

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Stanislaw Soszynski
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PREFACE

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STANISLAW SOSZYNSKI

October 6, 1989

Q: You can speak now. We are recording.

A: Yes. My name is Stanislaw Soszynski. I was born on February 24, 1931, in Warsaw. I lived in Old Town through my whole childhood. This is the oldest part of Warsaw, mostly inhabited by the poor, craftsmen, merchants. A very diverse population, forming the northern part of Warsaw. The neighborhood was inhabited by many, even very many, Jewish families. In our building, at 11 Fret Street, there lived five Jewish families, out of twenty-odd total in the building. Our relations were those of neighbors, that is apartments were not locked, theft was unknown. Nowadays the full symbiosis that existed in those crowded, packed buildings is forgotten. There were of course disturbances in this symbiosis. There had to be. Whenever people are crowded into a small space, the conflicts of their interests lead to occasional strife. That peaceful life, that life of storekeepers, tradesmen, craftsmen, minor civil servants, was interrupted by the war. There was an immense market hall near the street that I lived on. It was on Swietojerska Street. It was split in half, and fish were sold on one side, while vegetables, fruits, and dairy products were sold on the other. That market hall will be very important to the lives of many people during the war. Firstly, food will be sent through it, for it stood on the line that was designated by the Germans as the border of the ghetto. Later, in the years of the defense of Old Town, that hall will be transformed into a huge hospital. Although it is impossible to change a fish market or a produce market into a hospital, that was how it was, regardless. The siege of Warsaw in 1939 was a great drama. The Germans, having broken the resistance of the Polish army west of the Vistula, surrounded Warsaw. The city was full of historic architectural artifacts and monuments. Almost 700 antique buildings were so ravaged by the war that they had to be built practically all over again. Besides, the 1.5 million enclosed people of the city defended itself desperately, led by President Stefan Starzynski. The defenders consisted partly of members of the Jewish population. President Starzynski, the defender of Warsaw in 1939, appointed Czerniakow as his co-worker representing the Jewish population, the Jewish society. When the Germans entered Warsaw, a demolished Warsaw covered in snow, in which the walls smelled scorched. I lived through one of the most difficult times in my life. We were going on Wierzbowa Street to Marshall Jozef Pilsudski Square to visit my aunt, passing the burned buildings of Theater Square, when on the other side of the street I saw a man who appeared to be drunk. I was with my father and my siblings. He was stumbling from the sides of the houses to the curb and weaving across the width of the sidewalk. At last he fell down. Father said that we should keep going down the side of the street that we were on, but he crossed the street and approached the man. He picked him up, and now others came up. Together they sat him on a wall. I saw that my father lifted up the man's trouser leg and bound the man's leg with his handkerchief. He kept going down the street, parallel to us. When we came out onto the square, I noticed that Z-shaped anti-aircraft ditches had been dug into the grass of the square. There were some people filling them in while a German sentry watched over them. The soldier wore a helmet and carried a carbine with an affixed bayonet. Father went up to him and looked at him. He came back

and said "That thug ran his bayonet through that man's leg." I could not understand how someone could simply bayonet someone's leg like that, on the street in broad daylight, simply because he was not filling a ditch fast enough, or, as it later turned out, because he was a Jew. It was an inexplicable situation, but I realized then that a time had come when law went against common sense... these are complex matters, I cannot explain, but I realized that invaders, Germans, bad people had come.

Q: You were eight years old then.

A: I was then eight years old, yes. A common life of poverty commenced. The city was destroyed, there was no running water, no light, no food. Water was carried from the river. Because women did the laundry in their homes, every home had a big kettle for doing the wash. The men stood in a row and together took all of the pots. They went in long strings to the Vistula, taking streets that sloped down to the river. They nailed together boards and put them over the water they collected so that it would not splash out. These problems cemented people all the more; nothing unites like misfortune. Joy may split, while misery draws people together. This is the second scene that I remember, and it also is as if from a ghastly dream. German patrols began appearing in our neighborhood dressed in what were known before the war as anti- _____ [102] suits. They were made out of a watertight, prepared fabric. On their backs they carried tanks and in their hands they had nozzles such as are today used to apply lacquer under pressure. There was some kind of poison in those tanks, phenol or carbolic acid or some other liquid that destroyed everything that it came into contact with. It turned out that these patrols demanded money from owners of Jewish stores. If the extortion money was not paid, the Germans would hose down the inside of the store with the carbolic acid. There was a jeweler in the next building to us. He had a tiny store, so small that the door simultaneously served as the display. There was a counter inside, while the precious things he put on display were hung on an ingenious little shelf in the door. I stood before the door when the Germans came up and demanded payment - he did not have it. Within a few minutes, the store had been soaked with that stinking carbolic acid. To this day, I get a feeling of grimness whenever I enter a newly disinfected room, because I see a man with that destructive nozzle in his hand. There was no talk of a ghetto at the beginning. At first it was even said that the Jews would be in a better situation than the Poles under the occupation because they would be able to understand what the Germans were saying. The lion's share of the Jewish people understood German. This turned out to be an illusion. The winter of 1939-1940 was bitterly cold. The frost was so strong that it split open trees. On New Town Square, there stood a dozen trees at the base of which was a temporary cemetery. In the middle stood a statue of the patron of Warsaw, and the trees broke up so that limbs were falling down on the graves. During that winter I wore my scarf, earmuffs, a fur hat. I was standing in the gate when one of my friends ran out bare-headed.

Q: One of your Jewish friends?

A: Yes, one of my Jewish friends. I motioned to him with my chin, to ask "Hey, have you gone crazy? You should put something on your head." He motioned with his head at a German

patrol standing at a narrowing in the street to which all the passing Jews had to bow. He did not have a cap so that he would not have to bow, in that horrible cold. I looked at him, he was three or four years older than me, and I felt the strangeness of the situation. Then talk began that there would be a ghetto, that all the nationalities in Warsaw would be put into their own zones. No one said that there would be a Jewish section, an extermination section. I think that the precision with which that society was destroyed was the result of great thought - psychological thought, organizational thought. I think that it must have been done by people who knew mob psychology. It is not so simple to collect three or four hundred thousand people in one place without telling them about one's goal, one's purpose. The first step was simply lying: that is, it was said that Warsaw would be split into sections. There would be an assigned Aryan section, a German section, a Jewish section. The Jewish section was relatively speaking huge, very large in this first phase. These sections were to be inhabited exclusively by those assigned to them. The psychological groundwork for this division was laid by posting on streetcar posts and street lanterns signs that said "Jews Are Forbidden To Walk On This Side Of The Street." Suddenly, a part of the street was off-limits, like stores, like parks, and similar places in the city. Another form of preparation was that the Germans placed signs on the roads that instructed drivers to drive past very quickly because the area was infected with typhus. Finally, small walls sprang up. The people of Warsaw, especially the people of Old Town, the oldest neighborhood, were hot-headed, and if walls were put up against their will, then they took them down. At first those walls were taken part. Someone needed some bricks, and so on. It turned out that this was another ploy: it was said that the walls would form checkpoints where the police could check passer-by's identification, but in reality it was announced that the neighborhood was closed, and that people who were forced to wear armbands with the Star of David had to go there. Tens of thousands of people living in that zone had to be moved, however.

Q:Your house was not in the zone?

A:Our house was on the border of the ghetto.

Q:So it was still on the Aryan side?

A:The back of the house was in the ghetto. But our part, the front of the house, where our apartment was, was on the Aryan side. This later led to an unexpected result: the great smuggling operation that began when the ghetto was closed. For example, people would pour milk down the drain-pipes to the ghetto part. But now I am speaking about the point when tens of thousands of people were leaving the ghetto and tens of thousands were moving in. Because time was very short, the people who had property there had to quickly sell everything in an effort to save something. Those people were pauperized. So a great ghetto was created, containing 300,000 people. Today, when one looks at a map and knows the outcome of it all, one can see that the line of the ghetto was very carefully drawn so as to leave all large parks outside. No large area of greenery, no square that could give some respite to the children there, not to mention the adults. One of the surprising, shocking facts that I have learned is the story of the teacher in the ghetto who asked the children to draw summer. It turned out that the children did not know what it

looks like. Four and five year-old children who had grown up behind the walls could not; draw a horse, cows, sheep they did not even know what those things were. Families left our house in tears. Superintendent Bomoski [ph -220], a simple man, helped them load what they had - they were not rich people. In any case, we said that sooner or later the war would end, that we would surely see each other again. Unfortunately this was not to be. Those walls were the battle-ground of a contest between the leadership of the ghetto, the people of the ghetto, and the Germans. Because by means of those walls, attention was turned away from the basic facts. If one day it was announced that Zlota, Hoza, or Sienna, or a part of a building was no longer in the ghetto or else was now included in the ghetto, it seemed as if directing energies toward "defense" was the most important thing. In reality, this was not the case. Hunger began there. Rations were purposely reduced so that hunger began. Small boys who could get through the holes knocked in the walls of the ghetto went through. Among others, two boys from our building came. They sat on a stump. All of the houses in that old part of town, since the only heat was from coal stoves, had large stumps in the courtyard for chopping wood. They sat on that stump, we all ran up. They said that it was hard, that some of their parents were in poor health, that they came because they had nowhere to go and they knew they had friends here, and so on. The adults gave them, I had nothing of course, what they had, some pieces of bacon, bags of flour. I made an appointment to see them. Because the streetcar went through the streets of the ghetto to Powzazki, there was no other way for the streetcar to go, one could board on the Aryan side and ride through. Although a policeman guarded the car, it was possible to jump out, at first, when the streetcar still operated as it did before the war. I suddenly found myself in a city that is hard to imagine. Thousands of people walked back and forth, apparently with no purpose. Peddlers ran around with their carts. Someone was selling bread, which he kept in a basket made of barbed wire, so that no one could take it without paying. All of this was so unbelievable that even now that I am an adult, an old man, an artist, whenever I try to represent it graphically I look at my work and think that it is completely surrealistic. Bread bundled in barbed wire is inedible. One cannot even begin to share those peoples experience. I found the boys: it turned out that they lived with ten other people in one room. Sanitary problems began immediately. Today, in a world in which everything works without disruption, we do not understand what it means, twelve people in one room. Not in one apartment, in one room. Now, suddenly that one small water closet intended for the use of a family of four or five must function as a street lavatory. An unbelievable thing started to happen. I cannot talk about people dying. I know it now, but I did not see it then. But there were dead bodies laying on the sidewalks.

Q: In the street or on the side?

A: Everywhere! Today it is known that; on Krochmalna Street there was a building in which, out of four hundred inhabitants, four hundred died! A whole apartment building died, a huge apartment building with four hundred people. After some time, the ghetto was sealed off completely. One could not go in without a special pass, and even with a pass... the story went around Warsaw that a Polish doctor, on the so-called Aryan side, whom a Jewish doctor called because he had a serious case, went into the ghetto with a pass. The Gestapo

followed him and killed everyone, the patient and both of the doctors. That information went around the whole city.

A: Was it true?

A: Yes! Of course. Today, after the war, the names of those people have been established, and it is known that it was done with all of the perfidy of the consequences that such a form of extermination carries with it. Because the walls of the ghetto moved as those people were crowded even more, and we lived close by, I had an experience that I already told you about that is I sold milk. This was necessary because my father fell ill and could no longer support the household. There were three of us then, my mother. I was twelve years old then. I took a milk can and went outside of town to a farmer who would sell me twelve liters. I was scared while transporting it, because the so-called "sentries" stood guard at all of the train stations. This was often quite dramatic: a German gendarme called "Pretty Boy, " because he had a very pretty appearance, an ideally smooth face, clean-shaven, a pretty boy, came into the compartment and started looking for contraband. Meat, butter, whatever made him happy. I was sitting on my milk can between the seats next to the window. There was another milk can up on the luggage rack, which its owner, another man, had opened so that it would not go sour. The German seized the can by the handle, not knowing that it was open. The milk poured all over him. Everyone began to laugh, he asked politely whose can it was. The man next to me said that it was his. He opened his holster and shot him, right in that train. Within a few seconds, the man was dead. I brought the milk home. That day I also brought; a bottle of honey home, for us. I was supposed to go visit a friend who lived next to the ghetto wall. I poured some honey on a piece of very bad bread, which reportedly was made of sawdust mixed with flour, bread which was rationed to us. I took my bread and honey and went down the street eating it. I got too the street where the ghetto wall was, when a "szaulis, " a soldier working for the Germans, standing by the wall in an ash-grey uniform with black cuffs and a long cartridge belt motioned to me. I was convinced that I had died because I immediately thought that I was just as scruffy and disheveled as those boys who sneaked out of the ghetto in search of food, and that he had taken me for one of those boys. That was the longest walk of my life. I went up to him and waited for him to turn his gun on me and shoot. It turned out that he needed my piece of bread with honey. He twisted my arm, took it and put it in his mouth. Then he waved me off, "Weg." Coming back, I knew that I was alive, but at the same time I realized... maybe for a few minutes I was a Jewish boy - that there was no law there, that this was a horrible lawlessness. At one point a rumor went around Warsaw that Jews were being deported. No one knew how, but the word "Umschlagplatz " entered the vocabularies of the people of Warsaw. Of course the terror inflicted on the people of Warsaw was so strong, people were shot on the street, stopped, rounded up and sent to camps, whole neighborhoods were surrounded where thousands of men would be asked for identification and put in cars known as "boxes, " that all of these terrible rumors fell on different ears then we have today, as I speak. When one sees dead people on the street, one reacts differently than to a man killed in a car accident. But all the same these were horrible matters, exceeding the imagination. I had another experience that was unique. It turned out that there was no hope for my father. He is very sick, so sick that he must die. We were all

aware of this, but a person wants to... a person clings to his hopes. Father was put in a hospital which had been a specialist hospital before the war. The hospital was located in a T-shaped area that was cut out of the ghetto, but inside the ghetto. To go in, one had to pass a guard, go along a few buildings which belonged to the ghetto, and there was the hospital building that was separate. This was a hospital by name only - there was no proper food there, no beds, nothing. There were beds, but again in name only -- normal, iron beds, not hospital beds. As a result I carried part of the food we were able to obtain to the hospital every day. I carried a can with a spoon and by the Arsenal, because the wall went along Przejazd Street, it was completely empty. Evidently there had just been a round-up or some shooting or... anyway, I saw the Wacht mann in the ghetto gate from a long way away. He mixed up the soup to make sure there were no weapons or ammunition in it and let me pass. As I walked by those walls, people appeared who were fixated by the sight of my can. I saw this, I felt it. They could not cross the wall, but at the same time it was a horrible feeling of an indescribable hunger. That was how I took it. A few months later, the Ghetto Uprising began. From what I remember, it was not the fight that it is described as today, a band of desperate people shooting and so on. Because we lived nearby, I saw it. It was a militarily well-organized defense of parts of buildings. I do not know how the battle looked in the rest of the area, but along Swietojska, Bonifraterska, and Franciszkanska Streets, within our sight, was fought in an exemplary way. So well that snipers, placed in high points in those buildings, for a few days did not even allow the German soldiers and divisions to enter that way. It was not until heavy artillery, with multiple barrels, was brought in, and houses were subjected to direct fire - they would fire at a spot several times, the wall would collapse revealing an apartment, and they would move on to the next house, they were methodically destroying house after house - that the defenders retreated. Another shocking method, one that the Germans would use massively during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, were fires. The Germans would set fire to whole blocks of houses. So that northern part of the city had an enormous column of smoke over it. Because they would not let the fire department in and there was no access to that section of the city, those houses burned until they burned out. They then began to demolish those houses.

Q:After the Uprising?

A:After the Ghetto Uprising. No one was allowed in. The Germans put up signs saying that they would shoot without warning at anyone found in that area. It turned out that this was all part of their plans; in 1939, the architect Pabst had drawn up a plan for the destruction of Warsaw. That northern part of the city was to be leveled with the ground. No one knew that then except for people like Professor Zachwatowicz, who was able to get to the documents dealing with Pabst in the town hall. Now, filled with horror and surprise, we watched as a great city of a million and a half people and covering several square kilometers was turned to desert, completely leveled. Everything of any value was taken out: pipes, balconies, roofing, upholstery, and so on, and then the buildings were blown up. The houses were mined and blown up. In 1944, when the Warsaw Uprising broke out, the northern part of the city that the Germans had designated to be the ghetto was a flat plain. The partisans who went to attack the German divisions in the cemeteries discovered that there was no possibility of cover, because on an open field like that,

heavy machine guns can stop anything. This is very hard to describe in just a few words, those years, 39 to 45. If one goes to that part of Warsaw today, one can still see how it was. Every time a cable is laid, everytime a shovel touches the earth there, reminders of that city, that life, come up. I wanted to understand why it happened, why those people were destroyed, why that city was destroyed. I looked for some sort of memory of those people. I dug up the strangest things there. Some of them I could not pick up, or, feeling their gravity, I decided that I had no place worthy to hold them. For example, once a bulldozer pushed aside a huge block of bricks, under which lay several hundred trouser and vest buckles, which evidently had been in a bag or a box that had decayed. Oxidized buckles. Because they had been there, crushed, for a long time, they had formed a cluster, a sculpture. I looked at it and thought that this was a kind of summation of what had happened there. There must have been a sickly tailor there who was suddenly told that he had to leave everything. Of course, the buckles were the most important thing to him, because that was his shop. He hid them down there in the basement. They took his life away, and the buckles lay there. An object, a tiny object, can say more about a drama like this than a hundred words. That flat plain was petrifying to the city. It made it clear that life is stronger than that... that... demonic destruction. That was not human destruction, it was somehow devilish. The knowledge that someday this would all be grown over, trees would sprout, neighborhoods, children who did not even know what had happened would be playing, it would be another city for them. I tried to remember and cement in my memory what had happened from this angle and I collected fragments of that city and of that life. Sometimes the images I saw wandering in the ruins were surrealistic. I think that I have told about this already. I once saw that bricks were flying into the air on that flat plain. They would jump up. A brick would leap into the air and fall down again. There were whole fields of jumping bricks. I could not understand, I thought that I was starting to see things, for how do bricks jump? But I put aside my concern and went closer to where the bricks were flying. I now saw with great surprise that that Teutonic fury had destroyed everything on the surface, but that down below the fundament remained, and they contained good, healthy brick. So the local carters earned money by clinging holes down to the fundament, throwing the bricks up to the surface, and selling them to people who were building. It was very simple and logical, there was nothing extraordinary about it. All the same, that was how life began to creep back into that area. Spontaneously, in the general rebuilding of Warsaw, it began by taking out the bricks, restoring order. The bricks were put in piles, the area was cleaned, the Muranow residential district was built, partly on land that had been part of the Jewish section. The city began to expand as far as the cemeteries that are still there today. It turned out that this was a kind of holy place. Today it is very difficult to build something in Warsaw without disturbing the peace of the murdered. A bulldozer scooping up earth to build a fundament brings up human bones, mass graves are found in completely unexpected places. Every time a new urban building site is being chosen, history must be examined to ensure that the place is not one of martyrdom.

Q: And later the whole city was destroyed thus, all of Warsaw?

A: The Uprising?

Q: You did not tell us your experiences during the Uprising.

A: That is because I did not know that: it was a subject of our conversation. A year after the events in the Ghetto, Warsaw rose to do battle. As it turned out, that what they had done in one district, they now expanded onto a scale of the whole city. My beloved Old Town, in which I grew up, and which was the place on earth to which I belonged, as everyone should have such a place, was leveled just as the ghetto was. It is very hard to understand the words "Your house has burned down." They are only five words, but it is very difficult. When we went out, it was also very surrealistic. I kept fish. I always liked animals, birds, plants. I made myself an aquarium and kept fish. I had already had one sad experience: windows had to be completely blacked-out, so that no light at all got out, and it was winter. Upon opening the curtain one morning, I saw that the aquarium had frozen. It was so cold in the apartment that those poor fish were frozen still in the ice. It is now September 2, 1944, the end of the defense of Old Town. We are to come out with our hands up. I run into the apartment and there is the aquarium. I know that soon there will be a great fire here, and that the aquarium will shatter, and that that little bit of water has no chance of putting the fire out. The apartment is a place to which one comes back, to which one comes with the feeling that it is a place of respite - I will not mention the English saying, my castle, the place in which I rule -- and now it does not exist. The walls of the houses have been jarred apart, and from the gap between them I can see the ruins of the neighboring apartment. These are all surrealistic images. During those 32 days of fighting, Old Town was demolished down to the ground. When we came back in January 1945, Warsaw was dead. It was kilometers of, tens of, hundreds of streets where no one lived and burned out houses stood. Not only that, but it turned out that the whole infrastructure, telephone links, gas, light, water, it all had been destroyed underground with special instruments. I now know, as an architect and as a person who is interested in his city, that German scientists prepared a device called a "Typhoon" which blew up sewers. It was made and used. Unfortunately for them, it was well thought-out scientifically - assuming that all of the sewer entrances were closed. In that case, the sewer would be destroyed. Because both in the Ghetto Uprising and in the Warsaw Uprising soldiers used the sewers to travel under the city, some of the entrances were open. Even on the territory of the ghetto, a board with some debris would be placed over the entrance, and this made blowing the sewer up impossible. Which saved Warsaw in 1945, because it was said that the hundreds of kilometers of sewers could not be built in another place, but here there at least is the existing network. The destruction of Warsaw was planned. I mentioned Pabst's plan. But in 1944, Warsaw was turned into a fortress, Festung-Warschau, on Hitler's orders. This fortress was supposed to hold the Red Army at the Vistula, and to prepare the city for the fighting, special detachments went around dynamiting city blocks. As if this were not enough, places of cultural value were consciously targeted for exploding, and an average soldier could not do this on his own. In Leszno, near Poznan, in 1945, the files of the certified architect Menzenbach [ph - 42]. He was a methodical man. Every card in the file was labeled as belonging to him, and each had a photograph of a place he had registered, with a note next to it saying when, where, and what was to be blown up. Looking through the cards, one is horrified. A qualified architect, a man whose purpose is to raise buildings from the earth to serve man, to make something beautiful, using all of his knowledge against the works of his

colleagues; he walked and classified: this is to be blown up, because it has value. This is not to be blown up, because it is not valuable from a cultural standpoint. An example of this is the Bril [ph - '53] Palace. The palace is not distinguished by its architecture compared to a Secessionist ____ [55] standing next to it that had no cultural importance. But the Bril [?] Palace was blown up, while the _____ remained. Specialists walked around and said "Blow this one up, and leave this one alone," or else burn it down. Another apparatus, whose German name I do not know, was designed to destroy completely sites that were found to have cultural significance, that is a translation from the German. Those buildings that were cultural pillars. One of them was the Royal Palace, and when one looks at photographs of the destruction, one sees that that was not regular mining work done there I have established that a special sort of coal dust was pumped into the basements of such a building, which was then detonated. That dust tore buildings apart into pieces the size of this cup. Nothing remained.

Q:Are there any other matters ?

A:That is the end.

Q:That is the end?

A:I finished well. "Nothing remained."

Conclusion of Interview.