

BIAŁOWARCZUK, Waclaw

Polish Witness to the Holocaust Project

Polish

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Interview Length [3 links]: 95 minutes.

Waclaw Białowarczuk was 26 years old when war broke out in 1939. At the time he was a teacher in elementary school in **Tykocin**. He mentions that during the time of **Soviet occupation of Tykocin**, many Poles were exiled to **Siberia**. He blames this exile on young Jews who were co-operating with the Soviets. He describes the execution by the German military of about 1,500 Jews from Tykocin in August of 1941. During the German occupation, he managed a retail store and was providing valuable information to the Polish underground forces of **AK**. Białowarczuk was given the **Righteous Among the Nations** award for saving the life of a 3 years old Jewish girl.

Tape 1

[01:] 00:30:17 – [01:] 05:23:08

(00:23—05:28)

Waclaw Białowarczuk was born on April 17, 1913 in **Ciechanowiec**. He received his high school diploma from the **Białystok Seminary** as a primary school teacher in 1934. From 1934 until 1939 he was teaching a variety of subjects in the elementary school in Tykocin. He mentions that Jewish children were taught in Jewish schools until grade 5. Beyond that grade, Jewish children were taught in Polish schools. Just before the war he had 4 Jewish girls and 2 Jewish boys in his class. He says that the contacts and co-operation of teachers from both schools were good and friendly. There were some Polish teachers in the Jewish school however there were no Jewish teachers in the Polish school. He says that out of the total population of 3,000 in Tykocin, half were Jews. Jews were involved in various trades, buying and selling a variety of products. Because of constant interactions, Jews and Poles living in small towns knew each other and maintained generally good relationships.

[01:] 05:23:08 – [01:] 10:17:21

(05:28—10:35)

He says that Jewish students were disciplined, polite and studied hard. He says that in his class there were 6 students in a class of 20. He knew the families of the Jewish students and had good

relationship with their parents. He liked to teach mathematics but was trained to teach all subjects including physical education, religion and Polish language. He says that anyone who had a high school diploma was considered to be a member of intellectual elite. He mentions that in **Białystok**, a city of about 100,000, there were a total of 5 schools of which only 3 awarded high school diplomas. He says that in Tykocin, the population had a sense of danger, a sense that a war was imminent. Some thought that the war will break out in March of 1939. There was a sense of uneasiness.

[01:] 10:17:21 – [01:] 15:09:24

(10:35 – 15:39)

He says that war started with the bombardment of the airport in **Siekierki**. At that time he was a member of the **civil defense** which was charged with collecting various objects that German Air Force dropped over civilian population. These objects such as pens, cigarette lighters, etc, were meant to explode on the first time use. He did not hear of anyone hurt by such objects. He recalls that the central radio was urging the civilian population to withdraw eastward. He and a few friends went to Białystok to join the 42 nd regiment. The city of Białystok was already bombed and he found his unit about 10 km. beyond the city of **Wólka**. He met trucks loaded with Soviet soldiers. This occurred on September 17 as planned by the **Ribbentrop-Molotov** pact. Waław returned to Białystok and was arrested there by the Germans. He was able to escape from his arrest and returned to Tykocin which was already under Soviet occupation. He needed to adjust to a new political situation since he considered that the Soviets did not come as friends but as occupiers. He started to teach in **Saniki** and in Sierki.

[01:] 15:09:24 – [01:] 20:46:10

(15:35—21:30)

He says that the teaching language was Polish but the subjects and the methodology was dictated by the Soviet occupier. In his opinion, Jews accepted the Soviet occupation with open arms. The most accepting of the occupiers were young Jews. He says that the older Jews such as his friends Jewish teachers **Rubin Feld**, **Szajam** and the dentist **Bejnisz** from **Lwów** were not as welcoming of the Soviets as the young Jews. He talks about an accountant named **Granat** who was critical of the young Jews who immediately started to co-operate with the Soviets. Waław mentions that typically the heads of the political branch of the Soviet occupying apparatus were Jews. They were ruthless toward the population. He says for example that it was traditional during the Easter holidays to feed guests who came to visit. When a soviet soldier came into his house, his wife gave the soldier some cold cuts and sausages. When a Jewish political instructor walked in, he demanded that the soldier get rid of the food. He (Waław) tried to explain that he invited the soldier in and insisted on giving him the food as this was done according to the tradition. He tried to defend the soldier. The next day he saw that the soldier was being led to a forward front line where the **Soviets were trying to dislodge a German unit of 250 soldiers occupying a hill called Wizna**. He says that the Soviets lost about 10,000 soldiers in the attack. He also says that

any Soviet soldier, who committed some “political” offense or said something inappropriate, was sent to the forward lines which resulted in almost certain death. This was called *peredowoje* (*forward in Russian*).

[Note from the translator: I believe that the information Białowarczuk has provided in the text highlighted with yellow color is historically not correct. The battle for the Wizna hill occurred during the German invasion of Poland in 1939. The hill was defended by about 250 Polish soldiers and the attackers were German forces which outnumbered Poles by 40:1) When questioned by the interviewer about the date of the event , Białowarczuk admitted that he did not remember exactly the year in which this battle occurred.

[01:] 20:46:10 – [01:] 25:22:08

(21:30 – 26:17)

He says that after occupation of Tykocin by the Soviets in 1939, there was an increase in the Jewish population. He attributes this to some influx of Jews from **Warsaw**. (*The interviewee shows again some confusion about the battle for the Wizna hilltop*). He says that under the Soviet occupation of Tykocin, young Jews were favorably disposed toward the Soviet but older Jews were critical of the situation. He says that Jews were the cause of the Soviets exiling many people from Tykocin to **Siberia**. He admits that he has some resentment against the young Jews for being the cause of many Poles being exiled to Siberia. He says that in 1940, Jews in Tykocin were aware of existence of ghettos in **Łódź** and in **Piotrków Trybunalski**. They knew that in November of 1940, the ghetto in Warsaw was already formed. They were aware of the conditions in the **General Government**. He discussed the issue with some Jews in Tykocin. He says that some Jews such as **Odeta** who was an engineer, two teachers and a dentist, all came as escapees from the Warsaw ghetto. These Jews were the source of the information about the situation in the General Government territory. He says that the Jews of Tykocin realized that the Germans were planning to eliminate the Jewish population. He says that they assumed that there will be a war between Germany and Soviet Union and if the Germans were to occupy Tykocin, the Jews there will be exterminated.

[01:] 25:22:08 – [01:] 30:50:17

(26:17 – 31:59)

He says that not many Jews decided to escape deep into Soviet Union. The prevailing mood among them was that perhaps, somehow, the extermination will not happen. He knows of one case in which a teacher from Łódź left for the Soviet Union. He also says that the Soviets were not very willing to accept refugees from Poland. He talks about the outbreak of the Soviet – German war. He says that the Soviets were unprepared for the war. As the war broke out, the Soviet troops panicked and run away leaving everything behind. He says that the Germans

entered Tykocin on the second day of the conflict. The Soviet army has already withdrawn from Tykocin in panic and left trucks and armaments abandoned in town. He says that the entrance of the Germans into the town was uneventful. Although the Germans were not destructive in the first few days, most of the population stayed indoors, trying to avoid contacts with the Germans. The Germans established a Military Police post and started to control the town. He says that there were about 10 Military Policemen. In addition, they formed an administrative unit for the town. The top 3 administrators were Germans, the rest of the employees were Poles. He (Wacław) was hired as a bookkeeper. He says that he did not have any work until after the pogrom. At that time, the Germans have plundered the Jewish homes and have acquired some goods. They were obliged to send these goods to the **Reich**, but a lot of the goods were kept by the troops. That created a need for some form of bookkeeping.

[01:] 30:50:17 – [01:] 35:05:10

(31:59 – 36:24)

He says that during the first days after the Germans entered the town; the Jews stayed home and tried to become “invisible” to the Germans. He says that in August of 1941, things began to change. One day the Germans announced that Jews were to report the following day to the **Czarnecki square**, next to the monument. In the evening of the of announcement day, Wacław went to see **Rubin Feld** and offered to keep his family in his (Wacław’s) house, to wait and see what was going to happen. Rubin and his wife refused the offer explaining that they want to be with the other Jews and share their fate. Rubin Feld asked Wacław to contact his family in Lwów in case something bad should happen to him and his wife. He gave him a silver cigarette box as an item by which his family in Lwów will accept him as a witness to whatever was going to happen to the Felds. He says that about 30 people did not report to the square the next day. Wacław thinks that a few of those survived the war. He says that among those who survived was one named **Kapica**. Kapice has written a book in which he described his survival. Wacław says that the book was controversial although he did not read the book. He disagrees with Kapice’s claims. He describes that the announcement for the gathering of the Jews was done by some sort of a town crier who walked in the streets with a drum and yelled the order every few blocks. The order specified that the Jews should not bring any belongings and that the gathering was done only for the purpose of verifying personal documents. The crier was yelling the orders in Polish. Until the day of the gathering, there was no persecution of the Jews. The Jews were staying home and avoiding contacts with the Germans. This was different than under the Soviet occupation during which Jews were present in the streets.

Tape 2

[02:] 00:55:22 – [02:] 05:32:10

(00:28 – 05:16)

He says that Jews assembled in the main square of the town starting at 5 AM. He mentions that his brother saw the columns of Jews marching between the towns of Jeżewa **and Zawada**. His brother told him that the Jews were marching with their heads down and praying. In the first line of the columns marched Rubin Feld and his wife. Rubin was carrying a loaf of bread. He says that the Jews were assembled in a school building in Zawada from which they were taken in trucks to the **Łopuchowo** forest where they were executed. There were no eyewitnesses to the execution, but people who lived nearby heard the shots. He says that it is common knowledge that people were executed there and covered with dirt. Their remains are still buried there. He says that the distance from Tykocin to Zawady is about 13 km. and from Zawady to the Łopuchowo forest is about 3 km. He says that Jews were kept in the Zawady school from which they were taken in groups to the execution site. There were about 50 people in each truck. He says that after executions, some neighbors came to the pits and noticed that the earth was still moving indicating that some people were buried alive.

[02:] 05:32:10 – [02:] 10:04:03

(05:16 – 09:59)

Wacław went to the execution site about 2 months after the event. He saw the pits filled with dirt and covered with white powder (probably lime). He says that on the execution day Jews were gathered at the town center around 5 AM. He says that all homes around the town center were Jewish owned and that is why the Polish population was not present at the time to witness the events. He also mentions that Jews sensed the day before they were to report to the square, that something bad was going to happen to them. He mentions that Jews started to hide their valuables in their homes. They hid them in their chimneys, inside the walls, etc. Some were taking their valuables to the Polish friends for safekeeping. He was visited by a friend who asked him to keep a box with a fur inside. He refused because he himself did not know what will happen to him. He says the man took the fur to another place. Many Jews took their jewelry for safekeeping with their Polish neighbors. He says that most Poles were not aware that Jews were required to gather at the town center. He learned about it when he visited his friend Rubin Feld. He had a sense that Jews expected that something bad was going to happen to them.

[02:] 10:04:03 – [02:] 15:38:16

(09:59 – 15:48)

He says that recently he was asked by some journalist *“How did the Polish population react to the executions”* His answer was: *“The reaction was typical of relations between Jews and Poles. He said that it was a difficult question to answer. If one wants to find hate, one will find it. If one wants to find love, one will find it. He warns against generalizations. He says that the Poles he knew were shocked at the events after learning what happened to the Jews. He says that the majority of Poles were shocked and troubled by the murder. But there were some Poles who were happy that the Jews were liquidated.* He says that after the executions, the Germans forbade the Poles from entering the empty homes of the Jews. The Germans were first to enter

these homes and started to plunder valuables. He says that there were also some Poles who entered these Jewish homes to steal money or other valuables. He says that this was a grim stain in his memory about Poles who entered Jewish homes to rob some valuables of the inhabitants who were just murdered. He says that in his mind, this was a terrible act perpetrated by some people. Although the Germans forbade entering into the Jewish homes, they were lax in enforcing their own order. He mentions that there were about 300 Jewish families that were murdered. The Germans ordered that some items such as furniture, sewing machines, etc. be assembled at a storage facility near the church. He says that the Germans could not account for every piece of furniture or appliance, thus some of it was stolen by the local Polish population. The rest was assembled near the church.

[02:] 15:38:16 – [02:] 20:01:00

(15:48 – 20:21)

The Germans decided to sell off the items that were gathered at the warehouse near the church. He estimates that the revenue from the sale of the Jewish property brought about 60,000 German marks, which was a substantial sum of money. He says that he proposed to the German authority to use this revenue to open a store which would be controlled by the town administration. He asked for permission to organize and manage the store. He was allowed to form and manage the store which he did until the end of the war. He says that he did not enrich himself from operating the store. He felt that it was morally wrong to benefit personally from selling Jewish property. The store supported a few people who worked there. He says that he used the money given to him by the Germans to buy goods and then sell them. At some point he used the profits to support a local **Home Army (AK)** unit. He says that there was no accounting in a formal sense. The inventory was not known exactly and many people were only concerned with obtaining some documents that confirmed the ownership of the goods.

[02:] 20:01:00 – [02:] 25:56:21

(20:21 – 26:32)

He says that most Poles received the news about the murder of the Jews with shock and regret. But some elements were happy with the murder. He says that those who were happy with the liquidation were elements of the **National Democracy (ND)** party who used to **boycott** Jewish stores before the war. He recollects that about 30 Jews did not report to the market square as ordered by the Germans. He did not know any of these people. A few survived. He did not know one of the survivors named Kapice. He says that his circle of friends whom he considers to be intellectuals were mostly teachers among whom were some Jews. He does not think that the 30 people who did not come to the square were hidden among the Poles in Tykocin. He recalls that about 2 months before the present interview, he had a meeting with two Israelis who asked him if he knew that there was a letter written by the Poles to the German authority, asking them to liquidate the Jews. He terminated the interview right away.

[02:] 25:56:21 – [02:] 29:46:23

(26:32 – 30:31)

The interviewer indicated that a member of the Israeli parliament by the name **Ravit** said that members of his family from Tykocin were murdered there. Mr. Ravitz apparently visited Tykocin in April of 1998, but Waław did not see him. He says that after liquidation of the Jews, their homes were taken over by the Poles. Some homes stayed unoccupied until the end of the war. Those homes were either sold by the authorities or assigned to some people. Waław received the medal of “**Righteous Among the Nations**” He explains that he received this prize for saving a 3 years old Jewish girl. He tells about a roundup of Poles that occurred in 1943. Among those who were caught in the roundup was a Jewish woman with a child. He relates that the woman whose name was **Pakulska**, had escaped with her child from the **Bialystok ghetto** prior to its liquidation and since that time was hiding in Tykocin with two other Polish women. During the roundup of Poles in 1943, Waław escaped with the help of two Military Policemen whom he used to bribe. One of the Military Policemen hid him in his house. During that same roundup Pakulska was taken to a concentration camp but was forced to leave the child alone at the market square. Waław and his wife took the three year old girl to their house and taught her to call them aunt and uncle. They were raising the girl as a Christian to avoid any awareness that she was Jewish. This was done for her own protection. After the war, in 1946, the mother returned to Tykocin, found the girl and took her away with her. After finding her daughter in Tykocin, the mother stayed with Waław and his wife for two months and later returned to Warsaw where she worked in the Ministry of Education. He says that he was never compensated for saving the life of the little girl.

TAPE 3

[03:] 00:26:10 – [03:] 05:05:07

(00:18 – 05:09)

He says that he used to visit the mother and daughter in Warsaw. The mother's name was then Paulina Pakulska, the daughter's was **Marysia Pakulska**. He says that the mother's Jewish name was **Kaufman**. Since Waław was able to bribe the two German Military Policemen, he was informed of the plans and knowledge that the German authorities had. It is from them that he found out that Pakulska was really Jewish and her last name was Kaufman. He also mentions that he shared his information with the underground Home Army (AK). He says that the reason why he was not turned in to the Germans for keeping a Jewish child was that he was much respected by his neighbors and by the Tykocin population in general. He also mentions that he was not religious and that this fact did not cause any problems with the neighbors.

[03:] 05:05:07 – [03:] 10:07:07

(05:09 – 10:23)

He recollects that Pakulska had run away from the Białystok ghetto with the help of her friend named **Zawistocka**, before the ghetto was liquidated. The two were members of the communist party since before the war. Pakulska and Zawistocka joined another woman and rented an apartment on the outskirts of Tykocin. The child was with them. Pakulska acted as a maid for the two women. It appears that one night some members of the **National Armed Forces (Narodowe Sily Zbrojne, NSZ)** have murdered the two women but left the maid and her child alone. He believes that the reason for the murder was that the two women were communists. He says that Pakulska did not look Jewish and that probably saved her life. When in 1946 Pakulska returned to Tykocin looking for her daughter, the child did not want to go to her. She was used to Waclaw and his wife. He says that in 1948, Paulina Pakulska was killed in what he believes was a political assassination. He says that some cousins of Pakulska have taken over the custody of the child.

[03:] 10:07:07 – [03:] 16:54:22

(10:23 – 17:28)

He says that Marysia completed her education and was given a stipend to study abroad. She was not allowed to return to Poland for some time, but eventually she returned and completed her studies in nuclear physics. She left Poland in 1968. He maintains contact with Marysia who presently lives in the U.S. He recalls that some time after Paulina was killed, the **Central Committee of the Communist Party** had a family by the name **Dworzecki** adopt Marysia. To date this is her last name. Waclaw recollects that during the time when Tykocin was under Soviet occupation, some Jews created lists of names of Poles who were then sent to Siberia. He makes a careful distinction saying that he had some very good relationships with the intellectual Jews who were part of his group of friends. However, there were some Jews who were generating these lists and his view of them is extremely negative. He definitely knew of three cases of Poles who were sent to Siberia because of the lists generated by some of these Jews. He states that if he could he would sign a death sentence for those people. He says that some of those Jews survived the war in Soviet Union. He talks about his contacts with AK at the beginning of the war. Members of the AK were his friends, mostly teachers. AK was involved in military underground. Since he was managing a store, he was able to see many people without being suspect. He was providing information to the AK.

[03:] 16:54:22 – [03:] 24:41:01

(17:28 – 25:33)

He comments on the book written by Kapice in which the author claims that Poles were happy with the massacre of the Jews. Waclaw admits that he did not read the Kapice's book but he disagrees that most Poles were happy with the murder of the Jews, although he admits that some Poles were approving of the murder. He claims that most Poles did not participate or helped with the murder. He says that after the liquidation of the Jews, Poles were visibly sad and upset. He says that even today there are a lot of recollections about the Tykocin Jews. He remembers a

Jewish doctor named **Turek** who saved the life of his cousin before the war. He says that although the synagogue was destroyed during the war, it was being rebuilt. He believes that thanks to his influence, the rebuilding of the synagogue was accelerated. He sees groups of young Israelis who come to Tykocin, but he misses the contacts with his contemporaries. He finishes his interview with an appeal for better understanding among all the people.

Time coded notes provided by Sam Ponczak