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Reel three.

It was very common, of course, that many, many Jews, not from intelligentsia, Jewish intelligentsia spoke Polish like Poles, whoever they were otherwise, but educated people. But the bulk of the Jewish population were people, small traders, Hasids, uneducated people who spoke Polish but with a clear accent or with a typical-- typically Jewish mistakes. So those people were very easy to detect. If someone of this kind were caught on the street, the Germans or the Poles could recognize him as a Jew by his accent.

Or sometimes, the Germans ordered him to say the prayer, "Our Lord," this sort of thing because anybody, any Pole, knew, of course, "Lord's Prayer," but a Jew not necessarily, very often not. To especially with problem with children-- the children, Jewish children, many of them were actually hidden in the monasteries by nuns. Again, I don't give you any numbers because it's that the historical matter for historians to study it.

But of course, we knew that many, many children were hidden by the nuns in monasteries. Inevitably, some of those children had good appearance, others were bad. And inevitably, they were taught. You know, they had some religious education, both because they had to to be protected and because the nuns wanted it, inevitably, the orphans and so on. Many, many children were saved.

You see, the problem was that I was in a [? media ?] which was not-- which was special. I lived among people who saved Jews in Warsaw. And it was natural, so to say, for them. Everybody knew that if the Germans find a Jew in an apartment, everybody will be shot on the spot. Everybody knew that. Again, it was not like in other countries.

Nevertheless, not everybody was ready to risk life of his own and his family. Nevertheless, as far as I can say, not that I can tell you from my own experience much, but I had to answer twice [INAUDIBLE]. But I heard of similar cases, when there was, for instance, this blackmail. We called them szmalcownicy difficult to explain. Never mind. Szmalcownik was someone who was busy in hunting for Jews and denouncing them.

Whenever was such a man was trying to catch a Jew on the street or someone whom she suspected being a Jew, there was, of course, an-- on the street, people were people were worried and apprehensive. But normal reaction was neither help him nor help the Jew. Help him would mean, well, how to put it? You go to hell. Help the Jew was to risk one's life.

So active involvement in rescuing the Jews was certainly not widespread. Nevertheless, this category of Jew hunters and blackmailers, it was not large either. But you can read in the book, there were some attempts, very unreliable, some attempts to do some statistics. I mean, the general saying is that it took one blackmailer to deliver 100 Jews to the Germans. It took 100 people to save one Jew from the inferno.

So it was really a terrible, a very cruel time. You see? And as always, in times of such terror and violence, there is a minority of heroes, minority of scoundrels, and majority of people who just try to survive without being heroes or scoundrels.

But is this linked at all with antisemitism in Poland? You know, one does hear that Poles were very antisemitic.

I don't think they were more antisemitic than Frenchmen or Germans, not to speak of Russians or Ukrainians. It was, of course, antisemitism in Poland before the war. About 10th of the population were Jewish. And most of them, unlike German Jews, most of them were not assimilated people. They were recognizable, so to say, on the street.

They wore different clothes, different look, different kind of speech, and so on. Why there were so many it is historically precisely because they were brought to Poland, well ages ago. There was an antisemitism, of course. I wouldn't say-- I wouldn't say very unpleasant, obviously. I remember it from before the war as well, especially, especially in the last years before the war. After the death of Marshal Pilsudski, these antisemitic parties became stronger.

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But again, it's not my experience. There's no point to talk about it. But there was an antisemitism. I never, ever had it in my family or my immediate media, never. But of course, I knew and I experienced it occasionally from other people, comment or some or some-- not very dangerous, but unpleasant attacks and so on. This I remember from before the war. So there was an antisemitism. But nevertheless, I don't think it was much stronger than in other countries. After all, it was-- you know the history of France.

In Germany, the Jewish population was very small. It was perhaps-- I can't remember exactly, but it was less than one half of a percent of the population. And they were Germanized. Most of them were really Germans. They were even German patriots.

Why it was in Germany that this horrible thing started, I don't know. It's difficult to say-- Germany and Austria. So there was an antisemitism. There was, of course, a kind of hatred of Jews. But I wouldn't say it was-- it was stronger than anywhere else. And I might be biased because of my media. But after all, I read underground press, for instance, when I was in war. I read regularly.

Now, there were antisemitic journals. I mean, journals of extreme right, of Polish fascists who published antisemitic articles. Yes, that is true. But you could never read such things, for instance, in the press officially published by the Polish underground state. That was impossible-- and of course, by the leftists, by the leftist press.

Were people in Poland, do you think-- at this time you're now talking about from 1943-- aware of the full extent of what was happening to the Jews in camps like Auschwitz--

Of course, we knew.

--where the gassing was?

Of course, we knew that they were exterminated. The name Treblinka was known by everybody. Of course, we knew and that those people were deported for extermination. The Jews knew this as well. It's almost, to me, just a digression. To me it's almost unthinkable that there are still people in the West, some pretending to be historians, who deny the Holocaust. It's unimaginable. Of course, we knew. Everybody, everybody did in Poland.

Was it only Jews that this was happening--

Sorry.

Was it only Jews that this was happening to, the gassings? Or were non-Jews being gassed as well, did you know?

Well, of course, we knew that there were concentration camps, not only Auschwitz, but a number of camps in Germany or elsewhere-- Dachau, Mauthausen, and so on. We knew that, not that we had direct contact or direct information. It even did happen, but very infrequently. I remember an acquaintance of ours who was taken to Auschwitz and released after some time. It was very unusual. I can't tell the story. I don't remember how it happened. But nevertheless, there were some very infrequent cases.

So we knew that. Of course, we knew that both Poles and Russians and others were killed in concentration camps. Nevertheless, with Jews it was an exceptional case because they were brought directly by thousand and hundred thousands to gas chambers, directly, and then the corpses burned. The Poles were put into the camp, where they were-- some of them survived, after all. But very many were killed there or died of malnutrition or diseases. But some survived, like my uncle and my cousin.

The Jews had no chance. Some did survive among those who were some of them my friends, actually, who were dispatched to the camp just about the end of the war. So there was no time to gas them any longer.

Do you remember hearing about Katyn.

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Oh, yes, of course I do. The Germans made a very big propaganda of it.

Could you tell me about that, the propaganda?

Well, there were-- it was all over in the press, in the German-controlled press, with big headlines and day after day after day. So everybody knew that. I will tell you, I didn't believe it because it was-- we knew it only from the German source. We, as a matter-- as a matter of course, a priori, we didn't believe what the Germans said. Of course, there were then people who were interested and knowledgeable in these matters realized that, unfortunately, it was true for the German, what the German said. But I and many people, I remember, didn't believe it because it was the Germans. So why should they tell truth.

Why shouldn't be rather they who murdered those people and then-- and then blamed the Soviets. I didn't believe what they say then. Of course, everybody knew about Katyn. That was in '43. Yes.

Yes. Was that because you had faith in the Soviets?

To some extent, yes. And even more so because I didn't believe the Germans, whatever they said.

Did you have any idea of what had happened before Germany invaded Russia, you know, how the deportations to the Soviet Union?

No. As I told you, I was, for 10 or 12 days, under the Soviet. But it was on the first day, so nothing-- nothing I saw-- nothing I saw then was announced, so to say. It was a war, of course. So you know, there were corpses, there were shooting. But it was not yet what was to come. And I knew nothing all over the war about what was going on in the territory-- territories occupied by the Soviets. No, nothing.

And we were too much preoccupied with [LAUGHS] what was here.

Were you to change your mind about Katyn during the war?

No.

Did you know the effect it had had on the London government in exile? Did this sort of filter through your information? Do you remember how relations were broken off between the government in exile?

I must have known that. But I don't remember specifically. I must have known because I used to read the underground press. So I must have known. I remember big stories the Germans made of the death of General Sikorski in Gibraltar. This I remember. It was splashed again on the headlines.

The Germans, of course, said it was-- that he was killed by the British. But again, I didn't pay attention to such stories. But of course, the death of Sikorski was very deeply felt in the country.

The man who replaced him, was it Mikolajczyk? Was he well known in Poland?

I can't tell you. Of course, since he became prime minister he was known. Of course, he was a politician, well known apparently before the war. But I didn't know his name previously. I was not knowledgeable in such matters. Later on, obviously, his name became-- became known.

So I lived in Warsaw all over the year, '43. Again, I lived in various places, well, in this atmosphere as it was. Again, because I, for instance, for some months I was helped with my learning by acquaintances or other people who taught me. For some months I lived with a family. Well, it was a woman who was a friend of my aunt. And she taught me some French and German.

Someone helps me in learning Russian. So it was an occasional help, which was very good for me, but nothing

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systematic. And I made my examinations within this clandestine educational network. The most of people I was in touch with were engaged in one way or another in underground, in clandestine activity.

Did you yourself join the Home Army?

No. No, I did not. I was in contact with those people. But when I was 15 years old, it-- in fact, I didn't-- I did want, at a certain moment, to join another armed underground, leftist underground. And through some acquaintances I asked to be admitted. And to my sorrow, I was told, no, you shouldn't do that because after the war we'll have-- we'll have not enough educated people, and you will be an educated man. It's better that you survive than be killed on the field. So I was rather unhappy with this answer.

But [LAUGHS] then, yes, then I had no means to live any longer in Warsaw. So I went back to the same settlement where my aunt lived and was there until the fall of '44, until the end, until the Soviet army came. This was very-- this was again, I was learning all the time. It so happens again that my aunt helped an acquaintance, who was of Jewish origin-- not really a Jew, but with Jewish background, so he was in hiding. My aunt helped him. And he was professor. He happened to be professor of physics before the war at the university.

And myself and my cousin, every day we went to him, and he gave us lessons in physics and mathematics. He was enormously helpful to us. I really learned a lot from him. It was the last year or last two years of high school, so I remember him teaching us, you know, the elements of the differential and integral calculus, elements of relativity, theory of relativity, and so on. He was extremely helpful.

At the same time, I learned some Russian so that I could, you know, read Russian. I continued learning Latin and Greek. And somehow I had access to handbooks. I could learn other things, of course, on my own-- history, literature. I mean, easy, easy things. And mathematics, I was lucky enough to have lessons of mathematics and physics by this professor.

I'm sure it was great help. It so happened that this place in which we live was the last-- was the last railroad station still operating on the west of Vistula. So all the transports, German transports of arms and so on went there. And to us, the Red Army reached the Vistula on the other side, on the right side of Vistula. We are on the left side.

We were only a few kilometers from Vistula. And for half a year or more, the Soviets were on the other side. And therefore, they bombarded this town time and again and again.

This bombardment would not be very precise, so many people were killed. Obviously, many houses were destroyed because the Soviet military airport was just across the river. So we had, all the time, you know, Soviet military airplanes cruising above us. And the bombs were very frequent sometimes. When you went through this town, small town, you had several times jump into a kind of shelter and so on, of course.

Would this have been the time of the Warsaw uprising as well?

Yes. Yes.

Yes. Did you experience anything of that or hear much about it?

I was not in Warsaw already.

No, but did you hear much about it?

Of course, we heard about it. We heard about it a lot. And some refugees started pouring from Warsaw at a certain moment. I don't remember exactly the details of what they told us about uprising, people who went through it. But of course, we met such people. We knew everything, more or less everything about the destruction of the capital.

So it was unpleasant period, especially since because-- both because of bombardments and corpses and because the Germans then tried to catch people for all kinds of labor, labor on the front. So they caught people.

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Somehow, I managed to escape it even though I was very close on few occasions to be caught. But I never was. I was lucky.

I wonder about your mental state all these years, dreading or knowing that this could happen to you, that you could be picked up. You know, how does one cope with that?

I don't know. In such situations, you don't think much about-- because the-- because death and danger was everywhere. So one gets used to it, so to say. Everybody knew that it is a matter of accident. When you sit at home, there is a bomb nearby. All the window, you know, are shattered. You go out, and just next there is a next to the house there is a-- there is a corpse, you know, torn into pieces by a bomb.

And you knew that's an accident. You could be there as well very easily. Or if they catch people, that you could be caught at any moment. But somehow, strangely enough, after a certain time you just take it as a part of life.

So there was not even panic, I would say, except when, of course, it was direct. And there was a German raid, you know, where you escape. Or when there was a bomb, you hid into a shelter. Somehow it became a part of life, and that is that.

With the Russians being on the other side of the Vistula, they have been criticized, haven't they? The Red Army has been criticized for not moving over the Vistula, particularly for Warsaw, really for Warsaw.

They didn't help Warsaw, yes. Of course, it was an uprising of which the-- uprising organized in the hope that the Soviet army is there and that the Polish army will somehow become master of the capital. So it's a both military and political goal. Obviously it was in the interest of the Soviet that Warsaw be destroyed and that the uprising be defeated. They didn't help it at all. And they didn't want.

How it was in military terms, I can't tell you. There are people who know better. The result was, of course, several hundred thousand people killed, the capital in ruins, and so on.

I know this isn't in your direct experience, but do you know if any evidence has come out of what was the Soviet Union about that political decision, you know, to stay on the other side of the Vistula?

No. No. By then I don't remember having ever heard or read about it. I can't tell you. Everything was uncertain, of course. Nobody knew how long it would last, you know, the German power and the German terror. 1944, that was a crucial month from about July '44, when the Marshal Zhukov's army was approaching the Vistula to the final Soviet attack in January in next year.

Reel four.

Of course, by then, in '44, after defeat-- after the Nazi army suffered all those defeats and the Red Army approached, there was no doubt in our minds that the war is coming to the end, that the Germany would be defeated soon. But how soon, who could tell? We even knew about the assassination attempt of Hitler. I remember that. Yes. I don't remember how we knew that, from the German controlled press or else from elsewhere. But, yes, we knew that.

And for some time, very short time, there were rumors that Hitler was killed. And those rumors were in the German army. This apparently helped the Soviet army in the last days of their attack on the front approaching Vistula. Because then there are plenty of Germans.

It was a front line. There was plenty of Germans there. They had their artillery from the place. Their artillery was shooting to the other side of Vistula. There were many troops, including, I remember, you know, this Vlasov armies occurred. You know, not only Russians various people, from Tartars or whatever they were. They even were called Kalmyks in Poland. Kalmyk was a small nationality, Caucasus nationality. And some of them were there. Why it was Kalmyk that became a generic name for all those people, I don't know.

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Anyway, there are plenty of them. And inevitably, we had some contacts with them, nothing of importance, but there was some traders. And so we lived there until the-- until the final attack, which came on the night of 15 January, '45. I remember the day because the house we lived in was completely destroyed by artillery shells.

I remember this moment because I was in a room, then there was a terrible, terrible shock and no light, of course. And I remember-- it was a family, my family living there. I remember, my first thought was, who of my family was killed in this very moment? And miraculously, nobody was. Nobody was.

My aunt was-- I don't know how she survived because she was in a room nearby in which almost the entire ceiling was shattered so that it was a big hole in the ceiling from the shell. She was in shock, of course. But she was not even wounded. I don't know what a miracle it was. So it was, for us, the last day of the German occupation. Once we still have a bombardment by the Germans, but it was not terribly, terribly important. Since then, we didn't see Germans anymore.

Oh, I should tell you that I remember a bombardment of Warsaw by the Soviets in May '43. Warsaw was-- it was not a big bombardment, but a bombardment all the same.

From the air, would that have been?

Yes. Yes. Bombardment from the air, yes.

When the Russians bombarded you, and you've described that so well, and they came into your area, were they regarded as liberators or occupiers?

When they came? I had no doubt they were liberators. You see, as far as I know-- not from my experience, but from what I learned much later-- they were much worse when they occupied the territories on the right bank of Vistula-- the east of Vistula. They behaved much worse. Here, well, you see, the Soviets came. Well, of course, you heard rumors, true or not, about their raping women and these sort of things, or stealing and so on. Nevertheless, it was, from the moment when we were-- when we felt like hunted animals, it was another world.

Next day there was Polish press, Polish theaters, Polish books being published, Polish schools, universities. It was, of course, miserable, in many ways miserable life, but it was a Polish life all the same. So to me it was a liberation, no doubt about it.

Yes. It would seem from what you're saying that there was an infrastructure in place ready to go back. Am I right?

What do you mean?

A sort of Polish infrastructure of education, organization, ready to go back in. Was that right?

It was less simple than that. Education, yes-- education was rebuilt quickly, with great efforts but quickly, in spite of enormous losses Polish intelligentsia suffered during the German occupation. Nevertheless, universities were organized immediately on the spot. I went soon to the university, to LÃ³dz.

As to the political infrastructure, well, it was not so because the-- because by then the underground, underground Polish state was still in existence. But the Soviet, obviously, not only didn't want to have anything to do it, but arrested those people. A number of the 16, 16 leaders, they were invited to negotiations, and from these negotiations immediately carried to Moscow. We didn't know that. I didn't know.

And soon there was Yalta agreement, of course. And both the government in exile and its representations in Poland lost international legitimacy, so to say. Still, we knew something about it, but I can't-- I can't remember how it was. But for people like myself, not enrolled in any particular way, not very knowledgeable, I don't remember it made a great impression on me.

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We knew something about it. Again, communication was very poor. Information was poor. Newspapers only started appearing and so on. And certainly what came was, in spite of the fact that we were-- that the Soviets-- well, first of all, it was the Soviet army that ruled. Later there were Polish-- Polish structure of power came, first with appearances of respecting the Yalta agreement, this is to say a number of parties, you know, not only communists, but-- but nobody had doubts that communists played the crucial role. They practically dominated the main instruments of power-- police, army, and-- and-- and information system. But it was after the war, so that's another story.

What I wanted to stress is only that, to me, it was a liberation. And to say that one occupation was replaced by another, in my experience, it was absurdly, you know, different from my experience. Of course, immediately there was an anti-Soviet and anti-communist underground and struggles and shooting and killing and assassination and so on. But that's another story.

But German occupation was just a-- you know, an unceasing story of terror and horrors.

But you would have been at university, I imagine, in the years when the Soviet Union was exerting more control over Poland. Am I right? For whatever reasons, you know, I wondered was that coming from a family on the left, how did you regard that, the sort of Soviet role in Poland after World War?

I was-- I went to LÃ³dz, to the university. I mean, I first made my matura, what was called, you know, examination, high school examinations, and immediately started my university studies in LÃ³dz. Universities were relatively free in those years. It came later, this ideological-- great ideological pressures. And there were more important things. So the teaching was according to the pre-war programs. And the teachers were, of course, people who used to teach before the war. It was relatively free.

Of course, everybody knew that the Soviets-- that the Soviets-- that we belong to the Soviet sphere of influence. Nevertheless, we didn't feel an occupied country. There was a Polish government, dominated by communists of course, nevertheless, a Polish government, parliament. There was, of course, fraudulent elections to the multi-party parliament at the beginning of '47. But somehow, after some period of hopeless armed resistance, completely hopeless, people somehow got used to it.

There were persecutions, to be sure. Horrible things happened to people who were involved in the anti-communist underground. Many of those people-- now we know quite a lot about it. People were killed and tortured in prisons and so on. It didn't, however-- it affected-- oh, it affected communists as well. There was a number of communists, people who for one reason or another perished or spent years in horrible conditions in jail in those years, for a number of reasons, you know, connected with internal struggles.

And there was a pressure of the Soviets. The Soviets had control of the most, so to say, on the crucial centers of secret police and military police and so on. But ordinary people were less affected by those events and more by other kinds of pressures, like the growing stress on the nationalization.

To be sure, the agriculture had never been ultimately nationalized in Poland. There were no-- but they started it. They made some progress, not a big one. And it was connected with all sorts of pressures, with intimidations and so on. Liquidation of all private trade and industry, it was in existence still in the first years, but less and less.

But it's completely another story. And I wouldn't like, really, to dwell on it because then I was already-- I was not a boy any longer-- little boy any longer. I was active in many ways, and it would take completely different conversations to say this after war, first after the war, yes. So let's stop it, the war years.

Well, thank you very much indeed, Professor Kolakowski, for telling me about the war years. And if ever you feel you would like to talk about the post-war years, I'll be very happy to come back.

Thank you.

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Thank you.

Thank you very much.

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