

Jurek Orwowski, Tape 7. So could you continue with this story, Jurek?

Yes, as I said, although I was safe on the other side of the street once I crossed it, but my rifle wasn't. In fact, my colleagues who observed the things happening in front of their eyes in the middle of the street had an eye on it. And I had a quite heated discussion if I was eligible to possess this rifle, as the main argument was that it was, should I say, won on the territory on which the other detachment was in command. So anything within their reach was supposed to be their property. However, after, as I said, heated argument, I was determined not to let this weapon go away. That eventually I won the hustle, and I went on my way to the point where my detachment was stationed.

Is this significant of how precious a rifle would have been in those days?

Very much so. In fact, you find that if the strength of the detachment was calculated or assessed, it wasn't, for instance, said that this platoon consists of 27 people. This platoon consists of 3 rifles, 7 revolvers, 3 hand grenades, and about a couple of dozen of Molotov cocktail bottles. And that was strength of the platoon.

In fact, there were when there were three or four people assigned to one rifle. For instance, if there was a post, observation post or defensive post, a rifle was there. And people who came on rotation, on duty, were taking over the same rifle, counting rounds and making sure that rifle wasn't scratched or in another poor state of cleanliness. There was an extreme shortage. And although new supplies were coming as the uprising progressed, right through the uprising, a number of people were eligible to serve with Home Army was far greater than a number of weapons.

Now coming back to my story, as I mentioned before, my duty was to maintain a contact, a personal contact, between the area, which was called Warsaw Center South and also Center North. Normally, I used to carry a dispatch case with some documents, which I used to hand over to adjutant to commanding officer on the other side. And as it happened, this work could be carried out only at night.

So I was working at night resting and doing formal nothing during the day. And that gave me a think, first class opportunity to go around and see what's happening during the day. Obviously, I had a few hours of sleep to start with. But one doesn't sleep throughout the day normally.

And then sort of mid-morning, I used to go up and out to see how the other people, other detachments, are getting on and how people are living, in what sort of conditions. And I saw a quite a lot of that in fact. And--

This is during the Rising?

Oh, yes.

That was your job-- yes, if we can just establish that.

That was my initial duties within the detachment. I think that for about two weeks I was doing that sort of work. As I mentioned with plenty of free time on my hands during the day, I made a number of discoveries-- how people live, how they behave, what was their attitude towards the uprising towards Germans. Obviously, that was too obvious to mention. But people were talking about future or talking about what's happened, what's going to happen when the war is finished. And I used to mix with ordinary people who then openly and freely talked about what was happening around them without fear of German presence.

And what were they talking about in the first two weeks of the rising?

Well, basically, everybody was convinced that maximum two weeks, or even less, would suffice to see that Russian army will be in Warsaw.

Where was the Russian army at that particular time to your knowledge?

Well, to my knowledge, it was within two or three miles from the point where I was stationed. In fact, from a higher point in the city from upper floors, you could see movements of Russian troops on the other side of the river. In that part of the town or city was called Praga. And Russian tanks were clearly visible through binoculars at a distance, as I said, 3, maybe 4 kilometers.

The most, should I say, towering aspect of that period was movement and travel across town from point to point. You couldn't travel on the surface of the street because all streets, or most of them, were under fire by German snipers positioned, perhaps strategically, where the whole length of street was under surveillance. So it was impossible to walk along street, even across street.

And during this first two weeks, a maze of tunnels and crossings, underground crossings, was made by local population. Each block of flats or each-- well, I want to describe not only the block of flats, but also schools, hospitals. Personnel on this establishment was engaged in digging tunnels by breaking through the cellar.

I must say here that almost all houses, as far as I know, in Poland, or also on the continent, possess cellars. We haven't got cellars in this country, anyway, not so many. And the object was to break openings between the cellars. And that was the way people were communicating or traveling or walking across the town, through cellars. And when it came to crossing the street, a tunnel was dug underneath the street. So hundreds and hundreds, thousands of people were constantly marching and traveling and going from A to B through this makeshift tunnels.

Was there any sort of master plan? Because I can imagine an awful lot of confusion if you didn't have anyone sort of governing things. For instance, was a master plan made of this tunnel network?

No, it wasn't as far as I know. Generally, people were advised to construct these tunnels. And each individual block of flats or a number of blocks of flats had its own person in charge who was responsible for not only constructing these tunnels, but also digging wells for water and taking in charge the fire precautions, fire fighting precautions.

As it happened, fairly soon-- I can't remember how many days-- after uprising actually was going on, water supply was cut off by Germans. So there was no water in mains. Hence, you can imagine-- for the human consumption, there was no water. Hence, wells had to be dug in. And there was no water for fighting fires.

And that was the most dramatic, I think, aspect of the whole operation. Because when block of flats or houses started burning, and the fire was not extinguished in the first few instances of the commencement, then it was nothing to do just to see it burns out. And in fact, that was happening. Everyday is happening. The center of Warsaw in which I served to begin with, luckily, wasn't subjected to a terrific German pressure. They concentrated, in fact, on the outskirts of Warsaw and on breaking through the east-west thoroughfares to the bridges across the river.

Could I ask you, at this time, which is the first two weeks of the rising, how much of the town did the Home Army control? How much of Warsaw?

Well, I would think about 3/4 of the town, though it was very fragmented. Germans-- in fact, during the first five days, Home Army took over command over areas which were regarded as very important for maintaining Polish presence and holding on until Russian army would come. We couldn't take over bridges because there were anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns positioned on the approaches. And it was impossible. Otherwise, too many people would be killed.

And we couldn't also take places such places as Gestapo headquarters or police headquarters. These places were very, very heavily defended and barricaded. But the idea was if you cannot take a German sort of position, then surround it and keep in isolation so neither they could leave or no help could come and rescue them. And I think that was the main object of the uprising-- to keep the German forces in check so they cannot move freely. And that would allow incoming Russians to gain access or much easier than they would otherwise.

And what was the morale like of the people during this time, the atmosphere in Warsaw?

Well--

These are the first two weeks, isn't it, we're talking of?

If I look at this now I think it was fantastic, though at the time I thought that's how it should be. I thought, well, that's just natural. I didn't sort of marvel that somebody was laughing and being gay because we have no freedom and so on because I thought it was natural. And if you didn't behave that way you, something was wrong with you.

But if you look at this now, that was the period I think when the Polish population in Warsaw suffered most. But at the same time, they were in most gay, should I say, mood, in most gay mood. And they were just happy about what is happening.

How about the Allies? Did you appeal-- did you think the Allies would send you any help, the British?

Well, yes and no. We realized that distance is such that flights with a substantial military help would be impossible. There was nowhere to land because that was occupied area. In fact, we didn't count on a rescue by Western Allies.

But you did expect the Russians?

We expect Russians, yes, to go ahead and fight Germans right to the German soil. And in fact, we were prepared to give them our complete help which we were able to give them. Yes.

Well, going back to uprising and the mice duties, I did one or two quite interesting, I would call them, escapades. One of the first one I undertook was to go to my uncle's house, which was almost in a no man's land between German and Polish lines. I wasn't sure exactly where the front line was running because that changed, and different from block flats to block flats, or even from house to house. And even further, our people were downstairs and Germans were upstairs, or vice versa. So the line couldn't be drawn exactly where was a German territory or German occupied territory and where were the insurgents.

But one of these mornings, not having much to do, I decided to go and find out what happened to uncle, to two aunts and granny because that's where I left them. When I approached the area-- incidentally, I was about, oh, 1/2 a mile from the quarters where I was stationed to the house right across town.

When I got within, say, 600, 700 yards, I found that that was the edge where the Polish units were stationed. And they told me then that if you go any further, it's either nobody or Germans. So I managed to cross one of the streets on the surface. There were no channels between.

And then upon reaching at the side, I found that population already fled-- Polish population fled from that area. And that would indicate to me that possibly in my uncle's home was also empty. But I learned also that cellars between the block of houses in which my uncle lived and that point where I found myself at the time were interconnected already. So going through cellars, I got to the house.

And, in fact, I had to cross quite a large yard. And what, in fact, hit me in the first instance was an entire silence, was nothing happening, no shooting, nobody sort of walking about, nobody to be seen. And I went upstairs to the flat or to where the living quarters were. I found doors open.

In fact, all doors were open, main doors and kitchen entry doors. There was nobody there. But it looked as people left suddenly leaving everything behind because I saw breakfast still lying on the table.

I don't think I took anything from there. But I left note on the table on a piece of paper saying that I have been there and gave a date. And I think that was 5th or 6th of August.

Much later, I found that on the second night of uprising Germans entered the house and took all people from the whole block of houses in that area, took people as hostages. And they took them to Gestapo headquarters, which was so-called [NON-ENGLISH]. That was the headquarters for Gestapo, and not very far in fact, within a quarter of a mile, from

where my uncle used to live. Well, perhaps I come later to this story.

But leaving that place, it was very sad for me because not knowing what happened to family, not knowing if I come down to the yard again maybe Germans down there already. So I was quite prepared to little fight with them.

[LAUGHS]

Did you have any arms?

I had my rifle with me. And I made point even to sleep with it. So, so far, I was quite sort of well guarded.

After this escapade, after checking that my family wasn't there-- in fact, in this part of town, there were very few people I knew, although I managed to make contact with one or two people my uncle knew and established that they were well, comparatively well. I mean alive. And this was only because that part of town wasn't under German fire yet. That came much later.

I think about two weeks of this rather uneventful life, I asked my commanding officer for transfer to the front line. My reason was that here I sit, do nothing. I have a rifle. I could be used for somewhere else.

I think he was quite understanding in this respect. And he said, OK, I think there's an action to be taken soon quite near here. And I'll make sure that you take part in it.

So with quite a relief, in fact, I went through the area, which assigned to me, met friends with the other people in the other detachment. And, in fact, the object of the so-called action was to take over one of the telephone exchanges in Warsaw. This telephone exchange was manned by Germans and the German post office personnel.

And during the first hours of uprising, a considerable number of Germans who found themselves at that instant in the area of this telephone exchange found a sort of rescue there. And, in fact, the building was surrounded by Polish uprising soldiers-- uprising, yes. And Germans neither they could leave this building nor help-- could not reach them from outside. In fact, there were, I would say, at least a quarter mile within our lines.

Well, my duty then was to-- in fact, two types. One was to keep guard, an eye on the entrance, on the main entrance of this building, by sort of-- in fact, we made a hole at about third or fourth floor in the side of the building. I think two or three bricks were moved. And through this hole, we could see what was happening in that area. And there, I think I spent hours and hours lying there with my rifle, watching any movements. And from time to time, I had a shot at.

So the Germans knew you were actually watching them from that spot?

Oh, yes. Yes. And they were shooting at in my direction. And from time to time, I had one or two shots at them too, though I don't think there were any hits, anyway, not on my side.

Then, we decided to speed up the operation and start attacking them. To start with, we decided to-- there was a concrete post just outside the entry to this telephone exchange with slits for machine guns. And I think two or three Germans were posted the whole time guarding the area and approach to the building.

So the first thing was to blow this up by mine or some sort of big box of grenades or something. And, in fact, many grenades and many pounds of dynamite were wasted because that concrete was so strong we just couldn't even move it. So next step was to set fire to it, burn them out.

And, in fact, a makeshift flamethrower was made. And paraffin was gathered from whole town mixed with oil. And there was a hand pump being pumped like mad. [LAUGHS] And when the jet of this mixture-- petrol-- sorry, paraffin, not petrol, paraffin and oil appeared on the end of the long tube, a rag dipped in petrol was lit. And then this jet of mixture caught fire.

And we were spraying this building with this burning liquid. And, in fact, that had a good effect. One or two floors in

this building were burned out. And it terrified Germans.

[AUDIO OUT]

Jurek Orwowski, Tape 8. And what happened then?

Well, although we lit a fire once or twice within the building, and, in fact, threw several more hand grenades, we couldn't force Germans to surrender, or neither we could rush them and conquer the building, or conquer this post this day. Their defenses were, in fact, very, very strong. And as we gathered later on, there was around 100 of them inside.

Well, there was only one way to do, just to take time. And, in fact, I went back to my little hole in the wall. And I had quite a sort of interesting time there observing the area, observing how Germans were peeping at us. And incidentally, I was told not to waste any more ammunition. So there was no more shooting from my side. They shot at us from time to time, but they also save ammunition.

But there's one thing, between the vertical wall in which that was the hole I was peeping through and the German wall of the building where they were stationed, there was a yard, like a little square and garden. And in that garden, there was a white horse, quite big horse, I would say quite old one too because either he was hungry or very old. He hardly moved about.

And I was wondering whose horse is this, how long he will live. And I just wondered who is going to eat him? Are the Germans or Poles? Because in those days, already in those early stages, food was extremely short.

I remember we used to have a very monotonous diet. In fact, three times a day, it was soup made from porridge, oats. And sometimes we had a tomato thrown into it. And incidentally, tomatoes, we have to go out to allotments which were under German fire, at night. And we, in fact, pinched the tomatoes and potatoes from there. It was quite difficult at night because you wouldn't know where to look for it. And obviously, impossible to lit a torch or light because you immediately caused a fire.

Anyway this horse lived as long as I was there. So eventually, I wasn't sure what happened to it. But going along with the story, as I mentioned previously, at the hour of uprising, many Germans were caught and surprised by this happening and not knowing what's happening. And they took shelter in this building.

And, in fact, I think during the first hours of battle, a number of wounded Germans, in fact, were trying to get to that building, but didn't reach it. They died on the way to it. So the street in front of the building was rather messy with quite a number of bodies lying.

And, in fact, there was a half truck vehicle, or maybe that was a 1,500 weight truck, with the tail board open. And one could see that there was a German soldier either trying to go on the lorry or trying to get off the lorry. But he was killed with his body half on the lorry, half hanging out.

And truck was, I think, burned out, although I'm not sure. Perhaps it was only damaged. And there was another German lying next to the truck. Anyway, these bodies were lying there for, what, three weeks, maybe four weeks. So you can imagine what sort of state of decomposition and smell and all these things. It was rather unpleasant.

Until one night, I was off duty. And, in fact, we were expecting that something is going to happen because Germans hoisted a yellow flag from the building. That was a mast. It was a radio mast or something. I think it was radio mast. And from that radio mast, they hang out a hoisted yellow flag. And that meant that they were in desperate position. And they requested help from German lines.

There were endeavors-- in fact, Germans tried to break through our lines and rescue, or relieve, this crew. They didn't succeed. And it was, in fact, tension growing quite rapidly in the area until a particular night. As I said, I was not on duty. I was woken up by a terrific shooting and explosion of hand grenades and so on.

I went and run out. Somebody borrowed my rifle then. So I couldn't sort of take part myself. But I realized what happened. Apparently, Germans decided to break out from the building and join their main forces.

In fact, they didn't succeed. They didn't succeed. Our post and so-called barricades-- incidentally, barricades, that's one of the specific type of defenses during the urban uprising or fights. You had to cross streets by this barricade to stop Germans going along with vehicles and tanks and so on.

And, in fact, the Germans couldn't get through those barricades. And many of them were finished. And rest of them withdrew back to the building. So commanding officer decided that this is the time. And we have to go and get them.

Well, I got my rifle from my colleague again, who apologized for taking away without waking me up and asking for it. And about 60 of us rushed this building. And we found no resistance. All this obviously was quite noisy because we threw several hand grenades. The building was covered by a number of machine guns then from our side.

And we just got in, in the building, and found no Germans. But as story continues, we start searching and going up and down, in the loft, in the cellars. And we found them in the cellar.

I think I was one of the first ones to get in that cellar. A colleague of mine who went with me had a torch. And it was quite a sight when we went in that cellar, pitch dark, obviously no electricity. When he switched on the torch, we saw this German faces around us. But luckily for us, they all had hands up.

So in this sort of situation, we weren't sure what to do-- either to rush out and throw a hand grenade at them or see if they peaceful enough and come out with us. In fact, they did come out with us. We told them to come out with their hands up. And we put them against the wall, searched them.

And there was one of the things which I was after-- the symbol of a good soldier then was to have as many revolvers and pistols as possible. So apart from my rifle, I think I had about four revolvers after that incident in my pockets.

And Germans, as I said, did not resist. They were searched. And the names were taken.

And there was quite a variety of services. There were airmen. There were policemen, German policemen. There were German field policemen. There were ordinary soldiers, so-called Wehrmacht.

And the idea was because we hate police so much, that as a rule, police or Gestapo were shot on the spot. We didn't sort of play with them any longer. But in that instance, it was very difficult to distinguish because they stripped their uniforms. They didn't have jackets, neither caps. You couldn't sort of say-- and they didn't admit who they were.

But I think most of them were very, very anxious. And they were almost certain they would be finished off. Sort of indicating incident was that one of these chaps, after a while, he said-- oh, we gave them cigarettes then and talked to them and so on. And one of the chaps who regained his sort of sense of balance or conscious asked if he could go on the side and change his trousers. [LAUGHS] Yes, so it was a funny incident. We all laughed our heads off.

Did you really give them cigarettes?

Yes.

And you treated them sort of humanely?

Absolutely.

Would that be the end of that particular incident?

No, we continued searching the area, trying to make sure that no more Germans are hidden. We thought that the strength of this unit was about 180 people. And we knew that a number of them were killed during the night when they were

trying to break out.

And I think there was about 28 or 30 which we captured or found in the basement of the building. And eventually, they were taken away to a prison camp within our lines, or within our territory. And while continuing the search, I got across a further two Germans, who obviously did not resist be taken.

And, in fact, that was the occasion when I obtained my camera. It was quite good quality camera-- in fact, it was called Exakta. That's the make, Exakta. With quite a length of unexposed film. I think there were only a dozen or so film apertures exposed. So I had at least 20 or 25 to make. He also had one of the, I think, well sought after revolvers, P38, which was a 9 millimeter Luger. And I took also possession of that.

Now, another incident happened just outside the building. As I mentioned to you before, a number of German bodies were lying in the street. And, in fact, there was one who was half on the open truck. And part of his body was sort of hanging down.

And one of our colleagues said, well, obviously, these bodies will have to be cleared. But before they are taken away, I'm going to have his boots. And there was a nice pair of jackboots, so-called, you know, high boots, practically new.

Unfortunately, he couldn't take the boots off for one simple reason that they were full of rather unpleasant matter. And while wrangling with this foot, he broke off the foot in the knee. And because he was putting quite a force on it, he flew back on his-- and, in fact, fell over. But the contents of this boot splashed people standing around. And now you can imagine how we smelled for days on since you couldn't get rid of this smell for days on basically, I presume, this very, very strong aroma. And secondly, there was such a shortage of water that we couldn't even find the water to wash. So people sort of wipe their faces a little bit. And--

Could I ask you about the question of prisoners?

Yes.

What actually was the policy? You mentioned earlier that the Gestapo and police were generally shot on the spot, providing you could identify them.

Yes.

And it was your policy to keep the other prisoners, was it?

Yes.

How about feeding them and providing water?

Oh, well, you see it was an order for the headquarters that German prisoners must be treated in accordance with Geneva Convention. And, in fact, we were told that you could be taken prisoner at any time. And if you expect to be treated reasonably, you have to treat your prisoners reasonably. And that was the general approach.

This brings me to another point. Did the Home Army wear uniform? Were you easily identified as soldiers of the Home Army?

No. In fact, if you look at the soldiers of Home Army, you could think there was a masked ball or some sort of gay gathering of people. Everybody was in different uniform. Well, I wouldn't say uniform-- dressed differently. And I would say to begin with, they were all in ordinary civil suits. Only recognition was a white and red band on the arm, or red and white flash on the cap.

I started also in my sort of day suit, which very soon was torn here and there by scrambling through the tunnels and barricades. But I was lucky enough to go through wardrobes of a German. I think it was a staff officer in one of the

buildings which we occupied. And I acquired his most important parts of uniform, namely jacket-- in fact, that was a camouflage jacket-- and his field cap, which I converted to a Polish looking pickup with the white and red band around it. And that was all recognition. As the time progressed and more and more German stores were taken over, the uniforms became mostly German on the recognition, as I mentioned, red and white flags or bands around your arms and letters AK, which means Armia Krajowa, Home Army.

And if you were taken prisoner by the Germans, you know, even not wearing a full uniform, but just this band with AK, were you given prisoner of war status by them? That came about towards the end of the uprising. In the initial weeks of the uprising, Germans treated us as-- well, simply, they called us bandits.

Yes, I remember you mentioned that in the beginning.

Yes. And many people were shot without any asking, you know, without anyone saying. It doesn't matter if somebody said, yes, I'm a soldier. Perhaps the Germans said, well, you don't look like, and bang. But eventually, the Germans had to adhere to the Geneva Convention. And I think that was a pressure from Allies and Red Cross in Geneva where they, in fact, eventually agreed to that sort of treatment.

But if I go back to German prisoners, we had quite a number. I remember one place which was not very far from the quarters where I was stationed, there was a very large cinema. And that cinema-- well, I don't know how many seats there were, maybe 400, maybe 500. And it was full of Germans. In fact, every seat was occupied. Yes, they didn't have beds. They had to sit in the seats, like as you see people in the cinema.

I think there were about 400 or 500 of them. There was a German who was in command of other Germans. And any communications from our side was through him. There was a kitchen organized. Polish women were bringing food for them.

And they were not forced to work. They were just kept as ordinary prisoners of war would be kept in accordance with the Geneva Convention. They were not beaten up. They were not pestered. Within the building where they, sort of that was their territory.

Incidentally, that cinema was a direct hit by German artillery. And I think most of them died there, including our guards, one or two of our guides. I don't know how many. But I remember hearing that a number of our guides were also killed.

And, in fact, I saw two Germans who were wounded in that particular incident. And there were other-- the sight of the wounded Germans made quite an impression on me. I never saw before people so badly wounded and so badly, should I say, deformed by explosion.

If I could describe pictorially what they look like, [PAUSES] they look like two slugs, garden slugs, if you put them in sand and roll them in the sand. You don't know where is head, where is tail. You don't know where is arm or leg. And they were both I think-- one lost his legs and so on. They were all badly bleeding.

And because building collapsed on them, I think they were rescued from the ruins. And they were lying outside, just about being attended to by our Red Cross people. And obviously, they were wet in blood. And then they were rolled in this dust and brick dust and so on. I couldn't have forgotten them for quite a while after that incident. I don't know if they lived or not. But--

But they would have been taken care of, would they by your Red Cross?

Oh, they were taken care of definitely. In fact, they went on-- they were taken out the stretcher. And they were taken to hospital where our soldiers were lying.

The population of Warsaw, were they fighting the Germans at this stage in the rising, about the third or fourth week? Were they helping the Home Army?

Well, yes, we were population.

But had the Home Army sort of swelled its ranks, as it were, with--

Enormously. Yes, indeed. In fact, if you say there were so many soldiers, you could say each soldier had at least four or five replacements waiting to take his post. And people who were without arms were a hindrance. So those who didn't have arms and wanted to join, they were either building the fences, or they were digging new tunnels or building or repairing barricades. They were fighting fires, digging wells.

And they all thought of themselves as being in the Home Army?

Oh, yes. Oh, definitely.

And would this include women?

Yes, very much so. Yes.

And what other sections of the population? The old people?

Well, I wouldn't say old people. Well, as long as you were fit to do something, you were useful. If you weren't, then you have to sort of be either helped or looked after. And, in fact, blocks of houses who were under command of a block commanding person, what we call them, this person was responsible for looking after those who either were ill or in any way disabled.

How about children? Were they involved at all? Sort of older children.

Well, I would say from 8, 9, 10, they were all useful.

And what were they useful for?

Well, they would be, for instance, carrying things. I must say here that all these tunnels, which were interconnecting city, they were not for sightseeing or for pleasure walking. They were all very busy. And, in fact, it was like a snakes of people walking in all directions. If you know what the conga dance is, that's what they look like. [LAUGHS]

Could you stand up right? Could an adult stand up right in some of them in these tunnels?

No. Well, yes, on some you could. But in most tunnels, you have to bend down, particularly those which were running on the streets where you had, first, variety of services, like water, gas, electric cables, and on top surface you had tram lines and so on. So the thickness of soil which we could use for tunnel was quite restricted.

There were places where you had to more or less sneak through or slide through things. And if you imagine that there were hundreds and hundreds of people, young and old, who were employed in carrying food, corn, or ammunition, or anything, and you had to go, say, a couple of miles under such conditions, by the end, you were really exhausted. But everybody was full of enthusiasm.

Sometimes very amusing things used to happen when, say, two convoys carrying things or going in opposite directions met in a narrow tunnel. And who has priority then? Usually, there was quite a discussion who is more important. And either, those more important or those stronger used to win.