Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM NAHIRNIAK

Ukrainian Resistance, World War II

2005

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Nahirniak, William, (1922-), Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

William "Bill" Nahirniak, a Romania native, discusses his experiences in the Ukrainian Resistance during World War II. Nahirniak discusses his childhood in Romania and highlights that the village he grew up in was at different times part of Romania, the Soviet Union, and Ukraine. At age six, he talks about being adopted by his uncle after his mother died and learning English during a year spent in Winnipeg (Canada). Nahirniak reports his family moved to Poland in 1940 while he earned a bachelor's degree in engineering in Gratz (Austria). In 1942, he reports he got a job at an architectural office in Lviv (western Ukraine). He details how his job allowed him to get travel documents and a refuge card, which helped him act as an information officer for the underground movement. Nahirniak reveals he gathered on the German Army and weaknesses in infrastructure, especially bridges. He describes living in a German police state, including food rationing and his experience secretly transporting nationalist documents to Krakow. Nahirniak examines the politics of the Ukrainian Nationalists organization and the issue that once Ukraine was freed from Germany, the Soviet Union would move in and take over the country. He discusses being marked as someone not in favor of the Soviet Union and fleeing to Austria. Living in southern Austria when the war ended, Nahirniak states he moved back to Gratz after the Soviet troops moved out, and he reunited with his girlfriend. He talks about working for the International Refugee Organization in Saltzburg (Austria) maintaining refugee camps, and he comments on immigrating to the United States, where some of his wife's family lived. Nahirniak examines the political situation of Ukraine after the war, its progress as a democracy, the recent Orange Revolution, and the lingering effects of Soviet occupation.

Biographical Sketch:

Nahirniak (b.1922) was born in Romania and, after his mother died, spent a year in Canada with his adoptive father. During World War II, he lived in Austria and Ukraine and was part of the Ukrainian underground movement. After the war, Nahirniak immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Sun Prairie (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, 2005.
Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, 2005.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

John: This is John Driscoll and today is March 23, 2005, and this is an oral history interview with Bill Nahirniak, from Sun Prairie. We are interviewing in the conference room at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And Bill, thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview and coming down.

Bill: My pleasure.

John: Why don't we start at the beginning? Where and when were you born?

Bill: Well, I'll start with my father was born in Austria.

John: Okay.

Bill: I was born in Romania. My two sisters that were born after I left home, then were born in the Soviet Union.

John: Okay.

Bill: And all of us were born in the same village that is presently in Ukraine.

John: Okay. All right.

Bill: I want that to show you what the history was of East Europe has looked for the last years.

John: You stayed and the government left.

Bill: Yeah. So I was born in December, December 8.

John: What year?

Bill: '22.

John: 1922. Okay. And how about early life? School? Things like that?

Bill: Well, an interesting situation was I was an orphan. My mother died when I was six years old. And my father and I had a sister at that time that was two years older. He couldn't take care of both of us, so my uncle, my father's brother, took me in. And we took a trip to Canada about a year later and spent approximately one year. See, my adoptive father was a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. And he was invited to Winnipeg, Canada, so we spent there about a year. And he wasn't quite pleased with the situation, so we came back. While I was in Canada, I learned the English language quite well. Of course, within a couple of

years after our return, I forgot. Mostly. However, coming back to the United States in 1949 I learned the language quite easily and I retained the accent. Which is quite interesting because most of my friends, some of them even studying in the United States, they still have an accent. I lost most of it. Because as a child I learned the language.

John: Okay.

Bill: That is an interesting point.

John: Yeah.

Bill: Well, I can't, it's a long story beginning about my young life. But at the age of seventeen, that was in 1940, the Soviet Union has taken over part of the northern Romania, a province called Bukovina, And being a priest, my father decided to kick the country, and we wound up in a place presently in Poland, it used to be called in German Breslau. Now it's called Wrocław. In Poland.

John: Okay.

Bill: This is where my kind-of immigration started. Eventually I went back in 1941 after the war started between Germany and the Soviet Union. I went back to a western part of Ukraine, at that time. I tried to get the family back out east, and be settled down, because we were in kind of camps out there without any place of our own. And I got the approval of the archbishop at that time, and the city of Kholm, presently Chełm, also in Poland. And we moved to a town in that area where my father got a job at that time. Professor of religion at Latree (??) Schools in that area. And then I traveled to Austria at that time and finished my engineering schooling, that I started back home in 1942, in the city of Gratz, Austria.

John: Oh, yes.

Bill: With a bachelor of engineering at that time. They had only two sections. That was the hochbau which was architecture, and keifbau which was civil engineering. Hochbau meant up, upper, which is architecture, and keifbau is civil engineering.

John: I see.

Bill: Roads and so forth. With that, I went back to western Ukraine during the war, and it was under the German occupation at that time, to a city called Lviv, that's a larger city of about 750,000 population. And I worked supposedly for an office, an architectural office, doing a variety of things. Some drafting, and some supervision of work, and so I got familiar with

the situation out there. But on the other hand, the two partners in that firm, they knew that I was involved in underground work at that time, and so they permitted me, and they even they tried my request that they would give me a pass that I was traveling, and so forth. So that helped me very much. First, the knowledge of the German language, and second, the opportunity to travel throughout that area. It used to be called General Government. It was not an occupied eastern Ukraine. That was separate. If I wanted to travel to there, I needed more than just a pass from my office. So therefore I concentrated my work and this is where I was stationed in the western part of Ukraine at that time.

John: Okay.

Bill: That allowed me, actually I was sort of an information officer. We didn't call it spy. But they said, knowing the German language and being able to travel and a so-called either busses or trains, wagons, I could easily travel and I had a small document, just a card like a driver's license, without a photograph or anything, stating that I was a refugee, and it had a stamp, a German stamp, you know, that bird, hakenkreuz (??). And everyone except one waitress, a Polish waitress, recognized that didn't mean I was German. Of course, it did not mean that. But, that stamp, you know, opened my doors anywhere I wanted to go. So there was another plus in my work.

John: What kind of information were you looking for?

Bill: Well, all I had to do is travel to certain areas, and I had contacts in these areas, and I had to bring up all kinds of information, locations of German army camps, whatever. Transportation, bridges. I even worked in an office. I was kind of loaned to an office in that city that had a project from the German military, actually from the government at that time. They had already German administration in that area. They had a project to review the structural systems of all main bridges over the rivers, over roads, and so forth, which, during the war, and of course, the Germans thought they were going to spend the rest of their lives there. They were building up their colony there. They wanted to make sure that they could use these bridges for their tanks and so forth. So that was a very, very good location for me because they gave me a system on how to figure that out. Most of the bridges were built during the Austrian empire, you know, before the First World War.

John: Okay.

Bill: So we had all the drawings and we had all the structural computations, and so forth, of those bridges, and we just had to check them. We had a system of doing that. And as I worked that out with the chief engineer of that

company, we also knew more or less where the weakest point of those bridges were. And we had a printing machine right there in the office so we could make prints of these. You can imagine how well that worked out with the underground.

John: Certainly.

Bill: I could supply with information on various bridges, with the weakest points. Near the end of the war, when the Ukrainian underground grew up to probably somewhere between twenty to forty-five thousand various groups, this helped them to stop the Germans, to slow them down. Some of the bridges were destroyed. But the policy was not to destroy bridges that were used by the population primarily. You know. Including some of the railroad bridges, but some railroad bridges were blown out. Those that were directly on the course from east Ukraine directly to Germany. So that was one of the projects that I was involved with at that time in 1943, for approximately six or seven months. I worked to my partner engineers that suggested that I help the company. Well, a variety of things had happened meanwhile. The word "nationalist" in the variety of languages that was used was supposedly more or less negative. However, the way we were explaining is the Ukrainian nationalist organization was the type that were fighting for their own freedom rather than fighting for other territories. It was quite different, and unfortunately in the early forties, just before the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, the larger nationalist organization broke up into a more revolutionary type and a more conservative type. I was, I remain with the more conservative type under the leadership of a colonel of the Ukrainian army, 1918-1919, Colonel Melmik. And there was bitter actions between the two but eventually they realized that the Germans wanted nothing else but using Ukraine as a European colony of their own. Both groups sort of worked together for a free, and of course, what we had, the problem we had, was destroying German camps and sites and bridges and so forth; we were helping the Soviet Union.

John: Yeah.

Bill: The final result, what we realized already in the midst of 1943, was that the Soviet Union would be coming back, and the underground would remain, most of us would remain, and fight the Soviet Union, mostly the Russians. And it so happened that my organization decided, due to the fact that I left the part of the country that I was born, the only place where I could have gone back. That I left at the time that the Soviet Union took it over. That means I was already marked as one that didn't support them at that time. So they decided that I should emigrate to the west as the war was approaching. Which had happened. It happened at the last moment. I waited to the last moment and then I had a chance to actually go back and visit with my family. But it was one of those tragic situations and all of the

adventures trying to go to all these countries that were still occupied by the Germans. The only place I tried to get to was Austria because I was familiar with and still it was under the German occupation. There was a bit of a difference. It was not a fully police type of a country like Germany. I had to go through Czechoslovakia. At that time it was split, just like it is right now. I had to go through Slovakia there where kind of supportive of the Germans but they started the revolution and chased out the Germans and I, and some of our friends, there were six of us, had gone to Slovakia. Slovakia and then Hungary and then finally wound up in Austria.

But the, I don't know really what would be most to your interest. I would think the last few months, December, January, Ukraine was sometimes on page number one of the news media and that. And it came to the local people, had they known that Ukraine actually, even thirteen years after the proclamation of independence, was still not a fully democratic and free country. There was just no indication and that is as we now find out with Uzbekistan and the former republics of the Soviet Union that they are fighting for their full freedom. It was obvious that it couldn't be any, and seventy some years of Soviet occupation, you could not have raised a number of administrators and so forth within the Communist Party. So when that broke up, and Ukraine became independent, all of the administration of the country was basically in the hands of the same prominent people that were before. From the very village to the government of all the cities, and even the state government, was former Communist. And some of them even outspoken Communists for many years. The Communist Party was, probably within four or five years of independence, lost the majority. They still had anywhere between twenty, twenty-five percent of members of Parliament the last year. And most of them are still fighting for some sort of union with Russia. Which of course the majority is definitely against, and I don't think it will ever, I hope, ever come back to that.

John: Yes. Yes.

Bill: But the situation is changing and changing rapidly. So that is--

John: Bill, going back to when you were there and working for these firms, what was life like? Living conditions? Food?

Bill: Living conditions were not good. We were actually on the so-called food rations. You could only buy so much meat, per week. So much of such things as milk, butter, and oil and so forth. But the population was struggling, particularly in the cities. In small towns and villages, they had better products and they could even supply some of the people from the cities. And of course it was being a German occupation, it was actually a definite what we used to call a police state. No matter which way you go.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: Okay, this is side 2 of tape 1. Go ahead, you said this was definitely a police state.

Bill: Yeah. I have a funny story. One time in the city I was carrying a fairly large suitcase, and they stopped me there. And they asked me what I had in my suitcase. “And what do you have in the other suitcase?” I said butter. “What? Open up.” I opened up. One suitcase. I took out the smallest suitcase. I opened up that one. A small package of butter. But at one time, I had a very difficult task. I had no idea what my partners, what their politics was, and I didn’t ask them. But at one time I was called to the house of one of the partners, and when I came there, I met a couple of ladies. The wives of the chief engineer and another lady. And they said we were permitted to use your possibilities of moving a suitcase from Kyiv to Krakow. That’s in Poland. And I frequently traveled to Krakow and Krynica. That was a beautiful resort town. So they told me where to take it and all that. And they said this is some of the stuff, clothing and a bit of food, for an engineer so and so. And I knew the man. He was a high official in the Ukrainian National organization. And he was under arrest. He was already in jail. So I picked up that suitcase. Must have been about eighty pounds. I finally lifted it up and I said, “It’s quite heavy.” Of course I knew it was no clothing. It was nothing but files and books. It was the archives of the organization that I had to transport from one city to the other because there was the front coming closer. They knew that they had to move it to the west. I said, “Fine, I will try my best.” So I did load, I had a small suitcase of my own and this one I was practically dragging, it was so heavy. I got on the train. The coach I got onto was Neuf ver Deutsche (??). That means only for Germans. I got on that train because I knew that they would not check the contents of the suitcase on that train. I put it in the passageway and I said I’d forget about it until I get to Krakow, which I did.

John: Okay.

Bill: But coming to Krakow, here I am approaching the gates, and I see a couple of Germans and some of these Polish Volks Deutsch standing there and looking at everybody’s luggage. So I walked up to it. I was kind of shaking. What is going to happen, right? And I walked up with the two suitcases, and they said, “Open up.” And I said, “Don’t you first ask me for my identification?” In pretty sharp language. “Oh, yeah, yeah.” So I showed them the document. “Oh. Go.”

John: A salute and go through, huh?

Bill: That was really one of those time. If they would have opened it up, that was concentration camp for me.

John: Sure. Sure.

Bill: And I learned that even before that, that if you are resolute with the Germans, they would step back. They would not. That is what I did more than once. That was one of those cases that could have been very critical. Yeah.

John: Then, where were you when the war ended, Bill?

Bill: What?

John: Where were you when the war ended?

Bill: When the war ended, I was actually in southern Austria, Karentian. I left Gratz because the Soviets occupied first Vienna and then Gratz. But did not occupy the southern part of Austria, because the United States and English forces.

John: Okay.

Bill: Came up from Italy and took that part of the country, so I moved there. And of course, not having anything to do, and not looking for a refugee camp or something like that, I asked one of the Austrian farmers to let me help him out, at least for the food and a place to live.

John: Sure.

Bill: And that was through May of 1945. I think it was about the first part of June I finally, when I heard that the Soviet troops had moved out of Gratz because the military border was just south of Vienna, then I moved to Gratz. And I found my girl friend and her family and so forth. Wonderful reunion.

John: The Russians didn’t occupy Austria? That wasn’t behind the Iron Curtain, was it? Afterwards?

Bill: No. Eventually they retreated, but for quite some time there was still in east, northeast Austria, the Soviets, but then they moved out.

John: Then how did you come to this country?

Bill: Well, I got married in Gratz back in 1946 and I studied for my master’s degree at the university and of course not having the required finances I

had to give up. And moved to a camp in Salzburg, in Austria. Out there I got a job, actually, I was in charge of maintenance for eighteen refugee camps throughout Austria. So, again I did okay, traveling and reviewing conditions of all these buildings and barracks and all that. Good enough job to stay in Austria but I knew it's not going to exist because that was the International Refugee Organization, IRO. That was a British organization, because that was in the British section. I liked the way the British captain that was in charge of this maintenance group, the wall he called me "Mr. Nickannick." Yeah. And then we found out through my wife's family, of their family, that their, well, she was my wife's aunt. She was, I think, my father-in-law's brother's daughter. So we, she lived in Joliet, Illinois. So we got, went through a commission, and all the questionnaires and everything and got a passport to move to the United States. And in March, 1949, we entered the United States. Yeah, that was a wonderful day. Finally freedom, finally away from camps and refugee camps, labor camps, that we had gone through.

John: What is your reaction to what is happening in Ukraine now?

Bill: Well, I have been in contact with what has been going on in Ukraine ever since August, right before August of 1991.

John: I see.

Bill: To some of the contacts that I had before. For instance, whatever was going on at that time, from Kyiv – note the pronunciation of the capital of Ukraine – it is not Kee-Yev, for that is the Russian pronunciation. It is Kyiv, and it's spelled K-Y-I-V, pronounced "Kave." They would send a fax from Kyiv to London, from London to Philadelphia, and from Philadelphia I would receive direct. In fact, I would get the information within a few hours what was going on.

John: Wow. That's great.

Bill: And in some cases I would try to inform the local press about that. They would not accept. They waited for the regular agencies to send them the information two or three days later. But so I was very much concerned when they voted back, that was in November of last year, and out of the elections from the two people that were the candidates that got the most votes, was the former prime minister, Yanukovych, and his leading opposition leader, Yushchenko. And actually Yushchenko, at the very end, he was ahead by a small margin. And I was quite concerned about it, although we knew that the Socialist group, which is a very strong one, would be mostly voting for Yushchenko, but the Communist group would probably support the other one. So we were concerned about it. But when the results of the next election came up, we realized that it was a very

badly, you had situations in some oblasts, as they say, sort of states, where out of approximately 1.2 million ballots that were given out, came back 1.7 million filled ballots. How in the world can that happen? By people traveling and having printed ballots in the black market, or something.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Bill: Well, it was just an outrage, so when that happened, of course, the result that happened was the Orange Revolution. I was very much surprised because until that time Kyiv itself, which was quite Russianized. We were there in 1999. We visited Kyiv and my province there, and at that time you could hardly hear the Ukrainian language in the city. It was still mostly Russian.

John: Oh.

Bill: And so I was concerned about it, but it appeared that the city has changed tremendously ever since. In the first place, when we were there, they had the services of the local organization that was still supporting the Chernobyl victims, the victims of Chernobyl.

John: Okay.

Bill: And they gave us the use of an automobile and a chauffer, and he apologized for the fact that, he said, “I’m sorry that I don’t speak perfect Ukrainian.” And I said, “You speak well enough.” And he said, “The pressure over the years was so bad. The schools, about ninety percent of the schools in the city were teaching in Russian rather than in Ukrainian, and the parents were afraid to ask that the Ukrainian language be taught.” And my father was afraid to speak in Ukrainian in his office, that they would call him a Nationalist. So the situation was very bad at that time. But and until then, they did have demonstrations from time to time. Yeah, they would have fifteen, twenty thousand people. Well, this was well over a hundred thousand people! That was news! And for them, for Yanukovych and those people, that was bad news. Of course, a lot of people came from the surrounding towns and villages, too. But even the city alone, and even within that Orange Revolution, you had a lot of Russian speaking people who were strongly against the former prime minister and for Yushchenko. Now Yushchenko, the present president that was elected, used to be prime minister for the same president some six or seven years before that. And within one year of his work, he did miracles. He was a banker, foreign banker. Well briefed on economics, and all that, and he just couldn’t see the situation where, for instance, people who received social security and over sixty years old were behind in payments anywhere from nine to eleven months. Workers for the state were behind in payments for three, four months. It was a catastrophic situation when he

took over. By the time he got fired a year later, and he got fired because all of these millionaires, actually, by fraud and by selling all kinds of state property, over the years, they got so rich and they got so influential that they had the president in their pockets, not that he didn't mind. And so they fired him after one year because they were losing. He was a man that had paid off out of the state property, he has paid off all of the social security to these people, and in nine to eleven months had paid off the state people in one year's time. Even the Russian-speaking people were for him because they remembered what he did.

John: It's about eleven o'clock. How are you on time?

Bill: I think, if it is all right with you, but first I would like to know, what do you think your associates would like to hear?

John: I think just what you have been talking about. Live there, what you were doing. Traveling around checking bridges, things like that. That is, that is a remarkable story. Absolutely.

Bill: Well, I'll try to organize a little bit.

John: Well, no, I'll tell you what--

Bill: I'm not a public speaker.

John: No, no. You want to get over to the hospital. I'll transcribe this and send it to you, and then you may want to go over. It may kick some thinking and make some notes.

[End of Interview]