

Interview with Nachman Zonabent, September 9, 1994

Born in Leczyca near Lodz October 1918. Attended Polish elementary school, then Jewish High School. In 1936 the family moved to Lodz. When war erupted, he was 29 years old, and everyone was fleeing to Warsaw for safety. He didn't make it to Warsaw and was captured by the Germans. The Germans gathered about 3,000 people and forced them to walk to Psczanow where many were executed. He was able to escape and return to Lodz. He experienced round-ups to the labor camps by the Germans and other tortures; everyone was afraid.

From September, 1939, through March of 1940, the Lodz ghetto was formed. All the Jewish men who were rounded up by the Germans were executed before they had a chance to move to the ghetto. The Lodz ghetto was hermetically sealed on January 5, 1940. The Germans were afraid to enter the ghetto because of their fear of disease. Only SS-men and Gestapo who were employed at the ghetto would enter it. The conditions were miserable: there were no toilets or running water, and about 17 people were assigned to live in four-room apartments. More people were arriving every day from the transports.

He started working at the post office in June of 1940. People thought that if you had a job you would live. He was arrested once to be sent on a transport train, but a Jewish officer working for the Germans excused him from the round-up. He was responsible for the distribution of food vouchers and for keeping records regarding the packages sent to people living in the ghetto. At that time there were about 250 post office employees, mailmen, mail sorters and censors. All Jewish correspondence was sent to the German post office and checked by the Gestapo. The ghetto was closed but letters went through so that Germans could spread their propaganda that all was well and make people comfortable with being transferred to other camps, thinking that the conditions in the camps were bearable.

There were many letters from the ghetto that never left the post office for distribution. In 1944 the ghetto was liquidated. Germans who worked in the ghetto didn't want to lose their jobs and become regular soldiers so they would keep things running and prolonged the liquidation. There was one loaf of bread rationed for eight days. Everyone had a food card and was registered in a specific store where it could be claimed.

The second job he had was in the meat distribution center. Sometimes the meat sent was spoiled and crawling with bugs, but people still would take it and eat it. Food provisions didn't contain the delicatessen items for Jewish distribution. There was a rumor that, according to a German directive, the chief council of the Judenrat, Rumkowski, encouraged Jewish mothers to give up their children so that they could be saved from impending death. But there were also rumors or opinions about Cherniakow that he cooperated with Germans before the Warsaw ghetto uprising. There are many people and witnesses who gave faulty and inaccurate accounts about what happened in the ghetto, according to him.

Dr. Poznanski's accounts are inaccurate as are Prof. Nobuczynski (New York). Right after the liberation, the interviewee worked with ZOB and gave documents and accounts of what occurred. He is disturbed by the fact that today there is a tendency to rely on hearsay about what occurred. People who didn't live in the ghetto were less favorable with their accounts.

Rumkowski never decided himself who went to the transport and who didn't. There were also many Jewish organizations that would interfere with the selection of people going to the transports. But since somebody had to go, what is the moral in this? Rumkowski didn't have personal knowledge of where people were going or how they would end up. All the members from the group sent to the Czestochowa ammunition factory survived. His four brothers worked in a manufacturing business and his two sisters lived in Warsaw. His sisters died in Treblinka and he doesn't know what happened to his parents. He was liberated from the ghetto, where he was hiding in a bunker, on January 19th.

In 1939, he met Mendel Grossman, who lived on the same street as his brother. In the ghetto, Grossman worked on Plac Koscielny no.4, in the statistical division, and made a list of people who were ill. The interviewer was working in a dark room at Grossman house and developed photographs and copies of illegal photographs. There was a death penalty for having these photos. There is a document forbidding Grossman to make any private photographs of this kind in the YIVO Institute. Eventually he published a catalogue with 2,000 documents.

It was easy to take extra film for personal use from the German supplies or from Jewish informers. Germans didn't enter or photograph the ghetto except on special occasions, such as a visit from Eichmann or Himmler (e.g., Photo with Rumkowski). Rost was also a photographer in the ghetto. When after the war Rost finally published the photographs, he used only his name and didn't include his name or Grossman's. Klubman wrote a text to the photo album. He was a career communist opportunist. Nachman was very upset because he gave money for the publishing. He contacted Miron, a lawyer from Haifa, to help with this, but the case was dismissed because the statute of limitations had run out. The archives from the ghetto were hidden on Koscielny Street and Nachman took some items from the archives before he emigrated to Sweden.