

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Marian Gnyp

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Marian Gnyp (referred in the text as M.) was born on January 6, 1924, in the village Gorzendów, district Piotrków Trybunalski. Parents were farmers. They owned a farm, consisting of 12 hectares of land. They also had some forest land. They led a modest life. His father was twice married. From his first wife he had 3 children—all boys; from the second wife he also had 3 boys, from among which, M. was the middle one. While they did not live in opulence, they were not poor. They lived hand to mouth, without any money in reserve. M. remembers that when he attended school, his father could not afford to buy him all the books. M. completed 7th grade of primary school in 1939. Through hand-me-down reading of newspapers, M. was aware that war was looming. Once the director of the school was called up for military service and announced that school would not start in September, war became imminent. M. has a clear recollection of war. When the Germans entered their village, they burned it down to the ground. The area was heavily bombarded because the Polish soldiers displayed considerable resistance to the Germans there. Their village was in the most direct path to Warsaw. Probably some 30 bombs fell on their village. M.'s house was destroyed. They did get some help from peasants in nearby villages. Being 16 years old at the time, M. took up trading in order to get by somehow.

In 1940, the Germans started to establish ghettos—in Częstochowa, Piotrków Trybunalski, Warsaw, and Łódź—in all nearby cities. M. and 3 friends would buy produce from the farmers and figured out how to deliver and sell it to the Jews in the ghetto with a mark-up of 30—40%. M. makes a point that trade with the ghetto Jews was very honest and fair. If they agreed on a price and a meeting point, they kept their word. Most of M.'s trade dealings took place in Częstochowa, since it was only 40 km away. It helped that the Germans, at the outset, did not monitor the boundaries of the ghetto intensely. It made it possible to make drops into the ghetto from buildings that were abutting the ghetto walls. The territory of the ghetto was policed by Germans and Jews. Obviously, the Jewish policemen were not armed. They only had clubs with chains attached at the end. M. goes on to describe how they would schedule their deliveries. The arrangement worked well for both parties. In addition to food products, they delivered rolls of fabric and shoe leather, which were then used by ghetto tailors and cobblers. M. provides an interesting distinction between the more industrious Jews with which he dealt and the ghost-like starving figures that walked the streets of the ghetto. He could also see the dead and motionless bodies that were lying under the walls of buildings.

Later on, M. and his friends relocated their trade to Warsaw. Because Warsaw was a larger city, the returns from selling there were better. M. recalls a contact, Józek Rozponczik [sp?], (who was later killed by the Germans), who was well connected through his older brother, who lived in Warsaw. But, before describing his dealings in Warsaw, Marian decides to bring us back to an incident when he was caught by the Jewish police, while trading in Częstochowa... In fact, it was after he was beaten there, that he decided to end his dealings with the ghetto in Częstochowa.

This occurred in late afternoon, after the German guards went off duty. It was the best time to conduct their illegal dealings, since the watch detail consisted of 5 Jews and one low ranking German officer. Just as they were getting ready to make a drop, 2 Jewish policemen waited for them. Someone must have squealed on them. As they were being escorted to the gate of the ghetto, the German officer called the “navy-blue police” [Polish Police]. The 3 or 4 policemen, who arrived, started to take them away. However, Józek Rozponczik managed to get away. M. was taken to the police station where he was severely beaten, all black and blue and was given a warning that if he were to be caught again, the consequences would be direr. M. was sick for 3 days afterwards.

Back to Warsaw... What made also Warsaw more attractive for doing business was that 3 tram lines crossed the ghetto. Even though the “navy-blue police” would get on, it was possible to hop off the tram, even with bags. The risk was finding the right people from among the milling crowds. That risk was eliminated, once they found the cemetery, where constantly the residents of the ghetto made holes in the walls. Once again, M. asserts that in all his dealings there, he was never cheated. Once, however, the Germans set a trap for them, but they were able to drop the goods they were carrying and managed to get away.

M. reports reading in the Częstochowa Times that on September 22, 1941, war between Germany and Russia broke out. [Actually, the correct date is: June 22, 1941]. Next to the Gnyp’s barn, ran the train line Warsaw—Katowice. This was the first main line that started operation in 1720. [Actually, this date is incorrect. The earliest that a section of this route became operational was in 1845]. Once the war broke out, trains on this line ran virtually non-stop to the Eastern Front. A few days later, M. noticed that trains heading west were filled with Russian prisoners of war.

At one point, the partisans’ movement made its presence evident. Increasingly acts of sabotage were reported along the rail line. However, one day, a train carrying hay and ammunition was set on fire. That caused a major disruption on the entire line. Everyone expected retaliation from the Germans for this act of sabotage. M. went into hiding for 3 days, just in case. But, after a few days, he came back, thinking that the worst was over. Instead, Germans surrounded the village in the middle of the night and 10 villagers, including M. were arrested and taken for questioning to Piotrków. They were accused of causing derailments along the rail line. M.

denied any involvement in such activity. M. was imprisoned for 2 months. On September 1, 1942, M. was among some 200 prisoners from the Częstochowa prison to be taken away by truck to the nearby freight station, where they joined hundreds of other Poles. This date marked the third anniversary of the outbreak of war in Poland. This deportation was run by the German Military Police. M. and others, stood with hands tied behind their back, under the sun from 1:00 PM until 11:00 PM or midnight. At that point a train of cattle cars pulled up to the station and the MPs started to force all the prisoners into the trains on all fours. M. provides a detailed picture of the conditions in the cattle cars in which they were being transported.

After 2 hours they arrived in Oświęcim. From the train platform they were marched for some 2 km to the gates of the camp. Around 5:30 AM all the newly arrived prisoners were addressed by the Assistant Camp Director who delivered a grim announcement that all of them were deemed to be law breakers, war criminals, etc., destined to die in the ovens or to spending the rest of their life working for free for the Germans.

Around 6:00 AM they were led into the camp near Block/Barrack 11, where their hair was cut, they were disinfected, undressed, issued prison garb and sorted according to their skills. At that point M. describes in considerable detail a bestial scene to which everyone was subjected. Two camp prisoners were ordered to beat to death one of the just arrived prisoners—a Jew from Sosnowiec. He also describes a nearby pile of people who had just died or were about to die. M. tries to capture the smell emanating from the crematoria and the sense of otherworldliness.

M. decides to continue his narrative with events that most often come to his mind. First topic is: Coexistence with others in the camp. [His narrative is rather random and rambling]

With Jews, they [the Poles in Oświęcim] had best relations, because they spoke Polish, despite the fact that most of them came from Silesia, or the eastern part of Poland that the Germans occupied at the outset of war. Then there were many Jews from many other European countries. Since most Jews were experts in certain trades, upon arrival in camp, they were separated by their trades upon arrival on the camp's RR ramp. Children and the elderly were sent directly to gas chambers. Those, under 40 years of age were taken to work, according to their profession. The Germans had a system to take advantage of their expertise to the extent possible and then to kill these people.

M. ended up in the block/barrack for tailors. He ended up there because of one Jew who befriended M. on a sand shoveling detail, encouraged M. to raise his hand at roll call when the Germans sought tailors. M. acknowledges that this may have saved his life, since he wouldn't have lasted very long loading sand, especially with the approach of winter.

M.'s camp number was 62,692. This number he had to learn how to say it in German. At his first sewing assignment, his kapo, [prison functionary, selected from the ranks of those interned],

realized that M. was not a tailor, but he let him stay. Slowly, M. started to learn how to sew, especially since he was tasked to sewing by hand rather than by machine. In that section there was a foreman, named Jakub. He was an athlete from the Stajeski Circus. He was extremely mean towards his brethren Jews. He'd beat them mercilessly. After M. left Oświęcim, he learned that Jakub was moved to Block/Barrack 11, where he hanged people. He was apparently chosen for this task for his brutality, sadism and strength.

Next, M. narrates an occurrence that was extensively discussed in camp. It was in the fall of 1942. There was a Jewish work detail that was tasked with digging foundations under a barrack. In that detail there was a father and son. The son was a kapo. The father was a laborer in that detail. An SS-man, looking through binoculars, noticed that one man in the detail was not working, but resting and standing idle. He comes to the kapo and wants an explanation why that one Jew that he observed, was not working. The kapo started to explain that the man in question was his father and that he couldn't raise a stick to him to make him work more. Upon hearing that explanation, the SS-man ordered that this man was to be killed by the evening. In other words, the son had to kill his father. Kapos who followed German orders and distinguished themselves for greater brutality towards their charges were rewarded and recorded for their loyalty. Not knowing what to do, this kapo (the son), approached the worker (his father) from the rear, struck him and killed him.

This incident was the talk of the camp. At that time, M. was in Block/Barrack 1, with the tailors. When news of this killing reached their block/barrack, after hours, the scribe of the block/barrack, nicknamed Sad Michael, asked M. whether he'd be interested in taking on some extra block/barrack duties, for which he would receive an extra portion of soup. M. promptly agreed.

Almost immediately, M. noticed that everyone around him had put on his prison cap and began to pray in Hebrew. Being afraid that the camp guards might walk in on this illegal religious activity, he turned to Szymon, the Jew who encouraged M. to declare himself as a tailor, to ask what was happening. Once Szymon explained that they were praying for God's forgiveness for the father and the son, they agreed to a code that they would use, should an SS-man be approaching Block/Barrack 1. This praying went on, after hours, for a few days. This incident became a topic of discussion and debate among the camp's inmates. Who would kill their own father became the question of the day. For M. this was one of the most moving tragedies that he recalls.

Next, M. recalls a sadistic and perverse experience in Oświęcim. It was on a Sunday, when no one needed to be at work. The Germans were strict observers of Sunday as a day of rest. On this particular Sunday, an SS sergeant, came to their barrack and selected some 15 young Jews and M. Everyone was under 20 years of age. He took them to Brzezinki—a camp mostly for

Jewish women. There they were taken to Block/Barrack 30, where they were sterilized with X-rays. They were made to stand for some 5 minutes in front of screens that were aimed at their genitalia. That is the reason why M. never had any children. This experiment was cleverly masked. M. had no idea what happened until a few days later, when he noticed that his skin in the area of the groin started to peel and he felt some pain.

Next event described by M. took place on March 12, 1943. Only Poles were subjected to this ordeal. They were taken out from various blocks/barracks and brought to the Block/Barrack Eintreten [it sounded like the German word for Enter. LW]. Then they were led, block/barrack by block/barrack to the last path that ran between Block/Barrack 1 and Block/Barrack 11. Back there, there was a medical commission. Even though it was rather cold, they were ordered to undress and walk in front of this commission in their prison clogs. As they walked past, they were instructed to go either "Left" or "Right". Those who didn't look so good did not proceed towards the transport. Those who seemed stronger and looked to be in better health were directed towards the transport.

M. was directed towards the transport. He would not return to Block/Barrack 1 again. All those directed to go "Right" ended up in Block/Barrack 16, where they would spend the entire night, dressed in their old clothing. In the morning, their old clothing was collected; they were given new clothing; and they were marched in groups of five to the awaiting transport. There may have been 1,000 people there, who were then taken to Neuengamme—another concentration camp.

At this point, M. wants to return to narrative to the topic of coexistence between Poles and Jews from 1939, and when the Germans arrived in Poland after the start of the war. At the outset, coexistence between the Poles and Jews was excellent. Commerce thrived, even though the Germans were already growling at the Jews. From newspapers and radio broadcasts, people sensed that clouds were gathering. M.'s father continued to benefit from his dealings with the Jewish tailor and the Jewish cobbler. Jews in turn, would come by to buy produce. Even though many meat sales were restricted, Jews would buy poultry and fresh water fish. M.'s father had some friends among the Jews from which he could always borrow some money. And M. mentions that the Jew would lend money without issuing any receipts. There was a lot of trust among them, though he attributes that mostly to the Jews' prior knowledge of those to whom they would advance a loan. With the arrival of March 1942, some bad news about the fate of the Jews started to spread. Jews from surrounding towns and villages were being deported. On one of those days, a Jewess came running to M.'s mother to say good-bye. She anticipated her deportation in the coming days. She told her that the rabbi had come by, applied some oil and was preparing them for death. He urged them not to fear death, because they will be born again in a different and better world. Apparently, this same rabbi before the

war and even after the war broke out, preached that prosperity would come from the East, from the Soviet Union, and that they all should support Soviet Russia.

And indeed, within three days, Jews from around Gorzendów were being led to the Goszkowic rail ramp. There must have been some 800--1,000 people. They were loaded onto trains and were taken away. Only later did the Poles learn that these Jews were taken to Treblinka, where they were killed.

Next, M. goes on to tell a story that now touches members of his, though somewhat distant family. M. learned this from his mother, after he returned from concentration camp. This family was named Gałązka. The entire family of 7 people was murdered by the Germans. It happened this way: Three days before the Jews were deported from Kemieńsk, Mr. Gałązka allowed 2 Jewish families of some 10 people, to hide in the lime mines that he operated. These mines had large caves, which could accommodate a good number of people. These Jewish families approached Mr. Gałązka with their idea, in the hope that they would be able to stay there a short period, until the danger passed. Instead, they stayed there from March until November 1942.

By November, these Jewish families ran out of money. Mr. Gałązka couldn't keep them any longer either, because he was also out of money. Mr. Gałązka gave them no choice but to hide on their own somewhere else. The following morning, one of the Jews from those 2 families, ran to Niechcic to a German field police station and reported that a group of them was living in hiding. And in the process he probably had to explain who protected them during this time.

Once Mr. Gałązka's role became clear, the next morning the Germans arrived with machine guns drawn and killed the entire family. As to what happened with the Jews who were hiding there, they were probably killed as well. M. is not sure of this. He supports his suspicion with an incident that he witnessed with his own eyes, where a disoriented and lost Jew was brought by 2 Volksdeutsche to the German Gendarmerie and the German policeman took the Jew outside and on a nearby road he summarily shot this man. It remained for the Poles to clean up the site in the aftermath. This incident took place in 1941.

This brings to an end M.'s narrative that he labels: Relations between Germans and Poles. M. feels compelled to acknowledge that throughout this period he did not witness any animosity by Poles toward Jews. [Just as he was about to say at what point he noticed some animosity, the tape seems to be cut. Time mark: 1.04.48. LW].

Here, M. quickly lists the camps where he stayed after Neuengamme. As the war was winding down and he was being transferred from a camp near Hanover, Germany to Bergen-Belsen, he managed to escape into the woods, where he lived in the wilderness for 4 days. He was

ultimately liberated by British troops. After some time in Peace (?) camps, he returned to Poland, to his village in 1946. There, things were far from great, even though his father managed to get a lot of rebuilding done and he had built a new barn. His father did not receive any reparation for the damages that he suffered on account of the war. Bottom line was that there was nothing for M. to do. He notes a bit further in the narrative that there were no Jews in Gorzendów or in the surrounding villages. None of them came back after the war. He heard of one Jewish cobbler who returned, but out of fear of staying by himself in the area he fled to Łódź. Jewish houses were taken over by Poles. Commerce in the towns died down. M. admits that life was much more animated and more cheerful when the Jews lived there. The Jews added some local folklore to the area. Life in the villages became sad and unpleasant.

In search for work, M. first he went to Gdańsk. There, however, he could not find housing. From there, he went to Szczecin. Through a contact he made in Germany, he ended up working as a driver. Subsequently, until his retirement, he worked in a number of institutions. He married twice.

He enrolled in an organization for people from Zbowidów, which in its ranks had a chapter for people who were former prisoners of concentration camps. Since Oświęcim was his first camp, he joined this chapter. This chapter had 130 people/survivors. The original head of this chapter had to be ousted, since it turned out that he was a Ukrainian kapo in camp. M. agreed to replace him as a temporary head of the chapter. Ultimately, this chapter withdrew from the organization for people from Zbowidów and created an independent one, like it was in 1946, the Union of Political Prisoners of Concentration Camps. There he remained its vice-president.

[Translation completed on December 7, 2019 by LW]