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DACKIEWICZ, Włodzimierz
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project
Polish
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In this interview, Włodzimierz Dackiewicz, born on February 16, 1930 and a lifelong resident of Białowieża, discusses prewar life in Poland. He describes his childhood and notes his Jewish friends. He also mentions the fate of the local Jews under the Soviet occupation between 1939 and 1941, as well as under German occupation from 1941 to 1944. He describes the deportation and subsequent executions of the local Jewry in Białowieża, specifying that people were killed almost every day. Dackiewicz also discusses the public hangings that the Germans used as scare-tactics.

Box 1, Tape 1

[01:] 00:47:00 – [01:] 10:04:00
00:00 – 09:17

Dackiewicz says that his family has resided in Białowieża for many generations as foresters; says his mother was orphaned during World War I and was subsequently adopted by a Jewish family named **Nowik** in Białystok; notes that the **Nowiks** had two biological children, but their son left for Palestine in 1927; says the family that remained in Białystok perished during the war [*likely referencing World War II*]; says that in 1927 Dackiewicz's mother married his father; says that after World War I there were about 13,000 inhabitants in the city, including Germans and approximately 500 Jews; says the majority of Jews were artisans; mentions that the local population felt that the Jewish population was noble and friendly; uses an example that Jewish merchants would provide credit without additional fees to those who were in need and could not pay on time; says that primarily for that reason the Jews of Białowieża had earned the trust and respect of the Polish population; mentions that there was a synagogue in town; recalls that he sat next to a Jewish girl, **Irena Tabacznik**, in first and second grade; mentions his Jewish friends who lived on his street, including his best friend **Szuster**, whose father owned a grocery store, and two Jewish sisters, **Rachela** and **Paula Słonimska**; remembers a Jewish blacksmith, **Hanani**, who frequently shod his father's horses and extended credit when his father had financial difficulties; says the majority of the town's population was Belarusian and members of the Orthodox Church, and therefore greeted the Soviets with pleasure [*during the 1939 Soviet occupation*]; the members of the Communist Party in Białowieża greeted the Soviets as "saviors"; describes the harsh reality under the Soviet occupation; describes that the Jewish population was badly hurt by the Soviet order that demanded a certain quota of wood since they had no experience in forestry and yet were forced to comply; says that the penalty for failure to deliver their assigned quota of wood was imprisonment in Siberia; mentions that the Jews were forced to pay someone to deliver wood for them; says that at about the same time, the Soviets shut down all stores and shops were forced to become cooperatives; mentions that Jews were not allowed to work in Soviet stores; says that due to border issues no one from Germany and the

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General Government could settle in Białowieża, even though it was considered a town within the Third Reich.

[01:] 10:04:01 – [01:] 21:23:08
09:18 – 20:36

He says that the situation in Białowieża became significantly worse in June 1941 when the Germans entered; says that before the German arrival, Soviets arrested all officials and sent them to Siberia; recounts that Hermann Wilhelm Göring arrived in Białowieża four days after German military occupied the area, and immediately he [Göring] and his collaborators succeeded in antagonizing ethnic tensions between the Poles and the Belarusians; mentions that the Białowieża National Park was Göring's private property used for hunting prior to 1939; says that he saw Göring in Białowieża; says that his friend's father was Göring's collaborator and forester and that even now, his friend's sister travels to Germany and visits Göring's sons; says the torture and killings began immediately after Göring's arrival; mentions the Navy-Blue Police, "Granatowa policja" [Polish police that collaborated with Germans], was organized and recruited Polish Catholics; mentions that the Navy-Blue Police was dismantled and its members were taken away and never heard from again [does not clarify when or why this happened at this point in the interview]; says that when the Germans first entered Białowieża they did not appear interested in the Jews; says everyone knew about the animosity of the Germans towards Jews; says that the lack of any action against the Jews of Białowieża was rumored to be because the Jews understood German; remembers witnessing the Germans detaining his father on June 26, 1941 on the way to the family's potato field; mentions that his mother went to the German police station to find out what happened and she was able to communicate with the Germans because she spoke Yiddish; says his father was released but his mother was arrested under the suspicion that she was Jewish because she spoke Yiddish and looked Jewish; says the Germans let her go after she proved to them that she was not Jewish; says that the Navy-Blue Police supplied the Germans with a registry of the residents; mentions that Germans drove out the Catholic priest and established a military police post in his presbytery; says that in June 1941 the Germans arrested the town mayor **Borowski**, the secretary of the Communist Party of Western Belarusia **Olga Gabiz**, and Dackiewicz's uncle **Piotr Dackiewicz**; says the three were executed on June 28 at a gravel pit near the Pererov white forest; says that between June 28 and July 2 the Germans executed **Krugman**, **Szuster**, and their wives, **Paula** and **Rachela Slonimska**, as well as the blacksmith **Hanani** at the same gravel pit location; says that Jews who lived in the center of Białowieża as well as Jews from the village of Stoczek Łukowski were also executed at the Pererov white forest; describes how he witnessed Jews being arrested around 6 o'clock in the morning when he was walking to his job; says he and his friend **Szpakowicz** saw how the Germans took **Szuster**, **Krugman**, and their wives by aggressively loading them into trucks; says the **Slonimski** sisters and blacksmith **Hanani** were taken away in a similar fashion; mentions that the German trucks drove away in the direction of **Prużana**; mentions that he found out later that the Jews were executed at the same time as **Bolesław Książak**, a Catholic; says members of the Gestapo, identified by their brown collars, took the Jews to the execution sites; says members of the Gestapo used to sit in the back of the trucks and that typically a dozen people were loaded into one truck.

[01:] 21:23:09 – [01:] 30:49:07

20:37 – 30:02

Dackiewicz says he believes that Jews were executed simply because they were Jewish; mentions that Catholics and Orthodox Christians believed that the killing of the local Jews was caused by the Gestapo's fear that their secret communications could be revealed to the Jews since they understood the German language; says the Germans organized a work detail consisting of young Jews who wore a yellow Jewish star on their chests and backs; says this work detail was forced to continually repair the road between Białowieża and Hajnówka; mentions that this road, which was never paved, was continually damaged by heavy trucks using caterpillar style wheels; mentions that the Jews were watched by the Germans, not allowed to talk to anyone, and treated like slaves; says that in July 1941 the Germans started to liquidate local villages of Teremyski, Budy, and Pogorzelce, and the residents were sent to Prużana; says the deportees were allowed to take along enough possessions that could fit on a horse-driven cart and their houses were later burned to the ground; mentions that some Jews from Białowieża were loaded into two trucks and driven to Pogorzelce; says they were pushed into two buildings, the doors and windows were shut, gasoline was poured on the buildings and a fire was lit; believes that about 50 Jews, many of which were elderly, were burned alive in this incident; claims to have accidentally seen this event from about 250 meters away because his friend **Wasia Jeganow** convinced him to go to the liquidated villages to find something such as a saw in the empty houses to take home; says he and his friend came to the village right when the Germans were pushing the Jews into the two buildings; says he witnessed how the doors and windows were boarded up, the pouring of the gasoline on the buildings, and the ignition of the fire; mentions that the Germans stood and watched until the buildings were burned to the ground; says the original occupants of the buildings had been sent to Prużana; mentions that a few days after this event, all Białowieża Jews were deported to the Prużana ghetto and were allowed to take only one bundle of possessions; says the Germans took away their gold and silver and treated the Jews like cattle; mentions that the Prużana ghetto was soon liquidated and the Jews located there were then sent to the Białystok ghetto and eventually to Treblinka.

[01:] 30:49:08 – [01:] 35:00:00
30:03 – 34:13

Dackiewicz says he witnessed the Jews being loaded into trucks to be driven to Prużana; says that through a window in his friend's house he witnessed Germans raping his friend **Irena (Itka)**, the daughter of **Szuster**, and how she was later thrown into the truck; says he observed how an old Jewish woman, being held by her hands and legs, was thrown into a truck as if she were a log; mentions that the Germans were also executing Poles and Belarusians from Białowieża, Hajnówka, and other surrounding towns; says the group of young Jews who worked on the road was also forced to dig pits for the mass graves and then fill the pits to cover the bodies of the victims; says that at the end of August when the mass executions were completed, the Germans took that Jewish group to the gravel pit at Podolana and executed them as well; believes that there were 42 young Jews in that work detail; thinks that besides Jews, over 285 people- Poles, Belarusians and some foreigners- were executed at the same site; says a group of approximately 450 Soviet prisoners of war replaced the Jewish work detail; says he did not witness the executions or the digging of the grave pits, but rather heard about these events from his boss's brother who worked as a cart driver for the Germans.

Box 1, Tape 2

[02:] 01:05:04 – [02:] 10:44:05
00:00 – 09:39

Dackiewicz relates that Germans used many methods to terrorize the local population, including public hangings; says the Germans built gallows in the park near the palace and the first victim was executed there in August 1941; mentions that nobody knew who that person was, but all knew that he was a Jew because of a yellow Jewish star that was pinned to his chest; says the man remained hanging on the gallows for two days; says he saw the body on the way to work, but did not know when the body was taken down or where the man was buried; says that in Białowieża there were about 2,000 German soldiers and military police because the town was a military center in the Third Reich, and German military intelligence was stationed in the czar's palace; recalls that two weeks after the first hanging, husband and wife **Barmutow** were hanged on a double-pole gallow at the corner of **General Waszkiewicz** and **Sport** streets; says the Germans tried to force an acquaintance, Waszkiewicz, to perform the hanging of the **Barmutows**; says Waszkiewicz was badly beaten after he refused, and as a result of the abuse he lost some of his mental capacity; says he saw many other hangings; says after the first hangings, the Germans soon after started mass executions and mass hangings; remembers that on the Orthodox Christmas in January of 1942, many Jews from Bielsk, Hajnówka, and Białowieża as well as many non-Jews reported by informers, were executed; says that his cousin's husband from the East was a victim; says the Germans had sent his cousin's husband a notice to report to the authorities in order to "complete his documents"; says he [*Dackiewicz*] tried unsuccessfully to convince him not to report to the Germans but **Mitia** [*his cousin's husband*] did report to the military police and never returned; says that two days later, his cousin went to the military police to inquire about her husband and the Germans returned her husband's clothes and later arrested her; says that in Białowieża people were denouncing each other and the Germans organized mass executions not only of those who were denounced, but of their family members as well; says on Orthodox Christmas day 295 people were executed.

[02:] 10:44:06 – [02:] 20:36:20
09:40 – 19:27

Dackiewicz recalls other incidents related to the hangings; describes a monument dedicated to Józef Piłsudski by the village that the Germans forced the locals to tear down in the spring of 1942; says that this area was converted to makeshift gallows; says that along with the Germans, Ukrainian members of the military police arrived to be in charge of the hangings; says one of the Ukrainian leaders was named **Żywieluk**; says the victims, men and women of all ages, were partially dressed and barefoot; says these people were forced onto a horse cart and driven under the gallows and that **Żywieluk** ordered the victims to put nooses on; says that some victims willingly put on the noose and jumped off the cart, and those who did not jump off were hanged when the cart driver rushed the horse to pulling the cart from underneath the victims; describes that the hanging people looked like clowns; says he saw all who were hanged because the

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gallows were on the road to his workplace; says at first the view was very distressing to him, but after some time he got used to it; mentions that he saw how people from Białowieża and surrounding areas were hanged and that sometimes entire families were executed together; says that all victims were displayed for approximately 48 hours; tells about his cousins **Aleksandra** and **Mikołaj Tarasiewicz** who were taken by the Germans and both hanged; describes the reasons Germans executed someone; says many executions were in retribution for harm done to Germans; says the Germans called the people that they executed partisans; describes that the Germans considered his two cousins to be partisans, and therefore executed them, because they believed his cousins knew people who were hiding in the woods; recalls an incident in which the Germans arrested a woman and her two daughters from the village of **Kamieniuków** because the woman's husband had escaped into the forest during a round-up; says the Germans placed the woman and her daughters into an open-air pen surrounded with barbed wire, which also kept specially trained dogs; says that a German named **Kat** commanded the dogs to attack the mother and then the two children; mentions that **Kat** tortured his victims until their bodies were covered so thoroughly with blood that they appeared to be painted red; says locals watched what was going on inside the pen; says the German approached the crowd and announced in Polish, "Look, you can see that these are true Communists because they are red"; says the following day the woman and her daughters were hanged; says he witnessed their torture and their hanging.

[02:] 20:36:21 – [02:] 29:37:08
19:28 – 28:28

Dackiewicz recalls another incident concerning a beautiful woman he strongly suspected was Jewish; says the woman worked for a German officer that was the chief of forestry in Zwierzyniec (about halfway between Białowieża and Hajnówka) and most likely served as the officer's mistress; believes that when the German officer left to visit Germany during Christmas 1943, three German soldiers raped the woman and decided to get rid of her; says the body of the woman was dumped at the fence of his own house in the snow; says he moved the body from his property in a wooden cart with the help of a few other men; says no one could identify her body and she was buried as an Orthodox Christian; recalls that when the Prużana ghetto was established, many Jews from Białowieża and Prużana were also located in the Białystok ghetto; says that the Jews organized a system of communication between the two ghettos that consisted of couriers traveling by horse cart between the two towns; says that the couriers were always the same two men and a young woman; says they often stopped at Dackiewicz's house for a day to rest; shares that the Germans were aware of this arrangement because Dackiewicz's mother informed the Germans about the couriers; says that in 1943, his mother tried to convince the young woman to stop traveling as a courier and to stay hidden in her house; says his mother explained to the girl that the Germans will kill her, but if she stayed, she could be the only person from her family with a chance to survive; says the woman agreed and stayed hidden in a secret cubbyhole under the floor in their house; says that after two weeks, the two male couriers returned and asked to speak to the young woman and to Dackiewicz's mother; says the men explained that the female courier must return with them otherwise many Jews would lose their lives; says the young woman returned with the couriers and eventually disappeared; mentions that two months after this, the Prużana ghetto was liquidated and all Jews were taken to the ghetto in Białystok.

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[02:] 29:37:09 – [02:] 35:14:00
28:29 – 34:05

He says that the Germans profited significantly when they deported the Białowieża Jews to the ghettos because the soldiers took valuables to keep as their private loot not to be reported to the German authorities; says that in Białowieża the Germans did not conduct mass executions as was done in other cities and instead they executed or hanged a few people daily *[although the interviewee previously mentioned the mass pit where large numbers of people were buried]*; recalls two Jews from Białowieża who survived the war; names one as Mrs. **Sarenka** who was a housekeeper that lived on the same street as Dackiewicz before the war and identified herself as Polish even before the war; says she only survived the war because Germans employed her as a cook; says the other survivor was a young Jew who was part of the group that worked on the road and dug pits for the executions; says he escaped into the forest, but was eventually caught by the Gestapo and sent to a camp in western Germany; says this survivor's name was **Srulik Malecki** and in autumn of 1945 he returned to Białowieża where he got a job at the same shop as Dackiewicz; says **Srulik** returned home after the war underweight and weak.

Box 1, Tape 3

[03:] 00:39:23 – [03:] 10:55:02
00:00 – 10:16

Dackiewicz continues to tell the story about the Jews from Białowieża who survived the war; says that after the war, authorities allowed surviving Jews to sell two homes which belonged to Jews who were killed during the war; says **Srulik** and Mrs. **Sarenka** both decided to move to Israel; discusses that Jews did not hide in Białowieża during the war because before 1939, there were never outbreaks of unrest against the Jews, unlike many other places; says that Białowieża was a blend of many nationalities and many religions from all parts of Poland; says that the Jews of Białowieża felt that they were Poles, that they were part of a family; explains that during the war the locals did not attempt to save the local Jews because everyone was afraid and concerned with their own survival; says that during the occupation, Jews were very useful for the partisans because when a German soldier was captured by the partisans, only Jews could communicate with them because most Poles or Belarusians did not speak German, but Yiddish was very similar to German.

[03:] 10:55:03 – [03:] 18:25:10
10:17 – 17:46

Dackiewicz recalls that before that war Jews and non-Jews were buried in the same cemetery; notes that today there are no traces of Jewish graves; says that in Białowieża there was a large, beautiful wooden synagogue that the communal cooperative "Peasant Self-Help" used after liberation to store grain, cement, lime, and seeds; says that when the communal cooperative decided to build a new storage facility, the leaders, particularly **Mikolaj Siedom** and **Mikolaj Artiuch**, agreed to take apart the synagogue; says the leaders used the material from the

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synagogue for their own building purposes; states that during the war, there were about 2,000 German troops in Białowieża; says he is not sure which branch of the military they belonged to but the Poles called them “aviators” because of the steel color of their uniforms and an insignia that looked like an airplane on their shoulder straps; mentions the soldiers were stationed in the school and in the park near the palace; says that these soldiers belonged to the security detail and were not involved with the repression of the population; says the military police with brown collars on their uniforms were stationed there; mentions that the Germans also brought in soldiers from Holland, but the Dutch soldiers in Białowieża did not collaborate with the Germans and when on guard duty they carried shovels instead of guns; says that the forests outside of Białowieża were under the control of German military intelligence; says the Germans owned many lumber mills and frequently organized sweep operations looking for partisans; says that when the Germans used the railways they tied Soviet prisoners of war to the car platforms as hostages to prevent partisan attacks; also says that the partisans allowed the locomotive and the wagon with the prisoners to pass by, but blew up the cars with German soldiers which caused many German deaths; mentions that the Navy-Blue Police existed only for a few weeks after Białowieża was occupied and was liquidated and replaced by the German military police; says that Ukrainians and Cossacks were members of the military police and they acted as a German unit; says Ukrainian **Żywieluk** was a notorious member of the military police who achieved notoriety as the executioner of those who were hanged; says that **Żywieluk** escaped with the Germans at the end of the war and was known to live in England; recalls that the Germans in Białowieża organized a “Union of Belarusians” which allowed those who joined to send their children to a Belarusian school organized by the Germans.

[03:] 18:25:11 – [03:] 26:47:17
17:47 – 26:02

He says that in that school all subjects were taught in the Belarusian language, but German was a required course; mentions that the Germans recruited members of the union to join their military forces; says the Belarusians were used only as shields for the Germans in their hunt for partisans; says that before the war there were about 500 Jews living throughout Białowieża; says Jewish homes were given to workers; recalls that the German soldiers assigned to liquidate the Jews took all gold, silver, and valuables from their victims; mentions that United States dollars were not taken because they were considered worthless, and these dollars that belonged to Jewish households could be found scattered in the streets; says people stole windows and doors from Jewish homes and that sometimes Poles used to take apart ovens in Jewish homes and find gold and silver that the owners had hidden; claims that the Jews of Białowieża did not greet the Soviets in 1939 with flowers as was claimed in the German-occupied territory; claims that Jews did not fare better than the Poles under Soviet occupation because their private workshops were liquidated and the Jews were forced to deliver their allocated quota of wood to the Soviet authorities without the means to do so; says that Jewish and Belarusian children attended the same schools under Soviet occupation; says the Catholic population was allowed to organize a Polish school where all subjects were taught in Polish while Russian was just a subject; says he remains the last witness to the destruction of the Białowieża Jews.

Time coded notes provided by Sam Ponczak