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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

MRS CATHERINE SZOTKIEWICZ

SEPTEMBER 6, 1978

TRANSLATED AND TRANSCRIBED BY

MRS. NATALIA B. MCDONOUGH

NOVEMBER 7, 1979

Interview with Mrs. Catherine Szotkiewicz
Colonial Park Apartments 6-B
1401 Maryland Ave.
Wilmington, Delaware
September 6, 1978
Interviewer: Natalia B. McDonough

A: I had six children, and eighteen grandchildren. Thirteen of the grandchildren are married, and now another one will get married on November foruteenth. And I have fourteen great grandchildren. After May there will be four new ones, so I will have eighteen great grandchildren.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in 1898.

Q: Where?

A: It was in Galicia, near Poland, somewhere there near Russia, I don't really know just where it was.

Q: What was the name of the town?

A: In Polish it was called Wuisko and in Ukrainian Wiisko.

Q: What city was it near?

A: Dobromil. The post office was Dobromil and the village was Wiisko.

Q: And your parents, were they from the same village?

A: Yes. My mother and my father too. Everyone.

Q: What was your father's profession?

A: He was a farmer.

Q: Do you remember how much land he owned?

A: Four or five morgens (each morgen is 2.1 acres).

Q: Did you have brothers and sister?

A: I had three brothers and four sisters.

Q: Then there were eight of you.

A: No, that was including me. I was the fourth child and there were three younger ones.

Q: And your mother stayed home?

A: Oh, no. My mother worked in the field just like everyone else. There was no other kind of work.

We did all the planting and harvesting and everything.

Q: Did you have horses and cows?

A: We had three milking cows and two dry cows and two horses.

Q: What is a dry cow?

A: That's when the cow was big like a cow, but hadn't had a calf yet.

Q: How many years did you attend school?

A: I didn't go to school very long back home. The school was very small. The younger children went to school longer. I went only about three hours a day. I had about three years of schooling. It's different over here. Here everyone goes to school. My mother said it was more important to watch the chickens and the pigs. But when it rained we went to school. My father liked school, but my mother didn't.

Q: Then you porbably had more schooling in the winter than in summer.

A; There was no school at all in the summer. Everyone was out working in the fields. And when we finished our own work, we went to work on other farms for pay. We gathered wheat and dug potatoes.

Q: That's when the children were older?

A: No, I went when I was eleven years old. I lived there too and did all the work. I remember I went to my father's sisters. I tried my best to do all the work that I physically could. Sometimes people got mad because I got paid like a grown up. But then the boss told them that I did the work of an adult, they could see that themselves. Nobody was helping me, I just tried very hard; I was worth the money.

Q: Did any of your brothers or sisters come with you to the states?

A: My eldest sister, (she was actually the second child) was in the states. She sent me the ticket. She was the first one to get here. I got here in 1913. On November fifth I arrived in New York, and on the sixth, in

Mt. Carmel Pennsylvania. I was only fifteen years old when I arrived; I had just had my fifteenth birthday on August 25. When my sister saw me here, she looked at me and cried. I asked her why she cried, and she said, "What are you going to do here? You're a child yet!" Then I started to cry and thought that I'd like to go back home if I had the money. And then the war started and it was impossible to return. Then my brother-in-law, who was older said, "She's young, but she took care of herself back home, and she'll do the same here." So I helped my sister. She had renters. These were married men who left their wives at home and came here to earn money. There were four of them. I helped my sister with their laundry and ironing. There were no washing machines so we did everything by hand.

Q: Then it was your sister who first told you about the United States?

A: Well, she didn't know too much herself, but she sent me the ticket.

Q: Do you know maybe how she heard about the states?

A: My mother's brother was here in Wilmington. He sent my sister money and she got a job here after she came over. Then she got married. Five years after her arrival she sent me money.

Q: When you came here, did you intend to stay permanently?

A: No, I thought that I would earn money and then return to the old country. But soon after I got here the mail stopped going to the old country and I didn't know how my parents and my brothers were. It took me a year to reestablish contact with my family. I had an uncle in Drohobic with his family. I had one brother in Germany. He deserted from the army and that's where I was able to locate him. Another brother ended up by the Russian border. But in the area where we were from originally there were a lot of Mazuri people, the kind that didn't speak either Polish or Ukrainian, but this Mazur language.

The youngest brother is still there. As I left for the United States, he was in the third year. When I located him again, he said he just barely remembered me when I left. He remembered how I kissed him just before leaving and promised to take him with me to America, but then didn't. But then the war came. He stayed home and married there. Neither he nor his wife can read or write. His family is scattered too. Do you know where Lwiw is? He has two sons there. Two of his daughters live in Russia. The Russians took them there after the war.

Q: When you came over, did you come with anyone you knew?

A: There was another girl who was two years older than I that I knew. We had always been together even though she was older. Then there was a lady whose husband was already in America.

Q: Then you had this friend and the lady?

A: Yes, and the lady had a little boy and girl with her. We traveled together. She was good to us and we to her. We helped take care of the children. The little girl is still alive but the one that was born after we arrived In America died already.

Q: So you were friends with them all these years?

A: Yes. And even now the older one and I get together. Or, when she sees my children she asks about me.

Q: You came by ship?

A: Yes I did.

Q: From where did your ship come?

A: From Germany, Bremen.

Q: What was the name of your ship?

A: I think it was "Bremen", but I'm not sure. I think I saw that on the ship. I asked a friend of mine to check in New York, but she said I didn't need to know it anymore because I'm an American citizen.

Q: How did you get to the ship?

A: By train. There was a boss there. Then there was an agent too. His name was Mischler (or Mishler). He was a German. He told me not to stray and not to get lost in Bremen. When it was time for us to leave the agent and the boss communicated. Then they took us out of the hotel (presumably in Bremen) and transported us to the ship.

Q: From what city did you leave by train for Bremen?

A: Nizhankovichi.

Q: What was the general mood at departure time? Were you happy to be traveling?

A: It was very sad. I still remember it. My brother and mother brought me to the train. I hugged my mother and I kissed her hands and feet and we both cried.

Q: Once you were on the train or ship, did you have any problems?

A: No, because I was with this lady. I remember at the train station they had herded us together. Her husband was Ukrainian, but she knew German real well. When the agent came, she talked to him in German fluently. She asked for train space just for us. They took us on the train and gave us space so that we had someplace to sit and sleep, and he brought us everything we wanted. We were alright.

Q: Did you have to pay this agent?

A: Oh, yes, for everything.

Q: What did he do for you in addition to getting you a good compartment on the train and accompany you to the ship?

A: He arranged all the papers for us and told us what time the train would be leaving. He told this to my brother and my brother delivered us to the train. That lady is still alive but she's in a nursing home and I haven't seen her for a long time.

Q: How long was the train journey?

A: We traveled from Nizhankovichi to Krakow. But first we went to Przemysl. That took about half an hour. Then we changed trains in Przemysl. Then we went on to Krakow. I paid five Kroners, about four and a half dollars for for the trip. In Krakow we got on a German train and it took us to Oswinsee (Note: transcriber could not find a geographical name resembling Oswinsee on a National Geographic map of the area issued in 1975. It is assumed that it is a slavisized name of a German city.) There we caught another train that took us all the way to Bremen.

Q: Do you remember how much the train fare was from Krakow to Bremen?

A: The agent, Mischler, took care of that. It was all on one ticket.

Q: Where did you first see the agent?

A: In Dobromil. He had an office in that town, and if you wanted to travel somewhere, you went to him. He arranged all the papers.

Q: How much did you pay for your passage to America?

A: From Krakow to Mt. Carmel, in American money I had to repay my sister $42.00. And now you can't get anything for the $42.00. My sister and I wanted to bring my brother over, the one who ran away from the army to Germany. He was arrested there once. We wanted to bring him over after the war. It was in 1922-23. He wrote that things were bad over there. The price for passage then was $189.00. Then my father died and the brother got married and everything was different. We went to an agent here and we needed go to the agent there and my sister sent me the money.

Q: There were agents all over the place, weren't there?

A: Yes, there were. In America it was the same. And there wasn't work here, either. When I came here, I worked in Mt. Carmel, then I worked for a family near Pittsburg. Then after the war there wasn't work there either, so I came to Wilmington because I had family here. That's what people did then. My uncle in Wilmington said I could come and get a job here.

Q: Did your sister come to meet you in New York when you arrived?

A: No, I came all the way to Mt. Carmel alone.

Q: Were you friend and the lady with you?

A: No, they went to Philadelphia. Anyway, In Bremen, they got on a ship right away and left. I had to wait because I had to board the ship for which the agent bought my ticket. So I came alone on another ship. When they left, I cried terribly. I was in a foreign country, everything was in German and I didn't know what to do. But there were agents there and one of them came to me. I told him I was crying because my friend and the lady left. He looked at the papers and told me exactly when I would be leaving. He promised to arrange things so I wouldn't have to pay for staying in Bremen while waiting for my ship. Then when I went through the immigration check in New York I still had $25.00. They required that everyone have money on arrival in New York. I was afraid they would send me back because I didn't have enough money, but I knew that I wouldn't get back home on $25.00 either. But I passed inspection and they took me to Castle Garden to put me on a train. They showed us the train schedule there and where the trains went. So I came to Mt. Carmel, Pa. The agent told me not to let anyone take me anyplace, but to wait until my family arrived to pick me up. So my sister was supposed to come but she didn't because she had a little baby.

So she sent one of her boarders for me. He recognized me at the train station immediately as being from the old country and said I should come with him and that he would take me to my sister's house, but I wouldn't go with him. My sister lived near the station. Finally my sister came and she asked me why I hadn't come with Mykolai and I complained that I had to wait for her so long.

Q: What was your first impression of the U.S.? Did you like it?

A: No. I looked around the first day and said to myself, "Is this America?"

Q: What picture of America did you have in your mind?

A: Everything was different in the small town and in the cities. The men dug coal and there were coal heaps everywhere. That seemed strange to me. When I asked my sister where I could get a job, she said there was a cigar factory in town. Downstairs they made cigars. We sorted the various kinds of tobacco; there were two kinds for cigarettes and one for cigars. I worked on the leaves. I wanted to switch to cigars. So I asked this girl who was a native born American of Ukrainian family to help me. But she said that her mother wanted to see me. So they invited me one Sunday. They were from the same area in the Ukraine, from Sambor. Anyway, the lady said her daughter was to help me and take me shopping or whatever, which she did. That's when I began to like America. Then everything was differen.

Q: Did your sister help you find your job?

A: No. She said to go out in the street when the girls were coming home from the factory or going there. She knew some of them and asked the girls to help me get a job. They did and they sort of watched me.

Q: Did you like the work?

A: Yes, I liked it. Then when I got home, I helped my sister with her three little children. But in two years I got married and then my work became different and I came here to my uncle's in Wilmington. My uncle told me more about America and things became easier.

Q: Where did you learn English?

A: I learned from the children. I wanted them to know Ukrainian, but I also wanted them to know English.

Q: Did you take any courses or go to school for English?

A: I worked nights for thirty two years for duPont. It was hard in those days. My husband didn't earn enough. We had six children.

Q: But when you were young, when your first arrived, how did you learn English?

A: I used to read books. And then when the children went to school, I learned from them. I wanted to get citizenship papers but I didn't have a chance to go to school because I worked at night and there were no courses for citizenship in the daytime. A group of a dozen or so of us got together and went to the post office to ask if we could have help with the language because we were all interested in getting our citizenship papers. We were all women. They found us a teacher who came to our homes in rotation to hold English classes.

Q: How did you go about coming to Wilmington?

A: There was no work in Mt. Carmel. I wrote to my uncle to come to my wedding. He couln't because his wife was expecting a baby. So I suggested to my husband that we go to my uncle's because I knew he could help us with jobs. He was working for the railroad. My husband got a job with the railroad too. Our eldest daughter was born in Wilmington. Then her godfather said to my husband one day, "Why are you working here for 22¢ an hour when in Pittsburg you can make 44¢?" So we took our little girl and moved to Pittsburg. And my....

Q: Excuse me for interrupting you, but I'd like to ask how you met your husband.

A: He was a boarder at my sister's. I thought at first that I would return to the Ukraine after the war. We had a neighbor lady who was from his village back home. All the men used to go to bars for entertainment. This neighbor encouraged me to interest him in me. She said he was very young and she didn't want to see him start to drink a lot and waste himself. At first I wasn't interested, but then I did marry him at seventeen. After we were married we went to church once and one of his old buddies called him out of the service to go to a bar. When this neighbor lady found this out, she went to that buddy and told him she would really let him have it if he called my husband out of church to go to a bar again. He never did again.

Q: Then your husband got a job in Pittsburg?

A: Yes. He worked in a war factory in production of ribs for ships. (Note: her speech is indistinct and she doesn't know how to translate the hybrid(Ukrainian-English) word for "ribs" so it may have been rivets or something else.) He had a very responsible job because if the ribs or rivets were not properly made, the ships wouldn't work right. He worked there during the entire war period.

Q: When you came here, were there many Ukrainians already here?

A: In Mt. Carmel there were Ukrainians. They were from Uhorshchina and didn't speak Ukrainian, but we attended the same church. In Pittsburg they were Khorvaty. I learned the Khorvat language, but now I don't remember it.

Q: How did the Ukrainians socialize? Was it mostly through the church?

A: We met at the church in the social hall. There were no clubs. We had meetings. The people were split into two groups because there was a Ukrainian priest and one from Uhorshchina. The latter priest wouldn't preach in

Ukrainian and he didn't like the Ukrainian people. Then the old Ukrainian priest got the people together and told them to start a church of their own. The other priest said we'd never make it. But the men got together and they dug the foundation for the church and eventually finished it. In those days people didn't have much money to give to the church.

Q: Was it difficult to find living quarters here in America?

A: When we came to Wilmington in 1916, it was hard to find a place. People lived in close quarters. A couple with two children would live in one room. There were people here from neighboring villages and I got to know them and found living quarters through them.

Q: When did you return from Pittsburg back to Delaware?

A: When the war was over a lot of the war related industry closed down. We moved back to Mt.Carmel and didn't have intentions of coming to Wilmington again. My husband worked in the mines. He had to learn how to work in the mines. He had to take out papers and go to school for training. After he got a job there, a strike started.

Q: In what year did you go back to Mt. Carmel? In 1919, 1920?

A: I don't remember. Let's see. My Mike was born in 1918 in Pittsburg. Then Johnny was born in 1921, also in Pittsburg. And in 1922 we came back to Wilmington. It was hard to get a place to live, but I came to my sister.

Q: Then your sister came to your uncle too?

A: No, she came with her husband. She invited us to live with her even though her house was small.

Q: What was your street address?

A: Bennett Street, I think the number was 808.

Q: Was that near the old church?

A: No, the old church was beyond the third bridge. We looked for a house there, but finally found one on Eighth Street. But the (rental) agents didn't want to fix up the houses. They just took the rent.

Q: Then your husband didn't like to work in Mt. Carmel?

A: Yes, he did. His boss liked him because he was young and could do the job well. There were four guys who loaded the cars and brought them to the surface. But the mine didn't always work. So, we decided to go to Wilmington. It was hard to move, especially with children. I told my husband that it was time to send the children to school and that it wasn't good to keep moving around all the time.

Q: What kind of work did he have in Wilmington the second time?

A: With the railroad again. He was a machinist and he worked on the trains as they came in here. Then the children got older, and the war came. My boys joined the armed forces.

Q: When did you begin to work again?

A: In 1927. In the du Pont building in the offices where the clerks were.

Q: Did you clean?

A: It was during the depression. Everyone said I couldn't find work anywhere. My husband did and so did my sister. But I was confident and started out one day before six in the morning. I went to the building because I knew that the women started working at six. I thought maybe someone wouldn't show up and I'd have a chance. The boss lady was the oldest one there. She wasn't married. She asked me if I wanted to work and how many children I had. We had five children then. She asked who would take care of the children. I told her that my husband would switch to a day job and he would stay

home with them while I worked.....

This lady spoke very slowly, went into a lot of unnec-cesary detail and strayed from the subject quite a bit. All this added up to a very long interview and my tape ran out, something that I wasn't prepared for since all the other interviews left plenty of tape. I regret my unpreparedness.

N.B. McDonough