

GAWROŃSKA, Jadwiga
Polish Documentation Project
Polish
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SUMMARY

[Approximately 360 min]

Jadwiga Gawrońska (neè Jankowska) was born as **Fryda Ruer** on June 19th 1923 in Lublin. She comes from a partly assimilated Jewish family, which followed Jewish traditions and religion, yet spoke Polish at home and had friends among Poles. Jadwiga's father was an accountant and her mother stayed at home to take care of the children, with the help of a hired Polish nanny. Jadwiga speaks of the beginning of the war in Lublin and comments on the early persecution of the local Jews. She talks about the change in lifestyle, which her family experienced after the establishing of the ghetto in 1940/41; she remembers the closing of schools and frequent mandatory relocations. Jadwiga comments that the biggest change was experienced by the rich, who used to live in affluent neighborhoods before the war. She observes that a class of newly rich who engaged in shady currency trading was emerging in the ghetto. She explains how her brother who had "good looks" worked as a photographer in the local villages and obtained food for her family. Encouraged by friends, from both the Jewish and Aryan side, and supported by their uncle, a Jewish land owner, who had country contacts, the **Ruer** family officially left the ghetto and moved into the country. The life that awaited them was full of hardships, yet allowed freedom; she recalls that a Jewish wedding took place in the area. Her father and her brother worked as farmers. The **Ruer** family was well accepted in a Polish village, due to their knowledge of German and urban sophistication. Jadwiga and her sister offered fashion advice and were sewing for the locals. Despite escalating German persecution against the Jews, they made friends with many local youth, except for one; a girl named Barabara turned out to be a daughter of the prominent Jewish doctor from Lublin; she tried to thwart the **Ruers'** attempts to arrange false travel papers. Jadwiga remembers the deportation of all the Jews from the local villages to Piaski on October 16, 1942 and comments on being able to find shelter in the homes of many of her charitable friends. She remembers her father giving up and deliberately joining the group selected for deportation to the Trawniki concentration camp. She describes different ways in which her other family members were escaping the deportation by travelling, first to Lublin and then to Warsaw. She mentions encounters with szmalcownicy *[blackmailers/collaborators]* and purchasing identification documents through a well established black market. Jadwiga provides names of people and places, and describes in detail her life in Warsaw and the vicinity, where together with her boyfriend and his little sister, she illegally

stayed with many Polish families and had to relocate frequently. She describes the encounters with both decent Polish people [*ex. Wanda Olbrychska; she received The Righteous among the Nations Award*] and mercenary opportunists, who worked for the Gestapo. [Tapes 5, 6, 7, 8] Due to his obvious Jewish looks, Jadwiga's boyfriend and husband, Berek had to remain in constant hiding and Jadwiga's care. Berek's family supported their son and Jadwiga financially until Żegota (the Polish council to aid Jews) made the rescue funds available. Jadwiga remembers the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto and the positive reactions of Poles who prayed. She talks about the passport black market and describes the operation of the Polish Hotel, located on Długa Street, which was the center for the Jewish illegal travel abroad. She talks about her boyfriend's pre-war communist affiliations and remembers befriending Poles, who worked for the socialist underground. She mentions getting involved in illegal distribution of the RPPS [*Worker's Party of Polish Socialists*] newspaper. She remembers many situations when she was blackmailed or nearly caught by szmalcownicy [tapes 6, 7, 8]. Jadwiga recalls engineer **Cywiński** from Sapieżyńska Street, who was saving Jews by means of a small production hall, which he created in his apartment. The Jews were producing hair nets and thus earning money for their living. She remembers the murder of the Jews in the AL [*People's army; socialist army*] partisan battalion in Życzyński Forest [*Warsaw-Lublin area*], where—by oversight of their commander Mulak—some of the Polish Nationalists were admitted into the battalion. Berek, who belonged to this battalion, was murdered along with all the other Jewish partisans. Presently a Polish senator, Jan Mulak [1914-2005; a Polish senator in the years 1993-97] expressed his intentions to apply for the Righteous among the Nations Award, but Jadwiga threatens him with a law suit. Jadwiga talks about her life in Warsaw after Berek's death, when she worked for a Jewish businessman, who under the assumed name of Jan **Łaski** was protected by one of his former friends, now a high ranking Gestapo official [tape 8]. Jadwiga comments that several Germans were determined to get rich in Poland and they overlooked the regulations. She continues her story of frequent relocations, due to the vigilant pursuit by the Germans of the remaining Jews in Warsaw. Having learned about the advancing Russian front, Jadwiga decided to move into the country to join her brother in Łuków. She remembers her last “brush with death” when she was accused of being a Jew by a Volksdeutsch. A German specialist was summoned to determine her race [tape 9, 10]. She mentions the flight of the Germans in the area and talks about the approach of the Soviet Army on July 23, 1944. She describes the incident of her brothers' “brush with death”—while being an insurance collector [*he collected “ogniówka”, the insurance against fire damage*], he was accused of collaborating with the Germans and nearly killed by the local riff-raff. Thanks to Jadwiga's sound mind and quick summoning of help, he was saved by the Russian soldiers. Jadwiga talks about returning to Lublin and marrying a Pole after the war. She comments on anti-Semitism in Poland after the war and evaluates its roots. She describes the optimal characteristics of a Jewish Holocaust survivor: the assimilated and well-off young adult; and puts herself in that category. Jadwiga comments on feeling guilty for her first husband's death and regrets that she didn't talk him out of joining the AL partisans. Though she didn't come back to her original name, she feels both Jewish and Polish. She accuses Jewish

communists of forcing the communist system in Poland, despite experiencing poverty in the ZSRR and knowing that it is doomed to failure. Though she accuses Polish population of providing insufficient help to the Jews, she underscores that Poland is one of a few countries which didn't openly collaborate with the Nazis. She is appalled that some blame Poland for the Holocaust. Jadwiga comments how impossible it is to describe the moments of terror. She is infrequently engaged in conversations about the war, as she is then forced to relive her experiences. She believes that such conversations are "soaked with blood". Jadwiga has no plans of writing her memoirs as the perished would be the ones truly interested in reading them; there are few survivors, for whom this history is still alive.

[Prepared by Agnieszka McClure on 08/25/2010]