

2001 Oral History Project
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001
Interviewee: Eugene Kozak
Interviewer: Michael Douma
July 6, 2001

MD: When were you born, and where were you born?

EK: October 22, 1921, born in Grand Rapids.

MD: What do you remember of your early years and your family? How many siblings?

EK: Well, there were ten of us, however three died in infancy. Of course, I went to a parochial school and then on to Catholic Central High School. My father had a grocery and he also had a farm, and a lot of our spare time as children was working on the farm.

MD: Where was the farm?

EK: The farm was on Bradford Street, right across the street from the Meijer Gardens now. It was forty acres, and he raised mostly red and black raspberries. My father was one of the largest berry growers in the Kent County area.

MD: What were you doing as a job before the war broke out?

EK: Before the war I was a student at the University of Grand Rapids. In fact, our whole class volunteered in order to get the possibility of getting our degree. However, we were called into service three months before graduation, and our whole class was inducted at the same time. But we did get our degrees—business administration.

MD: What did you do when you first entered the military?

EK: I took my basic training at Fort Harrison, Indiana. Then I was with the finance disbursing section throughout the war.

MD: What was your first experience—you went over to Europe, was the first experience during the war?

EK: First experience was during the war, we went across on the SS Orion. I hesitate to even think of how many soldiers there were on the ship. We landed in Grenoch, Scotland, an estuary of Glasgow.

MD: So you spent some time in the British Isles. What were you doing?

EK: I was with a finance outfit. We were servicing the air corps at first in a little town called Molesworth. And then just prior to the invasion, we were switched into the southern part of England near Salisbury, and we serviced the medical corps, which was waiting for the invasion.

MD: When did you get transferred over to France? When were you sent over?

EK: I don't know the exact day, but I think it was D plus thirteen that we landed on Omaha beachhead.

MD: So the twenty-first of June?

EK: Probably, around that time.

MD: What was it like? Do you remember any stories of France or Normandy?

EK: It was pretty hectic because we used the...what do you call the holes that the soldiers used?

MD: Foxholes.

EK: We used the foxholes that were already there, and of course, we were subject to bombing at the time because Patton had not advanced that far. But it was a hectic time and once Patton got on the move we went right along with him.

MD: Why were you sent over to France so early after the invasion?

EK: I really don't know why, they needed the service troops there, I don't know, what they were going to use the money for, but we had all the invasion currency with us printed in French invasion currency.

MD: Interesting. Were you ever close to the front line, you stayed behind...?

EK: We weren't really that far away from the front lines. In fact, at one time, when we were in Le Mans in France, we found out later that we were almost encircled by the Germans and never even knew it. We were in close proximity of the lines. I remember that when we moved down to Mont Saint Michel, we were in a little town called Avranches. We were being bombed by the German bombers there, and they were also bombing England at the time. We were right in the area of the bombing done by the Germans.

MD: Do you remember the path you took through Europe during the war?

EK: I remember some of the towns. St. Lo, we landed in Omaha Beach, St. Lo, and Avranches I remember most of all because of the beautiful Mont Saint Michel that was out in the ocean just in front of us. Then of course we went on to Paris. And from Paris we went on to the French border, but we stayed in Nancy...no, Nancy was after the war—that was on our way back. I remember a little town called Nogent Sur Marne. That was just before Paris was taken. We went to Paris and we went to the border town on the border of Germany...I can't remember, Mike, just the name of the town.

(Strasbourg)

MD: So you also went in Germany?

EK: Yes. From France we went into Germany. I remember Kaiserslautern, we went along the Rhine, we went into Munich, and from Munich we went south. I remember a town

called Hamburg. Of course, we wound up in Salzburg on V-E Day, and then we stayed in Austria and Salzburg for the rest of the duration of the war.

MD: Was this your first experience in Europe?

EK: This was my first stab at seeing Europe and the British Isles, yes.

MD: How did it strike you? What was impressive, or scary, or...?

EK: England was sort of like a vacation, because we were not involved in the war. I was able to travel days off, and you could take trips, day trips, and weekend trips. However, when we were in Europe, we were pretty well confined. Most of everything was off-limits to us until we got into Salzburg, and even many areas of Salzburg were off-limits. Like the castle in Salzburg, that was off-limits to us. We were pretty well confined to our hotel and to our work areas.

MD: What were your duties? Do you remember how many hours a week you worked, and what exactly you did?

EK: We figured payrolls most of the time. That's all we were working on, is records and troop payrolls, for all the troops in the area. We had joined second army when we got into Salzburg, and we were affiliated with Mark Clark's forces when they came up from Italy. Most of the time, that's what we were doing, figuring payrolls, and computing payrolls, and dispensing the money.

MD: You said you were in Salzburg for V-E Day. Do you remember any excitement or what it was like?

EK: We didn't even realize that it was V-E Day when we got there. We found out after we were there that the armistice was declared in Europe. So it wasn't much of an excitement because we were oblivious to the fact that it was V-E Day.

MD: That brings me back to where were you on December seventh, 1941?

EK: December 7, 1941, I was in college.

MD: Okay, I remember. So after the war, you stayed in Europe for a little while?

EK: Our outfit stayed in Europe—we came back just before Christmas, December 1945, I think, 23rd or 24th. I was home for Christmas; I was discharged and home for Christmas. I remember the ship now that we came back; it was on the Kongsholm, the American Red Cross Mercy ship that was involved in World War One evacuation with the Gripsholm.

MD: You went over, you said, on the..?

EK: On the SS Orion.

MD: Which was a converted luxury liner?

EK: It was a British luxury liner.

MD: When you got back to Grand Rapids, do you remember noticing any change, like in your family structure, the area, or just coming back and seem different?

EK: Not really. My father still had the store; he still had the farm. I went to work; my first job after the war, I think I went to work for Standard Oil if I'm not mistaken, for a few months.

MD: When you got back, did you go back into education at all, did you go anymore...?

EK: Yes, I did. I took a post-graduate course, secretarial course at Davenport Institute.

MD: Where is that?

EK: That was in Grand Rapids.

MD: Were you sponsored at all by the GI Bill?

EK: Yes, I was; I took advantage of that.

MD: That must have been really nice. Did you work while you were going?

EK: I worked while I was under that, yes. You were able to earn so much money in addition to what the GI Bill paid you.

MD: Was it around this time that you met grandma, or what is your story on that?

EK: No, I knew your grandmother when she was a little girl. My father owned a farm across, what is now, the Meijer Gardens, and the Vander Laan family owned the farm that is now the Meijer Gardens. Your grandma's mother and the Vander Laans were very good friends, and they used to visit there. Your grandma's mother used to buy berries from my father. So our relationship goes back a long, long way. We went to high school together, and we went to Davenport College together. So, we knew each other for a long, long time.

MD: And you corresponded during the war?

EK: Yes, we did.

MD: And you have a lot of the correspondence still?

EK: I have it somewhere, up in the attic, I think, Mike.

MD: Did you have any children? Tell a story of how many children, their names, what they did...

EK: We had five children. Karl was the first born, after the war. We were married in Italy in 1948, and we came back in '49 and Karl was born in '49. And then Mary was born in '51. Janey was born in '53, Julie was born in '56, and John was born in '59. So that's our family history.

MD: When all your children went off to college, or got married and moved away, how did it affect your life? What changed?

EK: We were able to save a little money, Mike. That's what's going to happen to your mother and dad. (laughs)

MD: How was your family life different from your parents? What did you notice?

EK: I think our parents really struggled, because my mother and father were immigrants from Poland, did not know the language, they were factory workers most of the time. My mother worked as a chambermaid for the, what was now, Pantlind Hotel, or the Cody Hotel at the time. No, they had a tough time. I don't think our living conditions were anywhere near as meager as theirs were.

MD: Do you remember what type of house you grew up in?

EK: Oh sure, the house is still there.

MD: Was it quite packed?

EK: Not really because it was a large house. It was a two-story house, and my mother rented out two apartments upstairs in the house—my mother and dad. But then, when we needed the room, we took over the one apartment upstairs. So actually we were not that crowded.

MD: Did you receive any advice on bringing up your children from your parents?

EK: I don't think we...I think we managed pretty well on ourselves. In fact, there is an old Italian saying that we learned when we were in Italy, "the further you stay away from your parents, the better off you're going to be."

MD: Explain your time that you spent in Europe after the war when you were married.

EK: We spent two years in Naples, Italy. That was kind of like a big vacation also because I worked for the American Consulate, and it was just like having a job here in the United

States. I was an assistant to the disbursing officer, pretty much in the same line of work that I carried on through most of my life.

MD: Where were you married?

EK: We were married at a church called Our Lady of Good Counsel in Naples, Italy.

MD: How long did you stay in Europe?

EK: I was in Europe two years, and Grandma was in Europe one year. I was in Europe one year when she came over, and then we stayed another year after we were married.

MD: And you did extensive traveling during that time?

EK: A lot, a lot of traveling. Every weekend it was either Capri, or Ischia, or Sorrento, or Pompeii, or Amalfi, or Venice, Rome, Florence, Pisa. We did very extensive traveling in Europe.

MD: How much of the languages did you pick up in Europe?

EK: Both of us studied. We had a private tutor, and at the time we were there I could speak rather fluent Italian. I got to the point that I was writing Italian composition.

MD: Any other languages that you picked up? Parts of?

EK: When I was in the Army, they sent me to Paris in July of 1945, after the war, and I stayed in Paris for two months studying French at the Sorbonne. But without using it, you lose that little bit that you learn.

MD: When you were back in Grand Rapids working, did you spend more than forty hours a week working? Were you quite busy and gone quite often?

EK: No, I think they pretty well limited us to forty hours. My first real job after we were married was with the C & O Railroad, and I worked there for about a year and a half.

Then I got a job with the E. O. Bulman Manufacturing Company, which made paper dispensers, and I worked for them for twenty-five years.

MD: What effect did your work schedules have on your marriage and on your family?

EK: I was on a pretty much a regular eight hour day so I wasn't subject to a lot of overtime or anything. So I don't think it had much effect on us at all.

MD: So you spent quite a bit of time with your children?

EK: Oh, sure. And also at home. Right.

MD: Do you remember any vacation you went on as a family?

EK: Yes, we went to Niagara Falls with the kids. We went down to the caverns, Mammoth Cave. We made several trips to Indiana, because our relatives on the Pabel family, several of them were in Indiana, we made many trips to Indianapolis, and the area around Indianapolis. That's about it. We didn't travel too much, but we used to go to the beach, to Grand Haven and what's the lake up north? Silver Lake. Those were our favorite spots.

MD: What activities do you remember that you did as a family, or just you and grandma together?

EK: We were involved in 4-H. I had classes in entomology, and grandma had classes in sewing, knitting, and crocheting. And, of course, John was involved in sports. All of our children were involved in music—Janey played flute, your mother played piano, Karl played trumpet, John played trumpet, and Mary played clarinet. So we were quite involved in the music, both in grade school and in high school.

MD: When your children moved off, did it affect your social life? What did you start doing more of or less of?

EK: We did a lot of traveling. We went to Europe several. Janey got married and she moved to England for three years. We made two trips to England. We made a trip to Spain, Portugal, Morocco. We made two trips to Italy. We made a beautiful trip, seventeen or eighteen days, to California. We went to Wisconsin. We made a lot of local travel within three, four hundred miles.

MD: Is there any stories that stick out as especially important or comedic or interesting during those travels?

EK: They were all exciting to us, Mike. I would think probably the Alhambra in Spain was probably the highlight of our Spanish trip. Oh, and another one, while we were in Morocco, we were invited...part of our trip was a sultan's dinner in a huge tent in Marakesh. I think that was the highlight of that whole trip, the sultan's dinner, and it was really something to see. Snakes, and belly dancers, and pythons, and everything else to entertain us. When we were in England, Janey took us to a lot of local English...like we went to a dinner where the jester came and took a chicken leg off of your plate and starting eating your chicken leg. And silly things like that. (laughs)

MD: At retirement, how did you relate to each other, grandma and you? What did you start doing once you retired?

EK: Well, I'll tell you, Mike, retirement—I lost my job with Bulman. I was discharged, they say because of realignment of the company. And so what I did, we had a trip scheduled to Europe, our 30th wedding anniversary trip, so we just decided to go through with it and not cancel it. When I came back I had a job offer in Casnovia, where I stayed two years. And after that I started my own business, I started an antique shop on the north end of Grand Rapids, and I stayed in that until I was sixty-two and could get my Social Security.

MD: Was that quite a drive to Casnovia?

EK: About seventeen miles.

MD: I'm not quite familiar where that is.

EK: Just on the way to Newaygo.

MD: Also at retirement, were there any hobbies? I know flowers and antiques...

EK: We took ballroom dancing lessons for about eighteen years. Our interest was with a group of about eight people, and we generally spent either a Saturday or Sunday night either at the Ramona Terrace or at the DAV Hall at 44th and Eastern, dancing to the beautiful music of the Middleton Trio. Which, of course, I know you appreciate so much, Mike. (laughs)

MD: Yes, they're one of my favorites.

EK: One of your favorites, yeah. (laughs)

MD: And also flowers?

EK: Flowers, I've been involved with the Grand Valley Iris Society for probably fifteen years.

MD: Grand Rapids, right?

EK: Grand Rapids, right. Been president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer—held every office with them.

MD: And at times you've had quite extensive flower collections at your own house.

EK: Oh, sure, yes. Gardens, right.

MD: Involved with antiques?

EK: Yeah, antiques have been a part of my life. My car has a little sign in the back window that says, "this car stops at every garage sale."

MD: And just now you're getting involved with eBay.

EK: I'm trying to sell some of this stuff on eBay. We have done a few, not too many sales.

MD: You're also quite an editorial writer from what I hear. You get your name in the paper.

EK: Well, I have submitted two or three articles to the Pulse. When I get really involved and upset about some remarks, some ideas that people keep pounding at in the press.

MD: I know there's a little story just recently if you'd like to tell it.

EK: Well, recently I wrote an article and the press labeled it as "Stop bashing the Van Andels and the DeVoses," because some lady was complaining that their name was linked on to charity all the time, and they just wanted the limelight. Why do they have to go for the limelight and give some of those millions to the poor instead of putting their name on all the various building and things that they are establishing. I just said in the article that I'm tired of hearing these people complaining about the Van Andels and the De Voses when they have done so much for Grand Rapids, colleges, health, problems in the city. A couple days later, to my surprise, Rich De Vos called me. He wanted to know what prompted me to write the article. And I said, "Well, you guys have done so much for our city, and people just don't seem to appreciate it, so I decided to voice my anger a little bit about it."

MD: Okay. Can you just list off the occupations that your children have?

EK: Karl, our oldest, is in tool and die work, a machinist. Mary and her husband own a couple hundred-acre farm in Coopersville and they are raising about fifty beef cattle. Dick, her husband, has a full-time job hauling milk for Dean Milk Company, and Mary works part-time at the Meijer supermarket. She's been there about twenty years, I think, since the Jenison store opened. She was one of the longevity people at the Jenison store.

Janey works for some doctors. She had worked at Spectrum for a while, and now she is still involved at Spectrum with the doctors, as secretary. Julie, is...

MD: A wonderful housewife?

EK: Yeah, you know all about your mother. Your mother has held various jobs also. And John is an operating room assistant at the Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

MD: Do you think they were affected by your job choices or by what you pushed them towards?

EK: No, actually, I don't think any of our children knew what they wanted to get into. John, yes. John had started working at Butterworth Hospital at the time, while he was still in high school, I believe. St. Mary's Hospital, he worked there, and then when he was at Grand Valley he worked with Dr. Tomata and Rajani in open heart surgery, and he got a real taste of medicine. Of course his wife, Nancy was a veterinarian, and they moved down to North Carolina because of the horse exposure down in the area. And he got a job there at the hospital. In fact, his doctor that he worked with for a long, long time, was trying to convince him to go further on to college and become either a doctor's assistant or go on to be a doctor, but with John hurting his hand so, that's almost an impossibility.

MD: What kind of community involvement have you seeked or enjoyed? Do you do anything associated with the city, or have you ever had any influence?

EK: Not community involvement. I've been involved more in social things, the iris club, and you know, grandma and I are pretty involved in our church activities.

MD: What church is that?

EK: Holy Spirit Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

MD: How long have you gone there?

EK: We've been members there for fifty-one years now. We are charter members. We've been with them an awful long time; we're some of the oldest members of that church.

MD: Do you notice any great change in the area of Grand Rapids?

EK: We notice a change in our own area—the development and building is just...When we moved here, we were an agricultural community. Our house is probably one of the oldest houses on the street. I think ours and the Jakolat house were two of the oldest houses on the street. But when we moved here, most of the area across from us was vacant land, was agriculture. Now the only agriculture left is John Kinney's property.

[End of tape]