Interview with Kazimir Ladny

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good morning. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Monday, February eleventh, of 2008. I'm here with Kazimir Ladny who has quite a story to tell us today. He is a POW from the Second World War. Not only that, Mr. Ladny was in the Polish army in 1937 as a reservist, was captured by the Russians in 1939, ended up shortly thereafter in a prisoner exchange going to Germany, and spent most of the war in Germany. Today is probably the first of two parts of an interview we want to do. We want to cover your young childhood, if you will, and being in the war in 1939 when first the Germans and then the Russians attacked, and then of course your time as a prisoner of war in Russia in Siberia. That always conjures up images for people. So thank you very much, Mr. Ladny. Thank you for being here. Let's go ahead and start with when and where you were born.

Ladny: I was born in Poland, in eastern part of Poland, which was before the First World War there was this part, it was occupied by Russia.

DePue: So it was actually in Russia where you were born.

Ladny: Yeah. Now if I can go a little bit farther back, my great-grandfather had a very nice farm in this part of Poland which was under Russian occupation. Now if I want to start from beginning, so I shouldn't be born, I shouldn't be alive. My great-grandfather, he had two sons and seven daughters. And he decided to give the farm to the older son as inheritance. But the younger son, he wanted that he would become Catholic priest. So he sent him to Lublin to Catholic seminary and he was three years in this seminary when his older brother died.

So his father took him out of seminary to take the farm over. So he had to start a family. He found a girl. He got married. And he got four sons and two daughters. Oldest of the sons became my father. So if my grandfather would become a priest I wouldn't be around.

DePue: It's probably worth mentioning here: most people would be aware that—maybe some were not aware – that when you were born there technically was no Poland, was there?

Ladny: No. Now so when I was born—I was two weeks old when my father was drafted to Russian army in the First World War. So he was three years in the war. And he became prisoner of war in Austro-Hungarian Empire. So my grandfather took place of my father.

DePue: In raising you?

Ladny: Raising me. And he was naturally as a potential priest, so he raised me in Catholic way. And even he took me to the church every morning to the mass and he taught me to become…

DePue: Altar boy?

Ladny: Altar boy. So I had to learn Latin. Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.

DePue: Well, that's a lot more Latin than I know. Was your native language Polish?

Ladny: Polish, yeah.

DePue: But you were learning some other languages as well at this time?

Ladny: Russian, because before the First World War there were no Polish schools, just Russian. My grandfather was teaching me Russian. Russian alphabet is different, is Cyrillic alphabet, more of a Greek style. So this was helping me later on in my life.

DePue: That would be very important later on. So after the First World War then your father spent time as a prisoner of war in Austria-Hungary?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And that couldn't have been a pleasant experience for him at all.

Ladny: Oh no. He escaped from the camp and was about nine months on the way going home. And he got home. Two weeks later the war ended.

DePue: So his timing was good in that respect. So growing up in Poland, what did your father do? Now that you have this brand-new country of Poland, he's…

Ladny: He was farmer.

DePue: He was a farmer.

Ladny: Yeah. But my grandfather was raising me.

DePue: Even after the war?

Ladny: Even after the war. For sixteen years, till he died in 1930. So the upbringing, it was all in his hand. My grandfather took place of my father, and he was not only as a father. He was my teacher.

DePue: What was the name of the community then where you grew up?

Ladny: Kakolewnica.

DePue: Could you say that again, please?

Ladny: Kakolewnica.

DePue: And this is in Lublin? That's a province?

Ladny: Yeah, Province Lublin.

DePue: Looking at the map it looks like it was roughly halfway between Warsaw and Brest-Litovsk.

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: At that time this would have been in the central part of Poland?

Ladny: It was in central.

DePue: And today if we were to look at the borders of Poland, Lublin is on the eastern border.

Ladny: Eastern border, yeah.

DePue: Well, there's a lot of history there, isn't it, to explain why those borders keep shifting? Did you have any siblings then or were you pretty much raised by yourself with your grandfather?

Ladny: Yes. I had three brothers and one sister. But my grandfather was paying more attention to me than to my brothers, because my brothers, they were inclined to be farmers. They used to like to be with horses and animals, with cows and so on. But I hated that. And because I hated that and I liked books, so my grandfather was paying more attention to me in teaching me about history, geography and everything.

DePue: So what did your grandfather think you should do for your future?

Ladny: He was teaching me to be good solid citizen.

DePue: But otherwise it was for you to decide what your future would be?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: I know that in 1937 then—and most of your young life – you were growing at the same time Poland is developing itself as a country. Nineteen thirty-seven is when you joined the reserves?

Ladny: No.

DePue: Before that?

Ladny: Before that. Right after the war Poland introduced schools that all children should go to school, because before there was no Polish school. So I went to one-room school for seven years. This was my education in Polish.

DePue: So you already had a good solid foundation in the Russian language, and now in this school you're getting a good solid foundation in the Polish language, and I assume a lot of Polish history as well.

Ladny: Oh yeah. Polish history was very, very complicated. For 1,000 years Poland was defending Christianity. Poland was being invaded by Mongols, Tartars, Turks and Prussians and Russians. And so there is one story. After the First World War, Pope, he wanted to have his nuncios in eastern Europe.

DePue: His what again?

Ladny: Nuncios. So he assigned one to Czechoslovakia, one to Germany and so on. And now one that was Cardinal Hlond, he said, "You will be my representative in Poland."

DePue: What was the cardinal's name again?

Ladny: Hlond, H-l-o-n-d. He was disappointed. He said, "Poland? Where is Poland? What is Poland?" So Pope said, "Where is Poland? Take the map. You find Poland on the map. But now what is Poland? So when you get there, you take the handful of Polish dirt and squeeze it so Christian blood will be dripping between your fingers." Because Poland was always defending Christianity: the Mongols, Tartars, and all others, the Turks and so on. That is the base of Polish history.

DePue: And a very strong Catholic country. And of course that's one of the problems with being part of the Russian Empire, because they were Eastern Orthodox, and I suspect the two did not mix well.

Ladny: Oh no. They were always fighting and arguing and so on.

DePue: I would like to get up to the point when you joined the Polish military. I suspect you did not have a choice. Were you drafted?

Ladny: Yes, I was drafted.

DePue: What year was that?

Ladny: In ’36.

DePue: Nineteen thirty-six.

Ladny: And I was drafted and I was assigned to army division signal corps. First six weeks, so I had just soldier training. After six weeks I was selected to meet a gentleman. He was in civilian. And he didn’t introduce himself. He said, “My name and who I am,” he said, “it doesn’t mean anything. From now on, I am your friend. And we are going to, I would say, live together.” He said, “I know your background, who you are, how you grew up, and what you are.” He said, “I know you were born in a village as a farmer’s son. Farmers are the most dependable, patriotic people. And I know that you were an altar boy too. So you were raised properly. So and I know that you know how to play chess. So I want to play chess with you as often as we can, as a camouflage. And we can start right now.” He got a box, put it up, and so the chess was our beginning.

And he said, “So you are in signal corps. Signal corps is the most important unit in any army, because all communication goes through the signal corps. So enemies, they want to infiltrate signal corps to get the connections. Enemies know every Polish school, every Polish military unit. And enemies know every student in these schools. So,” he said, “enemies want to infiltrate these units.”

DePue: In 1936 who did Poland most fear as an enemy?

Ladny: My division was eastern division against Russia, Soviet Union. So he said, “I want you as a counterintelligence against counterintelligence, because,” he said, “we have school for special counterintelligence, but the enemies know them. Now I want that nobody supposed to know who you are and nobody supposed to know your name or rank or what.”

DePue: What was your rank at this time? Were you enlisted?

Ladny: I was enlisted. And he said, “You won’t have any rank at all till the time comes when you graduate.” So in the last year he sent me to—I have to show you—

DePue: Do you need a Kleenex? Well, if we could look at the photo of Mr. Ladny in 1937 looking very sharp in your military uniform here.

Ladny: My driver’s license.

DePue: Are you looking for the name of the school?

Ladny: Yes

DePue: I don’t think we should worry too much about it. Let’s go ahead and move on if that’s okay.

Ladny: This was Zegrze. This was central signal corps school.

DePue: At this school were you learning how to be in the signal corps or were you learning counterintelligence?

Ladny: I had training in [the] signal corps as the basic training. But I was in school for counterintelligence with him. He was teaching me that.

DePue: Without anybody else knowing that.

Ladny: Absolutely not.

DePue: So was the concern he had that Russians and Germans and other nationalities were planting spies within the Polish army?

Ladny: Yeah. So he told me, "Never introduce yourself to anybody. Nobody's supposed to know who you are. And you are just grunt, that is all."

DePue: Grunt. In other words just an average soldier.

Ladny: Yeah. And he sent me to this school. So not as signal corpsman, only as a cover to get a driver's license and automobile mechanic. This is your job. And by the end, by the graduation—but the graduation, it was not official –so second lieutenant. But you're never supposed to say to anybody under no circumstances that you have military ranks.

DePue: So you're a second lieutenant but can't tell anybody, couldn't tell your parents even?

Ladny: No. Never.

DePue: Were you receiving the pay as a second lieutenant?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Well, at least you have the pay.

Ladny: Yeah. I was not supposed to go to casino, to officers' casino, to any receptions or what, official reception or what. I was not allowed to be there.

DePue: Did they warn you against drinking?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So anything that might compromise your secret. Okay. Well, that was very interesting. I wasn't aware of that.

Ladny: And I knew that very often there was news on the radio and in the newspaper that Communists executed somebody in Poland.

DePue: Assassinated people.

Ladny: Yeah. So I was keeping very quiet not to let myself somehow open to such.

DePue: When did you get your commission? Was that still in 1936? Or was that later?

Ladny: Thirty-eight.

DePue: This was 1938. By this time what was the mood in Poland, because Germany is starting to make their intentions known? They're building up their military very quickly. The Russian military is building up very quickly. It was 1938, was it not, that they took control over Austria and had designs over Czechoslovakia?

Ladny: Sudetenland.

DePue: Sudetenland. So what was the mood in Poland watching all of this?

Ladny: Yeah. Poland was scared. As a matter of fact, in August 1938 I resigned the army.

DePue: Because?

Ladny: Because I was afraid of what was going on.

DePue: You were afraid a war was going to come?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So being in the army in 1938 would not be a good place to be.

Ladny: Yeah. So in August '38 I resigned the army. But in March 1939 I was mobilized in it. And I was assigned to the signal corps in the headquarters of the army Lodz. There was General Rummel army.

DePue: R-u-m-m-e-l.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So not to be confused at all with General Rommel, the German. And where was Lodz? This was in the western part of Poland.

Ladny: Yeah, western part.

DePue: Was that generally in the center of the border between Germany and Poland?

Ladny: Yeah, it was center, yeah.

DePue: And what kind of training was your unit going through? You were still in a signal corps unit?

Ladny: Yeah, signal corps.

DePue: And still working as a counterintelligence agent?

Ladny: Yeah. But of course—

DePue: No one knew.

Ladny: No one knew.

DePue: What kind of training did the signal corps unit get then?

Ladny: Build telephone lines and communication.

DePue: Well, without getting too far into the war itself, looking back do you think the training the unit received was effective, was the kind of training they needed with the war coming up?

Ladny: Absolutely not. They didn't have so many radios, and to build the telephone lines. We had to learn the alphabet Morse.

DePue: Morse code?

Ladny: Morse code for telegraph, because there is a difference, telephone and telegraph. When the line is broken in telephone, the telephone is out. But telegraph can go through. So this training signal corps. And this was very intricate.

DePue: But you didn't get enough of that kind of training?

Ladny: No.

DePue: How about the rest of the Polish army—the infantry and the armor and the cavalry units? Were they training hard at that time?

Ladny: Yes. They got the regular military training. Old-fashioned way.

DePue: Let's get into 1939. In March of 1939 the Nazis take over the rest of Czechoslovakia. They had already seized the Sudetenland before that. It wasn't too long after that that the Germans at least were finding reasons in their own propaganda for why there were problems with Poland and why perhaps it looked like there would be war with Poland. What was your thought at that time? Were you paying attention? Were you even aware that all of these storm clouds were building with Germany?

Ladny: Yeah, sure. But nobody was thinking that somebody would be that crazy to start a war.

DePue: Why?

Ladny: Because of the air force. We knew that we had our air force and Germany had. So because of that we thought impossible because of this devastation, which anybody can put on somebody else. So no, war, no, there won't be any.

DePue: So you had faith in the Polish air force at least?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Was part of the reasoning that World War I had been such a horrific war and it was so painful that who in their right mind would want to unleash another war?

Ladny: Yeah. My life, it was terrific and horrific. My life was very very complicated.

DePue: Well, let's throw in another complication. Did you have a girlfriend at this time?

Ladny: Yes.

DePue: Well, why don't you tell us a little bit about your girlfriend at this time? What was her name?

Ladny: Stanislawa, Stasia.

DePue: Stasia? And where was Stasia living?

Ladny: In the next village to my village.

DePue: Where you were stationed?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Now you start off your book with a wonderful story about talking to a Gypsy. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ladny: Yeah. Poland has many Gypsies. They were going from village to village, from house to house, and trying to tell the fortune and so on. But nobody believed in that. It is all nonsense. And one day I come on an old ugly woman Gypsy, and when she saw me somehow she was so fascinated to see me like she was seeing a ghost or something. And she wanted, she insisted to tell me my future. I said you have to give her something just to get rid of her. Anyway, so let her tell the story.

When she throws her cards on the table, just so, just throw them, spread them. so she said, "Young man, I don't like to tell you what I see. But," she said, "it's in a way my obligation. You will go through hell. You will be close to death dozens of times. But," she said, "God will be with you. You will live through it. But be prepared." And she says that she heard that you are planning get married. "Forget it. There won't be any marriage. Your wife is far far away. And you'll take a long time till you find your wife. Your wife is not even in this country. And you will go through hell till you find her."

DePue: So what did you think when you heard this kind of a prediction?

Ladny: That it was all baloney, because I was planning to get married in two weeks. But so that even my parents didn't know about it.

DePue: Your parents weren't aware that you were planning to get married?

Ladny: No.

DePue: Was this Stasia or somebody else?

Ladny: No, it was another one. Sophie. And she was a beautiful girl. Only girl from pretty rich farmer. So I was looking ahead for good future. But she said, "No, it won't be anything."

DePue: So did Sophie call off the wedding?

Ladny: That day when the Gypsy was telling me the story in the morning, in the afternoon I took the bicycle and I went to see my girl, and I broke it off. I broke it off.

DePue: Why? Because of this prediction?

Ladny: No. Because she and her parents were insincere. They were keeping a secret away from me. She had two brothers, oh, maybe eight, nine years old, both were—I don't know how you call this thing, polio or something, that they were—

DePue: They were crippled?

Ladny: Crippled. And they didn't tell me anything about, they were always keeping them out of sight when I was there. But I came unexpected and I met them. So I said, "What is that? Why didn't you tell me that?" But I said, "Anyway I'm willing to go ahead with the wedding under one condition, that I put these kids in some institution where they get proper care for their needs. They are younger than I am. I cannot spend my whole life taking care of them." The parents said, "No, they stay here." So I said, "I'm sorry."

DePue: So that was when? 1937? Somewhere around there?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So we took a little back-track. You have a new girlfriend as the war clouds are building. Tell us a little bit about the time when the attack actually happened on September 1, 1939, when the war started.

Ladny: Yeah. I was mobilized on March 23, '39. So we were put in standby situation, ready for something but just standby. So it was so boring we didn't know what to do and so on. And one day I had a night on the town. I came back from visiting girls. And I didn't want to wake up anybody, so I just crawled in my automobile and I spent the

night in my automobile. But in the morning my friend, he woke me up, "Kazimir, get up." "What the hell is going on?" He says, "The war just started." He worked his shift at the headquarter telephone service, and he said, "Just about half an hour ago the Germans attacked Poland and there is a war."

DePue: Did it surprise you when it came?

Ladny: Yeah, sure. But I thought, yeah, about time, time for something. I was happy that the war started.

DePue: Happy because you were tired of waiting for what you thought would be inevitable?

Ladny: Yeah. So at least now we'll see something constructive. Good or bad I don't know.

DePue: Well, what did you think of the chances of the Polish military against the German army, the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe? Did you think your chances were pretty good as a country?

Ladny: Yes. Not because of Polish army, only because of England and France. They promised that in case Germany would attack Poland they automatically will attack Germany. So this was just common sense that England and France, they won the First World War, Germany lost it. Germany was destroyed and desperate in many ways. And Hitler was just seven years in charge. So it would be impossible that he could make any fighting army to go against us or against France and England. So that it's good. Let him start. So we give him hell.

DePue: So the Poles would hold out long enough until France and Britain got in the war and attacked on the western front and then Germany would have its two-front war again, which they always feared.

Ladny: Yeah. The war started September first. But September third England and France declared war on Germany. Yeah so now come on. Yeah they gave him hell. But he gave all of us hell.

DePue: What was it like watching the Polish army disintegrate in front of your eyes? What were your thoughts at that time?

Ladny: Yeah, I was disappointed in many ways. Especially our supreme command. They didn't do the job that they should do. Ten days after the war started our supreme commander escaped to Rumania and left Poland.

DePue: Did you know that at the time, or did you find that out later?

Ladny: I found out later. But we knew already what was going on.

DePue: What was your first encounter with the Germans like?

Ladny: Yeah. First encounter, it was the first and last. On the third day we had our communication stations in several places. And two of them, they were run over by the Germans already. And third one was in danger, so they sent me to dismantle this station, get rid of it, destroy all the equipment and so on and come back. Well, what can you do? So I took automobile and went there. I took a truck. And it was in a post office on the second story. So just across the square. I was standing at the window and I told them to dismantle everything and cut the wires and so on. And I didn't like what was going on. But then I see across the square the German Spahwagen.

DePue: A German—

Ladny: Spahwagen. An automobile, the first—

DePue: Armored vehicles?

Ladny: Yeah. Armored vehicles that are going first, just looking where it was.

DePue: Scout vehicles then.

Ladny: Yeah. Oh boy. So I thought hell, war just started, and I am already prisoner of war, because they were going that way and they had to go here on the main highway to where I have to go back.

DePue: How close were you to the border between Poland and Germany at this time? My impression, it was quite a ways back.

Ladny: Oh yeah.

DePue: Were you thirty or forty kilometers away from the border?

Ladny: Oh yes, yes. And I was desperate. I haven't been in a fighting war yet. Till now all I had, just the dive bombers.

DePue: The Stukas?

Ladny: Yeah, Stukas. This all that I seen from the war. But now I am cut off here. Now I have to—and there was a lieutenant with me. And I said, "You see that? Do you know what that means that we are prisoner of war, we lost the war already. We didn't fight the war yet, but we lost it already." Really it was desperate thought. But then I see a Polish truck in the German…

DePue: Convoy?

Ladny: Convoy. There was a Polish truck. Then I see another one. Oh, I thought, okay, you get one more. So I just told our guys, "Go tothat truck, lie down, and do not move, don't raise your head, no matter what. Just forget that you are alive." And the lieutenant said, "Come, sit down, and we go fight a war." He was teacher in his

profession, and married. He had family. So he got scared, . but he did. And I went to the truck, and I pulled out, and I cut the Germans off. I cut them through. And—

DePue: You mean you drove right into their own convoy?

Ladny: Yeah. I was just waiting for the right spot. I saw the distance what they had between their vehicles, and I was looking for the right spot where I could sneak in. And there were trucks and all kinds of—there were a few motorcycles with the side wagon. So I just pulled in behind a motorcycle. So there was most likely an officer sitting in the side wagon. He looked at me. Yeah but then he straightened out. So I took the proper distance what they had holding back. But I was expecting that he will investigate here.

DePue: You're in Polish uniforms, correct?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: This was rather audacious of you.

Ladny: But in the truck we were sitting down so that he from down below, he couldn't see our uniforms. So I just told the lieutenant, "Listen. When he will be looking here, smile. Let's give him a smile." "Oh, yeah, there is something to smile about," he said. And okay, and it was that way. After a while he turned around and he was watching at us. But we smiled at each other. And finally he gave up and I knew where they get the reception, because there was a railroad truck on the higher level and our defense line was behind the railroad. So I was just praying to God, "Don't start shooting yet. Let us come closer." And so it was. They let us go. But then they opened fire.

DePue: Was it the Poles who opened fire on the German convoy?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah. So this was the moment I was waiting for. So the Germans from the motorcycle and all in the ditch, and I'm on a full gas right on them. I don't know if I ran them over or they escaped. Anyway, I just pushed the full gas and I got in the underpass.

DePue: The Polish soldiers weren't firing at the truck?

Ladny: No, because they saw Polish truck. So they put fire behind me.

DePue: During this whole time, what are your emotions during this whole experience?

Ladny: In that situation you don't have emotions. You are like a mannequin. You don't think of anything. You are like mannequin. Just your action is automatic.

DePue: Even the decision to slip into the convoy in the first place? Because as far as this lieutenant is concerned, you're just an average signal corpsman; you're not an officer, and then suddenly you come up with this idea?

Ladny: Yeah. So that is, but in that situation, you don't think about reason. You act automatically. Later on I thought, boy, Kazimir, you were an idiot. But I got away with it.

DePue: What did you learn from that experience, your first exposure to combat if you will?

Ladny: In my training I was told never try to be smart. Be smart but play stupid. Always when you are stupid you get away with many things. Yeah. But if you try to get smart, sooner or later somebody cuts you down.

DePue: Was that advice going to serve you well, especially as a prisoner of war?

Ladny: Oh yeah. Without that I wouldn't get through.

DePue: Once you joined the Polish army, what happened after that? What happened after this initial incident? The army started moving east?

Ladny: Yeah. I came to the headquarters and they are moving out. So they gave us three furthest possible station. You go to this and this place, and if this becomes dangerous you move to that or to that. So we get the three station. So we moved out. But it was funny thing that they told us you have to move out because tomorrow morning at five o'clock the Germans will be bombing this place.

DePue: Where was that?

Ladny: Lodz.

DePue: I wonder if we can put up the map here real quick. I don't know if you can see that real well. The map of Poland here, obviously in the center. Mr. Ladny, where are you going here? You can't go too far.

Ladny: I want to show the—

DePue: Well, that's okay. We can just look at it from here. You need to sit down here if you would please. I have a little star here, if you look close to the eastern border of Poland, and I believe that is where you were living at the time, because that's east of Warsaw. And then you moved all the way to the western part of the country. And now we're on that longer arrow on the bottom and moving straight east. This is going to happen over a series of days, I believe?

Ladny: Yeah. We moved east across the River Vistula, what's supposed to have been the defense point that the Germans wouldn't cross the Vistula River. So I went to the next town, to get gasoline. And this town was bombed out during the day, but I got gas. For ten days we were on the run. We couldn't sleep or rest, day or night. And so, on the run. So I thought my last order it was to go to Brest-Litovsk. There is a garrison there. You get supplies and so on. But to go to Brest-Litovsk I was going only eight kilometers away from my birthplace where my parents were living. So I thought I take a break now. And I go to my birthplace. There is a forest. I leave the

truck in the forest with all the people there and I go see my parents and my girlfriend. It was September tenth, the last time I saw my parents.

DePue: Did you have a group of other communications personnel with you at the time?

Ladny: Yeah sure.

DePue: How many people were with you?

Ladny: Twelve.

DePue: Were you leading this group by that time?

Ladny: Oh yeah.

DePue: Did they know you were a counterintelligence officer?

Ladny: No.

DePue: They just figured you're the guy taking the initiative?

Ladny: Yeah. They were waiting for somebody to do something. They were waiting to have a leader.

DePue: So tell us about the reunion with your parents for the last time.

Ladny: Oh of course it was big excitement, because from this village, many men were soldiers, and some of them, they got killed already. The parents got notice that they got killed. And here my parents were happy to see me alive. So I went. First I lay down on the bed and I said to my sister, "Leave me here for one hour. Don't let anybody wake me or ask question or what. In one hour you wake me up." She did. Because many people, they were coming here. Oh, Kazimir, he is alive, but where is my son or where is my brother or what, yeah. So I didn't want to have anything to do with hour I took a bicycle. I went to see my girl. But time goes fast.

Now sun is going down. I have to go back to my unit. I go to my parents first to say goodbye. I came to my parents. In front of the house there were quite a few people, and there were two soldiers from my unit. I said, "What the hell are you guys doing here?" They say, "Lieutenant sent us here to tell you that you know how the war is going, that we have no chance. So you are home now here. So you stay home, but we will go further east. But you can stay home. War is over for you. Okay.

This was a decision to make. I thought war just started. I was not fighting a war yet. I go wherever, whatever, till the end. They say okay. But this was the last time I saw my place, my parents. I thought to myself if I would stay home, so I would be considered a deserter. A deserter during the war is dead. No, if I have to die, I want to die from the enemy bullet, not from Polish bullet.

DePue: So to a certain extent you didn't feel you had a choice.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So what happened after that then? You continued to move farther east?

Ladny: Yeah. We went to Brest-Litovsk where we got some supply and again next order. You go now to Pinsk. Pinsk, that was a town close to Soviet border.

DePue: Was that basically just further east from Brest-Litovsk?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. So this is Pinsk, before you head straight south.

Ladny: Yeah. So we went there. We were for three days. They didn't give us any news, any order or what. But then when we went to the military unit over there, said, "What the hell are you doing here? Get the hell out of here as soon as you can. And go to Rumania. Because Soviet Union across the border. From the west, Germans; from the east, Soviet Union."

DePue: The Soviets came in quite a few days after the Germans attacked.

Ladny: Yeah, seventeenth of September.

DePue: Was that a shock to find out the Russians were attacking?

Ladny: Oh yeah sure. We didn't know what to do. Are they coming to help us against Germany, or are they coming to take us over? We didn't know what to do.

DePue: We see the next map over there. But we're now talking about going straight south towards the Ukrainian and Rumanian border, correct?

Ladny: Rumanian border. This line down.

DePue: There you go. What was the logic of going to Rumania? Why? Why Rumania?

Ladny: Yeah, just to get away from Soviet Union.

DePue: But as you go farther south towards Rumania, you're going into what today on the map appears to be Ukraine. So these are not ethnic Poles that are there.

Ladny: Yeah. The Ukrainians were fighting against Poles, were killing Poles wherever they could.

DePue: So you're still in Poland, but it's an area of Poland that's populated primarily by Ukrainians. Why did the Ukrainians go after the Poles? Why wouldn't the Ukrainians go fighting the Russians?

Ladny: Because Ukrainians: there were nationalist Ukrainians and Communist Ukrainians. The nationalists, they were sympathetic to Germany. They were waiting for

Germans to come in. But the Communists, they were fighting the nationalists. But both of them, they were fighting Poles. They didn't like Poles. They didn't like Russians. They didn't like Germans. So this was just chaotic situation.

DePue: So not only do you have Poland being attacked by Germany on one side, Russia on another, but you, in essence, have a civil war going on in some of these provinces. And here you are, a Polish soldier stuck in the middle. What were you armed with? What was your weapon?

Ladny: We had just sidearms and carbines.

DePue: Did you personally have a carbine then?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. So not much. Did your group run into any Ukrainians?

Ladny: Yes. We had some contact with them.

DePue: Now I wonder. There's a story that you told very well in your book about seeing some Polish soldiers trying to hold off a Russian cavalry charge as well. Do you remember that incident? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ladny: Yeah. On the way to Rumania we had to go through a forest. And we hear some shooting going on where I thought there were Ukrainian shooting against Poles or maybe against themselves. And yeah, so I stopped the truck. And I went through the bushes to find out what's going on. And I saw a Polish soldier. There was a highway and on this side of the highway there were Polish soldiers fighting across the highway. So I asked them, "What's going on?" Yeah. They say, "First Ukrainians were attacking us. Now the Russians are coming." But there was a lieutenant from this group. He said, "You better get the hell out of here. With your pistol you can't fight them here."

DePue: This is the Polish lieutenant who told you this?

Ladny: Yeah. I knew with my revolver what can I do across the highway. So I moved back. But in combat you're not allowed to leave a unit. Once you are in it you have to stay there, because your own can shoot you from the back. So I just went behind a tree and wait to see what was going to happen. And it didn't take long. So the Russians, "Hurray! Hurray!" and they run across the highway with sabers and with bayonets.

DePue: They were dismounted though?

Ladny: Yeah. And they attack here. The first line, they dropped dead on the highway. But then it was just chaotic. You didn't know who is in front of you, Russian or Polish soldier. They were all interlocked in combat, hand-to-hand fighting. And so I was

just standing behind a tree, and with my revolver, but I couldn't fire at anybody because I was afraid that I didn't have enough ammunition in it. So just keep quiet.

Finally the Russians gave up. But those who fell down, they were lying down; most of them gave up and ran across the highway to the horses and so.

DePue: So this sounds like probably the most intense combat that you were participating in.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And yet, armed with just a sidearm, there wasn't much you could do. In the heat of the hand-to-hand combat, even if you had fired, you probably would have been just as likely to hit a Pole as a Russian? Where were the rest of your soldiers at this time? Were they there with you? Or were they back at a different location?

Ladny: No, they were all mixed up.

DePue: I don't believe it was too much longer after this that your unit was actually captured by the Russians. Can you talk about that?

Ladny: Yeah. After this ended, so now I have to go back to my unit and follow my orders: go to Rumania. So I went back to the truck and I hear vroom vroom vroom, heavy motorized vehicles are coming. What was it? They were Russian tanks on the highway. So get the hell out of here. So I turn around and saw maybe two or three kilometers through the forest from the side, I came back to the highway. There were, oh, at least twenty Polish vehicles standing on this side and our soldiers. Yeah, "What's going on? Who are you? Why are you standing here?" Yeah. They say, "You see the rail track over there? The gate is closed. We cannot go any farther because Russian tanks are in there. The Russians already." So we cannot go any farther. So I cannot go back because Russian tanks are there and I cannot go forwards.

So the situation is hopeless now. So just wait and see. And it didn't take long. The Russian tanks started moving through the railroad tracks and down on there was like a meadow or something. Three on this side and three on this side behind us. And they of course pointed their guns at us. Then the one tank was standing on the highway behind the railroad barrier. And at once he starts moving. He didn't open the gate, he just went through it, broke the gate. And he, most likely an officer, he opened the guard, and he was saying, "Rzudzlyey kirach otstupitsa! Rzudzlyey kirach otstupitsa!" That means throw away your arms and step back. Well, what can you do?

DePue: So that was the moment of actually being captured. What did they do with you immediately after that?

Ladny: They took us across the town. There was a pasture. There were railroad tracks from one side and a highway from another side. There was a triangle and down below it there was just a pasture. And they put us in that place. And of course machine guns.

DePue: Posted around the perimeter?

Ladny: Yeah. Perimeter. And now you see on the highway the Russian army; there was a cavalry and artillery. They were moving west

DePue: What's going through your mind at this moment when you're first captured? What are the thoughts going through your mind then?

Ladny: There is no time for thought. You feel completely blank because you are so helpless and so hopeless that nothing could go through your mind, because it's a hopeless situation when the tanks are in front of you and behind you and pointed at you. Yeah, what can you think about? Any situation possible? No.

DePue: In the book you mentioned that once you got to this initial compound, as I recall, the Russians were pretty quick to separate the officers from the enlisted men.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ladny: Yeah. The Russian officers, they thought they felt sorry for us. They thought that they were liberating us from the oppression of the capitalist tormentors. So the Polish officers, they were capitalists, and they were mistreating you as the soldiers. And so they thought that they were liberating us from that.

DePue: When you say us, you mean the enlisted men from the Polish army. So at that moment in time when they're asking the Polish officers to step forward, what do you decide you want to be? Are you going to be going with the officers or enlisted men?

Ladny: Hell no. I am nobody.

DePue: Okay. So back to that advice you'd gotten a long time before.

Ladny: Yeah. I was just nobody. And I had a big surprise. I was sitting on the ground so dejected. And at once somebody, "Oh, Kazimir, what are you doing here?" I looked up, and it was one Jewish boy who was in the army, and we knew each other before the war. And he said, "What are you doing here? Why are you here? Why don't you go with the officers where they are?" But this was a surprise to me that he knew that I was officer. I said, "I am not officer. I'm just grunt as you are." And he says, "Kazimir, I make a deal with you. I won't tell anybody that you are an officer if you don't tell anybody that I am a Jew." I said, "Okay, it is a deal. But how the hell did you know that I was an officer?" He said, "In the army there are no secrets."

DePue: Now was this Joseph, Joe, Birnbaum? Is that his name?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: He's going to be with you for quite a long time after this. From what I gathered in reading the book he's probably your closest friend, the most important person to you, over the next few months here.

Ladny: Yeah. Yeah.

DePue: Well, that's a wonderful way to start that relationship then. What happened after that in terms of how the Russians got you back to—well, I don't want to get too far ahead of the story. I believe in your book you mentioned that suddenly the guards disappeared.

Ladny: Yeah. Next day when we woke up the guards disappeared. So no guard, so let's go home. So many groups, they said, "Okay, let's go." They went to the forest, and Ukrainian partisans, they mow them down with machine guns. A few escaped. So we are in danger here too. So I thought as unique as it can be, the best way is if I go look and find Russian officer and ask him for help, what to do and so on. So I went to the railroad station and I found one. He said, "What the hell are you here for? Go home." I said, "We cannot because the Ukrainians are killing us." So he called a unit, Cossacks, and you guys take these people and take them to the forest. As soon as they got close to it, they were cut down.

DePue: The Cossacks were cut down?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: By the Ukrainians?

Ladny: Yeah. By the Ukrainians. So then the officer said, "Yeah. We are in a peculiar situation. These people here, they hate you and they don't like us, so that we are in peculiar situation." So he said, "Nobody will move from here without my authorization. We are waiting for train from Stanislawow, and we'll board the train, and we'll get you out of here." Okay. So when he mentioned the train, so I thought there is possibility to get out of this situation here.

So I was waiting for the train. And when the train came I jumped on the bumper. And many of us the same way. We were hanging as flies on the train wagon.

DePue: I want to back up just a little bit. This huge field where they collected all of the Polish prisoners at first, and then separated the officers from the enlisted men, once they separated the officers, how many Polish soldiers do you suppose there were at that location?

Ladny: Oh maybe ten, fifteen thousand.

DePue: So this is a huge group. As you woke up the next day and found out there were no Russian soldiers guarding you, the little groups of five or ten or fifteen started to filter out, and then you found out that you were isolated. Out of this group, was it

you that took the initiative in representing this huge group of thousands of Polish soldiers?

Ladny: No. Absolute no.

DePue: Okay. So just your small group.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, and how big was that group then? Still these twelve people or so in your—

Ladny: No, I didn't have any group. I was just a member of them. I didn't want to expose myself as a leader or as a somebody.

DePue: When you went to find the Russian officer at the railroad station, you were doing that strictly for your own purpose.

Ladny: Yeah. I was following the instruction from my training: don't try to be smart; be smart but play stupid.

DePue: But your action in that particular case had an effect on lots of the Poles who were left in that field, right?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: The Russians came back and took control of that whole group of thousands of soldiers after that?

Ladny: Yeah, sure. They took us in the train. And we were waiting; what direction are they going. The train goes to Tarnopol. So I know from Tarnopol there is a—if it goes north okay, so we go to Brest-Litovsk, we go to Poland; if it goes east, so most likely Siberia.

DePue: Is Tarnopol a community that is still in the southeast corner of Poland at that time? Still in Ukrainian territory though basically. And did you go north or did you go east?

Ladny: East. And came to the border. And train stopped. Because Russian railroad tracks are wider than Polish. The train couldn't go any further. It was just on the border there. And they took us across the border on foot.

DePue: Again, what was going on in your mind now? Because before this you were saying, "Maybe they will still release us in Poland and we can go back home." So now, at the point when you're crossing into Russia, what are you thinking?

Ladny: In Poland, the Communist Party was prohibited, and it was big propaganda for communism and against communism. But who can you believe? So as strange as it may seem, I was happy that I became prisoner of war by the Russians, because I

thought, at least now I'll see what is communism with my own eyes. So when all this, everything is over, so I'll be able to tell the truth, because I won't be telling any story of somebody else; I'll be telling my own story what really Communism is.

DePue: I think, Mr. Ladny, this might be a good time for us to stop today. I had thought about going a little bit farther. But I don't want to miss any of your experiences about being in Russia a prisoner of war, and I think we'll probably bump into the end of our tape here pretty soon. So I would prefer that we cover that while you and I are both fresh in next session. I really look forward to hearing about that. You've done an amazing job of telling us what's been happening up to this point, so I'm very much looking forward to hearing the next chapter of your story. Thank you very much for joining us today. As I am, I hope you look forward to part two of our interview. Thank you, Mr. Ladny.

Ladny: Yeah. When is going to be?

(End of first interview)

Interview with Kazimir Ladny

VR2-V-L-2008-008.02

Interview # 2: March 20, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good morning. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Thursday, March 20, 2008.Today it's my privilege to have the second part of what probably will be three interview sessions with Mr. Kazimir Ladny, who was a Polish POW. That's how I've been referring to him. He was in the Polish army, joined up, I believe in 1937, was captured by the Russians, and then eventually spent most of the war in Germany. We are going to talk about from the point in time when we left the story off last time when you were actually captured by the Russians, if you recall. So we need to pick up the story of that trip to Siberia and then take it from there. So Mr. Ladny, if

you could start with that, what was the trip like from southeast Poland, where you were captured, to the prison camp in Siberia?

Ladny: First they took us across the border on foot, because west European railroads have different tracks. Russian are double, they are wider. So you have to walk across the border. And they put us in a kolkhoz.[state farm] There were kolkhoz buildings like barns. So they kept us for three days, nothing to eat, nothing to drink.

DePue: How many people then were in your group?

Ladny: Oh, it was trainload of about 1,000 people. And from there they put us in a train and direction east – where we didn't know. But they took us to Kiev, which is capital of Ukraine now. And there they gave us something to eat in military barracks. From there on next day they took us north through Kursk-Orel, Bryansk, all the way till Moscow.

DePue: I wonder while we're talking about this if we could see the map that has the route to the prison camp. It's not very detailed, and I apologize for that, but it does give something of an idea of what your route was. So do you remember anything about Moscow?

Ladny: Oh yeah. This I never forget because it's something worth to put in a movie. We stop in Moscow, like the freight train station. They kept us there for half a day. Then they decide to load us again, and they took us someplace else,to a railroad station, personal. And train stop. So the Russian military push civilian people who were waiting for train, they push them away. And they open the doors of our cabins. And come out and opravlyatsya. That means come out and relieve yourself. So I decided to be a student of the Communist system. So I thought how do I know why the hell didn't they let us on their freight train station, why did they take us here .So you have to, so you do it. I remember I came out and pants down and I sat down in front of the car wheel, and a beautiful lady in railroad uniform came, she leaned over me, and she hit the train wheel for the sound. So this was first visit to Moscow. Not as a tourist, but—. And from there on they took us to military barracks, right across Moscow River to Kremlin.

When I saw the Kremlin, it came to me, yeah, very solid built, but who did build? Our forefathers.

DePue: Not Russians, but Poles.

Ladny: Yeah. But Poles built that, yeah. But they gave us good treatment, and they were prepared for that. They had such wagon, like canteen on wheels. And they had something to eat in it. And they ran out, so they said, "Wait a minute. In fifteen minutes we'll be back. We'll bring more."

This was. They brought more, and it was very very nice, very nice, friendly. And so then they took us to the barracks. And they gave us military lunch –

cabbage soup or something. And from there on again on the next day they loaded us back in the train and direction east. Where can you go east in Russia? Siberia.

And they say, if you ask Russian, "Where does Siberia start?" they say, "Five kilometers east of Moscow Siberia starts." Any distance east of Moscow is Siberia. Now in this trip till Camp Oranki where they put us in, so it took seven days and eight nights.

DePue: So you were a long way farther than five miles east. The map that we showed here earlier doesn't do a good job. I don't have as much room as I needed to show just how far east you traveled from Moscow. That's a long way. That's hundreds of miles if not 1,000 or more. Were you on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains? Or still on the western side of the Urals?

Ladny: On the western. East of Volga River.

DePue: East of the Volga River.

Ladny: Yeah. And it took so long on the train because there's a one-track train. The whole length there is one track. They had to stop many times on the way and let another train pass by. So this was such long trip, seven days and nights.

DePue: What kind of food did you get while you were on that trip?

Ladny: Just scraps.

DePue: So just enough to keep you alive?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Tell me about your initial impression once you first got to this camp in Siberia. You say the location of the camp was—what was the name of the town again?

Ladny: Oranki.

DePue: Oranki.

Ladny: Yeah. The first impression, it was train stopped in a forest. And they took us out of the train and they took us, marched through the forest. There was snow and mush and so on. And then when we got out of the forest I saw a fortress in the distance. But it's like monastery with this huge cupolas.

DePue: Those onion-shaped domes that Russian monasteries are known for?

Ladny: Yeah. So when we came close so I noticed that it was built like a fortress with deep channels all the way around.

DePue: A moat around it.

Ladny: Moat, yeah. And the main entrance was blown up. And the bridge was damaged too. Later on I found out that this was a monastery with 2,000 monks and these Russian Orthodox. And in 1917 when Communists took over so they attacked this monastery and they blew up the entrance tower and so on.

DePue: As a good Catholic boy growing up in Poland, from what I understand, you had a strong Catholic foundation in your education, and a student of Communism now, seeing what's happened to this monastery, are you starting to learn some things about Communism that surprised you?

Ladny: Oh yeah, sure, this was as I said, I was taking advantage of my being there as a student. Now behind the monastery there were the monks' quarters. They were nice buildings; originally they were white, but about twenty years after the Communists' taking care of that, they were pretty dilapidated. But they used these buildings for our officers.

DePue: Where were you billeted then? Where did you sleep?

Ladny: For us there was a so-called cerkiew (in Russian), by a church next by the monastery. There was a former church. Inside it was painted white, everything.

DePue: So your barracks are inside a church proper?

Ladny: Yeah, and we had five-story beds.

DePue: Your bunks.

Ladny: Bunks, yeah, five-story.

DePue: I think it's worth reminding people here that you're an officer in the Polish army, but you're working undercover. I think you've told us before that you decided it's better for you to keep the fact that you're an officer secret,so you're portraying yourself just as an average soldier, so you're not billeted with the officers. Were the officers treated better here or worse or the same?

Ladny: Yeah. This is a question that is hard for me to answer, because I don't know how they were treated. But one time I was standing with a Polish officer, lieutenant colonel; we had a conversation, and a Russian soldier was passing by, so he saluted to us. Of course not to me. Only because he saw the Polish lieutenant colonel, so he saluted. So I thought oh what's going on. But later on I found out that this camp, it was transit camp. They were checking out everybody from the day you were born, and accordingly they were sorting us out.

And later on when I heard about Forest of Katyn where 12,000 Polish officers were killed, I thought most likely many of them were going through this, through the same camp as I was in, Oranki.

DePue: It's probably worth mentioning that Katyn is very infamous now, and there has been a lot of controversy whether that slaughtering of all of these Polish officers

was done by the Germans or by the Russians. But I'm sure that just in the last few years it's been revealed that it was, in, fact the Russians who slaughtered all those prisoners there.

Ladny: Yeah. How they found out, that's even—how they did it. First impression, I would say that they would machine-gun them. No. They were killing them individually, shot in the neck.

DePue: And Katyn, we probably should mention also, is in Poland. So if they had identified these people, they would have been taking them back to Poland.

Ladny: Oh yeah, sure.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your treatment there. You got there in the late fall or beginning of the winter?

Ladny: Beginning of the winter.

DePue: Not a good time to get to Siberia.

Ladny: Yeah. Food, I can't say that it was bad food. We didn't have any food. We didn't even have bad food. Once a day in the morning we got a scoop of boiled water. And late in afternoon when it began to get dark we got a scoop of so-called soup. What it was? Just dirty water. You wouldn't know what was in it. And one time they gave us salted fish. The fish was as big as my hand. And it had such tough skin that you could make gloves out of it. Yeah. And salty. And no water. It's only good if you had enough snow. So because with salted fish, we needed to drink, so we boiled the snow.

DePue: I know that disease was a real problem in the barracks as well. And I know that lice was a problem in the barracks.

Ladny: Oh, yeah, yeah. I took the lowest bunk, close to the door. It was bolted down. But so it was pretty chilly. But it was raining lice. Because so high up so many people. So there was like a steam bath over there. So this was a lice factory. So I say it was raining. The lice, there were so many lice that they were coming down. So I didn't get away from it either.

DePue: I know that dysentery was a real problem for the prisoners as well. Which is very typical, especially when there's a polluted water source.Obviously you had that. I wonder if you could tell us the story of the inspections What happened when somebody was sick? What did the compound do about sick prisoners?

Ladny: They took him to what they called a field hospital. But later on we found out that it was like, get rid of the sick people. So they were just—whoever got in there never came out.

DePue: With that as background, tell me the story, explain what happened when there was a pretty thorough inspection of all of the prisoners to see who actually had dysentery.

Ladny: Yeah. It was very interesting thing. One day they took us to the monastery and there were several tables standing there. And there were quite a few beautiful Russian women dressed in white, like nurses or doctors or something. And we were ordered to go to the table, take the pants down and bend over. And she was looking for some sign of blood or something. And if it was okay, she said, "Okay, you go in this direction." But if she found some question, "So in this corner". And so I was lucky, I was in this healthy group and I went out. The group of these people who were healthy were standing outside, and they were elaborating something on what to do, yeah. So they said, "These people over there are sentenced to death. They take them out and they'll never come back. They get rid of. Just to control the sickness, they are going to get rid of these people." Oh, hell, there are our soldiers, our friends. Never abandon your friend during the war. So we decided to go and to liberate them. So there's a whole bunch of us, we were close to 100 of us. But we were healthy. So we just went through the door. And the Russian soldiers tried to stop us. They didn't succeed. We pushed them out. And we went and we joined these people in the corner over there, and we mix so that nobody knew who was healthy or who was sick. And we all went out.

DePue: So they basically let you get away with this pretty audacious move on your part.

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: That's an amazing story and I think it illustrates a lot about the type of treatment you had, the incredible hardships you had. I know that you were in charge of a group there. How did you end up being in charge of a group of prisoners?

Ladny: No, I was not in charge. No, I was more joiner, not leader.

DePue: Well, in your book you talk about being a sotni [100 men] commander. Do you recall that?

Ladny: Yeah. First when they brought us to the camp, the Russian officer, these hated (e)NK(a)V(oo)D(eh) [Russian State Police]—they're called death police—in blue pants, all of them had blue pants. So he put us in two rows, and who of you can speak Russian, step out. Quite a few people stepped out. mostly the ones from east Poland. They step out. So then he asked them, "Can you speak Russian?" Tak tochno [Yes, I can].. "Can you read and write Russian?" Nyet. [No] "Otstupitsa."[Step aside.] The next one, next one. He didn't find one who could read and write Russian. Friend of mine was standing behind me and he knew that I could, so he was nudging me that I should step out. So you get maybe a privilege in treatment or something. But I didn't want to.. But he noticed that. "What's going on over there?" So I came out and I said, "Yeah. He wants me to step out to admit that I can read and write Russian." So he got mad. Boy, his face turned blue. "Why didn't you step out?" "Because you were asking who can speak Russian. I can read

and write but I cannot speak Russian." "Oh," he said, "it's okay." He hit me on the shoulder and said, "If you can read and write Russian, you'll learn Russian to speak very fast. And you are going to be commander of first 100 people." They were organizing always everything in Russia is in hundreds, so decimal. "So you'll be commander of 100 people. And every day you come to my office, you get a Russian newspaper, Pravda, and you're supposed to translate everything to your people."

DePue: So was this a way the Russians thought for you to help them propagandize all of these prisoners? To teach them all the wonders of being Communists?

Ladny: Oh yeah, of course.

DePue: So was that what you did? You would translate Pravda to the soldiers?

Ladny: Yeah, and we could buy so-called tobacco. We were most of us smokers, and we couldn't buy cigarettes, and they didn't have cigarettes, just so-called krupka, which is made from the tobacco plant stem.

DePue: Stem?

Ladny: Yeah. Ground up. And this was to smoke. We didn't have paper, so we were using the newspaper after I translated whatever it was. So these guys, they were waiting for the piece of paper. So I got tired of it, because I couldn't keep a piece for myself, because they would say, "Aha, he is a big shot now, so he has it." So I decided I'll make myself a pipe.

DePue: Which we happen to have here. Want to go ahead and hold that up for the camera?

Ladny: I made a small, small pipe, because I didn't have enough of tobacco. So this was just enough for a few puffs.

DePue: Well, I would think it's quite something just to be able to drill the hole. Was that the hardest part of doing the whittling?

Ladny: Yeah it was. But our bed bunks, they were made from green wood, and they were bolted together with long nails. So I pulled out one nail and I was sitting there and working on it till I got in, pulled it out, then again, again, from the whole log of wood that I had. Because I was afraid that it might break. I was very careful. I had plenty time. And I made this pipe. But I had a big log that the guys, some of them, they wanted to have a piece of it. I said hell no, I will shave it. This whole log, I shaved it just to make chips enough under my shoulder and under my hip.

DePue: For sleeping.

Ladny: Yeah, for sleeping. Yeah but this gave them ideas. So some of them were making pipes, more artistic and more elaborate.

DePue: Well, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit also. One of the things that apparently you wanted to do was to get on these work details that would actually leave the camp. What was your reasoning for wanting to go on these? And what were they?

Ladny: Yeah. Every day they were calling for volunteers. "We need twenty volunteers." I thought I want to be one, because here I can't learn anything. I want to get out of this confinement and see what's going on in the country. And I wanted to get the opportunity to talk to a Russian in private. I wanted to learn about Communism, what is Communism. And this helped me a lot.

DePue: Did you get better food when you went on the work details?

Ladny: Yes, there were a few potatoes. Boiled potatoes. Steamed potatoes.

DePue: Did you have opportunities to talk to some of the Russians?

Ladny: Oh yeah. One time they took us on a work detail. There was a hill. And they told us to dig a hole in the hill to make a garage for a car. But it was cold outside. I saw in the distance, oh, maybe 500 yards, the carpenters were building new buildings. So I got the idea, I asked the guard that wouldn't it be nice if he would go and get some wood and make a fire here, because he was cold too. He was standing there flapping his hands. "Yeah," he says, "good idea. So come with me and take four more people." And he took us to the cow barn and he showed us the door to take it off. Okay. We took it off and bring it to that place. They brought it, put it down. He said, "Yeah, why are you standing over there? Break it up." "Yeah," I said, "but to break up this door?" "Yeah, you wanted to have fire, didn't you?" I said, "Yes, but I see over there guys are working, are building, so most likely they have some kind of scrap; this would be good enough." "Oh," he said, "are you stupid? They are working with green lumber. Green lumber doesn't burn. But this one", he said, "it'll burn." But I said, "But the door is gone." "Well, so what?" he said. "When they see that the door is gone they'll make another one."

DePue: So in essence you're learning quite a bit just by observing and having these kinds of conversations. What conclusions are you making about Communism?

Ladny: There is no answer for that. Communism:, is chaotic, nihilistic, just like without any principle, without—

DePue: Would it be fair to say that at first you were keeping an open mind whether or not this new system was working?

Ladny: Oh yeah sure.

DePue: And you decided over time: no it doesn't work?

Ladny: Sure. At first I was happy that I became prisoner of war by the Russians, because if Germany, there's nothing controversial about. But Soviet Union, there is Communism; it is controversial. Some people say it is good and some people say it

is no good. But now I have the opportunity to see it with my own eyes, so when I get out alive, so then I'll know what I'll be talking about.

DePue: I wonder if you could tell us—in the book you do a very good job of talking about the way the prisoners dealt with these horrendous circumstances. You described three basic groups. Do you recall the three types of responses that the prisoners had? One group became very religious. And I think you said another one of the groups—

Ladny: Philosophical.

DePue: Yeah, they became philosophical and resigned to their fate and gave up. What group did you think you belonged to?

Ladny: Again I was as a student and observer. This was for me very interesting: the human reaction in difficult circumstances. So this human character is very hard to describe. What is character? Take three men, give them plenty of whiskey, so they'll be enjoying it, drinking, but as a result what is going to be their reaction? You will see three different kinds of human. One becomes violent: another becomes sleepy; another one, he just resign himself. This is every character is different.

DePue: I recall in the book you talked about one of the things to cope –with the boredom, the hunger, the sickness, the cold, all of these miseries that were heaped on you and all of the other prisoners –was that there was a conscious decision to start arguing about things, to start discussing things. What was the topic that you generally and others generally decided was the best to argue with other people just to get them motivated and stimulated?

Ladny: I decided to keep out of controversy. I didn't want to join any group. Most interesting group for me, so it was philosophical. There were some people that they had the answer for everything.

DePue: In a prison camp like this there are some fundamentally difficult questions that are being raised, I'm sure.

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Did a lot of the philosophical discussions center on religion?

Ladny: Oh, yes, it was very much so. The soldiers in any army, they seldom say a prayer, because if they believe in God, then where is he? I am here in this situation. But when it comes to the point where you want to find an answer for this question, I can say about myself, I was bitching as much as everybody else was bitching, because we were in the same shoes. But then I thought, This doesn't get anywhere. I thought I would like to get acquainted with my God, to have conversations with him. I want him to put me in the right place. And really, when I was so down that –well I just said, "God, wherever you are, I know you are near me someplace here. I want to talk to you. When I was a child my parents were taking care of me and they made a

good job. When I grew up my government was taking care of me, and my government made a lousy job. My government put me in this situation here. So now I have nobody to turn to, just you. So God, take care of me. Let me live through that, through the misery and so on, and help me in my life." And I found out that he is doing a very good job.

DePue: Were there times when you wondered how good a job he was doing?

Ladny: Yeah, there were times. But I thought there must be a reason for it, some reason, but I can't find the answer for it.

DePue: How long were you in this camp in Siberia?

Ladny: Three months.

DePue: So pretty much you were there through the worst of the winter of 1939 - 1940.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And then what happened?

Ladny: One day they called me as a commander of first 100 men, and he said, "Get your men together. You're going home." Oh yeah. Okay. So I got my men.

DePue: Did you believe him or were you suspicious?

Ladny: In such situation you have no opinion, because you don't know what's going on and you don't know to believe or not. So we got the 100 men. He took us out of this confinement. And such ridiculous question. There was a Russian colonel, and he said, "You guys are going home. But now if anyone of you has any arms or cameras or something like that, so please give it here, because I make a search, and if I find something you will be shot." How could he expect that anyone would have something like that?

DePue: Did they explain why you were being sent home?

Ladny: No.

DePue: Not then.

Ladny: Not then.

DePue: How were you shipped back to Poland? Did you return by rail?

Ladny: Yeah. By rail again to Moscow. So it was still prisoner of war treatment. But in Moscow they were treating us as a tourist. They were so friendly. There were extra trains for us, to treat us as polite as they only could.

DePue: So this wasn't happening just because it was the nature of the Russian people. This is a group of people who were told to treat you nicely?

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: What was the reason for that, do you think?

Ladny: Yeah, to get the propaganda to the West, because they were letting us go back to Poland. And this again, we could buy anything we wanted at the railroad station. It's like in any western country. But a Russian soldier, he wanted to buy something, and she refused to sell to him. So he got upset, and he said, "What the hell is going on? You are serving our prisoner of war but I am Russian soldier." "Okay," she said, "you are Russian soldier. So if you don't shut up they will be carrying youout from here." So it just gave me: this is a part of Communism.

DePue: Now let me see if I can get this picture right. They're suddenly treating you nicely after three months of being on starvation rations. Would I be correct to assume you have not had a shower since you've been in captivity?

Ladny: Oh, we didn't have water to drink.

DePue: So you're covered with lice, your clothes are probably rotting off the body, you haven't had a shower in months, and they're shipping you back to Poland.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: How long were you in Moscow before you got back on the train again?

Ladny: Just through.

DePue: So just a short stop.

Ladny: Just through, like a tourist.

DePue: What was it like arriving back in Poland? Where did you go in Poland? Was it Brest-Litovsk area?

Ladny: Brest-Litovsk, yeah. But this was very bad feeling for me, because I was for four years as a soldier. This was my base. It was Fortress Brest-Litovsk. I was trained as a soldier, for what? To keep Poland free. Well, now, free from whom? From these SOB who are standing here with machine guns? Yeah, so I thought we didn't do a good job.

DePue: Was there a lot of damage that you saw when you got there?

Ladny: Oh yeah. It was bombed.

DePue: And once you got to Brest-Litovsk did they just release you? What did they do then?

Ladny: They let us overnight in a train. I had a girl in Brest when I was stationed there, so I thought, I want to see if she is still around.

DePue: What was her name?

Ladny: Sophie.

DePue: Sophie?

Ladny: Yeah. So I went to see and no, she is not around. So while I was walking down the street I saw Russian soldiers going hand in hand with Polish girls. So I thought: hell, what a change. I was doing that before and now somebody else. So I turned around. I went on a dark side of the street to avoid streetlight; I didn't want to be recognized who I was. The next morning they called us and they took us to the Bug River. There is a railroad bridge. And there were German officers waiting for us. And they said, "We came here to take you over and to send you home. I want you to give answer loud when I ask you do you want to go home. So I want you to give a loud answer. Because if you don't want to, so we don't want you. So you can stay here." So after a while they assigned everything and they took us to the middle of the bridge. That group of soldiers were going east, those from eastern Poland. There was the exchange.

DePue: So the Germans were exchanging some Polish prisoners of war they had and handing them over to the Russians, and the Russians were doing the same with the Germans. At that point in time did you think your fate might be better to go with the Germans?

Ladny: I didn't have any opinion. I was just considering myself as a student. I thought this is adventure. It's beautiful schooling to go through these experiences.

DePue: Well, I know that you ended up going to Germany, so you obviously made the decision to cross that bridge once again and to go west. Did you feel like you didn't have much of a choice in that?

Ladny: Of course not, no. What ever is going to be, will be.

DePue: Did the Germans then put you on another railcar and ship your group west?

Ladny: They put us in the airport. It was military airport.

DePue: I wonder if we could show the map here now, and the next map if you would, please. Here we go. The one that's going to show your route to northeastern Germany. Go ahead.

Ladny: And they kept us for three days in the airport. And then the train came. In the evening they loaded us in the train, forty-eight men to one train car.

DePue: Which, I would guess, means there's not enough room for everybody to lie down. You pretty much have to stand.

Ladny: Yeah. And they wire down the door. And then he said in Polish, "For one, ten are going to be shot." That means if one would escape, so ten are going to be shot. Yeah. So at least they are giving us a reception. They were saying that they're taking us home, go to home. But where is the home? …Yeah.

DePue: So where was home? Where did they take you?

Ladny: It was very, I would say, nostalgic for me that the train went northwest to my hometown where I was born. It's only about four miles from the village where I was born. We were passing that. So I thought, Hell, where are you going now? Going to the army, I went on this train in that direction, and now I'm going this direction, where to?" At that time I didn't know that this was a train all the way to Springfield, Illinois.

DePue: Well, you have to add a few years before you got to Springfield. The train though, as I understand, at least short-term—and this would have been very early in 1940—took you to a prison camp in northeastern Germany?

Ladny: Yeah. They put us in labor camp to work by the farmers. It was very good treatment.

DePue: I know at this location they actually allowed you to take a shower and they deloused you, correct?

Ladny: Yeah. They took us in the truck and to military barracks. We take shower. And after we got out of shower they have to scrub the walls and the floor from our building where we were staying. So they deloused us. And entirely different treatment. Entirely different system from the Communist system.

DePue: What in particular struck you about the way the Germans were running the camp versus the way the Russians did? Anything in particular stick in your mind?

Ladny: Yeah. In Russia we were getting once a day scoop of boiled water and once a day something they called soup, if they still had enough. But sometimes it was coming close. "I'm sorry, we are out." Whereas in Germany everything like clockwork in every detail, so that the food, whatever was assigned, we got it, and exactly on time. When they said, "It's going to be at seven thirty in the morning," so it was at seven thirty, not seven thirty two.

DePue: Was it enough food?

Ladny: No, it was enough to stay alive, but that is all.

DePue: Now I know that here also, this is a work camp, but the work isn't at the camp itself, is it?

Ladny: No.

DePue: So where did you end up working?

Ladny: By the farmers.

DePue: And that would be Herr Vogt, is that how you pronounce it?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: V-o-g-t?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: How did Herr Vogt and his family treat your group?

Ladny: They treated us as guests. Really there was no sign of any enmity. And I found out later on why: Because he was an officer in German army in the First World War and he was a prisoner of war by the Russians. So he knew what a soldier is going through.

DePue: Did you spend just the days there and went back to the camp in the evening?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Did they feed you?

Ladny: Oh they were giving good treatment. Good food. And enough. At first it was not enough. But he said, "I know that you didn't get enough food. But," he said, "I cannot afford that, because if I would give you more food, the condition you are, all of you would be sick. So," he said, "we have to take it slow. Every day a little bit more." Really he gave us humane treatment.

DePue: What kind of farm work were you doing here?

Ladny: Sugar beets, potatoes, rye and wheat.

DePue: So basically, working in the fields around the farm itself. Just average chores?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DePue: Was there any thought among your group that you need to resist or do poor work?

Ladny: No. No. We were happy. Even we were so happy that we thought that nobody else is getting such good treatment as prisoner of war as we are getting here.

DePue: So a lot of how well you were treated depended on which particular farm you might go to?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So some of your comrades were going to places much worse than this.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: I know you had an opportunity to learn a bit of German here as well, did you not? To practice your German language skills?

Ladny: Oh yeah.

DePue: How did that work?

Ladny: Yeah. This farmer, he had a girl, Frieda, and somehow she liked me. So I was trying to have conversations with her. And she had fun with it, with my pronunciation. Yeah. But she was very cheerful. And she was helping me very much with my smoking. Because in Germany, smoking, it was all on the card that you had your allotment.

DePue: A ration card?

Ladny: Ration card, yeah. So she as a German, she got it, but she was no-smoker. So of course I was helping her.

DePue: And she gave you her tobacco allotment.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: A fair trade.

Ladny: Fair trade, yeah.

DePue: How long did you work for the Vogt family?

Ladny: Only three months.

DePue: And what happened after that?

Ladny: Transferred to another place.

DePue: Another farm?

Ladny: Another farm. Big farm, about 5,000 acres. Yeah, big farm.

DePue: So was this a nobleman or somebody pretty high up?

Ladny: Yeah, it was nobleman.

DePue: And how was the treatment there compared to Herr Vogt's?

Ladny: Treatment, it was good. I would say in all the time wherever I was, the treatment, it was good. There was no animosity. They treated us as just—

DePue: But you described in the book that you had one particular watchman who did not treat you well.

Ladny: Yeah. That is different.

DePue: The nickname you gave him, at least in the book, was Hey You. What can you tell us about Hey You?

Ladny: Yeah. He wanted to show off that he is superior, that we are just nobody but he is superior. So he could speak Polish. And this was what was making him proud. That he could speak two languages. And because he could speak two languages, so he made application to the government that he wanted to get a farm in Poland. But to be qualified to get a farm, he had to prove that he was a good German. So this he wanted to show to his superior, that he was a good German by treating us downwards.

DePue: Is it correct to say that this land in Poland that he wanted to get was land that the German military had seized from Poles?

Ladny: Yeah. It was western or northwestern part of Poland. Germany annexed it as a German territory and they threw out all Poles from this land. And they settled Germans, so that they wanted to make this as a German territory.

DePue: Were the nature of your jobs, your duties there, at this new estate any different from what they were at Herr Vogt's estate? Basically just standard farm work, that's what you were doing?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your friend Joseph Birnbaum, because it's roughly in this time period that you and he part ways.

Ladny: He was a very nice guy but I decided to escape from one place, so I wanted him to go with me. He said he can't. He said, "Kazimir, till now nobody knows that you are an officer. Until now nobody knows that I am a Jew. But if I would escape and they would catch me and the health inspection and everything and so on, they would find out that I am a Jew. So," he said, "I won't take the chance."

DePue: Why did you decide that you wanted to escape?

Ladny: I wanted to go to Poland to fight Germany.

DePue: So your idea was to escape, cross the border, get back to Poland, and join the resistance in Poland?

Ladny: Yeah, go underground.

DePue: Tell us about the escape then.

Ladny: Yeah, the first escape, it was biggest mistake of my life, and I suffered.

DePue: How did you escape?

Ladny: Oh, when a guard took everybody to work, I played sick, so he left me alone. And this gave me a time to walk by myself out to escape from that. And this was a big farm. They had hundreds of cows and so on. And German workingmen, they had the working suits in the barn. So I thought, "I'll need that during the day when I'll be walking down, so it's a German cutting wheat."

DePue: A sickle?

Ladny: Yeah. So I stole a scythe and German jacket and pants, and I was walking along the railroad. When I saw somebody coming, so I was cutting wheat. And so even sometime I didn't hesitate to say, "Heil Hitler!" And this way till I got caught, so they put me in a correctional institution, what I call it in my book is a sausage factory.

DePue: I'd like to have you—and this might be difficult for you—but I'd like to have you describe that first beating that you got when you were there.

Ladny: I thought I described pretty well.

DePue: It was fairly graphic, yes. What were they beating you with?

Ladny: That rubber club, about that long.

DePue: And were you lying on the ground when they were doing this?

Ladny: No. When they opened the door, when I came into the room, there was a bench, like a bed. And on the end here it was written, "Lie down."

DePue: Oh. Instructions to lie down?

Ladny: Yeah. So of course I didn't follow the instruction.

DePue: You did not.

Ladny: No. And these two six-footers came out. "Don't you know what that says?" I said, "No." "It says lie down. So you better lie down." And from behind he gave me over my head. I had to follow the instruction. And I describe pretty well.

DePue: Yeah. This was not just one or two blows they were landing on you, but from the way you described it, it almost seemed like it lasted forever when they were beating you. Was it primarily in the buttocks or along the back or the head?

Ladny: Mostly back. Back and behind, yeah.

DePue: Were these German soldiers? Were they police?

Ladny: These are German soldiers.

DePue: Were they SS?

Ladny: Yeah. SS.

DePue: And I assume you're thinking this is punishment for having escaped in the first place.

Ladny: Yeah this is what I thought.

DePue: What happened after the beating was over?

Ladny: The work and they were building some brick buildings. So we had to carry the bricks and everything.

DePue: Well, I appreciate your telling the story. I know that it's not easy for you to do that. Maybe it's not fair for me to ask. How long were you in this particular camp?

Ladny: Six weeks.

DePue: When you were there did you think you would be there for the duration of the war?

Ladny: Yeah. I never knew what to expect from day to day.

DePue: So what happened after six weeks?

Ladny: After six weeks they gave me humane treatment. So the commandant and this guard brought me in, so commandant said, "Sit down here." I sat down. And he said, "Do you smoke?" I said, "If I have some." Okay, so he pushed a pack of cigarettes to me. And then he gave me a lecture. He said, "Do you know where you are?" "Yes, it says correctional institution." "Yes. So you know that you broke the law. In Germany there is the law and order always. And if you break the law you have to take the consequences. So I consider that you paid what you deserve. So now you are going out from here to another camp. But don't you dare tell anybody where you have been and what you went through, because if we get you again here, you won't be so likely to get out."

DePue: And you had seen prisoners who had been killed there as well.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Where did you go after you were released from this camp?

Ladny: They put me in another camp.

DePue: A work camp at this time?

Ladny: Yeah. It was a nobleman's estate.

DePue: As I recall this was in the Demmin, Germany area?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Which is still in the northeastern part of Germany, correct?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: What time frame do you believe this would have been?

Ladny: Oh, I don't remember anymore.

DePue: I'm sure that over time all these dates and the months just blurred together, didn't they?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: I know that you weren't there too long at this other estate. Then you started thinking of escape again.

Ladny: Yeah. Three of my friends, they put me into temptation to escape again.

DePue: Despite the threats that this commandant had given you when you left the sausage factory?

Ladny: Yeah. But then they told me why they gave that rough treatment. I said, "I don't want to go through that again." They said, "You won't if you escape with us. You have to escape in Polish uniform."

DePue: You had put on German clothes.

Ladny: Yeah So I broke several laws, German laws, by stealing the German property and by trying to camouflage myself.

DePue: So those were the laws that you broke and that you were punished for. Describe a little bit about this particular escape attempt.

Ladny: Yeah. One of them, he was Polish sailor. He said, "We go to Sweden across the Baltic Sea." So I said, "Hell, I don't know how to swim." So he said, "So you are better off than I am, that you don't know how to swim, because on the sea, so either you are above the water or you are down in the water, and if you don't know how to swim, so you won't suffer that long. But I have suffered long trying to survive."

DePue: Well, that's a very fatalistic way of looking at life, isn't it? But you were able to escape?

Ladny: Oh, yes. We escaped. And we were three days on the Baltic Sea. He is a sailor. He knew how to handle the boat with the mast and so on.

DePue: How exactly were you able to escape this time? Was this at a work camp or were you at an estate someplace when you escaped?

Ladny: We were working at a nobleman's estate. This had about 5,000 acres, big place, so that the guard couldn't keep an eye on all of us.

DePue: So that escape wasn't that difficult for you.

Ladny: No, no.

DePue: And how long did it take you from the time you escaped to get to the Baltic?

Ladny: Two weeks.

DePue: Two weeks? And where did you find food?

Ladny: By farmers. Mostly we were raiding cow barns where they have the containers with the milk standing there overnight till morning delivery. So by the morning so the fat in the milk was swimming on top, so we were just skimming that.

DePue: Skimming the butterfat off the milk containers? Did you have difficulty, once you reached the Baltic, to find a boat?

Ladny: Oh, yeah. It took several days till he found it.

DePue: Okay. And then you were three days on the water?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Well, what happened on that third day?

Ladny: German navy, they caught us; they had a German navy speedboat.

DePue: What was your treatment like after that time you were captured?

Ladny: They gave us good treatment.

DePue: Did it surprise you? Personally I would think that would be the worst moment for me; was I going back to the same treatment that I had before, or what the treatment would be.

Ladny: Yeah. But I didn't see any animosity. The German soldiers, they were saying, "Your job as a soldier, your obligation, is to escape. But our job is to catch you. And we got you. So now you have to take the consequences."

DePue: As simple as that.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Where did you go once they'd brought you back to land? To another work camp?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And then you were assigned to a different farm to work?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Was this at the time that you got assigned to the—

Ladny: Henkel.

DePue: Henkel farm? Well, I think we are probably at about two hours, or at least we're well into it right now. This might be a fairly good place to stop. I would like to get in a little bit though about the treatment that you got at the Henkel farm, or how you were assigned there in the first place, because I think that's a wonderful story.

Ladny: Just by luck. The farmers, they needed working people. So they went to the government and they made application: I want five men, or fifteen men. So they have in the labor camp, they call ten or fifteen men, they are taken.

DePue: As I recall, when some people heard that you were going to the Henkel farm, they said that was not a good place to go.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: What was it that you discovered once you got there?

Ladny: Yeah. That I had the best place in this village.

DePue: So what was the reason that these other people had such a poor experience, a poor opinion, of Mr. Henkel?

Ladny: Because they didn't have such education as I had. My education: it was, never try to be smart. Be smart, but play stupid. Because if you try to play smart someplace, somebody will knock you down. So this was my rule. But these guys before me, they thought to be smart, I don't want to work for my enemy. My philosophy, it was, I don't want to fight a war with my stomach. If I couldn't fight a war with a rifle, with arms, so I won't fight with my stomach. And this was the difference.

DePue: So you didn't have a problem of going to Herr Henkel's farm and putting in a good day's work?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Well, I wanted just to quote one thing that you had in the book. This is apparently something that Henkel told you. "Good work, good food."

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And is that how it worked out?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And was it good treatment as well?

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Discuss the relationship between you and Henkel and his wife. Was it a good relationship?

Ladny: Oh yeah, yeah, they treated me as a friend. They never let me know that I was somebody else.

DePue: Did you stay there on his farm overnight?

Ladny: Oh yeah. One time he put me to work; it was in the fall, raining freezing rain. But he gave me an axe and showed me a pile of wood that I should split the wood. Well, cold, wet; it's ice. And so no, I don't want to get sick here. But how to get away from it? I had gloves. I took the glove off. I put it, and I chopped it, and then I scratched here. You can see.

DePue: Okay.

Ladny: I cut here so that the blood came out. So I went into the house and when I showed Mrs. Henkel the blood, ojojoj, what happened, and so on. And direct she washed it off and she put a bandage on it and so on, and she scolded her husband, "You old fool. Don't you have anything to do for him in a dry place, not in this kind of weather outside?" So and she was taking care of it every day. She changed the bandage and so on.

DePue: What were your opinions of the German people? Because you'd seen the best and the worst.

Ladny: German people, it's my philosophy that wherever you are if you behave as a human being you will be treated as such. If you behave, you try to get smart, somebody knock you down. This is what I learned in my military school.

DePue: What were the Henkels' opinions about Adolf Hitler and about the Nazis?

Ladny: He was a Nazi member.

DePue: Henkel was.

Ladny: Yeah, Henkel, yes. He was a member of the party. But he told me why. He said, "There are different opinions about Hitler. But," he said, "I became party member

because when I bought this farm I had to borrow quite a bit of money, but if I became a party member this was wiped out, government took care of it." So he said.

DePue: So he decided to become a Nazi Party member for some pretty basic economic reasons.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: This was during a time period though, when the German army was conquering Europe, if you will. Were they proud of being Germans? Were they happy about what was going on?

Ladny: Oh, of course. Who wouldn't? To that extent when I saw the whole system, whenever I see it, I thought if I would be a German so of course I would be Nazi. Every German should be a Nazi, because of what Hitler did. Hitler was a good soldier. He got medals and so on in the First World War. But when the war ended there was unemployment and hunger in Germany, and so on. But by joining the party he got a good job and good treatment and so on. And all the debts for the farm were eliminated. Yeah. And now being a German, four years in the First World War they were fighting, and millions of them died. And they didn't accomplish anything. But this guy, Hitler, in four months he beat the hell out of France and England. Yeah. So they even considered this God's blessing.

DePue: The Henkels and others like them. And from what you've expressed here, what you're explaining, to a certain extent you had quite a bit of freedom. You could move around. And to a certain extent you were essentially slave labor for the German people. That might be a good place to close up this session and then pick up again in the third, and I think the final session, with more of your fascinating story. And it certainly is a fascinating story. I'm sure there were moments when you wished you didn't have to live such a fascinating life, but I certainly appreciate your having the opportunity to tell us today and having written about it. And I wanted to show the book. I don't know that we have shown the book before. *It Was Worth It*.

Ladny: I'm happy. It was worth it for me.

DePue: And we're going to find out exactly why in that final session. So thank you very much, Mr. Ladny, and we'll pick this up one more time. Thank you for joining us today.

(End of second interview. Third section continues)

Interview with Kazimir Ladny

VR2-V-L-2008.03

Interview # 3: March 26, 2008

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good afternoon. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Wednesday, March 26, 2008, and I'm here for my third interview with Mr. Kazimir Ladny, who was a Polish POW, first with the Russians and then with the Germans, during World War II. In sessions one and two we took your career and your life up through the time you were in northeast Germany and had just arrived at the farm of Mr. Henkel. We talked about that a little bit and I think we talked a little bit at the end of the last session about his being a member of the Nazi Party purely because he wanted to retain his land. So where I would like to start today, Mr. Ladny, is for you to tell us what your life was like at the Henkel farm once you got there.

Ladny: My life as prisoner of war, war and prisoner of war, it was many times horrific, but also many times terrific. Especially the last part of it. An American consul called me in and he said, "After careful investigation we found out that you are eligible to be admitted to the United States. Where would you like to go?"

DePue: But that's way ahead of our story right now. I wanted to talk more about Mr. Henkel and his experiences and your experiences at the Henkel farm.

Ladny: They were very nice people. He was a party member, as he told me, because of the privileges which he got because of that. That he bought a farm and he owed lots of money to the people. So when he became a party member all this was eliminated.

DePue: His debt was forgiven?

Ladny: Yeah. They were very nice people. First time he asked me, "What was your profession in Poland?" "Oh," I said, "I was taxi driver in Warsaw." "Oh," he said, "it's too bad." He said, "Taxi driver. I would like to have somebody who knows

how to work on the farm. Farm work is very hard and heavy. So taxi drivers are not used to hard work."

DePue: And I know you were never a taxi driver in Poland. Did you tell him that to make him think you weren't used to the heavy labor?

Ladny: Yeah. But I said, "Mr. Henkel, as you see me, physically I am okay. But I am run-down. I don't have any muscles here. Farm worker doesn't need to have any brains, only muscles. So if you give me the muscles, so I give you a decent day's work." He said, "I like your attitude. So I'll remember that." I said, "Okay." And he remembered that. He was giving very good food and treatment and so on. In every respect he didn't give me the feeling that I was somebody below him as a human being. No, he treated me very well. And his wife too. So that I had quite a few interesting experiences as a prisoner of war. So I was obligated to take any kind of work assigned to me.

One day when his two horsemen were drafted to the Germany army, so he came to me and he said, "Kazimir, I would like you to take the four horses over and take care of them." Oh, I thought, hell. This additional work. I didn't come here to be a horseman.

DePue: And did you have any experience with animals before that time?

Ladny: Not much.

DePue: So you weren't lying in that respect.

Ladny: Yeah. This was what I learned in the counterintelligence school. We were told never try to be smart; be smart but play stupid. So I did. And it worked out beautiful.

One time he came with his carriage and he said, "Take care of the horses. Put them in the stable and give them food and so on." So okay, I did. I took the harness from younger horse, harness from his head, and front, he was tied to the bar. So the horse felt free, so was going to the stable. Yeah, but another horse, it was still dressed. So the horse is pulling the wagon sideways. (Both laugh) So I tried to catch him but no, he was young horse. But Mr. Henkel was still standing close by, so he jumped and grabbed the horse by the snout and put under control and so on. So that was my first experience with horses. He said, "Kazimir, you won't be a horseman. To be a horseman you have to have horse sense, but you don't have horse sense." So it was nice. I was relieved.

DePue: But it wasn't as if you weren't doing hard work. You were working hard and you were getting good food and good treatment. What has struck me in reading your story and understanding your story is, I've heard and read many accounts about what it was like to be in the concentration camps. I had never read any stories about what it was like to be—you were essentially slave labor. But it surprised me on a couple occasions, because you were getting a little bit of pay?

Ladny: Yes. Thirteen marks a month.

DePue: Okay, just enough to buy a few cigarettes or some food?

Ladny: Nothing.

DePue: Nothing.

Ladny: You couldn't buy anything, because everything was on the ration cards.

DePue: And you did not get a ration card.

Ladny: No, we didn't get any.

DePue: So whatever you could do was for barter then?

Ladny: Yeah. So we just played cards and gambled.

DePue: Were you able to leave the farm and go around the countryside?

Ladny: Oh yes, yes, yes. We were not restricted. If I wanted to go to the city I had to have his permission and the mayor of this village to use a railroad car. But otherwise it was okay.

DePue: One of the stories you told in the book really struck me, of how you still were in a very restrictive environment. I wonder if you could tell us the story about being marched off, I believe by the SS, all of the Poles and other nationalities gathered up and marched off one day.

Ladny: This was discipline what they had, and it was strictly enforced that we were not able to leave the farm during the day without permission. If they would catch one, like friend of mine who also worked at Henkel, we had a Polish woman across the street who was washing our—

DePue: Your clothes?

Ladny: Shirts and so on, yeah. And one time, one Sunday we went there to pick up our wash, and then came, the SS man, inspector. And who are you and so on, what are you doing here? They didn't want to have any excuses, only he said to my friend that was close to the door, there was a bed. So he told him, "Lean over the end of the bed." When he did so, he gave him three hits. Sausages we call them. So that this man, he couldn't straighten out. But he ran away. So this SS man, he asked, "Okay, I get him. I'm not through with him. Where does he work?" I said, "At Henkel." So then I had the impression that he was scared of that.

DePue: The SS officer?

Ladny: Yeah. That he was scared of the name Henkel. And this worked out very nice, because when I told Henkel what happened and so on, "Oh," he said, "I'll take care

of that." He went on telephone and I was standing and listening. I didn't know who he was talking to. But anyway he gave hell of a treatment, why this SS man beat his worker up. And he was very straightforward on telephone. He said, "Listen. This guy belongs on the Russian front. There we need tough people. On the Russian front, but not here. He is hero when he is armed and he has here a harmless civilian that he can beat up. No, he doesn't belong here. He should be sent on the Russian front."

DePue: Was he? Or do you not know?

Ladny: No. But anyway he was removed from his position.

DePue: Do you remember the occasion where the SS rounded up a lot of you and marched you off into the woods? As you explained it, you thought for certain they were going to walk you into the woods with this whole group and execute all of you.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Can you tell us about that?

Ladny: This was very scary situation, because from Poland we were receiving letters. The Germans are rounding up many people for one reason or another and they are taking them to the woods and they kill them off. They execute them. At one time they surrounded us and they were leading us to the woods. So we thought that this is going to be the end.

DePue: Do you know how many were in your group, roughly?

Ladny: Oh, maybe fifty. So we thought they'll take care of us in the woods. We were surrounded with machine guns from all sides. So anyway we were prepared for the execution. It was not easy. But we didn't have any choice. But then they brought us into the forest, but first two trucks and one car were passing us by. We had to make room for them to pass us by. We didn't know what was in there. When we stopped in the forest we saw through the bushes some motion over there, something is going on. We thought maybe they are digging a ditch for mass grave for us.

So we were waiting for whatever comes. But after a while they called us to bring them over here. So these SS who were watching us, they took us through the bushes to that place and there was a big oak tree and the trucks were standing right close to that. And there were three men hanging from the oak tree branch. And this SS, he was in charge; he made a speech that we are a noble race here, Germans. And you Poles, you are just dirty dogs and so on and so on. "Now," he said, "you know that you are not allowed to touch a German woman. Because by touching her you would contaminate her. Now," he said, "look at that. We didn't have to bring you here as prisoner of war. We had the order to kill of you as many as we could and as we wanted, but we didn't. We saved your life. We brought you here. But we didn't bring you here to fool around with our women. Our women, they have brothers, they have boyfriends, and some who are married, they have husbands, and so on. They are in uniform on the frontline somewhere, and they want to have their

women safe. So now, look what happens to you if you try to get intimate with German women. We won't cut them off. We'll take the ropes off very gently and we'll be holding this rope for any one of you, if you dare."

DePue: So an experience like that, you have to be incredibly relieved, because you thought you were going off into the woods to be executed, but overwhelmed by the message they delivered nonetheless, I would think.

Ladny: Yeah, yeah, just what I said. My life was horrific and terrific. And,oh yeah we can go home now. Yeah, but this was terrific.

DePue: It's actually still hard to comprehend, when you listen to these stories, and it's just amazing to try to understand what that must have been like. There's no way unless you've been through that, that you can. I understand that after you were there for a while there was a woman who joined Mr. Henkel's farm as a laborer as well. How did she arrive there? Do you remember the woman who came there? Another slave laborer?

Ladny: She escaped from somewhere from work assignment. Mr. Henkel said that most likely she was working in chemical factory, because he said, "Look at her fingernails, how yellow they are." And so she must have escaped from the factory and came to Henkel and he took her in.

DePue: So he convinced the authorities to let her stay there?

Ladny: Yeah. So that they didn't bother her. And after about a year he was notified to send me and her to the labor department in the city, that they'll take us someplace. So I didn't pay much attention. So what? I was in so many places, so now I'm going to go someplace else, get another experience. But she must have been so horrified, because at Henkel she was treated well and with good food and everything. She was so scared to go back to the city somewhere that she hanged herself.

DePue: Did you discover her body?

Ladny: The cowman who was taking care of cows, he saw her when he went for food in the attic for the cows. He saw her hanging, so he cut her off.

DePue: Do you recall roughly the month and the year that your time with Mr. Henkel ended? Was that in 1944?

Ladny: No. It was in November '43.

DePue: Nineteen forty-three. Did you have a sense in November 1943 how the war was going for Germany at that time?

Ladny: Oh yes, I had a pretty good idea, because I had a chance to listen to BBC London.

DePue: I assume that was not on Mr. Henkel's farm though.

Ladny: No, no.

DePue: How did you manage that?

Ladny: There was a German highway worker who was working on the highway patching holes and so on and cut the weeds and so on. And so in conversation with him so I noticed that he was strongly against Hitler and against Nazi. So I asked him about his radio and so on. "Yeah, but," he said, "how if somebody would catch us to listen to BBC?" So I said, "Listen, I have pair of broken-down shoes. So I'll be carrying the pair of broken-down shoes when I come to your place so that I want you to repair the shoes because I don't have hammer, I don't have needle, so on, so on. So you are providing me that, and I'm repairing my shoes." He agreed to it. And so I was happy to hear BBC London. *Menodo inip radamosi po polsku* or *hier spricht London* is in German.

DePue: So the BBC broadcast in Polish, in German, I assume in French as well?

Ladny: Polish and German. Oh in many languages. But at eight o'clock in the evening there was Polish and direct German, yeah.

DePue: Did you happen to see or experience any bombing raids or formations of aircraft going overhead?

Ladny: Oh, yeah, yeah. We enjoyed that. This was the biggest fun for us to watch the Americans, our friends up there. Although they were dropping bombs, they didn't know that we were here. They thought they were bombing Germans. Yeah but we enjoyed that.

DePue: So even though you're in danger of bombing raids, you're excited about it because it's closer to the end of the war?

Ladny: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. We enjoyed that. We were disappointed if for one reason or another, weather or what, they didn't come, there was no alarm.

DePue: Well, you were still in East Germany at this time. I guess I'm amazed that American bombing raids were penetrating that deeply. I knew they got to Berlin, but you're east of Berlin even.

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And these weren't Russian formations, these were American and British formations?

Ladny: American mostly. Yeah. British sometimes.

DePue: Well, that makes sense because the Brits were flying at night and the Americans in the daytime. Tell me about what it was like at the end. You had been with Mr. Henkel how—

Ladny: Three years.

DePue: Three years. That's a big part of your life then. What was it like when you had to part ways with Mr. and Mrs. Henkel?

Ladny: Yeah. They didn't like that. They were disappointed, because they liked me, and now they are losing a good worker. And they need a good worker. They don't know what kind they get as a substitute.

DePue: Do you think it was just that, or did they really grow to care for you as a human being as well?

Ladny: I think both. And I think the biggest part, it was that Mr. Henkel, he was disappointed and he was scared, because Russians were already in East Prussia. And how they treated Germans in East Prussia, they were nailing them down to the barn doors. And they were raping the women and so on and so on. So he, as a party member, so naturally he was scared. When Russians come here, what happens then? So he thought I would be his protector. That I would be telling Russians that he is a good man. He is a party man, but he is good man. This what he was hoping. So really he was giving good treatment because he knew that I could speak Russian and that I had some experience with Russians. So he thought that I would be his protector.

DePue: Did he tell you that, or is this what you just concluded?

Ladny: No, it is just my…

DePue: Well, you alluded to this before, but how did you feel after three years of relatively good treatment, of parting ways with the Henkel family?

Ladny: Few days before there was heavy air raid on Berlin that Americans bombed the hell out of Berlin. So I thought maybe they need now cleaning up people in Berlin to remove the ruins. So I thought maybe they take us over there for a few days as needed and then they send us back. But no, it didn't happen. They didn't take us to Berlin. They took us to West Germany, to Dusseldorf on the Rhine River.

DePue: I think there is a map that shows in general where you ended up in western Germany there. You can see it all the way over on the left side of that map in the Dusseldorf area. So this would have been early 1944 when you arrived in the Dusseldorf area.

Ladny: Yeah. Dusseldorf was in ruins already. But still, we had fun to watch American bombers. We were working in a factory. So we had a light on while we were working. But when a siren went on, air raid possible, so turn off the light. So we had fun. We didn't have to work. And the biggest fun, it was to stand outside and watch where are they coming from and what target are they going to have, because they were sending first reconnaissance airplanes, we call it, with Christmas trees. They were dropping on a parachute, so it looks really like a Christmas tree, with

hundreds of lights, different colors, so that the pilots, they saw down below what was. So we had fun in that.

DePue: Where were you working?

Ladny: In a factory.

DePue: What did the factory make?

Ladny: It was machine factory. They were making—my section, I was working on the lathe –cylinders for airplane engine. But another department, it was hull for the submarine; they were welding the sheet metal sheet for the submarines. But my section, it was a cylinder for the airplane engines.

DePue: Had you had any experience before working in a factory or working with machine tools?

Ladny: Absolutely not.

DePue: So yet another skill you have acquired here.

Ladny: Yeah. When they ask me, "What was your profession in Poland?" I told them, "I was working on a farm. I was a farm worker, I had never seen a factory in my life from inside." So the same thing. They said that we would prefer to have somebody who has some experience.

So when I broke a tool, I got away because they said, "Oh, what can you expect from a dumb farmer? He doesn't know how to handle it."

DePue: You already said when you got to Dusseldorf it had been very heavily bombed. Of course this is the industrial heartland of Germany at the time: the Rhine River Valley. What were your other impressions arriving in western Germany, having spent all that time in eastern Germany? The differences between the two regions?

Ladny: The people were very entirely different. In eastern Germany, so these were the so-called Prussians, Prussian Germans. But in western Germany they were really German, so nice and polite in every direction.

DePue: You didn't encounter as much fanaticism among the Germans?

Ladny: Absolutely not.

DePue: Even in the factory were you fairly well treated?

Ladny: Oh yeah, yeah. Treatment was very good. Only food, it was very miserable.

DePue: Was that because you were a POW or because Germany, the entire population, was close to starvation at the time?

Ladny: Yeah. Yeah. Germans didn't have enough.

DePue: When you worked in the factory were there Germans as well as foreign workers there?

Ladny: Oh yes. Even Russian prisoners of war, too.

DePue: Was there a pecking order in the factories? Were the Poles treated better than the Russians, who weren't treated as well as the French?

Ladny: No, no. The difference was between Poles and French. French and Belgian, they were treated much better than we, because they were allowed to receive Red Cross packages, but we didn't. We were not allowed to receive any packages.

DePue: Why was that? Do you know?

Ladny: Because Poles, they were just dirt, sub-race, as they call it, the polnische Schweinehund. So it's Polish pig-dog.

DePue: Big dog?

Ladny: Pig.

DePue: Pig. Pig.

Ladny: Yeah. Yeah. Schwein is hog.

DePue: Were you able to keep up or keep in contact with your parents at all during all of this timeframe?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: What were they telling you about conditions back in Poland?

Ladny: My father was in Russian army in the First World War and became prisoner of war in Austria. So he told me many times stories how bad he had it as prisoner of war and so on. In one letter he wrote that he had it so bad that they were eating peels from the potatoes. So later on I wrote him a letter: "Father, you were lucky that you had the peel of potatoes. I wish I had some here."

DePue: I'm sure you weren't exaggerating at all.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: I know you were still able to keep track a little bit with the war news. Do you remember the day that you heard about the D-Day landings?

Ladny: Oh, sure. We went to work and a German who was working on the nightshift, he told me, "Kazimir, the Allies landed in France this morning, so it looks like the war

is going to end. But," he said, "Hitler promised –he was telling that they'll be trying to land in many different places – but they won't succeed. If they'll land for more than twenty-four hours, so we might be in trouble." So now we were waiting the twenty-four hours.

DePue: What was your immediate reaction? The emotions you had hearing the news that the—

Ladny: It's about time.

DePue: (Chuckles) Were you at that time able to think that there might be an end of all of this?

Ladny: Oh yeah, sure, this was the last. First, I knew that the war was going to end when they cut the horns of the German army somewhere. And when they stuck the horns in Stalingrad in Russia, that 340,000 German soldiers were captured over there. And General von Paulus's army was destroyed. So then I knew already: aha, this is the beginning of end.

DePue: That was a couple years before, while you were still in eastern Germany at the time? Had ou heard that because you were listening to the reports on the BBC?

Ladny: Yeah. And then when Americans landed, oh yeah, the war is over.

DePue: I wonder if you could also tell us the story – because I think this is also indicative about the human spirit, if you will – apparently you were doing some traveling and you got on to a trolley and one of the workers, the conductor on the trolley, didn't want to give you your change back. You could tell us that story.

Ladny: Yeah. The streetcars, they were always crowded. People were always on the move. So there was only standing room on the platform. I was standing there and there were three German soldiers in uniforms and they had the medals from Russian front, hand-to-hand fighting. That the soldier who accomplished three hand-to-hand fighting with the Russians, so he got special medal. I didn't pay attention. They were standing there yapping around as soldiers do. And then the ticket control – there was a woman, she came and wanted to sell me a ticket. But I didn't have change, so I gave her ten marks. So she took ten marks and she disappeared.

Now these German soldiers, they saw that. The next station, when the streetcar stopped, people are going in and out. So the control, the ticket woman, she pulls a bell to move on. So the driver got the bell and so he moved on. But I pulled a bell twice to stop. So he stopped. And they did that three times. And then this woman, she starts screaming, "If you do it once again you'll be arrested."

DePue: She knew you were Polish?

Ladny: Yeah. "I'll see to it that you'll go to jail for disrupting the traffic." Okay. She pulled the bell to go. But the soldier, he pulled twice to stop. And boy, these soldiers, they jumped at her, but military language. They said, "Listen, woman, and this is what

we are fighting for in Russia? For such son-of-bitches who are treating another human being in disrespect? Yeah what do we have these medals here for? They are not worth a damn." Boy, they gave her hell.

DePue: I think that incident also speaks quite a bit about your courage to confront her in the first place about something like that. You weren't thinking in those terms at the time? Just that she was cheating you and you wanted your money back?

Ladny: Yeah. This is all. And she came and she gave all the details, money back.

DePue: Was it shortly after that that you also had another German who offered you a job opportunity after the war?

Ladny: Yeah. He was engineer and he liked me very much. When I sent him a postcard that, "Walther, I decided to go to America. And in a few weeks we'll go to transit camp by Hamburg for the screening up." So one evening somebody at night, around nine o'clock in the evening, is knocking at the door. What the hell? You don't expect any company at that time of night. We opened the door. And there he was standing holding the postcard in his hand. "Kazimir, is this a joke or really you mean it that you go to America?" I said, "Yes, I am going." "Oh," he said, "come here, sit down, I want to talk to you." He said, "I know America. I've been many times in America on business trips. So America is a rough country. But I know you had a rough life till now so you know already how to accept this. But I tell you what; I want you to go. But if you get in trouble, in some kind of difficulties, just send me postcard like this." He said, "I'll come over and I'll bring you back here."

DePue: That had to feel awfully good at the time, to know that somebody cared enough?

Ladny: Yeah. This was relief for me, especially when he said, "Listen. I know you are like a Gypsy. You were in Poland, Russia, and in Germany many places, and you speak several languages, but did you think about your wife? She never was out of this country. She cannot speak any other language. What about that? Did you think about that when you take her out from this, her nest, and you put her somewhere in the wilderness?"

DePue: We're quite a ways ahead of the story now. He offered you the job the first time well before the war ended, correct?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: But what was the job that he offered you?

Ladny: Factory job.

DePue: Wasn't it also training in clock making, clock repair?

Ladny: No, this was different. This was different. We had an elderly guard. He was too old to be Frontsoldat, so they made him as our guard of our camp. So he asked me,

"Kazimir, what are you going to do when the war ends?" "Oh," I said, "I don't know. I'll see. I'll find something." He said, "Listen, if you don't have any profession, when the war ends, you come to me, I will teach you one profession." "Yeah? What is that?" He said, "I have a clock factory in the Black Forest. So I'll teach you how to make and how to repair clocks. And in the world anywhere there are clocks and they need attention once in a while."

DePue: But you didn't start learning how to repair clocks, at least at that time.

Ladny: No. It took about a year.

DePue: We're getting close to the end of the war obviously with D-Day and then you get into the winter of 1944, 1945. I want you to tell us a little bit about your third escape attempt, when that happened and how that came to pass.

Ladny: American troops came to the Rhine River and stopped.

DePue: This would have been the spring of 1945, early 1945. No, earlier than that; it was late 1944, wasn't it?

Ladny: And our camp, it was just across the river. So American artillery was standing across the river and they were blasting here. But Germans, they had the trenches all over the field and so on. They were prepared to fight. So Germans declared this area as a combat zone. So they decided to remove all foreigners from this combat zone.

So they took us together in one city square and we'll go someplace. Where to? But I thought, hell, the war ends, and I went through it and I'm still alive, and now we are a burden for the Germans, they might take us to the forest and wipe us out. "No," I said, "I won't take that chance." So I escaped and I knew a farmer. He had one Polish family from before the war that were working there. I went to them that they should help me once in a while to get something to eat. So I escaped and I went in hiding.

DePue: Where did you hide then? Did you hide with them?

Ladny: No. He said, "Okay, but I don't want to see you around. Just in the evening when it's dark you can come here from behind, so I give you something to eat and you have to disappear."

DePue: So where did you hide during the daytime?

Ladny: Everywhere. Mostly this was nobleman's estate with a beautiful palace and so on and park. And there were lots of bushes and so on. So I was just hiding in these bushes and listening to American artillery, trying to judge where the explosion will come. Because they were just across the river, so they were shooting high. And when the bullet was coming down, so was giving whistling noise. So by the sound of this noise I could judge where it's going to hit.

And by the coincidence, there was a young German woman, was friendly with these Polish people. And she was helping me out. First time when I walked into the room, I saw a young woman washing the floor with rags.

DePue: On her hands and knees washing the floor?

Ladny: Yeah and she threw the wet rag on my feet and "Fusser putzen," wipe your feet off. This was my first reception of my later wife. "Wipe your feet off," she said. We were married forty-seven years. And she was always saying, "And he still didn't learn to wipe his feet off."

DePue: (laughs) I know this is about the time you had three very close calls as well. You talked about one of the locations you were hiding in during this timeframe, waiting and hoping for the Americans to come across, Was it a hayloft?

Ladny: Yeah. In Biblical times there were many miracles in the Bible and so on. But you didn't hear any more in our times. But I learned different. Miracles are still happening. And I had so many miracles that, at the last second, a miracle happens and I'm still alive.

DePue: Do you recall the occasion where you were hiding in the hayloft and some German soldiers came there?

Ladny: Yeah. I didn't know that these were German soldiers. It was nice place, a warm place. In the hay I had a hole. It was nice and warm. And one night I heard an automobile coming and there was no throughway;. it was just a field road to the barn at the end. And I thought, oh hell, somebody must have seen me coming here and notified Gestapo. So they'll come here to dig me out. So I was just waiting till they called, "Come out." No, but they didn't. The automobile stopped and two men climbed up on the haystack and they were digging in with bayonets on the rifles. They were digging in the hay. And I just heard this noise when they were digging in.

But I was on the side under the arm. So I felt pretty safe. I thought even if they would stab me I won't give a sound. I'll stay here. But no. After a while somebody calls from down below, "It is enough, come down." So they went down. So I thought, I'm still alive.

DePue: You thought at the time they were looking for you?

Ladny: Oh, of course.

DePue: And that was not the case?

Ladny: No, it was not the case. Later on I found out there were the defense ditches, trenches all over that field. It was in March. It was cold and wet. So these were German soldiers; they were stealing the hay for their trenches. But it scared the hell out of me.

DePue: You relocated after that, I assume.

Ladny: So I thought, I have to change my hiding place because if they come again there's not enough hay left, so they find me. So I have to find another place. And I decided on a cow barn attic. And speaking about miracles: that this was a miracle, that the German soldiers saved my life. I felt very comfortable in the attic over there, but that night the artillery was blasting at this area for hours. Behind this haystack barn, there was a railroad and underpass and railroad station. So this was a military object. So I thought they took this as a target. But in the morning when I got up I lifted the pane up in the direction of the field barn.

DePue: Where you had been the night before?

Ladny: Yeah. And the barn was gone. Just a shambles. They took two shots so that they blasted this barn in pieces.

DePue: I would assume about this time you're thinking to yourself, "The Germans came there because I wasn't supposed to be in the barn that night. Somebody up above had something to do with this."

Ladny: Yeah. And my girlfriend and these Polish people, in the morning, they ran to the field barn to find some piece of cadaver. They saw the ruins that the barn is gone. So they were looking everywhere for piece of arm or leg or something, because they knew that I was hiding there. But I was watching them. And finally I noticed that they just raised their shoulders and yeah, they didn't find anything, not blood or meat or anything. So they were disappointed that they didn't find anything, a piece of me.

DePue: But you were not going to come out of your hiding place, were you?

Ladny: Oh, hell, no, till late at night. I wanted to get something to eat. So I knock at the door. So boy, so, It's a miracle he's still alive.

DePue: Well, there's one piece of the story we have skipped over, and it's my fault I'm sure. We talked about the first encounter when you saw your future wife kneeling on the floor giving you a hard time for not wiping your feet. And now, when this barn was destroyed she was your girlfriend. So I'm sure this is a story you recall. How was it that she became your girlfriend?

Ladny: Not necessarily girlfriend; just a friend. Just a friend.

DePue: But there was some time in here when it went from just a friend to a much more serious relationship, and that's what I want you to tell us about.

Ladny: Her house was behind the underpass. So when artillery was shooting, always she was scared if her house is not hit. The one time in the evening she said, "Oh, I want to see if my house is still standing." I said, "Okay, let's go." So we went. "Everything is okay. So let's go back home."

DePue: She wasn't living at her house at the time. She was with this Polish couple?

Ladny: Yeah, she was living there. So we are going back, and when we were on the street crossing, there came an artillery salvo. But boy, it was – we just ducked, and we see the sparks flying from the concrete and so on. But now it's quiet. So run. So we run behind the post office building, and there came another salvo. So we just grab each other now, and "Are you okay?" "Yeah. And you?" "Yeah. Okay, so just stay here, and don't move." So this was the first embrace.

DePue: (chuckles) In the middle of an artillery barrage.

Ladny: Yeah. So it was scary but very pleasant.

DePue: And things developed pretty quickly after that then?

Ladny: Oh, yeah, yeah. So this was again miracle. And now I went from my hiding down to their hiding, because their hiding, it was in a potato cellar. And these two women, they were debating, "We have to go to the bakery. Who will go?" Both of them had to go. So I said, "If you go, I go with you." Okay. Of course she knew there was the danger of fraternizing with the dead.

DePue: And I have to think that, with that experience in eastern Germany when the SS took you out to the forest, that that is an incredible concern of yours.

Ladny: Yeah. So she was reluctant. She didn't want me to go with her. But I said, "Whatever, what happens. So I go." I came out on the street. I saw maybe fifty feet in front there was a Gestapo checking because this was combat zone. So they were checking everything that moved. And I thought they were checking automobile on the left side of the street, and we cannot go back because they saw us already. So we have to go forwards. So I thought this is the end. I was holding her on the arm. I squeezed it and I told her, "I'm sorry that I put you through it, because it is the end." So we go and now there comes the miracle. But such obvious miracle that you cannot contradict in any way. When we came closer they finished checking the automobile, so they just raised the hand, "Halt!" and they're coming across the street to us. We stop. And the one who came first, he says, "Papers!" That means the IDs, papers. I don't have any papers. And if I had, so it wouldn't help. But in this moment there was another street joining here and it was curved. There came three men on bicycles around the corner. So they just turned around and "Halt! Halt! Halt!" They stopped them. So I just jerked her and we go half a block farther. I turned to the right and then to the left. And on the right side there was an abandoned cemetery. So just over the fence in the cemetery. Oh, I felt so relieved that now it's okay. If I get killed, if they catch me or what, so at least she is safe, because she has her papers and so on.

DePue: We haven't mentioned her name yet, I don't think. Your wife's name?

Ladny: Adele.

DePue: And what was her last name?

Ladny: Libertus.

DePue: Say that again.

Ladny: Libertus.

DePue: Was that her maiden name?

Ladny: No, her maiden name was Lambertz.

DePue: So she had been married. What had happened to her husband?

Ladny: He was wounded on the Russian front and he died in military hospital. But he was buried in the cemetery in Dusseldorf.

DePue: Was that the same cemetery you were now hiding in?

Ladny: No.

DePue: Different cemetery. She had a child from her first husband?

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: How old was the child at that time?

Ladny: Seven years.

DePue: And what was her name?

Ladny: Adelheide.

DePue: Adelheide, that's an interesting name. So obviously you got reunited again after the night in the cemetery?

Ladny: Oh yeah. Oh, he's still alive. But this was a miracle that these three bicycle rider came right just in this moment! If they would be half a minute too late I wouldn't be alive.

DePue: It just occurred to me, Kazimir, that the number three keeps emerging in your story. You were in Russia, Poland and Germany during the war. You had three escape attempts. You had three near misses in just this occasion we're talking about now. And in the last case it was three bicycle riders that saved your life.

Ladny: Yeah, but this is so that they came just in this moment! Miracle! Half a minute later it would be too late.

DePue: Well, again, by this time you're thinking that you're supposed to survive, just like the Gypsy had told you so long before, that you would have this amazing life and come close to death, but you would be a survivor.

Ladny: Yeah. Now I'm thinking of the Gypsy, the fortune-teller. She told me that I would have rough life, but I go through it and I survive. But she said, "In the end you will get to become very rich and you will be living like a king." I'm waiting for these riches.

DePue: (laughs) Well, then you have to live quite a bit longer, don't you?

Ladny: Yeah. And I hope that some publishing company accepts my book.

DePue: It's probably a good time to hold the book up. *It Was Worth It*. And that has been what you thought for many years now will be the final conclusion to the Gypsy's predictions for you.

Ladny: Because it was worth it. If I wouldn't go through it, I wouldn't get word from American consul.

DePue: Well, let's again back up a little bit here. I want to talk about the experience of actually being liberated by the Americans. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about that and the emotions you felt at that time.

Ladny: In the morning from the cow barn attic I lifted a pane and I saw six tanks moving along the forest. I didn't know if the Germans were in retreat or Americans in advance. They were going very slow along the forest. And they came here to the main highway and stopped.

DePue: Were you looking west at this time and seeing these, or east? West would have been the river. But I thought I recall that they were coming from the east.

Ladny: Yeah. They were coming from the east. They were coming from Cologne.

DePue: So they had crossed the river someplace else and then swung around.

Ladny: They crossed the river in Remagen. So of course I jumped down and ran to say hello, friends. Ojojoj. You cannot—my English vocabulary is not sufficient enough to get the feeling to shake the hand with American. I am alive. And I thought at that time that the Americans came here because of me. They came extra to liberate me. Really this feeling I had. Yeah. But then I went back to this Polish family and so on and I told them that I met American soldiers and so on. And we were standing in the driveway. American tanks way over there, maybe 500 yards away on the edge of the forest. But here it was highway from Cologne to Dusseldorf. And at once I see American jeep with four men in it coming from here and turn in the driveway with machine gun on the windshield pointed, of course, at us and a man in the back seat lean over and says, "Waren amerikanische Soldaten hier?" He spoke German. "Were American soldiers here?" I said, "Yes, they were here, about 500 yards."

"Danke schon." But they turned around and they went back where they came from. In enemy territory you never take the directions, especially when they saw me in military age and military figure. I could have been Gestapo, SS or whatever. What they saw in me, they didn't see a Polack prisoner of war.

But anyway, I looked at the jeep. On the front there was a license, a red license with three stars on it. Later on I found out that was General Omar Bradley.

DePue: How did you find out it was Bradley?

Ladny: Because the German newspaper wrote it was that Omar Bradley; he was in charge of that area. Later on I heard the expression Omar Bradley was called GI General because he was always with his troops in the front, but here he was ahead of his troops.

DePue: You were obviously impressed that a three-star general had gotten that far forward.

Ladny: Ojojoj. I thought, boy, I wish I had this kind of general.

DePue: (chuckles) Well, that was worth waiting six years to see then.

Ladny: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Tell me about what you did after the war. I know you stayed in Germany for the next few years. These were very tough times in Germany for the next couple years.

Ladny: Yes. Black market.

DePue: When you say black market, that's what you did for a living?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Well, I think it takes some explanation for people who aren't all that familiar about the immediate postwar years. What passed for currency during those first couple years? What was used for money?

Ladny: Still German money was.

DePue: Marks.

Ladny: Mark, yeah.

DePue: Were they worth anything?

Ladny: Just inflation. One cigarette, one mark.

DePue: Now I've heard the story – you mentioned in your book as well – what really passed for money oftentimes was cigarettes more than marks; that people used cigarettes for trading.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And why was that?

Ladny: Yeah, because it was valued. One cigarette, one mark.

DePue: Explain why you got into the black market.

Ladny: I had to make living. The ration cards were not enough.

DePue: So food was in very short supply?

Ladny: Very short supply.

DePue: A standard family got ration cards. Do you know how many calories, how much food, that would be a day?

Ladny: About 600.

DePue: Six hundred calories?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Which is starvation level.

Ladny: Yeah. Not enough to live on and too much to leave or to die. But not enough to live.

DePue: Maybe I'm getting a little bit ahead of the story, but I also know you got married very shortly after the end of the war, didn't you?

Ladny: Yeah. There was a Polish friend, forced labor. He was much younger than I was. He was not by military, he was just taken as forced labor. And there were Polish girls too, in forced labor. And they were talking about to get married. So I said, "Okay, I join you. Make it together." I got married in a civil ceremony, justice of peace. But I'm Catholic and my wife was Catholic, so we decided to have a church holiday. So we got married together.

DePue: So actually you had two services, one civil and one religious ceremony.

Ladny: Yeah. A religious ceremony, that was standard. But the civil ceremony, so for me it was satisfaction that on April twentieth it was Hitler's birthday, and this was a state holiday; Hitler's birthday, it was state holiday, free of work and so on. So I told my wife, "You know what? I want to make Hitler a present. So we get married on his birthday."

DePue: (chuckles) That seems very fitting to me.

Ladny: So we went to a justice of peace and he gave us the papers to fill out and when he saw that I was born in Poland, so he just leaned back and said, "Yeah, how the

world is changing. Yesterday both of you would be shot for fraternization, but today," he said, "I have to marry you." I said, "Okay, so do it."

DePue: I think that's a wonderful story. But again, times are very tough for the next couple years in Germany. You're making your living in the black market. I think to try to explain that so we can understand exactly what that meant, you have a story in the book where you talked about deciding that you could make a little money if you had some glass thermometers. Could you tell that story?

Ladny: Yeah, fever thermometers. I don't know who wanted them; somebody had a connection someplace that they wanted fever thermometers. So I thought there was a good price on it. How to get them? I knew that the German most famous glass factories were in eastern Germany in Thuringia.

DePue: Which was now under Russian control.

Ladny: Yeah, it was Russian. So I thought I have to get over there to get a contact. And I did. It was very scary, but I made it, and on this deal I made about 35,000 marks profit. Oh this was nice money.

DePue: That was a lot of money at the time.

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: I would imagine the toughest part of that trip was crossing the border between western Germany and eastern Germany and then you got to come back again with the load. Were the borders guarded at that time?

Ladny: Oh yeah, yeah.

DePue: So how did you manage that? Here you are a Pole. What kind of papers would you have had at the time?

Ladny: I didn't have any papers. Again, God's help. Miracles happen. Way back, I knew just about where the border might be. I didn't know the distances or what, especially at night. But I just went off the highway in the field, in the direction. I have to go west. So just whatever happened. But then I see, oh, maybe 100 yards away, to the left there is another man who is going in this same direction. So I thought I join him, so at least two of us.

And so in conversation he said that this was his routine. He was going every few days back and forth across the border. So he says, "Listen. Your first time. If you want to go with me, so it costs you fifty marks. Or, you go on your own." I said, "Okay, there you are, fifty marks." He knew his way. Boy. I had 1,200 fever thermometers.

DePue: Twelve hundred.

Ladny: Yeah. In a wooden suitcase. We went through the mountain to climb the mountain. So I put the suitcase and my walking cane on the shoulder. And I was climbing. But then I slipped and the suitcase fell down. So all I heard the drudududududu at night, boy. So I thought now hell.

DePue: Where every little sound becomes a huge sound I would think.

Ladny: Yeah. So now what to do? To go try to get whatever? The scraps of it? But maybe over there the border guard will be waiting for you. So this was hard decision to make. But I thought, oh hell, it was worth it. I went through so much difficulties to get it. Now I won't abandon that. I want to get it. So I went. I got it. But when I get up I saw just down there he was running across the border.

DePue: Your guide was.

Ladny: Yeah, with my fifty marks. Now I thought at least now I know where it was. So I ran after him and made it.

DePue: Well, let's move on in the story. I know that shortly after that you decided that maybe black-marketing wasn't the greatest job to pursue. It certainly had its risks. I would imagine that Adele wasn't a fan of that idea, especially when you made the trip to East Germany..

Ladny: No, she was not.

DePue: It was shortly at this time then that you learned a little bit more about clock making and clock repair?

Ladny: Yeah. No, but I didn't use that as a profession in Germany. I just went to labor department and I was unemployed. I was getting unemployment compensation. And one time I went to get my unemployment compensation and they said, "You don't get it. You have to go to this address. There is job opening. You have to take this job. When you get the job, then you get it." The job was a canalization, the sewer, city sewer.

DePue: Sanitation job?

Ladny: Sanitation job. "Oh hell," I said, "no. During the war I had to accept any job. But now war is over." So I went to labor department office and I told the manager who I am, that I spent the war years here and so on. Then I had to take any job. But now I don't feel like. So he said, "What kind of job would you like?" I said, "As a chauffeur, driver." He said, "Okay. We'll do something about it." And he called the office in the suburb and he told them in not very polite terms that I'm sending this man to you and he's supposed to get unemployment compensation as long as he wants to, or you have to give him a job which he can accept. If not, I put you in unemployment line. Oh. A day later there came a man from unemployment office. "Mr. Ladny, here is opening for chauffeur in Yugoslavian consulate. Would you accept the job?" I said, "Okay, let me see it." So I went to consulate. They checked

my driver's license. "Yeah, okay. Come with me." He took me to the window. "You see this black Mercedes on the right side? This is your car. You will be driving this car."

DePue: Not bad employment then.

Ladny: Yeah, not bad.

DePue: We're getting close to the end of your story and it's been a wonderful story. But we have a couple more very important things that we absolutely need to discuss. The first one is how it came to pass you decided that you needed to bring your young family over to the United States.

Ladny: Because, in my family life in Poland there were always so much trouble either to Russia or Germany or what. My grandfather, my father went through war and so on. So I thought I want to go as far away as I can so that my posterity won't have to go through the misery what we went through.

DePue: Was there one particular incident where the need to do that was really driven home for you?

Ladny: No.

DePue: I'm thinking of the occasion where a couple German ladies saw your children playing out in the street. You made reference in the book about one of these ladies referring to your child as "that Polack's child". Do you remember that?

Ladny: Oh yeah, yeah. When children were playing on the street, my youngest daughter, she had white hair. The one German woman asked the one who was with her, "Whose child is that with the white hair?" "Oh, that is the Polack's kid." "Oh, the Polack's kid, who married the widow Libertus." When I heard that, oh, hell. So I cannot stay here, because so I went through that Polack, I am Polack, but I don't want that my children would go through that in the school and everywhere: Oh there's a Polack kid".

DePue: So was it about that time when you decided that you wanted to end up in the United States?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So now Mr. Ladny, why, of all places, Springfield, Illinois?

Ladny: Yeah. American consul told me, "After careful investigation we found out that you are eligible to be admitted to United States. Where would you like to go in United States?" I said, "To United States." "Yeah," he said, "Mr. Ladny, United States is a big country, we have forty-eight states; don't you have any preference?" I said, "What's the difference?" "Oh there is a big difference. There is warm climate, there is cold climate, something in between." I said, "Okay, put me in between." So he

said, "Okay, I put you right around in the middle. This is the state of Illinois. It is very well developed, industrial and agriculture, commercial. And there is a big city, Chicago; there is a big Polish settlement, big German settlement. So you get acclimatized very easy." I said, "Sir, if I would want to live among Polish people I would go to Poland. If I would want to live among German people I would stay here. If I go to America I want to live among American people." So he said, "Okay, I will put you right down in the middle of state of Illinois, capital city, Springfield." I said, "Nice. Easy to pronounce. Springfield. Not Poughkeepsie or something like that."

DePue: Why no interest in going back to Poland?

Ladny: Because there was no Poland. You Americans took Poland from German occupation and gave it to Russian occupation.
[When the Solidarity Movement came about later and got rid of Russian control, then Poland was again a free, but devastated, country.]

DePue: So as far as you were concerned, Russian-controlled Poland was no place to go.

Ladny: Oh yeah, I wouldn't want any smell of Russian.

DePue: Did your parents survive the war?

Ladny: Yeah. My father died in '48.

DePue: How about the Henkel family?

Ladny: Yeah, it is catastrophe. Russians came, so he was arrested very first day as a Nazi. They put him in a concentration camp. And they raped his wife and so on. And kids: he had a son fifteen years old, and two daughters, one twelve, one eight. So I didn't know what happened to them. But later on I found out that Russians arrested the father, put him in concentration camp, and they dispossessed them from the farm. They allowed them to take only what they could carry from everything that they had. They were allowed only to take what they could carry, and never come back.

DePue: So a lot of things still being sorted out in Europe at that time, and yet another reason to come to the United States for a new beginning. I know it wasn't necessarily easy when you got here, but I wonder if you can share your initial impressions of reaching the United States, and especially in getting to Illinois and then realizing, boy, this is a big country. What were your impressions then?

Ladny: Yeah. Big country. And not only that, my experiences: I grew up in a country, military dictatorship. Then I got experience with Communist country. And then with Nazi country. And then the United States. So through my experiences being here it is, that from the very first day I felt a free man, unrestricted, so that I didn't have to look over my shoulder on how to get a job and so on. How to get a job, this was the biggest part.

DePue: Well, I know again from the book, you paint a very vivid picture of the struggles you had in getting employment here. But once again a little bit of audacity on your part: not bashful, going out there and taking the opportunities you could find and making the most of it. So would you say in retrospect that, at least by the time you got to the United States, you've had a good life?

Ladny: The title of my book says everything. It was worth it, every bit of it. I paid a price but it was worth it.

DePue: And I know many, many years later the Polish government was able to track you down and give you some recognition as well. Could you talk about that?

Ladny: Yeah. They decided to give me a medal of honor.

DePue: A Polish medal of honor?

Ladny: Yeah. And they invited me to the Polish consulate in Chicago for a presentation of it. But I said, "It's too bad that it's in Chicago. I don't know anybody here. None of my friends would have any idea that I have that." So the Consul General said, "There is no problem. Give me addresses of people you would like to have in Springfield for a celebration. So we repeat that. We come to Springfield and we repeat the ceremony." And they did. It's funny.

One funny thing about that. I wanted to make very nice reception. So I hired a band. I knew a woman musician here. And she would play Polish music. Okay, on March third, they came from Chicago. He and his wife and two Consuls. And they came and they were checking in at Sheraton Inn. So the receptionist in Sheraton Inn, she said, "Oh, you are the musicians for the ceremony?" So he will never—I talked with him, so he'll always have fun with that, that he as Minister Plenipotentiary he was called as a musician. Yeah.

DePue: Well, Mr. Ladny, we only have two minutes left, and this might sound like a peculiar note to end on here, but there was a point in your story, a very poignant story about—I think this was in the sausage factory—where you're trying to convince somebody else that there's a reason to live, because this person had basically given up. And at that point in time you're convincing them that the reason to live is because of their hatred for the treatment and the hatred for the people who are treating them that way. I certainly got the distinct impression that that's one of the things—especially in the harshest moments of your experiences—that hatred was one of the things that kept you going. To see that final retribution. But the marvelous part of it is that by 1945 and the time you find Adele your outlook has changed dramatically. In just a few seconds if you could express that, maybe that would be the best way to conclude our story here.

Ladny: My philosophy is from experience. Wherever you are, if you behave like human being, you will be treated as such. But if you try to get smart someplace, they cut you down.

DePue: Any final comments? Very brief comments, I'm afraid.

Ladny: To find a publisher for my book. Or film, moviemaker, to make a movie out of it. This would be another miracle. I am waiting for this miracle.

DePue: Well, Mr. Ladny, it has been a real pleasure and a joy for me to talk with you. If ever there's a story out there that deserves to be published in wider distribution or deserves to be made into a film, yours is the story. So thank you very much.

Ladny: I thank you.

DePue: And thank you for joining us.

(End of third interview)

Interview with Kazimir Ladny

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Interview # 4: June 5, 2008
Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, June 5, 2008. This is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here once again with Kazimir Ladny. Kazimir and I have had several long talks already about your fascinating life as a Polish soldier, captured by the Russians, then traded between the Russians and the Germans, and finally making your way over here to the United States with your young family at that time. But Kazimir has asked me to interview him one more time and to capture one more very important story to you. So I think at that I will turn it over to you and ask you about your childhood friend.

Ladny: In my village, in my parish, there was an organist. He had four sons. When the war started, when Germans came into this area, they arrested all of them and took them to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. The youngest one at that time was about eight years old. He was a very frail-built little fellow.

DePue: What was his name?

Ladny: His name was Kazimierz But this whole story, it is of two Kazimirs who, presumably during the war, were killed, but they met after sixty years. They met together alive and well.

DePue: So obviously the two Kazimirs are yourself and this other Kazimir you're going to tell us the story about. And that's Kazimierz Tafil?

Ladny: Tafil.

DePue: Tafil?

Ladny: Tafil. I became prisoner of war by the Russians and they sent us to Siberia. But at that time Hitler and Stalin were friends. They divided Poland amongst themselves and they decided to exchange the prisoners of war. Because I was born in the western part of Poland which was occupied by the Germans, so the Russians sent me to Germany.

I was presumed dead because the Red Cross didn't have contact with the Russian authorities to find out who they took as a prisoner of war. So in Christmas of 1939, there was a family reunion and they were missing me at the table. My older brother's wife was pregnant at that time. So they decided that if it's going to be a boy they'll make him as a Kazimir. One Kazimir was lost. So they wanted to make substitute Kazimir. And they did it. There is only one thing that didn't come to reality: that the young Kazimir died after forty-four years of life. And I, the old Kazimir, I am ninety-four, and I am still around.

DePue: You're still going strong.

Ladny: Yeah. Now coming to the Tafil: I went to school with his brothers, and he was just a play kid at that time. When I got in contact with my parents, they told me that all Tafils were taken to concentration camp in Auschwitz. And it was well known, even at that time, that Auschwitz was just one-way trip. So that all Tafils were presumed dead.

But after sixty years, when I went back to Poland to visit, I was having conversation with my friends and relatives, they told me that one of the Tafils, the youngest one, the Kazimierz, that he survived. And they asked me if I wanted to get in touch with him. I said of course. So they took me to his place. It's not far away. Maybe twenty miles away from my birthplace and his.

DePue: And what was that town again?

Ladny: It was the town Siedlce, S-i-e-d-l—

DePue: c-e.

Ladny: c-e, yeah. So we went there. And I saw a little old man working in a garden, tending the beets. So I went to him and I recognized his face. So I said, "Oh, hi, Kazimierz, how are you? I see you are in pretty good shape." He looked up at me. He was surprised that somebody called him by the first name. Some stranger. And the way I pronounced his name, so this is distinct Polish pronunciation, but he was surprised. So he looked at me and asked me, "Who do I have the pleasure of meeting?" So I told him, "Kazimir Ladny from Kakolewnica." He looked at me and said, "What? Are you still alive? I thought you were dead." "I can say the same thing about you. What? You are still alive? I thought that you were dead. The way I was told that you were in Auschwitz and I was told that Auschwitz was a one-way trip. But how did you get out that you are still alive?" So this was funny. Two Kazimirs presumed dead, met after sixty years.

DePue: Tell me again how it was that you found out that he was still alive.

Ladny: Yeah. My relatives and friends from my village, they told me that. And there were four brothers and three sisters. The sisters survived and they kept in touch with him and they spread the word that he is alive.

DePue: What year exactly was this when the two of you first met? Was it 2002?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: So that illustrates—you go back to Poland quite often.

Ladny: Yes.

DePue: And this isn't the only time you've met him. You've been back there since 2002, right?

Ladny: Yes, yes, every time I go to Poland I am visiting him again. He is very handy man. He built a chapel on his property all by himself. I don't know how he did it. And he put a sign on it.

DePue: We have pictures of that chapel. It's not a large chapel but it's very ornate and obviously built with a lot of love.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And you said there's a sign on it. What does the sign say?

Ladny: The sign says—

DePue: If you can find that picture here real quick, Kazimir. The thing that impresses me about this one picture you have is that here's this barrel-chested older man; obviously, he's looking about as fit as you could possibly be. He's a very impressive-looking specimen, even though he's a tiny little guy. How tall are you?

Ladny: Five-seven.

DePue: And he must be about five-three or something?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: But a very impressive-looking man. Okay. Let's see if we can find the pictures now. We've got the pictures in front of us here.

Ladny: One sign, he says, "God. Honor. Fatherland."

DePue: Okay. Did he make this for any particular person in mind or people in mind? Everybody who was at Auschwitz?

Ladny: Yeah. The people who were with me, they took the pictures. He dedicated the name of his chapel to Maximilian Kolby, who was declared saint two years ago.

DePue: C-o-l-b-y?

Ladny: K-o-l-b-y. There is story behind it, why was he declared as a saint. Because in Auschwitz Concentration Camp quite often they were executing Polish convicts. And Germans had a system, the decimal system, that whenever was needed, so they executed ten inmates.

DePue: I'm sorry. I didn't understand you there. They executed—

Ladny: Ten of the—

DePue: Oh, ten.

Ladny: Yeah. Of these inmates who were there. And one time they called out, they put in a line ten people for execution. But one of them, he start to beg the Germans that he is married, he has two children at home, and so he was crying and begging them to save his life. But there was no chance. But this Polish priest, Maximilian Kolby, was listening to that and he decided to save this man's life. So he went to German officers and he asked him that he would take place of this man that they should let him go. He said, "I don't have anybody. I don't leave anybody behind. So I take his place. You can shoot me." But the German officer, he was surprised, but he said, "It's all right. I take you. But I won't do you a favor that I would shoot you. I make you die in his place." So they took this man to a special room and they tortured them to death; but Kolby they starved to death. So because of his deed, Catholic Church declared him as a saint.

DePue: And is this picture of Kolby?

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: And we're looking at a photo of, I guess, a display:. the altar inside the chapel. And in the center is the cross. You're in the right side of the picture next to a portrait of Christ. And on the left side is Kolby. That's an amazing picture. All of these pictures speak volumes I think. Are you planning to go back this next year as well, this summer?

Ladny: Yes.

DePue: And you're going to go meet Kazimierz again?

Ladny: Oh, yeah.

DePue: What does it mean to you then, after sixty years, to find each other?

Ladny: Yeah. That is in a way what we went through, what I went through as a prisoner of war, and what he went through in his life. So our meeting I would consider as a miracle: after sixty years to meet with memories of our childhood.

DePue: Looking at these pictures, it's very clear in the pictures, you can see the tattoo that he obviously got when he was in Auschwitz. His prisoner number on his forearm. But it's a gorgeous chapel. It's a wonderful picture of the two of you. And I can certainly understand why it's so important to you. Anything else you'd like to say in conclusion then?

Ladny: In the picture, when I look in his face I have the impression that he looks at me as a ghost, that I am not standing there as a man, but just as a ghost, and he tries to hug me.

DePue: I love the way he's holding on to your arm.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: I have one other peculiar question for you. How does a Pole say the name Kazimir?

Ladny: Kazimir. Polish names are—origin of them is after saints. And Kazimir, there were two Kazimirs in Polish history as kings and they were declared as saints. Saint Kazimir. [Casimir in Latin spelling] And the Vatican is putting the name of saints in the calendar, that every day has different saint. So March fourth of every year there is Saint Kazimir.

DePue: Is Kazimir pronounced the same in Polish?

Ladny: No, a little bit different. In Polish it is Kazimir.

DePue: Say that again.

Ladny: Kazimir.

DePue: That is a lot different.

Ladny: Yeah. They're a lot different, but actually it is just two letters different.

DePue: K-a-z-i-m, you spell it.

Ladny: K-a-z-i-m-i-e-r-z. [Polish spelling]

DePue: m-i-e-r-z, OK.

Ladny: So by naturalization here, when I came to the United States nobody could pronounce this Kazimierz, so I decided to cut out.

DePue: So you cut out the E and the Z at the very end.

Ladny: And Z on the very end. I just cut out these two as Kazimir.

DePue: That way you became an American.

Ladny: Yeah.

DePue: Well, again thank you very much, Kazimir. This has been wonderful to talk with you. A real pleasure and important history. That's probably the most important part. So we appreciate your telling those stories. Any final comments for us before we turn off the recorder?

Ladny: Yeah. I hope that people will enjoy seeing and reading my history, and because especially that my history is, many times I think, is miraculous. I had so many miracles that I'm still alive.

DePue: Well, some would say your guardian angel was kept very busy.

Ladny: Yeah. When I was in Siberia in desperate situation, so as a soldier and so on, soldiers are praying very seldom. They are more cursing and complaining. But in extreme situation, yeah, they are turning to God. And so did I. So one day when I was desperate I said, "Dear God, I was seldom praying to you. But I think this is the time that I should get in touch with you. When I was a child my parents were taking care of me. When I grew up my government was taking care of me. But now I have no parents and I have no government; and by the way, government did very lousy job with me, that my government put me in this situation where I am now. So now I don't have anybody but you, dear God. Please take care of me." And I think we are in good communion that God kept me alive through the rigors of war and that he gave me even a guardian angel to take care of me after the war. So I can say only hallelujah and amen.

DePue: With that I think we should close. Thanks very much, Mr. Ladny. It's been a real pleasure.

(End of interview)