

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Anna Nowak

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The narrative of this oral history deals with events that took place around Szebnie, a village in present day southeastern Poland, near Krakow and close to the border with Slovakia. Anna Nowak, born Gniaź, in Szebnie on June 24, 1919, lived on the estate with her parents, owned by the Gorayskis. When the war broke out, Anna was 20 years old and was single. By spring 1940, one of the “old” Gorayska ladies returned from L’viv to live on the estate in Szebnie. She remained there for the duration of the German occupation of Poland. It was at this time that the manor house was requisitioned by the Germans to house German officers and SS-men who administered the nearby concentration camp.

While Anna characterized the German residents as cultured and educated, she promptly proceeds to describe how under the first camp commandant Scheidt, there would be bouts of heavy drinking, debaucherous parties and loud carryings on, that invariably led to random ‘target practice’, with light fixtures and walls as targets. These orgies would scare Anna and the “old” Gorayska, forcing them to a safer room above the salon, from which they took pleasure at peeking through a crack at the goings-on below.

These festivities took their toll on the house. Consequently, for 2-3 days after such carousing, teams of plasterers and painters would be brought in from the camp to restore the rooms to their normal living standards. The day to day cleaning of the apartments was delegated to a number of Jewish and non-Jewish domestics. The first one was Hilda, a Jewish woman from Krosno. Anna considered her to be the most beautiful woman in the camp. The other one was Margot, who wasn’t as attractive, but still had a pretty face, a strikingly shapely figure and long legs. Both were 17—18 years old.

To the interviewer’s question who would come to the apartments in this manor house to drink, Anna simply mentioned that there were some high ranking German officers who would come from Krakow. However, inexplicably, Anna decided to interject an amusing incident that occurred on March 11, when Adolf Wolfgang came to the house for the first time. He was a very distinguished looking Jew who served as an orderly to Scheidt [Untersturmführer Anton Scheidt]. Anna didn’t recall what precipitated the commotion, except that suddenly, Anna and Mrs. Gorayska saw Scheidt chasing Adolf with a broom in hand, around the court. Both were stone drunk, covered with vomit. And in that disgusting state they remained until Hilda and Margot came the next day to clean them up and the apartment.

When Margot found a job in the hospital, she was replaced by Lala [Polish for Doll]. And according to Anna, she was a real doll—very pretty, blue-eyed and quite likeable. These domestics would be present when Scheidt entertained his company. For more elaborate meals at the manor house, Scheidt would bring the German cook Berndt from the camp. He was known by his nickname Crooked Head.

Anna became acquainted with these “domestics”/concubines who attended these parties, attended to the whims and perversions of its guests and then cleaned up the mess they left behind. Again, Anna provides a vignette from one of Scheidt’s evenings of fun and games that was described to her by the domestics: In the middle of the night, quite inebriated, Scheidt asked the domestic girls to strip naked and to run around the large table in the middle of the salon. Meanwhile he would chase, hitting them with a horse whip.

Under Commandant Kellermann [Hauptsturmführer Hans Kellermann], she says things were tamer. He was more refined and intelligent. He played on the violin and on the piano. As an example, Anna describes the entertainment offered in Kellermann’s apartment on Christmas Eve. He played on the piano and sang “Silent Night” in German, while Anna sang it in Polish.

In passing, Anna mentions that Kellermann had a German secretary, Mantei, who was also his lover. She was very attractive and a skilled typist. Kellermann was very respectful towards Hilda. He even gave her \$300.00 to keep.

In Anna mentions a man named Folkman. He was a German Jew who was a Kapo and supervised Jews in the Szebnie concentration camp. He was even authorized to travel by car among them in the surrounding towns, to draw up a list of those who might have something of value that could be used to bribe commandant Kellermann.

In a few instances, Anna mentioned people who were killed. Such was the case with Lala.

She discusses her memories of Janka Popowicz, who was another attractive Jewish domestic of Kellermann’s who managed to arrive in Szebnie via Krakow’s Montelupich prison. She managed to survive by having somehow obtained Aryan documents. Anna recalls that when Jana arrived from Krakow, she had two wounds in her head that hadn’t healed yet; legs that were all black from beatings and breasts that showed signs of torture with burning cigarettes. It is through Janka that apparently Anna also learned that Hilda ran away from Szebnie to Slovakia.

In another fragment, Anna mentions that after Kellermann’s bacchanalian excesses, she would pour together the left over alcoholic beverages and would bring them to the Ukrainian guards on the property and used that “kindness” to build up credit for future favors, should she need them.

On one New Year’s Eve, Kellermann and other camp officers were arrested by the SS and imprisoned in Montelupich prison in Krakow. They were charged with embezzlement and for enriching themselves with precious stones and metals, stolen from Jews in the camp and nearby towns.

Next names that are brought into the narrative are those of Dr. Shteinhorn from the camp and Dr. Artimowicz from Jasło, both of whom were present in the house when it was time to induce labor in Mantei, after she became pregnant with commandant Kellermann’s child.

[End of Tape 1]

Mantei did not want to have the child, since she was very young, while Kellermann was older and had two grown sons who were already of age to fight at the front. He also had a very attractive and elegant wife who lived with him in Szebnie. She was heard to have expressed her displeasure about how her husband lived in the manor house.

Scheidt's wife, during his brief reign as commandant of the camp, also lived in Szebnie with their 3 or 4 year old daughter. His wife, who was a teacher by profession, used to spend all her time in the camp in order to help her husband amass their wealth by stealing from the prison inmates.

Most of Anna's narrative during the interview is based on hearsay from others. She had very limited experiences that brought her in direct contact with the main players in Szebnie. She also admits that her memory is failing her, names are missing and information is mixed up in her head.

One of the worst acts of extermination in the Szebnie area had to do with mass killing of some 2,500 Jews in the Dobrucowa Forest in the fall and winter of 1943. Anna has very limited recall from that time period. She recalls that some people were loaded onto cars and driven away, and never to be seen again. Later on Anna makes an observation that after the massacre in Dobrucowa, trucks were seen bringing back the collected loot to be sorted and stored in the warehouses in the camp.

An interesting footnote was that Janka Popowicz ultimately survived the war and moved to Boston, MA. There she married her first love, a dentist from the Szebnie area, and had two children with him. But before then, it turned out that Janka Popowicz had some curious, unfinished business with Anna Nowak.

Janka was the safe-keeper of extensive valuables that belonged to Hilda. Later, after Hilda ran away, Janka turned to Anna, asking her to protect and safe-keep all the valuables that Janka had accumulated. This proved to be a challenge for Anna. She solved it by sewing these precious items into her own mother's coat lining and pockets. The older woman never knew that she was a walking safe for Hilda's and Janka's treasures. Janka also left behind a large suitcase, which Anna stored with Mrs. Gorayska in Szebnie.

Anna held the belief that Janka died when she ended up in Montelupich prison for the second time. She was quite surprised when, after the war, Janka paid her a surprise visit. Anna had to return to Janka all the valuables that she held for her for in safe-keeping. The only thing that she got in exchange, was Janka's tale of how she survived the end of the war.

One first-hand experience described by Anna was how she saved Adolf Wolfgang from being taken to Dobrucowa Forest to be executed and cremated. She kept him alive in the attic for at least a month. She also very vividly reported smelling the stench of bodies being burned in the Dobrucowa Forest—a smell that was overpowering and emotionally disturbing. She found this experience especially upsetting since she knew that some of the stench came from people that she knew and was quite fond of. [End of Tape 2]

The last tape was mostly concerned with Adolf Woflgang's escape. With assistance from a number of people and a collection of some funds from his camp inmates, Adolf made it to the Polish underground. After the war he ended up in Mexico.

The last fragment on this tape (Tape 3), had to do with Anna's acquaintance, Eva—a Jewish woman from Krakow. She was a secretary to a German from Krakow, Biegel. Biegel was a friend of Kellermann's. It's speculated that Biegel, who was in civilian attire, but wore an SS ring with skull and bones, may have been Kellermann's associate in his extortion schemes in the Szebnie camp, given how much time he was spending there.

Anna describes one day when Kellermann was hosting Biegel in Szebnie and sent Janka Popowicz to get a bottle of Iron Cognac from "old" Gorayska's cellar. Janka was afraid to go down to the cellar by herself and insisted that Anna go with her. By mistake, they brought up a bottle of olive oil. Biegel took a drink from it right away and was quickly overtaken by nausea. Anna was certain that she would be shot. That fortunately did not happen.

Ann heard Eva's story second hand. It deals with her death. When Eva learned that she was on the death list, she asked her executioner to allow her a few minutes to herself. During that time she decided to put on make-up and get all dressed up, so that she would be presentable at her death. With that allowed, she was executed. And apparently as a sign of Biegel's respect for her, he went to see her on her death bed. [BTW: Her bed was in the Szebnie camp.] This information Anna obtained from another domestic, Maryśka Kołodziej.

The interview ends with a curious and unfinished question and answer exchange between the interviewer and Anna.

Interviewer: Why did the Gestapo want to arrest you?

Anna: They found my address, because there were 16 packages for me at the post office. And it just so happened that there was an inspection and they became interested in me. Right away they referred me to the police in Jasło. As a result the *blue* [Polish] police came to arrest me. So I confused them by saying that instead of living here, that I lived below.

Interviewer: Why did so many packages come here?

Anna: They were for the prisoners.

Interviewer: On your address?

Anna: I had this... [Tape 3 comes to its end]