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Summary of the oral history interview with Anna Czerwinski

Translated by Lucien Weisbrod

[Translator's Introduction and Overview: This oral history was read and recorded from a written text. Some 30 minutes into the reading, Anna C. reveals that the text was written in Mexico, many years after the war. Perhaps for that reason, Anna C. does not provide a precise chronology for the events that she describes. The following document summarizes her recording in the order that she relayed it. It should also be noted that the text was frequently interrupted by tearful outbursts and prompts and cues from a male presence, who may have been her son, since Anna mentions that her husband died a few years prior to her visit to Mexico.]

September 1939. Anna Czerwinski [who is referred in this translation as A.] lived in Lublin, on Ewangelicka, 8, with her husband, Lutek, 7-year old daughter Danka, her mother, brother and sister-in-law. In Lublin, her husband had a shop in the Hotel Wiktorija and a tricot (fabric) factory. A. is involved in her husband's business affairs. Her husband was mobilized to serve in the Polish Army, in which he was an officer. Since Jews were fleeing through Lublin to Russia, A. had a lot of additional work. At that time A. was pregnant with her son Romek.

German bombardment destroyed their property. During the bombing, the entire family sought refuge in a brick factory outside of Lublin. They returned to Lublin, after the killing subsided. Since the Polish Army was disintegrating, A.'s husband returned to Lublin in civilian clothes. At that time, most men left for Russia, as did her brother. Very soon, the Germans started to deport Jews from the Polish neighborhood [of Lublin]. One day, two German soldiers came with a dog to requisition A.'s 4-room apartment. The entire family was given 15 minutes to vacate. When A. asked for additional time, the German threatened to kill her like a dog, and placed a gun barrel to her temple.

A.'s sister and her family were soon deported. A.'s family moved into the office of her sister's husband, on Lewartowska Street. This office consisted of 4 rooms. The room in which A. lived was blocked off by an armoire filled with books. This was a hiding place for men who hid from the Germans. Most of the families in the building were religious Jews. The Germans conducted frequent raids in search for Jewish men. Whenever the Germans would ring the bell at the gates of the building, the lady superintendent would delay opening it so that all the men had a chance to hide, including A.'s brother-in-law and her own husband. A. would sit in one of the rooms with her 3-month old son Romek as proof that there were no men in the apartment. If any men were discovered in the building, they would be led away, hands up, by heavily armed Germans.

Those were the beginnings of occupation on Lewartowska Street. Afterwards, Jews were able to move about with a yellow Star of David. However, they were at risk of being struck or kicked if, they did not keep their respectful distance from the Germans.

At that time, A.'s husband worked as a mechanic. The Germans started to deport Jews from Lewartowska St. A.'s entire family moved to Opole, a small town near Lublin. [Here, a part of the narrative is acknowledged as missing]. They found a place in Zastocze at Iskra's, who had a wife, a son—a cripple, 2 daughters and a baby boy. Iskra owned a cow and a small plot of land. A.'s family lived in a space that was once occupied by the cow.

Iskra knew German, since in the past, for many years he travelled to Germany to work.

A. and her husband tried to find a place in the countryside for her mother, sister and brother-in-law. A. even went to get them, but they refused to come.

To buy flour [for bread] that they needed in Zastocze, A. would go to the mill, which was very far away. It was owned by Mr. Grzybek. Each time she went there, she would bring something of value, so that Mr. Grzybek could hold on to it.

On one of those visits, A. approached Mr. Grzybek with a request to provide A.'s family with certificates of baptism [Equivalent to a birth certificate]. After some reluctance Grzybek agreed and ultimately managed to get them for A.'s immediate family.

For the summer, they lived as seasonal tenants at the widow Chojnacka. She was quite well to do. She had a son and daughter. During that time A. could not be together with her husband. He left Zastocze for Lublin and then, with help of some friends he made it to Warsaw. Part of the way he travelled by truck inside a coffin.

Many years before the war, A.' husband loaned a large sum of money to a Michał Chojnacki—a very good friend. It was in the form of a mortgage against a house that belonged to Michał. When Lutek got to Warsaw, he recorded Michał's loan as fully paid.

While A. was living in the country at Mrs. Chojnacka, Polish policemen came to follow up on a report that a Jewess lived there with her children. They accepted A.'s false baptism papers as proof that she wasn't Jewish, but decided to hold on to two suitcases that belonged to A., until A.'s husband made an appearance at the police station to establish his "I.D."/ethnicity. This arrangement didn't seem to bother Mrs. Chojnacka. A. continued to live with her. However, the parents of Mr. Grzybek's wife, who lived in a nearby village, advised A. to move to another village. In the meantime, the head of the local police, who knew A.'s mother by A.'s maiden name (Pomrokowa), learned from a snitch in a nearby concentration camp that A. was living freely. He, therefore, warned her that the Gestapo would come for her the next day.

A. and children moved to another distant village. They lived with a family, while A. found a position as a teacher in the village school. Living there, A.'s children lacked sufficient nourishment.

One evening, after returning from a lengthy trip to the mill, A. asks for horses to take her to Otwock, where she claimed she was offered a teaching position. They packed up their belongings and headed to the village where Grzybek's parents lived. But upon arriving there, they were told: "Go into the woods, you Jews. Otherwise the Germans will burn down our property." A. begged Mrs. Grzybek and bribed her with a very valuable ring to take them to the

Lublin Railroad Station. She left all her valuables with Mrs. Grzybek. She took only her two children and a small suitcase with her and in a horse-drawn cart went to the railroad station in Lublin. There, she was supposed to take a train to Warsaw.

A. managed to board the train with her children thanks to the intervention of a German at the train station. The train was overcrowded and the children cried all the way to Warsaw. A. was happy, however, knowing that she was going to meet her husband once they'd get to Warsaw. They came to Warsaw as if they were a wife and children rejoining their husband and father, after being on holiday in the country. While living in the village, A. would occasionally receive money from her husband from Warsaw.

The house, in which A.'s husband lived, was near the limits of Warsaw, at the last tram stop. Michał Chojnacki kept an eye on them, to make sure that no one recognized them as Jews. They lived in fear. Every day, before her husband would return home, A. would hoist something white in the window as a sign that everything was safe.

In Warsaw, A. managed to get an I.D. card, so that she could register in her building. The superintendent of every building was responsible for keeping records of all residents and filing that information with the city authorities.

One day, someone noticed that A.'s son Romek was circumcised. That led to the conclusion that he was a Jew. Once the building's superintendent learned of this, he informed A. that he (Romek) couldn't live there any longer. The next day, Michał Chojnacki came accompanied by A.'s husband in order to take him safely out of the house. Meanwhile A. took the children and one small suitcase and headed for the tram stop. They took the tram to Marszałkowska Street, near the railroad station. At that point they were homeless and the children were just getting over whooping cough. Since she couldn't just aimlessly wander around the city with two children, she decided to take Danka to the hospital. Danka was admitted for treatment into the section for infectious diseases. A. often visited Danka in the hospital. Meanwhile, she and Romek would sleep in staircases or in single room occupancies (SROs). This period lasted about 6 weeks. During that period, she would meet Michał, who hoped to find some permanent lodging for A. and her children.

A. starts this part of her narrative abruptly, being surprised how, in retrospect, she was brave and in good spirits through these difficult times. She was roaming around Warsaw, mostly in areas that had open air markets, looking for nightly lodging for her and her son. If she found a place, she, obviously, had to pay for it. If not, they'd sleep somewhere on a staircase.

Michał Chojnacki finally found a room for them in an unfinished house in the Praga district of Warsaw. It was inhabited by a superintendent and his family.

It is Michał who suggests to Anna to turn personally to the leading priest in Warsaw to ask his assistance with placement of Danka with the nuns. The placement would be temporary, until she found work.

The Holy Father ultimately gave A. a letter of referral to the nuns in Chodonów, near Warsaw. A. left Danka with the Mother Superior.

A. and Romek, who moved into their place in Praga, were legally registered and received a food ration card.

A. looks for work. Starts working in a bakery owned by a Mrs. Bobrowska—a very religious woman. The bakery was on the corner of Twarda and Złota Streets. As in many places then, the bakery had a small chapel for daily prayer. A. had to learn the *paternoster*; since Mrs. Bobrowska would listen in to A.'s daily prayer ... [the next page of text is out of chronological order].

A. hears daily from dairy farmers making deliveries to the bakery, about Jews that were discovered in the countryside.

One day, when Romek became ill and A. did not come to work. The following day she learned that the Gestapo had been by the bakery on a lead they got that a Jew was working there. [It didn't seem to have any lasting effect, since A. continued to work in the bakery].

Danka suddenly arrives at the house in Praga, where A. lived with Romek. She had a bad cold, a bad cough, head lice and was undernourished. Apparently the nuns found out that Danka's birth certificate was false and that, in fact she was Jewish. They brought her to Warsaw and abandoned her in the center of town.

Danka briefly works as a shepherd for geese and then for cows. Then she works as a waitress in a restaurant. One day A. is called from Danka's restaurant and is informed that one of the nuns from Chodonów was by and expressed her surprise that a Jew was working there, serving on tables. The manager not only intended to ignore that complaint, but even offered a job to A.

A. finds a new job for Danka at a hat maker's. There Danka does all sorts of odd jobs.

At that time, A.'s husband was working as a watchmaker in Minsk Mazowiecki. They would meet as a family every two weeks at a designated spot in a park on the outskirts of Warsaw. Romek [who hadn't seen his father much] did not know that this was his father. He knew him as Mr. Rutek. [a mispronunciation of his father's name of Lutek]

A. finds another job for Danka as a companion for a child in a house of an engineer.

The Polish underground was well organized and strong. Periodically a German officer would be killed. Then the Germans would come to an office, round up many Polish men and murdered them as revenge.

One day, A.'s husband came by bike to tell A. that the Russians were approaching Warsaw and the Germans were fleeing. He advised her to take the children and move away from Warsaw, since the banks of the Vistula were bound to be a major locale for a battle. A. left Warsaw for Falenice—a suburb in the direction of Otwock. Mrs. Bobrowska (owner of the bakery) urged A. to stay with her, since she had enough provisions to last her a year. A. declined the offer. In

Falenice, A. found an apartment that belonged to a German woman, who by then was fleeing Poland. A.'s husband found A. because she left her new address on the door in her place in Warsaw.

All 4 of them spent some time in a bomb shelter in Falenice as the Russians waged a fight for the town. The battle for Palenice did not last long.

Later, A.'s husband went to Warsaw to search for his relatives, but found no one. Warsaw was in ruins. A. went to Lublin in search of her relatives. She also found no one alive, not family, nor friends, nor people who worked for them before the war. She turned to the Red Cross, but that was also fruitless. She went to her father's grave, but found it leveled.

The entire family moves to Lublin. Danka started attending a private high school (*gymnasium*), the same one that A. attended. She quickly made up for her learning deficiencies with the help of the headmistress of the school, who remembered the A.'s family.

From Lublin the family moved to Lower Silesia to Reichenbach. There, Danka continued to attend high school and started studying music composition at the conservatory. From there they moved to Szczecin. From there they took advantage of the possibility of emigrating to Israel. They had to leave all their possessions behind. They lived in Israel for 2 years. From there they moved to France, where they lived a few months. From there they moved to Brazil, where they lived 8 years. They decided to wait to make the quota for emigrating to the U.S.

A. is writing this recollection in a spa in Guadalajara, Mexico, where she spent a month on holiday. This gave her the chance to gather her thoughts and compile this record of what they lived through during WW II.

At this point, A.'s husband died in New York, some years ago. Danka now has two children. She completed medical school in Mexico. She lives in the U.S. and is a Doctor of Psychiatry. A son [who is identified as Marek] is 15-year-old. A daughter, named Renée is 13 years old. The son Romek, also completed medical school in Mexico and is a Doctor of Neurology.

A. worked for years in New York. She is now retired. She lives in California and receives Social Security.