

**RG-50.030.0369**

**Translation of oral history interview with Reuven Paikowsky**

**Part 3 summary**

Reuven Paikowsky was born on 20 Jan, 1926 in the town of Szyszki. His father was Shmuel Leib. His mother was Basia. He had 4 sisters and one brother. He and his father fled from Szyszki on Sunday, September 22, 1941. The rest of his family was killed in Szyszki. Men were killed in ditches near the old Jewish cemetery. Women and children were killed near the Polish cemetery in pits that were dug over time when they were a source of sand. (After the war, Reuven had a memorial built to mark both mass graves.)

Next event is from June 1944, after Reuven was already liberated. Reuven was then hanging around in the woods and in homes where the local people built shelters for Jews [who fled Poland from the Nazis]. He credits the family of the widow Bikejcz in the town of Lebedniki of managing two such secret shelters. In Nov./Dec. '43 the Polish Home/National Army appeared in the area and set up its HQ in the town of Yuleli and started to look for and kill surviving Jews in the area. They came to the widow Bikejcz insisting that she reveal where these shelters were. When she refused, she was killed. They did find out the location of one shelter from the widow Bikejcz's daughter. About 10 people in that shelter were killed. [An interesting aside]: Among the people in the shelter was a Mr. Kabaczniak, who, before the war, served as an officer in the Polish Army. He was taken to the field HQ of the Polish Home Army and after two days he was killed as well.

Reuven provides more commentary how the Polish Home Army searched for Jews and Soviet partisans (guerrillas) and killed them. Whereas, if they caught German soldiers, they simply took their uniforms and weapons and let them go.

Reuven credits his and his father's survival, both of whom were in the second shelter, to a Kazimierz Korczuk. Korczuk was known as a local protector of Jew—a role for which he was being sought by the Polish Home Army. The survivors of the attack on the 2<sup>nd</sup> shelter managed to flee into the woods where they joined up with some Russian/Soviet guerrillas. Reuven credits Korczuk with saving at least 30 Jews. The next part of the interview focuses on the Sohnenson family, who were also saved by Kazimierz Korczuk. The family consisted of Moshe, the father, Tsipora, the mother, Yitzhak, a son and two daughters, Yafa and Sheinele.

Reuven then tells a story of a child that was born in the shelter that was under the protection of Kazimierz Korczuk, and where the Sohnensons lived. [It's not clear at this point of the interview as to who actually had this child]. About a month before liberation a child was born to the Sohnensons. It was taken in a basket to a Tatyana, in a nearby village. She in turn took it to a local church and had it christened and took care of it for a while. But by the time that Reuven came back to Szyszki, after the war was over, the child was under the care of the Sohnensons.

Reuven returns to Szyszki from Vilnius, in June, 1944. His family house was left standing, but no one was living there. He decided to live for 2/3 months in Kabaczniak's house. At that time, the Sohnensons lived in their mother's two-storied solid house, with an attic. Reuven also establishes that before the war, the Sohnensons were well to do people with interest in a number local businesses.

Next the interview focuses on events that took place on the night of Thursday, October 19 (1944?). Apparently there was a change in the deployment of Soviet soldiers and the Russian garrison was relieved. The local police station that was on the other side of town was staffed by Russians and Lithuanians. Coincidentally a number of Polish soldiers who had ties to Szyszki were on leave from the Home Army (a.k.a. Wanda Wasilewska Army) that was stationed in Vilnius. They were in Polish uniforms and were armed with Soviet automatic rifles. Suddenly, that evening, Reuven heard a commotion outside of the Kabacznik house. It was the Polish soldiers on leave who were deciding to stage some violent attacks. Among the soldiers, Reuven recognized the son of Bułak—the town cobbler, and Władysław Dudzinsky. Once they got to Sohnenson's house they began to throw grenades and one could hear automatic rifle fire. Meanwhile, having overheard that the Kabacznik's house was next, everyone fled the house. Only afterwards, Reuven learned that the Sohnenson's mother and her child were killed in the raid. Ultimately, both houses were ransacked and burglarized.

The authorities arrested Bułak as the murderer of the Sohnenson's wife and child, after finding Moshe Sohnenson's overcoat during the search of Bułak's house.

#### **Part 4 summary**

The Interviewer has Reuven return to the events of Saturday [presumably October 21, 1944?]. She is asking in what state he found the surviving members of the Sohnenson family. Reuven isn't sure whether it was actually Saturday or Sunday, but his immediate response is garbled by an outburst of uncontrollable weeping and then by a coughing spell. He seems to take offense at the question, since no words could describe everyone's state at that point, given what everyone experienced or witnessed. Everyone was in a state of shock and disbelief.

The funeral took place on Sunday. The Interviewer asks who attended the funeral. Reuven's answer is unclear. It may have been that all the Jews in Szyszki were there. The bodies were taken to the cemetery by a horse drawn cart. They were buried not far from Mrs. Sohnenson's father's grave. Next, the Interviewer asks what happened to Yafa's father. [LW assumes this to be Moshe]

Reuven: He was all broken up. The next day he was arrested by the Russians, accused of seeking revenge. Ultimately, after traveling to Poland and Germany, Moshe and his son [Yitzhak (?)] made it to Israel.

Interviewer: Was Bułak charged with the murder of Mrs. Sohnenson. Did he admit his guilt?

Reuven: He spent 5 years in a Soviet prison for the murder of Mrs. Sohnenson. I ran into Bułak not far from the Sohnensons house some 2/3 years ago (?) in Szyszki. He did not confess to the murder at that time. [The time frame of this encounter is unclear. It needs to be honed in]

At this point, Reuven asserts that the Poles killed 200-250 Jews from Szyszki between their liberation and the end of the war. After the war, if not for the Poles, some 300-400 Jews would have remained in Szyszki. Reuven claims that even when he was with the Soviet partisans, they suffered at the hands of the Poles.

Interviewer: Do you think that Bułak and Dudzinsky were in the Polish Home Army?

Reuven: I'm not certain. I think so. Such information was kept secret. There was an officer Wilk and Kryś. We knew that those two were in the Home Army. Towards the end of the war [Reuven is referring to January/February 1945], the Russian garrison was replaced by soldiers from Soviet Georgia. They

constantly waged battles against the Polish Home Army. When they captured a Pole and killed him, they would bring him on a sled, in a frozen state and displayed him in the town's market square to make an example of him. But when they captured and killed Kryś, they placed him on a sled and drove him from town to town to show what happened to him. There was a saying in the Polish Home Army: "Poland without Jews!"

Interviewer: Do you think that Bułak and Dudzinsky attacked the Sohnenson and the other house with Jews, primarily to rob them or to kill them as Jews?

Reuven: First to kill Jews and then to rob them: "Poland without Jews!" He repeats the slogan.

Before liberation, Reuven claims that an attempt to reach an understanding between the Polish Home Army and the Lithuanian Partisans, headed by Kembrig [sp?] Gambrys. The entire detachment of partisans, including Reuven went to a clearing in the forest near the village of Wisiency, where the two groups were supposed to meet. The Poles wanted only one thing from the partisans; that they turned over the Jews to them. The partisans did not agree to that. Later, the Russian partisans complained that they had to fight the Poles on behalf of the Jews [Read: To protect the Jews. Trans.].

Interviewer: Did you meet Poles who knew what happened to the Sohnensons?

Reuven: Yes and they were pleased, since they [the Poles] lived at the expense of our wealth, in our houses. And when we came back and recognized some of our possessions, which they should have returned to us they made us feel that we were in the way.

Reuven also mentions of a pogrom that took place in Tarnów when they were being evacuated to Germany through Poland. [This would be after liberation, but not necessarily the end of the war]

The interviewer raises a question about the discrepancy in Reuven's documents, about his date of birth. Reuven claims that this was an error made when he arrived in Israel and volunteered for the Israeli Army, an error was made when he was being issued Israeli documents. Instead of 1926, his date of birth was listed as 1922. Later on he never found the time or a compelling reason to correct this. And all in all, this error did not bother him.

Reuven ends the interview by voicing an unsolicited grievance against the Poles, for treating the Jews the way that they did. And that they were the greatest beneficiaries of German policies towards the Jews during the war. And that Jews have large score to settle with the Poles.

Translated by Lucien Weisbrod September 2019