

Transcript of the *Shoah* interview with
Simha Rotem and Yitzhak Zuckerman

Translation by Jonathan Engler - Volunteer – Visitor Services – August 2008

Note: This is a translation of the French transcript of the interview that Claude Lanzmann conducted with Mr. Rotem and Mr. Zuckerman for the film *Shoah*. The transcript is in an unedited format and includes segments that were used in Lanzmann's final film. Any segment that appears in the final film is NOT available at the USHMM. The Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection at the USHMM contains only the outtakes from the film. Outtakes are sections of a movie that are filmed but not used in the final version.

Simha Rotem's name is misspelled in the French transcript (as Simcha Rottem). This translation has been corrected.

ROTEM 2

Lanzmann: I would like you to ask Mr. Rotem if . . . he can try to do the following; I am absolutely aware that it may seem ridiculous to find himself facing a model of the Warsaw Ghetto at the time of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, in April 1943, and [to be asked] to try to relive [the uprising] through the means of the model, photographs, and the fact that he himself was a protagonist and one of the heroes of the ghetto uprising.

Rotem (through interpreter): I think that that there is a sense of being there and to see this model and to try to remember the events from 37 years ago; when I see these ruins, this assembly of things, this model, I remember.

L: Then tell him that it is very difficult to pose real questions when one was not there oneself, and that for this reasons, we will need help; ask him to begin with when he became a member of the Jewish Combat Organization, and if we can begin to tell of those things that he has lived through himself.

R-I: I joined the Jewish Combat Organization in 1942; at this time, I was not inside the ghetto but was in a collective farm that was preparing to move to Israel. I had for the first time participated in the Jewish Combat Organization at what was in effect its debut, after the first expulsion from the Warsaw ghetto, this was in the second part of 1942. At this time, I was sent as a representative of the Jewish Combat Organization.

L: They sent you where?

R-I: My mission was to penetrate the interior of the ghetto.

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I have told you that the ghetto at this time was in the midst of the period of expulsion and annihilation; my task was to penetrate the ghetto with a certain number of papers, the contents of which I was not very familiar with at that time; in any event, I had to make contact with different Zionist organizations which were working at that time in the interior of the ghetto.

L: Wait, first, this is during the period of the expulsions, the period of deportations, at the beginning of July 1942, when the Jews of Warsaw have been deported to Treblinka, but I want to return to the story of the collective farm in which you found yourself, Czerniakow, not Czerniakow, which was the name of the president of the Judenrat of Warsaw, but at Czerniakow, if I understand properly is a place, but this farm was something clandestine? Did the Germans know of its existence? What was in this farm? I would like to talk about this a bit. Finally, it was outside of the ghetto?

R-I: No, it was not clandestine. The Germans were not only aware of it, they gave official authorization to the director of the farm, whose name was Czerniakouf.

L: The director of the farm?

R-I: The farm; the authorization to employ about ten young people in agricultural work; it must be said that the farm served the interests of the Germans, its products were very important for them.

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L: The products were destined for the Germans, or for the ghetto?

R-I: As for our position, we did not have any possibility of deciding to who and where the agricultural products were sent; in any case, not to the ghetto. At this time, the Jews of the ghetto, like all the inhabitants of Poland, did not receive agricultural products except in a very rationed manner, as a result, we did not have a very good idea of where this agricultural production went. What interested us in particular were the young Zionists, it was to have the ability to move around, in a relatively free way, outside of the ghetto, and to train them in ways that we wanted.

L: Was this farm far from the ghetto? Was it in the Warsaw area?

R-I: The farm was in the Warsaw region, in a district called Czerniakouf [Czerniakow?], and the farm itself carried this name, after the name of the district. It was at the very edge of the district.

ROTEM 3

L: This farm, was it guarded? Were there Germans who guarded it? Jewish police? Or was it completely open?

R-I: No, the farm was not guarded, we depended on the authority of the director of the farm, who had confidence in us, and we did everything we could to merit this confidence, and to not cause harm, especially since we were able to appreciate the true significance of the opportunity that we have been given to be able, under the nose of the Germans, to undertake illegal resistance activities inside an unguarded place.

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The director of the farm was answerable to the Germans, as a result of which we had committed not to flee and to do the work for which we had been entrusted, and because the director of the farm trusted us, we had the possibility, from time to time, of sending one of our young people outside of the farm, like, for example, I myself had been sent to

the ghetto. In my absence, the other members of the group managed to do the work that I would have done.

L: The director of the farm was Jewish?

R-I: I don't know exactly what he was, but he was not Jewish. He could have been Polish, could have been German.

L: But in this farm, they were treated better than inside the ghetto, privileged treatment? Did you eat better for example?

ROTEM 4

R-I: Of course, the fact that we were on a farm, and not inside the walls of the ghetto, that we were not stifled, to be in the open air, this was already an advantage, a better treatment. In addition, we were on a farm, with cows, with milk, with cheese that we were able to supplement our diet, and in every way we were much more free than if we had been inside the ghetto.

L: How much time did people stay in the farm?

R-I: I personally stayed on the farm for three months, and towards the end of 1942, under orders from the Germans, the farm was shut down and the Jews who worked there were sent to the ghetto.

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L: And before you were on the farm, where were you?

R-I: I was born in the Warsaw region, in the district of Czerniakow (?), next to the farm where I found myself during the war. Then, I left Warsaw, my parents sent me to a small town in the region. This was in about the middle of 1942, until the moment of the

great deportation. My parents retrieved me and put me on this farm; it is there that I found the young pioneers.

L: Did your parents find themselves in the ghetto?

R-I: My parents were always in the ghetto; they were there at the time of the great deportation. I had the opportunity to see them, not at the time of the great deportation itself, but as a consequence of my mission, one of my missions into the ghetto. And I remember the empty streets, the disemboweled houses, the Germans circulating in the streets, the Jews were brought out early in the morning to work and returned in the evening.

L: If I understand correctly, Rotem was in the countryside, then in a small village and then he was placed on the farm, and until then he had never lived in the ghetto.

R-I: Yes, I had been in the ghetto at the moment it was created, I had lived there about half of 1942. But during this period my parents

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forced me to leave the ghetto and I went to the small village where I had relatives; I don't know very well what were their reasons, but in any case that allowed not to be in the ghetto at the time of the first great deportation from the ghetto; at that time, between 450,000 and 500,000 Jews were deported.

ROTEM 5

L: Now I would like Mr. Rotem to go back to the beginning of January, the time of the first insurrection. If he could relate what happened when he arrived at the farm and how he entered into the Jewish Combat Organization.

R-I: In December 1942, they closed the farm; we were all sent to the ghetto; the debut of the Jewish Combat Organization dates to this time; were organized in a manner that

we were able to respond to, fight the Germans, who had been very surprised at the new developments in the ghetto. They didn't expect any kind of reaction; they had begun, this was at the beginning of 1943, to interrupt the deportations, they had tried to beat the Jews in another fashion, in order to deport them in another manner, but in any event not with combat arms.

L: What was the state of morale inside the ghetto? There remained about 60,000 Jews in the ghetto, 55,000 after the great deportations, from July to September 1942, and everyone knew that the Jews had been taken to their deaths. What was the situation between the resistance movement and the 50,000 Jews who remained? I would like to know about their connection,

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and if there was a unity between the Resistance and what one could call the masses.

R-I: I don't think there were 50,000 Jews remaining, more like 80,000. In fact, the Jewish Combat Organization was constituted in July 1942, about five months before the members of the Czierniakow farm came to the ghetto. I would like to add something in response to Mr. Lanzmann, in a minute, it is important to understand that at the beginning of the month, during the period of the first great deportation, that no-one in the ghetto knew what was going on; that there were extermination camps, we did not imagine that in the twentieth century that a genocide could happen there. And the Germans tried to mislead the Jews in all possible ways. They established two model camps at Poniatowa and at Trawniki [original transcript reads Poniatov and Travinsky]. and permitted delegations to go and to return, Jewish delegations from the ghetto, so that they could tell what happened in these model camps. They described to us the housing conditions, the life, and the work, which appeared acceptable.

L: In December 1942, which is to say when Mr. Rotem returned from the farm, was the Jewish organization unified?

R-I: In fact, a few moments ago Antek [Zuckerman's nom de guerre] said that the Jewish Combat Organization was established on the 28th of July 1942, this is the official date. But there were already organized combat groups that were constituted. We had commanders; what we lacked, in particular, were arms. We managed to obtain a certain amount of arms over the course of three months of actions which had surprised the Germans, since they were not expecting any kind of armed reaction.

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In the course of this action we had taken arms and further organized ourselves. We didn't know at this time that the time that was going to be available to us to become fighters was only going to last several months, until the 19th of April 1943.

ROTEM 6

L: I would like Francine to translate the letter which Mordechai Anielewicz sent to Yitzhak Zuckerman, which was found outside the ghetto, to look for arms and to act as a liaison at that time, the letter which he had sent in the midst of the insurrection itself, which is a magnificent and heartbreaking letter, try to translate it from the Hebrew directly.

Francine [?]: It says that the letter was originally found here, in the kibbutz, and behind me, on the pane/panel [*JE: context unclear*], is the exact letter. The text, which we have here, is not entirely exact.

L: If you see it clearly enough, read it.

Francine: I think that it is in Yiddish.

I [Yitzhak Zuckerman, whose first name can also be spelled Izhak]: The letter which you can read on the panel, here at the kibbutz, is at any rate not the original; Mordechai had written in Hebrew, and my comrades directing the Resistance did not understand Hebrew. I had translated it to Yiddish; and if you look at the text you will

notice that in two places, the words are opposite: first there is a passage where Mordechai speaks of Zivia, he thinks that she is still alive, and the second passage concerns the problem of weapons and I thought that it would be better to put ...

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but the letter in my handwriting is behind you.

L: And Anielewicz wrote this letter how long before the beginning of the uprising in the ghetto?

I: Indeed, the letter was written, I think the date is written on top, the 22nd of April. This is the reply to a letter that I had sent him; my letter has not been kept, the response has been; indeed, the original has disappeared during an explosion on the first of August 1944, but the copy of the manuscript in Yiddish, it exists here. I think that Claude Lanzmann, chief among all his talents, which are known because of all our histories which have been related to him, is equally an agent for the diffusion of Cognac, because thanks to this, he has succeeded in opening words that I did not think to say.

L: He has not yet spoken very much.; try to talk about the letter.

I: He prefers if Simha would read the translation in Yiddish, because the text in English is not precise. One of the versions that was spread at the time via Polish radio, and the second version which was sent to Israel, Palestine at that time, which are not exactly the same, not for reasons of censorship but because it was considered that it was a document; this third version that was found in the kibbutz is the closest to the original, beyond the two phrases that were suppressed, which spoke to you about earlier.

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L: In what state of spirits was Antek at this time, when he was outside of the ghetto and trying desperately to help, which he saw that the ghetto was burning, and when he was addressing himself to the head of [illegible] at Warsaw {Romar}

I: You know, I had begun to drink after the war; I knew a lot more things than the rest of the world, [Mr. Rotem] was under full fire in fighting, but he did not know what was going on in his small group; me, I knew a bit of what was happening around us; I knew through an intermediary that one of my liaison agents had committed suicide around the 12th of May; after we had brought everyone out of the ghetto, she received a phone call in the night that allowed her to know certain things. And then, I also had contacts with Tosia Altman, which allowed to know a bit about what had happened, I had a complete view of the situation; I had a third source of information, which was the Jewish gravediggers. They brought out the bodies and buried them in the Jewish cemetery, which was right next to the Polish cemetery. Right now, Claude, you have asked me my impressions; if you could lick my heart you would be poisoned.

L: If he could tell how he tried to have

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the help of the Polish, in approaching the head of the [illegible] of Warsaw, who he called Komar, and how he [Komar] responded. He was never able to approach him, in truth.

I: To this question, I will not respond today.

ROTEM 7

L: Tell Antek about what the Poles told me, when I was in Warsaw, I was twice there this year, and I must tell you that I was surprised to see that all the Poles of Warsaw had assisted in the Warsaw ghetto uprising; they came to the doors, they watched, it was a sort of party to come there, on Sundays, and watch the ghetto burn. They told that it had a great impression, to watch the masses of burning paper, that illuminated the ghetto

and placed it back absolutely at the center of the city, it was this that [the Germans] had hit the most.

I: Mr. Rotem can speak...

L: Yes, but he was inside; I want to know how one saw the ghetto burn from the outside.

I: Mr. Rotem can also answer that. In my case, I left the ghetto six days before the insurrection, and that I tried to return to the city during Passover,

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that I was able to return on the 19th, the eve of the holiday, and that I wrote at this time to Mordechai Anielewicz and to Zivia, who was my wife; I had received a very polite letter, very high level, from Mordechai Anielewicz, and another, very aggressive, from my wife, who said, "you still haven't done anything until now."

A-I [Antek, speaking through the interpreter]: I had all the same decided to return, I didn't know absolutely what was being prepared in the ghetto; on the contrary, I was far from imagining, while the companions of Mr. Rotem knew well before me what was being prepared, they knew all about the German encirclement.

R-I: Before us, in the interior of the ghetto, we felt that something was going to happen; there were very particular movements that we were able to take into account.

A-I: Me, I didn't take into account anything, because I was already outside.

R-I: Inside the ghetto, we had the impression, from the evening of Passover, that the Germans had attacked, not only the Germans

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but also the Lithuanians, the Polish police, the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians, all this mass had entered and we felt that this was the end.

A-I: The morning of the first day of the holiday, the first day that the Germans came into the ghetto, we had felt that the attack had unfolded in the center of the ghetto; we were at a bit of a loss; which is to say here, the area that Antek came to design, we didn't understand that the sounds, the shots, the echoes of bullets, we knew that the fighting was very fierce at the center of the ghetto, but we , I repeat, were outside of the combat zone.

L: Mr. Rotem, I have to say, [they/the Germans] were not found in the central part of the ghetto, but it was in what was known as the brushmakers ghetto, where there were the large factories for brushes for the Germans and that it was here, where there were, with other members of the Resistance, because the ghetto was separated into four zones.

A-I: Exactly, they came in from there, by Malevkins Street, they continued by another central streets, they advanced in this entire area, which constituted the central ghetto. You, Rotem, you spoke just now of an [Umschlagplatz]. I give to you this last phrase to translate, knowing your cognac has

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A-I: done wonders, you have succeeded in pulling from me what I did not want.

L: it isn't the cognac.

A-I: This evening, it is definitely the cognac.

L: No, it is something else other than the cognac, it is the cognac plus something else. INTERRUPTION

ROTEM 8

There is a terrible storm, this isn't good for the sound? No, ok, translate what we've talked about now.

A-I: So, the Germans had penetrated into the ghetto of the brush makers to try to calm things down; they would have liked a cessation of combat. They returned to the ghetto with the directors of the factories; in the event, there were two Germans, the directors, they carried a white flag, and they demanded that we accept a ceasefire.

L: Is it not extraordinary to you that the Germans arrived with a white flag and demanded a ceasefire?

A-I: Yes, I think to use the word "unbelievable" is not the

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word that is sufficient to translate the impression that was made on us when seeing the Germans with a white flag; but in the event, we did not have the time to reflect on our impressions because it was necessary to act; we had immediately opened fire, the Germans had retreated, and immediately afterwards, a group of SS, three hundred SS, about, had penetrated the ghetto to attack us. At this moment, I found myself in an observation post that allowed me to activate a delayed mine which had been put there, as a precaution, when I had seen this group of three hundred SS enter, and was able to activate this alarm system, I was able to leave in time to hide myself in a place that had been intended in case I had activated the mine and was not able to defuse it.

L: Did the mine explode?

A-I: Yes, it did explode, well enough that the Germans had immediately moved towards the exit from the ghetto, carrying dozens and dozens of injured. At this moment, war was declared within the ghetto. We were able to make contact with the commanding general of the Resistance, which understood [??]. Zivia and other chiefs of the Resistance remained in touch with them all the time.

L: They remained in the central ghetto?

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A-I: Yes, in the central ghetto. It happened the same day as the beginning of combat; after we knew, during the first three days of combat, that the ghetto was nothing but fire, the Germans bombarded the exterior to try to destroy all that existed in the ghetto. It was the Jews, however, who had the [heights/advantage] the first three days. The Germans had not tried to fight in the interior; all their actions were launched from the exterior, by bombardments, and efforts to destroy, by artillery, the ghetto.

L: They burst in fear, the Germans. It was for them a fantastic surprise!

A-I: Yes, for the Germans it was a surprise to see Jews fighting, but it is important not to forget that for us, it was at least as important to see that we could fight and above all remain alive. When we had seen, after several days, that the Germans already had dozens of dead and injured and that, on our side, we could count on the fingers of one hand the number that had been injured and that, for our losses, the surprise had been truly great, to see that we could fight against the Germans and survive, was for us very important.

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It is important to know that we could not resist aerial attacks, and above all the method setting fire to the ghetto. Because the Germans tried to destroy house after house by setting the houses on fire, and we moved from house to house.

L: Tell him to continue, but, when he reads the journal to [incomprehensible], who commanded the attack against the ghetto, during I don't know how many days that had taken, extraordinary, which is to see that the Germans came to raze the ghetto, and in the end, they stopped at night. They came in the morning, at a precise hour, like workers, and they took a lot of time, to raze the ghetto.

A-I: The Germans came as soldiers, not workers.

L: Yes, but in the end, they came at certain hours and left at certain hours.

A-I: It is true that the Germans were mainly inside the ghetto during the day and then withdrew at night, because they were very afraid to enter the ghetto at night. They were even more afraid that all life disappeared during the day,

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on the surface of the ghetto. You must absolutely imagine what happened; the streets were absolutely deserted, the surface of the streets was empty, we were entirely hidden in tunnels, in the basements, in the bunkers, and we engaged in precise actions, we engaged in night actions, we could at these times enter into contact with Anielewicz and Zivia, the members of the high command, and at those moments, we fought in this fashion, at night, in the tunnels.

ROTEM 9

I: Antek said that the thing that most astonished him in the ghetto revolt, was that the people who were trapped inside the walls had been capable of that, that this had happened in the spirit of people who were trapped. The second element was that all the young people were not waiting anymore for their individual blooming and that no one and that, this is what astonished, of these people who were almost buds, and that this was a problem that was at the same time moral and political, because it was necessary to decide what was going to be directed; the directors of these were all young people.

L: The directors were themselves almost children.

A-I: These children, yes, look at me; I am almost 64; I was maybe 16, 17 years old.

L: How old was he at this time?

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A-I: About twenty, early twenties. We do a great historical crime to those who really fought; we make these myths of personality like for example [?] or Zivia or myself, we make these myths and we speak of them, while it is the people like Mr. Rotem, these are hundreds of people who found and who are buried and who made the revolt who deserve to have their lives written about.

L: And why, according to him, do we write books? Is it not inevitable? Isn't this during the time of the dissidents? Why is it that it happens like that? Why is it that the ghetto revolt has become almost a legend?

A-I: One returns to the idea that it is forbidden to do anything mythical; history will not permit that we transform into myths or one or two personalities; there are hundreds of people who acted for them and it is absolutely unfair that two or three bear the laurels from the work of the hundreds.

I: Mr. Rotem has responded more precisely to your question as to the reason that we make myths and legends about personalities . . .

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L: Which is that it is not the people, that all history is a legend.

I: It has first responded about the personalities; he thinks that it is perfectly normal and human to want symbols that represent something. It says then that Antek, Zivia and [?] were already known before the uprising for being the directors of these groups of young Zionist pioneers, and that their names were already known and permitted them to represent the entire population and to symbolize the actions of hundreds of others who acted; and Antek had interrupted him while saying in effect that we are in agreement on one point, and in disagreement on another point. The people who have made history, don't need to be in the group of glory, and that he has adds a personal point: he did not want that in the kibbutz [?], we build a house that carries the name of Zivia...

L: Who died two months ago.

A-I: It has been a year and a quarter, a week. In effect, I have not done anything but respect her will; she was absolutely opposed to the notion that we would build a house in the kibbutz, a building that carries her name; of all our circle of friends, I was the only one opposed, that the things should not be done.

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L: Which was on the relationship to death, at the moment, I must say, of survival, which was not their problem?

A-I: I don't want you to make this something collective; if you pose the question to me, I would like life until its limits, until the infinite, not ready to die at each moment (interruption).

ROTEM 10

L: [inaudible]. Mr. Rotem spoke of the three first days, these days in the course of which occurred an extraordinary surprise, which was to see that they could defeat the Germans, that [the Germans] retreated, that they didn't continue without losses. What I would like him to tell/recount is what happened afterwards, day after day, in the ghetto.

R-I: For this response, we need another bottle. ...

A-I: I insist that you read the last chapter of the book Zivia wrote, in which she tells...just about the entire rescue operation of eight percent of the Jews of the ghetto; at this time, there were about 580 Jews who were still alive in the center of the ghetto. Sixty were saved; this entire history is told in the last chapter, and when Zivia was still alive and wrote the last chapter, it was Antek, who was located 10,000 kilometers away, that tore it off with cruelty, like a surgeon, each of the details, to force her to recover exactly the reality in the descriptions in the chapter.

L: It must be said to Antek that my small personal tragedy, now, is that I am making a film, and I need human faces to tell this story. In effect, I am taking Zivia's book and then have the need, on the screen, to put it simply, then, in the lines of the book, I also do the work of a surgeon and I also am obliged to have a form of cruelty.

I: He tells me to thank you, to congratulate you that you are making the film in 1979 and not in ten years, at the moment when he will no longer be here to talk. Admittedly if you made the film in ten years he would continue to drink a small glass of cognac [?], which is to say that Mr. Rotem walks with a cane; what interests him is to know the principle that you could still save something by doing this film.

L: Me, in ten years, I will possibly walk with two canes. Or I will not walk at all. I do not know what I am going to save, that is the crazy job that I am in the middle of doing, the first question that I posed to

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Mr. Rotem, when we started, I asked him if he did not find something derisory in trying to relive all that before a plaster model and that he himself responded: no, one can try to do something, one can try to succeed in doing something. I think, after what we are going to do, which is in effect something out of the usual, and never the way which [?], and the other and all the deaths, never to relive that, it is not possible, but we can try to approach it modestly, humbly.

I: He responds that he is sad.

L: I am also very sad; why is it that he is sad?

A-I: Why am I sad, because they wrote these books, and we have lost this life.

L: I don't write books. I don't write novels. And I don't do films with actors.

A-I: That does not interest me.

L: OK, can he explain?

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A-I: I have behind me millions of beings; around me, in combat, thousands; try to understand, I try to act as if they were not there.

ROTEM 10A

R-I: I have seen all of this with my own eyes, if you have lived 45 years since you arrive possibly at a [illegible]. Claude Lanzmann, I have heard spoken of over the years, over many years, you have presented the experiences of many of us, and that you have a small idea of the way in which it is concentrated in each individual...what is concentrated in him is death, the combat, the war. Mr. Rotem proposes to us to go with to his house, to his room.

ROTEM 11

I believe that human language is incapable of describing the horror which we have known in the ghetto; in the streets of the ghetto, if we can still use the word 'streets', we were obliged to heap the corpses that were piled one on top of the other, we didn't have any more room to pass, and beyond the battle with the Germans we battled with hunger, with thirst, because we were cut off from everything, we were cut off of every system of water supply, we didn't have any contact with the outside world, we were completely isolated from the world. We were in a state that we had ceased to see the significance of continuing the fight, we had begun to think, along the lines of the

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direction of the Jewish Combat Organization, to try to break towards the rear side of Warsaw, outside of the ghetto. At this time, there were many efforts to leave the ghetto.

Each of these efforts had not really succeeded; all that was done with these efforts, which were returned to the ghetto, were injuries and deaths. The last effort was that of April 29, just before the first of May, we had sent, Sigmund and I, we were two, to try to enter into contact with the rear side of Warsaw with Antek, which was in the part behind since before [?]. He had been deputized to enter into contact with the Polish Resistance, at [place], a cave/tunnel which abutted several meters further, several dozen meters further, on the [old? Meaning of word 'arien' is not clear] side of Warsaw.

L: This was a sewer?

R-I No, it was really a tunnel. We found ourselves on the other side of Warsaw, outside of the ghetto, via this tunnel. We found ourselves in a Polish house, and were hidden in this house until the small hours of the morning, because we didn't know exactly what was going on outside, and we were afraid to go out from the house, we had suddenly met

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a Pole, a Christian Pole, he appeared a little afraid of us, our physical appearance was not that of a human and certainly his first movement, at least that was our impression, was to give us to the Germans. But we told him a story, that we were Christian Poles, and that, from the beginning of the insurrection in the ghetto, we found ourselves accidentally in the ghetto, and that the insurrection had caught us by surprise and that were blocked [from leaving] but had had the opportunity to leave and we demanded that he help us immediately to leave from his house.

L: Mr. Rotem spoke Polish fluently, without an accent?

ROTEM 12

R-I: Yes, of course. We asked the Christian Pole to show us the way to exit the house, without running the risk of crossing a German patrol. In passing through a courtyard, he related to us how several days before, in the same courtyard, there had been combat

between Jewish fighters and the Germans, we did not know exactly which combat had taken place, he in any event did not have a lot of details, but he showed us in the courtyard the traces of the bullets, the pieces of bodies, and we saw very well that a battle had taken place. Then we were out in the street; the Pole then showed us

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the way to the street, we had then figured out which battle he was talking about, in the courtyard of the house: a group of the Irgun, the revisionist group, had fought, probably following a betrayal, the Germans had encircled the house and finally massacred them.

L: Yes, because there were members of the Irgun, the revisionists, who fought inside the ghetto.

R-I: The Irgun, in the ghetto, was not part of the Jewish Combat Organization. It was a separate organization, they had their own organization.

L: But they fought?

R-I: Yes

A-I: And how!

R-I: So, we suddenly found ourselves, after leaving the Polish house, in the street in plain day. Imagine a sunny first of May, and we had come out of another planet. Stupefied to find ourselves there, in the middle of normal people, in a normal street, only, unfortunately, we certainly had a very exhausted appearance, thin, in rags, and

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immediately, people were onto us, because there were always Poles outside of the ghetto who were very suspicious and tried to stop Jews who left the ghetto. I said that outside the walls of the ghetto, we found groups of young Poles who tried to trap the Jews and to

extract from them, with blackmail, the few meager possessions that remained to them, and then, to give them to the Germans. By a miracle, we had managed to escape them, we only had one address, a single address, to which we could go, where we could hope to receive help. It was the address of a family at [?], a family truly of [?], of absolutely extraordinary people, that of Stephane of the photograph that you just saw. So, we made our way to them and we were very well received, in a wonderful way, they dressed us, fed us. Our charge, what we were trying to do, was to enter into contact with [?], which was located on the Aryan side of Warsaw, to try to undertake a rescue operation, to try to save some surviving Jewish fighters the Jewish fighters union, who could still be found in the ghetto. We had succeeded, I don't know if it was the same day or the following day, to enter into contact with [?]. We gave him a complete account of all that had taken place in the ghetto since he had left, and had taken his advice for undertaking a rescue operation,

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as I said earlier, and finally, we came to the conclusion that the best idea was to use the sewers in order to save whoever was left.

L: They met Yitzhak Zuckerman physically, they spoke with him?

R-I: Yes, they saw him. We spent several days looking for workers used to working in the sewers, for people who knew the topography of the sewers, because we were told that it would be crazy to undertake an operation without knowing exactly the territory. We at this point were having terrible discussions with Zuckerman because he was ready, the same day, to penetrate the ghetto. He told us that if we had not come he would have gone alone, and we had a great deal of difficulty convincing him that it was necessary to know the territory and to have a very precise plan and that to return immediately was crazy.

L: How many days did you remain outside of the ghetto?

R-I: We spent as much time outside of the ghetto as it was necessary to find some works, about a week, and then we reentered the ghetto around the 8th or

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9th of May. Our problem was to find a place to re-enter the ghetto, through the sewers; there was cover fire imposed by the Germans in all the territory that they occupied.

L: Did they understand the intensity of the fighting inside the ghetto when they were outside?

R-I: Yes, from outside of the ghetto we could hear the firing and the sound of the fighting inside the ghetto; all the more reason every day, in the course of looking for workers who knew the topography of the tunnels, we had the occasion to make a tour of the walls, and to try to look in the cracks, to see what was going on inside,. Now, I must for historical accuracy say that before our return, on the night of the 8th or 9th, after a week spent outside of the ghetto. Antek came to call me, and I have to admit that I don't remember, and then after he called me I don't remember everything, before this plan, there were four others, which, said Antek, four others with whom I participated, I give you that I don't remember, but I must speak of them for historical accuracy and also to evoke another plan in which I had not participated and which I remember. In any case, I remember very well, on the night of the 7th or 8th which preceded my return to the

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ghetto, of a delegation that had tried to return to the ghetto but had not been able to get in. As I said earlier, during the night of the 8th or 9th, I returned with a comrade, Richek, at first I was to go back with Sigmund, which is to say my companion from the beginning, ultimately he decided to stay on the other side.

L: Mr. Rotem spoke of the hour that he left the ghetto, the sunny first of May, of normal life, so what was it like for him to return to the ghetto, given the risk that he would never leave again?

R-I: The return to the ghetto was the most natural and normal thing I could imagine; I had left the ghetto, but not to save my life, but because of a very precise mission which was to do everything possible to save my comrades, and so it was completely normal for me to return to the ghetto to try to save them.

L: How was the burning ghetto seen from the outside?

R-I: It is very difficult to find the words to describe our impression; first I must say that we saw nothing but the flames which rose. We couldn't see anything else from the other side of the wall; we knew what was going on, for sure...

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it was in any event very amusing; sometimes from the top of a building we saw the people who were snipers; it was suicidal. Everything that we could see; it must be said that from an aerial perspective of Warsaw, life continued in the most normal fashion, as it had before. Cafes, restaurants, buses, functioned normally, the streetcars, the movie theaters, were open. Truly, as in the past, the ghetto was an [inaudible] isolated, in the middle of normal life. We had finished finding two employees from the sewage company and with their help with the person we called the "King of the Blackmailers", the blackmailers who lived near the wall to the ghetto and trapped Jews. We had succeeded in returning; I must say that we told them a good story; according to which of course we were not Jews, we were part of the Polish Resistance, and we were trying to penetrate into the ghetto because just before the insurrection, a group of the Polish Resistance were trapped inside the ghetto. And as a result, we had of course to try to rescue them. It was thanks to this story that the Poles agreed to help us, and thanks also to cold hard cash. We decided to re-enter the ghetto, and after the cover fire, we entered into the sewers.

ROTEM 14

We were a delegation of four people; the two

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sewer experts, Richek, and I entered into the tunnel to return to the ghetto. I must say that we were entirely delivered into the good faith of the two sewer experts, since only they knew the underground topography of the ghetto. Despite the story that we had told, that we were going into the ghetto to save Poles, they had almost decided, in the middle of our underground march, to turn around. They didn't want to accompany us. It was necessary to convince them, by threatening them with our weapons. I think we walked for almost two hours. There were certain moments when we told ourselves that we were in the middle of the ghetto, but we stuck to our walk with the sewer experts. And I won't describe what it was like to walk in the sewers; one who has not ever walked in a sewer and does not know what the interior of one is like cannot describe it. At times, we were required to crawl on our stomachs in the middle of this mud, of all sorts of things naturally found in a sewer. At other times, we came to junctions where the currents were very violent, sometimes two meters high. We were led always through this muddy water. This hike was very difficult and truly took a very long time; and then, when the sewer guides told us that we were in the middle of the ghetto, Richek and I had decided that I would leave, and that he would remain to guard the two sewer guides,

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for fear that they would try to leave us. At that moment, I opened the cover of the sewer tunnel.

L: How were they dressed in the sewer?

R-I: We wore ordinary clothes; we had no special clothing. A pair of pants, a shirt, very natural clothes. When I had opened the manhole cover that allowed me to exit, I was able to see, although too late, that I found myself a few dozen meters from the exit from the ghetto, which was guarded by the Germans, and that this street, if one could call it a street, was illuminated very brightly by enormous light projectors. I exited all the same and immediately concealed myself in the doorway of a ruin, and then I tried to advance in the direction of Gerschka street, and the Franciszkanska quarter, where I had left the combat union group. It was there that I had said my goodbyes on the 29th of April, when I left the ghetto, to the members of the group. And it was natural that, on returning, I would return to this place. Then, we were brought with a password into contact with the Combat Organization. And then I found myself in the door of a bunker where, normally, they would have been, and I murmured and then yelled the password but got no response.

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(There seems to be a missing page, which would be Rotem 15)

L: It was which bunker?

R-I: 22, Fracaskanska. I had then quit the bunker, and found myself in the place, or I thought,

ROTEM 16

we had progressed inside, and at the moment the sewer guides told us that we were under the ghetto, we decided to leave the ghetto. Or more exactly, Richeka was in charge of guarding the two guides, so that they could not escape, it was me who had opened the manhole cover to try to enter the ghetto. At the moment that I opened the manhole cover, I took stock of where I was and found myself about 50 meters from the principal gate to the ghetto, of [?] street, at that, unfortunately, this place was brightly illuminated by large projectors, but it was too late to reverse course.

L: They wanted the sewer guys to wait until their return.

R-I: Of course, I demanded that the sewer guides wait for me, because I did not know the entire network of sewers, and I needed them for the return route. Now, a moment passed and I found myself in the street and I decided to find the bunker of the Combattants Union., which I had left a week earlier. In front of the bunker, I said the password but no one responded.

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L: What was the address of the bunker?

R-I: 22 Franciszkanska (interruption).

ROTEM 17

L: Mr. Rotem, what exactly was your mission, when you returned to the ghetto? What were you going to save? The people in the bunker, in particular, or whoever you happened upon?

R-I: My mission was to get in contact with the fighters , all the fighting groups that I could find inside the ghetto, and to try to help them to exit the ghetto, that was the mission that was entrusted in me.

L: Did they know the new conditions? Did they know what had happened in the ghetto during the eight days that they were outside of the ghetto?

R-I: We had absolutely no information as to what had happened inside of the ghetto. Of course, there were only a few meters that separated us from the center of the ghetto, and though it seemed like it was another planet, another galaxy, still, information did not filter, not a detail, no knowledge. Consequently, I didn't have a particular mission, just general directives, I had exited the ghetto to make contact with people on the Aryan side, and I had return, I knew in general what was left for me to do, but I didn't know

absolutely if they remained alive inside the ghetto, if people survived on this other planet which awaited me, I didn't know exactly.

L: Mr. Rotem, pertaining to the unit that was found in the part of the ghetto that was called the ghetto of the brush makers, where were the brush making factories, and was it his idea to return there now.

R-I: When I returned, I thought of course to return to the brush makers' ghetto, but first to the bunker where I had exited, when I had been sent on the mission, this is to say the bunker where Zivia was and Mordechai Anielewicz; it was them that I hoped to find. Now, I also had other addresses, those of other bunkers, where there were members of the combat organization, or at least where they were before my exit eight days earlier. I hoped that they would still be there, since if not, my return had no purpose.

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L: So, the bunker of Mordechai Anielewicz and Zivia Lubetkin was Mila 18?
(interruption)

ROTEM 18

R-I: So I was then at Franciszkanska 22, which was the bunker from which I had left and where Anielewicz and Zivia were located. I knew that I could enter into contact with the combat groups which were in this bunker, and I would have also made contact with the rest of the combatants in the ghetto. Now I also knew the addresses of the other bunkers and the other combat groups of the ghetto, but it would have been easier if I had found everyone in the first bunker.

L: Because when he left Anielewicz and Zivia and the others were at Franciszkanska?

R-I: Yes, they were there at the moment that I left the ghetto and they were the ones who gave me the mission to leave the ghetto and to try to do this work.

L: OK.

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R-I: When I returned at first to the ghetto, I [didn't see] a man and I returned to the bunker and there was no one when I call the password, and I was obliged to continue in the ghetto, and suddenly I heard a woman's voice calling to me from the ruins.

L: What was the password, does he remember?

R-I: The password was "Jan." The woman's voice begged me to come to help her; she said that she had a broken leg; she insisted that I help her to go out. I spent nearly half and hour trying to figure out where she was in the ruins, and, unfortunately, I was not able to find here and was obliged to abandon her.

L: And he heard a voice that came out of the rubble?

R-I: Yes. It is important to understand that it was night, black night, one saw almost nothing, nothing was clear, there was nothing but ruins, the collapsed houses, I did not hear but one voice, it seemed that this was truly a bad place into which I had been thrown, perhaps a fairy had spoken from the rubble, and I made a tour of the ruins. I wasn't certain of my watch, but I had the impression that I had been there about half and hour in an effort to find [the woman] and the sound of her voice had guided me. And unfortunately I

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did not find her.

L: Where there fires?

R-I: One cannot really talk of fires, since there were no longer flames that showed. Sometimes there was still smoke and then the horrible smell of burned flesh, of people

who, certainly, were burned alive. I then continued along my route, and came to other bunkers where I thought to find the other combat units and each time, the same story repeated itself: I launched my password....

L: "Jan"?

R-I: Yes, each time.

L: This was a Polish first name?

R-I: Yes. No response. I left one bunker to go to another bunker, and after several hours crossed the ghetto and returned, in the direction of the sewers.

L: He was alone, at this time?

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R-I: Yes, I was alone all the time.

L: All the time alone . . .

R-I: Yes, I was all the time alone, except for the voice of the woman that I spoke of, and a man that I had met at the moment that I came out of the sewer; I was completely alone the length of my travels across the ghetto. There was still Richek and the two sewer guides inside the tunnels, but otherwise I did not meet a single living soul. I remember a moment in which I experienced a moment of tranquility, of serenity, in which I said to myself, I am the last living Jew here. I am going to wait until morning, I am going to wait for the Germans.

L: Why?

R-I: Because I didn't see any reason to return. I said to myself, "OK, if there is no one else alive, why return?" I had no more reason. But, it seems, something pushed me to return to the sewers. I found myself under the manhole cover, which I had opened, and I then returned it on top of me, and I had to yell at the sewer guides/workers, probably I was miserable because I hadn't found anyone. And we retraced our steps.

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L: Does he have some idea of how long he spent in the ghetto?

R-I: Several hours.

L: During the night?

R-I: I think I was there three or four hours.

L: Was he at Mila 18, a general headquarters of the combat union?

ROTEM 19

R-I: Yes, I went there, but between the others, had been in all the bunkers. After, much later, they told me that in the bunkers, and I think it was in Franciszkanska 22, but I am not completely sure, if not that then the other one, in any case, it was in one of the bunkers, they thought they heard a voice calling, but they were so desperate, that they imagined that this voice did not exist.

L: According to him, they were still in the bunkers when he passed there?

R-I: At Mila 18?

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L: No, I don't know.

R-I: No, at Mila 18, there was no one. I had missed them by one day. My return took place on the night of the 8th or 9th. The Mila 18 bunker was discovered on the morning of the 18th.

L: By the Germans.

R-I: By the Germans. At that moment, the majority of the survivors of the bunker committed suicide, they were being poisoned by gas. So, it was evident that there was no one left to find at Mila 18. But in the other bunkers by which I passed, there were certainly people.

L: Before leaving the ghetto, had he already been to Mila 18? Was that the first time or had he been to Mila 18 before?

R-I: Yes, before my exit from the ghetto, I had done it, I had been to the bunker to try to establish contact with the different groups.

L: Could he describe Mila 18, what it looked like?

R-I: You describe very precisely Mila 18; that for me is a bit difficult...I was much more at Franciszkanska 22 but, taking into account that all the bunkers appeared similar inside, I can tell you about what it resembled for me.

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All the bunkers were subterranean caves for which the entries were hidden such that someone who did not know the location of the entry could not discover them. That which knocked them from the exterior, it was the density, we were very numerous, and above all the heat, a heat so dreadful that you could not breathe, even a candle could not burn inside of these bunkers. To breathe in such intense heat, it was necessary sometimes to lie with your face towards the floor.

L: It was very deep?

R-I: Yes, it was very deep, since in general, since it was upon leaving the cave that one began to dig, beneath the cave, since a normal cave would have been very easy to discover, and what one did, when one entered the cave, was to begin to dig deeper.

L: It was caves beneath caves.

R-I: Yes.

L: Is it true, I say that at Mila 18, there was a sort...

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that there was a sort of central corridor along the back of the bunker, that there were these sorts of pieces on each side, that were distributed on each side of the central corridor, and that each piece carried the name of an extermination camp, that one was called Treblinka, another Majdanek, that it was a sort of atrocious humor.

R-I: It is possible. I did not have knowledge of that; it could be that the names were given during the week that I was absent. Possibly I was just not up to date.

L: To review, he returned to the sewer. What happened? After passing hours in the ghetto, it was a desert, he returned, what happened?

R-I: I returned to the sewer, I closed the manhole cover, and we continued on our march.

L: The others were there?

R-I: The two sewer guides couldn't escape; Richek guarded them.

L: Did the two sewer guides still take you for Poles? They didn't understand that you were Jewish, at this point?

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R-I: I don't know what they thought. Besides, it was all the same to me, I didn't think to ask them, it didn't have the slightest importance.

ROTEM 20

All the length of our walk in the sewers, I continued to cry out the password and at one moment, I heard a rustling noise in one of the perpendicular alleys, it could well have been the Germans, because at this point, the Germans already knew that there were Jews hiding in the sewers, they had already thrown pieces of [?] that it was enough to touch for them to explode and release toxic gas. This made it so that in the sewers we walked on the bodies of Jews who had been poisoned by this gas, or they died in these tunnels. So at one point we heard this noise and didn't light the lamp, and truly by a miracle, we met ten people who I each knew personally.

L: Please excuse me for asking a question a little bit late. [?] said that on the 19th of April, when the Germans attacked the ghetto and the revolt had begun, that there were approximately 70,000 people in the ghetto. Others say 55,000, others 60,000, little importance. They left the ghetto the 29th of April and returned the 9th of May, that is too say.

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a total of 15 days after the beginning of the insurrection. OK, so they found no one in the ghetto, it was a desert. Did they think at this moment that the 55,000 or 60,000 people were dead?

R-I What do I think today or what did I think at the time?

L: At the time.

R-I To be totally frank, I didn't think, I didn't have the time to think, I was too preoccupied with finding the fighters, but the fact that I wanted to stay in the ghetto should suggest to you that I thought that there were no more Jews, that they had been killed, exterminated, that there were no more.

L: Another question. When he thinks today, does he think that he could have done that completely aware? He was 18 years old, wouldn't he have liked to have been ten years older? Does he think today that it would have been better to have been ten years older?

R-I: I have the impression that I lived these things with enough intensity. I don't think that in these things, that age is very important. I don't think that had a fundamental importance; I believe that I understood very well what was in the process of happening to the Jews and what the Germans were doing,

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L: The reason that I ask this question is that it occurred to me personally. At the same age as him, I was in the Resistance. I know that one must not compare, I always say that at the time, I was not entirely unaware at the time, but I would have liked to have lived that [period] a bit more aware.

R-I: It is difficult to respond today. And finally, 36 years have passed, we are in 1979, the events of which we speak occurred in 1943, certainly the events are a bit branded on our memories, and certainly we don't remember them with the same intensity. But all the same I know that there are certain things that I remember with an acuity that feel as if I experienced them today. And it is that that makes me say that I lived these events with awareness. There is certainly something, that I was not able without a doubt to appreciate at its true gravity the extent of the catastrophe that had hit the Jewish people. I knew full well what was happening in front of me; that is to say, I was able to evaluate

the events that enveloped me at Warsaw, in the ghetto, at Auschwitz, that yes, I knew. The events that I knew well, I knew to appreciate. But there I am in agreement with you

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about the effect of age; probably because of my age I was not able to appreciate the magnitude of the catastrophe for the Jewish people.

Lanzmann: We return. So, he met a group of ten people who he did not shoot; he knew all of them; they were all fighters?

R-I: Yes.

L: So, excuse me, this brings me to another question. I would appreciate if he could clarify; in the bunkers there were nothing but fighters?

R-I: That is true.

L: You have not said, it must be said, that the population absorbed you...

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R-I: It must be said that the bunkers were prepared for the local population and not at all for the fighters; when we could no longer fight on the surface, we integrated the bunkers, if we can use the expression that we use for immigrants. The people in the bunkers had accepted us into the interior of the bunkers. I believe that the thing that we fighters had not anticipated being in an underground refuge shows well that we did not expect to remain alive after our enterprise of fighting against the Germans.

L: But Mila 18, this was the headquarters of the revolt; it must have been prepared...

R-I: It is true that it was at this place, Mila 18, that the command had been installed, but this was not a bunker that had been prepared for them; in fact, as far as I know, it had

been a Mafia bunker, of the gangster world, and that the gangsters received them marvelously.

L: And what can one say was unique, if one can say that, about Mila 18?

R-I: That, I don't remember.

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L: Is it true, what they say, that Mila 18 belonged to the gangsters? What was it, the gangsters of Warsaw?

R-I: You would like to know who these people were, what they did?

L: Yes.

R-I: In general, these people were involved in contraband commerce between the ghetto and the world outside. Most of this business was done in [barter]; which is to say that one exchanged everything that was available inside the ghetto, in general, gold, or clothes or furniture, anything that one could get out of the ghetto in exchange for food, an object in return for loaves of bread, or potatoes. This was a business that was very profitable.

L: Is it true that inside the ghetto there were people who were called in English the "wild Jews," savage Jews? The type of people who not only were not identified by the Judenrat and that weren't part of any formal organization but nevertheless fought in their own way during the period of the insurrection?

R-I: Yes, I think it would be better to clarify that the Jews of the ghetto

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weren't deported or transported to the exterior, but the majority were exterminated in [the ghetto].

Lanzmann: During the uprising, you mean.

R-I: I am not only talking about the several weeks of the uprising. We don't know exactly how long but there were groups that continued to fight for a very long time. I don't know exactly the dates; I mean from the moment that the Germans surrounded the ghetto, the 19th of April, 1943, from this moment, the Jews had been exterminated in place. The situation was very different, at the time of the uprising, from what had been the case in 1942, when, at the time of the great deportation, the first great deportation, the Jews had acquiesced to being rounded up in the Umschlagplatz for three loaves of bread and a little jam, and to come at the call of the Germans. On the contrary, at the time of the uprising, the Jews had refused, they were not all armed, they didn't all belong to organizations, but all had fought according to the means at their disposal. Even if it was suicidal, shooting from upper stories, or fighting in the manner that they could, and in any event, they were exterminated in place.

L: What was the name of the owner of Mila 18, the gangster who...

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gave the bunker to the resistance; his name comes to me. It was Samuel Ascher.

R-I: That is possible.

L: Is the word "insurrection" the right word? Is what happened, was it an insurrection?

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ROTEM 21

R: I think the word “insurrection” is a good word, because in effect we were insurgents against the will of the Germans, against what they wanted to do to us. Which is to say that they wanted all of us to come to the town square/Umschlagplatz to be deported in cattle wagons like they had begun to do and they hoped that there they could do their work peacefully. What they believed, at least what I think, was to murder us in plain day, in front of all of Warsaw. We did not agree to this, we refused, we refused to do what they wanted.

L: Good, let's return to the sewers.

ROTEM 22

R-I: When I met this group of ten people, the first thing that they did was to bring me up to date on all the things that had happened during the eight days that I was absent. In particular, that I had arrived one day too late, they told me that the Germans had surrounded Mila 18 and that there had been a massive suicide, that those who had not committed suicide had been poisoned including Mordechai Anielewicz. They told me the story of Lutek [Leib] Rotblatt who at the request of his mother had shot her and committed suicide afterwards.

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Then I decided immediately to organize the following operations; I gave instructions to the group that they should return to the interior of the ghetto so that we could organize ourselves. I would like again to interject one thing about our meeting between us and this group, by some miracle which we had managed not to fire upon. We had a need to touch each other, that we were not dreaming, that we were truly living beings in the process of meeting one another in the sewers. I explained to the group that we, Rijek, the two sewer guides and myself, were going to leave the sewers and had left a number of marks in chalk on the walls of the sewers so that we could retrace our route and we told them, or a part of them, to return to the ghetto to try to reunite the surviving fighters.

L: So, did you return with them then?

R-I: What do you mean to say, return with them?

L: I did not understand.

R-I: No, that is to say that they, Rijek, the sewer guides and himself, had to leave the sewers while those that they met in the tunnel had to return to the ghetto. Rijek, the two sewer guides and him left the sewers in the direction.

L: Ah, they left the ghetto, is that right?

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R-I: Yes, they had to maintain contact between those who returned to the interior of the ghetto to save the [rescue] of the combat units.

L: Ah, I see.

R-I: I then followed the route in the direction of the entrance through which we had entered into the sewers and a part of the group, the other group, had to reenter the ghetto and between themselves and one of my best friends, Slavier Suster, a 17 year old boy, courageous, truly extraordinary to whom I had given very precise instructions, which is that the remaining people should not disperse into the sewers but that the rallying point should be the famous manhole cover through which we could exit the sewers.

L: Outside? Outside the ghetto?

R-I: Yes, yes, outside of the ghetto.

L: Yes, but then this group of ten that they met, they said that there were more people in the ghetto?

R-I: Yes, they said that there remained combat units inside and that they were returning to try to save them. Then I left with Rijek and the two sewer guides and apparently we understood one another well enough that several hours later we met again at the same place to learn that they had succeeded in making contract with those combat units that had survived. We managed to meet the group a few hours later and I have to say that this place

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where this main manhole cover was located was about 100 meters from the entrance to the small ghetto and that it was an area that was guarded very carefully by the Germans. But we chose this location because we had no other choice, for the reason that we were obliged to exit the sewers under cover fire, that is to say during the hours that no one was in the streets, because otherwise we would have been immediately arrested and I have to mention that this area was right next to the house where the famous “king of the blackmailers” lived, who I talked about earlier. Underneath the cover, we had succeeded in receiving a message from those that were below, saying that the combat units were more or less assembled, or would be assembled shortly, and that they demanded to come out immediately, because they did not think they would last another day.

L: I don't understand. How did they receive the message underneath the manhole cover and why did the others think that they could not survive?

ROTEM 23

R-I: In each manhole cover of the sewer, there was a vent by which we could place a message and it was through this vent that we received a response. Which is to say that in several hours all the fighters would be reunited beneath the cover, ready to come out.

{interruption in Hebrew by Mr. Rotem }

L: Excuse me, I asked, why did they

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say that they needed to exit immediately because they could not hold out?

R-I: Because they were absolutely at the end of their strength and power and they were very afraid that they would not be able to hold out 24 hours inside of the sewers. I responded that today we could not bring them out but promised them that the following day we would try to get them out. I did not know how, but I had come to understand that their situation was desperate and I was ready to do everything I possibly could.

L: Why could they not get out that day?

R-I: Well, because at that moment I found myself alone with Rijek, and then because we had no means of transportation, we did have We didn't have anything prepared for them to get out and then it was necessary to know where to take them. It would have been virtual suicide to decide at that moment and that it was already too late. It was afternoon, and nothing had been planned, and I believe that it would have been suicidal to try to bring them out at that time. It was necessary to wait until we knew where to take them, to find vehicles, to prepare.

L: They were all assembled below, in the opening to the sewers?

R-I: I personally did not see them but that was the response that they gave me. We convened the next day at 6 am, we got together

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below the opening to the sewers and one of the men of [illegible]

L: Ludova, these were Communists?

R-I: Yes, they were engaged by us to procure a vehicle. The following day, we were collected at the rendezvous, but now one was there. It wasn't until 9:30 that a truck arrived with Tchacktchek and ...

L: 9:30 in the evening?

R-I: 9:30 in the morning. We had decided that . . .

L: With who?

R-I: With Tchacktchek.

L: A Pole?

R-I: Yes. Tchacktchek, the Pole of the communist army and we had decided that despite the great danger at that time, we were going to begin to bring these people out and that is what we did.

L: Who is "we"?

R-I: Tchacktchek was in the car, next to him the driver, Rijek, met and then Tadek.

L: Was [Rotem] the only Jew?

R-I: No, Rijek and Tadek were also Jews; it was only Tchacktchek who was not Jewish.

L: So, there were four of them? There were no Germans? There were no Poles or Germans around?

R-I: At the moment that we began

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to bring out the fighters, a big crush developed around us, and I remember it well because Israel Kana...

L: ...Kanal.

R-I: Israel Kanal went out and he saw me and these people and he cried, "Kajik, you have other people with you?" and I told him "Yes, yes, you see, all these people are in our group." I couldn't say otherwise, and in a sense that had calmed some of the people who came out – it was possibly less bad an on the other side, it was something positive in this crush since

L: This crush of Polish spectators?

R-I: Yes, yes, it was clear. A crowd had developed around the opening of the sewer and there was an advantage to that, in that it blocked a bit the view to the Germans and the people who were able to going without being seen from the other side. At one point, a Polish policeman approached us; I led him to believe that, very quietly, that I was armed and that it would be better for him not to say anything; he calmed me and left in the opposite direction from which he was headed. That is to say, he was headed towards the German soldiers; I re-crossed the street and left on the other side. The people began to come out and at one point I noticed that no one else was coming out and I approached the opening to the sewer and yelled, asked whether there was anyone else inside.

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When there was no answer I re-closed the cover to the sewer. There were at that point about 40 people in the truck and the truck got in motion. It was at that moment that Zivia came out of the group and told me that there were still people in the sewers.

L: Ask him what state the people were who had come out of the sewers.

R-I: The people who came out of the sewers were in a terrible state; they could not come out on their own, they needed to be helped, they needed to be pulled to allow them to come out and climb into the truck. I want again to add something: I was mistaken; it wasn't Tadek that was with us, there was another fourth boy but I don't remember his name. But in any event it was not Tadek.

L: They were completely out of strength?

R-I: Yes, there were completely out of strength and Ridek and the other boy helped them to come out, while I acted as the lookout to be sure that no Polish or German soldiers came.

L: And were they armed? The people who came out. Did they have any weapons?

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R-I: Yes, yes, they came out with weapons. At the moment that the truck began to leave, and they told me that there were still people in the sewer and Zivia demanded that we return to get them out. And I responded very firmly that I was now in charge and that I thought that it was not an operation that it was necessary to undertake at that moment, and that we would return later for the remaining people. We had to wait in a forest that was just outside of Warsaw. Ponchakikimska [hand-written], that was the name of the forest. To do that, we needed to cross a river and all the bridges over the rivers were in general guarded and we knew that there would certainly be Germans.

L: Which rivers? The Vistula?

R-I: Yes, the Vistula. And then [?] . . . in Polish the Visla.

L: Go on, OK.

R-I: When we arrived at the bridge, there was a guard of German soldiers and we decided that it was necessary to backtrack and find another route. Finally, we succeeded in reaching the forest, which is to say, the survivors and me. Rijek and the other boy did not want to accompany the group into the forest and since I had received information according to which there were supposed to be two trucks and not only one, I left with the truck, leaving Rijek and the boy to wait in the

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city next to the opening to the sewer [with the?] second truck. After several hours of waiting in the forest, considering Since Rijek and the other boy had not returned, and something had perhaps happened, I decided to return to Warsaw to have a clear conscience, and went back to town.

L: He left the others in the forest?

R-I: Yes, they of course remained in the forest. Me, I found myself already in Warsaw. I was in a tram and by the window I had seen a crowd; I jumped off and in the middle of the crowd I saw Rijek, lying dead. I was told at this moment that the Jews had succeeded in leaving the tunnel and that then the Germans had approached to see what was going on. The sewer cover had just been opened and the other Jews had tried to come out, and at that moment fighting had started. Everyone was killed and, they added, a few dozen meters further another Jew had been killed. So, I was far from the place that they had indicated and I saw that the second boy, who had been with Rijek, was dead too. So.

[Long silence]

Do you have another question?

L: No, no.

[Long silence]

And the rest?

R-I: Which rest, the other people?

L: All the rest, that's what....I don't want him to tell.

R-I: What happened next? The rest of the history?

L: I don't want him to tell it.

R-I: The rest? Oh! I understood at that point that I didn't need to . . . I went, because there was a risk that they would recognize me too. I returned to my house partly to change my clothes, and then I rejoined Antek and what Antek told you the other day at the Kibbutz was true. Which is to say that he didn't pose the question about Zivia. It was only at the end of several hours, in conversation, that I had told that Zivia was also among the survivors and that I had taken Antek there.

L: How many had survived among those that he brought to the forest? How many are still alive?

R-I: There are four men in Tel Aviv that I remember now. Zivia is dead and that is all.

L: and the others are dead?

R-I Subsequently, a large number of the people in the forest were killed in combat with the partisans and then I remember that one recently died in Tel Aviv. I could be that

I forget more. Maybe there is another one or two in the United States but I think that is all.

Lanzmann: So one makes plans? You make plans all the same? Or that is that painful?