Interview with Maria Spiewak and Danuta Trybus of Warsaw, Poland, with Dr. Sabina Zimering and Helena Bigos, St. Louis Park, MN, as Translators
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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: First, some background. You first went to your friends. You only asked for one passport. Who would have gotten the passport?

A: Well, the reason we only asked for one was, we were a family of five; parents and three kids, but our father had a secure job, so he was more or less safe. My brother, being a boy, we didn’t think could pretend to be a Pole. So it was a matter of the three of us. And it was very hard at that time unless you had a job that the Germans considered useful to them. The rest of the Jews were practically finished. But the mood in the ghetto was such that there were so many pressing problems, like I was after my mother all the time. I said, ‘Why aren’t we doing something? We know that this city was liquidated, and that city was liquidated. Our turn is coming up soon.’ I said, “Let’s do something about it.” And she said, “Don’t bother me. We can’t do anything. Whatever will happen to everybody will happen to us.” And I remember our grandfather, who was a very Hasidic man, he refused to hear it altogether. He said, “God will not allow it. I don’t believe it! All these things are lies!” So the psychological situation was such that you either denied it or you gave in and you said, “Well, there’s nothing we can do, let’s forget about it.” I was 19 years old, and I had the urge that I didn’t want to give up. I wanted to do something about it, so I kept nagging my mother, and finally she came up with the idea that the only people we could try would be them. And we approached them. And when they came, she had no guts to ask for too much, so she said maybe she (Danuta) could give me -- we were friends, we were the same age -- if she could possibly give me her passport, then that’s how I would be satisfied and quieted down. But then when we did it, then mother decided she wants to give to all three of us

Q: What would have happened if Danuta had given you her passport? Then what if she needed a passport? You would have been in serious trouble.

A: If I was caught, she would be automatically caught, too. But what we didn’t know, they were already active in the underground, and they themselves were on false passports, because they were fighting the Nazis already!

Q: Oh, so they actually had two passports.
A: Right. They didn’t use their own any more, but they didn’t give us their own, for their own safety. But their mother was one of the leaders, and she in turn asked someone who was making the passports for themselves -- for their own members -- she said she needs three passports for her Jewish friends, and they gave it to her. But they had closed the door.

Q: That was Dr. Sabina talking. It is Wednesday, February 26, 1986, and we are continuing an interview begun three years ago, because the two Polish women who made it possible for Mrs. Zimering to survive the Holocaust are here visiting in Minneapolis.

First I would like to ask your Polish friends what life was like for the Poles during the war. We all know how the Jews were deprived of food and clothing, but I’m sure that the Poles were suffering, too. Maybe they could describe that.

Note: From this point on, Dr. Zimering will translate Lewin’s questions into Polish, and then translate the responses by Mrs. Trybus and Mrs. Spiewak into English.

A: (Translates question into Polish. The response is in Polish, and then Zimering translates to English.)

She said the conditions for Poles were very difficult; that the original Nazi plan was to exterminate the Jews first and the Poles next. From very early in the occupation of Poland by the Nazis, most of the Polish nation became mobilized in the underground movement of fighting the Nazis for the country. She said the organization was almost like an underground army. The Germans were aware of it, and they were fighting them very fiercely, and they had a lot of members of the underground army executed. At one time, there were 90 people in the small town that we came from. And of course there was a continuous fear and terror to be caught and punished by the Nazis.

Q: When they caught them, did they just execute them on the spot, or did they keep them in jail, or transport them to camps?

A: (Discussion in Polish). There was no set way of punishing the caught partisans. Some were shot on the spot, some were put in prisons, and others were tortured, very mercilessly, like their mother. Their mother went through very hard beatings, and torture before she was sent to concentration camp. So there were not legal steps taken. They just handled them in different ways. The methods of interrogation were just extremely cruel. They pulled out nails. Outside of ordinary beatings with rubber things with lead ends, they would put people under water until they were practically suffocating, then pull them out. And burned them, and hung them up so they couldn’t touch the ground, and hung them there and continuously asked, “Tell the truth! Tell the truth!” It’s most brutal.
Q: Could they estimate what percentage of the people -- the Poles in the town -- were involved in the underground?

A: (Discussion in Polish). Ninety percent of the population. And by the way, it’s important to know that they belonged to the Armiya Krayova, the AK. That was the name of the organization that they belonged to and they fought with.

Q: There were different organizations?

A: Well later on. Poland was attacked by Germany September 1, 1939, and occupied within a couple of weeks. Warsaw held out a little longer, you know. Our town was finished in a week. It was occupied. But she says that the formation of Armiya Krayova was a month after the occupation. Within a month they were organized. The next organization underground, which had a Socialist leaning, the Army of Ludova, didn’t come into existence until 1941, so this organization carried on for two years before the other one came into existence.

Q: We’ll back up for a minute now. Food was rationed. There was no clothing. Everything was focused on the war effort, rather than for the civilian population. Can they remember anything about that -- how, where they got food? Was there a black market? They had land, didn’t they?

A: Yeah, they had land. (Asks question in Polish. Response in Polish.) Everything was rationed very early in the war. I still remember, too, that the Germans were confiscating everything that was available and shipping it to Germany, and very little was left for the population. She remembers instances where the only food they had was grain. And their mother used to just cook up that. There was no meat, there was no sugar. And for shoes, they were wearing wooden shoes. There was no leather, there was no shoes. There was a lot of hardship in that respect.

Q: And I’m sure no fuel in the winter?

A: (Question asked and responded to in Polish.) There was no fuel. It was very scarce and so it was quite cold. (More Polish.) So they were using wood, and the wood shavings, because coal was quite scarce.

Q: And if you had a typhus epidemic, Poles caught typhus, too.

A: (More responses in Polish.) Soap was in short supply. There was lots of lice infestation and of course typhus.

Q: Maybe we should move on and talk about some of their activities as partisans. I got the impression that because it was such a broad battle against the Germans -- the occupation -- that some of the partisans, or the partisan leaders perhaps, felt
that to endanger yourselves to shield Jews maybe was not the smartest thing to do -- it was not a high priority for them. Is this true or is this not true?

A: (Discussion in Polish.) She said she’s aware of only her own experiences, and in her case, the fact that the documents were given to us -- to Jews -- from a higher leader in her organization, this would mean that they were taking risks, and helping Jews, and she also remembers a case where a Polish man threw some bread to a Jew who was being led through the streets to work, and he was shot on the spot.

Q: Did they provide papers for other Jews too?

A: (Response in Polish.) She said they themselves helped only us, but she knows of cases where several other Jews survived in Piodsgraf because of help from other Poles. One was by her aunt, and some other people, and she also remembers a case where a Jew (Dr. Tannenbaum) was a high officer in the same underground organization, was fighting with the other members, and happened to die in one of the battles. (Other woman speaks in Polish. Mentions Feinsky, Zborovsky.) She knows several other cases where Jews survived through help of other Poles, in our town. (More Polish, mentions Goldhirsch.)

Q: Would they like to describe some of the partisan activities that they engaged in? You know, we always think of partisans blowing up bridges and things like that.

A: (Response in Polish.) This is the younger sister, Maria Spiewak. She says when the war broke out, she was 14 years old, and her sister was 16 years old, and they became couriers. Their job was to smuggle documents between Piodsgraf and the central office in Warsaw. And she was smuggling weapons. And this was basically their work. (More give and take in Polish.) Documents and secret, illegal press, newspapers. What is very important to know, is they both were given, and all the other members, cyanide that they had hidden on themselves, and they were told that if they are caught and tortured and in danger of giving away names of other members, to take their own life. (Brief discussion in Polish.) They happened to be in Warsaw twice, they were sent there twice, during the Polish uprising in August of 1944. There was a Jewish ghetto uprising in April of ’43, which, of course, the Germans completely destroyed, but then the Poles had a uprising of a bigger scale in summer and fall of ’44, and this was also not successful. Besides smuggling weapons and documents, their home was a center for hiding some of the partisans from other parts of the country that were on the run and had to have a safe shelter.

Q: I see. I noticed that you said in your interview, that after the war ended, you went back to your town -- it was 90,000, that was a sizeable town -- and you found your old friends still there. Could you talk a little about how you felt?
A: Well, when we came back in September of ’44, my sister and I were looking for members of the family that we hoped had survived. We had a large family of probably 70, 80 people, and we found two, an uncle and his daughter. And when we went to see our friends, their mother was still in Germany in the concentration camp. She wasn’t back yet. And Danuta, the older sister, happened to be married at that time, so we missed seeing her, but we had a visit with the younger one, with Maria, and she returned the things that we left with them before we ran away. Among especially valuable things were the family Shabbat candle holders that we still have, that were in the family for a long time.

Q: What other things had you left with them?

A: Clothes. Not much. There were some photos, family pictures.

Q: And they saved those for you?

A: Yes, they saved them and we got them back.

Q: One of the things I was going to ask earlier and we got sidetracked, you said that for much of the time that you were in Germany, your father was still free. I would imagine he was working with the coal business still?

A: No, no, no, no. After 1942, out of 24,000 Jews that were in the ghetto, they left 2,000. Everybody else went, most of them, to Treblinka, for extermination. They were shipping them to concentration camps earlier, but the final stage was just strictly crematorium. But what my father did, he was among the remaining 2,000 that were needed for the Germans to work in war-related industry. So he was not in the coal business any more, he was working for the Germans.

Q: In a factory?

A: In a factory. (Conversation in Polish.) It was a factory of wood-related products that they needed.

Q: And so you would write letters to your father from where you were in Germany?

A: No, not to the father. We would write letters to them, and they would give it to our father.

Q: And you sent food packages?

A: Yes. We were in Germany with the false papers, working as Polish girls in Germany, and we were able to keep in touch with him. He was able to know that we are alive and we were able to know how he is through writing letters to them. If we wrote a letter to a Jew, we would have been finished, so we were writing letters to our Polish friends, and how they were able to give it to him, was, he was
(Conversation in Polish.) --- See, I’m finding out new things now, myself! Apparently when they got a letter from us, it wasn’t that my father or my brother went to their home. It was too risky. It wasn’t possible. But they went to where they were staying, where they were interned, and they would have a place, a place of meeting, and my father would wait behind the wire fence, and they would approach, give him the letter, and quickly go away. And this was done continuously. And then once, towards the end of the war, when my mother was shipped to a concentration camp and they were being looked for by the Nazis, and ran away from home, and my father didn’t know what was going on, so only at that time did he go to their home to find out what happened, and it was a great risk. And their father was there, and he was not aware of all the contacts, and he was very scared to see him there, and he told him, “Get out. This house is being watched.” And there was nothing there for him, there was no letter. (More Polish.) And the father of the girls told him what happened, that the wife is in a concentration camp, and the girls are in hiding, and there’s no more contact -- it was not possible any more -- between us and our father. (More Polish.) This was about August of 1944, and Piodsgraf was liberated in January of ’45, so it was towards the end of the war.

Q: It was liberated by the Americans?

A: No, by the Russians. The Russians came from the east.

Q: It was about 90 miles from Warsaw.

A: Something like that, yeah.

Q: You were liberated by the Americans.

A: Right, in Germany.

Q: Do you want to talk about what it was like to be liberated by the Russians?

A: Well, I wonder. Probably not. I can ask them. (Asks in Polish. The answer is “no”.)

Q: Well, of course, talking about the Russians really doesn’t have anything to do with the story we were telling, so we’ll just omit that. Is there anything I didn’t ask that I should have?

A: Well, during the whole underground activity, they were together most of the time. They were traveling on trains delivering either weapons or the documents, and during one trip, the older, Danka, was caught by the Nazis, by the Gestapo, and put in jail in Czestochowa, which is a city maybe 90 miles southwest of Piodsgraf. And she was kept there until liberation. She was sure that she would not make it through it, because the penalties were death, but she was lucky that before they
got to her case, before any further investigation, the Russian troops liberated Czestochowa, and she simply ran out of jail, and was free, and walked on foot from Czestochowa to Piodsgraf, back home -- in January -- which was about a 90 kilometers walk. Now Maria, she continued her work after her sister was arrested, and she couldn’t be in Piodsgraf, because they were on the “wanted” list by the Nazis, so she was in another town, in Tomaszow. And when the Russian troops came, she also returned home. And they met each other, maybe a week later. Danka arrived, but the mother remained in Germany, and later on she recuperated in Sweden for several months, and didn’t come home until November of 1945. She was arrested in July, 1944, and didn’t get back until ’45, in very poor shape, health, from which she never fully recovered. She spent the last 11 years of her life in bed. She was 54 years old when she was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp.

Q: I’ve had a number of people say that they recuperated in Sweden. Was there some kind of a treatment center, a hospital, a recuperation area where people were sent?

A: (Conversation in Polish.) Well, she was sent to Sweden because of her very poor health condition. In the camp, she went through typhoid fever, typhus, dysentery, and towards the end she got tuberculosis. She was in Sweden, in Malmo, in a hospital, and they tried to bring her back to health. She left for Poland against their wishes. They felt that she still was not in good enough shape to leave, but she wanted to go home.

Q: How did she get to Sweden?

A: Oh, that was the Swedish Red Cross that was going to the camp[s and picking out weak people, children, and bringing them to their country for restoration.

Q: Were other countries doing that too? Other Red Cross organizations?

A: (Translates into Polish. Response.) They are not aware of other ones. We know that our brother, who was a teenager at that time, was liberated in Buchenwald, and he was sent to France, where they sent the Jewish orphans. But as far as medical care, she is aware only of Sweden, the Swedish Red Cross. Yes, Sweden was a neutral country, so after the war, they were in much better shape than most anyone in Europe, and they had the humanitarian drive. They were very helpful to thousands of concentration camp inmates

Q: To go back to your own interview, Sabina, are these the same little girls who used to say to you when you were a little girl, “You’re so wonderful, you’re such a good friend, why don’t you become a Christian like us?”

A: (Translates. Laughter. Response in Polish. Laughter.) Yeah, yeah. They were the little girls, they were the friends that proposed it. In fact, they just reminded
me that when we left Piodsgraf and went to work in Germany as Poles, we had the documents, and in addition to it, they gave us a little Polish cross to wear on our necks to really look like Polish girls, and little Catholic prayer books sent along with us. I forgot that. (More Polish.) They wanted to make sure that we were complete Poles.

Q: Now you’re Sabina’s sister…

Bigos: We are both sisters, yes.

Q: And your name now?

Bigos: My name now is Helena Bigos.

Q: You were talking about when you were hiding in their attic, and they brought the food up to you. Can you describe that?

Bigos: Yes, this is 40 years ago, and I still remember when they brought us the food, and there was a little window in the attic so we could look out, and many times we saw those people that were going to work, we saw them through the window. And we were there without the knowledge of their father, so we had to be very nice and quiet. I still remember it like it would be yesterday.

Q: And they weren’t getting extra rations, they were sharing their food. Would they like to talk about that?

A: (Discussion in Polish. Laughter.) She wanted to know if I said their mother was my teacher in grade school. I did. There was a closeness, a friendship, between their mother and our mother.

Q: And you had the brother. (Discussion in Polish.)

A: They remember the evening when we showed up out of the ghetto, in the hiding place where they, themselves, were hiding. What happened was, we got the documents before we needed them. That was several weeks before the time when the ghetto was being surrounded, when the extermination commando showed up. We heard about it at midnight -- I think I have it in my report -- and when we knew that this is it, the whole family took off our armbands, and we took our documents and left the ghetto at night. My father had the legal stuff for the job, but the four of us, my sister, myself, my brother and my mother headed for their home, to our friends, which was in the Polish part of town. It was illegal for us to be there. They remember when we showed up at night, not at their home, but at their hiding place. They seem to remember that better than I do. They saw us, and kept us there. They, themselves were already hiding out because they were active in the underground.
Q: So then the place where you hid in the attic was not their home, is that right?
A: Yes, it was their home, but later on. We spent that night in this little shack that was in a field, and then during the day we went and were in their home.

Q: Was their father ever active in the partisans?
A: No, he was not.

Q: Through the whole war, he knew his wife and daughters were doing this, and he just kept himself separate.
A: Yes. (Conversation in Polish.) He was aware of it, but he did not participate. He didn’t interfere, but he just did not participate. He was just afraid. (More conversations in Polish.) He knew the dangers of being shot, if caught.

Q: Poor father, his wife and his daughters wouldn’t obey him.
A: (Conversation in Polish. Laughter.) Not everybody can be a hero. And he just wasn’t a hero. He was a professor of biology, he was a very well educated man, but he just didn’t have the courage that their mother and they had.

Q: I think very few of us have the courage to be heroes.
A: Yes. (More conversation in Polish.) Yes. You might be interested in what Rabbi Goodman asked them when they were here last time and were honored at the Adath Jeshurun synagogue. He considered them heroines, and he was wondering how they came about to do what they did. Why don’t I ask them that and say their answer then. (Conversation in Polish.) At that time and again now, she claims that to them it was not a heroic doing. It was normal, humanitarian response to a friend in trouble. And they, at that time, considered it a normal thing to do, even though it was at the danger of their own life. (More conversation in Polish.) She remembers that when we were in Germany in the working camp, and we corresponded with them, one of the letters she wrote to me, very happy and excited, giving me the news about the uprising in the Warsaw Jewish ghetto. I was very happy to hear about it, and I was very happy that she was interested in it, but I immediately destroyed the letter, because I thought, if they saw a letter like that on me, it would be very suspicious, that one Polish girl in Poland is writing to another Polish girl in Germany about a Jewish uprising. (Laughter.) She wanted to share the news with me. (More Polish.) She wrote it because she was very happy about it, and knew that I would be, too.

Q: (Tape recorder off and on.) One more thing. We’ve been sitting here talking about people that also are studying the Holocaust, and then you mentioned a Jewish cardiologist who returned to Poland and is now living in Lodz.
A: He never returned. He never left.

Q: Oh, he never left Poland rather. Yet he was one of the organizers of the Warsaw ghetto. And that made me wonder, did any Jews come back to your city to stay?

A: (Conversation in Polish.) Piodsgraf, our hometown, which had 20,000 Jews, has only one Jew left. There’s one who lives there now, who never left either. (More Polish.) And then there was a doctor that’s deceased now, that was quite known at the time, but these were the only two Jews that they know of. In most cases what happened was like with us. Jews were either deported, or left, and when they were liberated in some other parts of Europe, went back to Poland mainly to look for other relatives, and then left again.

Q: Was there a lot of destruction in the city? Buildings bombed, burned…

A: The city was bombed the very first day of the war, September 1, 1939.

Q: Because I wondered if that had something to do with your not wanting to go back, too, that when you went back, so much had been destroyed.

A: No, no, no. The main reason why most Jews did not want to be there, was they just didn’t find any family, and it was very painful to continue to stay in a place where there was just no one there. But what she also suggested, a contact would be the Jewish -- (More Polish.) she had contact with, and she thought you might like to know about it, there’s a Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. (More Polish.) And another thing also, that you might want to know that they forgot to say, they said recently people like them who were given medals and acknowledgement by Yad Vashem, formed an organization. And they have an organization in Poland of all the Poles that were helping Jews. The organization is called the Organization for the Righteous Among Nations. And there are, as of now, she said, 1,600 Poles in Poland that belong to that organization, that received the medals like they did. And their name is shown in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Q: Now, in order to get that award and be recognized, there have to be witnesses, and affidavits. These 1,600 people are all people who have…

A: Well, how it’s usually done, is like in our case, we survived the war because of their help, and we applied to Yad Vashem. We sent a summary of the history of the Holocaust, for us, and mentioned their names as two people that gave us the passports, and made it possible for us to survive. And Yad Vashem had a meeting, I guess they have their normal procedure, they get together, they analyze the records, and then they decide who gets one, who does not. And that’s how they got theirs.

Q: And there are 1,600 Poles who…
A: Right. In Poland, yeah. In fact, from what she said, in all Europe there are 6,000 “righteous gentiles.” (More Polish.) And this is an ongoing process. There are people continuously being found and given the award and honored.

Q: Is there anything else that we should talk about?

A: (Discussion in Polish.) The Germans’ favorite place to execute Poles that were caught for activities in the underground movement was the remnants, the ruins, of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw and in Lodz.

Q: They would bother to transport them there and then kill them?

A: Yeah, they would take them out of the prisons, take them to the ruins of the Jewish ghetto and execute them there. (More Polish.) She thinks that it was done because it was an empty place, they were just ruins. She doesn’t know whether it had any symbolical meaning or not, but it was just ruined. They loved the part of Warsaw that used to be the Jewish part. (More Polish.) The Jewish uprising was the first one, in April of ’43. The Polish uprising was in August of ’44. And when this was squelched, then they leveled most of the city. (More Polish.) She was wondering whether you have any specific questions. She said she could talk for hours about it. (More Polish. Laughter.)

Q: What would she like to talk about?

A: (Laughter. More Polish conversation.) They feel that what we are doing is very important, to collect the oral history, to document, in order for our young people to be aware of what we all went through. And the second reason would be to try and prevent anything like that happening again, and to be aware that a dictatorial system could create a situation where one human being is so cruel to another one.

Polish Woman; (In English.) Thank you very much. (Laughter.)

A: Both Danuta and Maria went to the Jewish Historical Society in Warsaw, showed them the documents they received and the medal from Yad Vashem, and they were very interested in them. And they showed them the coverage they got in our press, when they got back from here in 1979, and apparently they were informed that when they returned from their trip now, they’ll be interviewed by the American T.V. over there. That they are very interested in their history and in their deeds. So that’s why they felt they would love to have this tape, also, to add to their collection.

Q: Well we can certainly make copies of the tape right away and give them copies of the tape.
A: Yeah, because part of it is in Polish, so they would see it, and their children know English. They are both mothers and grandmothers. In fact Mrs. Spiewak’s son is, right now, a professor at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, in mechanical engineering. And Mrs. Trybus’s son, at one time he was a fellow at M.I.T. in Boston, and spent two years as a teacher at the University of Edmonton, Canada, and now returned to Poland and is teaching in a high position in Poland, at the university. So they have children that are highly educated and know English, so they’d be able to translate this.

Q: Now the son who’s in Madison, is he there to stay permanently?

A: Right now, he’s on a three-year visiting professor status, and she doesn’t know how it will be in the future. (Polish conversation.)

Q: And you don’t have any trouble getting visas to come here.

A: (More Polish.)

Polish woman: Neit, neit.

Q: Of course you left your family behind.

A: (Polish.) It was not difficult. In one day they got it.

Q: Well, I’m glad you could come. Thank you.