

OSIKOWICZ, Danuta  
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project  
English  
RG-50.488\*0094

In this interview, Danuta Osikowicz, born on May 10th, 1931, in Szebnia (ditrict Jasielski, province Podkarpacki), a pupil during the war, talks about her observations of the concentration camp in Szebnia. She concentrates her narration on SS-man **Benke [Behnke]**, employee of the camp, who helped camp's prisoners. She also describes the evacuation of the camp from Szebnia to **Plaszów [Plaszowo]**, near Kraków, and murders of Jews comitted by Germans during this process. Oskowicz also remembers persecutions of Jews in the camp, and inhuman treatment of the prisoners. She recalls incidents of Poles hiding Jews in Szebnia as well. Besides that, she describes the outbreak of the WWII, Soviet repressions against Polish intelligentsia, as well as POW camp for Russians, established by Germans in Szczebnia, after the beginning of German-Soviet war.

**File 1 of 1**

[01:] 00:13:06– [01:] 05:13:11  
00:00 -05:18

The interviewee introduces herself as Danuta Osikowicz, born on May 10th, 1931, in a village of Szebnie (district Jasielski, province Podkarpacki). She says that right after the outbreak of WWII, her family moved to the village of **Pochorce [Pochorce, Pohorzyce]**, where her mother became a teacher; she recalls that her father, a teacher working in the village of Zaleszczyki, came to fetch the entire family, that they were traveling in freight cars during the first days of September [19]39, where Polish army was still fighting against German invasion; she also adds that they arrived in Pohorce before it was occupied by Soviets, and that when the occupation begun, Poles were afraid of Soviet persecutions, and hence her father, an intelligent with a doctorate, escaped to hide in the nearby villages, till he was hired by his brother, curate Franciszek Osikowicz, as a farm hand in his parish; she recalls very well the first day of the WWII; she says how she was waken up by the noise of the low flying airplanes, and how her mother heard on the radio about the German invasion; she remembers that the planes were flying in the direction of Moderówka (district Krośnieński, province Podkarpacki), where the airport was located; she continues, saying that her 82-years old grandmother, Danuta's sister, and she run to the basement, while her mother was sprinkling the basement door with water, for they were expecting a chemical warfare, not the bombing.

[01:] 05:13:12– [01:] 09:59:12  
05:19- 10:16

She recalls that her father was hiding his education, and worked at the parish, where he did all the manual labor; she adds that he survived the occupation; asked if there were Jews in **Pochorce** before the war, she responds that there were several families, who owned small stores, one family of Jewish farmers, and that she even had a Jewish girlfriend named Fajga; she mentions that the village had a Synagogue as well; she does not remember how the Ukrainian and Jewish populations greeted Soviet occupation, however, she talks about Polish teachers from the school in **Pohorce**, who staged a moot trial for children, during which children were playing witnesses, and adds that the Soviets sent the organizer of this trial to Siberia; she says that her other uncle, priest Andrzej Osikowicz, survived Soviet occupation in Borysław, and was not persecuted by Soviets; she mentions yet another uncle, who, having owned 20 hectare of land, was pronounced by Soviets an enemy of working class, and sent to Siberia with his entire family; she adds that he managed to come back and joined Kościuszko's army, but perished in Vistula river, while trying to make his way to Warsaw, to add Warsaw Uprising; she mentions that his sons left Russia with Anders army; returning to her uncle, priest Andrzej Osikowicz, she says that he was helping Jews, that he organized false documents for them, and placed Jewish children in convents.

[01:] 09:59:13 – [01:] 15:00:14  
10:17 – 15:30

She says that she spent a month in Borysław, and that she had a Jewish girlfriend, whose name she doesn't recall, but remembers, that the girl did not live at her uncle's; she also recalls her visit to a Jewish doctor, but does not remember other contacts with Jews; she adds that she heard about Germans beating Jews at the nearby mounds; she remembers that when the situation in Borysław became too dangerous, her father took her back to **Pochorce**; she does not know what happened with the Jews in **Pochorce**, for her family soon left for Szebnia; she continues, saying that in winter of [19]41, Germans organized a POW camp for Russians in Szebnie, and that Russian prisoners were dying there of typhus fever; she recalls seeing Germans who were escorting Russians from the train station in Moderówka to the camp and adds that Russian prisoners were in a very bad condition: emaciated, tired, and clothed in rags; she also saw how Germans were using wheel carts to transport bodies of dead Russian soldiers in the direction of the cemetery in Jasło, but she does not know if they were only the victims of typhus, or also murdered soldiers; describing the camp, she says that it was guarded by four towers, each containing a strong spot light, machine gun, and a guard; continuing her story, she says that the entire camp was fenced by the barrier, similar to those used at the railroad crossings, and that the guards were also posted along the barrier; she adds that Szebnie was crowded at that time, since expellees from Poznań province were living there; she switches the subject to the story of Polish born and raised SS-man **Benke [Behnke]**, an employee of the camp, who lived in her house

together with his Ukrainian mistress; she adds that it was this mistress, who, being herself from Borysław, gave the family the information of the death of priest Andrzej Osikowicz in Majdanek, where he was taken for helping Jews; she mentions that her family was not very close to him, but that his closer family, as well as his friends from Borysław, were in touch with him through exchange of secret messages to and from Majdanek.

[01:] 15:00:15– [01:] 20:00:16  
15:31 – 20:43

She mentions again that her uncle Andrzej was imprisoned in Majdanek for helping Jews; continuing her story about **Benke**, she says that it was a very good man, who was helping a Jewish woman from Kraków, imprisoned in Szebnie, by bringing her medication and food; she says that unidentified man approach her mother asking to help this woman, and her mother asked **Benke**, who agreed to help; she adds that medication and provisions were given to her mother, and then **Benke** took them to the camp; she also recalls that **Benke**, under the pretext of spending a night with Polish women from the camp, escorted them to his quarters, where their families were waiting, and where they could spend a whole night with the family, get provisions and financial help, while **Benke** was in his room; she mentions that he did not bring Jewish women, most likely because they were guarded more strictly and could not leave the camp.

*[a change of the interviewer; from this point on two men are interviewing]*

She does not know if it was a family of the Jewish woman, who gave her medication and food; asked, if the family of the Jewish woman tried to help her escape from the camp, she answers that one night her mother was visited by unidentified men who brought a lot of money, and asked her mother that **Benke** takes this Jewish woman for the night; she continues, saying that her mother refused to take the money saying that she would do it for free, but she cannot, for if the Jewish woman escapes, Germans will decimate innocent people in the camp; she adds that such practices were taking place in the camp when somebody escaped, and tells a story about brothers **Lemke [Lempke, Lempke]**, who both perished after somebody's escape from the camp; she adds that **Benke** informed them that the camp will soon be moved to **Plaszów** near Kraków, and that her mother told visiting men, that it might be easier for the Jewish woman to escape then; she adds that her mother motivated her refusal by her own situation as well, for if the Jewish woman escaped, her grandmother and two children would be in great danger; she mentions that, most likely, Jewish woman survived the camp in Szebnia till its evacuation to **Plaszów** in February of [19]44 *[she is not sure about the year]*.

[01:] 20:00:17– [01:] 25:08:42

20:44- 26:03

She says that during the evacuation of the camp, some Jews were shot in the nearby forest; asked if **Benke** talked about what was going on in the camp, she answers that he did not, and that he only repeated that he cannot be sober, for he participated in the liquidation of the camp in Bełżec, and when he was sober, he constantly remembered people being shot there: covered in blood, trying to lift themselves up and falling down again; she does not know if **Benke** was the one shooting or standing guard, but she knows that in order to function, **Benke** had to be drunk all the time, a fact that he tried to hide from his supervisor, often with the help of his Ukrainian mistress; she adds that **Benke** lived with them till the end of the evacuation of the camp in Szebnie, and then he moved out together with his mistress, but she does not remember the details; she mentions that **Benke** helped their family as well, for he took both sisters to Moderówka, where the storage of Jewish goods was located, and gave them both winter coats; she continues her narration about the evacuation of the camp and says that one night, as her book about the camp says, it was the night of February [19]43 or [19]44, she saw from her window Germans escorting Jews to the train station in Moderówka; she says that she heard terrible shouts of Germans, saw how they brutally pushed Jews using dogs and bright lights; she recalls one Jewish woman in particular, who seemed to push something small in front of her, perhaps a baby, and says that Germans were particularly brutal towards her.

[01:] 25:08:43 – [01:] 29:51:10  
26:04- 30:58

She continues, saying that she heard a shot, and that the next morning saw blood in that place, but she does not know if the Jewish woman was shot or wounded; she adds that a lot of Ukrainians participated in the evacuation, but that there were no Polish blue police present; she also remembers that Germans transported Jews in the cars to the nearby forest, shot them there, and burned their bodies; she recalls people saying that Jews in these cars were singing Psalms, for they knew that they were going to their death, but she did not hear that, however, she remembers a terrible smell of burnt bodies permeating the neighborhood; she adds that being a child, she was afraid to go to the forest, and hence did not see burnt bodies or any objects that Jews might have left behind; she does not remember either if any Jew managed to escape from the camp, but does remember an escape of a Russian doctor; she says that he had a permission to walk to the nearby villages to cure typhus, for Germans did not enter any area infected with it; she adds that the Russian doctor could move around freely and that he used his position to escape; she mentions that she only heard about Jews hiding in Szebnie, but does not know the details, for she was still a child; she also adds that she heard about the pension which the person who hid the Jews was receiving after the war; she also remembers that some people were hiding a Jew named **Wajs [Weis]** and his daughter, in the church tower in **Warzyce [Ważyce]**; she knows that they survived the war, for she saw the daughter working in her father's store after the

war; asked if Jews from Szebnia came back to the village after the liberation, she responds that there were no Jews in Szebnie before the war, that they were coming to trade here, but did not live here: **Wajs**, whom she mentioned before, had his store in Jasło; she also adds that she does not know the fate of **Benke** or his mistress; she mentions that there were other Germans living in her house, among others, Austrian, 18-years old pilots, who perished during the war.

*[a break in the interview]*

Asked if Germans were selling objects left after the Jews from the camp, she answers that local people themselves took whatever they could, but she did not see it, only heard from others; she adds that there were land mines at the place of the former camp, and that she did not go there.

Time Coded Notes prepared by: Elizabeth Kosakowska

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There is no restriction on this interview.