

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW J. BECK

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Krzysztof Swiatek: This begins an interview with Andrew Beck and Damian Kulikoski with Krzysztof Swiatek and Sandra Stewart Holyoak on March 17, 2010, in Fairfield, Connecticut. Thank you, Mr. Beck, for having us here and participating in the Rutgers Oral History Archives. To begin, please state for the record where and when you were born.

Andrew Beck: I was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1926.

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Tell us about your family background. You can go back as far as you would like, but let us start with your father's side of the family.

AB: Well, my father was also born in Poland. He went to school for a while in Kraków, and then, he went to an export academy in Vienna. This was just before the beginning of the First World War. When the First World War started, he came back to Poland. He joined the Piłsudski Legion and served with the Piłsudski Legion during the entire war.

[Editor's Note: In August 1914, Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) formed the Polish Legions (later the Polish Auxiliary Corps within the Austro-Hungarian Military), which fought on the side of the Central Powers, in the hopes that their service would lead to an independent Poland. The Central Powers partially rewarded their service with the creation of the Kingdom of Poland (essentially a German satellite). Piłsudski later withdrew his support for Germany and was imprisoned in Magdeburg until the end of the war. Piłsudski served as the leader (or de facto leader) of the Polish nation for most of the period from 1918 to his death in 1935. Józef Beck (1894-1944), Mr. Beck's father, served as Piłsudski's aide in the First Brigade of the Polish Legions, leading to a long working relationship over numerous military and governmental positions until 1935.]

My mother was also born in Poland. She briefly studied at the Warsaw University before she married my father.

SH: What was her name?

AB: Maria Slominski. My parents were divorced when I was a small child. I think the divorce was in 1930.

SH: Okay.

AB: Subsequently, both of my parents remarried.

SH: What was your father's full name?

AB: My father's full name was Józef Beck, B-E-C-K.

SH: Is it unusual to have a name like that in Poland?

AB: Well, it is unusual, but the family actually is Dutch. I guess the first of the Becks was a sea captain who moved from Holland to the Polish port city of Gdansk. That was the beginning of the Polish branch of the Beck Family. [laughter] This, of course, was, I believe, in the sixteenth

century. So, over the years, the family got completely Polonized, if you will. So, by the time it got to me, I suppose the only thing Dutch left in me is some DNA which could be traced.
[laughter]

SH: In this day and age. [laughter]

KS: What did your father do as a young man?

AB: Well, as a young man, of course, he served in the First World War. He then also served, in 1920, in the war between Poland and the Bolsheviks. By that time, he decided he would become a professional Army officer and he served in the General Staff of the Polish Army.

It was only in the early 1930s that the ruler of Poland, Józef Piłsudski, asked him to start in a diplomatic career. He then was a Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, and then, became the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I think in 1932, if I'm not mistaken, and was until 1939, of course, until the war broke out.

[Editor's Note: The Polish-Soviet War lasted from February 1919 to March 1921. In 1926, the May Coup ended democratically-elected rule in Poland and returned a government led by Piłsudski (who held the title of Minister of Military Affairs) to power. Józef Beck served as his Chief of Staff (1926-30), then, Vice Prime Minister and Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs (1930-32), and, finally, Minister of Foreign Affairs (1932-39).]

Damian Kulikowski: Did your family, your father and, also, your mother, come from, I guess you could say, a privileged background? Were they higher up in socio-economic status?

AB: Well, on my mother's side, my grandfather was a doctor. On my father's side, my grandfather was a lawyer. So, that can give you some idea.

SH: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Poland? Where were you?

AB: Well, I was born and raised in Warsaw and I went to grammar school in Warsaw. I started going to what was called in Poland a *gimnazjum* and that was the equivalent of high school, I guess, here. I went to a high school called Gimnazjum Batorego (that was in the name of King Batorego [sixteenth century monarch Stephen Báthory]) in Warsaw, which was considered a good school.

KS: Did you have any favorite subjects?

AB: Well, I really only had one year of *gimnazjum* when the war broke out, so, it's difficult to say that I had favorite subjects at that time. [laughter]

SH: When your parents divorced, how old were you?

AB: I was three years old.

SH: You stayed with your mother.

AB: I stayed with my mother.

SH: In Warsaw?

AB: In Warsaw.

SH: What did your stepfather do for a living?

AB: Well, my mother actually married my stepfather after; she met him when we came to the United States. So, there was a space of over ten years.

SH: You were raised by a single mother, as we would say today.

AB: Yes, I was.

SH: Did your mother work?

AB: No, my mother did not work.

SH: Was her family close by? Did you have a good relationship with them?

AB: Yes, my grandmother and my uncles also lived in Warsaw, and, also, my grandmother on my father's side lived in Warsaw. So, we had some family there.

SH: You were able to visit both.

AB: Yes, yes.

DK: In your schooling, you said you did not develop a favorite subject since the war broke out, but did you have any general interests, sports, perhaps?

AB: Oh, yes, I played soccer. I belonged to the Boy Scouts. Actually, just before the war, the summer before the war broke out, I went to a Boy Scouts camp in Northern Poland, north of Wilno [the Polish name for Vilnius, capital of Lithuania], way out by the Lithuanian border. Actually, the Boy Scout troop into which I belonged, during the war, became one of the mainstays of the Polish Underground. It was one of the, shall we say, fighting battalions during the Warsaw Uprising. Consequently, many of my friends died.

[Editor's Note: From August 1 to October 2, 1944, the Polish Home Army led the Polish Resistance in the Warsaw Uprising against Nazi occupation. The operation was part of a Polish Government-in-Exile plan to assert some control over Poland before a Soviet-backed government could dominate the entire country. The Polish forces timed their attack to coincide with the arrival of the Red Army. However, the Soviets delayed and blocked aid from the

Western Allies (although they carried out some air support missions) until the Germans had crushed the Polish fighters in the city.]

SH: There must be a real sense of pride, though, in knowing that they fought the Nazis.

AB: Yes.

SH: As part of the Boy Scouts, were you out camping a lot and learning survival skills?

AB: Yes. The Boy Scout movement in Poland, before the war, was very well organized. I mean, every summer, we would go to different camps. Even the older boys could go to a camp in Southern Poland, where they were learning how to fly gliders.

SH: Really?

AB: Yes. Of course, some of them became fighter pilots during the Battle of Britain later on.

DK: Was the training for the senior Boy Scouts aimed at possibly producing future soldiers for the Polish Army?

AB: Yes. It was, I think, much more formal than the Boy Scout movement is in this country, from what I could gather.

KS: You mentioned that your parents separated. In regards to your father during the 1930s, did you see him often? Did you remain in contact with him?

AB: Well, I was in contact with him, but you have to appreciate that the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the 1930s was a very busy man. [laughter] So, the meetings with him were few and far between, if you will.

SH: Do you think the fact that he was so busy contributed to their divorce?

AB: Well, I don't know, to be very honest.

SH: As a young man in Poland, what did you do after school? What did kids do to keep busy?

AB: Well, first of all, school kept us busy. The homework was fairly substantial. I would spend my vacations in Southeastern Poland, near Lublin, where a relative of ours had some land out there. It was fun, because I was able to go hunting and a little bit horseback riding, which I enjoyed, and so on.

SH: How involved were you in the Church?

AB: Not very involved. Of course, we had religion as a subject at school and they were preparing us for our First Communion in the first year of high school.

DK: Warsaw was a very metropolitan area and, also, Poland, at that time, was a very diverse country. Growing up, did you interact with any non-Polish people in the community?

AB: Yes, we had a friend who was a commercial attaché at the Italian Embassy. We would meet with him or, sometimes, travel around Warsaw and the suburbs with him. He was a very nice person and he also, subsequently, married a good friend of my mother's.

DK: Did you interact with any Lithuanians or Ukrainians?

AB: No.

KS: In the 1930s, as so much was happening in foreign affairs (in which your father played a key role), were you kept up-to-date as to what was happening or was it too early on for you?

AB: Well, I was a kid. I mean, I was thirteen when the war broke out.

SH: When you would sit down at the dinner table, was politics discussed?

AB: Well, politics was popular in those days, both the internal Polish politics and the foreign politics, if you will. So, yes, I was up-to-date on what was going on. Particularly my uncles, I had several uncles and they had very different views in politics. So, sometimes, the discussion got rather heated. [laughter]

SH: What were the differences?

AB: Well, one of my uncles was very liberal and the others were conservative. So, the discussion would get heated sometimes.

SH: Did women participate in these conversations?

AB: Oh, yes, very much so.

SH: Were children allowed?

AB: Children were allowed to listen.

SH: Listen, okay. [laughter]

DK: In regards to your family, do you feel that you were treated any differently because of your father's diplomatic status?

AB: No, because my parents were divorced and I was brought up by my mother. So, the limelight, I missed the limelight, if you will. [laughter]

DK: In school (again, it was only for a year), did you have the opportunity to learn other languages?

AB: Well, I had French and Latin in that first year.

DK: Were you forced to take Latin and French or were you able to choose?

AB: Well, Latin was compulsory. In Gimnazjum Baterego, you had a choice--you could either be in the class where you learned French or in the class where you learned English. Looking back, I wish I was in the English class [rather] than the French class, because, when I arrived in the United States, I couldn't speak a word of English. [laughter]

SH: Oh, my.

AB: So, that's life.

DK: What made you choose French instead of English?

AB: Well, you have to recognize, in those days, French was the international language, which it ceased to be. English has taken over now, but, in those days, very few people spoke English, almost everyone spoke French. You have to recognize that the Polish language is difficult and not widely spoken in Europe. So, Poles had to learn French in order to survive, if you will.

SH: Was music important in the family?

AB: Music to me was zero. I have a wooden ear. [laughter]

KS: You mentioned you played soccer. Were you in any type of club?

AB: Well, no, we played soccer at school, as physical education, and so on.

SH: What chores were you assigned at home? Did you have chores?

AB: No, I really did not. We had a maid who cooked and cleaned, and so on. So, from that point of view, no, I did not have chores.

KS: You were thirteen when the invasion began. Was it expected or was it a surprise?

AB: Well, the relations with the Germans were getting worse and worse, really, I would say, from the latter part of '38, 1938. So, it was not unexpected. Shall we say the date of the invasion was unexpected. People were expecting a war, but didn't know when it would happen. As it happened, it happened on the 1st of September. I was still on vacation at my family's, the relatives in near Lublin. So, we never got back to Warsaw anymore.

KS: When they invaded, did you leave Lublin?

AB: Well, you see, the first week, we were listening to the radio. We were bombed a few times. There was a sugar factory nearby and the Germans thought it was some kind of an industry.

They came in and they bombed it. After the first week, it became fairly obvious that the Germans were moving very fast into Poland. My mother decided that we'd better leave, because of my father, and so on. If the Germans caught us, they could get very nasty with us.

We did not have a car. However, one day, some friends drove by and stopped. They were going further to the south of Poland and they gave us a ride to the southern city of Lwów [now Lviv in Ukraine]. It took us over a day to get there. Of course, we had to jump out of the car a few times when the Germans planes were coming overhead.

When we got to Lwów, things got pretty tough. First of all, Lwów was being bombed from morning to night, I mean, around the clock. The bombs were coming pretty close to the place where we were staying. We had no car, too, because these people went on their way. My mother was getting fairly desperate about getting out of Lwów. The trains were not running anymore. She went to the biggest principal hotel in Lwów to find out if there were any friends [that] happened to be there.

Well, she didn't find any friends, but, all of a sudden, a man walked up to her and introduced himself. He said, "Well, you don't know me, but, when I was a boy, your father," that is my grandfather, who was a doctor, saved his life. So, he said, "Look, I have almost a full car of people, but I'll give you a ride to the Romanian border." That's how we departed Poland. Otherwise, we would have got caught by the Russians and probably ended up in Siberia.

DK: How long were you in Lwów?

AB: We were in Lwów about three or four days, I think.

KS: By the time you were there, had the Russians already attacked?

AB: No, not yet. Actually, I think, if I'm not correct, the Russians attacked on the 16th of September ...

KS: 17th?

AB: Or 17th, maybe. We got to the Romanian border on the 14th, I believe. So, we stayed still in the town of Zaleszczyki [now Zalishchyky in Ukraine], which was the border, a Polish town. Then, we decided, "Well, we'd better cross the border." So, we just walked across the bridge to Romania and we took a bus from there.

[Editor's Note: In the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, also known as the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, of August 1939, the Nazi and Soviet governments agreed to invade and divide Poland. The Soviets launched their attack on September 17th. By October 6th, the Red Army reached its objectives along the Bug River and eliminated major resistance by Polish forces.]

KS: There were no problems crossing.

AB: No. You see, there was, I guess, some kind of an arrangement between Poland and Romania, that you could just show your passport and cross.

SH: When you and your mother went on vacation, was it just the two of you?

AB: Yes, just the two of us.

SH: Your grandparents on both sides were still in Warsaw.

AB: Yes. Well, no, my grandmother on my mother's side was with us on vacation.

SH: Both grandfathers were still there.

AB: Well, both grandfathers were not alive anymore.

SH: I wondered how hard that must have been to have family still trapped there.

AB: Yes. So, we crossed the Romanian border. We went to the first near city, which was Czerniowce [then Cernăuți, Romania, now Chernivtsi, Ukraine], and then, we took a train to Bucharest. My mother made a smart move. She realized that Romania may not be a very safe place to be. So, we had some friends who were living in Italy and we took a train to Italy.

I want to add a few interesting things.

SH: Oh, please do.

AB: You would ask how we managed, financially, to do all this. Well, it so happens that my mother--well, we lived in a rental apartment in Warsaw, but my mother had a small house on the outskirts in which we never lived, but we always rented.

Just before the war, someone came and offered her really good money for that house and she sold it. Then, she was wondering what to do with the money that she got, whether she would want to buy something in Warsaw or so on, but a good friend of ours said, "Look, things don't look so good in Europe anymore. Don't buy any more houses in Warsaw. Go and see if you can buy some gold."

My mother went out and she bought some gold dollars, the twenty-five-dollar gold piece. I think we had something like 130 dollars in gold. That's how we survived.

SH: Where did she hide it?

AB: On herself. She just put it around her waist, so that when we crossed the border, the customs people wouldn't get it. So, this enabled us to buy a ticket to Rome, and so on. In Rome, we stayed for the Winter of 1939 and part of the Spring of 1940.

Things were getting a little dicey. The Italians were getting close to the Germans. My mother decided, "Well, we better leave." She tried to get a visa to go to England, but it was extremely difficult. The English were not giving visas and it was almost impossible. Even the Polish ambassador in Rome tried to help us with it and he couldn't get a visa for us.

Let me tell you an interesting story here. One day, when we were in Rome, a little Jewish man showed up. He said his name was Adolph Cohn and Mr. Adolph Cohn said, "Mrs. Beck, you want an English visa? I'll get you an English visa." My mother looked at him--she was even afraid to give him a passport--but, finally, decided we have nothing to lose.

Two days later, Adolph Cohn came with an English visa. [laughter] We didn't know who he was. We decided to go to Paris first, and then, to London. He said, "Well, look, I'm also going to Paris. Let's go together." So, we went. We took a train. From Rome, we went to Switzerland, and then, to the Swiss-French border.

At the Swiss-French border, things were really tough. I mean, the French authorities were out there really looking at every piece of paper, checking all the baggage, and so on. So, Adolph Cohn said, "Look, Andrew, we have to wait here to go through passport control, but you can go there and just sit down at the other end of the passport control [area]. Wait for us, but you just take this little booklet that I have here."

I took that booklet, I put it in my pocket. I went--nobody stopped a kid--and I waited for them. They went through passport control, but I was kind of wondering, "What did he give me?" I opened up the booklet. It was a narrow thing, almost like a checkbook. I looked at it and, instead of pages, there were thousand-dollar bills in there, maybe that thick.

SH: Like an inch thick?

AB: Well, I mean, less than an inch, but there was a lot of money there, I can tell you that. [laughter] Of course, I gave the booklet back, and so on.

SH: You were sitting there, knowing that you have all this money on you, waiting for your mother and an almost stranger to come through.

AB: Yes, well, he came (they came through) and I gave him the booklet back, and so on. He was interesting. I'll tell you his story. He was an interesting man. Well, we went on to Paris and we stayed in Paris for a few days. Then, of course, the Germans started attacking France from the north and they cut us off from England. We could not go to England anymore. So, we started going to [Southern] France.

We went to Southern France, the City of Bordeaux. We went there to wait until the French would win the war. It was a reasonable assumption; it didn't turn out to be true. [laughter] So, after a couple of weeks of that, things are getting pretty tough. The Germans were getting close.

All of a sudden, here comes a big Buick limousine with Mr. Cohn sitting in there, Adolph Cohn, in the uniform of a Polish lieutenant. How he got the uniform, whether he was a Polish

lieutenant, God only knows, [laughter] but he was there, he had a car. He said, "Look, the Germans are close by. You'd better get going." So, we went to the South of France.

We tried to get visas to go to Spain and Portugal. When we got to the Spanish Consulate there, I think there were, like, a zillion people trying to get visas, looks almost hopeless, but Adolph Cohn walked in, passed everybody, opened the door and disappeared in a while. After a while, he stuck his head out, he said, "You, come over." [laughter] We walked in the office of the Spanish Consul.

There was the picture--Spanish Consul was sitting at his desk, sort of holding his heart like he had a heart attack. Adolph Cohn was sitting out there with the stamps and stamping passports. [laughter] Well, anyhow, we got the visa. We crossed into Spain.

Then, Adolph said, "Well, I'm going to Madrid and you people go to Portugal," goodbye, and so on. We crossed the Portuguese border, but we did not have a Portuguese visa. So, everybody off the train. They held us there for a while. After a while, they got tired, they said, "Go ahead, go to Lisbon."

Adolph Cohn showed up in Lisbon. Well, we know we were stuck there. We're trying to get out of Lisbon, because everybody was saying, "The Germans will invade." We tried to get to the United States, but this was a quota system at the time and the quota was already oversold. You couldn't get an immigration visa to the United States.

So, Adolph Cohn came and he said, "Well, I've got a solution for you." He says, "I happen to be the Consul of Haiti in Warsaw and I have all the passports and visas. I'll give you a visa to Haiti, on the basis of which, maybe, you can get a transit visa to the United States. If you can get a transit visa to the United States, well, you can probably get a lawyer and he can help you to stay." He really had a little suitcase and he had all the stamps of the Haitian Government. Whether this was for real or not, I don't care. He said, "One thing," he says, "don't go to Haiti with that visa," he said. [laughter]

Well, based on Adolph's visa, we got a one-week transit visa to the United States and we got to New York. Of course, we got some help from the Polish Consulate and they extended our visa. They extended our visa several times.

SH: This is in the United States.

AB: In the United States. They were always telling us, "Well, your visa ends in thirty days. You'd better leave and tell us which boat you are taking." This went on for quite a while, but, after about a year of it, I guess the State Department got tired of it. They said, "How would you like to get some kind of a semi-permanent status?" which we got.

Of course, by that time, the war broke out--the United States entered the war--things got easier. Still, I think it was about two more years before they offered us an immigration visa. We had to legally leave the United States. We went for one day to Montreal and we came back as legal immigrants. [laughter]

KS: Did you ever see this mystery man again?

AB: Yes, the mystery man disappeared. I really didn't know what happened until many years later. In the Polish paper (which is published in New York), there was a story that the British Government was trying to set up some kind of intelligence system in South America. They did not want to, for some reason, send their people. They asked the Polish Government to send their agents to do it. The man in charge of that was Adolph Cohn.

SH: Do you think your father had something to do with Adolph Cohn showing up?

AB: No. Well, I think that Adolph Cohn was an agent of the British Intelligence Service. It could be that the British, that way, wanted to unofficially help us. I don't know that for sure, but I'm now convinced that Adolph worked for them, because nobody could get an English visa in Rome and he got it, overnight.

SH: And the fact that he keeps showing up.

AB: Yes.

SH: Having all the stamps for Haiti, "But, don't go there."

AB: By the way, many years later, I was visiting some friends here in the United States. They told me, "Say, we still have the old Warsaw pre-war telephone book." First thing I did, I grabbed the telephone book and I tried to find, "Was there a Consulate of Haiti?" There was no Consulate of Haiti. "Was there an Adolph Cohn?" There was no Adolph Cohn in the book.

SH: I want to go back. You and your mother were traveling with just a suitcase.

AB: Just two small suitcases. In Rome, my mother started working for the International Red Cross. They had a program of sending packages to prisoners of war. So, she was making some money. By the way, when we got to New York City, we exchanged the last gold dollar piece.

SH: Oh, my.

KS: Perfect timing.

SH: What ship did you take from Portugal?

AB: We took an American Export Lines ship, which was called the *Excambion*.

[Editor's Note: American Export Lines launched the *Excambion* in 1931 and put her in service on its Mediterranean runs. In 1942, the US Navy took command of the ship, renaming her the USS *John Penn* (APA-23). Japanese torpedo planes sunk the USS *John Penn* during the Guadalcanal Campaign in August 1943. After the war, American Export Lines took control of the USS *Queens* (APA-103) and rechristened her as the new *Excambion* in 1948.]

SH: How old are you at this point, fourteen?

AB: Yes.

SH: Who else was on this ship?

AB: Well, there were a number of Americans who were fleeing Europe at war. There was a bunch of international [travelers], different people of different nationalities.

DK: How long was the trip?

AB: Oh, about ten days, roughly. It was a small ship, was not a very fast one. There was some concern, because the German submarines were stopping ships, and so on, but, thank God, they didn't stop us.

SH: Were you zigzagging? Do you remember?

AB: No, but we had big American flags [that] were painted on the sides of the ship and the ship was lit up at night, because the US was neutral then, I mean.

SH: Right. Were you able to communicate with people, because you said you only spoke...

AB: Well, we spoke French to them.

KS: You mentioned arriving in New York City. How did you come to Connecticut then?

AB: Well, I didn't come to Connecticut. We lived in New York for some time. Then, my mother met my stepfather and she married him. He was a civil engineer, a Polish citizen, who worked in Pittsburgh. So, we moved to Pittsburgh.

SH: When you first came to New York, where did you live? Did you go to school right away?

AB: Well, we stayed for a few days in a hotel in downtown. Then, we met some friends who lived here. They invited us to stay with them, which helped a great deal.

I got a lucky break, one of the many lucky breaks, [laughter] but the man who was in charge of [the] YMCA in Warsaw was an American. When the war broke out, he came over here and became the head of [the] International YMCA. He started a program to provide scholarships for European kids who were stranded in America during the war.

This was primarily set up for English kids who were evacuated from the Blitz. So, I was very lucky because, in this program, I ended up in an excellent New England prep school, with a total scholarship. There were twelve English kids, two French kids and me. Of course, the English kids had no problem, because they spoke English. The French kids spoke a little English and I spoke no English. So, the first year was rather interesting.

DK: Do you remember the name of the YMCA director?

AB: His name was Mr. Paul Super. [Editor's Note: Paul Super (1880-1949) went to Poland to start the Warsaw YMCA in 1922 and remained until the German invasion in 1939. He then founded the American Committee to Aid Poles which, working with the YMCA, supported Polish refugees in Europe and the United States.]

SH: Time wise, you land in the United States in...

AB: 1940, in the Summer of '40.

SH: That fall then...

AB: I went to Loomis School in Windsor, Connecticut.

SH: While you were in school, that is when your mother met your stepfather.

AB: Yes.

SH: Was she able to find work right away?

AB: Well, of course, [when] we first came, we did not have an immigration visa. So, my mother tried to get a job and didn't take very long that the immigration people would show up and she would lose the job. It was pretty dicey for a while. Once the war broke out, no more problem--they were short of people. So, she ended up working as an inspector in a factory, which made fuses for bombs.

SH: What do you remember about the attack on Pearl Harbor, hearing that news? [Editor's Note: Japanese forces attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, thrusting the United States into the Second World War.]

AB: I was at school. I think it was afternoon of that day and we were sitting in sort of a social room. The radio was on and this thing came on as news. It was an interesting reaction, because the American kids were not very militaristic. Back then, people looked at the Army kind of down and serving in the Armed Forces was considered not much of a career, and so on. So, shall we say, the nationalistic feeling of my American colleagues was kind of low, I would say.

Now, that changed overnight. You couldn't believe the change that happened. I mean, the boys in the senior class went out to enlist in the service. Some of the younger teachers did. It was unbelievable, that it changed the young American kids after Pearl Harbor.

SH: Had your mother married by December of 1941?

AB: No, she married later. I think she married in '42, I believe.

SH: From Loomis, did you get back to see your mother often or did she get to see you?

AB: Not very often. I would get home for vacation. That's about it.

SH: How quickly did you pick up English?

AB: It took me probably at least six months of the first year before I could really easily do the homework and pick up [the language], which meant that, the first year, I did not pass English, of course. I had to take it over again, but I passed my algebra and I passed Latin.

Actually, I found out that the Polish school that I went to was probably pretty well on the level of the prep school here, because I found that I had no problem with French, I had no problem with Latin. I had no problem with math as long as I could understand what was going on.

SH: Was there anyone near who spoke Polish?

AB: Nobody spoke Polish, but there were some French teachers I could talk to.

SH: I was going to say, it must have been really lonely.

AB: It was.

SH: With everything going on in your homeland, then to be there.

AB: Yes, it was.

DK: To go back a little bit, when you were going through Romania to Italy and, ultimately, to the United States, how much contact did you have with your friends and family back in Poland?

AB: None.

KS: Your father came over to Romania and he was detained.

AB: Yes.

KS: Did you have any type of contact with him?

AB: None. Well, we got, I think, one or two letters when we were in Italy. Somehow, he managed to get a [few] to us, but that was about it. Then, of course, once we came to the United States, we had no contact with him. Actually, the first thing I heard is when he passed away in 1944 in Romania. [Editor's Note: Józef Beck died in Singureni, Romania, on June 5, 1944.]

SH: In those letters that you received in Italy, did he give you any advice?

AB: They were very short letters. He said he was happy we escaped, and so on.

DK: Did you feel the reason they were so short was because he was interned at the time? He was not able to actually write freely.

AB: Yes.

SH: It is amazing that he got them out at all. Were you aware of the Polish Underground as you were escaping? Had it already formed?

AB: Not at that time. We really became aware of the Underground when we were here in the United States in the '40s.

SH: Did you keep up with what was going on in Poland? Were you able to do that once you were here?

AB: Well, we had very limited contact during the war.

SH: Were there any letters that went back and forth?

AB: Well, my mother corresponded with her mother in Warsaw.

SH: Your grandmother did not come with you.

AB: No, no, just my mother and I, that's all.

SH: Where did your grandmother go back to?

AB: She went to Warsaw.

SH: She never left Poland.

AB: No, no.

KS: When she went back to Warsaw, had it already been taken or were they under siege then?

AB: This was after the siege.

SH: She was not in any kind of danger with the Germans or, later, the Russians.

AB: She somehow managed.

DK: To go back to the Loomis School, can you tell us about any of the teachers or students you interacted with? How were the Americans compared with the Polish people?

AB: Well, different to some extent. I came from a Europe at war; I was interested in what goes on in Europe. The kids here could care less, really, what was going on. The thing was sports. Football, soccer, basketball, that was the big thing.

KS: Did you make friends?

AB: Yes, I made some.

SH: Did you play soccer?

AB: Yes.

SH: Since soccer was then almost a new sport in this country, you must have been a star.

AB: Well, I wasn't so much of a star, because we had twelve English kids and they were all soccer players. [laughter]

DK: What position did you play?

AB: Goalie.

DK: Did you do any other extracurricular activities?

AB: I played basketball.

SH: Had you played basketball in Poland?

AB: No.

SH: You were becoming Americanized. What about the food?

AB: Oh, the food was completely different. I had a little hard time getting used to it.

KS: What was the typical diet that you had back in Poland? What did you regularly eat, as opposed to what you ate in the States as a student?

AB: Well, actually, we did not at home eat the typical Polish food. We ate pretty well what we eat here.

DK: What was the difference that you needed to adjust to the food here?

AB: Well, one thing, breakfast cereals, that's something that didn't exist. [laughter]

SH: Before the war, where would your family go on vacations?

AB: Well, we went on vacation. We went skiing in the Polish mountains in Zakopane. We went to the Polish seacoast, to a place called Jurata, which is between the town of Hel at the end of the peninsula and Jastarnia. Jurata was, shall we say, an elegant place, a fairly new one, considered a nice place to visit.

SH: Was it a resort?

AB: It was a resort, yes.

SH: Were there other vacation spots?

AB: Well, we went to the seacoast, we went skiing and we went to the country, where our family had some land down there.

SH: The school year in Poland, was it just like here, nine months?

AB: Yes, so, from September on, very similar, to June.

SH: When you came to this country, the United States was still not in the war. Did you see any evidence of people who were adamantly opposed to getting in the war?

AB: Yes.

SH: Where did you encounter that? Did you see any of the demonstrations?

AB: No, I didn't see any demonstrations, but, when you talked about it, people would say, "Well, you have your war in Europe, but we are staying out of this."

SH: What about those that were supportive of the Germans? Did you encounter any of those?

AB: I don't think so.

DK: Did you encounter any Americans (or any other people here) who were sympathetic to Poland or antagonistic in any way?

AB: Oh, people were quite sympathetic generally, yes.

DK: At Loomis then, there were actually a few students who would become famous later in their lives. I was wondering if you knew Tom Lehrer. He was a mathematician and pianist. He was at the school at the same time you were.

AB: Oh, Tom Lehrer?

KS: Yes, yes.

AB: Yes. He was, I think, like, a couple of years ahead of me.

DK: There is another person, the *New York Times* publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger. [Editor's Note: Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Sr. (1926-2012) served as publisher of *The New York Times* from 1963 to 1992.]

AB: He was in my class. I knew Arthur.

DK: Do you have any anecdotes about him?

AB: Well, he was not the smartest kid. As a matter of fact, I don't think he graduated with our class. I think, somewhere along in the junior year, he disappeared from Loomis. [laughter]

SH: Were there any favorite subjects in high school at Loomis?

KS: Did you have a lot of options to pick your courses?

AB: Well, we had some options to pick courses, but not too many, actually. Well, I ended up at Rutgers at the School of Engineering and I think that I liked the scientific courses better.

SH: Were you considering joining the military for the US? You talked about some of the upperclassmen and the younger professors enlisting.

AB: Well, I wanted to get in the service. I was sort of terrified that the war would be over before I had a chance to get in.

KS: You were anxious to join.

AB: Oh, yes, very much so.

KS: Take us through how that worked. You finished at the Loomis School.

SH: What year did you finish?

AB: Well, I finished in June of '44.

KS: What happened after?

AB: Well, as a Polish citizen, I had an option of either joining the United States Army or the Polish Army. Because of the family tradition, that my dad was an Army man, and so on, to me, there was no choice--the Polish Army was going to be it. However, I did it legally. I went to the draft board in Pittsburgh; I went through the procedure.

At the end of all the physical exams, and so on, they were ready to swear us in. I said, "Oh, hold up, I'm a Polish citizen. I have the right [to join the Polish Army]." The guy in charge of the draft board looked at me as if I had a hole in my head. [laughter]

We argued for a while and he started to pull out some books or something. He found the right paragraph, the agreement between the Polish Government and the US Government. Polish citizens had the right. So, he said, "Okay."

SH: As long as you join. [laughter]

AB: "You can join." He said, "We'll write you a ticket to Detroit. You can cross into Canada on your own. We'll give you a ticket to go there and goodbye and good luck."

DK: How did your mother feel about this?

AB: Well, like all mothers, she was concerned. I perhaps was not aware of what was going on in the world. I figured that I would go back home to Poland with the Army after the war. Well, it didn't turn out that way. The Russians got there first and I came back.

KS: You went to Canada. Where specifically?

AB: Well, the Polish Army had a recruiting station in Windsor, Ontario.

SH: Across the border.

AB: I actually crossed the bridge and took a bus to Windsor. By the time I got there, I found out that the training situation was pretty well closed off, because there were no more volunteers. So, they sent me to Ottawa, Ontario. There was a Polish Military mission there. I was there for a little while before they got me on a ship to England.

KS: Did you conduct your training there or was that over in England?

AB: No. All the training was in England.

SH: Was everything conducted in Polish within this institution?

AB: Oh, yes. They finally made an arrangement for me and two other men to go to England.

SH: Had these two men also been in Pittsburgh?

AB: No, they came from Canada. They gave us a train ticket to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then, Halifax, they put us on a freighter loaded with troops, the Canadian troops. It was a South African freighter. It was the filthiest boat. Oh, this was horrible. I think we were something more than two weeks at sea, because, from Halifax, we went down to New York. In New York, we picked up a convoy and went across.

The food, it was not edible. I mean, it was terrible. We were sleeping in hammocks. There were some hooks in the ceiling. Every evening, we would hook up our hammocks there. Everybody was sick. I never get sick on a boat, but everybody around were getting [sick], because it was a small boat, was being tossed pretty hard.

DK: Was the ship packed with people?

AB: Yes, all those troops, yes. It was a troopship.

DK: Who else was on the ship?

AB: Canadians.

KS: How did you get along with the Canadians?

AB: Oh, fine.

KS: You headed to where in England?

AB: Let's see, we landed in Southern England, somewhere. We were told to proceed to Scotland, because Poland, let's face it, Poland occupied Scotland during the war. This was home base for the Polish Army. Of course, most of the Scots were away somewhere, in the Far East or something. So, I mean, there were Polish troops everywhere you turn, almost every town.

It's not like here, where you have a huge amount of space, like Fort Sill [a US Army artillery base in Oklahoma], where they have zillions of acres. Over there, it's more compact. So, almost every town had some kind of a Polish unit stationed there.

DK: To go back, why did you have to go to Canada to enlist? Were there no Polish missions...

AB: Not here.

DK: Do you know why that was?

AB: I don't know. Well, of course, [the] Polish Army was in England in the framework of the British and Canadian forces.

DK: How did the remaining Scots view the Polish soldiers? You were coming in 1944 and the Polish Army was there...

AB: Oh, for several years, yes.

DK: I am guessing things were pretty friendly to begin with.

AB: Yes. I guess they were even more friendly at first. In my day, they were getting tired of us after a few years--not the girls, but the Scots. [laughter]

KS: You were there with a Polish unit.

AB: Yes, well, I first went to somewhere like a transit camp. Then, for a while, they gave us some kind of a training thing. From there, I was assigned to an artillery officers' school where I spent six months, near Edinburgh, Scotland.

SH: This was all run by the Polish Army.

AB: Yes, very much so. After that, I tried to get an assignment to the Polish Armored Division, which was on the Continent, but I just didn't have enough pull, I guess. I didn't get the assignment, so, I was assigned to a new division being formed out there.

KS: Were there plans to send them over?

AB: There were plans to send us over, but, I guess, when things got along, they finally said they could win the war without us. So, I never went, saw action.

SH: Had the D-Day invasion taken place, June 6, 1944, before you graduated?

AB: Just the day of graduation [from Loomis], just about.

SH: Really? Was everyone paying attention to that or just you?

AB: Oh, everyone at that time, yes.

SH: Were most of your friends in the graduating class also going in?

AB: They all went in service.

SH: This was a co-ed school, right?

AB: No.

SH: Just boys.

KS: While you were stationed in Scotland, did you hear about the Warsaw Uprising?

AB: Yes.

SH: How did you hear about it?

AB: Well, first of all, we had an Army newspaper and radio, everything, newscasts.

KS: Was it something you knew before it happened or after it happened?

AB: Well, while it was happening.

KS: What talks did you have about it with other Polish soldiers? I think the deal was that the British would drop supplies or the Russians would push in and help, but, of course, they did not. Was there an expectation that they would succeed in the Uprising? Did you feel that way?

AB: It was pretty hopeless; actually, we expected it would be over in a matter of weeks and it was several months, a couple of months, actually. The big disappointment was that we had a

paratrooper division in Scotland and we were hoping that the British would drop them in Warsaw. Of course, it was physically impossible to do it, but, to us, it was a disappointment.

DK: In regard to the uniforms Polish soldiers wore in Scotland, were they of British design?

AB: It was British.

DK: Did you have a *rogatywka*, the Polish hat?

AB: No, we wore berets.

DK: Berets, okay.

AB: Just like the British, and the color of the beret showed what service you were in, like, paratroopers wore gray berets and commandoes wore green berets and things of that sort. Armored wore black berets.

DK: What markers on your uniforms distinguished you as Polish?

AB: Well, there was a "Poland" [shoulder patch] here and the eagle on the cap.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We just took a moment to look at the memorabilia and memoirs from the war that Mr. Beck has gathered for his family.

DK: In the beginning, in 1939 and 1940, one of the reasons why Polish units were stationed there was to protect Scotland from a possible German invasion. Was that still a fear by 1944?

AB: No, not in '44. I'm not sure, but I think there was (back in the '30s) some kind of a law in England where they did not want to station foreign troops there. That's why they chose Scotland instead of England. The only elements of the Polish Armed Forces which were stationed in England were the Air Force people and the Navy.

KS: In Scotland, were there British divisions there also?

AB: Yes.

KS: What about Polish commanders, like maybe General Anders? Did they come there?

AB: Well, Anders was, of course, in Italy. The Army Headquarters, of course, were in London, but the troops were up in Scotland.

[Editor's Note: General Władysław Anders fought against the German invaders in September 1939, but was captured by the Soviets as they advanced west. After the German invasion of the USSR, the Red Army tried to coerce Anders into leading a force of Polish veterans (then POWs

in Soviet camps) under their control. Anders and his men (nicknamed Anders' Army) proved too difficult for the Soviets to manage and, in March 1942, they left the USSR via Iran to eventually join up with British forces in the Middle East. Anders then formed and commanded the Polish II Corps in the Allied Campaign in Italy.]

SH: Did you, as an officer, get to move around a lot within Scotland or to England at all?

AB: Well, I moved quite a bit. You see, the artillery officers' school was near Edinburgh. Then, I was assigned to a regiment, which was way up in Northern Scotland, north of Inverness, if you know where Inverness is, which is way out in the boonies out there. It's a beautiful country, countryside. People in the little towns, they still speak English, but they speak it with, like, a Gaelic language.

SH: Were you able to communicate with them?

AB: Oh, yes, I mean, they also speak English well.

SH: How many of the Polish troops there spoke English as well? Where were they coming from, those that were stationed, say, in your division?

AB: Well, look, the entire Polish Army-in-Exile amounted to about a quarter million, 250 thousand, take a few up and down, of which three divisions were in Italy with General Anders. That was what they called the II Corps. The I Corps was located in England, which was composed of an armored division, which went on to the Continent afterwards to fight all the way through the war.

They were forming the Fourth Infantry Division, which I was in, which was about twenty thousand people. The paratroopers division was there. There were an awful lot of special units, and so on. So, Scotland was saturated with Poles. As a matter of fact, we had some Scottish girls that spoke Polish without hardly a trace of accent.

SH: You must have been an excellent teacher. [laughter]

AB: Well, I was one of the very few who spoke fluent English.

SH: You had an in. How did these Polish troops get to England? What stories did you hear?

AB: Well, all sorts. Look, the first group, of course, was evacuated from France in 1940 when France fell. In 1940, Poland had two divisions already formed and fighting with the French up on the French-German border. The First Division was involved in very heavy fighting and was pretty well torn apart. The Second Division retreated to the south and crossed the Swiss border and was interned in Switzerland. Whatever was left managed to get (in Southern France) on boats to go to England.

So, that was the beginning of it; then, came a big influx when the Russians let out prisoners of war, when Russia entered the war. They came out of Southern Russia into Iran, and then, into

Palestine, and then, into the Near East. That was General Anders' Corps. That was pretty close to a hundred thousand right there.

SH: How many of them were fellows like you from the United States?

AB: Some came from all over the world, from South America, from China, from all over the world. Of course, towards the end of the war, we got a tremendous amount of troops from the Poles that were forced into the German Army and taken prisoner. They immediately came and volunteered to serve in the Polish Army.

SH: Interesting. Did anybody document any of their stories?

AB: Oh, I suppose so.

DK: With the Soviets entering the war, how did Polish soldiers view that, that the Soviets, who were the aggressors, are now our allies?

AB: Well, we had the II Corps, the people who were prisoners in Russia in the first couple years of the war. They knew what Russia was. Certainly, we were always worried about what would happen.

KS: Was there an ongoing fear that the Russians would be the ones that would enter Poland instead of the Polish troops?

AB: Yes.

KS: Did you believe that, after the war ended, Poland would become independent or would be swallowed by Russia?

AB: Well, it was swallowed by Russia.

KS: At the time.

AB: When the war was over, some of the Polish troops went back to Poland, particularly people who had wives and children and families there, but most actually stayed abroad. They either settled in England or came to the United States, or a lot went to Argentina. They spread all over the world.

KS: You mentioned that you originally wanted to come back to Poland with the Army.

AB: Yes.

KS: Once that was not the case, what did you do?

AB: What happened was, of course, then, the war was over. I was still stationed over in Scotland and I applied for discharge. The discharge came through with a bunch of Polish

Americans who were serving in the Polish Army. I think, in that group, that was probably over, well over, a hundred of us and that was only one of several groups.

We were put on a ship and shipped back to Canada. Then, from Canada, we came by train to the United States. Actually, we arrived in Boston on the day when there was a railroad strike in the United States. All the railroads stopped. There we were, in the Boston railroad station, almost a hundred of us.

SH: Do you remember the date?

AB: This was in June, either late May--I think late May of '46. We were wondering what to do. All of a sudden, some Polish Americans from Boston started arriving. They said, "Well, we'll help you people. You are Polish soldiers, who are our boys." So, they took us to a Polish National Home somewhere in suburban Boston.

There was a dance going on there. So, we were dancing, and then, they stopped the music. They said, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, we have these Polish soldiers and they have nowhere to go. We suggest that each lady who is dancing with a soldier takes him home." [laughter]

DK: To go back, what were your thoughts on the government-in-exile? Did you think that they were doing an effective job as leaders? Did you feel that they could be doing something more?

AB: Well, we felt, maybe, they somehow could have played their game better. How, of course, we didn't know.

DK: What were your thoughts on the American and English leadership, FDR and Churchill?

AB: Well, of course, we were very disappointed. We were very disappointed in FDR and in Churchill. That's why I never voted for the Democratic Party in my life.

DK: In what ways were you disappointed? Of course, there were the deals at Tehran [November-December 1943] and Yalta [February 1945]. How did you find out about that? Was that after the war?

AB: No, it was leaking through. We felt that both the British and American Governments should have taken a stronger stance with the Russians and tried to make a better deal for us.

KS: Nothing happened.

DK: Did you feel it was just to appease the Russians, because they did do a lot on that front?

AB: Yes.

KS: In terms of the Russians and the West, did you fear that maybe, when the armies met, there would be some type of extended fighting between the two? Did you feel that they were strong allies and it would end wherever they met at the borders?

AB: Well, it looked like they would. For a while, we were all assuming that there would be another war with the Russians, okay, with the Allies against the Russians. Of course, that didn't happen.

SH: After the war ended in Europe, was there any time that the Polish Army would be asked to join the Allies in fighting the Japanese in the Pacific?

AB: There were some rumors to the effect that they would, but they never did send us out there.

SH: Basically, they just disbanded the Polish Army.

AB: Well, what happened was, the British created--what was it called?--the Polish Resettlement Corps, which gave an opportunity to go to school, to learn a trade, for those that stayed. The British did a good job of it, I would say. Actually, anyone who really wanted to go to school could go to school in England.

SH: Was the GI Bill afforded to you as well when you came back here?

AB: No, the American GI Bill was not available to us. Parts of it became available years later, like, I have the right, for example, to buy medications through the VA hospital, and so on.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KS: You basically had no contact with your father once you moved to the US. How did you find out about his eventual death?

AB: Through *The New York Times*, the article in *The New York Times*.

SH: Really? You had shown us before a *Time* Magazine cover he was on. When did that come out? Did you see a copy?

AB: I had a copy of that *Time* Magazine, yes.

SH: You saw it when it came out.

AB: No, I saw it many years later.

KS: You did not know about it when it was first published.

AB: No, no.

SH: When you saw the article in *The New York Times*, were you still at school?

AB: It just happened to be on the day of graduation.

SH: Oh, my word. Your mother was there, I assume.

AB: No, she was in Pittsburgh. She was not there.

SH: She did not come to your graduation.

AB: She could not.

SH: Did you talk to her about it?

AB: Well, I went to Pittsburgh for a little while and, yes, we talked about it.

SH: Were you confident that that is what happened?

AB: Yes.

KS: While you were stationed in Scotland, did you have contact with your mother?

AB: Yes.

SH: Were there letters?

AB: Oh, yes, we used to write.

SH: Did she send care packages?

AB: No, actually, we were well-fed. There was no problem. [laughter]

SH: You did not say...

AB: But, I did have an interesting incident. For some reason, I don't know why, but I didn't write to my mother for a long time. She got worried [about] what happened to me. Well, my mother had a good friend who was a general in the Polish Army, happened to be the divisional commander of my division.

So, one day, at the morning report, there was a note saying that Cadet Officer Beck was supposed to report to the commanding general. [laughter] I didn't know why, what happened. My friends were trying to console me and said, "Look, I mean, if it was a criminal case, they would send the MPs [military police] after you." [laughter]

So, I put my uniform [on], I shined my shoes and belt, and so on, and I went to report to the General. The General was almost laughing through his teeth--he says, "Well, damn it, why don't you write to your mother? She wrote me a letter. She couldn't locate you. She was trying to locate you through the bureau of lost soldiers and couldn't find you, so, she finally wrote me." He chewed me out. [laughter]

KS: You made sure to write your letters after that. [laughter]

AB: Yes.

DK: Did you tell your friends, those soldiers, when you came back about that story?

AB: Well, my commanding officer, I think, was very curious, but he didn't ask me and I didn't volunteer. [laughter]

SH: Did you have any contact with the Red Cross at any point? The stories that we collect primarily are with US servicemen, who had the USO [United Services Organization]--was there something similar for the Polish forces?

AB: Well, there was a Polish Scottish Society, set up way back in 1940, which welcomed Polish soldiers. They would serve tea and crumpets and that kind of stuff. The Red Cross didn't seem to have any setup like that, but there were clubs for servicemen in the major cities.

DK: How much did you know about what was happening with the Polish Underground during that time? Did you get any word about their activities?

AB: Relatively little. It really wasn't until the war was over and some of the Underground people who were taken prisoner of war showed up in Scotland. That's when we would get some feedback.

DK: What would they say? Do you remember any of that?

AB: Well, some of it had to do with the Warsaw Insurrection and some of the activities before that. It was still fairly scant. I mean, it would come out years later in time.

KS: The war ended in May 1945. However, you were stationed there into the Summer of 1946.

AB: Yes.

KS: Was there any reason for that?

AB: Well, you just don't take off your uniform and walk out the door.

SH: When you signed up, did you sign up for the duration?

AB: The duration.

SH: I know that American soldiers received directions or instructions on how they should interact with the British, that they should not drink all the beer in the pub or eat all the steaks.

AB: Well, of course, we weren't that rich, so, we couldn't drink all the beer in the pub. Of course, we were there already for several years, so, we were, I would say, rather well integrated in the Scottish society there.

SH: You were housed in barracks.

AB: In Quonset huts, you know these half [cylinder buildings]. When I graduated from officers' school and I was assigned to this artillery regiment, the headquarters were actually in an estate, in a country estate building that the Army took over during the war, but the troops were in Quonset huts.

SH: Walk us through a typical day--what would you do? What time was reveille?

AB: Well, the reveille was at six am, I think, and then, breakfast. Then, we would take care of the equipment, and so on. This was after the war. Of course, at the artillery school, I mean, this was a really very well-run program. Artillery takes a lot of mathematics and surveying, and so on. So, six months was very much of a crammed course in artillery.

We were stationed, again, in an estate, in a huge [estate]. I think the owner was an English Army colonel who was, I think, taken prisoner at Dunkirk in the early war. I guess the family turned the estate over to the British Army and, eventually, we were stationed there.

SH: Who was doing the cooking?

AB: Oh, there was, shall we say, like, a service platoon, which was taking care of [the soldiers], the cooks, the tailors.

SH: They were all part of the Polish Army.

AB: Yes.

SH: How were you paid?

AB: We were paid according to the Polish Army system, every ten days, and a private was getting three shillings a day, which was not a heck of a lot. [laughter]

SH: Even then. What would an officer get paid?

AB: I think the lieutenants were getting, like, twenty pounds a month.

SH: Were you responsible for your own uniform?

AB: The officers were. The non-commissioned and the soldiers were not, were just issued the uniforms, the typical British battle dress.

SH: Were there any times that you were bombed or suffered raids?

AB: No. By that time, the Germans were not raiding anymore.

SH: Were there any accidents?

AB: Yes, there were accidents. There were people killed.

SH: In the training exercises?

AB: Yes.

KS: Was that rare or did that happen often?

AB: Well, it was rare, but it did happen. There was a case where the infantry officers' school was practicing an attack. The artillery officers' school was supposed to lay down fire ahead of them and they fired short.

SH: That happens.

AB: That happens, unfortunately. There were also a number of car accidents, motorcycles-- motorcycles, that was the place to get killed.

SH: Really?

AB: Well, the roads were narrow, slippery in wintertime. The dispatch riders were kind of wild. A lot of those guys got killed on motorcycles. While the United States Army had a huge fleet of jeeps, we had huge fleets of motorcycles.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: We were talking about how the motorcycle was the vehicle that got Polish troops around, but you said there would be Americans coming...

AB: Yes. The Americans sometimes would forget that this was left-hand traffic and would come on the right-hand side. [laughter]

SH: How close were you to American bases?

AB: Quite a ways. American bases were primarily in England and we're in Scotland.

SH: However, they did come up.

AB: Yes, we would see them, but not that much. Like, [if] you would go to Edinburgh on a weekend, you would see all sorts of [Allied troops], but, still, it was more of Canadian and Polish troops out there.

SH: Was Edinburgh the place to go if you had a weekend pass?

AB: Yes. Well, it was either Edinburgh or Glasgow and Edinburgh is much nicer. [laughter]

KS: What sort of things did you do in Edinburgh? Were there dances?

AB: Oh, yes, there were dances and, of course, we would drink, and so on.

DK: Were there any educational things? Edinburgh is a very old city.

AB: Not very much, not in those days. It was more chasing after girls. [laughter]

SH: That is an international sport.

DK: Were there any rivalries between different divisions? For example, I know in the US Military, the Army guys would say, "Oh, those Air Force guys, those pilots think they're so much better than us."

AB: Oh, sure, there was quite a bit of it.

SH: Paratroopers ruled.

AB: Yes, the paratroopers, and, again, the RAF boys, they were extremely popular, the Polish pilots. They were good, I mean. They shot down ten percent of all the German planes that the Royal Air Force shot down.

DK: The 303rd Squadron [the 303rd "Tadeusz Kościuszko Warsaw" Fighter Squadron] was very popular with the troops, also.

AB: Yes, well, but this just happened to be one. I think, at the height, there were, like, thirteen squadrons of Polish Air Force, bomber and fighter and ferry command, and so on.

SH: They were involved in the ferry command as well.

AB: Yes.

DK: Was there any talk of doing occupation duty in another country?

AB: No. We stayed there. The II Corps was still in Italy then and the First Armored Division was in Holland, or in Germany, rather. So, they didn't come back until late '46.

SH: Did you talk to any of them about their experiences?

AB: Oh, sure.

SH: Were you shocked at what you heard?

AB: Well, we talked a lot to the people from the armored division, because, actually, some of them, they were assigned to the artillery school where I went. So, I had many friends who came back from action.

Of course, the Polish Armored Division went in about a month after D-Day and they were still very much involved in fighting in Normandy, particularly in the Battle of Chambois. That was when the Germans were encircled and cut off from returning [to their lines]. They were trying to fight their way back. The Polish Armored Division was right there stopping them. It was pretty messy and pretty bloody out there.

[Editor's Note: The Battle of the Falaise Pocket (or Gap) took place between August 12 and August 21, 1944. The Polish First Armored Division captured Chambois on August 20th and helped seal over fifty thousand German soldiers in the Pocket.]

SH: Can you talk a bit about your mother's activities? When we talk to GIs about their mother's activities on the home front, they report how they were wrapping bandages or knitting caps.

AB: Well, my mother worked in a defense plant, first of all, and she was making these bomb parts, and so on.

SH: In Pittsburgh.

AB: No. Then, when she married, she moved to Pittsburgh.

SH: Okay.

AB: Really, I was at Loomis, she was there, so, I didn't see very much of her. Actually, before the war started here, she worked in a number of plants. Among them was a plant where she made porcelain figurines. We had a Polish friend--actually, he was in New Jersey--his name was Cybis, C-Y-B-I-S [Boleslaw Cybis (1895-1957)]. Maybe you've seen in gift shops, Cybis China. They were in Trenton.

Cybis was sort of a wild character of an artist, but a very capable one. He came over to the United States as a decorator of the Polish Pavilion at the World's Fair in '39, and then, stayed here and went through a number of businesses. Some failed, some didn't.

He finally hit it off in this porcelain business, because, somehow, in Poland, before, he learned how to make those porcelain figurines extremely thin. They would not crack in the heating process. He became very much in demand because of his knowledge, but he was an absolutely wild character. [laughter]

DK: Wild in which ways? Was he just very eccentric?

AB: He was eccentric, he was a drunk, he was a woman chaser, [laughter] made all sorts of things, but made an awful lot of money.

SH: In the end. [laughter]

AB: He bought a beautiful property in Princeton, New Jersey, built a house, but not through a contractor. He just hired some guys to do it. He was supervising them. He built a house, but he forgot to build a kitchen with it. So, his wife had to cook outside in an outside fireplace for the first year. [laughter] I mean, he was a real character. Besides making things for the market, which sold well, he also made all sorts of things for friends. I'll show you a typical example which I have.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AB: He was also one of the leading collectors of old English China. I have some examples from his collection.

SH: You will have to tell us more about how this connection came to your family.

AB: We happened to meet him in New York. [laughter]

SH: For the record, Mr. Beck has a collection of beautiful blue and white platters and plates displayed on the wall.

DK: Moving on to the postwar period, how was the transition process coming back to the United States? Where did you settle down?

AB: Well, I came back. By that time, my stepfather got a job working in Trenton with a company called Roebling. I don't know if that name means anything, builder of suspension bridges? He was a senior engineer at Roebling. So, we lived in Trenton for a while. Then, my parents bought a place in Princeton and we moved there, eventually.

SH: That was where you came back to.

AB: I came back to Trenton. That was Summer of '46. In the Fall of '46, I got a job as a lab assistant at Roebling. At the same time, I was going evenings to a Rutgers extension in Trenton, where they had, at the time, an extension there. I don't know if they still do or not, but they had it. That's the way, the first year, I was going to night school at Rutgers and worked in Trenton. Then, of course, if I wanted to go to engineering, there were not enough courses available at night school. So, I had to start in New Brunswick.

SH: What courses did you take at that extension in Trenton?

AB: Well, mostly the non-engineering. So, we were required one year of English; I took one year of English there. I took economics and something else.

SH: Were your professors also working other jobs and teaching at night?

AB: I think so, most of them.

SH: Were there a lot of GIs like yourself in these courses?

AB: Yes.

SH: Did you talk about what you had experienced with them?

AB: Oh, sure. Then, the following three years, I commuted by train to New Brunswick. I was a day student at Rutgers, which means I probably missed an awful lot of college life.

SH: Did you have any kind of scholarship?

AB: No.

SH: Because we talked about the GI Bill.

AB: No. Things were a little tight, because, well, I made money that year that I worked. I saved some money there. So, I was able to [make ends meet] and my mother helped me.

SH: Was she working at that time?

AB: No.

SH: Did your stepfather have a family as well?

AB: No. My stepfather actually came over to the United States, I think, in 1937, working for a Polish trading company. Then, when the war broke out, the trading company folded up and he started working as an engineer in Pittsburgh and, later, at Roebling.

SH: What was his name?

AB: Mr. Janiszewski.

SH: Did he have family back in Poland?

AB: Yes, he did.

SH: Did they survive the war as well?

AB: Yes, they did.

SH: Was it a tough adjustment, coming back to civilian life?

AB: It was a tough [time]. Look, I'd been away--I was four years at Loomis, two years in the Army. All of a sudden, I end up back home. It was not the easiest adjustment.

SH: It must have been very difficult for your mother, because she had to realize that you were no longer a teenager.

AB: That's right, yes. So, it was not easy.

KS: When you came to Rutgers, how did you feel about the fact that it blew up in population?

AB: Rutgers was a mess, let's face it. [laughter] I mean, it was overcrowded. We only had that one campus in New Brunswick, that's all. So, you had students everywhere you would turn. The classes were crowded. Like I told you, the library, you couldn't even get a place to sit down unless you came early during the day.

So, the relationship between students and the administration was not the best. The administration was very busy. I can understand; they had many problems. Again, on the other hand, we felt that maybe they did not treat us all that well. So, the relationship was not the best

KS: What about the other students that did not go to war?

AB: There were very few of them around. I mean, when I look at my engineering class, maybe there were three or four who didn't go to war. The rest were veterans.

SH: This was 1947 when you were on campus.

AB: '47-'48, I graduated in '50.

SH: All of the Engineering School was right there in Milledoler [Hall].

AB: Yes, that's right.

DK: You mean Murray, right? [Editor's Note: Murray Hall, on Rutgers-New Brunswick's College Avenue Campus, originally housed the School (later College) of Engineering before expanded facilities were built across the Raritan River on what became the Busch Campus.]

[TAPE PAUSED]

AB: Somewhere back there, there was also an old steam engine, which dated back, I think, from year one of Rutgers. [laughter] In the senior year in engineering, we had to go through a twenty-four-hour boiler test, making all measurements. The Dean of Engineering would go to the old foreman then, he says, "Look, do you think this will last another year?" The old guy said, "Yes, I think it will," and they would fire up the boiler. [laughter]

SH: Who was the Dean of Engineering when you were there?

AB: Oh, God, I don't remember his name anymore.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AB: ...Was Dean of Engineering, wasn't he? Yes, he called a few of us in one day to give us a little lecture that we were walking around dressed like bums. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Dr. Elmer C. Easton served as the Dean of the Rutgers College of Engineering from 1948 until his retirement in 1974.]

SH: You were still wearing your fatigues.

AB: Yes. We were still wearing fatigues and things of that sort. He didn't think that was very elegant. The other thing which we didn't care about [care for?] was the system in the School of Engineering. A lot of people sign up for engineering and they are really not meant for it. They should be weeded out. Most engineering schools managed to weed out after the first year or maybe in the middle of the second year.

Now, at Rutgers, they had a problem, that the real engineering laboratories, which came in the junior and senior years, were rather small. So, they would eliminate in the junior year, which was really unfair, because people lost two-and-a-half years of their time. I think they weeded out maybe thirty or forty percent of my class in the junior year.

SH: They waited until then to do it.

AB: It was not very fair. We felt that they should have done it earlier, but, on the other hand, they had facilities for the algebras and the calculus. They could have a lot of people there, but, then, the lab shortage limited the capacity.

SH: Did you have a lab in the basement of a building that had a converted swimming pool?

AB: I don't think so.

SH: Next to the library?

AB: In the Engineering Building, we had a lab downstairs, was a machinery lab, but I don't recall a swimming pool.

SH: Okay, I just wondered, because one of the stories that we heard reported that they converted the swimming pool to some sort of a water tank.

AB: Well, they could have, but, let's see, I wasn't aware of it. [laughter] [Editor's Note: Mr. Beck shares several photographs with the interviewers.] This is in the mechanical engineering lab at Rutgers, a group of us there. The picture below is at Roebling, where one of my jobs was to build models of bridges.

SH: Which bridge is this?

AB: Well, this is actually not a roadway bridge. It's what they call an aerial crossing for pipelines. You see, this was in the days before computers. So, the only way that you could really analyze some of the stresses, you had to build a model. Today, this is all done on computers.

SH: Are you one of the people photographed in that picture?

AB: No, no, I'm not. No, this is some of my bosses.

SH: Was there an internship that went along with the engineering program, where you would work at a place like Roebling?

AB: No, not at the time. Some engineering schools had it, but Rutgers did not offer that.

SH: Were there fellow commuter students with you going from Trenton up to Rutgers?

AB: Oh, yes, on the morning train, it was full of commuters.

SH: Did you get to be friends with anyone?

AB: There were commuters to Rutgers and to NJC [New Jersey College for Women, now the Douglass Residential Campus].

SH: Was there any interaction between Rutgers and NJC as far as you were concerned?

AB: Not as far as I was concerned, but I know a lot of my friends used to go up there.

SH: Did you ever stay at Rutgers for any of the activities, like dances?

AB: I did not. I was working, I was a commuter--I missed all that college life, unfortunately.

SH: You had to go to school on Saturday, correct?

AB: Yes, sometimes.

SH: You were commuting six days a week.

AB: Yes.

SH: What were some of the other concerns for returning veterans like yourself?

AB: Well, we were different students, because we were older, we already went through the war service. We realized that our education is going to be our meal ticket. A lot of them were married and had families already. So, we were more serious.

We didn't go for this business of hazing people or anything like this. I think when the first group of veterans came back to Rutgers, the few young students tried to whistle at them or something and haze them. They got slugged and that was the end of it. [laughter]

SH: Was there an organization, like a Polish club, or different clubs like that?

AB: Well, there were many clubs, there were many clubs. There was no Polish club there, but there were many clubs.

KS: What about Polish students?

AB: Very few. I mean, there were Polish American students, who were people with Polish names, but they did not speak the language or, really, didn't know much about Poland. I think when I was a junior, we got a few transfer students from somewhere (from England) of Polish origin.

SH: Were there any facilities, medical or otherwise, for returning veterans or students such as yourself?

AB: Well, there was the infirmary.

SH: Did you ever have to use that?

AB: Yes, I did, once. It was interesting, because I was taking final exams in some of my courses and I got a very bad cold, really bad cold. I had a fever, I was feeling terrible and I had to take the exam. I went to the infirmary. They said, "Well, we'll give you an injection." They said, "Did you ever have penicillin before?" I said, "No." They gave me a shot of penicillin and it killed the fever immediately. I mean, within hours, I was cured. This is because I never had penicillin before.

KS: How was the Commuter Club?

AB: I don't know, I didn't belong to it.

SH: Was there a place for commuters to gather and play ping-pong?

AB: Yes, across from the Engineering Building, there was--what'd they call it? There was, like, an old, private home where you could get a cup of coffee there and lounge, and so on.

SH: You did not have to just stick to the library.

AB: That's right, yes. There was, I guess, a business going on that they were serving box lunches, which were offered the day before at the local industry. The ones which were left over, they would bring and sell to us at cut prices. [laughter]

SH: Did you try them?

AB: Yes, I used to eat it all the time.

SH: Did you have a mailbox on campus?

AB: No, I actually had a mailbox in town, in New Brunswick.

SH: Did you?

AB: Yes.

SH: Did you go to school over the summer or did you work in the summer?

AB: Well, the first summer, I was trying to graduate a little faster, so, I took several courses there. I think I took chemistry and calculus in one summer.

DK: Fun, very fun. [laughter]

AB: Oh, yes. The next summers, I worked.

SH: At Roebling?

AB: At Roebling, yes.

SH: What did you plan to do after graduation? How much planning did you do?

AB: Well, there was a lot of planning, but something which was not planned was the fact that there was a major recession in 1949-1950. Trying to get a job anywhere was terrible. I think I sent in, like, three hundred applications and got zip of an answer out of it. It really wasn't until the Korean War [June 1950 to July 1953] started that things loosened up.

SH: Was there any thought that you would go into the US Military to Korea?

AB: Well, I was classified a veteran, so, I thought they might call me up, but they never did.

SH: You graduated in 1950 and the war started almost immediately.

AB: Yes, that's right. Actually, we were wearing our gowns, and so on, to get our diplomas. Then, most of the other fellows took the gowns off and they had the ROTC uniforms. Boy, they went to Korea, like, "Whoosh."

SH: What did you do that summer?

AB: Well, I was looking for a job, without much success, until, one day, we got a telephone call of a friend of my stepfather's who had a business here in Connecticut. He was flying his own plane from somewhere in the mid-west and ran out of daylight and landed in New Jersey. He

stayed overnight with us. In the morning, at breakfast, he said, "Well, young man, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm looking for a job."

He said, "Well, why don't you come with me and let's see if we could find something for you?" So, I got on that plane and we flew to Waterbury, Waterbury, Connecticut. Well, he went through the motions of making contacts at the brass companies, and so on, but he hired me, let's face it.

SH: What were you doing?

AB: I was a mechanical engineer, working in that. Well, his business was designing rolling machinery for the steel industry. This is what I was doing. Then, he sold his business to a company in Waterbury. Eventually, I became the chief engineer of that place. After being chief engineer for [a while], then, also, in the meantime, that company again got acquired by a big conglomerate called Textron.

One day, the President of Textron came for the annual review. He said, "Well, we are expanding worldwide and, now, we are beginning to look at the business in Russia and Eastern Europe." So, when I heard that, I said, "Hey, maybe that's an opportunity." So, I let it be known that I might be interested in the job. Later, I got a call to come to an interview at the Textron headquarters and I was hired as the guy to run the East European business.

SH: Did that require you to be in Europe often?

AB: All the time. I traveled very extensively, through Russia and Poland and Romania and Hungary, and so on.

KS: Was there a specific headquarters there?

AB: What do you mean headquarters--oh, of Textron?

KS: Yes, of the company in Eastern Europe.

AB: Well, our headquarters in Europe were in Belgium, actually, but I did a lot of business in Poland. Actually, I got the order for a big brass mill in Poland.

KS: How did it feel going back?

AB: It was strange. It was a different country. It was not the same country that I left. I went back the first time in 1956.

SH: Ten years after the war.

AB: Yes, and it was a different country.

SH: Did you get to connect with any of your family?

AB: Yes, I saw my family, and so on, but I was watched. I mean, I got used to being watched.

SH: How did you handle that?

AB: Well, you have to get used to it. I knew that they were going through my baggage when I was not in the hotel room. I knew that, sometimes, I was being followed. In Poland, I even got to know the guy who was supposed to be following me. [laughter]

I used to make his life easier--I would say, "Look, at ten o'clock, I'm going to the Ministry of Industry and, later, I'll be at the US Embassy. In the evening, I'll be at my aunt's. So that you don't have to run around, I'll be there." [laughter]

SH: He just took that as a matter of fact.

AB: It simplified his job. In Moscow, they were more professional. We knew we were being followed, we knew that they were checking us, but we couldn't tell. You know what I used to do? I don't know if you remember these toys, it was a little box with a spring thing that flew out, like, "La-la-la-la-la." I used to put it [a jack-in-the-box] in my suitcase. So, they opened it... [laughter]

DK: Did they ever comment on that? Did they ever write you a note, "Please stop doing that?"

AB: No, they didn't. [laughter] We were in Moscow and this was some kind of a holiday season. There were several of us from the company and we knew that there were listening devices there. So, we were saying, "Well, look, we are here, sitting and eating and drinking vodka, and you guys have to sit and listen to it." There was a pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AB: We were telling them that we were having all the fun and we're drinking vodka. All of a sudden, [the] telephone rang. All we could hear is, "Pop," a cork popping, that's all. They gave us a signal they were also drinking. [laughter]

SH: Were you ever approached by the US intelligence community to work for them?

AB: The President of Textron asked me to be the representative of Textron when the CIA would come. So, I had regular visits from the CIA people. Because the President did not want the guys from CIA to just wander loose around the office, I had to arrange the interviews, and so on, but, every time I would come back from Eastern Europe, I was debriefed.

SH: To be able to travel behind the Iron Curtain at that time was very rare for anyone.

AB: Yes, it was rare. It took some doing to learn the tricks of the business out there.

SH: The fact that you are fluent in French and Polish...

AB: Yes, a little Russian. I could understand Russian. I was not fluent in Russian, but, during the meetings, I would always know that the Russians would warn each other, "Hey, this guy understands."

SH: There were translators there.

AB: Yes. We had an Italian firm representing us in Russia and they had the interpreters, they had drivers.

SH: How free were you to wander about? Were you confined?

AB: We were free to circulate within a certain perimeter of Moscow. Trying to get out of that perimeter required special permits, which I did get several times. I went to Leningrad a couple times, I went to Southern Russia a couple times.

SH: Did you?

AB: As a matter of fact, I made a trip to the Armenian Republic.

KS: Was that work-related?

AB: Yes. Well, what it was was, the Russians send in a delegation of engineers here and we help to make arrangements for them, for their visits. They reciprocated by inviting a group of Americans to do the same thing. They took us around the country.

DK: Coming back, you said there were, of course, many different changes in different fields. What were these changes? What did you observe that was so different?

AB: What was so different?

DK: Yes.

AB: Well, at first, when I first started going to Poland, it was bleak. I mean, there were hardly any stores. It was a very uninviting place. Gradually, you could see things loosen up over the years, but, at first, it was not fun at all. Actually, I organized for the Polish industry a big show of Textron products. I had a slide presentation and the literature and, of course, we fed them a good dinner and lots of drinks.

There was a nasty guy from the secret police that, once in a while, would give me a hard time. So, when we had that show in Warsaw, he showed up, of course. Here, he said, "Gee, I came because I had to, but I have a fever, I have grippe [flu] and I feel terrible." I said, "Well, look, you are coming to an American show here and you have to drink what we drink in America, not this vodka that you drink in Poland." So, I went in and I fed him something like three or four dry martinis. That's the last time I saw him; maybe he died after that, I don't know. [laughter]

SH: Maybe it was the olives. [laughter] The family that you visited there, were they in need? Did you have to bring things to them?

AB: Well, yes, I always [brought gifts]. At the Warsaw Airport, there was a duty-free store and you could buy liquor, you could buy food. I would always buy some cans of ham and whiskey and things. Oh, I would always bring something, but they were not destitute. I mean, they were reasonably well-off.

SH: Were any of them trying to immigrate to the United States?

AB: No.

SH: Did you encounter any people that had different political views than what you had thought they would have in Poland?

AB: Well, look, I mean, there were some people who were Communists, not too many, actually. Well, you know officially and unofficially was different, sometimes. You know how it works, but there were some who were hardened Communists. I, once in a while, would get into bits of argument.

SH: You could relive the dinners with your uncles. [laughter] I imagine it would be hard to have a real conversation with being followed all the time.

AB: But, you get used to it. Believe me, you get used to the fact that you're being followed and they are checking up on you, and so on.

SH: How much support staff did you have with you? Were you traveling alone?

AB: Just myself. Well, I would travel, sometimes, where I had a friend who was the manager of one of our plants in Brussels, Belgium, and we would travel together sometimes. He was also very knowledgeable about Eastern Europe.

SH: Were you ever concerned you would be detained?

AB: First time when I went to Poland, I was concerned. I was very concerned, as a matter of fact, but, when I saw that they were not about to lock me up, I felt better. The first time, back then, you arrived at the Warsaw Airport and there were only two passport windows there. I mean, that's all there was. [laughter]

SH: Not a lot of people coming in and out.

AB: No.

SH: As the son of a famous diplomat, did that affect either your military or business career?

AB: Did not affect my military career. In my business career, when I traveled to Poland, it created an [issue]. People were curious and, I must say, mostly sympathetic. I mean, I came across a few Communist managers that were real nasty, but, by and large, I had a pretty good reception.

DK: I was told that the Communists tried to revise as much Polish history as they could and one of the ways was painting your father in a very negative way.

AB: Yes.

DK: Was that something you came across as well?

AB: I came across it, but most people didn't believe it.

KS: Same with the Russians during the war, like the Katyn Massacre. My father told me that he was taught in school that, even though they knew, unofficially, that the Russians did it, in school, they were taught that it was the Germans that did all that.

[Editor's Note: In April and May 1940, the NKVD (forerunner to the KGB) carried out a program of executing Polish military officers, police and civilians considered a threat to the occupying Soviets. The NKVD murdered twenty-two thousand victims at several sites in Poland and buried them in mass graves. After German forces uncovered some of the mass graves in the Katyn Forest, many began using the term Katyn Massacre. The Nazis revealed their findings to discredit the USSR among the Allies. Stalin denied any Soviet involvement and blamed the slaughter on the Nazis, a position held by the Soviets until 1990.]

AB: But, we had to watch ourselves. I went with another engineer, a Polish engineer that worked with us, to the steelworks in Kraków, the Nowa Huta. We were in a large meeting out there. Of course, he and I, we traveled quite a bit worldwide. When we wanted to communicate, we'd just speak Polish, quietly. So, all of a sudden, he started speaking Polish to me and I said, "Look, they understand that language here." [laughter]

SH: Did you ever visit your father's grave?

AB: I did. I went to Romania on business several times and I did. Actually, it took a little doing. I finally found a lady who worked for a Romanian trading company and she helped me to go to the military cemetery.

My father died just weeks before the Russians moved in. So, they didn't have much time in putting up a monument. There was just sort of an angular piece of stone with the name on it. Then, I managed to put a decent monument [in its place]. It took me quite a while to get it done out there. In fact, I think I have a picture of it here.

SH: Was there ever any thought of burying him in Poland?

AB: Yes, he was--what do you call it?

DK: Exhumed.

AB: Exhumed and brought to [Poland]. He's buried at the Warsaw cemetery now.

DK: That was years later, in the early 1990s.

AB: Oh, yes. You see, this is the stone which I found and this is the one which I put up there.

KS: Huge difference.

SH: He was buried in Bucharest.

AB: Yes.

SH: Is this the same type of burial in Poland?

AB: Yes, in Warsaw, very similar. Actually, that triangular piece was brought in to Warsaw, yes. It was done very nicely, with military honors, in Warsaw.

SH: What year was this done?

AB: Well, this was--what, '81, something like that? They really went out of their way. You see, here are the military escorts during the funeral in Warsaw.

SH: May of 1991.

AB: '91, yes.

DK: Was that only possible because Communism fell?

AB: Yes. Well, look, we did not want to ask the Communists a favor to bring him back. We said, "As long as the Communists are in Poland, he will be in Romania."

SH: Did you feel that it was another way to fight the war, reporting on the Communists as you did as a professional?

AB: Well, I felt that heading the American presence in Eastern Europe in business, in a way, weakened their position. I mean, it was no big deal, but at least we felt we were doing the right thing.

KS: When was it that you went back the first time, 1956?

AB: In '67.

KS: Okay, and when did you end the job?

AB: In '78.

SH: You first went to Poland, you said, in 1956.

AB: No, in '67.

SH: Oh, in 1967. I am sorry I thought it was...

AB: No.

SH: How were you able to continue this, to be able to have your father's body exhumed, then, moved? What community or group did you work with to see that this was happening?

AB: You mean the movement from Romania to Poland? This was done by the Polish Foreign Office.

SH: Did they contact you?

AB: Yes, they contacted me. They did a very good job of it.

SH: You were involved.

AB: Yes, they invited me to come to the funeral in Warsaw, but they made all the arrangements and all the military things, and so on.

SH: Were you involved in the politics of Poland as it began to free itself from Communism?

AB: No, really no.

SH: Were you friends with people here in this country that were working on it?

AB: Yes, I mean, we had some friends go over.

KS: You finished your career in Eastern Europe in 1978.

AB: Yes.

KS: Soon after, the Solidarity Movement started in Poland. Were you up-to-date on that?

AB: Oh, sure. After Textron, I started my own export-import business, which I ran until two years ago.

SH: What countries were you working with?

AB: Well, since we were knowledgeable in the steel industry, we were importing, like, rolls for rolling mills from Europe. We did a lot of business in Yugoslavia.

KS: How did this idea of starting your own company come about?

AB: Well, there was a point where both a friend of mine and I left Textron and we were deciding what to do. He said, "Well, look, why don't we start a new business?" and the two of us, just the two of us, ran a business, quite successful, a small company but profitable.

SH: Where did you meet your wife?

AB: She was in Poland during the war. Then, she and her mother escaped Poland in 1946, first to Germany, and then, they came over to the United States. We met through friends.

SH: Here in Connecticut?

AB: Yes. Actually, her father was here during the war. He was a professor at Wellesley College.

DK: In your pre-interview survey, you noted that your uncle was part of the Polish Military.

AB: Yes, he was.

DK: What exactly did he do in the Polish Military?

AB: Well, look, he was the youngest brother of my mother, okay, so, there was only something like twelve years difference in age between him [and me]. In 1939, he was in the last year of medical school. He took a summer job in 1939 as an assistant to a doctor on a Polish freighter. The war actually caught him somewhere in Africa, in Dakar. He left the ship and, first, signed up with the French Foreign Legion.

When the Polish Army in France got started, he got transferred, but still as an infantry officer rather than a doctor. He then managed to get to England after the fall of France, finished medical school in Edinburgh, was still back in the service. Then, he volunteered--they had a program of dropping by parachute officers, Polish officers, to the Underground in Poland. He signed up for that program. They sent him to Italy, from where the flights were made, and the war was over. So, he was not dropped there.

He came back to England, married an English girl in the meantime. He decided he was not going to practice under the British medical system. He went to the Colonial Office and applied for a job in the colonies and got a job as a medical doctor on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean. He was there for something like three years almost, as a medical doctor on the island. We used to go and visit him. It was lovely. [laughter]

DK: What is his name, for the record?

AB: Jan Slominski.

SH: Grenada in the winter is lovely. [laughter]

DK: What did your wife do? Did she work? Did she stay at home?

AB: Well, she went to a two-year college in the Boston area, because she lived in Wellesley, where her father was a professor. Then, she started at Tufts University in physiotherapy, which she never finished because she married me. [laughter] So, when we got married, she took a quick course, secretarial course. She worked for a while as a secretary. Then, she worked as a secretary of the Connecticut Garden Club for many years.

SH: With you traveling, she was by herself often.

AB: She was, yes. Actually, she had all the problems in bringing up the kids. I would show up only once in a while. [laughter]

SH: How many children do you have?

AB: Two daughters.

KS: When were they born?

AB: They were born here.

DK: When?

AB: Let's see, one was in '55, the other one was three years later.

[TAPE PAUSED]

AB: You are probably getting hungry by now.

KS: What did your daughters wind up doing?

AB: What are they doing? Well, the older one is an electrical engineer. She lives in Las Vegas, comes to us every once in a while. She has two daughters. The other one works for the bank here. She works in commercial real estate. She has a son.

DK: Did they learn how to speak Polish?

AB: The older one speaks reasonably well Polish. The younger one is not very good at languages, but she does, she speaks it. She understands enough to hold a conversation.

KS: When they come by, what language do you speak with them?

AB: With the older one, I usually speak Polish. The younger one, I speak English.

DK: Were they also into Polish culture as well?

AB: I wish they were, but not so much.

KS: Were they ever enrolled in a Polish language school or anything like that?

AB: No, but they did go to Poland several times. Actually, my older daughter spent a summer working in Europe. Part of it was, she visited the relatives in Poland.

DK: Did you feel it was important to keep your Polish identity? Some people, when they came from Europe, would say, "Well, now, I'm an American."

AB: No, I kept my Polish identity.

SH: How did you do that? What were some of the things that you did?

AB: Well, first of all, my wife was Polish. We spoke Polish at home.

SH: Did you?

AB: That makes a big difference. We had many Polish friends here.

DK: Did you join any Polish organizations or start a new one?

AB: Well, a couple of ones. There is an organization called the Pilsudski Institute in New York. Also, at Central Connecticut University, there is a Polish Studies Program and I'm on the board of that organization.

DK: What do you think of the contributions of the Poles in the United States? What do you think about the community here and how it has grown?

AB: It has changed dramatically, because you have to look at the Polish immigration over history. In, say, before the First World War, the people who had immigrated were the poorest farmers who could not make ends meet in Poland. So, they were not educated people. They did make, many of them, considerable progress when they came here. They first worked very hard, and then, they started businesses of their own, and so on.

Now, during the war and since the war, you had a large immigration of educated people-- professors, engineers, professional people. It's a completely different situation. Like, when I first came to New York, I think, in the New York telephone book, there were only two Polish doctors who were listed. You look today and there are several pages of them. It's a very different situation. The brunt of the immigration now are educated people, professional people.

KS: What about in Connecticut specifically? Has it grown?

AB: Yes, it has grown.

DK: Does that also mean in terms of culture? Of course the population grows, but what about the people who feel, "I am Polish, but I am living in America--my kids must learn Polish?"

AB: A lot of it is being done with the help of the Central Connecticut University, which has a very strong Polish program. They teach Polish language, Polish history. There's a whole Polish department there and that's, I would say, a nucleus of activities. They bring, several times a year, speakers who address the Polish community. They do a good job of it.

DK: What do you think about the future of the Polish American community here? Do you think it will continue to grow or is it perhaps slowing down?

AB: Well, I think right now, the immigration, especially during the recession, is very much less. Obviously, they and their children will get Americanized; to what extent, that remains to be seen.

SH: You have done so much to preserve your father's legacy. Was that something that you always wanted to do or was there a point where, as you got older, it became very evident? How did it come to be that you wanted to document his contribution and his life?

AB: Well, I felt I should get it down on paper for the children and the grandchildren and for a very small group of friends. I mean, I think I printed this [a memoir], like, in twenty copies.

SH: Are you ever called upon to speak about him?

AB: Once in a while, somebody would ask questions, and so on.

DK: Another thing about your father, recently, in some Russian media, they have been, for lack of a better word, accusing your father of actually being a German agent, which I find ridiculous. I mean, I have not met a person who thinks that it is not ridiculous, but what do you think of that, that, even now, they are still going after him?

AB: Well, the Russians will always do that.

KS: It is expected.

AB: Yes. However, look, he was interned in Romania. The Germans made damned sure that he would not get out of Romania. Many numbers of Polish Government people were able to leave Romania, by hooks or crooks, but he was so closely guarded. The Germans ran Romania during the war. They basically made damn sure that he would never come out alive.

SH: Was he interned in a prison camp?

AB: No, he could live in a house, but he was watched by agents. The other thing which they did, when he was taken ill, they made damn sure that he got no medical treatment. In effect, they killed him.

KS: The Polish Government-in-Exile wound up in London. Was there a specific reason that your father went to Romania instead?

AB: Well, they had no choice. Physically, they were retreating south and there was no way except by way of Romania.

SH: How did some come to be in London, but he remained in Romania?

AB: Well, because he was a marked man by the Germans and they made damn sure that he would not get out. Actually, as I understand, at one time, FDR wanted to bring him here to the United States and ask him to set up the basis for the United Nations. Since my father spent many years in the 1930s in Geneva at the League of Nations, he was well-versed in this business.

I have some correspondence between FDR and the American ambassador in Romania, where FDR was trying to spring him loose, but couldn't do it. I was told that because the Romanians would not let him out (my father out), when the King Carol [II] of Romania [from June 1930 to September 1940] came, escaped Romania and came to Mexico and tried to come to the United States, he couldn't get a visa.

SH: Wow.

KS: Wow.

SH: Interesting. This ends our interview with Mr. Andrew Beck.

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Reviewed by Adithya Venkateswaran 7/18/2022

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 8/11/2022

Reviewed by Barbara Beck & Margaret Beck 1/8/2025