

3-7-2003

## Edmund Ziemba interview, 07 March 2003

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Ziemba03072003A-B  
Tremont Oral History Project

Interview with Edward Ziemba  
Interviewed by Christine Cleary  
March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003  
2:15pm  
Jefferson Library

Cleary:  
What is your name?

Ziemba:  
Edmund Ziemba

Cleary:  
When were you born and when did you live in Tremont?

Ziemba:  
I was born in 1933. We lived here on Jefferson Ave. until I was twelve years old. After World War II, we moved up to Starkweather between W14th Street and Scranton. The home is no longer there; they took it for the freeway. We lived there for several years. I got drafted into the army after high school and my parents moved to Parma.

Cleary:  
Why did your parents move into Tremont?

Ziemba:  
My grandfather came here originally from Poland at the end of the nineteenth century. He may have been the first of his family to come here. He was just a young man. At the turn of the twentieth century, this was a predominantly Polish, German, Ukrainian, and Russian neighborhood. The nationalities had a tendency to settle together. It was going to be either here or the other big Polish neighborhood in Slavic Village off of Broadway. For some reason he settled in this area and started his family. They lived on the library side of this street. My grandfather had a bar that he ran right next door to the library on Jefferson Street. Later, he built a place right across the street. I have an older brother and a younger brother. We were all born in this neighborhood, not in a hospital. We were all born at home. I can remember the day when my younger brother was born. I remember my mom giving birth right in the bedroom. Women didn't go to hospitals in those days. I believe my grandfather settled in this area because of friends.

Cleary:  
Was a foreign language spoke in your home?

Ziembra:

Yes, Polish was spoken a lot, however both my grandmother and grandfather spoke very good English. Even though they came from Poland, they took the time to learn Polish. I knew people whose parents could hardly speak a word of English.

Cleary:

Tell me about your home across the street?

Ziembra:

My grandparents lived in the brick house. My grandfather built it. He had a bar downstairs. When prohibition hit, my grandfather must have been a slick old guy. The garage in the back, he had a grease pit built in it. He used to park his car over it. My grandfather knew how to drive a car but he did not know how it ran. I believe the grease pit served another purpose. He stashed the booze there. He wasn't going to go out of business just because they passed a law. He did that for a while and then he changed his way of life. He and a group of friends started the first Polish bank right on Professor Ave.

Cleary:

Where did you go to school?

Ziembra:

I went to Tremont through the seventh grade. At that time they shifted a few of the grades and sent them to Lincoln High School on Scranton. It is no longer there. It was replaced by Lincoln West. Lincoln then became a five or six year school.

Cleary:

Where did you graduate from high school?

Ziembra:

I graduated from Lincoln High School and we just had our 50<sup>th</sup> high school class reunion last September.

Cleary:

When you were younger, what did you do for entertainment? I realize the Park was a couple blocks away and it sounds like you didn't have a very big back yard.

Ziembra:

It was a different era. We played a lot at the Tremont School yard. We played a lot at the park, even at night. Our parents did not have to worry about us.

Cleary:

So, there wasn't a lot of crime?

Ziembra:

No, there were police officers that used to walk the beat. We didn't lock our doors. We didn't have anything to steal either but we still didn't have to lock our doors. In this neighborhood, everyone knew each other. We didn't have television but we had radio. At night you entertained yourself by listening to the radio. I used to come here at night and read books till it closed. I did have some favorite radio programs like the Lone Ranger. My dad was an avid reader and I became an avid reader through him. We could play in the streets. There wasn't the traffic that you have today. There were cars but not that many. We would play football in the streets and baseball at Tremont School. We also played football and baseball at Lincoln Park. There was also the Merrick House; it was a community center. Years ago it used to be just like an old house. We had a small club that we formed and the Merrick House provided us with a woman as our advisor. The closest YMCA was quite a way from here off of W25th Street on Franklin Ave. We used to walk there and walk back home at night. None of the kids that I grew up with, parents had automobiles.

Cleary:  
Did your parents have an automobile?

Ziemba:  
No, we rode public transportation.

Cleary:  
What type of transportation was available?

Ziemba:  
Before public buses, there were the trackless trolleys. They were like a bus but they hooked up to electrical wires up above like a normal electric trolley. At W25th Street you could catch the electric trolleys. By trolley, you could go anywhere in the city. A transfer was for free and then they charged a penny. Every Saturday we would go to Jennings Theater in the afternoon.

Cleary:  
Was that here in Tremont?

Ziemba:  
It used to be on W14th Street. It is no longer there. They tore it down.

Cleary:  
Do you remember how much it cost to go to the movies?

Ziemba:  
A nickel for two movies, a serial and cartoons. I remember when they raised it to a dime my brother and I were broken hearted.

Cleary:  
How old were you when you were going to the movies by yourself?

Ziemba:

My brother and I were about seven and eight years old. We would walk there and walk back home at night. Our parents knew where we were going and when we would be home. There was never any fear that something would happen. It was a different world.

Cleary:

Did you go into the city or to the beach?

Ziemba:

We would ride our bikes to Edgewater Park. When I got older and in high school, on Sundays we would go to the Garden Theater. It was on W25th Street. Sunday afternoon at the Garden that's where all the high school kids would hang out.

Cleary:

What would you do there?

Ziemba:

We would watch a movie and hang out. Entertainment was cheap. My parents didn't have much. We did always have clean clothes and plenty to eat and a place to sleep.

Cleary:

Where did your parents do their shopping?

Ziemba:

There used to be a grocery store on the corner of Jefferson and Professor. There were two of them, one on the east side and one on the west side. We primary shopped at the one on the west side. On Saturdays we went to the W25th Market by bus. We used to buy our meats, cheeses, dairy products, fish and fresh fowl. Across the street, there was a guy who sold fresh fowl. My mother would pick out a chicken. He would whack the head off and put it in a bag. My mother would take it home and throw it in a pot of hot boiling water. She would pull the feathers off and then singed it over the stove. You could smell the quails burning. She would have to clean it out too. I used to go with my grandfather on the roof to the pigeon coop. I used to grab one and then put it in a burlap bag. He would show me how to behead them. We would have roast squaw. It would be absolutely delicious. There is nothing like corn fed squaw.

Cleary:

What type of job did your father have?

Ziemba:

He just worked in factories and plants. That's what most people in this neighborhood did.

Cleary:

Was he in a union?

Ziemba:

I'm sure he was. I never really paid much attention.

Cleary:

Did he ever lose his job during the depression?

Ziemba:

He did lose his job during the depression. It was tough at that time but we always managed to have something to eat. We squeaked through. When WWII came along every young man from this neighborhood disappeared for four years. Everyone that I personally knew went to the front lines. What was amazing was that everyone that I knew came back. They all made it. In Tremont at Lincoln Park there used to be a memorial. It was a huge white monument that had the names of every guy from the Tremont area that died. It was full. You would see flags hanging in the windows. They had blue stars, one star for each son in the service. Gold stars for each one that died. Walking around the neighborhood, there were not too many homes that did not have those little flags hanging in the windows. My uncle was with the Hundred First Airborne in a glider at Normandy. He was one of the guys in Private Ryan. He survived. He told me the horror stories when I was young. I saw the movie Private Ryan and trust me it was worse than that. With all the mortar shells you could still hear the screams of all the guys getting hit.

Cleary:

Was church an important part of your family life?

Ziemba:

St. John Cantius was the Polish Catholic Church in the neighborhood. It was very big. I remember you had to do two things at Easter. On Good Friday you had to go to church. The inside of that church is very elaborate. It has stained glass windows and has all marble floors. It is quite beautiful. I don't know if this is a Polish tradition or a St. John Cantius tradition but on Good Friday you had to start at the back of the church on the marble floor and go on your knees to the alter and kiss the crucifix that was laying there. The next day mother would prepare a big basket of all the food she had made for Easter Sunday. There would be kielbasi, eggs and a little bit of everything. I would take it to the church to have it blessed. That was on Saturday before Easter. The other big Polish tradition happens on Christmas Eve. The whole family would get together for a big Christmas Eve spread. One of the things that would get passed around was a wafer that was blest. Everyone would break off a little piece. Men and women would give each other a kiss and pass on their best wishes to each other.

Cleary:

Where did you have these dinners, at your grandparent's house?

Ziemba:

Yes, that was the focal point. Everyone would come. Everyone would bring something.

Cleary:

Did the church help your family during the depression when your father lost his job?

Ziemba:

I really don't know. People helped each other. I can remember when times were tough and men would come asking for handouts. These were guys down on their luck. They couldn't find jobs. If my mother could scrap together a sandwich or a bowl of soup, she would give them a sandwich or a bowl of soup. That was not uncommon. It was a tough time. People helped each other and they didn't expect anything for it. If someone was down on their luck, you tried to give them a hand. I think everybody realized they were in the same boat. It could happen to any of them.

Cleary:

I would like to go back to transportation, what were the roads made out of?

Ziemba:

They were primarily brick. They were paving bricks. They are big, red and smooth. They weigh thirteen pounds a piece. You could drive a tank over these things. All of the roads around here used to be paving brick. I don't know if they tore them up or just paved over them. In the wintertime when it snowed they didn't put salt on the streets. They would go down to the steel mills to get the slag and cinders. They would spread that.

Cleary:

How did they do that, from trucks?

Ziemba:

Yes, from trucks. That's is how they handled things back then. The garbage trucks were not like you see today. They were wide-open trucks with guys in the back of the truck standing in garbage. You would just throw the garbage out of the cans. Most women would wrap it up in newspapers. When the guys tossed it in it would come unraveled. In the summer there was a whole herd of flies going down the road with them. There were horse drawn carts. Have you ever heard of the paper rags man? They would come down with their carts yelling "Paper rags, paper rags". People would take their junk out to him and he would give them a few pennies. Most of them smoked and the foil on cigarette packs got peeled off. People would hand over a big ball of this foil. It was worth a couple of bucks so was balls of old string. They almost went out of business in WWII. In WWII there use to be scrap metal drives. It would usually emanate out of the school. They would tell the kids when there was going to be a scrap metal drive.

Cleary:

That was donations? People would give donations.

Ziemba:

They would haul all this stuff away to be remelted. They had saving bond drives. They called them war bonds and war stamps. Did you ever hear of tax stamps? In the state of Ohio when you went shopping and paid state taxes you would get a tax stamp. If you paid fifteen cents worth of state taxes they would give you a fifteen cents tax stamp. You would collect all these stamps and they would have stamp drives at school. The school would submit them to the State and they would get money back to go buy books. As kids, we would go door to door collecting tax stamps.

Cleary:  
Did the schools have any other type of fundraisers?

Ziemba;  
No not like in the schools today.

Cleary:  
Did there used to be ice-trucks?

Ziemba:  
There used to be a little icehouse on Professor Ave. I used to take my wagon and go get twenty five pounds of ice for my mother. I would haul it back for the icebox. We did not have a refrigerator. We got our first refrigerator when we moved up to Starkweather.

Cleary:  
Did you have flush toilets?

Ziemba:  
Yes we did. That was one of the things we did have. When I was in Korea there were no flush toilets. It is tough in the wintertime.

Cleary:  
What did your parents do for entertainment? Did they go to your grandfather's bar?

Ziemba:  
I don't remember the bar. My grandfather had already converted it to a grocery store. He had started the bank and he was running the bank.

Cleary:  
Did they go to different dance halls?

Ziemba:  
Every nationality in this neighborhood had it's own club. There was the Polish National Home across from Lincoln Park. It was on Literary Street. Ukrainian National Home was on W14th Street near Fairfield. The Russian church was St. Theodosius on Starkweather and Professor. I do know that the Russian people had a hall on the east side so I don't



know if they had something here. Just about every nationality had it's own church and club. Weddings were a big deal to go to. Weddings were a lot different then. When the women went to the weddings they ended up in the kitchen cooking. There were no caterers. Weddings were not catered the women chipped in and helped. I don't know what the men did maybe they just drank a lot and danced. The kids were not left at home. They drank pop and ran around the hall. People liked to go to movies.

Cleary:

Did they go to the amusement park?

Ziemba:

Twice a year we would go to Euclid Beach Park. My mom told me that when her and my dad were younger Euclid Beach Park had a bandstand. They would have Saturday night dances. They would bring in big name bands. They would love to go there and dance. They had a roller rink and my mom would like to watch the young people skate while my brother and I went on the rides. Men worked extremely hard and they didn't make a lot of money. They were hard jobs and when they came home they were tired. Their entertainment was reading the paper having a couple of drinks and going to bed. They had to get up and do it all over again. Entertainment was a weekend thing on Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Sunday afternoon was generally a big dinner. It seemed to always be up at my grandparents. Guys would sit around and play penucle and cards. There were a lot of bars in the neighborhood so you know a lot of guys were spending time in the bars.

Cleary:

Did they have the Bathhouse and could you explain what it was?

Ziemba:

The concept of the Bathhouse was to allow the men to come up from their dirty jobs in the mills and factories and to go into the steam rooms and the showers to get cleaned off and to relax.

Cleary:

Where was it located?

Ziemba:

It was right on Starkweather across from the park. Right now it is a fascade front and upscale condos in the back. At one time it was a community center and in the back we would go play basketball. They had open hard courts in the back. The primary concept was for the guys to have someplace to go to relax after working hard all day. There may have been a lot of homes in this area that did not have indoor baths. That provided a place.

Cleary:

Do you remember the name of your grandfather's bank?

Ziemba:

It was the Lincoln Savings and Loan. It is still there. It is on Professor and part of Third Federal now. I don't know if it had a name prior to that. I remember my grandfather was held up once. Apparently, they tried to run the bank very frugally. The purpose of the savings and loan company as established in the State of Ohio back then was do only one thing and one thing only. It was to provide loans to buy homes. They were not banks. They were savings and loans companies and that was their charter. They tried to run these places as frugal as they could so they could have money for people to borrow to buy homes. They knew how much that meant to people to own a home. They were being charged these enormous fees by the armored truck companies to bring in cash. They decided to do it themselves. Somebody knew they were doing it. They were driving in my grandfather's car and just before they got to the bank they were cut off. Some masked men held guns to them and had them give them all their money. Today it doesn't sound like much but twenty-five thousands dollars around 1950 was a lot of money. He had to pay for it out of his own pocket. The two of them had to pay for it themselves. They tried to do the best they could to help people. It had to have been an inside job. They never did find out who did it.

Cleary:

Did other family members work at the bank?

Ziemba:

No, my Uncle Ben ended up being a baker because he married a baker's daughter. My Uncle Chester became a factory worker. My Aunt Helen married a physician.

Cleary:

That brings up a good point, when you went to the doctor's did you go to a Polish doctor?

Ziemba:

My Aunt's husband was a Polish man and is who mostly treated us.

Cleary:

Did you have to travel far to go to the doctor's?

Ziemba:

He would come to the house and only when we were sick. You didn't go for check ups. There was a clinic. At Tremont Grade School they used to bring in portable dental equipment. Dentist would come in and all the kids would get examined. If kids needed work done on their teeth then they would do it.

Cleary:

Was that all done for free?

Ziemba:

Yes it was. I remember at Lincoln High School, I may have been in the seventh or eighth grade, they did fluoroscopes. That was done for free. Back then tuberculosis was a prevalent disease. They would examine your chest with a fluoroscope. I don't know how well you could see with these things. They were not x-rays. I have a vague memory of having it done once at the school. Most people could not afford to send children to the doctor's for every sniffle. They had home remedies. I remember drinking hot milk with melted butter in it. I don't know what it did for you but I had to drink it. Also cod-liver pills, I hated that stuff. For a sore throat there was tea and honey. You went to the dentist if you had a toothache which was usually too late. Fortunately for me I still have all my own teeth. Both of my brothers are dentists. I remember my father and my mom and grandparents had dentures. It was expected. Sooner or later your teeth would go bad and you would get dentures. I remember up at the school again when I was young; they would bring in doctors and speakers. They would try to get in as many people into the auditorium as possible. They would have lectures on health and cleanliness. They would try to get people more aware of it. You have to remember that people just didn't have the money. It was a community event that went on for several days. They talked about keeping your yards clean so you don't have rodent infestation. People lived very close to each other and the interface with the neighbors was quite traumatic. Look at all those front porches, people would sit on those porches and talked to each other. Some of my fondest memories are sitting on the front porch with the radio playing an Indians game. Neighbors would stop to sit and for a couple of hours stay talking. Communities were different because no one had cars or television. One form of entertainment was being a neighbor. It was nice. My fondest memories are summer evenings sitting on a porch with my dad, neighbor men and some of my buddies listening to a ball game. Just about every house had a porch for that reason.

Cleary:

Why did your parents move out of Tremont after the Korean War? Was the neighborhood starting to change or did they want to buy a single family home?

Ziemba:

They bought the house on Starkweather, which was a double. They had renters upstairs. There was probably a slow exit of people moving out. One of the firsts was my best friend John who lived on Professor. He was a Russian. They rented and bought their first house in Old Brooklyn. That was quite a ways out there. When I was a kid, me and a few other guys maybe four times a year we would walk from here all the way out to Parma. We would spend the day in the woods. It was a wooded area and we had some favorite spots we liked to go to. We would walk all the way back. We would think nothing of it.

Cleary:

Were you in high school then?

Ziemba:

No, I was going to Tremont. It was a long walk but we would get there. We would have a heck of a good time but it was tough getting back. My parents bought their home very close to there. I really can't answer why that big exit took place. One thing could have been that the buses started to run out there. They switched from the trackless trolleys and the trolleys to diesel buses. Once the buses started going out there, the developers started to go out there. Post WWII the economy was initially not doing that well. Around 1948 and 1949 it started to boom again. A lot of veterans went to college on the GI bill. When they started to develop those areas many saw an opportunity to get out. They got bigger yards. I remember my grandfather telling my mom and dad that they were crazy for going all the way out there. Once they moved out there my grandfather would come over. He said that they were getting old and maybe after the sons moved out they could move in. They loved this neighborhood and the only reason they moved out was because he suffered a stroke. They finally had to leave. They moved in with my dad's sister and her physician husband. They just hated to leave this neighborhood. Their church was here and all their friends. My friend Ron and his parents lived on Professor almost next to St. John Cantius. Ron became a very successful investor. When his mom was in her eighties he could not get her to leave that house. There were bullet holes in the windows that she had to have replaced and still she would not leave.

Cleary:  
What year was this?

Ziemba:  
This was just in the last ten or maybe fifteen years. She lived in that house till she died. I'll bet there is still some old timers living here.  
My grandfather had a farm out on Brookpark Road, what today would be Brooklyn. He would pile us in his 1933 Dodge. We would head out to that farm on a Saturday or Sunday and stay all day. We would play baseball out in the field running through the cow pies.

Cleary:  
Did you travel another place outside the city or was everything here? Did you go Downtown for clothing?

Ziemba:  
You would not believe how nice downtown Cleveland used to be. It was gorgeous. It was immaculate and clean. The stores were magnificent and there were a lot of them. Sterling-Linder Davis used to have a store that was the up class store. My mother liked to take me in there at Christmas time because they had the most gorgeous Christmas tree. The decorations downtown at Christmas time were just beautiful. It was really something to see the displays in the windows. My mom would go to the May Company predominately. May Company had a big store on the corner of Ontario and Prospect. Higbee's was across the street. Sterling-Linder was down near Playhouse Square. Halle's was downtown. There were a lot of big department stores where people could buy clothing. There were dry good stores in the neighborhood where men could get work clothes and things like that. For shoes you went to the corner shoe store. You didn't go downtown.

Cleary:

So here in Tremont there were little Mom and Pop Shops?

Ziemba:

Yes, there were grocery stores and drug stores, dry good stores and shoe stores. There were delicatessens.

Cleary:

Was there any type of diners or restaurants in this area?

Ziemba:

One of my favorite places was a hotdog shop right on Starkweather and the corner of Scranton Road. The guy had the best hotdogs I ever tasted in my life. I can't remember the name of it. On W25th Street there were restaurants. W25th Street was a business district for shopping and for going to restaurants. W25th was a prosperous street at one time. It had theaters and men stores. It had a photography studio where I had my senior pictures taken. I had my first Holy Communion picture taken at a photography studio right here on Professor Ave.

Cleary:

Were there enough shops in Tremont to keep you in the community?

Ziemba:

My mother bought most of her stuff in that corner grocery store. On Saturdays to get produce we would go to W25th Street Market. Remember we didn't have big refrigerators. We had little iceboxes. We couldn't keep a lot of stuff. You did not shop for meat for a whole week. You couldn't freeze it. The icebox would keep it chilled. Whatever she was going to cook that day she would go buy it. Just like that chicken that she worked on right away. I would go with her and carry bags. That was not one of my favorite chores. I used to deliver newspapers, the Cleveland Press.

Cleary:

Was that a daily newspaper and was it delivered in the morning or afternoon?

Ziemba:

It was a daily paper delivered in the afternoon. That was a tough chore. When you are a young kid, you want to be playing ball in the summer but you have to go deliver the papers.

Cleary:

How old were you when you were delivering papers?

Ziemba;

I was nine. When we moved to Starkweather I still came over here to deliver papers.

Cleary:  
Where did you pick up your papers?

Ziemba:  
I picked them up right at the corner of Professor and Starkweather. My route was part of Starkweather to a little street that runs parallel to Professor. It was all of Professor and up Jefferson. I had one hundred and something customers.

Cleary:  
Did you have a wagon that you put them in?

Ziemba:  
I had to on Friday's because the Press was big. That was the only time I used a wagon. The other times I would carry them on my shoulders. I had a bag draped on each shoulder.

Cleary:  
Was that a seven day a week paper?

Ziemba:  
It was a six-day paper. The Plain Dealer was the only Sunday paper. There were three newspapers at that time. There was the News, the Press and Plain Dealer. The News and the Press were afternoon papers. The Plain Dealer was the morning paper and the Sunday paper.

Cleary:  
Was that how you earned your income to use for the movies?

Ziemba:  
I never saw any of that money. It went for the first house that we bought. I would deliver the papers, collect the money and turn it over to my mother. She would give me what I needed for the movies or an ice cream cone. I never thought anything else about it. It didn't bother me. I'm positive that other guys did the same thing. It was a family endeavor. The only thing that I ever got mad at my mother for was when I came home from the army. They were living in Parma. I had a great baseball collection and she threw them out. You would buy baseball cards with packs of gum. We used to trade them or gamble for them. We used to pitch them. At my grandfather's building we would go out to the curb and pitch pennies. You would toss a penny and the one closest to the wall, won them all. We did the same things with baseball cards. If you got a leaner everyone would try to knock it down because that was an automatic winner and he takes everything. We would shoot agates or marbles. The marbles we use to have were magnificent. I used to have thousands of them. I was the best marble shooter in the Tremont area. We used to play for keeps. We would draw a big circle and throw so many in. I forget how we would chose who went first. Everyone had their favorite shooter. The

marbles would get thrown into the circle and you would shoot your marble into another marble. If that marble went out of the circle you would keep it. She threw all those out too.