

RUSSKO, Borys
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project
Polish
RG-50.488*0084

Box 1, Tape 1

In this interview, Borys Russko, born in 1929 and a wartime resident of Białowieża, discusses village life before and during the German occupation. He focuses on the lives of the local Jews and other people of his town who were discriminated against. He also spends time talking about how unified the locals were and that internally there was never conflict between nationalities, rather, it was the Germans who created problems.

[01:] 01:00:57 – [01:] 01:51:00

Borys Russko begins by explaining he was born in 1929 near Białowieża, in the village Podolany, in the flat, where the interview takes place; says his parents were farmers who had 11 hectares of land; says the family was quite well off and was able to afford to save some money.

[01:] 01:51:01 – [01:] 03:25:00

He explains that before the war, Białowieża numbered about six to eight thousand inhabitants, including over 500 Jews; says the Jews were engaged in various professions: hairdressing, shoemaking, smiths, tailors, retail trade; notes that the richer Jews were concerned with wholesale trade; comments that the local Jews were well integrated with the local community; explains the local community consisted of Belarussians, Poles, Jews, immigrants from Russia (so-called “white immigrants”); says the members of different nationalities cooperated and lived well together.

[01:] 03:25:01 – [01:] 05:21:00

Russko tells a story from the middle of the 19th century: at that time famine was rampant, and the poorer Jews endured starvation, but there were numerous families who had large pieces of land who were helping the Jews; notes that **Grigorij Pisarewiczowie** helped the starving Jews, giving them grain, potatoes, milk; says the community remembered the helpful gesture of the **Pisarewiczowie** family; notes that when somebody in the village was in a terrible plight, a Jewish family helped him or her; explains that his father suffered badly from pneumonia in 1934, and if **Frejda Lubietkin** had not helped him, he would have died; says she lent him some money and led his father to a well-known doctor in Białystok who treated him.

[01:] 05:21:01 – [01:] 09:01:00

He says that as a child he had some Jewish friends; says he was in school with Jewish children from the next village, where there were more (Jews); remembers playing in the forest with his Jewish neighbor **Szpulko**; says he was often with the Russko family and that they ate together; notes that with the permission of his mother, **Szpulko** even ate bacon;

comments that peoples' origins were not important to the locals and that everyone was just a human being; digresses to say that even today there are no differences, noting that Catholics are buried in the Orthodox cemetery; says coexistence is a tradition in Białowieża, and that neither World War II nor the Soviet period changed that, especially in the Soviet era when they took care to ensure there were no incidents between ethnic groups; says that the period of the German occupation was tragic because the Jews were pulled out of the community and destroyed; goes back to World War II, explaining that one August morning all the Jews from Białowieża were taken away; says the men were separated from women, children, and elderly, and shot; says the others were taken away to Kobryń south of Białowieża.

[01:] 09:01:01 – [01:] 17:55:00

He says the Germans invaded Białowieża in June 1941; says when they organized their administration early on, they gave a regulation about death penalty: for example, if somebody was caught out after curfew, he or she was sentenced to death; says the punishment was used also in cases of petty theft; says after about a month the Germans shot their first criminals: Soviet-era government employees, poor people, peasants, Belorussians, Poles and Jews among them; says that at first it was not the nationality but the role they played in the soviet times, that was important—it was enough to be arrested and immediately shot; notes that some villages were destroyed by fire around the Puszcza Białowieska (Białowieża Forest) because there were allegedly partisans; in response to a question about German discrimination against the Jews from June to August, Russko says that the Jews were marked by the star of David sewn onto their clothes; says if Jews were caught without the star on their clothes they were immediately shot; says that early in the morning on August 9, Germans in police uniforms came to the house of **Lubietkin**, and got members of the family, **Judel**, **Malka**, their children **Szmulko** and **Frejda**, as well **Malka's** brother; says that in the back went **Szmulko's** grandfather, pushed with a rifle butt by a German; says **Szmulko** and **Frejda** were very sad; says he watched through the window until a German saw him; says he sprang back so the German could not shoot his rifle at him; says he watched **Szmulko's** family being pushed into a truck and taken away; explains that the next day he and his friend **Jan Tarasiewicz** went mushrooming in the forest; says when they got there, they heard the creak of a car and a gun burst; remembers running with **Jan** in the direction of a village and meeting old people going in the same direction; recalls telling the old people about the shots and the people explaining that they saw the Jews from Białowieża being taken away and that 77 Jews were murdered; says after a few weeks he went to a gravel pit, where, on August 10, more people had been shot; recollects what he saw: freshly dug soil and fissured ground, indicating to him that those who were shot must have made movements as they were dying; thinks that there are now more than 400 persons of various nationalities buried, besides Belarussians and Poles, and about 77 Jewish men.

[01:] 17:55:01 – [01:] 22:04:00

Russko notes that he saw some similar scenes during the German occupation: as he would go in the direction of the Orthodox church, he would see several men and women publicly hanged; says the first—the **Balmutowie**—were hanged on telegraph poles for allegedly collaboration with partisans; says that there is now a monument with the names of the victims; elaborates to say that it has to be commemorated somehow, neither the crime nor the victims can be forgotten; says that at the gravel pit in the forest, where more than 400 people were shot, there are now a grave and two crosses: an Orthodox and a Catholic one and the national emblem as well.

[01:] 22:04:01 – [01:] 27:07:00

He begins to explain that the Poles were killed because of collaboration with partisans, the Jews because of their origin, and that the Belarussians were murdered as well because of cooperation with the local government, regardless of nationality; says to have been on the council it was enough to be shot; says counselors were mainly poor peasants; says he tried to find out what happened to **Szmulko** and his family, but was unable to find anything out; notes that he was probably taken away with other Jewish families to Kobryń, so that they could get to Majdanek or Auschwitz; being asked if as a 12-year-old if he was aware of what the Germans did with the Jews, answers that it was an unforgettable experience because nobody could feel safe; says people were taken away and knew that as he saw **Szmulko's** family taken away, the same could happen to his family or others; says the point of the Germans was to completely annihilate the Jews, Poles, and Belarussians; says the Białowieśka Forest was supposed to have belonged to Göring.

[01:] 27:07:01 – [01:] 32:25:20

Russko tells about a Jew from the **Alkom** family that moved to the United States in 1939; supposes that he had to know what was happening in Germany; says the Jew wrote to his family asking them to come to America but they chose to stay in Białowieża, eventually dying there; says more intelligent Jews educated their children, so that the next generation of shopkeepers or artisans would also be educated; tells about a student who came to Białowieża, where inhabitants only studied for three or four grades in elementary school and who was telling about the things outside the village, had to focus; says the Jewish intelligence played an educational role in Białowieża; notes there was no difference in appearance between young people, but the older Jews sometimes had side locks; explains that the Jews were well integrated with local society, that they often spoke three languages: Belarussian, Polish, and Yiddish; notes that the only difference between the inhabitants was in religion—everybody went to their own place of worship; notes that the local synagogue survived the war; remembers that the Germans managed to burn a palace; says that in the early 1960s the palace and the wooden synagogue were knocked down; says the synagogue should be reconstructed because the Jews were meritorious for the people of Białowieża; notes that as a dynamic group they influenced positive development for the whole town; thinks that the first Jewish families came to Białowieża at the beginning of the 19th century and during the interwar era.