember coming from school a lot of times. There'd be a group of guys waiting. But I—I don't—there wasn't much—much bruising going on because they're kind of thinking twice. They're—one—one hurt the other. One guy hurt him so he hurt the other guy. So it—it stopped after a while. It was all right.

SIGRIST: Mostly just verbal insults.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remem—you mentioned cabbage eater, which I've never heard before as an insult. Do you remember any of the other insults that people used at that time to—to hurt immigrants?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh. Well, all—all—all I—oh, well, [laughs] it was both ways. It was—the French were frogs. The Polish were kielbasa chokers. The sausage. That's in the—and the—oh, the Irish, they were harps and every other thing, you know. And—and how come, Francis, I haven't got a name for the Italians?

SIGRIST: I'm sure there were some.

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, yes. Yes, there was. Wop. There's a wop, the dirty wop. You know. Yeah, that's right too.

SIGRIST: And it was customary for people to sort of hurl these insults?

RUTKOWSKI: After—after a while, they wouldn't be that—like, how many times was I called a damn, silly Polack? And—and nobody thinks nothing of it. Or a wop or a frog or—they say, "Ya dumb Polack," and [unclear] retaliation, you know, for what you said. But it never was, "Take you to court because you called me this or that." You know. And now, it's getting to—that you insult him in public and you hurt him so bad that he's got to get a million dollars for it. It's—it's a funny—funny way of living, you know.

SIGRIST: What language did you speak at home when you were growing up?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, Polish.

SIGRIST: Polish.

RUTKOWSKI: Yes.

SIGRIST: And talk to me a little bit about how you all learned English.

RUTKOWSKI: Well, in—in school.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RUTKOWSKI: We went to school. It was difficult. It was awful, awful hard to learn English because you had nobody at home that could do it. They could—could write good Polish and they could sing Polish songs. But as far as English is concerned, they—nobody was—my mother and father couldn't tell me. My sisters didn't know nothing. So you—you had to pick it up in school. And that's where the dumb Polack come in, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember some of the first words in English that you learned as a kid?

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] Yes, "Good morning, Miss Shea." Or, "Good morning," this or that in school. That's the first thing. You get up and says good morning to the teacher, which wasn't a bad idea at all. And—and that teacher—and that stayed with me all the time. There was a Miss Shea. And the minute she walked in and she took her coat off, she stood up by the desk. And if we forgot she'd go, "Ahem." And we'd know what it was. "Good morning, Miss Shea." And the rest of the [unclear]. Then we'd sit down and we'd start in with our arithmetic. It was on a board ready for us to do. And that was it. I don't remember too much English. We just under—what we—we heard talking to one another. We picked English up more that way than by teaching—the teachers teaching us.

SIGRIST: What about—did your parents attempt to learn English in any way?

RUTKOWSKI: They didn't—they didn't—they didn't have—they had the roughest time of—of—of learning English, that they had to have a translator every time they went somewhere. But—but—

SIGRIST: What do you remember about their attempts at trying to learn how to speak?

RUTKOWSKI: They couldn't wri—they'd try to write. They—

SIGRIST: Could they read and write in Polish?

RUTKOWSKI: They couldn't, no.

SIGRIST: Neither of them could.

RUTKOWSKI: No. They—they couldn't re—write. So my father learned to—because they asked him, no matter where he went, always, “Sign your name. Sign your name.” So he learned to write his name. But he didn't learn to write it. He printed his name. And that was no good. So he [laughs]—he give up the whole thing be—he printed his name and he thought he'd done a wonderful thing. And the guy says, “No, you've got to write it.” And—and you know, yourself, printed—no document is any good with your print on it. You've got to have a writing—your writing. So he—[laughs] he—he gave it up and he never—never bothered with it.

SIGRIST: Do you know how—and you may not know this—but do you know how your parents felt about their difficulties trying to negotiate the new language?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, they were—they were sad about it but they never were bel—belligerent to—they never were mad to a point where they'd fight and they'd—they'd—they'd—verbally, yes, they would say things. But they'd never be—being violent about anything of the kind. They—they says, “Well, in time—in time, we'll learn.” So the—the kids picked it up to a point where they spoke too much English in the house. And one of da—one of the girls say, “Hey, Ma. When are you going to learn English if you don't listen to us?” And they tried—they tried to teach her but, just to speak, she'd say yes and no. That's a easy thing to do. But then other—other than that, they weren't foreign.

SIGRIST: You—you have to—you have to wonder just how frustrated they might have been, you know, trying to do this.

RUTKOWSKI: No, no.

SIGRIST: You don't think so?

RUTKOWSKI: No.

SIGRIST: They just kind of accepted the fact—

RUTKOWSKI: They had it—they had it—still, they had it—with all their troubles, they had it better here than they did over there.

SIGRIST: What—what work did your father get in Three Rivers? What work did your father do in Three Rivers?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, yeah. He worked in the Wickwire Spencer.

SIGRIST: The what?

RUTKOWSKI: Wire mill.

SIGRIST: It was a wire mill.

RUTKOWSKI: Wire [unclear].

SIGRIST: And what was name of the company?

RUTKOWSKI: Wickwire Spencer at the time.

SIGRIST: Wickwire—

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: —Spencer?

RUTKOWSKI: Spencer.

SIGRIST: Spencer, Mass?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, well, it—same as Spencer, Mass. But that was the name of the—the wire mill. It was [unclear]. [coughs] That was quite a place to get a job in.

SIGRIST: How did your father get the job there?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, it was [unclear] work and it was heavy work. And he did it; he kept it.

SIGRIST: What kind of work did he do there?

RUTKOWSKI: Draw—they draw wire. They—y—you—for ni—if I tell you to draw wire, you wouldn't understand. They—you have to make a point on the wire to fit a smaller hole than the wire is. And you get that point. You put it through and you grab it here with a pair of tongs and pull it through and start it and connect it. And then the machine takes over. And you draw the wire down a couple sizes, a couple of—smaller than it actually is. That's what they call wire drawing. I—I did that after a while.

SIGRIST: What—what—do you remember how much your father worked?
What—what his workweek was—

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs]

SIGRIST: —in terms of hours?

RUTKOWSKI: It was—it was trans—transferring one—when it's drawn down to this point, you have to pick it up, put it on a reel that turn. And it draw down two more and then two more. And then you draw—you moved that three times before you finished it. And—

SIGRIST: How many days of work did he—how many days a week did he work?

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] Boy, that was a—that was a tough one. He worked six days a week.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what—

RUTKOWSKI: Twelve hours a day.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. For what money?

RUTKOWSKI: That was a [unclear] in pay. That—I don't know. But I don't know if they made—I really don't know if they made \$25 a week.

SIGRIST: And did your mother work outside the house?

RUTKOWSKI: Yes.

SIGRIST: Where did she work?

RUTKOWSKI: For a while. For a while, she worked, because she had to help. It was—they had—in a—in a—Otis—Otis Cotton Mill was in—was in town too. That's in Three Rivers.

SIGRIST: The Otis. O-T-I-S. Just—

RUTKOWSKI: O-T-I-S.

SIGRIST: Yes.

RUTKOWSKI: That was the same as the elevator people.

SIGRIST: Right.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. And th—they—they—they were in town. But—and this was [unclear] was here. My mother worked in just cleaning—cleaning floors. You had to keep it pretty clean because the lint would fly and it'd fall into the weaver and make a mess of it. So they had to sweep the floors pretty clean before—all the time. So that's what—that's what their job was. And then come—if you had children, she'd have to—10 o'clock, they gave a time off to go to the nursery to breastfeed the child, you know. And then they did that for when they—they bathed them, washed them up a little bit and changed them over and went back to work. And there was a tenant there, a girl taking charge—two or three girls taking charge. And the kids had to be—in order to get that service, you had—your kids couldn't be older than I don't know how many years. But he couldn't do nothing for himself. He had to be done—

SIGRIST: That seems very progressive and future thinking for a company at that time—

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah, it does.

SIGRIST: —to provide daycare that way.

RUTKOWSKI: Certainly. Certainly, yes. I—yes, I remember. I remember the girl—the women all getting ready in the wintertime, especially, getting to go feed their chi—kids. And that building is still there in Three Rivers, that—the person that's running it is—runs a beauty parlor there now. But that's where that—that building is still there.

SIGRIST: How did your father feel about your mother working outside of the house?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, they—[laughs] naturally, they—tickled pink. They could help out, you know.

SIGRIST: Because all the money would go—

RUTKOWSKI: All—

SIGRIST: —to the household.

RUTKOWSKI: All in one group. And there wasn't much—there wasn't much—much extra left over. I'll tell you that. And everybody—it was—it was so—so different than the thing is now. You had a—a book. You go in—into the store to the—your grocery store. You traded in

one place. There was a meat market and a store and every—all in one. You went in there and you bought what you want. The guy added it all, marked down, gave you the book back and didn't—at the weekend, you'd pay what you had. But he give you—he—he—he—you wouldn't think of wri—writing something down to cost—erasing it and cut—make it less. Everybody was honest. They slept with the doors open, screen doors in. Nobody never was afraid of nothing. Now—[laughs] now—

SIGRIST: When—when your parents worked in these different factories, were there lots of immigrants?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, most—mostly all immigrants.

SIGRIST: They were mostly all immigrants.

RUTKOWSKI: All—

SIGRIST: And then from—from—like, did all the Polish people work in the wire factory or was it mixed?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, cotton mill. The—the women—women worked in the cotton mill, most of them. The wire mill was for men and that was the difference.

SIGRIST: But were they from different nationalities or—

RUTKOWSKI: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: It didn't work out that all the Polish men happened to work in the wire factory?

RUTKOWSKI: No, no, no, no, no. There was Swedish fellow people, the Italian people, all—all—all—I worked—that—that Wickwire Spencer, while they changed—changed hands so many times, different names, but with me, it's always Wick Wire. That was your passport—if you get a job there, that was a passport to look around, get married. You h—you know you had a job that was good for about 10, 12 years, at least. So when you got the job there, why, you had enough to [laughs]—as I say, to get married or whatever. You could plan on it. You can't do that today.

SIGRIST: Did your parents have other children after all you guys had gotten to America? Did—do you have—do you have American-born brothers and sisters?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. Two—one—one passed away and one is still living. Two—two—a brother and two sisters.

SIGRIST: Well, what are their names?

RUTKOWSKI: There was my brother, [laughs] Stanley. I'll call him Stanley. His name was Stanisław. His name is Stanley, okay.

SIGRIST: Can you spell—can you spell Stanisław?

RUTKOWSKI: Just like mine. S—S-T-A-N—Stan—I-S-L-A-W.

SIGRIST: Thanks.

RUTKOWSKI: Stanisław. You know, in—in Polish, you've got a "T" and you got an "L." It's made like an "L" but there's a "T" mark on it. That's the difference between—you—do you—do you understand what I said?

SIGRIST: And—yes. Yes.

RUTKOWSKI: L—L—Stanisław, see. If you don't make that thing, you'd have "T." Stanitaw, see.

SIGRIST: Right. It's like an "L" with a "T" across it.

RUTKOWSKI: It's—it's got to be the separation. It's not made like a "T" up and down straight. Okay?

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm. So there was Stanley. And who—

RUTKOWSKI: Stanisław.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RUTKOWSKI: And then there's—oh, my God. Why'd you ask me? [laughs] Stanisława.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Which would be W-A at the end?

RUTKOWSKI: No. Stephanie. Stephanie. That's—it's spellt, I think the same in English as in Polish. Stephanie. She's in Clinton now.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm.

RUTKOWSKI: And my brother is Stanisław and [laughs] one sister is Józefa—Josephine. J-O-S-(pause) S-A-W—S-A-W. Józefa —S-A-W-A.

That's a hard—a hard name to spell. I'm—I'm beyond—[laughs] beyond—

SIGRIST: [laughs] Didn't know this was going to be a spelling test today. Is there a—a—I'd like—can you still speak any Polish?

RUTKOWSKI: Who?

SIGRIST: Can you speak any Polish?

RUTKOWSKI: Yes, I can speak Polish.

SIGRIST: Can—what—what I'm hoping is that—is there, like, a little song maybe that you learned as a child in Polish that you could sing for me on tape, or a prayer perhaps in Polish? Like the Lord's Prayer in Polish that you could recite?

RUTKOWSKI: If I—if I didn't have this here, I'd tell you a lot of them. But I just [laughs]—

SIGRIST: Maybe a Christmas song in Polish that you sang as a kid?

RUTKOWSKI: I—I'm not much of a singer, not with my throat now. No.

SIGRIST: No. Okay. What was the first job that you got that you were actually paid a wage for?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. That's Otis—Otis Company in a cotton mill.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

RUTKOWSKI: Seventeen.

SIGRIST: And what sticks out in your mind about that job?

RUTKOWSKI: I—I had to apply for it for a year, every morning come in and see if he needed help. And there—there was a partiality. Boy, I'll tell you. Now is a time I would like to meet some of them guys.

SIGRIST: Partial to whom, though? What were they partial to?

RUTKOWSKI: I don't know. They'd pick out the—they'd—just a certain group of people. I used to go there every morning at seven, eight o'clock and wait for him to come out of the office and says, "No help wanted." You understand? You waited there. He could have told you right off the bat. He waited. He made you wait a couple hours before he

told you. He didn't go from the—he didn't have no communication like you have now. He just sat there and was mean and tells you, "No help today." And you did that day in and day out for about a year. And then he must have—evidently, he must have got sick and tired of looking at you, because he says, "What's your name?" I told him, "Eddy." He says, "Got a job for you." So it was a—it was a—a job of picking up the work that the women twisted—the machine twisted. But they watched the machine twist the—and when it filled up, they'd take it off and put it on a shelf. Your job was to go around the whole thing and pick up what they finished and give 'em—give 'em an empty one. And that was another hard thing about the job. There wasn't enough empty ones. The boss would be madder than the dickens because the work is piled up. Well, what—what are you going to do with it? Put it in a bag? Well, I felt like asking him that myself but I never did. You held all—that's what—[laughs] you often wonder why you had a blood pressure problem. That was enough to kill you, you know.

SIGRIST: [unclear] tension.

RUTKOWSKI: You wait every morning. You wait every morning and to have him tell you, "No work today. No." Or else, do your work. You're willing to do a hundred times over because it's so much easier to do it. But there was nothing to put it into.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how much you were paid?

RUTKOWSKI: The biggest job I got—the biggest pay I got in the cotton mill when I was a weaver, weaving cloth. And you heard of the—you maybe never heard of them, but jacquard—

SIGRIST: A jacquard.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-hmm, sure.

RUTKOWSKI: And that was a—that was a—oh, when I was weaving a jacquard it was a wide one. And it did—you—you weave scenery. That's what they called a jacquard weave.

SIGRIST: The jacquard, you used, like, cards with holes in them, sort of? How—what was the process that you [unclear]?

RUTKOWSKI: Oh, that was—what you're talking about was the—was the—it's—the compressor'd send them things down. As they—as they fall into

that certain hole, like you saw, well, that's what—that moved so that the shuttle would go through and leave the wire—leave the cotton there. That's the jacquard. They used to—the rich people at the time used to paper their—like, if they wanted a hunting scene on a wall, they'd have cloth jacquard, and make that. That—come to the point, that was the best pay I ever got was, never forget, 17.76 for [laughs] independent—that's how much, \$17.76. You worked five and a half days at 10-hour day.

SIGRIST: And what did you do with your money?

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] I kept—I kept a few bucks and I gave the rest to my mother and father to run the place.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever go back to Europe?

RUTKOWSKI: No, they had no part of it.

SIGRIST: They were never interested in doing that?

RUTKOWSKI: No, they were good citizens. They—they—they abided, just like myself. I never went against the law. I just—they made 'em [unclear] try to go through with it. And we did.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to Poland?

RUTKOWSKI: To Poland?

SIGRIST: Just to see where you were born?

RUTKOWSKI: Well, I wish I could but I didn't. I never was that enthusiastic about it, you know. A—a lot of people—my gosh, they would—I never—I never cared for it. I think with the—with the trouble you had, you know, that—you know, that starts a lot of trouble. If you haven't got enough to pay for something the kids want, you know. And it wasn't nothing that they wanted that was out of this world. Something good to eat, a piece of cake for dessert. You had a piece of white bread. [laughs] That was good for you though, anyway. I laughed at it but that was good for you.

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself in terms of nationality—

RUTKOWSKI: Yes.

SIGRIST: —how do you think of yourself?

RUTKOWSKI: I never thought to it. Never—never had no—no—I never felt that way about it.

SIGRIST: But—but do you now? Now—

RUTKOWSKI: Now, no.

SIGRIST: —do you think of yourself as being American or being Polish or Polish-American?

RUTKOWSKI: No, American. I—I feel that if I'm just a plain American and—and minding my own business, which I'm glad for that.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had never left Poland?

RUTKOWSKI: I don't know if I'd—it—there wasn't much opportunities to do anything. Y—you had—you had nothing to work with. All you had to do is sit around and—and go ask a neighbor if he needed any help or something to get a chicken or something. You know, something for the table. That's—there was no money transacted. There was just food, potatoes and corn and stuff like that.

SIGRIST: And what do you think would have happened to you if you had stayed there?

RUTKOWSKI: [laughs] I—I don't know. Maybe—I suppose I'd look around, find one that's—it's my level and get married, I guess.

SIGRIST: [laughs] Oh, that's a good place for us to end, I think. Mr. Rutkowski, thank you very much for letting me ask you these questions. You did a great job.

RUTKOWSKI: Well, been—been a long time.

SIGRIST: [laughs] Yeah, we've been talking for 53 minutes.

FRAN: For—for someone who didn't have anything—

RUTKOWSKI: Did you have a recorder?

FRAN: For something you—someone who didn't have anything to say, you sure said it.

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah. [laughter] Well, no. I didn't know you wanted—that was my—

EI-822/RUTKOWSKI

FRAN: No, but I [unclear]. See how e—

RUTKOWSKI: Them were nice questions. I liked them.

FRAN: See how easy it was?

RUTKOWSKI: Yeah.

SIGRIST: All right. Let me just sign off here. [laughs] This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Edward Rutkowski on Saturday, October 12th, 1996 with his daughter-in-law, Fran and his dog, Sebastian, in attendance. Thank you very much, sir.

RUTKOWSKI: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]