

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Andrzej Szalbot
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Andrzej Szalbot (A.S.) was born in Wisła-Malinka, Poland, at 8 Czernikowska Street. Before the war, the town was inhabited by Evangelists. It is also a town that is near the source of the Vistula River, the queen of Polish rivers. A.S.'s parents were Evangelists. His father's name was Jan and his mother's name was Eva. A.S. had two brothers and two sisters. The family was poor.

After World War I, Poland became a new, independent country. The country was poor and unemployment was rampant. A.S.'s father fought in World War I, and it was during this time that he lost his health. He was afflicted with an ailment until his death in 1942. A.S. was 18 years old when his father died.

Before World War II, Poland was heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. Poles considered the Evangelists as Germans. And in fact, part of the region of Silesia where A.S. lived belonged to Germany, and part belonged to Austria.

Interviewer Robert Buckley (R.B.): Did your parents raise you with a religion?

A.S.'s parents were very religious and raised him as an Evangelist. And that's what he remained until the outbreak of World War II. When the war broke out, A.S.'s older brother went to serve in the army. In 1941, after he returned from the front, he discovered the "truth." He was introduced to it by his cousins, Andrzej and Jurek Pilch—two of a foursome who started to disseminate the "truth" in Wisła.

In 1941, A.S.'s brother Jan went to fight in the war. Jurek and Andrzej Pilch would visit A.S.'s ailing father. (Andrzej Pilch actually perished in Auschwitz towards the end of 1941. Jurek Pilch is still alive. At the time of this interview he was 87 years old.) When the two visited A.S.'s father, they would have discussions about the "truth," while A.S. was eavesdropping. A.S.'s father was a passionate Evangelist. He believed that the Evangelists were the best religion because Luther brought about the reformation in the Roman Catholic Church, eradicating everything that was wrong with the Church. Thus, he believed that the Evangelists were in good shape. However, during these debates, A.S.'s father was unable to defend his position on the Trinity, hell, and the immortality of the soul. Once A.S.'s father died, A.S.'s brother and his cousins continued telling him about the "truth." During the second half of 1942, A.S. gradually became convinced that the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses were true. He started to read the Bible and other literature.

When 1943 arrived, A.S. was still a minor. He was 19. His mother signed the *Deutsche Volksliste* (as an ethnic German). That, A.S. believed, was an act of betrayal, since now he was eligible to be drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. On February 5, 1943, A.S. received his draft notice.

R.B.: Were you already baptised?

A.S. was not yet baptised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was merely a weak beginner. Still, he didn't want to go on record as having acquiesced to the military call-up or for bringing disgrace to

Jehovah's Witnesses and the organisation. He did not respond to the call-up. By evening the police arrived. He justified his refusal to the call-up as a reader of the Bible, which forbids the killing of others and requires believers to have mercy on others. A.S. was taken to the local police station. When someone tried to put a rifle on his shoulder, he refused. At that point, he was taken to the basement where he ended up spending the night. The following morning he was taken to the Gestapo in Cieszyń. There the Gestapo hoped to include him with some 1,500 draftees who were waiting to be sent for basic training. With the assistance of a German/Polish translator, A.S. made it clear that his beliefs forbade him from killing others. Despite warnings that he would be shot, A.S. refused to board the train. After the train left without him, he was taken to prison.

R.B.: Were you beaten then?

A.S.: "Yes, but that time, the beating was tolerable."

After two weeks, A.S. was ordered to step out of the prison cell. He was greeted by two Gestapo officers that looked like butchers to him. A.S. turned to Jehovah for help, and by the time that he was placed in a car, he was calm and collected. He was taken to the Gestapo office. There, after being given a chance to change his mind, A.S. was subjected to a fierce beating with a four-ply whip. When the Gestapo removed his sweater and jacket and continued the beating, A.S. started to lose consciousness. Following this beating, A.S. was taken back to the prison. At this point, A.S. began to feel that he wasn't long for this world. It was the next morning, thanks to a kind jailer who insisted that he go to the bathhouse and take a shower, that A.S. began to feel better. By evening, he began to feel well enough to eat some food.

A.S. remained in the Cieszyń prison another month, until the investigation of his case was completed. During that month, he was left alone. On March 17, A.S. and other prisoners were loaded into a truck and taken to Auschwitz. A.S. was the only one in the group who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. The others were political prisoners. From that transport, only five survived the war.

In Auschwitz, they were brought to Barrack 28. After about two hours of standing outside in a snow-covered field, they were shaved and deloused. During the course of this treatment, A.S. got sick. The next day, he was running a high fever and was suspected of having typhus. He was taken to the clinic, but it turned out that he didn't have typhus, but the flu. After a week, he recovered and was released from the clinic.

A.S. was in Auschwitz until June 12, 1944. From there he was sent to Ravensbrück. [Timestamp: 00:33:50]. This was primarily a camp for women prisoners, but there were a few barracks for men. After spending two weeks in quarantine, he was sent to Świnoujście, [Poland]. This was a military island. The civilian population had been evacuated. Any prisoner sent to this island had no expectations of leaving it. Had it not been that the front was rapidly moving west, likely A.S. would have died there.

R.B.: Were you able to meet with your [spiritual] "brothers?"

In Auschwitz, during the time that A.S. was there, there were 16 “brothers.” They met every morning near Barrack 17 at a designated place. There, they shared the news and when they received packages, all food products that they contained were evenly shared.

Life on Świnoujście was worse than in Auschwitz. The food situation was worse and the work was more difficult. A.S. primarily worked in the port unloading concrete, bricks, and lime from barges. On the 27th or 28th of April, when the Soviet army was already fighting for Szczecin, the prison authorities loaded the inmates onto barges, transporting them for three days by water and then three more days by railcars. They arrived in Ellrich, [Germany]. Conditions there were even worse. The place was covered with muck. Body parts of dead people protruded through the mud.

On Tuesday after Easter, A.S. and others on the transport were taken to work. However, they did not work long before the American forces broke through the defences near the camp. On Wednesday, A.S. was loaded onto what would turn out to be the last transport to leave Ellrich. That transport left at 9:00 a.m. and took them to Bergen-Belsen. By 1:00 p.m. that same day, the camp in Ellrich was liberated by the Americans. The prisoners that were left behind were freed.

A.S. was confined in that last transport for six days under constantly deteriorating conditions. Many people died during the journey. In Bergen-Belsen, A.S. was not taken to the camp, but instead to an assembly point that had earlier belonged to a panzer division. This field had about 100 one-story barracks and was encircled by unelectrified barbed wire. It had been set up as a gathering point for prisoners of war. A.S. spent about four days in this facility. While there, he met six of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

On Sunday, June 15, the Germans started fleeing east. At 3:00 p.m. that day, the American forces arrived. Two days after the front collapsed, a British or American commission arrived to inspect this assembly area. The Gestapo was gone. Those left in authority were Hungarian soldiers who had fought alongside the Germans. They were left to watch over the camp prisoners. These soldiers were disarmed three days later. It would seem, at this point, that the worst was behind him. Orders were given to feed the freed prisoners as soon as possible. That occurred without delay. Unfortunately, the tinned military rations of pork were distributed without any bread. The bread did not arrive until at least two hours later. And, while these tinned rations may have been tasty, the effect on starved and ravenous people was tragic. They all were stricken with uncontrollable diarrhoea. A multitude died just as the war was coming to an end. A.S. might have died as well, if he had not run into an acquaintance from his hometown in the clinic. This fellow instructed him to take a spoonful of burned coal and wash it down with water. Lo and behold, that remedy magically worked.

Around the middle of June, A.S. was evacuated to Celle where conditions were much better. That facility was clean, and he was given much better food. He soon recuperated sufficiently to be able to begin the trek back home. He and seven “brothers” found transport as far as Wrocław. From there to Opole the infrastructure was in total disarray, so that 90 kilometres of the trip had to be covered on foot. He reached Wisła via Bielsko.

R.B.: Whom did you find at home?

A.S. found everyone at home in Wisła. His brother had returned from the war. His other brother was lucky. He wasn't taken to a concentration camp nor was he taken to serve in the army. There was a lot of joy when they all met up.

R.B.: Looking back, do you believe that your faith helped you survive?

A.S. credits his survival to his faith, even though he was still a weak novice. Either by the end of August or the beginning of September, he completed his conversion and became a full-fledged Jehovah's Witness. His acceptance of the "truth" had a major influence on the rest of his life. His brother who went to war also became one of Jehovah's Witnesses.

At the present time, there are seven Kingdom Halls of Jehovah's Witnesses in the area of Wisła. During the war, some 100 of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested by the Germans, including 30 children. Most of the children returned alive. Of the adults, more than 30 perished.

R.B.: You've been to a few concentration camps and you could harbour a grudge against those who operated those camps. How do you look back at this?

A.S. does not hold any grudges. Jesus prayed for them: "God, be merciful, for they know not what they do." [Timestamp: 55 min.]

R.B.: What can you say on the subject in regard to other groups of prisoners? Did they not seek revenge afterwards?

In camp there were prisoners with various outlooks. There were certain political groups like the Poles, who waited for the Polish government in exile in London. There was a group of inmates in camp who looked to the east, that is, they supported the communists. These two groups clashed with one another.

In Bergen-Belsen, after the military commission left and the remaining guards were removed, a bloodbath followed. The *Kapos* and the barrack leaders sensed what was coming. Nine of them took shelter upstairs in one of the barracks, having amassed some provisions and furniture, and barricaded themselves there. But this didn't last long. Two groups formed—one consisting of Poles and another consisting of Russians. They armed themselves with pickaxes, iron bars, and ropes. They quickly broke through the doors, stripped the resisters of their clothing, brought each one of the collaborators down, and threw them to the waiting mob. A shocking massacre followed. The last one of the nine collaborators was killed by defenestration.

A.S. attempted to talk with Jews about the Bible. He found them unreceptive and demoralised, convinced that if God existed, why would he have allowed the suffering to which the Jews were subjected?

A.S. comments about the hatred and brutality toward the Jews not just from the Germans but also from other ethnic groups. He singles out the Poles who are presently trying to clear their record on this matter. But when they were all together in camp, he heard numerous Poles praising the

Germans for their treatment of the Jews. It was one action for which Hitler drew the applause of the Poles. Many thanked Hitler for what he had done to the Jews, saying that if he had not done it, they would have had to get their own hands dirty with exterminating them after the war.

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[Note: The comments conveyed in the above paragraph are available in English on the tape by the interviewer, Robert Buckley. At this point the interviewer asks A.S. to comment on his present life.]

A.S. married in the fall of 1953. He raised two children—twins named Andrzej and Wanda. Both were raised as Jehovah's Witnesses. Until 1976, A.S. was overseeing a congregation. At the time of this interview, he was no longer an overseer. A.S. was a carpenter by profession, and he was self-employed in construction. For over 20 years he worked at a sawmill. At present, A.S. is retired.