United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Jan Nowak
February 22, 1995
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a taped interview with Jan Nowak, conducted on February 22, 1995 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.

The reader should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose. This transcript has been neither checked for spelling nor verified for accuracy, and therefore, it is possible that there are errors. As a result, nothing should be quoted or used from this transcript without first checking it against the taped interview.

JAN NOWAK
February 22, 1995

01:00:48

Question: I'd like you to begin by just telling me your name at the time, you can tell me your name now, where you were born and what year you were born?
Answer: Shall I start or not? Very good. Well, my real name is _____, my present name Jan Nowak was not together. It was the name which I assumed during the war to protect my family. When I was in the west, my family was still in, in Warsaw. I was born in Warsaw in the first year of the World War II, in a pretty well to do family. My mother came from a rather wealthy Warsaw family. My father had a travel agency. He died in 1918 when I was four years old, and my mother was not really prepared to manage her affairs without the help of the husband. So during the big inflation, Hippard inflation, she lost everything we had, and we grew up on the verge of poverty. In a very neat (?) family I was really brought up by my grandmother and my mother. It was a very religious family. We were, we were catholics, by, but my mother and grandmother was very liberal.

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They were very liberal, and I remember they were always telling me and my, my, my older brother that any kind of hatred or any kind of bias to other people because of their different race, religion, outlook is a sin. So, and that, that had a big impact on us. I went to schools in Warsaw and after I, after my matriculation I left Warsaw and did study in Posznan because I did want to study economy, the only faculty of economy was in Posznan. Well, okay. I did want to be a scholar, and after I finished my university studies and got my, my graduation as master in economy I became what is called in Poland, "Assistant to the Professor," or if you like, "Senior Researcher." And after two years, war, the war broke out. At the time I was working on my doctorate thesis. I was drafted, left my, my writings, my doctorate theses in my, on my desk and never saw it again.

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I did participate in the September campaign. I was in the artillery, also an artillary unit, and on, in the middle of September I was taken prisoner by the Germans at the battle of _____. It so happened that I was in the same transport with the future communist prime minister of Poland, Zerongaibich (ph). And we both jumped out of the train near Krakow. And I did go back to Warsaw at the time when the siege of Warsaw ended. The Germans occupied the city, and I joined my family there. That was the beginning of my life under German occupation.

Q. I just want to ask you a few questions and clarify something. I think by mistake you said that you were born the first year of World War II; you meant World War I.

A. Oh, of course. Should I, should I repeat this? No. I wish I would be so young.

Q. The other question I had for you, before the war were you, did you know Jewish people? Did you have contact with them?

A. Oh, yes, I had many schoolmates, Jewish. For instance the man by the name of Anton Rosenthal, was my boyscout master. A close friend of mine was Jan Kott (?), who is now in United States. He's my contemporary professor emeritus of Stonebrook University, a well known international authority of Shakespeare. He was a very close friend of mine and I had many other colleagues who were, who were Jews.

01:06:08

Q. Were you aware of anti-semitism before the war?

A. Not in the schools. I don't believe that for instance, Jan Kott or Rosenthal or Antoni Thom who were Jewish or, or Josef Handelsman, that they were really in any way felt different from others. They considered themselves Poles and I, I didn't witness any kind of, you know, unpleasant treatment. At the University, yes, not my university but the last years I mean, 30s, there was a lot of anti-semitism at the universities and Jewish students were requested to sit on a separate bench. They were humiliated. And they had really a bad life. This is, this is the time when I did witness anti-semitism. Not in the school. We went, eh, by curiosity, I remember that we did go in a small group to the synagogue just to see how it is inside. It was something very exotic to us, but I, I really didn't see much anti-semitism.

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I remember when I was bad in mathematics and I had to, my, my mother had to hire some student in mathematics who would, who would help me and there was an advertising and a young Jew from the ghetto from the Jewish district came and he asked, "Do you mind? I, I am a Jew." It never even occurred to me. I mean, of course, I don't mind. But there was, this was a different kind of anti-semitism than in, in Germany, but, but there were this extremist students organization of the right wing and that was one of the reasons why I didn't want to study in Warsaw. I didn't like these kinds of things.

01:08:15

Q. How much did you know or think about what was going on in Germany about the Nazism that was really starting to take form about Hitler. How was that perceived?
A. Well, I remember when Hitler came to power. They were, we were scared. This was the first time we realized that maybe a war. We knew all he wrote, I mean, and this was considered to be a threat. I do remember maybe in '38 or '37 some Jews who escaped from Germany into Poland. I remember I, when I was on, on the train from Posznan to Warsaw that I talked to a, to an elderly Jew who just escaped from Berlin and he was telling me all about it.
Q. What was the general attitude in Posznan and in Warsaw towards the Nazis?
A. Well, you know, to us Nazis were Germans and Germans were Nazis. And Germans were enemies. Germans were considered to be enemies. So at that time really we considered every German is a Nazi. You see it was over simplification, but this is how we... And after all, the support for Hitler was overwhelming in Germany, that we couldn't see any difference. We considered Germans as a big threat to us and that's from my young age, because Germans did want to take back the territories which they lost to Poland after the war and they were always considered the greatest threat to us. But until the end of the war really we didn't differentiate much between the Germans and the Nazis.

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Q. In this distrust of the Germans was really a very separate than the, their ideas about genocide.
A. Well, you know genocide came late. Remember they were of course victims of Nazis in Germany itself and in Poland, I mean, the number of people that were executed was considerable. I lost my uncle who was executed in October '39, but this was not genocide. In the sense that came later. The genocide of Jews did come, happen in 1942. This is when it started. There was extermination of Poles and of Jews, but this was not a sort of a total extermination of race or religion of people who belonged to the race or to the religion. Many victims, there was a German terror.
Q. Early on it was very clear that the Germans weren't, were going to try to eliminate Jewish people in one way or another. Your distrust of Germans and Nazis was more territorial?
A. Well, as far as Jews are concerned during the war, no. Nobody really anticipated that there will be a sort of a total extermination of every Jew. That came later. We knew that Jews are persecuted, that they are discriminated, that they are being killed, but the final solution in the sense that every Jew had to be killed because the crime he committed was that he was alive, that came later.

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Q. I understand that. I was trying to distinguish between you as a catholic Pole disliking or distrusting or hating the Germans as something separate than because they were persecuting the Jews and other minorities.
A. Well, they were persecuting Poles, they were, they were, of course, but it was all, we abhored it. This was terrible. But we in the first stages we considered the persecution of Jews as the part of Nazism, of atrocities that they were committing, you know. Of course I felt great sympathy for my Jewish friends. I remember, you know, when I came back from, when I escaped from captivity and we were living in the apartment block, during the war people became

very close to each other. We were no longer neighbors who didn't know what the other neighbor was doing. They were very close. And there was Antoni living in our block of houses. A very nice man who was Jewish, and then they were all requested to leave the so-called Aryan district and to move to,to the Jewish district. And he was struggling with himself. Should he go to the Jewish district to move there or buy the, or get the legal papers and stay outside, which he felt was much more risky because this was a violation of law and every Jew that was caught outside the district would be killed. So, I, I remember how this man was fighting with each other, with, with himself. Should he and his family move to the Jewish ghetto or pretend he was, he was a Christian, and he finally decided to go there and probably that was his, his end eventually.

01:15:21

Q. Would there have been support among the Polish community for Jewish people who needed to, who wanted to stay outside of the ghetto and hide?
A. Well, they, they, the best way it was described was by Jan Karski (?) who just said there were people of bad will. There were people of good will and there were indifferent people. And this is exactly what happened. The bad people who were denouncing Jews very often for, for gain, for money, and people who were risking their lives to save Jews. Both were in minority. The great majority were indifferent people. You know, people who were, cared only how to survive, how to survive with their families. And this was not just something in Poland. I mean, the world was indifferent. Even the Jews in U.S. we knew were indifferent. But unfortunately most of the people cared about themselves. They were indifferent, but they were a great force to save the Jews. For instance, I know somebody who was active in some organization that dealt with the Germans and he was trying to get from the Germans special kind of permits for Christians of Jewish background. And the Germans said of course, give us the list we will give them special immunity. They will be able to move out and you know what happened? In the best of faith, he offered them the list. All of them were arrested and sent to, to jail and probably executed.

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But there were efforts to, to rescue. It was not easy, I will tell you. I remember my own experience. In the first year of war, we had to now livings and there was a tremendous shortage of food so everybody was smuggling food from the countryside, from peasants. And I was one of them, so I traveled to the estate of my uncle which was east from Poland and was getting some butter or some, even vodka which I would change for something else. And there were trains that were full of smugglers. This was, as I say, first months of war. This trains were dilapidated without, you know, windows where, where the glass was smashed. It was cold and all that, and I was alone in my compartment, but in the next compartment was a Jewish girl and there was some typical Warsaw hooligans who started to be aggressive. And instinctively she came to me and said, "Protect me. They are hooligans." I scolded them and they let her alone. She was sitting next to me. Now, at that time, the Jews were not yet in closed ghettos, but using of the public transport was forbidden and any Jew caught in the train, in the bus, would be executed. And she was a beautiful girl, maybe 19, 20, but with very characteristic Jewish features. You could, one look is enough to know she is Jewish. She was very thankful. We talked and said, "But, you know, I have to ask you one more favor." I said, "What is it?" "Well, when we come

to _____, to the station, we have to go through the schpera (ph)," in other words, exit. And always there was a German policeman, schutzpolizi (ph), who was checking passengers and documents and all that. Not everybody but sporadically. Said, "I would like to take you under arm so that we go together."

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Now, frankly, you know, I couldn't refuse, but I knew I am accepting risk of life because she would be recognized. If she was with me, they would take us to the next police station and, and shoot, but I couldn't refuse really. So she took me under arm and I didn't look at this German policeman but I could sense that he was looking at her. And it was a moment of terrific fear. When we passed, well she thanked me and she kissed me on both my checks and I, my, my knees were trembling under me. And later I smuggled compromising materials. I crossed the border with false documents. I was never so much afraid because it was not written on my forehead that I am a member of the resistance movement, but here it was enough to look at her. So, I very much appreciate the people who really were heroic enough to risk, not only their own lives, but that of families, of their wives, children and kept, and were offering hiding to Jews. It was an act of outstanding heroism and, and frankly many of them were, lost their lives. They, we, I remember, you know, posters with the names of Poles who were executed because they were hiding Jews. And I don't wonder that they were in minority, but there were many of them. I mean the, there are at least 6,000 names, Polish names, in Yad Vashem. In, only in Poland people were executed, in Russia and in Poland people who were hiding Jews were executed. They were not executed in Denmark. They may have been jailed, but never executed. It was only in Poland that anybody hiding Jews was executed.

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Q. Tell me a little bit about the beginning of the war in Poland. What you were doing, what Warsaw was like during occupation. I know that you were in a battle initially.
A. Well I was in the battle initially but I was taken prisoner escaped got back to the city and lived in the city. Well, you know, first of all it was a city of unemployed because all people were employed by the state lost their jobs, and they had to find some means of living. The rations, the coupons were totally inadequate. Nobody could live just from, you know, the bread and butter and so on that was, you could buy from coupon. So initially the main preoccupation was how to get food, how to, you know, -- the winter was terrible. What about heating, you know. There was no coal, so that this elementary needs of people were occupying us. But I was trying to get in touch with some underground organization. We did all had a great need to fight on with the Nazis after our defeat in September, but it was only in '41 really, that, the Spring of '41 that I joined the Polish Home Army. It was a matter of accident because you had to find somebody in the underground who would trust you and who would get you in touch with some people. And as far as I'm concerned it happened in, in the Spring of '41.

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We all lived with, you know, nobody knew if he will live to the end of the day because there was a German terror. And it was a blind terror. The Germans would take, arrest one hundred people

because of what? Because some German was killed or something happened and they would be executed. So, that people came to a conclusion very soon that it doesn't matter if you are in the underground or not if you are passive or if you are active in the anti-German movement. It's a matter of accident. You may be surrounded on the streets, there were this, and either deported to Germany as a forced labor, or to Auschwitz. Auschwitz was established in 1940 as a camp for Polish inmates. The first 700 inmates of Auschwitz were Poles, mostly Polish intelligencia, but we got used to the terror. Very few people were really afraid because it was daily bread. You simply had to co exist with, with, with the possibility that you may be arrested, killed and all of that. It became something, part of life.

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Q. Was there much evidence of brutality?
A. There was. There was people who were beaten on the street and the police, the gestapo would come to the house. They would start by beating people. Of course the worst of it all was the treatment of Jews. It was gradual. You see, they were, first they were requested to wear David Stars, yellow band. Then they were requested to move to the Jewish district. But the Jewish district was not yet closed, so they lived there but they could move around. Later it was closed. The wall was built around the ghetto and initially Christians were not allowed without special pass to go into ghetto, but the street cars were crossing the ghetto in a transit to other districts of the city. And I do remember. You know this was the time probably '41 when ghetto was isolated and people in the ghetto were simply hungry. They were starving. And the streets were covered by corpses, covered by newspapers. People who died from spotted fever mostly or from starvation and the family had no means to bury them. They would just put the body on the pavement and cover it with the newspaper and the car would come simply from, from municipal. So it was--piles of these bodies were put on the car and taken to some common grave. But the, the view was terrible. People were like skeletons. Young, young Jews who really looked awful, I mean, living skeletons. You could see that the people were starving.

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Q. When you went through the ghetto on a street car, did people ever try to call out for help?
A. Very, no, because street cars were going pretty fast. There was no chance to do anything. But, some Jews were, in spite of the great risk of losing life, they were coming for help. I remember, I will never forget it, I will never forget it, you know, probably it was '41 when we were living in a good residential area and the girl, Jewish girl who was no more than 10 came with a small brother who was five and said, "We are very hungry." And it was something I will never forget, to see the child who say, "I am hungry."

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Q. Were you able to help her?
A. My mother gave her bread, soup and said, "Come whenever you want, whenever you are hungry." They never came back. Nobody knows what happened.

Q. Did you have any other experiences in seeing what was happening in the ghetto or knowing about it?
A. Well, we know, we knew, but later we were isolated. I mean you could see the groups of Jews who were under, mostly under the escort of the police going to work and of course they were trying to get food and they were getting food, potatoes and bread and all that. But the police, German police, would take away everything from them and beat them when they were coming back. Still, they were trying to get food, coming back. But what was inside the ghetto, we didn't know because it was a wall, total isolation.

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Q. Now, your family was able to stay together?
A. Yes.
Q. Was there semblance of normal life for you?
A. The life was always normal even life in ghetto was normal. There were coffee houses, there were theaters, concerts everything in the city condemned to death. Life is always normal you know. People, children were playing. Also even in the Jewish ghetto so there was some normal life, family life. Everybody was trying to get his, eh, and for his life and all that. It was a normal life. Life in danger, life in terror, life in poverty, in shortages, but it was a normal life. More or less.
Q. Generally, in the community not so much when you chose to go in the underground, was there any support for the German occupation?
A. Very few. There were always, you know, in every community you have people who will cooperate and collaborate and denounce people, but frankly you know it was the Germans who united people. Since the, every Pole was, you know, also condemned. People because of this terror, they really became very, they got used to it, but they were united. There was a common anti-German front, no question. And we had no questling (?) government, for instance. And collaborators were shot. I mean, the people who collaborated with Germans were killed. By, they got sentences of death and they were killed. The underground was very ruthless with collaborators. It was a risky thing to collaborate with the Germans.

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Q. Your government was --?
A. There was, of course, administration was German. They were some offices for instance, city offices Poles were employed. Germans had no manpower. They had used their manpower for war industry and, and in the front. So, they did use Poles but it was different thing to work in the, in the administration. It was not collaboration. It was not considered--as long as you were not used as an instrument to persecute others. So, of course they were, they were offices, labor offices or municipal authorities. The same was in ghetto. The Jews were employed by the, by the German authorities in all kinds of organizations.
Q. In your prewar government?
A. Was in London, but we did have an underground authority. It was a kind of underground state which was kind of moral authority, you know. People did obey the orders that came from our underground government. Commander and chief of the Polish Home army of the military

underground and there was so called delegation of the government in London. And they did have considerable authority.

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Q. Which was respected by the civilian community?
A. They were respected, yes.
Q. And the underground worked in conjunction with the government in London?
A. Well, there was daily communication by secret radios with the government in London. There were couriers, emissaries. So, there was a contact and above all Polish radio from London and BBC. After all, everybody, it was daily bread, news from London, information from London, programs broadcast from London. It was a source of hope.
Q. Can you tell me a little bit about the circumstances how you got involved with the underground?
A. Well first I established some contact with some underground paper, but it was sort of a conservative paper which I didn't like very much, but there was no choice. I mean, I had no other contacts. But in '41 I did, I met somebody who really introduced me into the underground and I joined so called Action Ann which was psychological warfare against the Nazis, against the Germans. We produced German underground press, by, which was prepared by excellent experts. Mostly by Poles, who were bilingual, spoke as good German as Polish. And this was, we were pretending to be German newspapers which did create a sensation in Germany. And it was never distributed from hands to hands because it would betray Polish souls. It was distributed by dropping on the floor or inside the book, inside the parcels that were sent to the soldiers in the front, in the restaurants, in the trains. And my, my function was to organize distribution of this black propaganda press.

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In Germany, I didn't know German very well, very, just a few words, but there were so many Poles who became German, so-called volksdeutsch who didn't speak good German that it was not so bad as you may think. SO, I had to cross the border of so called Generalgouvernement, which was central Poland, isolated from the rest of, of Germany, of occupied Poland. And I had to find agents inside Germany who were distributing this, this subversive literature. Which was a fascinating job. I traveled under disguise of Polish railway man and then German railway man which was the safest way to travel with forged documents of course. And that lasted until the spring of '43. In '43 I discovered the possibility to go to Sweden hidden in the Swedish ship. Swedes were importing iron ore to Germans and were taking coal from, from Poland, from Polish territories and I was put in touch with some people from the underground who could place a blind passenger in the bunker of coal. So, I reported to my authorities and volunteered to go in this manner. And I became a courier. I was traveling with intelligence reports hidden in the microfilms and all kinds of objects. And after some adventures I did reach Stockholm and that was just at the time of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto.

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And I learned about it by listening to the Polish radio in London which was in touch with the secret radio in Warsaw. So, they were getting daily reports and I was very impressed by this and I remember I wrote a report about genocide of Jews to a Polish commander and chief and Prime Minister General Chicovsky (?), and were urging him that the allies must make some kind of threats of reprisals to Germans to stop it. And if they will not do anything, well Poles will be next. I used this, this argument, that if Germans will be completely, could, without any penalty, murder three million Jews then next after them will be Poles. And I know that report did reach the addressee and was passed over, passed on to Churchill. And I was told after the war that it did have some influence. I think the, this decision to bring war criminals before the international tribunal was done more or less at that time. What I was really asking for was to have a kind of bombing which would be declared as a reprisal for mass murders of Jews, and I remember I used the argument you, you, the Americans and British are going to bomb the Germans anyhow. Why not to say this is an act of reprisal. No, nothing like that ever happened.

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So, I came back from Stockholm and I was immediately commissioned to go this same route but to London. And at that time they put me in touch with a man in the underground who was in a contact man with the Jewish military organization in the ghetto, by the name of Henry Valinsky (?). And I was under instructions to get as much briefing about the Holocaust as it is called now. We didn't use this word at that time, about the Jewish uprising and to consider it a sort of a priority in my mission to London. And I did spend much time with Volinsky who told me all about the problems with even names of some militants, and I got microfilms and I was the man who brought to London a report _____, a Jewish Militant Organization, written after the ghetto. I remember when I was boarding train on my way to port Gdansk to go to Sweden, the messenger came and gave me, I believe it was a battery or something, you know, battery for a torch and said, "You have to take it, this is a report, the story of the extermination of Jews and of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising." And it was -- I didn't know really exactly what it was until I reached London and the film was developed and it was a very impressive story written by the woman writer called Kahn, K-A-H-N. "P_____, Before the Eyes of the World," which was translated but I don't believe it was published, you know, because it was very little interesting the kind of atrocity stories at that time. So, this was my mission. I already knew that people in the west do not believe in the genocide on the scale that it took place. So, I approached a British NCO by the name of Ronnie Jeffrey who is still alive. He's in New Zealand. He escaped from the camp, POW camp in Woodje (?).

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Q. You were talking about Mr. Jeffrey?
A. Yes, so I didn't know that the credibility of a Pole with the British may be questionable so I approached a friend of mine, a British NCO by the name of Ronald Jeffrey, an extremely brave young man who escaped from a POW camp in Woodje (?). He lived in Warsaw in hiding and was very active in the underground. He was a man of considerable courage, spoke fluent German and learned Polish and I told him, "Ronnie, write the letter to London Times about the

Jews, about the atrocities and all that's going on and identify yourself. Give your number, your regiment and all that and I will ask that it's microfilmed and we'll send it to London Times." And it was developed, the microfilm was developed, and the Polish government sent it to London Times. They never published it. So when I met archbishop Temple who was the archbishop of Canterbury, head of the underground church, he was really a good man and he was just not asking what can I do for you in the sense which implied, I can do nothing. He just asked the question. In the good sense, "Can I do something?," and I said, "Well, you know, use your influence you are the second person after the king." Send my letter to the Times and ask why they didn't publish it. Use your influence to, with the Times to have this letter published.

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And I have his answer. I have his answer here in Washington, the original letter. He says, "Mr. Nowak, I am sorry. Nothing to be done. London Times say they can not publish the letter because it could endanger the man in Warsaw and the British POWs," which was nonsense. I mean he was one of I don't know how many thousand people living with the forged documents. Nobody could, how could the Germans find him? And I told about it Walter Laquer (?) when he was writing his books, and he approached London, London Times and said, "Do you have this letter in your archives?" They said, "No, the letter was destroyed," which is not true. I mean a letter smuggled from the occupied Poland from a British prisoner of war was a curiosity. I'm sure they would keep it. They didn't want to admit they had this kind of letter and then publish it.

01:46:57

Q. Now, I want to back track a little bit and learn more about the underground, the Polish underground. What motivated you to get involved?
A. Patriotic duty. I mean, I was a young man. I was the officer. I mean, it was my duty to fight on. That was the motivation of people who joined the underground.
Q. From where did all these people come?
A. All walks of life, absolutely all walks of life. The countryside--the peasants were extremely well-organized. For instance you know parachuting, parachutes, they got special committees by the peasants. They were peasant battalions, partisan units, guerrilla, intelligencia, they, they, everybody. If somebody was not in the underground he was at least trying to help in some way or the other. But it was a conspiracy of the entire nation I would say. There were very few people who were not involved in this or other way.

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Which does not mean that organization itself probably would be no more than 100,000 but it had tremendous hinterland (?) of people supporting it, whether by offering hiding place or helping in any way they could. So, that even if I didn't know a passerby I could approach him and say, "Look, help me." And it was a fantastic experience. I remember when German closed the street because there was some attempt on the, attack on the SA unit, marching, this, hand grenade was thrown. I was inside the apartment house with some other people on the conspiracy. We were

told that everything is quiet. We can leave. I was the first one who left and when I was leaving the house the gestapo man stopped me and he said, "Where did you come from?" I knew if I say which apartment the rest of my colleagues including my finance were there. So over his shoulder I saw the name of a dentist and I said I left the dentist's room and I gave her name. He took me to the nearest pharmacy, picked up the phone and called the dentist with my identity card and said, "Was a man by this name in your room?" I thought that's the end. He put down the received you can go. She said yes of course he was. He, I never saw the lady. She never saw me, but she was in this house. She knew what this was all about. So, yes, of course he was in, he was my patient. He was in my room. This was the kind of conspiracy where everybody was trying to help and assist.

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I lost ticket, a ticket when I was with my compromising material. I approached a worker who had a season railway ticket and I asked him could you please buy me a ticket because I cannot go through the schpera (?) without the ticket. Of course he didn't know who I was. He went, bought the ticket and brought me the ticket. I left the railway station safely. So everywhere there was some kind assistance. That's why we would act.

Q. Did the organization of the underground evolve out of prewar political organizations?

A. It evolved spontaneously. They were really secret organizations which were mushrooming after the defeat of Poland everywhere. At the same time the commanding officers were appointed by our authorities in London and they were trying to unite this whole kind of spontaneous organization into one underground force and they managed to do so. But the initiative would come from grass roots.

01:52:14

Q. Were there any Jews in the underground?

A. Oh yes. I mean, for instance my school mate, a little older Lucian_____?_____ was in, in the, in my, very close to me in the organization. Jusak (?) Handelsman, he's, he's, professor Handelsman, who was killed by the Germans later. I could name several other people. Yes, there were some Jews in the underground movement.

Q. Not a lot?

A. Not many because, because you know there was, this was a terrific danger. You know, the man Lucian_____?_____ for instance, was, had very Jewish features. Now if he would be caught with some compromising material and tortured, he would betray others, so it was dangerous to have a Jew who could be recognized as a Jew in the organization. But, there were some.

01:53:20

Q. Was there any coordination between the Polish underground and the Ghetto underground?

A. Yes, but not from the very beginning because at the beginning Jews like Dr. Jenokov (?), for instance, they took the position that if we resist, I mean if Jews we resist, all will be killed. If

we don't resist, if we simply carry out orders, some will be killed and some will survive. This was a wrong philosophy. And the first really Jewish militant units were formed only after this big wave of extermination at the end of '42. And then they were trying to establish contact with us and to get weapons. Now, initially the Polish military were reluctant because they were not sure if they will fight but later they have shown tremendous determination and they did get weapons. Not enough, not sufficient. They were always complaining they don't get enough. But also not only weapons because we were very short of weapons until British started really to throw a lot of weapons since April '44. But we were for instance, I know that the Poles were giving them contacts to the, where they could buy weapons from Germans. It was a possibility. There were many German soldiers who were selling their weapons. So whatever they had they got from us, but this was very poor equipment. They were poorly equipped. Some pistols, some few guns. It was very small, very poorly equipped insurgence army.

01:55:24

Q. Was there any coordination in terms of information?
A. There were, there were liaison people who were coming from the ghetto, mostly by sewers or other ways. I don't know what. One of them was Antec Zuckerman (?), for instance. He was the one that was kind of a liaison between the ghetto and the underground. There were some others. And there was an organized transport of arms. The men who were really in touch with them was _____ was among others. He was the one who was assigned to be a kind of a liaison with Jews.
Q. What were the primary goals of the underground?
A. Fight for independence, for freedom. Fight with the enemy, fight with the Germans for freedom. That was the goal, as in France as in every occupied country.
Q. Did the ways in which you hoped to achieve that change or evolve as the war went on.
A. I didn't get your question.
Q. When you say fight with the enemy obviously you worked in a more political or propagandist end for quite a while.
A. It was also kind of a struggle, a very important one, psychological warfare. Yeah.

01:57:04

Q. I'm just wondering if the ways in which you wanted to achieve this freedom or independence evolved or if you always had kind of a full scale strategy in place of how to do this both militarily and politically.
A. Well, of course it developed gradually, but the concept was clear. It was all out fight on every sector. Psychological warfare was only one of many but there was urban guerrilla. There were partisan units in the forest. There was sabotage of all kind. It was all out fight with many directions. There were the units that were trying to terrorize the Germans, who were executing Germans. It was a very broad front to inflict as much on them as possible. And to contribute to the victory.
Q. How much information did you have about other operations working in the underground?

A. Not much, whatever, only what was published in the underground papers, because the rule was that if you belong to one cell, or one unit, you are not allowed to get, involve yourself in any other. This was the rule to protect organization. You, you shouldn't try to know more than you have to know because if you are arrested you never know how you will, you know, will you, if you will not under tortures, if you will not break down and will not betray others. It was assumed that the man who is arrested and tortured may tell the Germans under, you know, tortures, things about others. So the policy was that everybody had to limit, to have his knowledge as limited as possible.

01:59:19

End of Tape 1

Tape 2

02:01:09

Q. How extensive was the Polish underground?
A. It was very extensive because in addition to people who were organized, and I believe people who were organized were probably no more than 400,000. There was a hinterland, the people who were supporting by offering hiding places or any kind of help so that frankly we could operate mainly because of this kind of spontaneous assistance from people who were not themselves organized but who were ready to accept the risks and to help.
Q. Had this whole state essentially gone underground? I mean, what kind of services were--
A. Well, it was really an underground state. There were court, underground courts, underground justice. There was, there were underground universities. There was a whole underground life really, and it comprised the entire society really. So Jan Karski (?) called his book published in United States during the war "The Story of the Underground State," and it was the underground state.

02:02:32

Q. Who was getting prosecuted in these courts?
A. Oh, the traitors, collaborators with the Germans. This was the court to sentence the people who were guilty of collaboration with the enemy. Also the people who, for instance, denouncing Jews were, were also put before this court and executed. But, Gestapo people, particularly cruel Germans and it was also a kind of psychological warfare because the man who was sentenced would first get the sentence and then he would be killed or he would get a warning that he's going to be put before this kind of underground court. But this was a regular court with the attorneys. They were mostly professional judges or professional lawyers. So, there were regular courts and they were using the Polish penal code.
Q. In all these spontaneous organizations and prewar political organizations they all came together and supported this unified system?
A. Correct. There were some groups that did not belong to it. Extreme right wing groups were, did not belong to the, this underground state and communists. Otherwise there were people of all possible outlooks. There were nationalists, there were social democrats, there were catholics, all kinds of groups--peasants. The whole spector of political views with the exception of extreme rightist and communists.

02:04:26

Q. Were they a problem?
A. They were a problem, particularly communists but also the extreme right wing were problems.
Q. How did you get your supplies and what supplies were especially important to you?
A. What?
Q. How did you get the supplies the underground needed?

A. Well you know, the money and the weapons did come from, from London. They were parachuted. There were some weapons that were bought from Germans or we simply attacked the German units and took the weapons. But supply of money would come mainly from first Paris and then London. From outside.
Q. What other supplies were really crucial to your efforts?
A. Mostly weapons, but money as well because people had to live from something. If somebody could, lost his legal life, so to speak, he had to live with false documents, he couldn't work, so he had to be put on the payroll. So, money was extremely important. The underground press had to buy papers.
Q. So if you had the money you could get any of the other things you needed?
A. Yes, including even weapons but one could buy weapons from some German soldiers. Weapons and ammunition.
Q. What sort of risk did you, did you personally have to take a lot of high risk?
A. Oh, yes, I had to risk my life very often. I mean any crossing of the border with forged documents and with compromising material was very risky. Moving around in the, Germany, being a Pole, was very risky even considering that I didn't speak good German. Crossing from Warsaw to Stockholm was not an easy matter. I don't want to advertise myself because people were taking considerable risks. Many people died. Many people were arrested and died. I was very lucky.

02:06:57

Q. How afraid were you at the time?
A. I was, I really had probably no imagination. Because as I told you before I was once scared to death when a Jewish girl with very characteristic Jewish features asked me that I, that she should take me under arm to cross the so called schpera (?), you know, where Germans were checking. I knew that if they would arrest her I would be executed as well, so I was afraid. I was very much afraid before the parachute training. It was a kind of suicide really to jump out of the plane. It was a, but otherwise I got used to it. I never thought about dangers and risks and I was not very much afraid simply because I was not thinking about what may happen. This was the best thing to do.
Q. How much initiative did you have to take versus systems that were in place for you?
A. Every day, every step. It all depended on my initiative, on my concepts, my ideas, how to act, what to do, how to avoid dangers, how to find the people who can help. You were left to your own resources mostly.
Q. What prepared you for this?
A. What?
Q. What do you think prepared you for this kind of activity?
A. I had the motivation I think. I did want to serve my country and to help to, to defeat the Germans.

02:08:43

Q. Tell me a little bit more about the propaganda campaign, its action end.
A. Well it was a psychological warfare with the main purpose was to demoralize the Germans by all kinds of tricks. For instance, instruction, "How to behave to avoid, you know,

frost at the east front," which was so terrible, the instructions, that would frighten anybody going to the east front, to the, to Russia. That's just one example. For instance, the Germans in Warsaw, yes, would get a secret instructions that the gas attack, chemical weapon attack by Russians is expected in Warsaw and that they should go to the such and such office to collect gas masks. You see? But they are not allowed to tell Poles about it because there are not enough gas masks. We knew there were no gas masks at all. So, the Germans would make queues, would come for gas masks and were told we don't have any gas masks for you which would spread panic of course. There were for instance we would send the secret instructions--no, not secret, open instructions that there is such and such anniversary in the Nazi movement and today is free from work. It was not, but if every worker and every engineer in a big factory producing weapons they would not come to work and it would be a terrific waste of manpower, you see. We were forging secret forms of all kind of Nazi documents and, you know, all kinds of managers, directors, important people would get an order. For instance the important engineer in Munich would get an order to go the party meeting in Hamburg.

02:11:08

So, he would put his SA uniform on him and he would go to Hamburg to say that you are a victim of a joke. Okay but he would not be at work. It would inflict considerable damage to war machinery. So, it was a kind of a psychological sabotage which was extremely effective. And above all, to give the Germans the impression that there is an anti-Nazi resistance movement which in fact did not exist. That there is anti-Hitler plots. All this had certain psychological impact on Germans and I think we were pretty effective in this.

Q. Were you thinking up a lot of these schemes?

A. No. My job really was to organize the network and distribution and the others were thinking about, you know, were finding the ideas how to do it.

Q. Did you have any sense of how effective it was?

A. We did, because we did have all kinds of secret German documents how to fight it, how to -- and Germans went out of their way to find us, to arrest us and so on. And then we had the report from the British Intelligence Service which found that this was a very effective job. We got a lot of praise from the British for this kind of propaganda. They did have their own black propaganda. We were trying -- one of my jobs was to establish cooperation between British black propaganda which was mostly, mostly for, by radio, you know. But radio which were posing as the German underground radios and the man who was conducting it was a genius by the name of Sefton Delmer (?). I met him and he praised our effort very highly. He respected what we were doing.

02:13:18

Q. What was your biggest challenge in setting up this distribution network?

A. Well, to travel, travel with the forged documents with the compromising material under, with the uniform of a railway man without good knowledge of German. There was a considerable risk in it but it was fun. It was, I considered it the most fascinating part of my life.

Q. Was it easy to recruit people for this?

A. It was easy. Too many people. There were too many volunteers. You had to be selective, but people did want to work for us and were really contemptuous of the, of the risk of life.

02:14:13

Q. Now when you were in London, you were there doing what?
A. Well, I arrived right after the _____ on 11th of December '43 and I left on I believe the 14th of July, or maybe, no maybe on 11th of July '44. And I was in Richt (ph), Poland on the 25th of July, just before the Warsaw uprising and I was sent after the collapse of the uprising back and we reached, it was a long journey. We reached London on 22nd of January '45. This was the last trip.
Q. On your first trip to London, why were you sent there. What was your role?
A. Emissary, a man who were bringing some very important messages, oral, briefing. I had a mission. And also of course I had my microfilms with me. But, but it was, they were important reports from the commander in chief in Poland to the Polish commander and chief in London and to the Polish government. My main mission was to brief and to tell people. I mean, I met Anthony Eden. I met at least five other members of the war cabinet. It was Annis Bevin (?), Archibold Singer (?) who was the minister of the airforce. Lord Selbourne, psychological warfare, Morrison (?). Annis Bevin was labor and at the end I met Churchill. This was my last meeting. I met many parliamentarians, many journalists.

02:16:21

Q. What kind of information were you taking?
A. About the underground activities, about the situation there. About our plans of action, and above all we were trying to really get support in view of the coming danger from the Soviets. I mean it was not only the fight against the Germans, we were then already facing great danger of the Russians, of the Soviets. My mission was really to convince the British and the Americans that they should in some way help us resist Soviet designs to subjugate Poland and the rest of the area. This was one of my most important missions. One of my missions was also to report about genocide of Jews. This was a high priority mission. I got instructions, to consider it a very high priority.
Q. When you met with Mr. Eden and some of these other ministers, did you, what kind of response did you get from them?
A. Well, it was friendly. There was interest because it was an unusual thing to have an emissary from occupied country. And at the same time the attitude, "Well, what can we do for you? Do you want us to make a war with Russia to defend Poland? What can we, how can we help you?" I was right in the middle of the game between, between Joseph Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt with Poland in the middle and I was trying to use this influence. I also was telling everybody I could about the genocide, about the Holocaust. I met with disbelief with, when I talked to the Jews from joint organization with some rabbi from York.

02:18:39

I was in the presence of Ignace Schwartzbart (?) who was a Polish zionist an important political figure. I sensed that they don't believe me and only one high level British intellengence officer was really moved by my story about the Jews. And he told me, in the same, I was told the same story by Ignace Schwartzbart (?). Don't tell people that two and half million Jews were killed. Nobody is going to believe you. It's something beyond imagination. They will say you exaggerate. Tell individual stories. Tell what you saw. Use examples but don't use statistics because you will, they will not believe you. And I was trying to use it, but when I and my wife, after the war in '76, when I was writing my war memoirs, we both went to London, to the archives, to Her Majesty's records office. Plenty of documents were already declassified and I found a lot of documents concerning myself. The report that Antony Eden wrote after meeting me addressed to Churchill. In all this reports, nothing about what I said about the Jews, at not one word I spoke to the intelligence officers. I spoke to the, to Eden, to others. In all their reporting any reference to the Jews were not repeated. Then I was interested to find if the same story was with Jan Karski (?), who was one year before me. And I found a report of Antony Eden on his conversation with Karski in the documents of the British war cabinet. It was printed and distributed. Not one word about the Jews. So, I sent it to Karski and he wrote me back, saying, "Look, I mean, I told Eden, when I was describing the situation in Poland, I told about what's going on with the Jews." Not one word.

02:21:00

Not one word, and the main reason I think, you know, you had to differentiate between two categories of people. There are people who simply didn't believe because this was something beyond their imagination. And there were Jews, Jews from United States I talked to and British Jews who simply didn't believe. They didn't believe that there is a possibility of mass killing in a sort of conveyor belt method, you know, like in a factory, or in a butchery. You just mechanically kill people one after the other. They didn't believe it. And they, they were suspecting me of some kind of ulterior motive. They said, "Why a Pole should exaggerate? Well, because he's anti-German and he would like to have as harsh terms imposed on the Germans after that defeat as possible. That's why he's exaggerating." And they were, but, as far as such people as Eden is concerned or members of the cabinet, they were very well informed because after, discovered it after the war, that for instance, a very high level Nazi official, whose name is known, was passing to a Polish intelligence officer in Berne, in Switzerland, information about the plans of final solution well before it was they started to implement it.

02:22:40

And I know that this report was passed on to British and to Americans. They knew but they didn't -- they were afraid that if this would become known publicly it would generate the pressure from the Jewish communities and general public for some kind of action that would divert limited military resources from the military targets to the targets that are in their view irrelevant from the military point of view, and that may prolong the war. I don't remember if it was Eden or Beven. Bevine (?), rather, Annis Bevine who said, "Well the only way we can really save the Jews is to win the war. And the more we can focus on military targets, strategic military, the better to the Jews." I think they refused to bomb the railway track to Auschwitz because they believed that they would be repaired in a matter of days or hours, but the planes

may be lost. The planes which could be used to bomb the important target in Germany would be diverted from the target. And they were wrong because the greatest tragedy of Jews was not just their deaths. Indifference of the world. That absolut--They were absolutely lonely in the face of their death. It was in the, they realized the world doesn't care about them. That's what killed them, about the dimension of the crime, we are lonely, you see, and this was, in my view, it was a crime, really, not to do something. The kind of a moral relief that we tried to do something to save you, you know.

02:24:39

Q. What was your impression of Eden and Churchill?
A. Well, Churchill was not very friendly. It was, really, I had only ten minutes and I was so intimidated by his appearance and some kind of, you know, impression. "Well why really this young man is taking my time?" This kind of thing, that I lost my self, I was not good, my performance was not good because I was so nervous that I didn't perform well with Churchill. But with Eden I was pretty lucid and, as I say, he was very, very friendly. When I showed him the photographs of Warsaw with the, some underground inscriptions of the war on the walls and all that, he said to himself, "Poor Warsaw," and all that, but there was the attitude well, we cannot do anything for you. I mean, you have to accommodate yourself with the Russians. You know, we cannot save you. We cannot save Poland. You have to make your war effort to contribute and to try to find some kind of compromise with Stalin. That was the message basically.

02:26:08

Q. Discouraging?
A. Discouraging! It was the worst time of my entire life. Appeasement, total appeasement.
Q. When you returned to Warsaw, was right before the uprising, the Polish uprising, what were you doing during the uprising?
A. I was in charge of the insurgent radio station called _____, Lightening, which was broadcasting literally from the front line because we were trying to be as close to the Germans as possible because then they couldn't bomb us from fear they would hid their own soldiers. And we were broadcasting. I was in charge of broadcasting in English. My own English was not good enough at that time and I had a man who was bilingual. He was half British, half Polish. I wrote. He would translate it and he was the announcer. And we knew we were monitored by extremely sophisticated equipment in Cavicham (?) in London and monitoring bulletins would land on the desk of all high level people, decision making people, editorial offices. So it was an effort worthwhile. Even now the old quote that we're saying, would get through in German or that, is still there on the record.

02:27:53

Q. During the uprising, did the home army have the support of or instructions from London?

A. No, we had, we had some parachute, you know, some weapons and ammunition and food parachuted. It was not enough but even without this kind of help the uprising would not last 63 days. Then we had one at the very end when the uprising was in it's agony on the 18th of September there was a mass daylight raid by American so called fortresses so that the sky was covered by American planes and they dropped thousands of parachutes with weapons, ammunition and food. But this were the last days of the uprising. We were holding the very small parts of the city so most of it went into the Germans hands because they couldn't hit the small areas we were still holding.
Q. Was there Russian support during the uprising?
A. Only appearances of it. No, they wanted us. They wanted Germans to finish us. They, I could see them with my eyes, I mean, on the other side of the river, cities separated by, you know, the, divided by the River Vistula. They were on the other side waiting until Hitler finished us.

02:29:32

Q. Was London supportive of what you were doing at this point?
A. Who?
Q. Your London government?
A. Of course, I mean, they, they were supporting, but they were helpless, I mean it was a government in exile. All they could do was to beg British to, and Americans, to give us, send us ammunition, weapons, food, medical supplies.
Q. How organized was the uprising?
A. It was well organized. It was, otherwise we would not hold for 63 days. Again, it was a kind of, of liberated city, really, with its own life but communication was very well organized. They were, for instance, we were using sewers because the areas of the city were isolated and communication between the areas we were holding were mostly through the sewers.
Q. What kind of messages were you sending to London?
A. Well, information about the fighting, about our needs. This was our daily reports of what's, what was going on in the city.
Q. Were you in your radio tower when the under, under whatever it is, started?
A. No, the studio was, was on the very, either in the underground, in the cellars or on the first floor. We moved from place to place. We couldn't be in the same place all the time. The normal transmitter was outside.
02:31:20

Q. But you weren't really in the streets when all of this activity---
A. Well, we had to move through the streets.
Q. What was happening?
A. We were under the bombs, under, under fire all the time. We had a kind of tunnels or we were... To avoid the streets which were under fire, there were corridors, I mean the walls were, you know, so that you travel from cellars to cellars under the houses to avoid the streets. It's the whole underground labrynth of, of, of communication.
Q. Did everything happen in a synchronized fashion? Did all of a sudden one day at an appointed hour the city --

A. Well, yes. This was 5 p.m. August 1. There was so called zero hour when it started. We have 13 minutes.

02:32:32

I don't think I really told you all about the Jewish aspect because you are mainly interested in non-Jewish aspects, but this is the Holocaust Museum.
Q. Well, what else...
A. Well, what kinds of--it depends on you, what questions.
Q. I have asked you a number of questions and I think you have talked about your relationship with Jewish people, your mission to go tell London about what was happening to the Jews. If there are areas that you feel I haven't asked you about, because I, maybe I don't even know, to please--
A. Only my personal experiences which I describe in my book for instance when I was going to, to -- it was the time of the agony of ghetto when really I mean people were starving. And although it meant a sentence of death for any Jew to go outside of ghetto because he would he would killed on the spot by any German patron. People were made so desperate by starvation that they would take any risk to go outside through their own means and ways to beg for food or for money, buy food and I, this is, this is something that I will never forget in my life. When I was going to a town hall and to do some business there and this was probably the spring of '43 or maybe earlier. Earlier. And I saw a young Jew who was sitting on the pavement with his back on the wall and his head was just on, like this, you know, and there was a cap on the pavement full of money. People were dropping, you know, some notes and some money. He was just sitting there. So I came to him and said to him, "Look, I mean, if you will sit here, the first German patron will kill you. Take your money, buy your bread and disappear." And I remember he just raised his head and very, looked at me very intensely and he was really a living skeleton but had beautiful black eyes. The boy was no more than 16 maybe 17 and I saw that he wants to tell me something.

02:35:20

He couldn't. So I said to him, "Look, I mean, I have to leave but I"ll be back. Go to this church." There was a church nearby. "Go inside and wait for me I'll be back." And I left him. Twenty minutes later I left the office where I had some business and I saw a small crowd around this place, so I came there and the boy was still there with his head like this, you know, sitting in the same position but he was dead. He had no force, you know, to really stood, go, buy something and escape. He didn't want to tell me probably, "I wish I could follow your advice but I have no strength to go." So, I will remember it always this intense looking and this black eyes, you know, of the young fellow who just wanted to tell me something and he couldn't. And also, I remember and I described it, when I went to a court and this was some problem. In my civil life I was manager of a house and collector of rent, and I had some question I had to go to court. Now, the building of the courts, some windows were to the Aryan side, to the Christian side, the other to the ghetto. And this was probably the beginning of '43 when there were only 70,000 Jews left in the Jewish district.

02:37:25

On that day the Germans started to get into transports to the death camps. And I was in the court room. There was some trivial case of, against somebody who was probably was, you know, was, stole a sack with wheat or something, you know. Trivial. No problem. Outside on the street, there was this terrible drama of Jews who were herded that and they were running towards this, you know, place where they were boarded on the train. There were children. There were women. There were men. I remember the, the, somebody was pushing a cart with the sick Jews who were, you know, limping, they were, you know, almost dying people and these Germans were drunk with their, you know, whips beating these people and pushing them, "schnell, schnell, schnell, quicker, quicker, quicker," and all that. There was some lady who was well dressed and she was holding money in her hands and had a child, a small child and she probably wanted to bribe her way out. So she stretched this money towards the gestapo man and he just beat her with his whip so that she lost balance and the child was dropped on the pavement. And there was an old Jewish woman who was so desperate that she stretched her hands toward the sky and said, "Hitler that the grass should" -- how did she say this -- "that the grass should cover your house," or something of that sort. I was told later this was kind of an old Jewish saying and I didn't want to see what would happen. I knew that she would be shot or killed in some way so I turned from the window. There was a silence in the court room. The judge was speechless. He was just, couldn't concentrate because of these terrible shouts from outside and all that.

02:40:28

I remember that years later I was stationed in Munich as director of the Polish service of radio free Europe and my wife and I went to Berchtesgaden and looked at the house of Hitler which was blown up by Americans and believe it or not there was in these ruins there was bathroom, you know, and grass was everywhere between the, this, you know, how you call it, bricks and everywhere was grass. So this terrible shout of grass cover your house became true.

Q. Anything else you want to say?

A. Well, that's more or less all, more or less all. It was an unspeakable misery of human beings, and I didn't care whether they were Poles, Jews or Gypsies. It was unspeakable tragedy and no words can really convey. The people who were condemned to death only for one crime, they were alive, and total destruction of people of their race, their religion, their heritage, and above all this process of wives who were losing first their husband then their children and in the end they were killed. This was unspeakable tragedy with no precedent. I mean Poles suffered. There were martyrs. I mean, there was not one single Polish family without some victims, but a Pole had a chance to survive. Jews had no hope, no chance. I mean it was a miracle if you would survive. Okay.

Q. Thank you.

A. That's all.

02:42:45

End of Interview.