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PIEKALKIEWICZ, Lech  
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project  
Polish  
RG-50.488\*0021

In this interview, Lech Piekalkiewicz, born on January 13, 1924 in Poznań, discusses his relationships with Jewish people as a young boy. He describes his arrest by Gestapo in 1943 and his internment in the Pawiak prison in Warsaw. He shares his observations of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and presents a detailed description of his 4 month stay in Auschwitz-Birkenau, including the operations of the gas chambers and the crematoria. He also talks about incarcerations in Neuengamme, Hanover **Schteken** and Bergen Belsen camps in Germany. He talks about his liberation by the British army from Bergen Belsen and his return to Poland in 1945.

Tape 1

[01:] 00:07:15 – [01:] 05:01:12  
00:00 – 05:05

He introduces himself as Lech Piekalkiewicz, born on January 13, 1924, in Poznań, to a family of intellectuals; says his father was an engineer and his mother came from landed gentry in an area near Brześć nad Bugiem in Eastern Poland; describes his contacts with the Jewish people he met during vacations when visiting his grandfather's estate; says that Jews were in charge of the orchards and fisheries on the estate; mentions that he became friendly with the children of these managers; recalls that he finished his primary school in Poznań after which the family moved to Warsaw; says that his father died just before the outbreak of the war and that the family came under the care of his uncle, Professor **Jan Palkiewicz**.

[01:] 05:01:13 – [01:] 10:48:00  
05:06 – 11:06

He says that his uncle was appointed by Gen. Sikorski (Prime Minister of the Polish Government in Exile) as his deputy; recalls that on January 19, 1943, his uncle, aunt, grandparents as well as himself, were arrested by the Gestapo; mentions that his mother was away from home, thus avoided the arrest; says they were taken to the Gestapo headquarters on Aleja Szucha for investigation; says he saw the effects of the torture when his uncle was brought into the waiting room; describes it as being "softened up" by the Gestapo.

[01:] 10:48:01 – [01:] 15:14:17  
11:07 – 15:44

He recalls that the Gestapo wanted to find out if **Jan Piekalkiewicz** was his father; notes that after being beaten, Lech was taken to an isolation cell in the Pawiak prison which was in the

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Jewish section of town; says that on April 19, 1943 the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto began; states that it was lead by the Jewish Combat Organization, "Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa," (ŻOB); says he observed the uprising from the window of his cell; recalls that his uncle, after being repeatedly tortured by the Gestapo, died in the Pawiak prison on April 19, 1943; describes how German troops, together with Ukrainians, Latvians and Lithuanians were burning buildings in the ghetto and executing those who tried to escape.

[01:] 15:14:18 – [01:] 20:07:15  
15:45 – 20:49

He describes how the Germans and their collaborators used flamethrowers to burn down buildings in the ghetto; says Jews who were hiding in the basements were forced to escape because of the lack of breathable air; says that as the old men, women and children were crawling out of the basement windows they were shot; recalls that the burning fires in the ghetto caused the air in the Pawiak prison to be filled with smoke.

[01:] 20:07:16 – [01:] 25:14:25  
20:50 -- 26:10

He says that on April 29, 1943 he was sent from Pawiak prison to Auschwitz; reports that he was packed with others into cattle cars at the Gdański train station; says prisoners could only stand during the trip but that about 50 km from Warsaw, a group of about 20 men broke a wall in a car and escaped into the woods; says that they were all killed by German soldiers who were conducting military training exercises in that area.

[01:] 25:15:00 – [01:] 30:00:17  
26:11—31:07

He explains that upon arrival to Auschwitz II/ Birkenau he was told the rules of the camp, including how to march and how to take off his cap in front of the SS; *[Lech shows his tattoo, number 119397, on his left arm]*; says that during the period of quarantine his kapo was **Pinchas Chmielowski**, a Jew from Łódź; says the grandfather whom he found in the camp advised him to give **Pinchas** his good leather shoes to receive better treatment.

[01:] 30:00:18 – [01:] 33:33:01  
31:08 – 34:49

He mentions that during the four weeks he spent in the quarantine, he did not receive cruel treatment from **Pinchas**; remembers that after the quarantine, he was sent to barrack B2D (Narrack B24) in Birkenau; says that during a morning assembly the SS-man chose him to lead a team of Gypsies to do some work in the camp; says that knowledge of German was of great help to him; notes that the team he supervised was supposed to lay down some ground foundation for narrow gauge rail tracks; describes how the prisoners wore striped uniforms and frequently lost their wooden shoes while working in the muddy terrain; explains that Birkenau was still being built in 1943; *[Lech shows a picture of a typical prisoner uniform. He describes various insignias on the uniform. For example, the letter "P" identified the prisoner as Polish].*

Tape 2

**[02:] 01:07:15 – [02:] 05:55:13**  
**01:03 – 06:02**

He explains that the narrow gauge train was built to carry construction material through the camp; says that the Gypsies were not cooperating with him and he did not want to be brutal towards them; explains that, as a result, the job was not finished and he was punished with 25 lashes with a stick; recalls that the following morning he was taken to the camp hospital where he stayed for a few days and, with the help of a few Polish prisoners, was able to recuperate; reports that after returning to his block, he was assigned to a group of 10 prisoners whose job was to cut the grass inside the camp near the electrified barbed wire fence which surrounded the whole camp; says that since the work was inside the camp, his group was not guarded except for the guards in the watch towers.

**[02:] 05:55:14 – [02:] 11:13:18**  
**06:03 – 11:34**

He says that since his group was not guarded, members of the team could walk all over the camp; adds that the leader of the group was Polish and because it was a relatively small group their food allotment was good; explains that the smallest size pot used in the camp had a 15 liter capacity so each member of his group received 1.5 liters of soup while a standard allotment for other prisoners was 0.5 liters per person; says the soup contained some grass, rutabaga and nettle; reports that while working during the summer of 1943, he saw many transports of Jews that arrived from the ghetto in Salonika, Greece; says that he believes those Jews were completely unaware that they were destined to die; explains that after the arrival of the transport the selections were made on the ramp during which women and children were separated from men and sent directly to their deaths in the gas chambers; reports that those who were able to work remained in the camp; says that he was able to make these observations from a distance of about 200 meters.

**[02:] 11:13:19 – [02:] 15:10:12**  
**11:35 – 15:40**

He says that he did not observe the actual loading of Zyklon B from the roofs of the gas chambers but he saw the unloading of cadavers from the gas chambers on to carts and their transport to the crematoria; mentions that the people who transported the bodies from the gas chambers were Jews in the Sonderkommando; explains that these people wore gas masks because residual Zyklon B gas diffused into the air when the doors of the gas chambers were opened; says that after the bodies were removed from gas chambers, the doors stayed open in order to vent the chamber before the next load of victims was being packed into it; states he believes that because of overcrowding in Auschwitz, he was sent to Neuengamme camp in Germany on August 25, 1943.

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[02:] 15:10:13 – [02:] 21:11:04  
15:41 – 21:56

He says that at the time he was moved to Neuengamme he weighed 45 kg (99 lbs.); recalls that in Birkenau he lived in barracks that held about 1,000 prisoners where there were two rows of three level bunks; says 3 to 5 men slept on each bunk which were made of wooden planks; says in the morning they received 1 slice of bread and ½ liter of coffee, at lunch they received soup, and that dinner was the same as breakfast; describes that some people who were at the verge of dying and lost their strength were called “Muzułmani” (Musselmen or Moslems); says that they did not have enough strength to work or to move around and that many died in the barracks; adds that most were mentally broken and some committed suicide; *[shows a photograph of a dead man hanging on the electrified barbed wires and a picture of the bunks in the barracks]*; mentions that all members of the grass cutting team were Poles.

[02:] 21:11:05 – [02:] 25:14:06  
21:57 – 26:09

He talks about various aspects of life in Auschwitz, saying that in his barrack B2D there were many Jews but he doesn't know how many; mentions that in his barrack was the team which was involved with building large constructions; says that he did not have contact with the sonderkommando since they were supervised by the SS; *[shows a page of various designations used to identify the prisoners]*; mentions that he heard such names as “bloody **Mietek**” and “bloody **Franek**,” who were notoriously cruel Polish kapos, but he did not have any contact with them.

[02:] 25:14:07 – [02:] 33:46: 08  
26:10 – 35:04

He notes that when the Auschwitz camp opened as a concentration camp in 1940, the first transport known as the “Tarnów transport” contained about 300 Poles; adds that at the same time, there was a shipment of about 30 German criminals who were held in Sachsenhausen concentration camp for having committed major crimes; states that the German prisoners were promised freedom if they would do a good job being kapos in Auschwitz; reports that some of the early prisoners also became kapos, but they were not cruel to others; mentions that one of the German criminals, a kapo **Otto Kissel**, escaped from Auschwitz and hid in Warsaw with the help of the Polish Home Army, “Armia Krajowa” (AK); says he was turned in to the Germans and eventually was returned to Auschwitz; reflects that although there was antagonism among the prisoners, it was not widespread.

### Tape 3

[03:] 00:31:20 – [03:] 05: 16:05  
00:25 – 05:21

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He observed that during his stay in Birkenau, the gas chambers and crematoria worked 24 hours every day; *[shows a map of the camp and location of his block, Number 24, and points out the electrified fence where the grass cutters worked]*; says that because of his work he was able to observe when the bodies from the gas chambers were placed on carts and moved to the crematoria; *[shows on the map where he stood to be able to observe how the bodies were handled]*; says he could see Crematoria 4 and 5; says that bodies from the gas chambers were moved on narrow gauge carts and then transferred on to a flat metal plate which had wheels and moved directly into the oven; says the crematoria oven door was closed and bodies were burned; recalls that the transports of Jews used to arrive daily.

**[03:] 05:16:06 – [03:] 10:43:09**  
**05:22 – 11:01**

He says that members of the grass cutting group were deeply affected by what they saw; mentions that he still has nightmares about it; states that when he was transferred to the Neuengamme camp near Hamburg, he was given a new prisoner number, 22865; says he worked unloading cement bags from ships and that later, he was moved to an area near Hanover called **Hanover Schteken** (Translator cannot verify the name or location of any place called Hanover Schteken); says he worked there for 1½ years in a factory that produced aircraft batteries; reports that about 150 prisoners worked 12 hour shifts in that factory.

**[03:] 10:43:10 – [03:] 15:36:03**  
**11:02 – 16:06**

He mentions that Hanover area was being bombed by the Allied air forces and that prisoners were going to the shelters with the Germans during the raids; says this provided some respite from the grueling work at the factory; recalls that at some point the prisoners were taken to clean up the bombed railway station in Hanover; reports that in April 1945, he was put on a “death march” to the concentration camp in Bergen Belsen; says he noticed that during the march through the forests, the SS guards started to disappear; recalls that the convoy ended up being guarded by teenagers from the Hitler Youth and old Germans from the Volksturm organizations.

**[03:] 15:36:04 – [03:] 20:00:23**  
**17:07 – 20:42**

He relates that Bergen Belsen was in chaos and that nobody seemed to be in charge; says the guards were some old Volksturm; notes that he got sick with typhoid within two weeks after arrival; reports that he was lying on the ground with fever when the British forces liberated the camp; says he woke up in a hospital in Sweden; discusses his return to Poland in the fall of 1945. *[At this point his narrative ends and the witness answers various questions. Answers are listed below.]* He says that in Hanover he did not see any Jewish prisoners; says that Bergen Belsen was a death camp where most people died of hunger and exhaustion; recalls that there were many people from different countries; says that after taking over the camp, the British soldiers pulled back allowing the prisoners to take revenge on their tormentors, however, he did not witness this.

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[03:] 20:00:24 – [03:] 25:02:19  
20:43 – 25:56

He recalls that before the war, the man in charge of the fish farm on his grandfather's estate was a Jew named **Abe Kaplan**; describes how fish were taken in wooden containers to be sold in Brześć; says that after the war he found out that Abe's brother owned a fish store in Kraków and that he supplied Lech with fish during the time of food shortages; mentions that after moving to Warsaw in 1935, he went to high school named after Adam Mickiewicz on Konopczyńska Street; says he did not finish high school because of the outbreak of the war and that, during the war, the Germans closed all public high schools; says they allowed only vocational schools to function; reports that he decided to enroll in an agricultural vocational school; says that Jews were forced to wear armbands soon after the Germans entered Warsaw and that not wearing an armband resulted in an arrest and shipment to a concentration camp.

[03:] 25:02:20 – [03:] 33:03:16  
25:57 – 34:18

He relates that when the Warsaw ghetto was formed, there was a street car that passed through the ghetto; says that at both ends of the cars were German police that watched everyone who entered; mentions that Poles occasionally were able to throw some food into the streets of the ghetto from the windows of the street car; discusses the formation of Żegota, the Polish Council to Aid Jews, "Rada Pomocy Żydom, (an organization of the Polish resistance); says that his uncle, who was a leader in the underground Polish Government was active in the formation of Żegota; mentions that he is presently trying to obtain recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations for his uncle **Jan Piekalkiewicz**; says that since his uncle was politically close to the leftist movement before the war, he did not have any difficulties with the postwar Communist regime; names all the members of his family who perished during the war.

Tape 4

[04:] 00:34:10 – [04:] 05:01:13  
00:28 – 05:05

*[The witness continues to answer questions]* He says that the crematoria worked 24 hours a day, every day; observed the crematoria while working as a grass cutter, 10 to 12 hours per day during his 4 months in Auschwitz; estimates that each gas chamber was packed with about 200 people; thinks that people died within 15 to 20 minutes; says that after gassing, the doors were opened to vent the chamber and to remove the cadavers; says that the bodies were loaded on to the carts by the sonderkommando; says that for each cart, there were 6 to 8 sonderkommando loading the bodies.

[04:] 05:01:14 – [04:] 10:53:25  
05:06 – 11:12

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He mentions that while one group of prisoners was gassed, another group that followed was disrobing, leaving their belongings on the ground and attaching their names and addresses to be able to retrieve their property after the “showers”; says that the sonderkommando used to close and open the doors of the gas chambers; describes how the bodies were transferred from the carts on to metal plates on wheels which were then driven directly into the crematoria ovens.

**[04:] 10:54:00 – [04:] 15:02:09**  
**11:13 – 15:31**

He says that the sonderkommando were always watched by the SS; mentions that he didn’t know any of the sonderkommando or the SS; *[shows the locations of the gas chambers and the crematoria on the map of the camp]*; says that the ashes from the crematoria were dumped into a small lake near the crematoria and that this task was also done by the sonderkommando.

**[04:] 15:02:10 – [04:] 21:40:09**  
**15:32 – 22:27**

He says that during the time he observed the operations of the gas chambers and the crematoria, most of the victims were from transports of Jews from the ghetto in Salonika, Greece; says he had no contact with those Jews; says this information came from other prisoners in the camp; reports that his direct observations occurred during summer of 1943; mentions that the crematoria burned not only bodies of those who were killed in the gas chambers but also those who died in the camp.

**Time coded notes provided by Sam Ponczak**