

Antoni Chroscielewski

Tape 1

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Abstract

Antoni Chroscielewski was born September 4, 1924 in Augostow in Northeast Poland near Lithuania. He had two older sisters and a younger brother. His father worked for the Police Department. Antoni heard about Hitler and Germany's actions on the radio. He experienced the beginning of the war by Germany bombing his town and soon they were evacuated to the middle of the country. They returned a month later to find their home ransacked by the Russians and Russian was now the school language. Because of his position in the Police Department, his father fled across the border. The family was deported by train to Siberia. There they were placed with a Ukrainian family in a small village. His mother supported the family by bartering her clothes and jewelry for food. After a year she was given a job cutting wood. She remained in the village for six years with the younger son while Antoni and his sister walked 200 miles to join the Polish Army. Antoni's unit went to Persia, to the Middle East including Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and from Montecasino, Italy up to Bologna. He completed his secondary education and Cadet Training while in the Polish Army at the end of the war in Italy. Then he attended Exeter College in London before immigrating to the US in '52. He married in '56 and has two children. Antoni had a reunion with his parents in 1965 and his father died six months later. He brought his mother for a visit to the US. Do to the political changes, he has been visiting Augostow since 2002.

Summary

- 00:00 Antoni Chroscielewski was born September 4, 1924 in Augostow in Northeast Poland, 15 kilometers from Lithuania, 20 miles from Slovakia and near East Prussia. He had two older sisters, Algosi (?) born 1920 and Haden (?) born 1922 and a younger brother, Zishof (?) born 1928. His father's name is Antoni and his mother's name is Zoshesfa (?). His father was a government official in the Police Department. He was an investigator and did no security. He was a regular policeman. It was a prestigious job. He was the first in his family to hold such a position. He served in the Russian Army during World War I. He was in the regiment that guarded the Tsar of Russia. He went on vacation to Poland to visit his wife and was late on returning so he was punished by being sent to the front line. There he was wounded in the chest. He deserted before the end of World War I and joined the Polish Army. Antoni knew his father briefly as he was deported to Siberia as a teenager and his father went into hiding as he worked for the Police Department.
- 05:00 His mother raised the children and seldom had help though the older sister was helpful. They rented their 2-family home. They lived in a beautiful town with a forest. It was

famous in the summer when people came for vacation. The population was about 15,000. They had a small garden. They lived in town so his father walked to work. Sometimes he visited him at work. His father worked partially at a desk and sometimes interviewed people. His father sometimes told him stories. They went to church on Sunday but the family was not very religious. Antoni attended grammar school and was deported after the second year at gymnasium. It was a public school and had classes on religion. About one-fifth of the residents were Jews and fewer were Byelorussians and Lithuanians. Everyone knew each other. Antoni had friends. He played soccer.

10:00 In the summer, they went fishing and walked to the forest where they saw leftover ammunition, grenades and rifles from World War I. They skied in the winter. His family was middle class. His father was able to support the four children and pay for gymnasium which was public but had a charge. Primary school was free. His parents were balanced and understanding. He was closer to his mother. Antoni respected his father. His mother did the disciplining. She wanted to install honesty in the children. His parents were patriotic. The children were born after World War I so the war was fresh in the parents' memory. His father came from Grodno (?) which was about 10 miles away.

15:00 Antoni's grandfather had a large farm which they visited for a week or two for vacation. Antoni enjoyed it. His mother's family also had a farm. They did not talk much about politics at home but he learned from the radio what was going on in Poland and the world. They had German broadcasting on the radio so they were aware of Hitler, World War I and the war in 1920. There was a lot of fighting in World War I which was a horror for his parents so they feared war. Antoni had a sense that something terrible was coming out of Germany. They discussed events in Czechoslovakia. He heard that Memel, a port city on the coast of Lithuania was annexed and claimed by both Germany and Lithuania. They were awoken at 5AM on September 1, 1939 by a loud noise overhead and everyone came out to look and saw a German flyer. They were just ten miles from the Prussian border. They knew the war started as planes dropped bombs all over town.

20:00 They did not know what to do. They often saw planes flying. There was an airport in Prussia. On the third day, they were evacuated by the Polish government. They took a train to Praszka (?) west of Breslau in the middle of Poland. They were housed in a private home. His father left in August. They stayed in Praszka (?) a month and saw Russian troops advancing into Poland. Some Byelo-Russh and Jews welcomed them. The Soviet soldiers, who were poorly dressed, bombarded convoys, horse and wagons and supplies. The civilians did not have much contact with the Soviet soldiers as they went further west. Antoni never saw German soldiers. The family returned to Augustow. His father went into hiding as the Soviet troops tried to catch him. After three tries by the Soviets, his father went to Lithuania. Antoni was deported to Siberia.

At the end of the war, he learned that his father was living near Warsaw. The first time he saw him after the war was 1965. After six years his mother and younger brother returned to Poland and they reunited. His father assumed the name, "Cania."

- 25:00 Antoni and his family returned to Augustow as it was their home. The evacuation was just temporary. They recapitulated in 60 days and in 30 days returned to Augustow but the father was in hiding across the border. They found their home ransacked. Antoni returned to school and had to speak Russian. The school atmosphere had changed. The students were frightened to speak to one another. There was more discipline. At first they had their former teachers and later the teachers were Russian. It was hard to buy anything. There were lots of troops in town. A Russian officer spoke to him and asked if he wanted to see Poland again and Antoni replied that he did and the officer said that it would not happen.
- 30:00 Antoni was 15 at the time. People were afraid of the soldiers as there were robberies. When they returned in October, a few people were arrested and disappeared. People who had government positions disappeared. Some police hid and others remained. In February Antoni knew that he was going to be deported in April. He wanted to cross Poland and join his father but he was grabbed and placed on a train for Siberia. The first deportation was in February when some people he knew had to leave. They were mostly well-to-do and government officials. His friends told him that he was on the list of family of policemen that were to be deported. He was going to cross the border to Lithuania but he was caught first.
- 35:00 The list of deportees were compiled by citizens including Jews. Before the war, all the citizens were equal. He had Jewish friends before the war. They were in school together. Now the Jews were cooperating with the Soviets. They said, "Yours if over, now it is ours." He prepared for deportation. There was a stereotype to accuse the Jews of being involved with the Soviets. When the Russian Army arrived, the Belo-Russians greeted them with flowers and flags. The Polish militia and Jews wore red bands and came to deport them at 2 AM to the train station. They spoke Russian. Antoni's family had a half hour to pack.
- 40:00 He took his mother's photographs and valuables including clothing and jewelry. Since his mother was experienced with war, she thought of her valuables. Antoni packed his own things and loaded them on a horse-driven wagon with the family, all crying. They met others on their way to the railroad. There were about 50 people in the wagon, all friends. One family were well-to-do farmers and there was another family with a wife and small children. There was a policeman and a teacher. There were no minorities deported, only Poles. After two days at the station, they sat in the railroad cars. There were 1,000 people. There was no food or sanitation provided. It was April so they were not too cold. They moved east on April 10th. They were in a freight wagon on the

middle shelf so there were people underneath and on top. They shared the wood. They could lay down or sit down.

45:00 They squeezed together on the boards. It was a terrible atmosphere as they knew some survived and others died in Siberia. They were crying. Some were pregnant, some breast feeding and one baby died and it was thrown out. People in the other wagons died, especially the elderly. The journey lasted three weeks. The train stopped in the bigger towns in Russia and would let them out to get hot water or bread. They saw poorly dressed people sleeping on the floors of the railroad stations. The soldiers were strict and showed no consideration for the sick and elderly. No one tried to escape. The railroad cars were locked and the soldiers, equipped with rifles and bayonets, watched them from the outside. In May the train stopped in the middle of a field and the children got out and they threw the corpses out. They arrived in Petropavlovsk where they were placed on big trucks and taken to a small village.

50:00 His family spoke little Russian. In school he had studied German and Latin. He easily learned Russian after a few months of Russian occupation. He did not know where they were going. They were all placed in villages, not in concentration camps. Each family went to a private home. He had a place to sleep. His mother used a watch or gold as barter and later used their clothes to barter. Some of the Russians were sympathetic. They were mostly Russians and Cossacks in the villages. Ukrainians who had been deported were in the village and they were helpful. The family lived in Sichoraviska (?). The homes were built of clay and straw and the walls were of grass and turf.

55:00 They grew wheat in that village. There was a chief who ran the village consisting of 20 or 30 houses. There was one road and two houses on each side. For the first year, no one was told they were required to work but they worked to obtain food. The following year, they were required to work. Antoni and his family, except for his older sister, lived with a Ukrainian family. His older sister lived elsewhere as was deported from another place. His father was left behind in Poland. His mother sold jewelry and clothing for food and tried to work. He went for a short time to Kazakhstan which was four kilometers away. He got special permission to move there. In 1940 and 1941 they were required to work.

60:00 They cut wood from the forest and in the spring plowed the steppes to sow wheat. There were no schools or stores in the village. When the Germans came, all the village men were in the Army so the remaining civilians had to work. There were four or five other Polish families there. No one was released as they were part of the military. In 1941 their government was in London. There were 150,000 people from jails to form the Polish Army alongside the Soviet Union Army. In August '41 the people were released and they formed a Polish Army. Antoni's family lived 200 miles from a railroad station and his elder sister went looking for the Polish Army. He and his sister walked the 200 miles on dirt roads. It took them five days. They returned via some rides on trucks.

Later they went west to Chelyabinsk (?) and Totskoye where the Polish Army was forming. He wanted to enlist but they had closed up and moved out.

- 65:00 The Commissioner did not accept him and told him to return home. It was December when he walked the 200 miles. His sister was provided transportation to Bazakistan (?) where the Army had formed and she got accepted. He returned home to his mother. After a month, Antoni went south like his sister and was accepted. He had four weeks training and crossed the Caspian Sea to Persia. 200,000 people were permitted to go to the Middle East as they thought the Germans might invade the area. The British Army was in charge. The trains were crowded and the British government supplied their Army. The food was bad but they had something to eat. After four weeks they moved as some people were sick and others were washed into the water by a storm. They drifted four days on a boat without water or food. Another liner came to Bachielyv (?).
- 70:00 Only men were on his boat. The soldiers were 17 to 50 years old. They changed to better circumstances. Everyone got on the beach and changed their clothes. They washed as they all had fleas from Russia. They moved on tracks to Iraq. They left the Tiber River. They were four weeks in camp and left for Palestine along the Mediterranean Sea. There were green orchards, gardens, hills and desert. It was under British rule. He saw Polish Jews. Twenty percent of the Army were Jews. A few months later they went to Italy and 80% of the Jews deserted to remain in Palestine. The British Army were well-trained. They were in Palestine from April to November when they moved west as the Germans were getting close to Alexandria. They had to fight them off and were shooting all the time. At the end of November, the German invasion of North Africa stopped. They went to Palestine and Iraq. From '42 to '43 they went to Syria, Lebanon and then Palestine.
- 75:00 In December '43 he went through the Suez Canal on a ship to Italy. Then he took a big ship in January '44 to Italy and saw no fighting. Then he was on the frontline for a month. It was mid-winter on the Adriatic Sea on the other side from Rome. In winter the front was stationary. For one and one-half months he was on the frontline with the British. In April '44 he went to Montecassino, a fortress, where they tried to take the front. The Polish 2nd Corps moved from the Soviet Union to Iraq. They were the armored division. He fought five days and the front moved north. One battle at Montecassino resulted in 1,000 dead and 4,000 wounded. They moved the artillery to the next area. Planes and mortar and Germans were around them. After the front moved forward, they fought the Germans and positions changed daily. They had to take a valley and a river. There were 50,000 British and French troops at Montecassino.
- 80:00 They had a good defense position and good fighting armies. The first attack was not successful but they reorganized and took the hills and realized the battle was ending. Morale was high. After so many defeats since '39, they finally had a chance to fight on a

better level so could return to Poland. There was some interaction with the British on the right and the American 5th Army on the left. They held high respect for the British. The Americans seemed like "Big Boys." After the battle, the Americans tried to sell a truck as had too much stuff. The British were well-organized. Discipline was high with the Polish officers before the war and under the British government. Things changed for the better with better understanding. General Anders had a high reputation for pushing the Army from the Soviet Union to Berlin. They were capable as moved 30,000 to 40,000 civilians. His sister was in the Polish Army in Kazakhstan and they met in Persia by surprise by ocean liner.

- 85:00 She moved to Iraq and joined Palestine forces for the rest of the war. In 1944, after Montecasino, Antonio's unit moved to the Adriatic Coast. They had to fight in each town. There was a big battle of Loreto and they went north to Remy and then east to Bologna in Northern Italy. The frontline was stationary in the winter. As he had missed out four years of schooling, he was able to attend Polish Secondary School while serving in the Polish Army. They were euphoric at the end of the war. He spent seven months in school and then returned to fight until the end of the war. He received a diploma from the Polish Gymnasium and joined the Cadets School to train to be an officer. He completed it in 1946 in Italy. His mother and younger brother had remained in the Soviet Union until June 1946 with no contact with the father. They were evacuated to Poland to live with the sister who was left behind. They were in Skierniewice (?) which was close to Warsaw. They searched for the father.
- 90:00 The sister in Palestine got moved to the Polish Office in London for a few years. The brother had a Polish diploma and attended London University. Then the sister moved to San Francisco where her husband got a position with Bechtel. Antoni finished Cadets School. Roosevelt gave Poland as a gift to Stalin. Antoni was thankful that he got out of Poland at age 17 so remained in the West as Poland was under Communist rule. He had no choice of what to do in Montecasino. General Anders made a decision and Antoni questioned it as it caused so many lives. In 1946, Antoni had been in Italy for a year and in August '46 he was demobilized and moved to England to attend Exeter College in London. He was there for three years. Everyone said the US is better and he got an extension on his expired visa so in February '52 he left Southampton for NY. He felt that if he did not like the US, he could always return to England.
- 95:00 He had a friend from London who was chief geologist for Secoma Vacuum and had 60 geologists under him. The friend met Antoni at the ship and took him to a hotel. Antoni did not like the masses of people in New York City. He went to visit his uncle in Long Island but there was nothing for him to do there. It was a nice place and near the water. He got a job in New York for \$1 an hour. He could not get into the electrical company as he was not in the union. After two years, he got a job in medical supplies. It was a private company and he met interesting people. There were many rich people on Park

Avenue. He was in charge of bringing them medical supplies. He met Marilyn Monroe. The rich do not go to the hospital but the hospital comes to them. In 1956 he got married and subsequently had two children, Mark and Julie who live on Long Island. In 1965 he returned to Poland and saw his father. His parents were together and he stayed with them for two or three days. He bought a car in Amsterdam and toured Poland. His father died six months later. He had not seen his father since '42. It was emotional to see his mother again.

100:00 Later he brought his mother to New York for three months and then to California to visit the sister. His mother returned to Poland and died in 1997. His sister in Poland got married. His younger brother lived in Porchesdrewy (?) on land taken from Germany where the father had lived. The brother has one child. Antoni worked in medical supplies for twenty years and then formed his own company. His company was in air conditioning or climate control business. After 15 years he retired and now does charity work. For 40 years he serves on the board and 30 years as president or commander of his district of Polish veterans and is president of the Polish choir. He feels he is still alive and all his tragedies and experiences could have made him go astray but schooling helped. Attending good schools with good professors gave him balance of life. He was in despair on the train to Siberia. Most were in despair as they had no knowledge where they were going or how they were going to survive.

105:00 Books were written that had distortions of battles and political climates. Recently a German said on TV, "Our mothers and our fathers gave the Polish Army and Underground. The Germans came to Poland to save the Jews from Polish Anti-Semitism." The War was the worst thing that happened to the world. Not only six million Jews but others suffered, too. We must prevent the same thing from happening again and again. The US should be strong and live morally strong. You can have small wars but they are nothing compared to what happened. Antoni returned to Augustow in 2002. The political climate had changed so he returned several times. It looks a little different but it is still a small beautiful town. He went to Skee (?) and Vilna.

110:00