

Interviewee: Urszula Wierbik
Interviewers: Haley Andrews & Jamie Young
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Abstract: Urszula Wierbik was born in Slupsk, Poland in 1950. She attended grammar and high school in Poland and became involved in various recreational clubs. After marrying her husband of 41 years and having two children, a boy and a girl, she came to the United States in order to receive medical treatment for an undisclosed illness. She did not speak a word of English and was only granted permission for herself and her daughter to leave Poland, forcing her to leave her family and friends behind. She received her treatment and built a home for herself, and started her own business to provide for her and her daughter. Eventually, her husband and son were able to join Urszula and her daughter in Worcester. Urszula's husband became a factory worker and she began a cleaning business without ever advertising. The flexible hours of her cleaning service allowed Urszula to focus on the maintenance of her home, family finances, and other domestic responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. In the interview, Urszula acknowledges her cleaning business as something in which she takes great pride and enjoys. She explains that her domestic responsibilities mirror what would have been expected of women her age in Poland, and that her husband focuses on the exterior of the home (landscaping, repairs, etc.), providing them with equal responsibilities in the sustenance of their home. Throughout the interview, Urszula highlights the fact that her ability to own and run her own business provides her with opportunities to maintain an intimate and close relationship with her husband, children, and grandchildren. One of the final questions was if she thought she had a legacy, after all she had been through. Her response was, "I don't feel that way. It's just you have the duty to do and you just have to accomplish." This speaks volumes about the kind of person Urszula Hierbik is and her attitude of overcoming all obstacles that appear in her path.

HA: Alright. So what is your full maiden name, and your married name?

UH: Urszula Sprengel Wierbik.

HA: Okay. And when were you born?

UH: In Poland.

HA: And have you ever married?

UH: Yes.

HA: What's the name of your current husband?

UH: No. It was, [baby makes noise in background] it was...

HA: Past?

UH: Yeah.

HA: Okay. Did you have any previous husbands? Or just one?

UH: One.

HA: Do you have any children?

UH: Yes.

HA: How many?

UH: Two, two children.

HA: Boy or girl?

UH: Girl and boy.

HA: Which one came first?

UH: My daughter.

HA: Awh. And do you have any grandchildren? [laughs, because one grandchild is in the room at the time]

UH: Yes, I have three grandchildren.

HA: How old are they and...

UH: Ten years old, Alexander, five years old, Angelica, and seven months, Felix.

HA: Okay, so what cultures and ethnicities do you identify with, like your family background?

UH: Polish.

HA: Polish, okay. And, do you want to tell us a little bit, like, about your parents?

UH: [pause] What would you like to know?

HA: Just like, you can start with your mother if you want, like where...you came from Poland, she was in Poland, correct?

UH: Yes, she was in Poland but she, she passed away when she was very young, 42 years old.

HA: I'm sorry.

UH: And my father was 66 when he passed away. And I have a one brother---oh no I mean no brother right now I---you want to know my parents. They lived in north of Poland in the city called Slupsk. S-L-U-P-S-K. and...they were just typical Polish family, middle class, you know.

HA: How long were they married for?

UH: How old my parents were?

HA: How long were they together, do you know?

UH: My parents?

HA: Yeah.

UH: About 25 years.

HA: Oh, that's very nice. Did they ever come to America, or did they stay in Poland?

UH: No, my mother passed when away when...

HA: When she was still in Poland?

UH: Yes, okay yeah.

HA: Okay. So, have you lived anywhere else during your life? Like, when you moved here from Poland?

UH: No.

HA: Did you come straight to Worcester?

UH: Yes.

HA: But you lived somewhere else in Worcester before here?

UH: Yes. I lived in a suburban small apartments. [**HA:** Oh ok.] It was the downtown apartments.

HA: Okay.

UH: And then I built this house. I-I bought the land and I built this house.

HA: What was-what was your neighborhood like, generally like, in Poland growing up?

UH: There was working, there was working class. And in...in Poland, there was, at the time we didn't have like a single houses that people lived. Most of the time like in Europe in the complex apartments.

HA: Shared them?

UH: Yes.

HA: How many, about how many families were in those houses usually?

UH: There was like a usually like a four floors, sometimes three floors and each floor was like a three family.

HA: Oh wow.

UH: Usually...so it depends on how the family large. Usually there four people, five people, six people, and ours floor was 10 people.

HA: Oh wow.

UR: Yes.

HA: So they had to be pretty big buildings?

UH: [pauses]

HA: [laughing] Or not really?

UH: That apartment was very small, that apartment was very small. We even didn't have the bathroom upstairs. We have to go downstairs on the first floor, and we live on the second floor.

HA: Oh wow. Was there only one bathroom in the whole...

UH: There was three bathrooms in the building. And each one belonged to that floor. So...it was horrible [laughing]. There was, there was [laughs] bad memory--- that's how

there was no, no---there was after second war when my parents arrived to that city in the north because their land was occupied by Germany. And after the second war they move out to the Germany and the Polish people start moving in. [HA: I see.] So that's what my parents---at was the apartment I was born in---was---grew up actually.

HA: Did you live there your whole life when you were in Poland? Or did you live different places in Poland?

UH: No, just that one.

HA: Just that one?

UH: Just that one, yeah.

HA: Okay...so you were saying before that you had some other family members in the area, do you just want to tell us about where they are?

UH: About other family in our neighborhood?

HA: Well in the area now, in Worcester area. I know you had said before that you had some family around.

UH: No, I mean I was renting out the proper---the apartment in different part of the city, usually around Eleventh Street.

HA: Oh, okay.

UH: Sometimes, a couple times.

HA: Oh, okay. So, but now, you have, do you have family around here, like now currently like you said...

UH: My family, my family, my daughter live in Oxford.

HA: In Oxford, okay.

UH: My son live in Dudley.

HA: Okay.

UH: That's my, my closest family.

HA: That's nice that they're both over here. How did you decide to come to the U.S. in the first place?

UH: I came for the medical reason.

HA: Oh okay.

UH: And I came for, well hoping to, to get the help and, and I received the help.

HA: Oh that's great, it's good to hear. So did you come by yourself?

UH: No, I came with my daughter.

HA: Oh she was already...she was born in Poland.

UH: Yeah.

HA: Oh okay.

UH: She was 10 years old then,

[**HA:** Oh wow.]

UH: when she came with me.

HA: That's nice.

UH: And I had to leave my son over there with my husband.

HA: Oh, I see.

UH: I was, I was just only covered permission to come here with my daughter.

HA: And then he came over later?

UH: Later.

HA: That's good...So what challenges do you think the city of Worcester faces right now? And, like, is there like anything you would want to change about the city of Worcester...that you know of?

UH: Well, I can only speak from my experience with my business, because I am in a cleaning service business.

[**HA:** Yeah.]

UH: First I was cleaning myself, and then I opened a service. And it's like I have the service not-not about 20 years.

HA: Wow that's great.]

UH: Because I never worked for somebody I worked for myself from the beginning.

HA: Yeah.]

UH: But I start to---just opened the service because I had so many customers and I just realized I saved money better than nursing home, than nurse's aide, and there was flexible hours, there was mother hours. And I had the two children so it was easy for me to do this kind of the job. But I got so many clients I don't know what to do with them! So I opened a cleaning service.

HA: That's great! [laughs]

UH: And I'm still there. Still...

HA: Going good?

UH: Yeah. I run the service with my daughter now. When she graduate from college and she got married, she had child, so it is a great job for her because she's my partner---I make her my partner, and we run the service together.

HA: Oh that's so nice!

UH: Yeah, my son's helping me. He also is a college graduate but he, he has own business but he helps me Friday

HA: Oh.

UH: Bbecause we provide transportation for people and I just needed a little bit more time. I'm getting old [laughs] so I need a Friday for myself and for my family.

HA: Take a day off!

UH: That's right.

HA: So, was that anything that, like, you had done when you were in Poland? Did you...

UH: No.

HA: It was just something that was kind of...

UH: It was something I never, I never thought I would do.

HA: It just occurred when you came here?

UH: Well I just realized it was good money.

HA: Yeah

UH: And that's what I needed. I never thought I would stay with it for so many years, but I-I like it, you know?

HA: Yeah.

UH: I like it. I don't like doing it myself, but I'm not doing for many years right now. It's just--- time is not---except my home, and also not always. I give it help when I need it.

HA: Yeah. So you've lived in Worcester for about 20-25 years now you said earlier?

UH: Yeah.

HA: Or a few more yeah.

UH: From '82, yeah.

HA: So like, what changes...has Worcester really changed since you first got here?

UH: Yes, yes it was change. It was change, change for worst. [laughs].

HA: For worse?

UH: [laughing] No, not really the economy right now is, is very bad. But I think Worcester is beautiful city, I-I like it, I enjoy here.

HA: Yeah.

UH: And I met some very interesting people through my job. And with my customers and I'm still friendly with them for so many years. We still have our---the older people and they with me from the beginning, from the beginning, so it's just like a---you know you attached to these people. And kind of we attached to them too.

HA: Yeah, that's nice that you get to know people

UH: Yeah, yeah--- and stay with them. I tried different job. I worked for the Digital Company in Marlboro. And...

HA: Oh really?

UH: Yes, I worked for, for a nurse's aide, but---for nursing homes---but there was not...I wasn't very happy. I'm not the person to sit in assigned same place and do some kind of record.

HA: You have to be doing something.

UH: Yeah, it was not creative at all. And I consider that cleaning service business is very, is very interesting.

HA: Yeah.

UH: It is, it is. You meet a lot of people and you...

HA: Get to see a lot of different homes!

UH: Yes, a lot of homes. You know, how do people live. You participate kind of with their life.

HA: um-hmm..

UH: So...kind of. [laughs]

HA: No, I would think that would be very interesting. So would you say that there are any, like, distinct characteristics that make Worcester, like, the place that it is? Is there anything that stands out?

UH: Well, I have some challenges to move to the other cities because I have the Polish community is spread all over the place, and I have some friends in different states and different cities. And I just, I get used to, too. And I think it's very nice place to live. Has a lot of colleges.

HA: Yeah [laughs]

UH: And I always have my people with the education and I think it's, it's---right now we are cleaning the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy for 10 years.

HA: Oh wow.

UH: Yes, and I have a contract with them...through my clients because they...

HA: Recommend?

UH: Mm-hmm.

HA: That's great.

UH: Yeah.

HA: That's so nice. So what do you think women's experiences in Worcester have been, generally? [pause] Do you think that it's equal, do you think it's the same...or...

UH: I think it's better now. You know, I don't have too much experience. I cannot tell you

HA: Yeah.

UH: Some examples because I was---didn't work for the factory for the long time and I don't, I don't have the comparison. Because-because I was working for myself, there was a different...I was the ruler. I make my-my rules.

HA: Yeah, but you get that basic vibe?

UH: Yeah, I think is-is-is-is better now.

HA: yeah Is better now. Okay, you know.

HA: So where did you attend school when you were a child...jumping back?[laughs]

UH: Oh, jumping back? In Poland.

HA: In Poland? Like, what was the name of it?

UH: Of my school?

HA: Mmm-hmmm.

UH: First there was, of course, grammar school and then there was high school. And then I have after work---there's--- like three years' study offered like a kind of like a social---you can compare with a social worker

HA: Oh, okay.

UH: And I work for clubs most of the time.

HA: What was...

UH: But they're not the clubs like here, with the alcohol or some.

HA: Oh, okay

UH: It was a club where the--- the people got out to, kind of...kind of culture clubs.

HA: Oh, okay. So kind of recreational?

UH: Yes. Recreation, and we invite many people and they, they came; they shared experience, and there was actors and-and painters, and that kind of...And for the example, I liked this, I used to like this job very much, so I'm Vice President of the Worcester Polish Heritage Foundation in Worcester, and we do this. Right now we have a present exhibition in, in the library, Worcester Library

HA: Umm-hmm.

UH:So you can go and check. We have exhibition exhibit about the Chopin

HA: Oh, okay.

UH: Exhibit about Katyn...it's a, it's a horrible place where Russian kills over 20,000 Polish officers, they murdered.

HA: Wow.

UH: And it's, it's very touching.

HA: Yeah. So you can go and check. And we also have in Saxe Room...Saxe Room...Saxe Room? I believe that's the pronunciation [laughs], another exhibition of Mrs. Relieva(ph) paintings.

HA: Oh.

UH: It's folklore, folklore paintings, and it, it will be until in the end of this month.

HA: Oh, that's very cool. Okay. So what were some of your challenges in education, would you say?

UH: My...no, no...my challenge in education? What do you mean by that?

HA: Like, what were some of the difficulties that you faced, like, when

UH: In United States?

HA: in school? Well, did you, you didn't attend school in the United States

UH: No, no, no.

HA: So I guess when you were a child or coming up? What were...

UH: Difficulty? I never was a mathematic and chemistry individual [laughing].

HA: [laughing] Me neither!

UH: No...but...[laughing]

HA: Okay so...

UH: Actually, I was, I remember I was a good student.

HA: Yeah?

UH: Mmm hmmm.

HA: So then when you came to the United States you were already all done though, so you never...

UH: No, I was, I was 33 years old. So...

HA: How did you learn English? Did you know any English?

UH: From my children.

HA: Oh. And I took few free classes, and just, just learned. Too bad I had no chance to go to the school because I was by myself with my daughter first, for a few years, then my son came, and my husband came the last, so...I had to provide [laughs] bread for the table. And I build the house before my husband came.

HA: Oh.

UH: Yeah, I was...

HA: Wow!

UH: I was busy.

HA: [flipping through papers] A lot of these we've already answered. So, what are some of your primary responsibilities in term of—in terms of—housework, like, in your own home...here?

UH: My responsibilities?

HA: Yeah.

UH: Well, naturally around the, around the house. [laughs]

HA: Cooking? Cleaning?

UH: Cooking, cleaning, and managing the money

HA: umm-hmm...

UH: Because my husband doesn't like that [both laughing]. He's outside person, so [clears throat] he likes to do everything outside but nothing...if something were to get broken and need to be repaired, so---'s, he's very good. But that's, that's---most of the time that's how the Polish people run the households.

HA: So it's about the same?

UH: Usually the women are taking care of everything, except the repair stuff. [laughs]. And I have a couple of friends in Boston, they do---men---they paint, they cut the grass, they do the things unbelievable.

HA: Would you say they'd be, like, about the same kind of roles, like, in Poland, that they're about the same?

UH: Yeah, about the same. You just kind of taking what you learned and how you've been taught by the parents to the other, other place, and just---automatically kind of.

HA: Did you think when---you said you came over here for medical reasons...did you think you were going to stay here ?

UH: No.

HA: Or did you think you were going back to Poland?

UH: No, I never thought I would stay here.

HA: You would want to go back?

UH: Uh, it's not a question I want to go back. I didn't, I didn't planned to-to leave the country

HA: Oh okay.

UH: And my family and my friends, and...it was just happened, you know?

HA: I see, okay.

UH: Remember, I am from the Communist country. We are not allowed to go anywhere

HA: Yeah.

UH: So you have no comparison. You cannot talk with other people because generally nobody never...went to anywhere

HA: Everybody stayed.

UH: Except, like, East part of the Germany, and maybe Czechoslovakia, Russia, and Communist countries from the same block. You cannot---you, you are not allowed to go to other capitalist countries.

HA: I see, okay. So it was never really an option, so you never...

UH: No. If, if you don't know, you don't miss stuff

HA: yeah.

UH: Because you don't know

HA: I see.

UH: What you're missing...

HA: So what time of---what type of---like, work does your husband do?

UH: From Poland he is mechanical engineer, but he never work as an engineer here in the United States.

HA: So he just pretty much...he repairs the house and stuff?

UH: No, he...no, he works for the...the last job he retired, it was at Gate(ph)...[mumbling to herself]...I forgot its name even! [laughs] It was a firm. That was a firm, they make part---metal part---from, from powder.

HA: Oh okay

UH: Yes, is from Worcester.

HA: Okay.

UH: It's not longer...

HA: So it was a factory?

UH: Yes, it was factory. But it's not longer existence here. They move out...

HA: Oh, okay.

UH: from Worcester area.

HA: Oh..

HA: Okay, so do you think...do you consider yourself active politically?

UH: No.

HA: No? Okay. Have you been involved in any volunteer or community work lately?

UH: Yup, yup.

HA: What kinds of stuff would you say?

UH: Well, like the Worcester Polish Heritage Foundation, I'm very active because I'm Vice President, so I'm,

HA: Oh, wow.

UH: I'm...always have plenty to do! [laughs]

HA: How long have you been a part of that?

UH: We opened---there was no organization---we opened Worcester Polish Heritage Foundation five years ago.

HA: Oh okay

UH: So... and I'm... [phone ringing]

HA: Do you need to...?

UH: That's okay.

HA: Okay.

UH: And I've also gotten---I was singing in a church, the staff---

HA: Oh.

UH: ...helping the church with its activities and coffee social and bake the cakes---kind of woman stuff. [laughs].

HA: So you, are you active in your church...like, do you...

UH: Yeah. You're very...

UH: Yeah.

HA: Okay...so how have health issues impacted your life or those in your family? You were saying before that that's what brought you here in the first place correct?

UH: I don't really...could you repeat please?

HA: How have like health issues and stuff, how have they impacted your life and your family?

UH: It's ery good.

HA: It's very good?

UH: It's very good. I'm very grateful to be here I have a lot to take to America.

HA: Okay, so in terms of healthcare now what are some of your experiences like access, equality, and getting affordable healthcare, would you say?

UH: Well, I can speak for my yard(?), so to speak...well, we don't have problems so I don't go to doctors so often. Just you know minor things and nobody is really sick, so I can't judge anybody and tell anything. It's just, it's okay right now.

HA: Just take it as it comes.

UH: Yeah. It's okay. And we have the help when we need. And I think it's--- and of course you have to pay, nothing for free

HA: Yes.

UH: I don't have bad comments.

HA: That's good. Okay, what would you say was like the hardest part of coming here? Like what are the most difficult things? Transitions or...

UH: For me language and, and there was no time to actually go to school because you have to...First immigrants face always the worst [laughs]. It's easy for my children. And

you'll notice they have the houses, they have the...they educated, they think differently. So...that was my goal and it was solved.

HA: Okay [pause] okay, so then...

UH: I always have a job for myself so I cannot speak for this matter. Because when I have always more to do than I was able to do. So this that job was never, that job, cleaning service, was never a problem for me, so that's what I'm living.

HA: Yeah.

UH: I do this for living. We have a quite few employee and they stick with me for long time.

HA: Have you always been in the same location or have you like expanded like...

UH: I don't want to, I never advertise.

HA: Oh.

UH: Never. Because I don't want to go to the public, because I don't want to deal with public, it's, it's hard. But when you are a referral, have a referral from the other people, it different approach.

HA: Yeah.

UH: People they already know who you are, they know something about you, and I know who that, my employer is, so...

HA: That's great so you got all of your clients from...

UH: Yeah, just by the referral.

HA: That's great.

UH: Commercial (_____ ?) so I'm lucky with the spot.

HA: So now that we're working to tell a fuller story of the history of women than has been in the pass, is there anything else you just want to tell us? Like is there anything else we should include in this you think? Is there anything we've missed, like very important experiences we didn't cover? That you'd say?

UH: No, I think we have a quite simple life, ours pleasure is to travel.

HA: You like to travel?

UH: Yeah I like to travel.

HA: Where have you gone? Like some of the places you've traveled?

UH: Oh quite few. United States, that's the first. Cause I think it is beautiful. There is just so much to see. We just got back in June---July from Alaska. We worked hard saving money and go to the trip.

HA: Did you get to see the Northern Lights?

UH: No, no [laughs]. We went seven days on cruise and five days in land. But it was a big celebration, it was my 60 birthday party over there, and 40 years of marriage.

HA: Wow!

JY: Congratulations!

HA: Yeah congratulations, a big year! [laughs]

UH: Oh yes.

HA: So where—where else did you go?

UH: Well...

HA: Just within the United States? Or did you go out of the country?

UH: Well, no sometimes just would need a rest and go to the Mexico, which was the cheapest one [laughs]. You lie down and get rest.

HA: You just relax. [laughs] So have you always...like...

UH: No, we went to the Paris. And I went to there from Poland because we used this opportunity to go the Poland. And from Poland we taking the trip across and in Italy. I took my daughter for 12 days and it cost me \$499, 15 years ago. It was 15 years ago but still...When you change the dollar for the zloty [polish currency], and you can take opportunity there and it's much less expensive than from here. But lately we are not planning anything, Alaska was a big expense. [laughs]

HA: It was probably worth it!

UH: It was worth it, absolutely, absolutely. Nobody will take away from you what you see it, an experience.

HA: So is there anyone else that you'd suggest we talk to, to like get a fuller, broader idea?

UH: To talk to with my friends, or the Polish people? What you mean?

HA: Just anybody else that kind of would relate to this whole idea of trying to get like a better idea of this Women of Worcester. Is there anybody you would really...

UH: I have a couple people in mind and they probably would like to talk. Their English is excellent so they would be much easier than me [laughs] and they would be better to express themselves better.

[**HA**[laughing]: I think you express yourself fine!]

UH: But you could ask them, they are interesting, very interesting people.

HA: Okay...alright. So is there anything else you wanna add? Is there anything that you can think of?

UH: I don't know.

HA: Do you believe you have a legacy? It's one of the things that...Do you believe that there is a legacy that you have?

UH: What you mean by legacy? I don't...

HA: Like something that you wanna like leave behind for future generations, like something that you hope to pass on?

UH: Well, I'm just ordinary person, so I don't know if I'd be able to contribute something except to my, my family, and to work for some people at the some organization and the...

JY: Well maybe with your business. I know that it's quite an accomplishment that you came here, built your own house, without any help from your husband or anybody else. It seems that you started your own business and it's still going today. Do you think that that says something about the kind of person that you are, that you've gone through the medical issues that brought you to the U.S. and, and then coming here by yourself to what you've become today? Do you think that?

UH: I don't feel that way. It's just you have the duty to do and you just have to accomplish.

JY: Yeah.

HA: Yeah.

UH: I don't think it's any big deal [laughing]. When Maria told me about that I said, "I don't know." I said, "I'm ordinary person, what's interesting with my story?" Perhaps everybody have something to contribute.

HA: Definitely, I think so. It's very interesting. Okay well I think that's about it. Thank you very much.

UH: You're very welcome.

HA: It was very interesting, I like it.