

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Wanda Ollbryska

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This Oral History Interview of **Wanda Ollbryska (WO)** took place in September 1984

[The **Interviewer was: Abram Ogniewicz (AO)**]

WO: My name is Wanda Ollbryska. I was born in Warsaw in on June 20, 1889. My parents' name was Andrzej Fice [?] and Paulina Żak. My father was an industrialist. My family consisted of four children—Stefan, Wanda, Waclaw and Tadeusz. We were Roman Catholics. We went to church every Sunday. My parents were Polish patriots. My grandfather was a participant in the January Uprising in 1863.

When the war broke out, we lived in central Warsaw, where I lived all my life. The inhabitants of this district were Poles and Jews. My husband and I didn't have much chance to speak about the fate of Jews, since he was promptly arrested. He spent a half year in the Pawiak Prison. Then he was sent to Oświęcim, where he stayed until the end of the war.

AO: Have you ever been a witness of a particular antisemitic act, which made you think about the lot of Jews?

WO: I have seen such an act on the corner of Marszałkowska and Chmielna Streets. Two German soldiers were wiping off blood from the face of a young Jew, while the third one stood and photographed this scene. This was an act of mercy for the picture.

AO: Have you seen Jews wearing yellow Stars of David?

WO: No, only saw Jews wearing blue Stars of David.

AO: Have you witnessed the beating of children?

WO: No, I haven't.

AO: When did you decide to help Jews?

WO: When my brother came to me and asked me to take in a Jewish couple.

AO: Did you help people that you knew or strangers as well?

WO: I only helped strangers. I did not know them.

AO: Are you able to tell about some details when you decided to help those who were persecuted?

WO: When my brother brought me this married couple he was a member of the AK—National Army. Given his contacts he recommended this couple to me for offering them shelter.

AO: What was the first thing you had to do?

WO: I had to adapt the apartment for these new tenants.

AO: How did you manage with the increased demands when it came to food, clothing and lodging so that it wouldn't be noticed by anyone?

WO: I didn't draw anyone's attention since no one came to express any interest. The superintendent of the building received on my behalf a delivery of 5 l. of milk every day. I would go to various stores, always different ones to buy produce for them. I have to admit that my super was very supportive in my secret affairs.

AO: Did people closest to you know what you were doing?

WO: No, no one knew. No one could have guessed, but my brother, who worked in the AK.

AO: Did anyone threaten to report your activity to the occupying authorities?

WO: No one knew. No one threatened. Everything passed very smoothly and secretly.

AO: Did you receive any assistance, given your increased needs?

WO: My caretakers had remarkably modest needs, on the verge of hunger. As a result, I bought very little foodstuff for them. Also, I had an acquaintance, who from time to time came and brought me some food provisions. I shopped in different stores so that my purchases would not draw any attention. I rarely bought the donuts that were made by a local family, so that I wouldn't draw any unusual attention to myself.

AO: Did anyone help you in saving these persecuted people?

WO: No, only my brother.

AO: Did any organization support your efforts?

WO: No.

AO: Did you act of your own free will?

WO: Yes.

AO: Was either one of your protectors discovered?

WO: No.

AO: Did anyone find you.

WO: Basically no. But there was an incident when people came to inspect the apartment and were amazed how modestly it was furnished. There were no traces that anyone else lived there. During the time of the inspection, my guardians managed to hide in the shelter.

AO: When and under what circumstances did your charges leave your apartment?

WO: About a week or so, after the war was over, my 'guests' left, once they deemed that it was safe. They had the advice of a friend who was not in hiding. And they decided to go to their home town, to Lublin.

AO: Were there any misunderstandings between you and your guardians?

WO: No. There were never any misunderstandings. On the contrary, those of us who are alive are in close touch still today. We correspond with one another and fondly recall those days of our camaraderie.

AO: Have you ever regretted your actions?

WO: No, I never had any regrets.

AO: Was there ever an incident when you could have helped someone but didn't?

WO: I don't recall that such an event ever took place. If I had a chance to help, I'm sure I didn't decline extending such help

AO: To what degree did your wartime experiences influenced your faith in God?

WO: It deepened my faith in God. I was impacted by God's magic ways of working his miracles. Throughout the war, none of my charges lost as much as a hair on their head. They survived in a happy state without any traumas or fears.

AO: To what extend were you politically involved?

WO: I wasn't, except that I detested the communist regime. That was the beginning and end of my sentiments.

AO: Are your current viewpoints any different than they were 40 years ago?

WO: As it pertains to the government, they remain unchanged. It may be even that they are even stronger, since they are fresh.

AO: Is there anything in our present conversation that we did not discuss and you would like to add?

WO: Naturally, there were many things that I haven't mentioned. For example, there were many difficult surprises that one had to live through and somehow we did so. For example, at one point in time, I was washing the windows on the porch and the apartment was open. I took no precautionary measures. And suddenly I see how a German jumps over the gate. He looked at me and I froze. I wanted to let my guardians know that they needed to hide. However, some masculine control took hold of me and I regained my composure and continued to wash the windows. That German jumped across my fence to my neighbors, where in fact some people were indeed hiding. The Germans knew about them and had tried to catch them on a number of occasions. However, they failed because they came too late and the evaders always managed to flee to their hiding place in time. As soon as the German left, I ran to my charges to warn them that they needed to hide. Thus, this incident had a happy ending.

Another time, a 5year-old girl named Danusia, says to me: "Auntie, there's a man standing in front of the windows." I managed to press the warning bell with my foot, and Danusia informed the man that this isn't a good time. The man waited patiently. Once I was pretty certain that my guardians heard the bell and had managed to hide, I looked inside, only to find them sitting calmly inside. My guardians had not gone into hiding because the warning bell was out of order. They hurried to the shelter and Danusia delayed the man's entry for a bit longer. When he came in, it was he who observed that the apartment was very minimally furnished. To which I answered that I was robbed of most of my belongings by thieves. That was actually the truth. They left almost nothing behind. But that brought the visit of that official to an end.

Another tragic event which ended fortunately without any consequences... One day the Germans arrived and on the mounds of sand they placed a reflector that searched the skies for enemy planes. This meant that the Germans would be constantly nearby and could have

decided to visit on a moment's notice. Fortunately, this lasted but a few days. The Germans packed everything up and left.

WO: One recollection left me with a deep impression. A German soldier was leading an older woman with her 10-year old son. She knew that she was headed to her demise and was loudly crying. This is how the little boy was trying to encourage her: "Granny, don't be afraid! Don't cry! It hurts only a second." I still feel that little boy's bravery. He must have been given such self-control over fear by God.

In conclusion of this interview, I would like to add that during a social gathering that was taking place in my house, one lady participant of this gathering read aloud her memoir, describing the period of occupation. This memoir was so tragic and so memorable that it moved everyone present and surprised people how merciful the Lord is. That in such awful conditions she managed to survive and find kind people who helped her. And this wasn't limited to only Poles. Even a German freed her from arrest. That's how God watched over her.

[An unidentified female interviewer asked the following question: What was that woman's name?

WO: Her name was Paula Ogniewicz. She wrote a most interesting and tragic memoir. She hopes to publish her memoir. However, life is so difficult in this Canadian land. A number of years will have to pass before she'll be able to raise the funds for this publication. The memoir was written shortly after liberation. [It was a fresh memory when she read it. L.W]

OA: What would you like to convey to your children, grandchildren and subsequent generations?

WO: I would like that that there wouldn't be any differences in feelings among people of different races and different colors of skin. We're all created by one God. There should be no hatred and difference among us. I may not live until then, but I believe mankind will attain such perfection ultimately.