RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCIS T. ZUPKO

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Mr. Francis Zupko on November 5, 2012, in Dunellen, New Jersey, with Nicholas Molnar and Nicholas Panos.

Francis Zupko: Middlesex, New Jersey.

NM: I am sorry, Middlesex, New Jersey.

FZ: Middlesex.

NM: For the record, could you tell us when and where you were born?

FZ: I was born in Dunellen, New Jersey, on May 23, 1922.

NM: Okay. Before we get into your childhood and your history, I want to learn a little bit about your family background. Could you tell us a little bit about your father and his background, what you remember?

FZ: Yes, my father owned a home in Dunellen and he had a butcher shop, which he ran. He was a butcher and he ran the butcher shop in Dunellen until the Depression. When it came time for the Depression, he lost the business. Then, he had to go work in the factory with a newspaper company, because the business failed, because of the Depression.

NM: Okay. Did your father ever talk about the reasons why he immigrated to the United States?

FZ: Well, no, … I never remember him saying anything to me about that, but I know they both immigrated.

NM: Okay.

FZ: From Europe.

NM: What about your mother? Can you tell us a little more about her?

FZ: Well, yes, she immigrated, too, and she lived in Raritan, New Jersey. She raised a family of seven children. … I had a twin brother, also born in the family, who was in the service, but he went to Biak, an island in the South Pacific, during the war, my twin brother. I'll explain to you later why I didn't get in the service when you ask me.

NM: Okay. You mentioned that you were born in Dunellen. Did you live in Dunellen during your childhood?

FZ: Yes, we lived in Dunellen. I lived in Dunellen until I got married in 1948. Then, my wife and I made our living home here in Middlesex, New Jersey.

NM: Okay.

FZ: Went to Piscataway in an apartment first, then, we came here.

NM: Tell us a little about what you remember about Dunellen when you were growing up.

FZ: Dunellen was known as a railroad town.

NM: Okay.

FZ: It used to be a part of Piscataway. Then, they took a piece of it away. They called it Dunellen, New Jersey, and called it "The Railroad Town." In fact, there's a lot of publicity right now about Dunellen being called "The Railroad Town." They had people who came from New York who were well-heeled people who put some nice homes in Dunellen and they used to travel by train. They took the train in Dunellen. They came from New York and they went to their homes that they had in Dunellen. They said they used to have rides from the train station up to Washington Rock, where George Washington was during the war, and people used to come to Dunellen just to get on the transportation up to Washington Rock, to see where Washington overlooked the British Army during … that war, the Revolutionary War. [Editor's Note: Washington Rock State Park is located on the first Watchung Mountain in Green Brook Township, New Jersey. In 1777, with his army encamped at nearby Middlebrook, George Washington monitored British troop movements from this mountaintop.]

NM: You mentioned that Dunellen was known as …

FZ: Railroad Town.

NM: Railroad Town. What was the makeup of the community, in terms of race, class, anything that you can remember in that regard?

FZ: Well, I would say we're middle-class. There were some wealthy people, but mostly middle-class. … One square-mile, Dunellen was. It wasn't very big.

NM: Were a lot of people employed by the railroad?

FZ: Well, yes, people worked for the railroad. There was one company that grew up in Dunellen called the Art Color Printing Company, and that was there for a number of years and they printed the publications, the magazines like you have today, … the magazines from Hollywood and movie stars and things like that. That was printed in Dunellen. You couldn't buy a magazine in Dunellen, because you got them for free. They were printed in Dunellen. That was a famous company in Dunellen.

Bertha Zupko: Coffee, the coffee company.

FZ: Well, yes, there's a coffee company [that] started in Dunellen, I forget the name of it, but they did have a coffee company and I think they still sell coffee in Dunellen, on Mountain View Terrace. That originated in Dunellen. [Editor's Note: The Walter B. Law Coffee Company was founded in Dunellen around 1900. Law Coffee opened a roasting and packing facility that

operated on Mountain View Terrace in Dunellen until the 1930s, when the operation moved to Newark.]

NM: Since your parents had immigrated, what languages were spoken in the home?

FZ: Slavish, Slovak, Czechoslovakian.

NM: You mentioned that you had brothers and sisters. Did they speak this language?

FZ: No, not really, I don't think so, no. They spoke American, the English language.

NM: Did you pick up some of this language?

FZ: Well, yes, I did. I'd say words like, "*Maso*," for meat or, if we wanted to talk about something, we knew little sentences. That's about all, but I did hold it in conversation.

NM: As a young child living in Dunellen, what were some of the things you did for recreation?

FZ: Well, we played handball on the lots, didn't have baseball fields like you have today for Little Leagues. We just had sandlots and you had your own ball and your own bat and you had wooden bases [laughter] and we played ball. We played ball.

NM: I saw that, later on, you were a Boy Scout.

FZ: I was a Boy Scout leader, yes.

NM: When were you involved in the Boy Scouts?

FZ: During the war, during the war, when I was home, because I didn't get into the service. I was a Scoutmaster for Boy Scout Troop 26 in St. John's Church in Dunellen.

NM: Were you a Boy Scout yourself?

FZ: No, I was not. I just became the leader.

NM: To get an idea of what Dunellen was like, were there stores, movie theaters and stuff like that in town? Was there a lot of entertainment in the town itself?

FZ: Yes, the little theater was built in 1922, the year of my birth, Dunellen Theater was built. …

BZ: And, now, it's owned by your …

FZ: Now, it's owned by my …

Jean Zupko: Owned by the family now.

FZ: By my family.

NM: Okay.

FZ: The Dunellen Theater is up by the bar, yes. [Editor's Note: Richard and Pam Zupko purchased the Dunellen Theater in 1989 and turned it into the Dunellen Cinema Café. It is adjacent to their tavern, Zupko's.]

JZ: Tell them how you used to watch the movies, when they had the big open windows, across the street.

FZ: Yes. [laughter] Well, I lived right across the street from Dunellen Theater, … above my father's butcher shop. … You could look out the bedroom window of the house and see into the theater, the moving pictures. [laughter]

NM: The butcher shop was on the first floor and you lived upstairs.

FZ: Upstairs.

NM: As a young child, did you help out in the shop or things of that sort?

FZ: No, I was too young. The Depression was in 1929 and I was born in 1922.

NM: Okay.

FZ: So, I couldn't be much of a help.

JZ: You did chop the heads off chickens for your mother, though, didn't you?

FZ: Pardon.

JZ: Didn't you say you used to help your mother chop the heads off chickens?

FZ: Oh, yes. That was the backyard in our house. We raised chickens--and a lot of people raised chickens in those days--and I remember my mother raised chickens in the backyard and we'd have to get fresh eggs and chop off the heads to have chicken for dinner. A lot of people did that in those days.

NM: Among your siblings, where did you fall? Were you and your brother the oldest, the youngest?

FZ: I was the youngest. The twins were the last of the seven and I was the youngest. He was born first.

Nicholas Panos: You said you chopped up chickens and got fresh eggs. Was this because the Depression was on or would this have happened regardless?

FZ: That was the way they did things in those years. A lot of people raised chickens. I remember another thing, too, [about] the Depression. I remember the Depression. My mother was a drinker--she liked her liquor--and she would send me to a house in Dunellen. So, some woman made it in her bathtub. They made liquor and she would send me on my bicycle. She'd give me an empty bottle and she would say, "You go to this woman's house now and bring this bottle and … she'll put something in it. You bring it back and don't you drop it." In other words, I think she charged a dollar or something for a bottle of homemade whiskey. That was very popular during the Depression.

NM: I know that Nick has a lot of questions regarding the Depression.

FZ: Sure.

NP: You said that you were a child with six siblings, right?

FZ: Yes.

NP: Did your parents struggle to raise seven kids during the Depression?

FZ: No, believe it or not, we didn't struggle. We had plenty of food, because we had a butcher shop. They had food in there, until the Depression came, but, no, we had no trouble.

NM: In the Depression, did your dad remain a butcher or did he have to find new work?

FZ: No, he had to find new work. He went to a company. We had an uncle who worked for Scott Printing Company. They made printing machines in Plainfield, New Jersey, and he worked there, right after he lost his job, lost the business as a butcher.

NM: What about your mother?

FZ: No, she never worked. She was a homecare person.

NM: After the Depression, did your father go back to his old job?

FZ: No, never went back to the butcher, but I had some brothers that--well, I had some brothers, I have, I said, my twin brother and I had two other brothers--and they all did a little bit of butchering. They'd work in butcher shops part-time, because their father was in the business and you learned something about butchering as a butcher.

NM: When you say that your father lost the business, did your family own the building?

FZ: Yes, we owned the building. We lost the building because of the Depression. … A lot of people used to charge that meat, the food they bought, to my father, … but it came to the point where nobody had any money. They couldn't pay the bills. He had to buy the food to sell it;

they couldn't pay for it. So, it caused part of the Depression, part of the problem. That's how we lost the business.

NM: Can you talk about how that impacted your family? Where did you go to live after that?

FZ: No, we stayed in Dunellen. We stayed in Dunellen. … Eventually, since we lost that house, we had to move two doors down. My sister knew a woman who owned the house and she sold it to her. … So, we moved to that house and that's where we lived until I left in 1948, when I got married.

NM: How old were you when your family lost the house?

FZ: … Oh, that was 1929. So, I was born in '22--you're talking about, you know, eight years old, seven years old.

NM: As a young child, was this something that affected you or did you go along with it?

FZ: Just went along with it, because I was going to school at the time, [was] but a schoolboy, yes.

NM: When your father had the butcher shop, it sounds like some of your siblings helped down in the butcher shop.

FZ: Well, I think my older brother may have, yes, my older brother.

NM: How soon after your family lost the business was your father able to get a job?

FZ: Almost immediately, because he had a brother-in-law, which was my uncle, who worked there and he arranged for him to get a job.

NM: During his time there, was it fairly steady work?

FZ: Steady work in that factory, in Plainfield, Scott Machinery, Scott Newspapers. … I think they built newspapers, didn't they, Bert? They made printing machines or something like that.

NM: Did your mother and father have family in the area?

FZ: Well, yes, they had their parents, lived in Raritan; my mother's parents lived in Raritan, New Jersey, and my father's parents lived in Perth Amboy, New Jersey.

NM: Did they have any brothers and sisters in the area?

FZ: Yes, they had. Yes, my father had, I think, three brothers and my mother had a brother and two sisters.

NM: I want to get into your elementary school and high school years.

FZ: … I went to grammar school up in St. John's School in Dunellen, a Catholic grammar school, for eight years and, after that, we went to Dunellen High School … for four years, and then, after that, I didn't go to college, but I went to work after graduation. I worked for a trucking company, Kramer Brothers Freight Lines. I was the office manager. I handled the payroll and all the reports and taking care of the drivers coming in and it was quite interesting. I did that for eighteen years, and then, after that, they went out of business and they sold their business and someone suggested … I might run for office in Middlesex. There was an opening for a tax assessor in 1971. At that time, to be a tax assessor, you had to run. You had to be voted in. Today, you're not voted in, you're appointed, but I went on the election and I won the election. So, I became a tax assessor in Middlesex Borough for twenty-one years and I retired after twenty-one years as a tax assessor.

JZ: But, you didn't stop working.

FZ: No, this is strange, too. I'm ninety years old now and I'm still working part-time. I worked for Drug Fair, … delivering prescriptions to homes, sick people, and then, Drug Fair went out of business a few years ago and Walgreens took over and I'm still working for Walgreens. I'll be going today if they have any deliveries. I feel like I'm doing something useful. I can't just sit home, watch television. I feel, by delivering prescriptions to sick people, I'm doing something useful and I'm getting to meet people and talk to people.

BZ: Frank, aren't you going to tell them about Hank and the surplice, with the candle.

FZ: Oh, yes, my friend Hank Hodulik, yes, we grew up together. Hank, who was in the service, in the Air Force, we grew up together from kindergarten and, I remember, … we went to St. John's Catholic School. We were altar boys and it meant that, when we went to church, we were altar boys and we wore a surplice. … At Mass, you would pass the plate with the priest to give out Communion and I remember Hank passing by a candle that was lit and it caught his surplice on fire and I ran over and put it out. I often tell Hank that I saved his life, you know. [laughter] We were young kids, you know. … Later on in life, I'll tell you later about it, I had a car accident going to Rutgers, but we'll get to that later. Hank was in the car with me.

NM: Before you graduated, did you work at any jobs in high school, part-time?

FZ: No, I didn't work … any jobs in high school.

BZ: Didn't you work in the hardware store?

FZ: Well, that was after graduation.

JZ: Tell them about all your jobs.

FZ: In high school, I was pretty good, I learned how to type on a typewriter and I was pretty good at it. I was pretty accurate. …

JZ: Tell them what they wrote about you in the yearbook under your picture. …

FZ: Yes, they wrote under my picture in the yearbook, Dunellen, 1940, "He types the keys with the greatest of ease," because I was quite a typist. They actually used to take me out of some classes to make what they call mimeograph stencils, because I was accurate. I enjoyed that.

NM: At this time, was there a business track and a college track? Did you have any plans for yourself after high school? What did you see yourself doing?

FZ: Well, I didn't have a college education, so, I went to work. My first job, the principal of Dunellen High School called me and said, "There's an opening in (Smalling's?) Hardware Store in town," in Dunellen, and I went there. It was my first job after graduation. I was a clerk in the hardware store. That was my first job.

NM: You were referred to this first job. It was still during the Depression.

FZ: That's right.

NM: Was it hard to find work?

FZ: It was hard to find work.

NM: Okay. Before you had the job, were you looking for work?

FZ: I was looking for work, yes, and wasn't much work at the time.

NM: What year did you graduate high school?

FZ: When I graduated? I graduated in 1940.

NM: Okay, 1940.

FZ: 1940. That's when I worked for the hardware [store], (Smalling's?) Hardware Store, 1940.

NM: You worked as a clerk and I saw on your survey that you continued in other companies as a clerk. What type of things would you do?

FZ: Well, I left the hardware store and went to Calco Chemical Company in Bound Brook. I applied for a position and they hired me. I worked. It was a dye company; they made dyestuffs. There were a lot of strong chemicals and I remember, while I was there, during the war, I was there during the war, … what they had me doing for a while was, I was filling, like, cans, like beer cans, with dyestuff. … This dyestuff was used by the Navy and the Army. If somebody got dumped into the ocean or ditched their airplanes, they would dump this dyestuff to color the water, so [that] they could be picked up. So, I felt I did something worthwhile while I was … working at the company. I was able to maybe save some lives by filling these cans with dyestuff.

NM: While you were at Calco Chemical, were you always filling these dye cans?

FZ: No, I worked, I stayed at Calco Chemical, for about three years, and what happened was, it was getting close to the war, 1940, '41, and we started to go to school, Hank, myself, five of us in the car, and we decided we might go into the Air Force. …

JZ: And where were you going to school? Tell them where you were going to school. What school?

FZ: Rutgers.

JZ: Rutgers.

FZ: I'm going to tell them that. [laughter] The five of us traveled to Rutgers. We wanted to become pilots in the Air Force. So, what happened, on October 16th, while I was working at Calco, we were traveling to work. I was driving. I was driving my sister's new 1940 Chevrolet.

BZ: 1941.

FZ: And I was going down a highway heading towards Rutgers when Hank and the guys said, "Come on, Zup, make the car go faster," and I showed them how fast it could go. I came to a slight bend in the road and I was going, like, eighty-three miles an hour and I turned the wheel. When I turned the wheel, the car turned over three times and there were five of us in the car and every one of us got thrown out. … I was the most seriously injured, because I got the steering wheel into my stomach. So, as a result, I was in the hospital [for] nine weeks, in St. Peter's, right across from Rutgers University. … I remember, while I was in St. Peter's, [the] Japanese struck Pearl Harbor. [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.] So, here I am in the hospital, with a fractured pelvis, and, when I came out finally, I went to check to get into the Army. I was drafted and, of course, we were going to go into the Air Force, but they wouldn't take me, because of my fractured pelvis. … They put me in 4-F. … That's why I went to Calco then, remember, because I couldn't [enlist]. I was working at Calco, then, we had the accident, and then, after the accident, instead of going back to Calco, I tried another job. Hank was working for Buffalo Tank Corporation in Dunellen, New Jersey. They made steel tanks and I applied there and I got a job and I worked there for about three years during the war. … Also, during the war, I was an air raid warden and I remember, when I worked, … I had a Geiger counter and I had to check for radiation. I remember, … some of these tanks that were made in Buffalo Tank, they sent to our holding company, big storage tanks, and they sent me there once with a little Geiger counter to check to see if there was any radiation. I did that for a little bit when I was there. So, that takes me to around 1948, '49. Then, I got married.

JZ: Dad, when was that thing that happened to you when you went to the beach with your camera?

FZ: … Before the war. I remember, the submarines were dropping off saboteurs on the beach, on the East Coast, and we were down the shore on the beach.

JZ: You and Hank?

FZ: And the Army saw us there. They picked us up, took us to headquarters. They thought we were [saboteurs]. … They thought we came off of a submarine. They took us to headquarters. Of course, when we got up to headquarters, the officer in charge called the chief of police in Dunellen, New Jersey, and he vouched that we were all okay, we were all members of the community and there was nothing wrong with us. We weren't saboteurs. So, they let us go. It was quite interesting. [laughter]

NM: I know that Nick has a lot of questions.

NP: When you worked for Calco …

FZ: Chemical.

NP: You had the accident and you remained there …

FZ: I was there, yes.

NP: … For a couple years.

FZ: No, I stayed there until I had the accident and, when I had the accident, in 1941, October 16th, I went to the hospital and, when I left the hospital and started coming back there, I went to work in Buffalo Tank.

NP: Okay, instead of coming back to Calco.

FZ: Yes.

BZ: When did you do the dyes then? I thought you did that during the war, the dye in the cans.

FZ: Yes, that was during the war.

BZ: Then, you must have came back after the hospital.

FZ: … I was making that dyestuff for the war, yes.

NM: Did you make it with Calco during the war?

FZ: In Calco.

NM: At Buffalo Tank, how long did you work there?

FZ: About three years.

NM: Did they contribute to the war effort?

FZ: Yes, they made steel tanks, which they used for the war. … I remember, I had to pick up some--we worked with Russia at that time, they were our allies--and I remember, I had to go to the airport, or the train station in Dunellen, and pick up some Russian people from Russia, who were coming to the factory to check out what we were doing for them. We were making tanks.

NM: Why did you stop working at Buffalo Tank? Where did you work after Buffalo Tank?

FZ: … That's when I became a tax assessor.

JZ: No, you got laid off before that. You worked for Kramer Brothers.

FZ: Yes, that's right.

BZ: Didn't you get laid off?

FZ: … I worked in the trucking company, that's right. For eighteen years, I worked in that trucking company, Kramer Freight Lines.

NM: Did you get laid off because the war ended and there was not a great need for tanks anymore?

FZ: No, I was let go at Buffalo Tank. There was a steel strike. …

NM: Could you describe what your work entailed at Kramer Brothers?

FZ: Yes, I was the office manager. I actually went to two places to look for a job. One was Kramer Brothers Freight Line, which was in Edison, and, also, right across the street from there was the motor company. They made cars in Edison and I went there for a job and they were going to hire me in Ford Motor Company, but I decided to take the other job and I stayed with the trucking company for eighteen years.

NM: I saw on your survey that you were in the Civil Defense.

FZ: Yes, I was the air raid warden.

NM: What year was this?

FZ: Well, my job was to warn people to get safe if there would be an air raid, you know, put the shades down, and so forth, that type of thing.

JZ: What about the baby butlers that you had to sell before you could get the job at Kramer's?

FZ: Oh, that was just a part-time job, because things were tough. I got a part-time job selling baby butlers, little tables to put little children in, so [that] they could have breakfast, have food.

JZ: I had one.

NM: As an air raid warden, did you work with anyone else? Were there other air raid wardens in Dunellen?

FZ: Yes, there'd be other air raid wardens working elsewhere in town.

NM: You mentioned that you became a Boy Scout leader during the war.

FZ: Yes.

NM: Could you talk about the things you did with the Boy Scouts?

FZ: Yes. … I mentioned before, … the town used to send people up to Washington Rock, to see the spot where Washington watched the British come in, coming across. I remember, we used to go up there and camp as Boy Scouts and stay overnight … up in the mountain, just normal Boy Scout activities, you know, teaching them how to make knots and how to prepare food.

JZ: Did they do stuff for the war, the Boy Scouts? Did they do things for the war, the Boy Scouts? …

FZ: The Boy Scouts, we did a lot of things, yes. We used to collect, you know, clothing, we used to collect steel, pots and pans. They needed steel for the war. … Naturally, the Boy Scouts were involved in something like that, to help people get the things they needed for the war effort. Yes, we did that.

NM: Since you worked in Calco Chemical and Buffalo Tank during the war, I know industries tried different methods to motivate workers for the war effort. Was that anything you perceived, like posters?

FZ: Well, yes, selling war bonds. Everyone was trying to sell war bonds to help the war effort, you know. That was done quite a bit. In most companies where people worked, they tried to sell war bonds. We did that, we sold war bonds.

NM: For someone who worked there, would they take that directly out of your check?

FZ: Yes, out of their payroll, yes.

NM: You obviously were in Dunellen before the war began and during the war.

FZ: And during the war.

NM: Can you talk about any changes you saw in Dunellen, in terms of rationing, attitudes?

FZ: Yes, the gasoline was rationed for a while. I remember, we had to have … coupons or little tickets to buy gas.

BZ: The food was rationed, too.

FZ: Oh, yes, food was rationed, yes. We did those things. We had to do those things.

NM: Did rationing affect your family in a severe way?

FZ: Well, you just had to watch what [you bought]. You were limited to what you could purchase in some items, … but we always had enough to eat. We always had enough to eat.

NM: I understand that some of your siblings joined the service.

FZ: Yes, my twin brother, Edward, he's the same age as me, we're born on the same day, 1922, he left. … He was a junior in high school and he was going to become a senior, but he left high school to go into the Army, because the war started. … No, he left to go to a factory, to work, and then, the war started and, when the war started, he enlisted. … He was in the Army and he went to, he was stationed in an island called Biak, B-I-A-K, in the South Pacific, somewhere near Australia. … I think what they did there is that they worked on Army tanks, you know, repairing Army tanks and putting them together. He did that sort of thing when he was in the Army.

NM: Did any of your siblings work in any war-related industries?

FZ: No, I don't know. I don't think so.

NM: Okay.

FZ: My daughters?

BZ: No, your brothers and sisters.

FZ: My brothers and sisters, let's see, … one sister worked at Wall Street and it had nothing to do with the war effort. Another sister worked in a department store in Plainfield, Tepper's Department Store. … My brother, my other brother, well, I just can't remember what he was doing. …

JZ: One was in Art Color, right? I think Mike was in Art Color.

FZ: He worked at some company where he made cigarette lighters and things like that.

NP: Did all of you still live in the same household, the house you moved to?

FZ: Yes, we all lived in the same household.

NP: All seven of you, or six of you, because your brother was in the service.

FZ: Yes, … until they got married and left, yes, we stayed in the same house.

NM: How closely did you follow the war, what was going on in Europe and in Asia?

FZ: Oh, I listened to everything that was happening, whatever was on the radio, in the newspapers. I read everything. I knew what was going on. I knew what happened

BZ: You used to write to your buddies every day, didn't you?

FZ: I used to write to my buddies that went off into the war, those seven guys that we used to meet. We met when the war started. I used to write to them.

NM: You mentioned, before we started recording, this group of gentlemen that you met with. Could you talk about that? Did you meet every year, annually, on the same date?

FZ: Yes, every year since 1945, these fellows that were in the service, we met, except for the few that didn't come back. Two of them became airplane pilots. One was a P-38 pilot and the other one was a copilot on a bomber and they were both killed. The fellow that was a copilot in a bomber, his plane was landing in England, coming back from a trip over Germany. … They landed in the fog and the plane crashed and he was killed, and, of course, the other fellow was a P-38 fighter pilot and he was killed in the war in the South Pacific. Of course, my friend Hank Hodulik, the one I grew up, he was a gunner on a bomber. … He flew over France to go to Germany to bomb some installation and the flak knocked his plane down and Hank had to jump out of the plane and parachute. … As a result of that, he landed and he had to hide from the Germans, of course, who were looking for the pilots that jumped out or men in the plane. … What Hank did is, he ended up visiting a home in France and these people took him in and kept him undercover, so [that] the Germans, you know, wouldn't catch him. … They even got false papers for him and they taught him a couple of French words, so, if they ever were questioned by the Germans, they could get away with it and Hank got away with it. He stayed with these people until it was the end of the war.

NM: You would write letters to your friends.

FZ: My buddies.

NM: Would you get letters back from them? How regular was the mail you would get back?

FZ: Well, actually, … I should've done better than I did. I know I made a letter and … I made a copy of the letter, telling them what was happening, but I sent a copy of the letter to them, rather than write individually, and some of them let me know about that later, says, "You could've written to us personally, you know, rather than just making one letter and sending it to all of us." That was it, what I did, which I shouldn't have done, you know, but I did write to them by putting everything in writing and making a copy of it and sending it to the boys.

NM: Were you able to keep track of where everyone was? I know that some of the news and some of the information was censored.

FZ: Well, during the war, they didn't really tell you where they were at. You know, if they were in training somewhere, you'd know where they're at. …

JZ: Did they black things out of their letters? …

FZ: No, they didn't. … We didn't know where they were. We didn't even know … that Hank, my friend, was shot down over France, didn't even know. We thought he was missing. We didn't know he was there.

NP: In those years that he stayed with that family, did you have any contact with him?

FZ: No, not at all, didn't find out until the war [ended], when he got, actually, released and sent back to England, yes.

NM: In interviewing other gentlemen who were not drafted, they said that, often, people asked them, "Why aren't you in the service?"

FZ: Yes.

NM: Was that something that people would ask you?

FZ: Yes, they would ask me why I wasn't in the service and I would explain to them that I had a car accident and a fractured pelvis and the Army wouldn't take me, but what I did, in 1945, in the last year of the war, I did go back and I tried to get in. … I went to Newark and I went through the physical. … They decided, after that physical, that they would take me into the service and they told me to, "Go home and we'll call you in about a week," but, when I got home, a week later, they called me and they said, "The war's over. Don't bother to come in." So, they didn't take me.

NM: What motivated you to try to join the service again?

FZ: I felt I didn't do my share. … I thought I missed out on something. Of course, the buddies all told me I didn't miss out on anything. I missed a lot of terrible horror, a lot of horror in the war. I felt that I'd missed something, you know, and I wanted to get in and … try to do something, but the war was over.

NM: Since you were on the home front and your brother was in the Pacific, how often would you hear from him?

FZ: Oh, yes, he would send me pictures of the island, of the people on the island, where he stayed, yes. He showed pictures. He sent me pictures and wrote to me. We wrote back and forth to each other.

NM: During the war, was your father still working with the same company?

FZ: During the war, he was still with that Scott Company, yes.

NM: Did your mother or father take on any additional part-time work in factories or anything?

FZ: No, … my mother didn't. She was always a homemaker.

NM: When you had the car accident in 1941, you were on your way to Rutgers. What courses were you taking at Rutgers?

FZ: We were … doing algebra at the time. We're taking algebra.

NM: What was that for?

FZ: So, we … would be able to get into the service, the Air Force.

NM: It was required.

FZ: Yes, certain things. You had to learn something.

NM: Were these courses during the daytime or nighttime?

FZ: In the evening. After work, we'd go, yes.

NM: During the war, on the home front, is there anything that we may have missed or that you want to add about your work?

FZ: Well, I think that's about it. I think we covered it mostly.

NP: How did your parents receive you not being able to enlist? Were they in some way happy?

FZ: No, they understood that … I injured myself quite seriously. So, I mean, they knew I couldn't go. I couldn't do anything.

NP: Would they have wanted you to fight if you had not been injured?

FZ: No, I don't think they would want me to fight. I don't think parents wanted their sons to fight, although some may have. I don't know. … They never said anything to me, that they wish I had gotten in or should've gone in, you know.

NM: When you were at Buffalo Tank, at one point, you had to pick up some Russians.

FZ: Russian men, yes.

NM: Could you elaborate on that a bit more? Can you talk about that situation?

FZ: Yes, they just sent me to the train station to pick up two Russian men there, from Russia. I guess they had to come to inspect something where the tanks were being made. I remember one thing about--in Plainfield, oh, I picked them up in Plainfield--and, when I picked them up, I remember that we were going through … the street and they noticed, the two Russians noticed, a nun … walking on the street and they said to me, "We don't allow that in Russia." They don't allow the religion, I guess. I always remember that statement that they made.

NM: Do you know what these tanks they were making at Buffalo Tank were used for?

FZ: No, I never knew, … all sizes of tanks, storage tanks, I guess for fuel, and I guess tanks for industry, for storage, you know. They made a lot of tanks.

JZ: Maybe you want to tell them what you know about the Manhattan Project in Middlesex here.

FZ: Oh, yes.

JZ: And Mom's brothers worked there.

FZ: In Middlesex, New Jersey, here, right across the tracks over here, they had the Manhattan Project. That was the one that … worked on the atomic bomb. Here in Middlesex, my wife's brother was in high school and … they gave him a job working there. They were taking this ore that they used for the Manhattan Project and they were bringing it into Middlesex and working at it and putting it and sending it somewhere. So, that was right here in Middlesex, New Jersey, part of the Manhattan Project. [Editor's Note: The Middlesex Sampling Plant operated from 1943 to 1955, first under the Manhattan Project, then by the Atomic Energy Commission. The plant sampled and handled uranium, thorium and beryllium.]

JZ: They were picking up … her brother and his friends. Didn't you say they didn't even know at the time …

FZ: No, he didn't know what he was doing. He was working on something, but didn't know what it was. It was all secret. Yes, the atomic bomb was a secret.

NM: You mentioned that you were in a hospital when you heard about Pearl Harbor.

FZ: Yes.

NM: Where were you when you heard the war had ended?

FZ: I was working in the Buffalo Tank.

NM: What was the reaction in the community?

FZ: Oh, everybody was elated. I remember people going to church, going to the church doors, going inside and thanking God that the war was over, it was all over, yes.

NM: In the town, were there any celebrations, parades, things like that?

FZ: No, not like there was in New York City. No, there was nothing. Everybody was elated, but no big demonstrations, … not in our little town.

JZ: How about when people came home? How about when people you knew came home? Did they have big receptions for them when they arrived?

FZ: No, I don't recall that, I don't recall receptions. They came home individually. They didn't come in a group.

NM: You continued to work at Buffalo Tank until 1950 or so. Then, there was a steel strike.

FZ: Yes.

NM: These ex-servicemen were now in the United States and trying to get jobs. Do you recall if it was hard for the former servicemen to get jobs?

FZ: Well, after I left Buffalo Tank, I had that trucking job, office manager, and … I kept that for eighteen years.

BZ: What about the veterans? Did they have trouble getting jobs when they came home?

FZ: … Well, no.

NM: At Buffalo Tank, were there people who had worked there before the war, joined the service, and then, came back?

FZ: Yes, Hank was one of them, yes. He was in the service. He was working there, and then, he went into the service and he came back and went back to work there.

NM: Were there positions at Buffalo Tank for the people who left for the service?

FZ: Yes, they gave them their jobs back.

NM: In 1950, there was a steel strike. Can you talk about it? After that, you left Buffalo Tank.

FZ: They just laid me off, that's all. … They laid me off.

NM: That was when you got the job with the trucking company, Kramer.

FZ: Yes, the trucking company.

NM: Could you talk about the type of work you did at Kramer?

FZ: Well, I was the office manager. I did the payrolls, I made the accident reports for the injuries or accidents, … you know, took orders, normal routines in the trucking office, taking care of what you had to do, and I did that for the eighteen years.

NM: While you were at Kramer, the Korean War began.

FZ: Yes, the Korean War came on.

NM: Did that affect the company or you in any way?

FZ: No, it didn't affect them at all.

NM: Okay, because I know some companies retooled and produced things for the Army. Would you have been of age where you might be drafted in the service?

FZ: No, I was not that age anymore.

NM: You worked at Kramer for eighteen years.

FZ: Yes.

NM: Did you retire from there?

FZ: They went out of business.

BZ: No, didn't you go to [where] you were training people? When they came back, they let you go. …

FZ: Kramer sold out to somebody else.

BZ: Transcon.

FZ: Transcon Lines, and I worked with them for a little while. They sent me to California, their home office, to learn their procedures, and they sent me back. After I trained the people, they let me go. [laughter] They just let me go.

JZ: Gee, that sounds like what's happening today.

FZ: They had some strike problems at that time, some strike problems.

NM: After Kramer, what did you do?

FZ: I went to become a tax assessor.

BZ: What about the other trucking companies?

FZ: Well, that was just a short time. I worked somewhere else for a short distance, some other company. They hired me, another trucking company hired me for a couple of months, but, … then, somebody asked me if I'd like to run for tax assessor in town and I said, "I'll give it a shot." So, I ran and I won the election and I became the tax assessor for twenty-one years.

JZ: Tell them about how it was. … They had a new tax assessor every term, because, if you got reelected, it'd be tenure for life and no one got it until you. You were the first one to get reelected and have tenure for life.

FZ: Yes, I got tenure.

JZ: No one ever got that before you. No one got reelected.

FZ: When you're elected the second time, we got tenure. You could keep the job as long as you wanted.

NP: When you left Kramer and were in and out of jobs, did your wife hold a job?

FZ: My wife worked for Mack Trucks.

BZ: No, that was before I was married.

FZ: Oh, that was before the war, that's right. No, she was home.

BZ: Yes, I was home with the children.

JZ: Those were the days, if you were pregnant, they made you leave a job in those days.

FZ: I had to leave my job.

NM: You were a tax assessor for twenty-one years. Could you talk about your duties there?

FZ: Yes, sure, as a tax assessor, it was the responsibility of the tax assessor to put the assessment on homes that are built, for taxation. … Well, not only that, but, if some people wanted to appeal their taxes, they thought they were high, or too high, they were allowed to file an appeal and go before the county tax board and I'd have to go to the county tax board there to listen to what they had to say. The county tax board, which was Middlesex, it was in New Brunswick, they would make a decision after hearing what the conversation was, the objections to the high rates or the high assessment, and they'd make a decision whether they would lower the assessment or not. … My job was always to, whenever a new building would go up in town, including industry, we'd have to go there and get the measurements of the property, because they were mostly based by square footage, whether they were homes or they were commercial industry, and we'd have to use our book value, what we had in the books per square foot, to assess their taxes. That basically was the whole job as a tax assessor.

NM: Are there any experiences that stand out in your memory about your time as a tax assessor?

FZ: Well, while I was a tax assessor, we had a revaluation. What happens is, when the market goes down, the houses drop in value, like they are today. … The county board insists that you do a revaluation and bring the assessment values up to what they should be, you know. … We had a revaluation once when I was the assessor. … They hired a firm to come in to do it, because you had to have a lot of men get out and look at every house in town and, in most cases, they changed some and lowered some and raised some, or left some the same. That was the biggest thing we had to do when I was a tax assessor, revaluation.

NP: How long does a tax assessor hold office?

FZ: Well, if he made it, if he was elected a second time, he had tenure. He could keep it as long as he wanted to, but I kept the job until I was sixty-nine and I retired. I retired with a pension. … Then, a friend of mine was working in … the drugstore, he was delivering drugs and he gave it up and he said, … "You want a job delivering prescription drugs?" So, I went there and they hired me and I've kept the job to today.

NP: Was that the reason you ran for reelection? You enjoyed being a tax assessor.

FZ: Yes, I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it, yes.

NM: In a small town, did local politics affect you and your position in any way?

FZ: Well, yes, … I worked with the party, that I belonged to the party and I did work with them whenever election time came. … I helped them with the elections, yes.

JZ: There was some mudslinging at election time, I would say. At election time, there was a lot of stuff.

FZ: Oh, yes, a lot of stuff, election time.

JZ: Political.

BZ: Like there is now.

JZ: Yes, same thing.

NM: Were these elections close elections for you?

FZ: No, high for me. I was pretty well-noted in town. I was very active in my church parish and a lot of people knew me and the woman that had the job before me--it was a woman as tax assessor--went against me and I beat her in the election by quite a few votes. … After I beat her in the election, she took me to court. She said … that she had tenure and she should've kept the job and I should not have even run against her, but, after going to … the trial, we went to the trial

and the judge said, … "You can't have both worlds." In other words, she didn't get elected, she lost, so, because she lost, she wanted to keep the job saying she had tenure, but she didn't have tenure, according to the law. …

NM: The second election, where you got tenure, there were no challenges, just straight forward.

FZ: … In fact, when she lost out, the next time, yes, she didn't run against me.

NM: I want to give you a chance to add anything to the record that we may have skipped over.

JZ: I think your radiation experience with the town was a bit interesting. [Editor's Note: Mr. Zupko misinterpreted radiation as recreation.]

FZ: Yes. I was also active in the town in recreation. I used to run dances during the war. They had dances and I'd set it up at a high school on the grounds and we'd have a band come there and we'd have food there and we'd have dancing in the high school. We did that during the war.

BZ: What about in Middlesex?

JZ: In Middlesex, when they trained you for the Geiger counter, that radiation stuff.

FZ: Yes.

JZ: The Geiger counter thing, tell them about that. … It was interesting, when you had to go out in the middle of the night that time, remember?

FZ: Where?

JZ: When … they called you in the middle of the night, when you were the Geiger counter expert in town.

FZ: Yes.

JZ: Three Mile Island.

FZ: Oh, Three Mile Island?

JZ: Yes.

FZ: I went to school. I had to go to school. In fact, I was going to school, learning about how to use a Geiger counter when that Three-Mile Island happened. Remember that? Three-Mile Island, yes.

JZ: And? They brought that back to Middlesex, remember? The part that was made in Middlesex, they called you in the middle of the night to go check it for radiation.

FZ: I did that, yes.

JZ: Part of the reactor.

FZ: Yes.

JZ: They brought it back to this town and you had to go check it.

FZ: Yes, they brought it back. Yes, I mentioned I did that.

NM: Okay, that was during the Three-Mile Island incident.

FZ: Yes, Three-Mile Island.

NM: Since you lived in the area, Dunellen, then, Middlesex, in the late 1960s, people in the area often talk about the riots that occurred.

FZ: In Plainfield? [Editor's Note: The Plainfield riots, also called the Plainfield Rebellion, occurred from July 14 to July 17, 1967, and resulted in over one hundred arrests, ten gun violence injuries and the death of police officer John Gleason. Gleason was killed by a mob after shooting a young African-American man on the third day of the crisis. That same day, civilians seized arms from a local munitions factory. The National Guard was then deployed to the city and a truce was negotiated on July 18th.]

NM: Yes, Plainfield.

FZ: Yes, yes.

NM: Can you talk about what you recall about that, if there was concern in the community?

FZ: Yes, I remember that. It was quite horrible. My wife lived in Plainfield. …

BZ: Not at that time.

FZ: Of course, I married here. Again, she came to live with me, but … her home was not too far from where they killed the policeman … during that riot. It was quite a thing and I remember it very well. Of course, I didn't go there, I didn't want … to have any problems, you know, but they did have a lot of problems, yes.

NM: Was that ...

JZ: That's when I was in high school. I'd have trouble getting in to some of my friends, to visit some of my friends. You had to show your license to get through the blockades, to get to their neighborhoods.

NM: Is there anything else you would like to add?

FZ: No, I don't think so.

NM: All right. This concludes the interview with Mr. Francis Zupko in Middlesex, New Jersey. Thank you again for having us here today.

FZ: Thank you for coming.

[TAPE PAUSED]

NM: We want to add an addendum to Mr. Zupko's interview; go ahead.

FZ: Yes, okay. After the war, a lot of the veterans came back and they were injured. A lot of them were sick in the mind and they were sent to Lyons Hospital over here in New Jersey. … I belonged to the Knights of Columbus organization. … Every couple of months, we'd go there and we'd take care of them or bring them something or take them to church, to Mass, wheel them into Mass and that was quite a harrowing experience. You know, you think it's bad when people talk about the war, but, if you go there and see what happened to some of these fellows that are on their backs since the end of the war and you know how lucky you are to be able to walk on your feet. So, we did a lot of that. We went to the veterans' hospital in Lyons and to help the people, to help the veterans.

NM: How soon after the war ended did you get involved in these activities?

FZ: Continual, even to today.

NM: Since 1945.

FZ: Yes.

NM: You have remained involved with the Knights of Columbus.

FZ: Right.

NM: I am glad we added that part in.

FZ: We still do this today.

JZ: How many years are you a Knight, sixty years now?

BZ: Sixty-five.

FZ: I'm a Knight of Columbus seventy years and I'm ninety years of age, yes. [laughter] Have you ever heard of the Knights of Columbus?

NM: Yes. It sounds like you have been involved in many volunteer activities. Is there anything else we may have missed in regards to that?

FZ: Well, I'm very active in the church. I'm a Eucharistic minister in the church and I used to sing at funerals. I'd sing at the church funerals, I used to sing in the church choir, and, oh, very active with the church.

JZ: And you had a lot of offices in the Knights of Columbus, … too.

FZ: Oh, yes, I had a lot offices in the Knights of Columbus. In fact, … I went to a Knights of Columbus convention. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

FZ: They presented me with this, the State Deputy. He works at Rutgers, the State Deputy, Rossi. You know [Daniel] Rossi, a teacher there, a Professor Rossi? [Editor's Note: Daniel Rossi is the Associate Director of Special Projects at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers.]

NM: Unfortunately, no, it does not ring a bell.

JZ: It's pretty big.

FZ: He's a State Deputy of the Knights of Columbus.

NM: For the record, I am holding a plaque that reads, "Presented to Francis T. Zupko, Sr., Chapter Chairman, in honor of his seventy years of service with the Knights of Columbus Chapter 4, the chapter with a heartbeat." Thank you.

JZ: And his grandson, right now, Rich (Philip?), is in ROTC in Rutgers, for the Army.

FZ: Yes, my grandson is in Rutgers now, ROTC.

NM: Great.

FZ: In fact, they called him the other day. The National Guard wanted to do something because of the hurricane. … They took him over. They came over to get them and put gas in his car, so [that] he could go with the National Guard, but he found out that since he was still going to school, the contract that he made with the government, he has to stay at school when school started again. So, they couldn't take him, the National Guard.

JZ: … They're only closed a couple of days, Rutgers.

FZ: So, he couldn't go, but he was ready to go. Here's his picture, see there, … Rutgers ROTC.

NM: Just for the record, Mr. Zupko is referring to Hurricane Irene.

JZ: Oh, no, Hurricane Sandy. [Editor's Note: From October 22 to October 31, 2012, Hurricane Sandy (or Superstorm Sandy) claimed the lives of 286 people internationally and caused over sixty-eight billion dollars in damage in the United States, the second-costliest hurricane at the time, behind Hurricane Katrina.]

NM: I am sorry, Hurricane Sandy, which heavily affected New Jersey. Thank you again.

FZ: No, thank you.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Anthony Mazzucco 4/1/2014
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/25/2014
Reviewed by Francis Zupko 7/13/2014