

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

Document: Jan Otrębski Interview – Translation of Polish Transcript into English (Part 1)

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Additional information:

This is a translation of a verbatim transcript from Polish of a videotaped interview with Jan Otrębski conducted on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies (link: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508834>.) It consists of two parts. The first part of the interview takes place at a Kingdom Hall. The second part of the interview takes place at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum site.

Translation:

[Robert Buckley]: August 2nd 1995, we're in the Branch Office of Jehovah's Witnesses outside of Warsaw in Poland and we're doing an interview of a Jan Ostresky.

[Jan Otrębski]: Otrębski.

[Translator]: Otrębski.

[Robert Buckley]: Otrębski. Ok. If you'd like to begin, if you could give us his name and age and background.

[Translator]: Could we first ask some information about you, your family, [and] the place where you lived?

[Jan Otrębski]: My name is Jan Otrębski. I was born in Ząbkowice, Będzin district, it is the industrial area of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie. My father also came from Ząbkowice. He had a grandfather who was a teacher, so he was raised in education, he was very well read, he was interested in everything. So, then my father got married into a very Catholic family, to my mother, when they married, at home they were all busy with church activities. Grandfather was a churchman, my brother-in-law was a churchman, and grandmother belonged to various church congregations. So, my father got hold of Brother Russell's volumes. He studied them diligently and really wanted to have a Bible. He turned to his father-in-law to ask the priest to lend him one, but the priest refused. Why? He told him that he could not lend it to him, "because Grześ" – father's name was Grześ – "you would become too wise." So, then the priest did not lend him the Bible, but [father] turned to his brother-in-law, who was a churchman in the neighboring parish and he lent the Bible to him, on the condition that he had to give it back within six days. After he had kept his word in giving back the Bible to his brother-in-law, he said: "Brother-in-law, I will not go to Church anymore, because the Church does not teach the truth." And this is how it started. It was the year 1920.

[Translator]: Is this photo possibly from that period?

[2:32]

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, here you are, [showing photo of his father] here is my father Grzegorz Otrębski. He went through a lot, because he barely came back from the war, because he took part in the war in Crimea.

[Translator]: In the First World War.

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[Jan Otrębski]: He took part in the First World War, because my father was born in 1887.

[Translator]: Did you have any siblings?

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. I had four brothers. Except that the war divided¹ us, so the family... I was the only one left 'in the truth'.

[Translator]: Uh-huh...

[Jan Otrębski]: One 'in the truth'. The other brothers they were younger, one was older, but he was away from home, so he was not informed properly. I was brought up [in the faith] from my youth.

[Translator]: Did it have any importance for you?

[Jan Otrębski]: It mattered because my father was a musician, my father was a musician, and I was talented at music, I was extremely talented, (here you are [gives a photo]), an outstandingly talented musician, you know, then, from when I was six years, I was playing instruments, so I was gifted in terms of music. I just absorbed music, played in orchestras, was brought up and trained musically. But I will come back to that later. How did it happen that father, father got to know the truth? So, after he read the Bible, he found in the Bible, the information that shocked him. Why, why did the First World War happen? That so many were murdered, so many killed. He was on the front. He was asking himself: "Who is directing this?", "Why, why is this happening?" After all, such military songs were sung, "War, war, what kind of a lady are you that these most handsome boys follow you?" So, then he wondered: "How can a war be pretty, when so many people are murdered, killed, maimed, and besides that, villages and cities are burnt, plundered?" And then priests, were blessing the cannons, as it is shown here – Father Bieniek from Mikołów blessing rifles for the war. It was shocking evidence for my father, and that's why my father was just absorbing 'the truth'. It was the Twenties.

[5:03]

He immediately contacted Warsaw, because *The Watchtower Society* was in Warsaw. He contacted brothers and he 'took the symbol' [baptism.] Here, I will show a document that confirms that my father was baptized. Here it is, please. Here it is. In 1922, he was baptized in Warsaw, when there were only 300 publishers in Poland, about 300 publishers. This document was made [Jan showing the document.] Here brother Uchman (the oldest, he lived here in Warsaw for 103 years) was the last to sign, with whom I have had the pleasure to work with for over 40 years, with brother Bolesław Uchman. He gave father 'the symbol'[baptism.] It was then at 35 Hoża Street. So, I was raised 'in the truth' since my youth. Well, it's as if the spirit had directed that, when I was born, my father had already decided, because I was baptized² 5 months after my father's baptism. Five months. So, my father had already decided that I was not to be baptized in the Catholic Church. And my father made such a decision. But exactly one year, on the same date, I was secretly kidnapped from my home and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. They baptized me.

[Translator]: By whom?

[6:58]

[Jan Otrębski]: By my neighbors. One neighbor and the landowner did this while my father was away and took me to the Church. Of course, I did not remember it, but I found out later,

¹ Originally "*Rozjednata*" – literally divided (in a religious sense.)

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after several decades, I found out, particularly in the concentration camp. When I came to the concentration camp, I received a certificate that I am Catholic, that I am Catholic. Then I said: "How, Catholic?! I am not Catholic, I am a Jehovah's Witness." And I have here a document given, I will show this document here. Here you are, here is this document stating that I am, that I am a Catholic. Here it is: "Otrębski Jan. *Römisch-katholisch*" (Roman Catholic), but in brackets "*Bibelforscher*" (Bible Students.) When I found out that I was listed here, I intervened immediately and resigned from the Church, because it is "*Römisch-katholisch*" and "*Bibelforscher*." This was something incorrect. Therefore, I turned to the authorities and officially resigned from the Church. Officially, here I have an official certificate of resignation from the Church.

[Translator]: We understand that...

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes.

[Translator]: ...of course the upbringing that your father provided...

[Jan Otrębski]: Oh, here it is, it is here, the resignation from the Catholic Church, I have it here. Here it is resignation from the Church.

[Translator]: Document testifies leaving the Catholic Church.

[Robert Buckley]: Can you hold it back a little bit? What is that again?

[Translator]: It's a document testifying that he left the Catholic Church.

[Translator]: Could you please tell something about it? About upbringing which...

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes.

[Translator]: ...convinced you to take a neutral position in conflicts.

[9:24]

[Jan Otrębski]: Quite right. I will move to this, because it's almost that... from my childhood I was raised... Our father taught us to read the Holy Scriptures every day, because once he got baptized, my father was very zealous. He was just so moved with the work that he carried out the work in all the area. He was the only one in all of Silesia, in all of Silesia. The territory stretched three hundred, up to three hundred kilometers in radius. And father was assigned to work this territory. I have everything in the documents here, only that would be too much; maybe we'll do that later. Father was occupied with the activity in this territory, and the work grew very quickly, very quickly. In 1930, he attended a convention in Warsaw. He rode a bicycle there. There were three hundred. I have this picture here. Here is a picture, how my father... here is my father. Here is the picture in Warsaw and my father is here, my father is in Warsaw. In 1930.

[Translator]: 1930, there was a convention of Jehovah Witnesses, there were 300 persons.

[Jan Otrębski]: Look, here is my father.

[Translator]: There is his father.

[Jan Otrębski]: And this one baptized him – Uchman. Here is Uchman, here is my father. Here is Brother Scheider, here is Brother Łobuszewski from Berlin, and there is one brother from Zurich – brother Harbeck – because he was at this convention then. 52 people were baptized here at this convention in Warsaw in 1930. The convention was held from the 8th to the 9th of June 1930. And my father also attended this convention.

[Translator]: Then came the 1930's ...

[11:15]

[Jan Otrębski]: Later in the thirties, and the thirties I can remember, because I started my activities at the age of eight. I started my activities, [and] I worked with my father. He was a colporteur, missionary, a full-time pioneer today, and I helped him with this work and worked with this brochure [showing brochure] for the first time in 1932 publicly from door to door. I was working with this brochure, this brochure from door to door. It was my first work. At the convention in Sosnowiec. There were over 200, many people were baptized there. And from then on, I served alongside my father faithfully, until the war started. Besides, I really liked reading "*Złoty Wiek*" (The Golden Age.) "The Golden Age" back then³ prepared us for what was happening in Germany. And here I brought this very interesting article "German Imperialism and its *Furor Teutonicus* (Teutonic Fury)." Teutonic. Here, when I read it, when I read this article, I was affected because we were soaking up knowledge. Everyone in our house was talented. Yes, my brother has a master's degree in Warsaw, although he is not 'in the truth', but he is [talented], they were talented, all of my father's sons were talented, all of them. That's why all my granddaughters are talented.

[12:50]

[Translator]: That literature helped to cultivate that spirit of neutrality. This is the "*Awake*" magazine.

[Jan Otrębski]: Here it is shown how in Germany the satanic spirit, the demonic spirit was there in Germany already under Wilhelm...

[Translator]: Germany.

[Jan Otrębski]: ... [Wilhelm] The Second.

[Translator]: Demonic spirit.

[Jan Otrębski]: Demonism. And here it is shown that they wanted to take over the whole world, all of Europe. And here it is really shown ...

[Translator]: The totalitarian attitude, it's perhaps Hitler and the nations here.

[Robert Buckley]: And that was printed when?

[Translator]: When is it from?

[Jan Otrębski]: This is from the thirties... from the 1930's. I'll check it in a moment, because there is no date, but this is the "*Złoty Wiek*" (The Golden Age.) There is no date here, because the literature in Polish was undated, but it is the 12th year of its publication, and from the 1919 it began to be published, from 1919, and this is the 12th year of its publication.

[Translator]: Don't you think that this is already a Nazi figure?

[14:02]

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, it is already a figure, it was from some newspaper: "trampled on by the nations", I just want to quote from it that: "The Devil himself could not think of anything more brutal and wish for something more monstrous. German imperialism is apparently the greatest [unclear recording] barbaric march organizing the whole world into battle. Nazi Germany, said Hermann Rauschning, former president of the Gdańsk Senate, 'will not be satisfied with partial gains along its borders, but they seek to gain power over the world, and to that end spread constant confusion in all countries.'" And then Hitler, Hitler started here...

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[Translator]: So, it was already in the 1930s.

[Jan Otrębski]: Around 1934, because my father wrote a telegram. I took this telegram to the post office. So, after this telegram, we were very preoccupied in what was happening in Germany.

[Translator]: It was a telegram to whom?

[Jan Otrębski]: To Hitler. My father wrote a telegram to Hitler, and after he wrote it, there was great confusion in the post office. About one hundred telegrams from Poland were sent out.

[Translator]: What was this telegram about?

[Jan Otrębski]: It was a telegram that Hitler would stop persecuting Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany, stop tyrannizing and imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses.

[Translator]: So, you already knew what was happening to Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany?

[15:27]

[Jan Otrębski]: We were thoroughly informed by the "*Nowy Dzień*" (New Day) and "*Złoty Wiek*" (The Golden Age.) The society informed us, and I was preoccupied with this news because I was emotionally involved by the spirit of that time. I also did not think that one day I would meet face to face with this situation, that I was going to experience it. So, until 1939, for example, I was preoccupied with the abduction of Brother Ruhnau in Gdańsk. Brother Ruhnau was locked up one day, and no one knew where Brother Ruhnau was. They lost² him. He was from Gdańsk. I was also concerned with the events in Germany before the Germans unleashed the war. But, because it would take too long, I will come back to the time of the war. When the war broke out in 1939, I was already involved in the preaching work³. I helped to organize the preaching work with my father, I would have to tell a lot, how we worked with phonographs from door to door, and what kind of persecution, yes, terrible persecution.

[Translator]: I understand that you considered that if war broke out, you could all attract the attention of the German authorities.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. It was, it was one thing that we were interested in, because we knew that there was a great campaign against Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland. They considered us imperialists. And that it is for money⁴, some said that we do our activities for dollars. Additionally, Kolbe, who was the editor of the "*Ryker Niepokalanej*" (Knight of The Immaculate), in 1936 in this magazine, said that Jehovah's Witnesses are communists and therefore, when the German came, many brothers were sent to concentration camps and prisons as communists, not as Jehovah's Witnesses. They were imprisoned as communists because of such Church authorities...

[Translator]: Depicted.

[17:34]

[Jan Otrębski]: ...depicted. And it was, that was the pioneering work in Poland, because it was then, when I submitted my first report, before the war, there were 70,000 of us all over

² Originally "*stracili*" – possible translations: "lost him" or "executed him", according to: "1938 Year Book of Jehovah's Witnesses ""Danzig Nazi police (...) carried Brother Ruhnau off to Germany secretly (...) [to] a concentration camp near Berlin. "

³ Originally „*zaangażowany dziełem*” – Involved in evangelical activities.

⁴ Literally "for dollars."

the world, and in Poland there were less than a thousand publishers. Also, when the Germans came, the war began and ID cards began to be drawn up. But they were not IDs with a photo, just ‘pressing a finger’.

[Translator]: Fingerprint.

[Jan Otrębski]: Fingerprint. It was like a photograph, but the point was that there was a field for religion to be written, because before the war there was religion stated in all documents. I have a proof here, which shows the religion my father was. But⁵ my father had been issued this ID card [with] "*religion*" and now it had to be decided whether to write "*Römisch-katholisch*" (Roman Catholic.) As in Poland everyone was Catholic, they had to write "*Römisch-katholisch*", but some wrote "*Gottgläubige*", that is...

[Translator] and [Jan Otrębski] (simultaneously): "Believers in God".

[18:58]

[Jan Otrębski]: But Jehovah's Witnesses could not write "*Gottgläubige*" because "*Gottgläubige*" were Protestants and we had to write "*Jehovas Zeugen*" (Jehovah's Witnesses) in those passports. And whoever wrote "*Jehovas Zeugen*" was subject to investigation and arrest. And not "*Gottgläubige*", because "*Gottgläubige*" were Germans, just like half of Germany were "*Gottgläubige*", but "*Jehovas Zeugen*" in this place where "*Religion*" had to be written, "*Jehovas Zeugen*." It was a great trial, a great trial. And my father wrote "*Jehovas Zeugen*" and I also wrote "*Jehovas Zeugen*." When it came, then these documents were contradictory, which I had to arrange after the war. Soon after anger spread against Jehovah's Witnesses, many were arrested from our town, many, about thirty, were arrested and deported to Auschwitz. So, in 1941 these arrests had already begun, but they were based, as I said before, on the fact that they were accusing Jehovah's Witnesses of communism, that they were communists. And such a roundup of the whole village, as in Grabów, a neighboring village near us, they took all the brothers, who were killed because they accused them, the priest accused them of being communists. There are also many papers that cannot be confronted now.

[20:29]

[Translator]: When did this persecution begin for you?

[Jan Otrębski]: Persecution for me began when I was baptized in 1940. It was at night, before 11:00 pm. The moon was shining beautifully and we were baptized in the forest. There were seventeen of us, young ones. And this is where my life began. I had the predisposition to be a pioneer, to be a regular pioneer and so I realized it only now, but I had to suffer for so many years. When I started my activities, I started on a large scale. I was preaching from house to house, door to door.

[Translator]: Even during the war?

[Jan Otrębski]: During the war. It was forbidden. Because I went from door to door, I made the introductions in such a way that it seemed that I came to ask about food, about bread, potatoes, if they had them, I did not want these products, but I would lead the conversation to give a witness. And so, I found an interested family, a large and rich family, materially rich. There was also a policeman in this family. They had a son, a policeman before the war. And this family became interested ‘in the truth’. It was the year 1942, the month of March.

⁵ Jan talks to himself, looking for a document; “Because, I don't know if... my Father's was written... Because it is not clear in the papers.”

When I went to see them, I would go out at night, sometimes at midnight, and I was at risk of being searched. One time I went out in the dark and someone shouted "*Halt!*" (Stop!) I stopped, and there were four military policemen already next to me, searching. "*Hände hoch!*" (Hands up!) And they started to search me. And for example, it was such a hardback book I had [shows inside jacket pocket.] This military policeman asked: "*Was ist das?*" – "What is this?" I said: "*Das ist heilige Schrift*" (This is the Holy Scriptures.) And he said, "*Du bist heilig?*" – "Are you holy?" I answered, "*Jawohl*" (Yes, Sir.) And then he let me go. It's like the angels 'pushed' me home. I had so many blessings, Jehovah blessed me so.

[22:42]

I started a study with twelve people. It was a small congregation. We were gathering together, singing and playing instruments. And it was all very nice, as it was the month of March, the month of April, and when May came, because this family was very religious, they used to go to church, they used to sit in the first places on the pew, and they led the priest under the [processional] canopy and took care of the cross and the shrine next to them, so that the flowers were always there on May 1st, because in Poland before the war there was a Catholic holiday [on this date.] From the first of May, the whole month had celebrations at the shrines, at the crosses, and on that day, it was not decorated, everything was dirty. There were no flowers. And these *tertiaries* (lay members of religious orders) asked, "What is this?" And they found out that the whole family no longer went to church. And the priest, out of anger, called the Gestapo. He called the Gestapo many times. And the Gestapo came. Examined... first, many had to spy who came, and so on. And one day, at the agreed time, I came there for a meeting, and the house was already surrounded by the military police. Only, on that day, as if the holy spirit had guided me, I did not follow this road, but went around. I drove into the village, and they did not know me, they did not know who I was. There was, among others, a non-resident brother, there with me, Jan Pinaki from my area. We were talking outside, because it was nice and warm, the sun was shining. I saw that in the bushes, behind the bush, there is a spike, I can see a bayonet. I said, "Brothers, the house is surrounded." To this brother, I gave an order to run through the barn into the field, and all the residents should enter. And they went in. And they entered their residence, but I stayed outside. And then they asked questions, the military police, four of them there were. I have not been searched or asked who I was, because I was there fixing my bike. They entered the residence and asked: "*Was ist los?*" – and they did not understand German – "what's going on here?" So, they said "nothing." "What do you mean nothing?! Who are you?" "I am the householder" "Who are you?" "I am a daughter." "And who are you?" "I am the wife of the householder" "And who are you?" "I am the brother-in-law." "And this one ..." because they all lived in the same property. "Well, if you don't say the names of who visits you, we will arrest you all." And they said my name. Then I quickly threw down the bicycle, took a bicycle nearby from the brother-in-law and quickly drove home. I removed all the copies, I moved all the literature to the garden, because I had little time, I moved them to the garden and returned to Ujejsce, where I was conducting this study. They arrested everyone. Well, grandpa was the only one left, crying. I encouraged him, so he wouldn't worry – and told him that I [also] would be arrested. So, it happened. I come home, and they were searching my house. Military police. They searched the whole apartment, found nothing, no proof. There was a mandolin on the table. And I had it here, here I had "*Złoty Wiek*" (The Golden Age), where Hitler... I'm looking for it right now, yes, I had it stuck here [Jan shows a magazine hidden in his sock under the trouser leg], through the entire occupation, we were going around like that.

I had it here, in this way.

Here I had it, and then I had my hands up [Jan puts his hands up], and I came.

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And now I was worried about what to do, but since the policeman saw the mandolin and he was very...

[Translator] and [Jan Otrębski] (simultaneously): ...I
interested.

[27:00]

[Jan Otrębski]: He said: "Who is playing?"

[Robert Buckley]: Maybe you could back up and say that again. We're too close now.

[Jan Otrębski]: "Who's playing it?" and I said...

[Robert Buckley]: *Einen Moment*. Just back up, a little bit further. Just... show it again.

[Translator]: Could you please show it again where you had this [magazine]?

[Jan Otrębski]: Here I have it behind it, this way [rolling down his pant leg], here I concealed it, and I had it, and so I went home [Jan shows his hands up.] The policemen here [Jan puts his hand to his back] had put a bayonet on me, and he brought me home in this way [with his hands up.] I saw what was happening in the house... there was a search and so he saw the mandolin and asked who was playing it. I said it was me. Well, "*Du bist spiel? Gut. Spielen Sie.*" (Are you playing? Good. Play please!) And I played him such a beautiful melody "*Kornblumenblau*" (Cornflower blue) (Jan hums.) And these military policemen [Jan performs dance movements made by policemen and hums.] And now I say: "*Ich meine bitte. Ich habe eine Bitte*" – "I have a request." And he says, "What?" "I want to go to the toilet." And he says, "*Gut* (Good.) Go!" And then I went to pull it [the magazine] out. And I went. And father was standing there by the military police [Jan shows the distance with his hand.] I pulled it out, hid it there and then I said, "Now you can arrest me." And that's how they arrested me. And that was the last time I saw my father. I never saw my father again after that. This is how I was led to the Police station, and from the Police station to the Gestapo. And the Gestapo, these are many kinds...

[Translator]: Listen, now begins the period of your stay in concentration camps. Could you ...

[29:13]

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, not yet. In the Gestapo, I was in a basement with no window, nothing. In a damp basement. In the dark, in the dark, on bare wood. Four days. And I was under pressure, because they really wanted to force me to confess that I worked in an organization, right? Well, they wanted to know if I was not a communist. I told them that I was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Well, that was enough for them. They saw that I was capable, they wanted me to cooperate with them but I didn't sign it. In this way, after a few days in the Gestapo, well, the beatings were there also, and [I was] in fear all the time. So, the I was put in prison, I was in Będzin prison for 15 days, and from there they took me to the camp; the so-called "*Ersatzgefängnislager*" (substitute prison camp) in Mysłowice.

[30:15]

[Translator]: Could you first briefly list the places of the camps and when were you brought there? For now, just list all of them one by one.

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, when it comes to Mysłowice, they brought me to Mysłowice on July 3, and I was in Mysłowice until September 15.

[Translator]: Next...

[Jan Otrębski]: The next one was from September 15 in Auschwitz in 1942 to March 13, 1943. Later, I was in Gusen until June 15, 1943, and Mauthausen, till the end. And liberation took place in Mauthausen.

[Translator]: So maybe let's go back to Mysłowice now.

[Jan Otrębski]: To Mysłowice. So, in Mysłowice...

[Translator]: Some experiences from that period?

[Jan Otrębski]: Horrible! They put us up against the wall [Jan holding his hands up] we stood against the wall for nearly three hours. And before we were admitted to the cell, we received 25 lashes, blows for this... 25 [Jan shows with his hand the whip.] It was impossible to endure. This is excruciating pain. I prayed to Jehovah because there if someone screamed, someone grunted, someone groaned, they got 50, 60, 70, 80, and they could even kill [that person.] So, they said not to scream. And I prayed, I prayed that every time I was hit I would not make a squeal. And it was Jehovah who strengthened me that I did not make a sound. When they struck, I pleaded: "O Jehovah! O Jehovah!" And so, I endured it. Anyway, it was like this from the very beginning... They asked me, what is my name. Do I know where I am? And straight away I got hit in the teeth [Jan shows punching in the teeth.] That's why I don't have teeth, because they've been knocked out. In the camp almost, all of my teeth were knocked out. And what made it worse were the number of lice, so many lice. Huge lice! Billions of lice! Billions! It was impossible to sleep. Because I didn't sleep in my shirt, because I had to throw away the shirt, because all the lice got into the shirt, you couldn't get any sleep. They were bothering you terribly. Anyway, you had to sit on the benches, do nothing, just like this [Jan is sitting upright, with his head down.] You could only go to the toilet twice. Put your hands up and you had to run to the toilet. And there was an appointed time for urinating: one minute, and three minutes for a 'hard one'. Otherwise, they were beating horrifically, beating unimaginably, even to death. It was the allotted time of 5 minutes and you have to run, putting your hands up. Once someone shouted "*Achtung!*" – "Attention!" And I was running [Jan puts his hands up] to the toilet and I did not hear "*Achtung.*" And then he reached me, he thrashed me. So that I barely dragged myself back to the cell. Well, my cell was quite cramped, dark and damp. There was no sun at all. No daylight. It was a vestibule⁶ of Auschwitz. It was the worst camp in terms of sanitation. And I only got three decagrams⁷, three decagrams of bread.

[Translator]: Per day?

[34:03]

[Jan Otrębski]: Per day. Three decagrams of bread, just imagine. And soups, a quarter of a liter of soup. It was all the food [for a day.] I lost weight. I was just skin and bones. I was completely exhausted there in Mysłowice. And so, it was on the 13th, 14th, and the 15th, because I was always getting scraps⁸ of bread, from *kalfaktor*⁹ who was serving [food.] I reminded him. I said: "Sir, could you please give me some crust," because the crust would be [at least] a little in my stomach. And he answered, "You won't get it, you won't get it." And with this... he hit [shows: punching] my face and then I cried and left. I prayed to the Creator. And then, they read my name. They read my name [and said]: "Take all [your]

⁶ *przedsiónek* – pre Auschwitz.

⁷ 3 *deko* = 30 grams = around 1.07 oz

⁸ *Okrójki* – most likely scraps of bread.

⁹ *Kalfaktor* – in Silesian: a person (probably a prisoner) who performs an auxiliary activities, e.g. serving food.

belongings¹⁰ and get out!" I went out to the corridor, and here are the skulls, *Totenkopf*¹¹ the SS, there were the skulls here [Jan shows the place where they were placed on the uniform] And then I knew that I was going to Auschwitz. Because there was transportation to Auschwitz on Tuesdays and Fridays. Many have died there in Mysłowice, a lot [of people] died.

[35:15]

[Translator]: Were there any other Jehovah's Witnesses?

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. They were there as well, some came there, Jehovah's Witnesses, only I did not meet them personally. However, I gave a witness to one person. He was a Silesian from Ruda. He really liked to listen and I asked him to let my father know when he leaves. Because he was a Silesian, and at least Silesians could be freed, when they signed the *Volksliste* (German People's List.) But they did hold some [Silesians.] He was saying that he will get out, but he did not get out, because I met him in Auschwitz. He arrived from the concentration camp in Buchenwald to Mysłowice, and from Mysłowice, instead of home as he had expected, he went to Auschwitz and he was in the *kapo kommando Gettner Verwaltung*¹² (possible management work crew), not the "*Gettner kommando? Gestellte*" (asking question) – it was similar to the *kommando*.

[36:10]

And this is how I arrived at Auschwitz. Well, in Auschwitz, I came to the camp, and the orchestra was playing there. And I am a musician. After all, it was in the orchestra that I played, and it lifted me up immediately. I've asked: "How? Music? Music?! Music in Auschwitz?" But I was trying to work out what was happening there, right? And this music was needed to keep this march, through the gate, because you had to use the same steps like "*Eins, zwei, drei, vier*" (one, two, three, four) [presents the way of the march], and this leg had to go evenly: "*Eins, zwei, drei, vier.*" And that's why the orchestra was there, and this orchestra played for them, and it was needed. And so, at the beginning... Because I gave the statement: "musician", because I played in orchestras. I was extremely gifted. Well, if I were not doing my [preaching] work but [became] a musician – I would be a truly famous musician, but I chose [the preaching] work. I put the "musician" aside. When they saw that I was a musician, they really wanted [me] to join an orchestra. There were 150 musicians. There was Wysocki Adam and Kopyciński from the Dana Choir. Well, I knew almost all those in the orchestra¹³, because I was at the musicians' play and I used their instruments to comfort my brothers, and I sang songs and played songs for my brothers. The brothers were strengthened, because these songs were very beautiful then. I could improvise here, but I don't have any instrument. I also passed the orchestra exam, because there you had to pass the exam. I passed the exam and was supposed to play the violin. My parents were supposed to send me a violin to the camp. But I changed my mind that as a Christian, as a Jehovah's Witness, I couldn't play. Why not? Because I combined music with my heart, with my feelings. And I knew that it would not give me pleasure, because I would play some extracts from the overture, or some "*Potpourri*" (medley music), and here I see murdered, slaughtered people. These *kommandos* were dragging dozens of dead bodies. And hundreds were mutilated. Heads smashed, pierced, hands broken, legs broken. Each *kommando* was a harvester of death every day. And I say: "How can I play in front of such an audience?!" And I gave up. I did not

¹⁰ *Totenkopf* – German word for the skull and crossbones (or "death's head") symbol.

¹¹ *Zachy* – in Silesian: things, clothes.

¹² *Verwaltung* – camp command office, management, administration or a head office.

¹³ Originally "*Orkiestratus*" or "*orkiestratorów*" – members of orchestra

go, because I preferred to work in a heavy labor *kommando*, to suffer rather than use such... Because the orchestra benefitted, so that they had milk, they could have milk. They did not have to work hard, only to help in the kitchen in the camp. Besides, they had many hours for exercise. They practiced a lot. And I did not want to use such work for my benefit and that is why I took the worst work in construction, I worked in the *Lenz Baukommando*¹⁴. And they liked me there because I was a musician, they gave me a nick name "Musician" and [called me this way]: "Musician", "Musician."

[39:15]

[Translator]: You mentioned suffering.

[Jan Otrębski]: About suffering.

[Translator]:... at the time. Could you describe any specific experiences in the camp from this period?

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, I can. Because when I came to Auschwitz, I immediately gave a witness about God's Kingdom. And everyone thought I was a young priest. They said, "There's a young priest here." Oh, I'm telling you. And I was in trouble because of this. Because they believed that I was a priest, but I was not a priest, right? Because [I was talking] about the Kingdom of God, about God, and they said: "There is something in it..." And someone put, you know, put a medal of Our Lady in my pocket. How did he put it in there, I didn't know. I did not know that there was something... Because I never looked into my pockets, because there was neither a handkerchief, nor anything, no hands in the pockets, because it was forbidden to hide anything in the pockets, to search in the pockets. So, I didn't look there.

[40:09]

But how did I get to know about it, you know. I had such, such experiences. Because when I came to Auschwitz, I was looking for brothers, to contact with brothers. And right on the first day, as if spirit was directing me, because we were taken to do hard work, very hard work.

Auschwitz was divided by a fence four meters high, with wires, and we were taking it apart. It was a historic moment, as the camp consisted of male section... the right was for men and the left was for women. But the women were moved to Brzezinski, to Birkenau, so the fence had to be demolished. And they took me to that fence. And you know, four-meter concrete poles and three prisoners here, but how, how is one supposed to straighten oneself in order to walk with this pole, one had to straighten himself, not carry it in such a way that the spine was bent [Jan presents the way of lifting and carrying the poles], but he had to stand straight and lift the pole. And you know, I was hit there, hit. This *kapo*¹⁵ hit me like this, because everything had to be fast, he was hitting mercilessly – on the head, on the back. And in the spine. How he hit me with such a stick¹⁶ in the spine, so I sat down. But it was over, the sun was already setting. And now I didn't know what to do. But before I came to the camp, I had a block supervisor from the "number nine", he was a Silesian, and I was only one [besides him] – two of us were from Zagłębie. They all were Silesians and they knew German. And I also spoke German, because I studied it at school, so I knew a bit of German.

¹⁴ *Lenz Baukommando* – the name of the building work crew – translation unclear

¹⁵ *Kapo* – a prisoner given oversight of other prisoners.

¹⁶ Originally "Sztyl" – stick, nightstick.

As for those Silesians¹⁷ the block supervisor said: "Are you Silesians?" and everyone answered: "*Jawohl*" (Yes, Sir.) "It's me, *sa pieruny* (in Silesian), I'll be speaking German." And he started to speak in German. And then he gave a very beautiful advice. He said: "You can survive the camp – only in German, I will not speak German anymore, but I will just say – "*muss die Auge alle Seiten muss sein*" – "You must have eyes all around you." And all such advice, among others, but wise advice, that you know, watch what is happening around you. Whether to the right or to the left or behind. So that you do not look around, but that you know the situation.

[42:30]

Besides, he said: "For example, if you feel cold, frost, biting frost, minus 30°C and you are going to go to the bathhouse, now when you come to bathe, and you are cold, you are shivering with what feels like a fever, and now you will come to the water – what water will you choose?" – he asked. And one answered: "Under the warm." He said "Then you can go to the crematorium today. But the one that chooses cold, this one will live." And I said, "So, that's the way it is." He gave such advice, and I began to apply this advice. Because I want to tell my brothers that when I went to the camp, the brothers said we should study the Bible every day. Every day. And I got up at 4:00 a.m. before going to work to study the Bible every day.

[Translator]: And where did you get the Bible in the camp?

[Jan Otrębski]: At home, before then, when I was still at home – I am going back to before I was sent to the camps – the brothers recommended that we study the Book of Deuteronomy. And faithfully I had and memorized the Book of Deuteronomy. It was for me, this Meribah, all of this I saw with my [own] eyes, the Fields of Moab, I saw Moses speaking to them, how he advised them. And I was engrossed in the Book of Deuteronomy. Besides, I had [studied] all the prophecies in the past. The prophecy of Habakkuk, the prophecy of Daniel, the prophecy of Jonah. Next, I had [studied] all the prophecies like the "lesser [prophets]" – Obadiah, Micah. Daniel's prophecy, I had deciphered Jeremiah, Isaiah. I was very spiritually strong. When I went to the camps, I had the entire Bible in my mind. A complete Bible in my mind. That is why I strengthened my brothers. I encouraged such ones as Oremka, [and] Wróbel. Before I get to that, how I found them, I still have to tell you what it was like when I met them. So, I will go back to the fact that I was alone. I was looking for Witnesses. I was giving a witness. And when I was hit, I asked one [of them] and he gave me advice, among other things: "When you are hungry, when you are so hungry that you would chew stones and you will be beaten unconscious, what will you choose? Will you choose food if they gave you any? [Or] will you choose water?" Well, this is the dilemma again. What to choose? Food, when you are hungry, would you chew the stones? Or water? I chose the water, you know? And it saved me. I gave up eating when I crawled to the block with my injured spine, and then I chose water. I went to the *waschraum*¹⁸ (washroom) and I let the water run, and it dripped, drip by drip and I came to consciousness, do you know when? In the morning, the next day, I regained consciousness. But I had no food left. So, I was weak. I had no food, but it gave me strength. And on the next day, I attached myself to a *rolag*¹⁹ (transport wagon.) It was already loaded, fully loaded, because it was a demolition. The *Abbruchlager kommando* (camp demolition crew) was in Auschwitz, they were dismantling the thirteenth block, because it was an old building. Because it's not what it looks like now. Because there were military barracks there and those barracks had to be rebuilt. And it was necessary to de-

¹⁷ Jan Otrębski is using a form "*Ślqzarów*" – Silesians.

¹⁸ *Waschraum* – German word for washroom, bathhouse.

¹⁹ *Rolwaga* – Silesian word for transport trolley, similar to "*Rollwagen*" – German word for wagon.

molish it first and then start building again. And I see a pile of bricks and the transport wagon, and I quickly jumped on it. And the coachman turned to the *kapo* to give him one helper to unload these bricks. And the *kapo* answered: "But you had one already sitting." So, he turned around: "Where did you come from?" It was as if the angels put me on this wagon.

[46:22]

And on the second day, for the first time I drove past the gate of "*Arbeit macht frei*" (Work sets you free), right? And we left the camp. So, then I gave him a witness. And when I was giving him a witness about God's Kingdom, he said to me, that his wife is a Jehovah's Witness, but he was not. "I am telling you, they will kill you. Because you will not live long here in Auschwitz, if you preach, you will not stay alive in Auschwitz." And I started crying. I said: "How, how? Where are my brothers?" He said, "All killed." Indeed, they killed everyone. I have a list here, but we would have to look for it, which shows they had killed all the Witnesses who ended up in Auschwitz. There was no trace of them. And when I got to know this from him, that there is not a single Jehovah's Witness, I was a bit devastated, but I kept a good spirit, I prayed, prayed fervently as much as I could, and preached as much as I could. I tried to give a witness. And what happened is, that someone planted this medal of Our Lady. Well, he put it [into my pocket], but I didn't know that I had it.

[47:29]

The calamities started. What calamities? One time I came, because it was raining all day, very heavy, from early morning until evening. All were soaked, shivering. And it was so that before the roll call, you were not allowed to enter the block. It was forbidden. And I respected that, because I was taught to respect the law, and I stood around. I stood where there was an exit here, in front of the block, I stood there. Hands here like this [Jan stands by the door and shows where and how he stood.] Then there were a lot of prisoners in there, but because of the roll call, the *kapo* and the block supervisor got angry and started beating all those prisoners who were inside. He was pushing them out, but because it was a narrow door and there were hundreds of people inside, I was standing outside in the rain. I wasn't paying attention, and I got hit. I saw stars. I could see stars, what happened! He kicked me in the wrist, here he kicked me. Here. When he kicked me in the wrist, I saw stars, all the stars. I blacked out. And the next day, instantly a fever. A fever of 38°C. Fever in the morning. Fever in the evening. 40°C fever on the second day, 40 degrees on the third day. I said, "What am I supposed to do?" I'm already injured. I did not know what to do. And I decided to go to *Krankenbau*²⁰ (prisoners' hospital) on the fourth or fifth day. *Krankenbau*, in [block] 28, when we go to Auschwitz I will show where it is.

[49:15]

I ran across, after the roll call, but I was positioned in such a way that by the time I got there, there were already over 300. I was [number] three hundred and something. And they only admitted 20 to 25 prisoners in *Krankenbau* a day, and the rest to the camp, back to the block. But I didn't get any food. Because they gave food right after the roll call. I already gave up on this food, I didn't get any food, and I didn't get this done either. And now I came and prayed fervently. I said, "O Jehovah God, make me somehow... what decision should I make?" A fever – well, in *Krankenbau*, it means five minutes left of life, because an SS man would give me a phenol injection and I would just shake and then to the crematorium. So, I begged God, I begged God to make it possible. And here, I tell you, I looked in my pocket, and here is this medal with the Virgin Mary. How I threw it, I threw it away! You

²⁰ *Krankenbau* – prisoners hospital located in Block 28

know, the blessings came straight away, the blessings came straight away! So, I... Aha, because I wanted to [tell] you, aha, I haven't finished yet. Because I wasn't able to that day, then later, the second time, I went to eat, and next, somewhere on the fifth day, finally I stood in the first row during the roll call. You know, because there were 1000 people, over 1000 people were in the block, I stood right on the edge, so when "*Ende, Apellende*" (end of roll call) "*in die Blocki, marsch, marsch!*" (To the blocks, march, march!), I ran across and got there. I was in the first 15, and I got in, you know, to that hospital.

[51:10]

And now I saw holes (sores), holes in my thighs, holes here, holes there, holes right through. It was all covered in *phlegmon* (inflammation.) And this is how I came to him, and he looked at the hand, and my hand was about to be cut off. And he said: "What do you want to do? After all, this hand is no longer of use. Shall we cut it or not?" And he had the saw, you know, without anesthesia. "So, What? Do we cut off the hand or not?" I said we are not cutting it. I asked him, if I can live in Auschwitz without a hand. And he said, "[straight] to the crematorium." And then I said: "If I have to go to the crematorium, I prefer to go with both hands." And I started crying. He said: "I will not do anything to you." So, I asked him to clean it at least. So, he scraped it to the bone, because it was all rotting, the *phlegmon* was already well advanced. It was already [shows the shoulder] a fever of 40°C – no less, no more – 39 – 40°C fever. So, I had to decide: what to do now. Either to the crematorium or the hospital, phenol injection and *raus* (out.) So, I prayed. I tell you, I prayed all night, I prayed to the Creator and the Creator gives, you know what, he gave me help and what wonderful help. Then, I got up, because there was a roll call gong, and I got up. And I was walking around the camp. I said: "Either this is the end of my life, because it was such a joyful day for me... And I was walking and singing to myself: "*Pricy czas, pracy czas, głodnych karm, bracie mój, a spragnionych gdzieś tam, gdzie wód żywych jest źródło*" (Time for work, time for work, feed the hungry ones, my brother, and the thirsty ones lead to where the streams of living waters are) (humming.) And so, as I was signing to myself, with a joyful spirit, suddenly I saw, here were Jehovah's Witnesses. I said, "This is impossible! After all, I was looking for them all over the camp, and now I see Jehovah's Witnesses!" And there stood Oremek, the brother I will show later. Brother Oremek, brother Nogawczyk, brother Andrzej Wróbel, was there at the time. And they looked at me... He says: "You, 'red triangle'²¹ and who are you?" I said, "Brothers. I am a Jehovah's Witness." "What kind of Jehovah's Witness?!" "Well, I'm a Jehovah's Witness, but they gave me the wrong triangle, it's not my fault." But ... they didn't trust me. So, I described Daniel's prophecy. The interesting thoughts that "You will not stumble, but God who is within, will act for you." And I encouraged them. I told them about it. And there was Wróbel, and he said: "*Pieruny, to sa brat, ta sa brat*" (Silesian: He is a brother.) They welcomed me. You know, and as soon as they took me in, they told me where I should go: "To so and so, [called] Wróbel," he said, "Come to Wróbel, I'm in the 15th block." You know, I... and it was noon, and how I rejoiced then, how I thanked the Creator.

[54:06]

And every day there was "*Läuseappell*" (lice inspection), you know? And one day on a Sunday, when that moment was, and on the Sunday before the inspection, you had to get naked, you know, and look for lice. "*Läusaappell*." You had to look for these lice in the clothing folds for half an hour. But apart from the fact that you searched all these lice – naked, everyone was naked – these hygienists were going through your underwear, to see if there were

²¹ Nazi concentration camp badges, primarily triangles, were part of the system of identification in German camps.

any nits or lice. Because: "*Ein 'wesz' das ist dein Tod*" – "one louse is your death." And they were terrified, because a typhus epidemic broke out in Auschwitz. When the typhus epidemic broke out, that was the end. I also was sick with typhus. I'm telling you, something awful. Amazing hunger! You could eat a tree, anything. The hunger is unbelievable and you are exhausted. Fever, no fever. And [unclear speech] that epidemic was [caused by] the lice. When you got typhus lice, it was like half a nail. They were some Russian lice. Huge lice. They were so unpleasant, when you crush them, it was like a bullet exploding. And then, after lunch on Sunday, there was always "*ein Stunde frei*" (an hour off) or in other words "*ein Stunde in die Bett*" (one hour in bed.) It was obligatorily, whether you wanted to sleep or not, you had to sleep on these beds. Well, I couldn't anymore. I just covered myself with a blanket and prayed. I said, "Thank you, Jehovah, that I could find the brothers." Well, this "*ein Stunde schlafen, nach Mittag*" (siesta time, after lunch) had ended, that is, after lunch it had ended, the gong [sounded] and I looked for them and went there to the 15th block. I was asking if he was there – but I didn't know the name! I forgot the name. I forgot the number. But I knew where the 15th block was. But I knew that one had a badge, you know? One of these brothers had a badge "*Schlosserei*" (metalwork), so he was some "*Schlosserei*" (metalworker) there. And I said – I don't know the name, but I know he had a badge – and I said, "Sir, where is the '*Schlosserei*' here?" And he said: "At the 15th [block], *fünfzehn A* (15-A)." I went there, and the *kapo* looked me up and down, [and] I got such a thrashing, because I was a *muzulman*²² (extremely exhausted), because I was dirty, untidy, and also thin – a *muzulman* ready to finish off. And then he beat me up, but I asked one prisoner to call the one who was a Jehovah's Witness, I said, he lives here. "Ah, Wróbel [unclear speech], Wróbel." Well, for Wróbel and... "Wróbel, your Kamerad [comrade] is here, he has come." "Come on then, bring him here." And they brought him, I went in, and the brothers were there, you know? They were already gathered there. And someone gave me a bowl of food: "Brother, here is your food, you're hungry." But instead of eating, I put the food away and said: "No, brothers, not this hunger, hunger is hunger, but I will not eat now, I just want to tell you something." And I started talking about the Kingdom. They asked me questions: "Why do you look like this?" And then I showed them, "Brothers, look, I have seconds to live. Look, *Phlegmon*, I've been there [to hospital], and I am in danger of having my hand cut off. And brother Oremek said, "Okay, we will give you now [bandage.]" He made the dressing, and I tell you, I received a proper dressing from him, he says, "You will get a carrot every day." But how would they pass on this carrot? One would pass it to another, because he worked in the *Kartoffelzelle* (food warehouse), this brother Oremek, and he had access to carrots. And he would put that carrot in his pocket, but you know how we would pass it on? We would pass it on facing back, passing behind their back. I wouldn't take my hand like that [Jan points forward], just a hand in my sleeve. One sleeve to the other sleeve, so that no one would know what I had in my sleeve. He fed me so that I would get 'new blood'. You know, he saved my hand. Look, you see, to this day, my whole hand is fully working. This is only with the will of Jehovah God, who so protected me that I could trust in him completely, you know what I mean. And I was like that, during all [the time] in the camp, [and] all the later activities...

[58:18]

²² *Muzulman* – „Distorted form of the word Muslim (German „Muselmann“) commonly used in Auschwitz and other German concentration camps. In camp jargon, the word meant a prisoner who was extremely exhausted due to hunger (...)” – source: <http://www.70.auschwitz.org>

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

Well, I did have a few accidents. When I was in a work crew, where we were transporting bricks on a *lorka*²³ and there were three of us. One was pushing a full *lorka* on small rails²⁴, the second one was holding it and the third one was pushing it down, you know, so that the wheels would go on this rail turntable. When he pressed down on it, it couldn't bear the weight and the cart overturned and it all fell apart, so then everyone [came] to the cart, you know. Everyone, me too, you know? And beating... Two SS men were beating sticks on the back, on the [shin] bone, and so on. And you had your head in that box [Jan shows – leaning over the box, head inside], two SS men stood on the box. And they were beating. And I prayed to withstand these blows. Because they got mad if someone screamed. With every blow I [prayed] to God, to Jehovah God: "O Jehovah, help me to endure! Help me to endure!" And I endured 25 [blows], but you know, I was treated for three months. I was treated for three months! I had to lie on my stomach. Three months. It was in the *Lenz Baukommando, Lenz Bau*. Well, there were such accidents. There were very frequent escapes in Auschwitz, you know. Sometimes the roll call was held all night long. In the cold. Well, sometimes it all [depends on your] spirit. If someone was physically weak, they gave up. Whoever had no spirit died. That's why I kept saying this poem, that of Mickiewicz, that (Mickiewicz says, "Ode to youth", isn't it?), That "you beyond youth", that who has no spirit is like a skeleton, you know. And I knew that a strong spirit can do anything. You can be hungry. You can be thirsty, but the spirit must be strong. And those who gave up, were going to the fence. They just shot them like birds. But I did not give up, despite these various obstacles and difficulties.

[1:00:25]

Also, you know, the roll call sometimes lasted all night. All night long. Later they chased us to work, and everything [was] "*Bewegung! Schneller! Tempo! Raus!*" (Move! Fast! Speed up! Out!) Everything in a hurry, everything in a hurry. And to the left and to the right. Well, I had the advantage, that the *kapos* liked me very much. Because I was likable, and then, when I was in difficult situations, I would turn to them, and tell them that I was sick. For example, I had *Durchfall*²⁵ with blood that was impossible to heal it in Auschwitz, impossible. *Durchfall* with blood – everyone went... [unclear], a few seconds and died. And look, I had *Durchfall* with blood. I prayed to Jehovah God: "God, save me somehow!" Then I turned to the *kapo* and said I had *Durchfall* with blood. And he said, "Don't eat anything. No water, nothing." And this fever, burning heat. 40°C temperature. My lips were parching. But he said, "You must not take anything to your mouth. Nothing. You must not take even a drop of water in your mouth." I kept this [advice] and after three days the bleeding stopped, I tell you. I managed to stop the bleeding. From then on, in Auschwitz, I did not suffer from stomach problems for three years. Until today I do not get sick. Until today I have a healthy stomach, see, and I have survived this *Durchfall* in Auschwitz.

[1:01:57]

Well, I want to go back to the memories where the block supervisor gave us the advice, this advice was very wonderful. You know, the advice he told us was so wonderful. I followed it all, because for me it was like the 10 commandments, you know? And it was just for me, if beaten, if hungry or something else, do not... That's why I do not chase food. I am pioneering now. My first priority is service, right? Not eating. As for me – I can go all day, two days,

²³ *Lorka* – a small open freight wagon or an open car trailer; it could have been a cart on rails.

²⁴ Originally "*Szynki*" – small, narrow rails.

²⁵ Originally "*Durchfall krwisty*" [literally: "*bloody diarrhea*"] – it is a description rather than a medical term; http://www.70.auschwitz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=119&Itemid=176&lang=pl

three days without food. I can bear it, because I am not in favor of food. I'm not for food. I have food in second place and pioneer service in the first place.

[Robert Buckley]: I think he could use a little water.

[1:02:45]

Well, I would like to add more. Auschwitz was a great shock for me, you know, a great shock. But when I shook off the shock, when I came to my senses, the transportations came. For example, transport from Łódź came, Schnell Wiktor, Nadera Michał, Frydrych, [and] others came. 15 brothers, I have these 15 brothers here. I can name them: Król, Wróbel Konrad, Oremek²⁶ Feliks, Nogawczyk Jan, Nogawczyk Andrzej, Otrębski (me), Ryś Leopold, Willi Zygmunt from Brzeg, Wiktor Schnell, Jakobi, Jauer, Streich Wilhelm, Baumert Gustaw, Nadera Michał, Gałczyński Jan, Friedrich Józef. We were there, you know? And it was such a group, what a group it was. We prayed every day, every day. Near block five there was such a quiet corner, and every day, twice a day, we had to be there to exchange experiences, to talk about who suffered, and for spiritual and physical help. So, the brothers were really built up, you know? We were like an enclave, so different. The world had not seen it. Therefore, when you read the books... I have some here, when they write about Jehovah's Witnesses, that they were conscientious, honest, although antagonistic, they always wrote positively when it comes to morals. They had to learn, learn, learn, and learn from Jehovah's Witnesses. Because they weren't greedy. For them, it was no strange to steal from a prisoner. Because it was an everyday custom to steal from other prisoners. It was horrible. You got bread and they stole it, they stole it. But brothers didn't do that. When the brothers got bread, they shared it: "Here you go brother, here go brother, here go brother." Because I had some food this day, but he would have it the next. And one shared with me²⁷. So, the thieves did not steal anything from us, because we ate everything every day and we were sated. But they used to steal from one another. For example, Bishop Jasiński, about which I want to tell you more. He was one of the greatest enemies of Jehovah's Witnesses. And this Jasiński, he used to take bread for confession, a bowl of soup for confession, and so on. He was always hungry, also the thieves would rob him, because when he hid the bread in a *Rucksack*, the thieves watched where he went and they pulled it out. Jehovah's Witnesses would make sure that nothing was stolen from them that everyone was... Therefore, sharing was really because of great love and others were watching.

[1:05:23]

Well, the question was, did they treat²⁸ Jehovah's Witnesses better? No. Jehovah's Witnesses came first for persecution, before the Jews. I want to tell you. The SS was hostile to Jehovah's Witnesses. Besides, Hitler himself said that this brood was to be exterminated all over Germany and in all the area! Hence, there have been cases when motorcycles have ridden into Jehovah's Witnesses. As they saw one of Jehovah's Witnesses, with motorbike they killed that one. He killed him with a motorbike. Regarding the sisters, no. The sisters had a milder situation, a milder one, because the sisters worked in the houses. For example, two sisters worked for Höss, with whom I had personal contact. Friedrich [Martha] worked in *Führerheim* (SS officers hotel and club.) I had personal contact with her. With the one who is not there, Benita Adamczewska, the one from Poznań. She was at Mengele's house. They were domestics in these houses. So, they were treated a bit differently because they [the SS]

²⁶ The precision of the names is uncertain.

²⁷ Originally "*mnie podzielił*" – meaning: shared with me

²⁸ Originally "*mieli lepiej*" – have better; implied: treated better

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

saw that they were honest, that they were hardworking, that they were helpful, and so on. Our sisters were appreciated very much. However, they [the SS] treated the brothers as their greatest enemies, you know. Well, that's why when I was leaving Auschwitz, I raised my hands to heaven and thanked the Creator that I was leaving Auschwitz. Auschwitz was for me really like *Vernichtungslager* – a "camp of destruction." Because I saw, I saw hundreds of people. I have seen both those who took their own lives and those who were shot, those who were butchered.

[1:07:09]

Because it was a tremendous pace of work. "*Raus, raus, raus*" (Out, out, out), always this "*raus*" and "*Bewegung!*" (move!) "*schneller, tempo, raus*" (faster, speed up, out) and it was all around you, this "*raus, raus, raus*" and racing everywhere. Here and there. A terrible pace of work. Besides, people were coming to the camp, singing. When you were coming back with those dead bodies, you had to sing. They were singing (humming) or like this: "You are in Auschwitz. Whether you like it or not..." – such a song is about Auschwitz. And everyone had to sing, everyone! And they shouted, just to shout, you know? They had to come to a certain point where the orchestra could be heard. When they heard the orchestra, then they had to sing to the rhythm of the orchestra, you know, to the "*Arbeit macht frei*" gate, because on this side the SS with rifles, with those bayonets pointed towards you, and on the other side *kapos* and *Oberkapos*²⁹, on the other side again. So, it was a death parade. It was one, one... Well, I would describe it, but it takes time. I do not have time, because I am pioneering, so there is no time now.

[1:08:15]

And then from Auschwitz to Gusen. But this trip alone, oh... About 3,000 of us were taken, why? They did such a *miszung*³⁰ (mixing.) Because they were afraid that the Poles were very organized and that they could be a threat for them in the camp. That is why they did not hold many Poles, but moved them immediately. Poles – immediately to other camps – to Sachsenhausen, to Buchenwald. Well, our transport went to Mauthausen. They squeezed us into freight wagons, 300, 400 into one wagon. Crowded and, I'm telling you, nothing to drink... it was so hot. Well, we knew... As I read it – I don't know if brothers are familiar with this article, but if I could read it here for you? Here one Russian woman writes how people were dying in the wagons. Without food, without drink. That's how we felt. Because brother Oremek said: "Brother Jan, organize water." I said, "Okay, I'll organize it." But I didn't organize it. And as we were going to Prague, Brother Oremek said: "And, brother Jan, is there water?" I say, "Brother Feliks, I didn't take it." "You didn't take the water?! And we're all dying now because of you. We will all die." You know, we stuck our tongues to the iron, to the iron of the wagon, to cool it with the iron, because we had such a desire to drink, a terrible, terrible desire to drink. Food, you can survive without it. But drinking – you can't survive without drinking. The thirst...

[1:09:48]

[Translator]: How long was this journey?

[Jan Otrębski]: The journey was around... Well, we left at noon. We went through Dziedzice, through Prague. They opened the doors for us in Prague. The next day we were in Mauthausen. But in Prague they opened the doors for us and there was an escape. The inmates

²⁹ *Oberkapo* – chief kapo (prisoner functionaries)

³⁰ *Miszung* – in Silesian „mixing”

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

tore off the floor and, you know, they got under the wheels and a few escaped, you know. Oh, what happened in Prague! Chasing, beating... because if it had not been for this, this escape, we would have all died of thirst and suffocation, because there was no air. But the fact that they opened for us in Prague, because they were looking for who escaped, you know, that's how we were all saved. And we got to Mauthausen. And in Mauthausen, you know, they set the dogs on us. The dogs tore us to shreds. Whoever jumped down, a dog would instantly tear a piece of his body. They chased us, they beat us, on the way there, I tell you. And the Austrians were crying. When we walked, we saw the tears, as they saw them forcing us. And we had Dutch clogs. They weren't shoes, they were clogs. Blistered heels, everything blistered, no *onuce*³¹, just bare feet. And so, they forced us to Gusen, six kilometers to Gusen. Because it was from Mauthausen, say, Mauthausen to Sankt Georgene. The camp was at the end of the village of Klingenstein. And they led us there. Do you know how they welcomed us there? They told us, "See the gallows?" There were concrete gallows. He said: "All Poles will go to the gallows. Not one of you will remain here." And they showed us a quarry, a "Steinbruch", a mill in Gusen. I don't know if this brother [Jan is referring to Robert Buckley] was in Gusen, but in Gusen was such a huge colossus, where a mill grinds stones, you know, grinding stones.

[1:11:36]

And I got to Steinbruch. And I was assigned to work at Steinbruch. But then, this one made a mistake, because my number in Gusen was 13449, but the Steinbruch's *kommando Szrajber* (work crew scribe) number was 13339. And he thought that he wrote himself down, you know, and he crossed me out. And so, it saved me from Steinbruch.

[Translator]: (unclear) this portrait? So, is this from that time?

[Jan Otrębski]: This is from Auschwitz, yes. Yes, this is.

[Translator]: This is earlier.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. But this is... I did it through this [unclear]... yes. Well, and...

[Translator]: Could you hold it please? Maybe you should drink some water...

[Jan Otrębski]: Well then, Aha, because you have to leave it, I know.

[Robert Buckley]: Have him hold it a little bit higher.

[Translator]: Could you hold it like this. A little bit higher.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. And there I got there, to block 15. The conditions were gruesome there. You know, the block supervisor was a murderer, a killer. He chased us all over the square and shouting "*Bewegung!*" (Move!), "*Schnelle Tempo! Raus!*" (Fast, Speed up! Out!) He beat us in a terrible way. And in the baths, there was a barrel of water that was constantly filled with cold water, you know? And do you know how they killed a prisoner? He took him by the legs and put his head down in that barrel. Only seconds, "glub, glub, glub, glub, glub" [Jan mimics the underwater gurgling sound], the bubbles disappeared and he threw him out, the corpse. And next. They grabbed by the legs and into the barrel. And "glub, glub, glub, glub, glub" [Jan mimics the underwater gurgling sound] and that's it, and then the next. And that's how they drowned prisoners in that barrel, you know? Also, in the sewage pits. That was Reichling, Hugo. Murderer! Killer! I'm telling you, I was under his command! He murdered prisoners, he did so. On the noose. And this, in our block, a few were hanged. You know, they hung in this way, that they tied here [Jan shows how the hands were folded

³¹ *Nucci* or *Onuce* – a wide strip of fabric for wrapping the foot, replacing a sock or a stocking.

at the back and were tied at the wrists], they tied you by the rope here, and they tied you to the beam. And all night, all night the prisoner hung like that, you know, he was swinging like that, he was swinging on this rope all night long. When they lowered him, he everything was dislocated here, here in his socket [Jan shows his arm joint] everything was torn. He was already an invalid, he was already an invalid, because it was all torn [Jan shows his arms.] You know, these muscles were twisted, because you know, these are attached to this...

[1:14:13]

But we held on... Particularly regarding the bed, I was already taught how to make the bed, you know. Because often some could get into trouble with the bed, that they could not do it properly, because it was always uneven. And I thought of a way to do it. I made four pins³². One pin, the second, and the third, and I instantly pulled them. For me, it was two seconds to make the bed. I was as smooth as a table. Of course, I didn't press it, just that this blanket would be neat. I used my head, because I was taught to think and I thought, and that way my bed was neat the whole time. And besides, I had to take care of cleaning all the time. And this one told me, the one who was in Auschwitz, that if you want to survive, you have to get up early. And all the time in the camp, I got up early. Not at 4:00 am, I got up at half past three. To the sacrifice of my dreams, but for my well-being.

[Translator]: Hygiene.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. And when the gong sounded I was already washed, finished in the toilet. Everything was chop, chop, chop and I was ready for the roll call. Like that. It protected me and that's why all my life I got up early. My wife would say that she did not know when I went to work. She wouldn't know. She was fast asleep and I was on my way to work. Anyway, I spent a lot of time in the service, I had distant territories, because I had Czestochowa, I traveled to distant territories. So, I'm awake early in the morning. Now, I'm waking up at six o'clock. And that's only because I learned to get up early that way in the camp. And then I was washed, everything was prepared and I didn't have to... and when the gong sounded, so then thousands of people, thousands of people, and then you wouldn't be able to use the toilet.

[Translator]: And then they were looking for any pretext...

[Jan Otrębski]: Any pretext, any pretext. And I was prepared to pray, for everything, so in this way I never gave them any cause. Never. Never. Because if I gave them any cause, then I'm gone. And I tried not to get caught in these maws, because I knew it was a bloodthirsty block in the camp, they were tyrants. They were bandits without respect.

[1:16:32]

[Translator]: Have you ever wondered why they did this?

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, I read about it, and I had been wondering... because if you read it, I could leave it with you, so you can read this article, then you would know, that there are demons³³, demons who – as Revelation says – were to enter the kings of the earth, the rulers of the earth, that they were to do immense things, and they did it in the camps. The camps were constructed by brothers, because I want to tell you that the brothers built the first camps, they were brothers, and the communists came later, but the brothers were building, for example, Westergren, this camp, which is shown there, there were brothers, here it is... it's here. I saw it somewhere here... It was the first concentration camp in Germany. Later there was Dachau, but Dachau was... it was a sanatorium, we talked about Dachau as a sanatorium,

³² *Gwóźdki* – informal: nails, or pins.

³³ Originally "*Demoni*" – demons.

but such death camps were Auschwitz, *Vernichtungslager* [Extermination camp] and Mauthausen. We called it "*Mord-hausen*", not Mauthausen, but "*Mord-hausen*" (House of Murder), because it was work that was... killing! Killing... Also, I want to tell more about Gusen, in this Gusen, where that Reichling was, and later I was under Reichling's command. Later I experienced Reichling, how he was hanging these prisoners on the beams, how they... so I had to... sometimes I was shaking, you know, because such a sadist... He was a bachelor, from Köln, Reichling Hugo. And he was hanged, in my camp he was hanged, because there... there it came out. What was it? ... A-ha! That this Reichling, because it was Reichling who was the *Lacerates* (camp elder) at my place, and the commandant once came to inspect the camp. And this commandant knew him from before the war, that he was a murderer, he said: "You are here? You won't be from today." And then he ordered Reichling to be executed and they hung him. How he was begging for his life! Because they wanted him, this Reichling, to bring him to the fence, that he would go to the fence himself, and to be shot with a machine gun by a SS man, he came to the fence at midnight... And this SS man provoked him "*Noch komm, noch ein Schritt*" (Come here, one more step) "*Noch komm, mein Lieber*" (Come here my dear), "*Noch komm...*" (Come here...), but he came to this boundary, because there was the demarcation line, which could not be crossed, because you would be shot instantly... And then he cried and asked to give him something to smoke "*Rauchen, Bitte rauchen*" (to smoke, please, smoke), and he said "*rauchen*, then go away and smoke", and he went to the toilet, but he cried there and he didn't want to come out and they took him and they hung that Reichling, that's what happened to this torturer. And then from this... from this camp in Gusen, I later went to Mauthausen, and from Mauthausen I went to Eisenerz. It was the Eisenerz *kommando* there was an ore mine there, and we were supposed to build a road in the Alps, and I got this purple triangle there, you know, I asked, because I was not a Catholic, and I wrote to them, and a decision came, that 'yes', that it is "*Bibelforscher*" (Bible Students) and that is why, you have there "*Bibelforscher*", but they did not cross "*Römisch-katholisch*" (Roman Catholic), I had to do it officially. And once there was a very interesting event. When I got that purple triangle, I was immediately spotted at the gate. Because I was like a daisy in a bouquet of flowers, one immediately looked – saw a purple triangle and said: "Who is that?", and I walked in the column and then we left the camp, this one approached me "am I one of Jehovah's Witnesses?" I said "*Jawohl* (yes) I am a Jehovah's Witness." And he said: "Why don't you take a rifle in your hand?" He gave me the rifle, I gave it back to him, and said: "All who fight with the sword will perish by the sword. I would not take the rifle." "You won't take the rifle? And if I give you a thought, would you accept it?" I said "No!" And then we separated, I went to work, he went to the barrack, but just before 12 noon the *kapo* called me to come to the barrack where this *Rapportführer* (Report Leader) had his office. And this *Rapportführer* said to me: "Listen, I will let you go free today. Sign a declaration that you will not be a Jehovah's Witness", he said "but if you do not sign, I will order to destroy you." And he pointed to the *kapo*, who was murdering a prisoner, killing him. And he says, "Choose now! Do you want to die like him?" And there was *kapo* murdering a prisoner in the square, he said: "He will get the order to kill you! Will you sign it and go free?"

[1:21:35]

And I prayed to Jehovah God and gave a quick reply, and you know how I started? I began with the words: "If Jehovah allows me to perish, I will perish at your hand, but if he allows me to survive, I will see you perish³⁴." And he laughed loudly, and said... "He wants to see the Germans cease to exist? *Das ist nicht möglich!* It is impossible!" And he said, "So,

³⁴ *Zginienie* – extinction, death.

that you can see it, I will feed you." "*Kapo kommen! Kommen Sie!*" (*Kapo* come! Come!) And the *kapo* came, straightened up, stood to attention, saluted with his hand, and he said, "That *Häftling*" because they called us *Häftling* (prisoner, detainee), "This *Häftling* has to get two bowls of food every day," and this one: "*Jawohl! Herr O... Jawohl!*" (Yes, Sir!) he exclaimed. He then said "From today on, you are to get two portions of food," and said "Eat." Dinner came, I finished my bowl, finished it, and he calls me a second time: "*nachschlag*", that is, a refill and a second liter, the second liter. I ate another liter. The prisoners were watching what was happening. One said: "What is this, that they are officially giving him two bowls of food?" It was impossible, but I got it! This SS man brought me his food: potatoes, stuffed cabbage, pork schnitzel and gave it to me: "*Jehovas Zeugen, bitte*" (Jehovah's Witness, here you are) "*Bibelforscher*" (Bible Student), because they called me "*Bibelforscher*." And I got food from him as well, and the prisoners widened their eyes: "How is that?!" The SS officer, an assassin, a murderer, to feed me, it is impossible! And you know, they fed me until the end of the war. And you know, he said, "I will kill you, if you don't sign it", but you see? Instead, I saw the Germans perishing. Do you know what I'd been through?! And this German was killed... he was killed at the front, because he went to the front and they killed him. I survived and I learned from it all, when the war finished. This is how I saw many blessings from Jehovah... I was in Obersalzberg, where Hitler was 'shaking the whole world'.

[1:22:57]

I was there³⁵, I tell you, in Obersalzberg, because you would have to see how beautiful it all looked, in Obersalzberg. We have it somewhere here, Obersalzberg [Jan searching for picture and showing it], oh, here it is: how Hitler shook the world, it shows here, how that the world belonged to them, like here... Did everyone see it, or not? They wanted to conquer the whole world, and here comes destruction, look, the 10th year anniversary, dead bodies, see here, dead bodies murdered... and here death, and here Hitler with Himmler, this is Himmler, and this is Hitler. They wanted to conquer the whole world. And now... and now I have seen, seen destruction, seen all the terrible things. I was affected by it... but I kept very joyful, until the end of the fight, the end of hunger, incredible hunger, Mauthausen, terrible hunger, you know? Terrible hunger! I will tell you later, how we were later evacuated from Eisenerz to Pegau. When they put us in Pegau... there was the brother-in-law of this murdered Reichling. And he took revenge on the Poles, how he did! Cruelly! I have already prayed to God, what to do here... And I volunteered as a bricklayer, you know, because they were building tunnels, they were digging such huge tunnels in the Alps, they laid bricks, and I volunteered to be a bricklayer. Well, you see... it saved me too, because others were murdered, killed, in a terrible way, chased, you know... and I had a bit of freedom, because I laid two or three bricks, and then I checked. Sometimes the inspection was, building control, he praised us. Although I could not use this trowel, or anything, but as the *Baumeister*, an engineer came, I set a leveler³⁶, and plumb bob, then he said "*gut, gut, gut!*" (good, good, good!) He left and I was happy. And it was that way until the end. Later Pegau was evacuated, and there was one brother Trockenbrot from Thuringia, and he was the only one in this camp, then I was the second and then another brother was there. You know, I got in touch with him and thanks to that, I knew a lot beforehand what was going to happen. Because the commandant informed this brother, he trusted him, really trusted, because this brother had been in the camp for 11 years, from 1934, when Hitler came to power, he was arrested. And he is such a godly, fine brother Trockenbrot, but I lost touch with him and can't find him anymore now. And he came to me at night, at night and he woke me up "*Johann! Johann!*" (Jan! Jan!) And

³⁵ Literally "My feet have stood there"

³⁶ *Waserwaga* – leveler

he said "*Tsch... pass auf!*" (Shhh... be careful) be careful... "*hast du ein Stück Brot*" (have a piece of bread), "*hast du ein Handtuch*" (have a towel.) He gave me a towel, he gave it to me... "Get ready because the camp is going to be evacuated at night, but don't wake anyone up." And then I was like this; the bread here – underneath my shirt, I tied myself well with a belt, I prepared everything, rolled blankets just like in the army, I prepared everything properly. At four o'clock the wakeup call... the prisoners... they didn't know what was going on, because normally the camp got up at half past four, and here at four – an early wake up call, and at midnight I was already packed. And then there was the evacuation. They said: "Anyone who is weak should step forward to be shot, we will not shoot along the way." But they were shooting on the way, you know, these prisoners, who were weak, they would shoot them right away.

[1:27:50]

And then they gassed my friend, because they gassed the whole hospital that night, they gassed them because they didn't want to have anything to do with the sick – they only took the healthy ones out of the camp. And then we left the camp, I asked him, this Trockenbrot, because he was older than me, I said "Brother, where should we go, at the front or in the middle of this... this column of prisoners, or at the back?" And he said to me, "To the back." I said "Brother, no, because we will trample on the corpses, I would suggest at the front, and he said "*Nain* (No), not the front", so I said "in the middle then", "*Nein*, not in the middle." Well, if he made such a decision that not at the front, not in the middle, at the end then. I said: "Then I will trample on the corpses." Well, I was the youngest of them all, and the SS man standing next to me said "*Du bist jung. Hast du meine Rucksack*" (You are young, have my rucksack.) For me to carry his *rugzak*³⁷, you know a rucksack, 50 kg backpack and the helmet, the helmet was, and this helmet saved my life, you know? We went out, went out, and marched, because everybody was carrying a rucksack... And there was a shiny helmet on the rucksack. As we were leaving the camp, the English planes came, English planes came, and the first one was scouting, and the second was already flying with bombs and the bombs were falling on us, I tell you, the panic, because it was a whistle, a terrible whistle of those falling bombs, it's such a monstrous screech that it was impossible to endure, so your eardrums burst. And then the *kommandoführer* (commando officer) ordered all to fall to the ground, but the SS did not, [because] he said "*SS bleim stehen!*" (correct: "*SS stehenbleiben!*" – SS can stand!), he added "Only prisoners", and I saw these SS men throwing their rifles and running away, you know... Well, because it was terrible within the bombardment area, you know, we were buried, I fell into the ditch, the helmet fell on my head, I was covered with stones and earth. The brother was covered with bricks, we were all buried after the bombing, because they dropped those bombs right on us, you know. In addition, they mowed us down with machine guns "*Ta ta ta*" – crossfire. Well, after all this rubble, quite a lot of time passed before we regained consciousness, and then we were pushed into the caves, so they pushed us into the caves till night, and at night they led us, I tell you, 200 km at night and... and through the night, and during the day, and with hunger and the cold...

[1:30:23]

That's how they dragged us to Mauthausen, I'm telling you. What I experienced during this death march, and during this death march, many people died there from thirst, without anything to drink... And there, in the camp where I was in Pegau, the Vlasovtsy and the SS men were guarding them, only there were fewer SS men, but Vlasov's troops were there. And they

³⁷ *Rugzak* – Rucksack, backpack.

were even worse than the SS, even worse they were, those Vlasov's units. And so, they led us to... to Mauthausen. Well, the bridge over the Danube was already fitted with explosives and the train was going so slowly that the mine... so that the bridge would not explode, they led us this way, we prayed that we could cross the Danube, about 200 meters of this Danube, and we arrived at Mauthausen, at night we arrived at Mauthausen. Well, I had a purple triangle, So then when I shed those striped uniforms and went naked, I had a terrible thirst, but it was written "poisoned water", I drank maybe five liters of this water, you know, I said 'if I am to die then I will die', but I survived until morning, and in the morning the brothers came, because they recognized the uniforms, when they saw the purple triangle, they went looking, they checked whose it was and went to look for me, so I already had contact with brothers the very next day, how I was rejoicing, I didn't finish, before the brothers were calling me to come, and that's where the brother Pötzinger was, brother... brother... well, all those brothers were there. They looked after me. We had already started to write *The Watchtower*. Here I have one, which we wrote in Mauthausen, in Mauthausen we wrote it, oh you see, it is from Mauthausen, this is all from Mauthausen, here I have it, oh... this is from Mauthausen, maybe you heard about it? It is archived, it is printed in Mauthausen, printed in Mauthausen.

[Translator]: Piece of literature of Jehovah's Witnesses, prepared and published in the concentration camp in Mauthausen.

[Robert Buckley]: Inside? Can he hold it up?

[Translator]: Inside... inside the concentration camp.

[Robert Buckley]: All this inside?

[Translator]: Inside, yeah.

[Robert Buckley]: It's an actual one?

[Translator]: Yes. It's original.

[Jan Otrębski]: Original, original.

[Translator]: That is original. Yes... that's date and...

[Robert Buckley]: Would he be interested in donating it to the Museum? One?

[Translator]: Maybe you would like to donate one of the copies, or if you have a something like this, to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC?

[Jan Otrębski]: Well... I can send it, I can... even that one – it's for brothers, right? I can send it, good, let's give it. Yes, I'll take this, and that can go like this, okay. I will give many things for this...

[Translator]: Possibly.

[1:33:24]

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, I would have a lot, interesting, because it is all scattered now... But many, many such things I would like to say, that only this connection... the relationship with Jehovah God, incessant prayers, constant prayers day and night, day and night, because nights were also terrible, I mean... they would make inspections at night, they would wake us up. Sometimes drunk SS men would come into the block, and then, for example, under the pretext of having unclean feet, those who had dirty feet were gone and they were oppressing everyone, always in fear, always in danger. And I already had God's Word strongly imprinted in mind, and it strengthened me, because I was constantly looking for encouragement in God's

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

Word and in relationship, in prayer with Jehovah God, because otherwise I would not survive, really... I did not believe that... Because I was only worried about that day, not about tomorrow, just to survive 'today'. About tomorrow: I didn't think about tomorrow at all. And it helped me. That is why brothers often ask why do I have so much energy, so much faith. Because I kept saying, that Armageddon is here already! One brother, from France, when I was in France recently, asked me: "Brother, it was already supposed to be Armageddon in 1935, Armageddon was supposed to be in 1943, Armageddon was supposed to be in 1975." I said because I am saying that it is "today", that is why I remain, because if I were to dismiss it, I would not last. He patted my shoulder and said: "Yes, this is faith – such powerful faith as if it were going to happen today." That is why I still live to see how Jehovah God will show me great things, and every single event from "after war", soon after the war, I observed the growth of the work – the enormous growth of the work! As I said, there were over 70,000 publishers worldwide, and today we have five million. The same I can say about my congregation, they were... they were small groups, and here today it is a powerful work. I have it somewhere here, I wanted to show, how my father worked, it is an amazing work, an amazing work! Here, here I have the activity... how my father rode 200, 300 km and he was starting congregations everywhere... today they are powerful, there are thousands of congregations. Today there are hundreds of congregations, hundreds of congregations. See how far, from Ząbkowice. My father was very zealous, a devoted servant, and I worked all these places, because recently after leaving, I was a servant here, a Congregation Overseer, here in Częstochowa. Brother Proszak also came to me, Władziu Szklarzewicz, he was working here, but I worked in all these areas, and later on, because...

[1:36:38]

[Translator]: These are comments on the development of the work in those times. After the Second World War.

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, today there are congregations everywhere, there are circuits, here is a circuit, circuit here, circuit there, circuits everywhere.

[Translator]: The present day.

[Jan Otrębski]: And in the place where I was conducting a study, there are two congregations now, strong congregations, with their own Kingdom Hall. And until today two people are still alive from... from what happened then... Well, that's exactly where I was going, where the arrest took place... my arrest.

[Translator]: That's the place...where his arrest happened.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes. Well, still a lot could be told, because there I have many documents here. Well, I wanted to show how I was active right after the liberation, when I came from the camp.

[Translator]: Right after leaving the concentration camp [unclear] in 1948... worked as a publisher.

[1:37:42]

[Jan Otrębski]: Also, with *The Watchtower*, these *Watchtower* magazines have strengthened me as I studied them, every single article. And I was taking it to heart; that's why you see, brother, you asked a question, you asked a question about that time before Hi[tlar]... before the war... I lived all these events. So, you see, why have I not written my memoirs? I would have many memoirs, but in Mauthausen – you see, this is the original, and here it says: "Don't story tell, but get back to work". And I got back to work and I didn't write, read here and you'll see. It was published in Mauthausen by brother Pötzinger, read, the original is here.

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Translator]: That is also material prepared by the brothers in Mauthausen concentration camp. And the encouragement for the prisoners is here to go on with the preaching work, not with writing diaries of what they have experienced in the camps. So, that's what they did.

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, brothers... brothers wanted to take me, when the war ended, brothers wanted to take me home. Because my father was arrested, arrested because of the trenches. And they liked my father very much, also those, even opponents of my father, wanted to go instead of my father to dig these trenches, that they would do this activity for him, so that... my father could go home.

[Translator]: Your father refused to dig?

[Jan Otrębski]: My father absolutely refused to dig and refused their help. He said he decides what he is going to do. And my father was arrested in 1944, when I had already been in a concentration camp for two years. So, I didn't see my father... I didn't see my father. However, my father was well liked by everyone, because he was helpful, kind, he was law-abiding, well... he was persevering, my father was liked... At this convention, which I showed in 1930, the main topic was "Daniel's Prophecy." In 1930! So, my father was a very devoted servant, very zealous and for many years... he was a director for many years, I have it here... a director, he was a Service Director for many years. Oh! Here is his document... which arrived...

[1:40:16]

[Robert Buckley]: Higher...

[Translator]: Testifies to his father's... who also was in prison to use after his imprisonment. He was one of the responsible brothers in the congregation.

[Robert Buckley]: What organization is that?

[Translator]: That is ... the Bible students, International Bible Students.

[Robert Buckley]: A little bit higher.

[Translator]: The date here is 1931.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, I have some more here... wait a minute, wait... There are... Oh! My father here too, here it is...

[Translator]: And what is this document?

[Jan Otrębski]: And this is a document. My father was the Chairman of the congregation and here he had the letter of recommendation for the work, about activities, because it was the *Watch Tower Society*.

[Translator]: This is another document that states that his father, Grzegorz Otrębski, was responsible for the work of Jehovah's Witnesses. This is the assignment he was given.

[Robert Buckley]: Back in 1930... what?

[Translator]: 1936.

[Robert Buckley]: 1936?

[Translator]: The 11th of September 1936.

[Jan Otrębski]: Wait, where I have these... pictures... Oh! Here, for example, the whole orchestra was in my house. My father was a musician, he played the flute. I am here.

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Translator]: His father was a musical person, so everyone was playing some instrument in the family.

[Jan Otrębski]: We played all the songs, such a song... Well, all the songs from "*Brzask Tysiąclecia*" (Millennial Dawn) ... and I would like to say, for example, that the songs, besides the prayers, the songs were [important] for me. For example, when I was beaten, badly beaten, I sang the song: "His blood was shed for me... (humming "na na na") ...gave his life", and when, for example, my work was going well and there was such a blessed day, I was singing: "Move ahead, move ahead to maturity! It's the will of our God that we gain... " And such various melodies that built me up. If the work was faster, I chose the songs appropriate to the work, but again... But the songs filled my life, so thanks to songs, songs and prayers, I endured and overcame obstacles and difficulties.

[1:43:32]

[Robert Buckley]: Now, if he wants to go through the rest of these pictures since we have just a few minutes left.

[Jan Otrębski]: And here later in Krakow, the convention in Krakow. Well, a lot of people.

[Translator]: Some of these photos, if you'd like to pick one more, because there's so little time left...

[Jan Otrębski]: this one, for example, here I am working from door to door in the service.

[Translator]: Present day activity... work from door to door. A little bit higher, please?

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, yes... Well, I have a lot of photos like this here. I am with my wife, here I am with my wife; right here please.

[Translator]: With his wife.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, do you have this photo, do you? do you have it...

[Translator]: This is the picture, yes... Picture from Auschwitz.

[Jan Otrębski]: This is Auschwitz, here I have it... Here Mieciu Śliwiński [was also here.] Here is Mauthausen on the day of liberation. The other brother next to me... 'took the symbol' (of baptism) in Gusen...

[Translator]: It's on the day...

[Jan Otrębski]: Sawicki.

[Translator]: This is on the day of liberation?

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, it is...

[Robert Buckley]: After [unclear]

[Translator]: I understood it is on the day of liberation.

[Robert Buckley]: Oh yeah?

[Translator]: Was it really on the day of liberation?

[Jan Otrębski]: No, no, no, it was at a convention.

[Translator]: Some time later, during the convention.

[Jan Otrębski]: This is the one, this is the cemetery now, yes, there is the cemetery there, the cemetery is there.

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Translator]: Now is just.... cemetery.

[Jan Otrębski]: And here is this brother Oremek who saved my hand, this is this brother.

[Translator]: This brother saved his hand.

[Jan Otrębski]: Here is Brother Pötzinger, Brother Schipp and there is Matiszek, Hubert Matiszek here. So, these are... And here is one brother here... such a photo is in Auschwitz of the "Death Wall."

[Translator]: This is "Death Wall" in Auschwitz.

[Robert Buckley]: Uh-huh. OK.

[1:45:41]

[Jan Otrębski]: And here's a photo that... Heaps of corpses were... Heaps of corpses.

[Translator]: Heap of corpses.

[Jan Otrębski]: And here it is one made in Dachau, here is Matiszek, here is Matiszek's father, this is Hubert's father. His father.

[Robert Buckley]: Down a little bit.

[Translator]: A friend... Dachau... concentration camp.

[Jan Otrębski]: This is Auschwitz, this is Gusen, this is Gusen, this is Gusen.

[Translator]: Another concentration camp.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yorhause, Yorhause [it is not known what Jan means]

[Translator]: Brothers, concentration camps.

[Robert Buckley]: Uh-huh.

[Jan Otrębski]: This is, I would have to tell a lot here, this is the doctor who treated me, Jankowic Seda from Yugoslavia, from Serbia.

[Jan Otrębski]: Jankowic Seda, he treated my spine in the camp, and then... I would have to tell you, I had many accidents.

[Translator]: A doctor... treated... treated him...

[Jan Otrębski]: When the bridge collapsed.

[Translator]: In one of the concentration camps.

[Jan Otrębski]: He was also a friend of the truth.

[Translator]: Prisoners suffered many injuries.

[1:46:53]

[Jan Otrębski]: And this is a group of Polish in Gusen, a group of Polish brothers in Gusen.

[Translator]: The group of Jehovah's Witnesses from Poland in the concentration camp of Gusen.

[Jan Otrębski]: Gusen... here is brother Schipp, here is brother Kęsicki – he is still alive, he is in Zakopane, he is still alive, Janek is in Zakopane... And there are many brothers here. This is a Polish camp. Here Mieciu Śliwiński is... well, that is... "*Arbeit macht frei*" – Auschwitz.

[Translator]: Auschwitz. The entrance.

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Robert Buckley]: Down.

[Translator]: The entrance gate.

[Jan Otrębski]: Here is a convention in Krakow, right after, right after, the convention in Krakow.

[Translator]: Convention of Jehovah's Witnesses right after the Second World War.

[Jan Otrębski]: Here is Brother Muhaluk and... and... the second one... "*zweite*" (the second.)

[Translator]: Two missionaries from the United States that came to Poland.

[Jan Otrębski]: Here I still need... from these documents... because it is...

[Translator]: Behunick

[Jan Otrębski]: Behunick

[Robert Buckley]: Can we wait one minute?

[1:48:19]

[Jan Otrębski]: Maybe he has some questions?

[Robert Buckley]: Would we like to thank him now? Does he have anything else to say?

[Translator]: Are there any other observations?

[Jan Otrębski]: I will tell you, yes... I will tell you about when I was building a mine railway, it was in Eisenerz, we were building a kind of 'drawbridge', I mean a temporary wooden bridge, it was 15 meters high, it was made of wooden elements, and I was working on fastening the rails, a track way. And we were creating³⁸ the appropriate radii, appropriate arcs, on such a special device, and we assembled this railway on this bridge. This bridge was incomplete. It wasn't finished yet, but it was in use already... It wasn't fully completed, but carts already were rolling on it. I stood at the end of this bridge, the end element of the bridge and I was fastening the rails. Suddenly someone pulled up with a cart, heavily loaded... and the *kapo* shouted "*Noch ein Schritt*" - "a bit further." And when that cart went a little further, the bridge moved and everything collapsed, those carts, and that bridge! Everything collapsed! And I flew in the air, and everyone foresaw my death, everyone saw it... The cart flew above me. And suddenly, in the middle, everything falls apart, the earth with the *koleba*³⁹ (V skip wagon) to one side, the chassis with iron wheels to the other side and me in the middle, head first. And because it was an area not surveyed, a wetland... it became heavy and everything collapsed. And I hit the ground, and they all shouted, "One dead, one dead!" And this SS officer saw it with his own eyes. And as they pulled me out, he saw the purple triangle, saying, "Now I know, Jehovah has saved you!" And I was shaking all over like a leaf. And here, I have this event, I have it here, I have it here...

[1:50:30]

[Translator]: That event is testified by one of the documents.

[Jan Otrębski]: Wait... here I have... this incident... I have it written that... And this doctor treated me. You know, but he said that Jehovah saved me! This SS man said "Jehovah your God has saved you." Because they saw it was... instant death. And see, such an event

³⁸ Originally "*wykrepowywali*" – creating, making, bending.

³⁹ *Koleba* – a "V skip wagon", a side-tipping skid with a V-shaped body

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

I experienced. Well... I was shaken for a dozen or so days, so shocked that my legs and hands were shaking like this. But that doctor Jankowic Seda liked me and he treated me. Besides, I had a second accident. One day I got [a rash] all over my body, this is Jankowic, which is here [in the photo.] Oh, here is this Jankowic, this is Jankowic Ceda, this is Jankowic Ceda, he treated me, he treated me. And now one more interesting thing in connection with this doctor. One day I got a rash all over my body, and the rash was getting bigger all over my body and I got an abscess and soon as I scraped it, matter was pouring out. The whole body! I was scared, I didn't know what it was and I was hiding it, right? Because when I was going to the bathhouse, I was not seen by anyone, and so on... But one day it was very hot and they ordered everyone to undress in the square, in the square, the SS ordered, and I did not know what to do, so I did this: I took my shirt off, but I held it like that, in the second row, not in the first row. I stood in the second row and kept the shirt like this, but he went and checked those naked men. And then he saw that I had this shirt, and he grabbed the shirt. The shirt 'raus' (out!) and he saw, and I was all covered in matter, gangrene all over my body. Then he ordered me to go to the gate and he shouted that there was an epidemic, that there was an epidemic in the camp, you know? And they called *Lagerarzt*, *Lagerarzt* (Camp Doctor.) It was, it was just *Lagerarzt*, that Jankowic. When he saw me, and he knew me well - who I am, right? When he saw me, he touched me, and the SS men flew away because they thought it was some kind of plague... And he said: "Fine, I'll save you." And to these SS men he said that this is not a plague, not gangrene, and that he will heal me. And he cured me. For two weeks he treated me and cured me of it. I do not know what it was, but had they not recognized it, they would have sent me to the gas chambers, because they would be afraid that it would not... Jehovah protected me, look! If not, I would have gone to the crematorium, but the crematorium was temporary, we were burning... For each man, you had to cut wood with your own hands, and carry such huge stumps, my wife told me that she was chopping the stumps, but I was carrying those stumps! It was often a 50 kg stump, a 30 kg stump... We had to drag this stump to the camp for eight km. We did not go to the camp from the work area with empty hands, but everyone had to carry enormous stumps and each had to cut a kilo and a half one and a half meters of stumps, only for his own cremation. It was such a heavy portion, one and a half cubic meters of wood had to be cut for your own cremation because this crematorium was primitive. Such a concrete bunker, these bodies were put on this pile of wood and they were poured with tar and set on fire. It was burning day and night, day and night! A stench! I'm telling you, it was horrible! And everyone had to cut a meter and a half of wood for himself. And it was, there was a portion in the camp, it had to be left untouched, because they used trees for various purposes... But I didn't chop wood for myself and that's why I'm alive. I will tell you one more experience, about stones. We carried stones, large stones. And these are 30 kg, 40 kg stones, and the SS chose stones for everyone, monstrous... [Jan shows the size.] And this was eight km with this stone, to carry it on the shoulders, then on the stomach, if someone couldn't [carry it on shoulders] then on stomach for eight km dragging it to the camp. It was horrible, and you know how I coped? When I came to work in the mornings, I would look for a stone that seemed large, but thin, and then if I had this stone, I had a huge stone here on this [Jan shows his shoulder], but it was thin, because otherwise I would not be able to carry it, but it had to be a large stone. And when they saw that someone was carrying a small stone, then he had to throw it away and they would choose the stones to carry, you know, to the camp, because there was still construction going on in the camp, for this and for that, to cover the assembly square, and for then roads, building the roads, well... The torment was beyond strength, tormenting beyond strength. Besides that...

[1:55:55]

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Robert Buckley]: What we'd like to do, we're just about out of film....

[Jan Otrębski]: Well then (Jan pointing at Robert Buckley) to Washington he should sign me up... (laughing)

[Robert Buckley]: We would like to see a picture of your family before we go. Do you have a picture?

[Translator]: Could we see a family photo?

[Robert Buckley]: Because we're just about out of film now.

[Translator]: Time is running out now...

[Robert Buckley]: We would like to thank you very much, your daughter and grandchildren.

[Jan Otrębski]: Wait a minute... OK.

[Robert Buckley]: Yes.

[Translator]: And children, and grandchildren.

[Jan Otrębski]: Yes, of course, this is the 'pioneer camp' (preaching campaign in a remote area of the country) that I was responsible for.

[Translator]: And the family...

[Jan Otrębski]: This is my wife [Jan points to his wife and then to the other woman in the picture] This is another person who was in Ravensbrück, wait a minute, I'll show my family here... Yes, I didn't take all the photos, because I didn't expect that many photos will be needed... Lots of photos here, but not this one...

[Translator]: If you can go a little higher.

[Jan Otrębski]: No, no, no, no, I have to find it, I don't know... maybe there is one... yes, here is my family. Here is my wife, here is my daughter and here she is, here is my second daughter.

[Translator]: Wife, daughter.

[Jan Otrębski]: This is "*Tochter*" (daughter), this is my granddaughter, who is a pioneer, she is a pioneer now, and this is the youngest. All 'in the truth', all of them. The son-in-law, the husband of my first [daughter], here is Danusia, here is this son-in-law, here I am, me, and here again.

[Robert Buckley]: Okay. Very good.

[Jan Otrębski]: Wait a minute, wait a minute, I still have pictures here.

[Robert Buckley]: Okay.

[Jan Otrębski]: I wrote it for my wife, because my wife is losing her memory sometimes, and that's why she has more... Oh, here I am at the 'pioneer camp' (preaching campaign in a remote area of the country) when we were at the 'pioneer camp.'

[Translator]: ...'Pioneer camp'

[Jan Otrębski]: ... Here we are playing music, here we are playing... And, here I am in Krakow at the convention, here I am... at the convention in Cracow in 1937.

[Translator]: Cracow.

Jan Otrębski Interview – transcription (Part 1)

[Jan Otrębski]: Wait, here is in the camp (concentration camp.) I am here, at the ‘pioneer camp.’ Wait...

[Robert Buckley]: Okay. You want to sit down now.

[Jan Otrębski]: And here I am in the congregation.

[Robert Buckley]: Oh yes, if he could sit down.

[Translator]: On, on the chair...

[Robert Buckley]: We would like to thank you very much from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for your fine expressions and your experiences.

[Translator]: Thank you very much for these experiences.

[Jan Otrębski]: Thank you, as well.

[Translator]: All the information provided here.

[Jan Otrębski]: Well, all the best for the Museum, that the history will remain, because it is an interesting history.

[Translator]: All the best for the Museum, that records this interesting history.

[Robert Buckley]: Thank you very much.

[Jan Otrębski]: Thank you.