

NESTEROWICZ, Helena
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project
Polish
RG-50*488*0082

Tape 1

In this interview, Helena Nesterowicz, born 1910, in Orla (in present-day Bielski District), Poland, discusses everyday life before World War II and the relations between the local Jewish community and other residents of Orla. She also talks about the Soviet and German occupation, and how they affected the fate of the local Jewish population.

[01:] 00:43:20 – [01:] 05:04:01

Helena Nesterowicz begins the interview by noting she was born 1910 in Orla, Poland; notes that while she was still a child, she spent seven years in Russia as a refugee; says that once her mother found out Orla was within Poland's borders after the revolution in Russia, she decided to return the family to their hometown; says when they arrived in Orla, they found their house along with everything else on their property entirely burned and destroyed; indicates that at the time the population in Orla was roughly 75 percent Jewish and 25 percent Byelorussian; says she knew all the Orla Jews; details the work she did for them during the sabbath—milked cows, washed floors, kept the oven fires burning; explains that the majority of Jews had Orthodox Christian maids; notes that their standard of living was higher than that of the rest of the local community; remarks that the Jews were not all bad people; adds that while there were no divisions or differences between Byelorussians and Poles, the Jews were a decidedly distinct group—they had their own affairs and were proud; says they maintained contact with other locals mostly because they were merchants and traded with them; notes that the Jews were smart and Jewish children excelled in school outperforming their peers, especially when it came to math skills; adds with a smile that they were great dancers too.

[01:] 05:04:02 – [01:] 07:21:07

Nesterowicz talks about the time when she worked as a helper for the local rabbi's family; says the rabbi and his wife were very good people, and that they had five daughters; says the oldest would always give her things to do, even though she wanted to play with the other kids; explains the kids liked her and wanted her to play with them but she was not allowed to because she had to work; says the rabbi had a cow, and that one time the rabbi wanted to give her a hand when she was about to feed the cows; remembers the food was in a big pot and the rabbi wanted to help her carry it but she turned away from him and dragged it all the way to the cow by herself; explains that she was a rascal when she was little; says the rabbi complained to her mother about the incident; says she liked the rabbi's wife, but did not like the rabbi, not because he was mean, but because she was a little girl afraid of a grown-up man; says that during the winter she slept in a different room than usual to keep warm and that in the temporary room she could watch the rabbi pray; says he prayed a lot and in a very expressive manner, and that sometimes he would even run around the room; notes that as a child, she was afraid of these ardent prayers, thinking the rabbi lost his mind.

[01:] 07:21:08 – [01:] 10:22:06

She talks about the Soviet occupation; says that as a young unmarried woman she did not have much contact with the invaders; says the Jews managed to secure more rights for themselves compared to the situation before the war, because in pre war Poland, Jews did not have equal rights—they could not be teachers or politicians, but they could become engineers, because there were not enough qualified engineers in Poland; mentions there were many Jewish engineers, doctors, dentists, construction workers, and carpenters; notes that Jewish construction workers built good, solid houses; says the local Jews were happy with the Soviet invasion because of their new equal rights; says the Soviets told the local people that Jews were not to be addressed as Jews; rather they were to use the word “Yevrei” (Jew in Russian) [*incomprehensible sequence in Russian/Byelorussian*]; says Jews did not steal; notes that the Soviets were not accompanied by a militia; mentions again the newly established equal rights and adds that the situation only lasted for two years until the German invasion.

[01:] 10:22:07 – [01:] 14:00:09

She recalls the time of the German invasion in Orla; says the news spread fast through the village; says that her husband did not believe it to be true, saying that Germany struck an agreement with Russia on the division of occupied land; notes she did not know much about politics and did not know what to think of it all; says around that time her son was born; notes there was a military doctor staying at their house; says her husband asked him if there was a war approaching, which the doctor denied, but his face gave him away; says Bielsk Podlaski, a nearby town, was taken over; indicates that Orla was in a border area, so there were many planes and tanks around; says that one of the Vlasov men, a Ukrainian, made a deal with the Nazis and sold everyone in Orla; says when the Nazis were in Orla for the first time during the war, when the Soviets were not there yet, they were very good and gave children candy, and all the locals were friendly towards them; says when they returned they burnt down everything immediately and beat everyone; remembers Nazi soldiers driving through Orla and that around the village there were still some Soviet soldiers; says the Soviets killed one of the German soldiers and wounded another; explains that local Byelorussians found the wounded soldier, carried him to a barn, gave him water and medication; says he remembered that and told his fellow soldiers not to kill them; notes that as a rule Byelorussians treated everyone like a human being and with respect, but when the Germans arrived the second time, they found out what it means to deal with Germans.

[01:] 14:00:10 – [01:] 22:24:04

She indicates that at first, the Nazis left the local Jews alone, but that the Jews were afraid of the Germans; says that later they were all placed in a ghetto with barbed wire along its borders; remembers that the Jews tried to get out every now and then looking for food; says she does not remember how much time Jews spent in the ghetto, but she remembers the exact place where it was; remembers the entrance and the place where Jews put their belongings; says when word spread that all the Jews would be deported from the ghetto, the rabbi's wife asked her to bring them some onions; says the rabbi's wife showed her the place where she buried the family's important belongings; says the rabbi's wife thought the family would return to Orla after the war, or go to Palestine; explains that the same night neighbors came and dug everything up; says the deportation started by organizing the Jews at the market square; says there were only German soldiers there, no Ukrainians, because they wore German uniforms and spoke accent-free fluent German; remembers there was silence all

around; says the Jews were deported towards Bielsk; says the Jews who tried to take packages with food and different belongings were beaten, because the Germans told them they would get new stuff once they were relocated to the Caucasus; says a young Jewish girl approached one of the carters and told him they were being relocated to the Caucasus, adding that the climate is very good over there; says one of the Jews was beaten for trying to sneak a package with him; says she still remembers the scene and feels very sorry for this man; remembers that the elderly people and children were transported on carts and the others walked; notes that Jews were not used to cover long distances on foot, because they traveled in carts all the time; says those who could not keep up with the rest of the group were shot and their bodies left in ditches; remembers that the last person to leave the ghetto was the rabbi; says he spoke to all the Jews in the ghetto, telling them in Yiddish that they should not be surprised at their fate, nor complain about it, because they were destined for such fate; says at this point some young Jews started asking in an aggressive manner why the rabbi did not tell them about it earlier and that if they had known about it, they would have converted to Christianity, because life was dearer to them than religion.

[01:] 22:24:05 – [01:] 30:24:15

She does not know exactly how many Jews were killed en route to Bielsk, because she only heard second hand information; notes that the locals knew all the Jews in Orla so they talked about people being killed but did not know any exact numbers; recalls that before the deportation, when it was already common knowledge that it would take place within days, two young Jews came to her brother's house and hid in the attic; says her brother allowed it; says the Germans were in possession of documents of all the Jews in Orla and they soon found out that the two were missing and threatened that they would kill all the other Jews if they were not found; says two Jewish women came to her brother's house to ask if the two missing men were not hiding there but he said he was not harboring any Jews; reports that women started shouting that the two should get out, otherwise all the others would be shot; says the two men left their hiding place and left with the women; says nobody helped the Germans with the deportation, and that stories about local participation are fabricated, and that the locals only drove the carts used to deport the Jews but they were only doing that because they received orders from the Germans, and if they failed to comply, they would have been killed; says her husband did not help because they did not have a horse; says their friend **Wańka Jakimowicz** was there and it was he who reported that a Jewish girl said they were being relocated to the Caucasus; says after the deportation there were no Jews left in Orla; notes that nobody went into hiding or resisted the deportation; says everybody believed they were being relocated to the Caucasus; says when the front moved she escaped with her family to the forest; says there were many Jews from other villages there; explains that they knew the place from before the war because they used to spend their holidays there; says when they returned there were partisan fighters but does not know where they came from; says there were only men there; notes that only one Jew from Orla, **Panicz**, survived the war; but that during Soviet rule he was a profiteer and was sent to Siberia because of it; says while he served time there he married a Russian woman; says later she ran into him while on the bus and he introduced her to his wife and children, and told her he was now living in Palestine.

[01:] 30:24:16 – [01:] 34:20:00

Explains there were more Russian than Polish partisan fighters in the vicinity of Orla; says the Germans were making life difficult for everyone; says if there were any houses on the

outskirts of a village, the Germans would tear them down so that partisan fighters could not be harbored there; notes that toward the end of the war, the Home Army (AK) was approaching Orla from one direction; remembers that her husband said to take their son and leave the house; says at the time it was winter and she only had old shoes for her little boy, but he was nevertheless happy to leave the house because he did not understand the war; says that soon after, the army came to Orla from another direction and the AK did not enter the village; mentions another village [*inaudible*; **Radzieszany?**], which the AK allegedly pillaged, but she does not want to talk about it.