

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Marian Gargaś

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Marian Gargaś was born on November 7, 1927 in Rzeszów, Poland. The family lived in a two-family, wood frame house, owned by Jews. The Jewish family owned and managed a store. Some 14,000 Jews lived in Rzeszów at the start of the war. In other words, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population was Jewish. Marian attended school with Jews. His mother was friends with the woman whose family owned the house. Her name was Berl Fiskus. Mariam's mother grew up in a rural village and therefore, she knew how to milk cows. Meanwhile, Mrs. Fiskus ran a small farm around the house. So, the two women got along very well. In the family's store, they would buy groceries on credit, which they would pay off at the end of each month. Everything worked very efficiently and conveniently.

The interviewer led off with a question regarding the burning of the synagogue by the Germans in September 1939 at the start of the war. Marian must have confused the date, because he described an incident when the synagogue was burned and the nearby bridge on Dworska Street was dynamited. But that was when the Germans were retreating and the eastern front was advancing. And then the Germans kept a warehouse in the synagogue.

The interviewer tries to redirect the conversation to life in Rzeszów at start of the war. He asks whether Marian was able to continue going to school? Once again however, Marian drifts to a later period of occupation when the school buildings were primarily occupied by German soldiers as well as those who came from the Soviet Union under General Vlasov. Most of those were Mongols from Soviet Central Asia. Marian finally reorients himself towards the interviewers' question and states that the Germans oppressive measures against Jews were not immediate. They were imposed gradually and systemically. By the time that the ghetto was established, towards the end of 1941, the Fiskus family was expelled from the house which they shared with the Gargaśes and moved to Kopernik Street in the ghetto. [At this point of the narrative the tape seems to have suffered a brief, unanticipated interruption and Marian's response is left disjointed. L.W.] Marian returns to his narrative, describing the roll-call square in the ghetto, where Jews would be gathered mercilessly, sometimes day and night. At those roll-calls the Kapos (uniformed Jewish Police), who were created by the Germans, would go around collecting ransom in gold and US Dollars, from the ghetto residents. This ransom was collected rather frequently. This gathering of Jews was visited by a German officer named Hartman. He would randomly shoot these Jews without any apparent rhyme or reason, from a distance of no more than 50 meters. After each gathering like that, there would be 10 to 15 corpses left behind.

The interviewer's questions and Marian's narrative meanders somewhat aimlessly. There was an accounting of an execution of a Jewess and her child, who came out of the ghetto without permission. Then Marian stopped to describe an event on Puławski Street, when the Germans

in a murderous fashion drove Jews to cattle cars onto the Staronimo [sp] rail ramp from where they were taken to the concentration camp in Szebnie.

Then Marian brings up a “navy-blue” policeman, named Jarecki, a Ukrainian by nationality, who seemed to know how to establish contact with wealthy Jews. He was completely trusted by the Germans. He guaranteed these wealthy Jews that he would free them from the ghetto, but first they had to bring with them everything of value. (Ultimately, after the war, he was caught and tried for these crimes and died in prison in Tarnów.) He would be allowed to take them out of the ghetto, to the border between Poland and Slovakia where he had Polish henchmen who killed these “escorted” Jews. But not before they were relieved of their valuables.

The interviewer asks about goings and comings by Jews to the ghetto. It turns out that Jews would be taken out of the ghetto to workshops and factories in town. This would be done under tight supervision by the “navy-blue” policemen and the Jewish Kapos. Then, at the end of the work day, they would be returned to the ghetto.

Then, one of the two interviewers asked whether Marian had visited the ghetto during the war? He answered that he did, but only towards the end of its existence, after the ghetto was getting empty of Jews. Many Poles would go inside to rummage through the possessions that the Jews left behind. They would sort them and bring them to the German warehouses, from where they were shipped to Germany.

The interviewers next asked Marian to describe in greater detail one of his visits to the ghetto.

Marian admits that he was drawn to the ghetto by the off chance of finding left behind that might be of interest to someone his age, be it a bike or a scooter. He would enter through a window into a basement. That way he would make his way through a few apartments.

[End of Tape 1 of 3]

Marian further elaborates that one could do some small business transactions with SS-men for items that were found in the ghetto, if the German could be trusted. And this was commonly done. Everyone was looking to get some sort of deal on the booty. Marian recalls visiting the ghetto in in June/July 1942.

Marian was also witness to how the city fire department would arrive after executions in the main square to gather up the bodies, some of which were not even completely dead. Then they would wash off the blood that covered the pavement. All the bodies were taken for burial on the Jewish cemetery.

In Rzeszów, Jews were sent to extermination camps by train from Staroniło [sp] ramp, by automobiles and they were also chased on foot. Those that were driven on foot were raced by SS-men who were completely drunk. And this was done in order to kill off those who fell by the wayside due to exhaustion. This deportation was particularly intense during July 7—13, 1942. Marian tells of an incident during one of these ‘on foot’ deportations, where a coachman’s family was being chased to the train. The child was unable to maintain the pace and started to

lag behind. A drunken SS-man turned around and killed the child with the butt of his rifle. In anger, the coachman threw himself at the SS-man, only to be shot on the spot as well.

Even German women were outraged with displays of the brutality during the deportation of Jews to the concentration camp or their places of work in the city. And their outrage had an effect. When Jews were escorted through city streets afterwards, there was no shooting or corpses did not appear on the streets.

Marian mentions a locality of Nosówka, located outside the city limits of Rzeszów. Apparently, someone reported that Jews were hiding there. When the Germans arrived, they found a family consisting of a husband, wife and child. The child started to run away. The SS-man enticed the child to come back by offering him a candy. When the child opened his mouth, the SS-man shot him. The parents were subsequently taken away.

Next, the interviewer expresses an interest in the House of the Railway Worker, which served as a warehouse of all property left behind by the Jews in the ghetto after they were deported to Szebnie or Osowo. While Marian expressed an interest in the place, getting in was difficult. In the end, Marian never made it inside.

Now the interviewers are turning to Marian's arrest, which occurred in the spring of 1943. It happened at his place of work in Rzeszów, the *Flug Motoren Werk* [SP]/ (Flight Engine Works) where Marian had the closest relationship with a Jewish co-worker (whose name he does not recall.) Marion had the highest opinion of his co-worker, in terms of integrity and productivity. Approximately 1,500 Jews worked in this plant. The Jews represented forced labor. They did not get paid. Marian was paid with food rations. These Jews lived in barracks on the territory of the plant and were fed there. Marian had a beneficial arrangement with him, where Marian would receive partial credit for his co-workers productivity, while Marian would bring his co-worker some items of basic food.

While Marian denies any complicity in any acts of sabotage, the Germans began to suspect that the repairs at the Flight Engine Works (FEW) were compromised. But even before Marian was arrested, it was apparent that the Germans were deporting many of the workers at the FEW and their numbers were visibly declining. Once sabotage became suspected, the Germans didn't spare any effort in getting to the bottom of it. Marian was brought in for questioning, was beaten repeatedly to either confess or name people involved. He and his friend were handcuffed and taken by the Gestapo that was located on Jagiellońska Street. There they were kept for 3 days. Afterwards, they were marched to the same ramp in Staromino, from where the Jews were deported to concentration camps. From there they were taken to the station Moderówka, and from there they were marched to Szebnie. Upon arrival they were issued a number and an outfit of prison clothes. The entire process of registration, haircutting, shaving and bathing in Szebnie was handled by Jews. However, at the assembly points, Poles were separated from Jews. They weren't even allowed to see one another.

[End of Tape 2 of 3]

While in Szebnie, Marian was assigned to a detail that attended to corpses of Jews that were just executed in Tarnowiec. This detail was charged with collecting, searching and sorting the clothing left behind; and undressing those deceased that didn't have time to undress before their execution. Marian, being a witness to this process, provides a fairly complete picture of this entire process. [Tape 3. Time stop: 7:45] Marian witnessed these executions from a distance of some 150 meters. The executioners were Ukrainians. Marian here relates a story of how his group of Poles, while on task to find Jews who might have been hiding, found a woman and her two children hiding in goose feathers. Once discovered, they were killed momentarily.

At this juncture, the interviewer asks Marian to describe his day in the Szebnie concentration camp.

"Food was paltry. They cooked for us turnips, horsemeat, 15 grams piece of bread, bitter coffee. Reveille was at 6:00 AM. Afterwards we were assigned work."

The final question from the interviewers was whether there was an orchestra in Szebnie, composed of inmates? Answer: Yes. It was made up of Jews. They would be asked by the Germans to play on their holidays.

Were people hanged in Szebnie? Answer: No. They were shot, tied to a post, by a 12-men firing squad. And everyone was required to watch it.

[An abrupt and inconclusive End of tape 3 of 3]