

Transcript of the *Shoah* Interview with Madame Pietyra
Translation by Bissie Bonner - Volunteer – Visitor Services – April to May 2008

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INTERVIEW WITH MADAME PIETYRA

La: Madame Pietyra, you are a citizen of Auschwitz.

Pi: Yes, since my birth.

La: Ah, you were even born here in Auschwitz.

Pi: Yes.

La: And you have never left Auschwitz.

Pi: No, never.

La: But, tell me, were there Jews in Auschwitz before the war?

Pi: Yes, it was mostly Jewish.

La: In Auschwitz, there were mostly Jews in Auschwitz. So one could say that
Auschwitz was a city with a Jewish majority.

Pi: It was 80% of the population.

La: And it was a population of how many citizens? Does Madame know?

Pi: That is going to be difficult to say.

La: And so, where did they live in Auschwitz, the Jews?

Pi: One could say that they lived everywhere. This apartment also belonged to
Jews. There were only a few buildings that belonged to Catholics.

La: Madame just spoke of a proverb, I forget, what is the proverb?

Pi: The Jews would say: "The streets belong to you, the buildings are ours."

La: Ah, it was the Jews who said that?

Pi: Yes.

La: Was it a Jewish proverb or a Polish proverb? Who said that, the Jews or the Poles?

Pi: No, no, it was Jews who said it.

La: The Jews said “The streets belong to you and the houses belong to us.” And... was this proverb true? Was it a truth there?

Pi: Yes. Yes, it was the truth.

La: It was in fact the real situation.

Pi: Yes, it was the real situation.

La: And were they liked, the Jews?

Pi: There were a lot of people, a lot of Poles, who worked for Jews, who were at their service. Women as well as men worked for Jews.

La: Ah, yes? And so? My question was: were they liked?

Pi: That depended on the Jews. There were some who were liked and there were others who were not liked.

La: But the general sentiment?

Pi: At the time... they were rather liked, because the Jews for example gave credit.

La: Ah, yes.

Pi: When the Jews felt that... that they were going to be

Pi: reimbursed, they gave credit. That did not bother it.

La: It was... it was... credit, it was... a Jewish activity?

Pi: Yes, the Jews gave credit to the citizens.

La: Yes. And did one like the people who... lent you credit with interest?

Pi: For example, if one wanted to buy a piece of clothing, he did not have the necessary sum, he would go to a Jew, there, he would give a deposit, some of what he had to dress himself, and, after, he would reimburse the sum, successively.

La: And the interest was high?

Pi: There was no interest.

La: There was no interest?

Pi: There was no interest.

La: That is incredible!

Pi: No, no, there was no interest.

La: That, it is astonishing.

But were there... were there a lot of religious Jews in Auschwitz?

Pi: Yes, there was even a synagogue here.

La: Only one?

Pi: Only one, I believe.

La: It has always existed?

Pi: No, it was ruined; now, there is something that was installed there.

La: Was there a Jewish cemetery in Auschwitz?

Pi: This cemetery has existed until now; now, it is closed.

La: But it has always existed?

Pi: Yes, yes, it has always existed.

La: "It is closed," means what?

Pi: It is to say, one is no longer buried there.

La: That surely, but the graves exist? They were not **deva**...

Pi: It is closed, it is to say... one is no longer buried there, there is still a wall
that surrounds it...

La: And they were not devastated by the Nazis, the graves?

Pi: It was very neglected, very abandoned. They began to destroy the graves.

La: Yes. But they were busy everywhere with living Jews, I imagine.

Pi: Since there were no more Jews here, of course, the cemetery had been a bit
abandoned, they began to destroy the houses.

La: And so, what happened to the Jews of Auschwitz?

Pi: They were expelled and resettled, but I do not know where one directed them.

La: In what year?

Pi: ... And they could bring with them only the baggage that they could carry.

La: By hand?

Pi: Yes.

La: According to what I know, it was in... 1941... in April 1941.

Pi: Yes. That started even in '40, because I settled in 1940 and this apartment belonged to Jews.

La: This house? ... And they had already been expelled?

Pi: They were no longer there. The furniture remained, they could take with them what they could carry by hand.

La: All this, this is the furniture that... that was already in the apartment?

Pi: No.

La: No, you can tell, that is new furniture.

Pi: No, no, no, it is modern.

La: Yes. But... does Madame remember the deportation... of Jews from Auschwitz? How did that happen?

Pi: That is difficult for me to say. We lived at that time 2 kilometers from here.

La: Ah, that is right.

Pi: Because we, we had been resettled just here

Pi: because there where we lived before, it was taken for the camp.

La: Ah, yes... it became the domain, the domain of the concentration camp. But... according to the news that we have, the Jews of Auschwitz would have been resettled, since that is the word, not far from here in _____, in _____, in Upper Silesia.

Pi: Yes, because they were Jewish cities.

La: And so does Madame know what... happened later to the Jews of Auschwitz?

Pi: I think... that next they all ended at the camp.

La: That is to say, they returned to Auschwitz.

Pi: Yes.

La: They returned to Auschwitz to die there.

Pi: First of all, they were expelled, and next, here, there were all sorts of people from all sides of the world, who returned here, who were directed here.

La: Exactly, so does Madame not find it a... paradox a bit... a bit frightening, to know that the Jews of Auschwitz were expelled and that finally Auschwitz became the biggest Jewish city of the world, if one can say.

Pi: It difficult for me to say that because we had been so surprised by all that happened here, one

Pi: was at a mixture of people, there were all sorts of people who... who came here, who were mixed as nationalities.

La: Who came from the entire world.

Pi: Yes. All the Jews came here.

La: All the Jews of the world came to Auschwitz to die.

Pi: Yes, to die. Yes, after the gate, when they went through the gate of the camp, there was immediately a selection, the men would go from one side, the women, the children from the other, then they were forced to leave their baggage.

La: But... did Madame know that at the time? At the moment when that was happening?

Pi: One did not have access to the camp, but there were all the same workers who worked there, so there were leaks.

La: One knew or one did not know?

Pi: Yes, yes, yes, one knew... what happened there.

La: One knew that the Jews were being... exterminated in mass and were being gassed?

Pi: Yes, because they were coming by train, so the Polish railway men knew what was happening, they saw that and only after one directed them towards

La: Towards the camp, towards _____.

Pi: Yes, towards _____.

La: They all passed through the station of Auschwitz.

Pi: They did not stop at the station of Auschwitz.

La: But they were passing.

Pi: Absolutely, they passed through Auschwitz.

La: And did Madame take the train sometimes, at the time?

Pi: Yes, it was one station that was functioning normally at the time.

La: And... And... Did it happen that your train, the train in which one found oneself, passed convoys of Jews?

Pi: There were merchandise carriages and the windows were barbed wire.

La: Did one see the faces?

Pi: Yes, in the windows, one saw the faces.

La: And Madame herself saw them when she would take the train?

Pi: Yes, yes, yes, I saw them.

La: And it was a sad sight?

Pi: Very sad, very sad. Because we knew where they were going, those people.

La: Yes... and _____ finally, it's very close to

La: the very city of Auschwitz. When they were burning the bodies all around, there, did one smell that here?

Pi: Yes, it was a sickly sweet odor, which one smelled when there was a wind from the west.

La: It was an odor that... that bathed the city, that floated above the city?

Pi: No, it was not so all the time. This odor, one smelled it everywhere when the bodies were being burnt on the pyres.

La: Ah, yes, when the wind from the east blew...

Pi: No, when the wind from the west blew.

La: Ah, from the west, pardon.

Pi: Yes.

La: And one knew what this odor meant?

Pi: Yes. One knew it, and even, if there was someone who came to Auschwitz and who was not from here and when he demanded: "But there is something that stinks here, but there is a strange odor," it was dangerous to respond, and the people from here preferred not to respond.

La: Ah, the people would say nothing?

Pi: No.

La: And did...

Pi: Between us, one spoke of it, when one had confidence in the people with whom one spoke, but not otherwise.

La: That is to say when one spoke, one whispered?

Pi: Yes, the resistance was very active, at that time.

La: And what did one say?

Pi: The people knew what was happening at the camp, I think just as one made films that remained.

La: Yes.

Pi: And... my brother who worked at that time in the station also did something there.

La: Yes... in the resistance, Madame?

Pi: Yes.

La: Yes. But...

Pi: But all that, it was secret, of course because one feared the other.

La: Yes. The whole world was afraid. But who lived in Auschwitz at this time?

Pi: The railway men mostly, because... also a bit the people who lived in the surrounding villages who had been expelled, but in general, the farmers were resettled elsewhere, not here.

La: Yes, so it was the Polish population from before the war who continued to live in Auschwitz, that is right?

Pi: Yes.

La: Were there Germans who lived in Auschwitz as well?

Pi: The Germans lived in the houses mostly.

La: But, Madame Pietyra, did you know, exactly at the time, how one was killing the Jews?

Pi: One knew that the Jews were being gassed, that one killed them also otherwise, that the children were being crushed against the walls.

La: One knew that absolutely at the time?

Pi: Yes, one knew it.

La: And one knew that there were gas chambers?

Pi: Yes, one knew it.

La: But did one know that... the extermination was also massive?

Pi: Yes, one knew that also.

La: They knew that it was millions who were... who were being killed?

Pi: The convoys arrived all the time, all the time, all the time to the camp.

La: And that, they saw that?

Pi: When one was at the station, one saw all that, of course.

La: So they were not surprised after the war when the real numbers of the extermination were made public?

Pi: No, no. No, no, one was not surprised; first of all, one even said that it was six million.

La: Yes. But... it was not difficult, all the same, to live with all that, while all that was happening?

Pi: It was very painful because no one was sure of

Pi: his future.

La: Yes... And it was not difficult to... to continue to live in Auschwitz after? Even though Auschwitz acquired for itself such a reputation?

Pi: Of course it was difficult to live here, but everyone one wanted to make a living, we stayed without anything, we as well.

La: Of course. Auschwitz was not at all bombed during the war, the city is intact?

Pi: Yes, yes, it was bombed.

La: The city itself or the...

Pi: At that time the city was bombed, but above all the Catholic cemeteries were bombed; one was very, very surprised, one did not know why just the cemeteries were bombed.

La: That, that is astonishing. But who did that?

Pi: It was only after that one learned that under the cemetery was a store of munitions.

La: And who bombed that, airplanes?

Pi: It was the English who bombed the cemeteries.

La: The English? And... they bombed the cemeteries and they did not bomb the camp? The Catholic cemeteries and not the camp?

Pi: No, no, no, I believe that not a single bomb fell on the camp, I did not hear of it in any case

Pi: discussed.

La: Good, very well, to return to the city, the city where we find ourselves today, the marketplace, all that, it is intact, that has not changed much?

Pi: From time to time, there was a bomb, of course, but in principle it stayed as before.

La: That did not change, that is right?

Pi: Yes.

La: Except... the strange store that is in the middle of the square?

Pi: It is a pavilion of commerce, but initially it was a German bunker, one did not know what to do with it, so one built a store on it.

La: Ah, good, the Germans had built a bunker in the middle of the square, that is right?

Pi: Then the German police force was located on the marketplace there where now there is the casino, and certainly.

La: That is right.

Pi: There were underground passages that ran to these bunkers.

La: But the homes that form the quadrilateral on the marketplace were Jewish homes in the past, is that right?

Pi: Almost all the homes belonged to the Jews.

La: Very good. Very good. We thank you Madame. Thank you very much, dear Madame.