Interview with Ms. Maria Medwit
Language: Polish

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The interviewer asks Ms. Medwit to sign a document to certify that she acknowledges that her statements will be used by the USHMM. Some technical remarks are heard in the background about how she is supposed to be sitting and which direction she should be facing.

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Ms. Medwit introduces herself with her full name (Maria Medwit). She was born 7 July 1909 in Przemysl, where she remained for her entire life. Prior to the war Przemysl was inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews. As she remembers that the interview will be used by an institution documenting the Holocaust Ms. Medwit rushes to add that in the tenant house (*where she lives and where the interview is being held*) there was even a committee. Ms. Medwit adds that she is a national of Ukraine. The interviewer asks how the three groups (Poles, Jews, Ukrainians) coexisted before the war. Ms. Medwit says relations were sometimes good, and other times bad. You harbored some, but were afraid of others. She says she was not afraid of Jews, but of some Poles indeed. It is hard to say that relations between Jews and Ukrainians were better than those between Poles and Jews. She was always on good terms with Poles and consequently lives in Przemysl to this very day.
The conversation shifts to the topic of occupation. Ms. Medwit was 30 when it began. It was a very traumatic experience for her because she had an 18-year-old brother who was arrested by Germans and practically given a death sentence. The 'navy blue police' – together with some Ukrainians and Germans – led the convicts to the cemetery over a railway bridge. Ms. Medwit implored for her brother to be released because he was so young, but nobody would listen to her. She was led to a courtyard (*on 1 May Street most probably though unclear*). People were packing up there, because bombs were already being dropped. Some German noticed that Ms. Medwit was in despair over the fate of her brother. An officer who was in charge of loading weapons from the courtyard onto cars was there too. The first German told Ms. Medwit through one of the Poles who were there that she should address that officer and ask him to release her brother before they take him to the cemetery. She did as she was told. When the officer came over she knelt before him, kissed his boots, cried, and eventually managed to get her brother released. The brother was arrested for possession of arms that he was meaning to hand over to someone from the Home Army (AK) or another organization (*Ms. Medwit cannot recall*). Ms. Medwit says that the German who saw her despair understood her situation, because, as he himself mentioned, he had four children. Ms. Medwit thinks that saving her brother was a miracle and she made an offering at church in recognition of that.

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The conversation now turns to the 'first occupation'; i.e. the Soviet one. The Soviet occupants treated all three groups – Poles, Jews and Ukrainians – equally bad. People were

being arrested all the time; everyone lived in fear. The fear was overwhelming also when the Germans entered. Ms. Medwit's husband had a position with the administration at that time and was working with the head accountant Mr. Gruft, the father of the girl that the Medwits were later harboring. Mr. Gruft was originally from Krakow. His entire family was on the 'other side'. The girl's mother put her up with some people. She knew that she would most probably 'go' herself (*most probably Ms. Medwit meant that she would not survive*) and that only the girl could remain. The person who was taking care of the girl took her to the ghetto in Przemysl, knowing that her father was there. Mr. Gruft was brought to the stone bridge and the girl spotted him there. That person must have known Gruft themselves too because otherwise it would have been impossible to hand the girl over with all the commotion around. At first Gruft left the girl with someone else, but as he knew Mr. Medwit was very fond of children, he asked him to take care of Stella for two or three months. When Gruft brought the girl over, Ms. Medwit was not at home. Later she was very scared. Ms. Medwit says she is very nervous and can barely speak. The girl's name was Stella, she was six and very pretty. Mr. Medwit got very scared when she found out about the girl. She didn't know what to do. Her husband went to the chapter where the clergy lived to get some advice from Father Rynyk/Hrynyk (*it is not entirely clear what his name actually was*). The priest called Ms. Medwit and told her that she should not let her nerves overwhelm her. He was an Orthodox priest (*I am not entirely sure but most probably Ms. Medwit adds that she confused facts because of being nervous: the priest did not call her to the chapter but came to their house instead*). The priest told Ms. Medwit not to stress out too much adding that they would find another place to hide the girl. Ms. Medwit was very afraid because these were awful times – shootings and searches everywhere. Efforts were being made to put Stella in an orphanage in Sikorski Street, but the girl's features were too Jewish and so she remained with the Medwits. However, when Ms. Medwit's brother was arrested the girl could no longer stay there and she was placed at the chapter with the priest.

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The girl was placed at the chapter in case of possible searches at Ms. Medwit's house. They brought her food there. The chapter was half-empty because some seminarists ran away and many rooms were free. Father Hrynyk was the one passing the food to Stella as he had the key to her room. This went on for about two months. Before that Stella had been at Ms. Medwit's house for two years. Ms. Medwit cannot recall exactly when Stella came to their house, but it seems to her as if it was right after the Germans came in. Her presence was kept secret so well that the inhabitants of Przemysl have only found out about it recently from the newspapers. Only one friend who visited them at their house knew about Stella. Even though they had a plaque outside (*it seems like they had a business at home; later it turns out that they were offering tailoring services*) and they had visitors, or maybe because of all that, the girl's presence was never discovered. Ms. Medwit's husband wanted to baptize Stella and formally adopt her. He signed her up for piano classes at the music school (*the school must have been nearby because Ms. Medwit points in that direction; I am not sure though how the girl would have attended classes being in hiding*). Stella was very gifted. When there was a possibility of a search being conducted Stella was sent to the apartment of Ms. Medwit's mother upstairs. Ms. Medwit gets very upset again and excuses

herself before the interviewer. Normally, Stella lived with the others in the room where the interview is being recorded. (*Ms. Medwit gets up to show the previous spatial arrangement*.) There was a separating screen, next to which there were two beds. Stella walked through a closet which had the back wall removed into the next room. In case somebody walked into that room she was supposed to hide under the bed. One time someone did walk into their apartment. Ms. Medwit's husband made someone a pair of leggings. That person was caught by Germans who asked them where they had got the tights. One of these Germans later came to Ms. Medwit's house. Stella only managed to hide in the closet behind some coats so that one couldn't see her. Everyone in the house was very scared. But the German only opened the door and looked for nothing else in there. Otherwise, in case of an emergency, the girl would go through the closet to the other room, where she would hide under the bed. Nobody helped the Medwits out financially. The formerly mentioned priest was also poor; after all it was a war. Stella's mother was allegedly killed in Krakow. The father went back there, was discovered and executed. After the war her uncle's wife took Stella away. She cried and was reluctant to leave. She grew very close with Ms. Medwit's husband, whom she referred to as uncle. He was like a father to her; he played with her. Ms. Medwit did not have the time to do that since she was the main housekeeper. The relative took Stella away a week or two after the Soviets entered. Eventually the woman took the girl to a kibbutz in Israel. There, Stella met her future husband and got married.

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After the war Stella wrote to the Medwits. Sometimes she would complain about life in the kibbutz, because, as Ms. Medwit says, she was a little clumsy and still a child after all. Stella lives in Israel until this very day and has three children. Ever since Mr. Medwit passed away they are in less frequent contact. Ms. Medwit's son wrote to Stella to notify her of that event. Ms. Medwit does not remember what Stella's last name is now that she is married. Except for the Medwits there was one more person in their tenant house who was harboring Jews. His name was Kaminski and he was hiding doctor Szetner/Szetler (*unclear pronunciation*), his wife and two daughters. They were hiding in the basement. Kaminski knew the Medwits were aware of the fact he was hiding the Szetner family, but he in turn did not know that the Medwits were hiding Stella. Even after the war Ms. Medwit was afraid to talk about it. Through all these years Stella got out of the house just once. That one time the Medwits sent her to the (Orthodox) church. Some children who remembered her from back when she was still going outside recognized her. They started to call her name. Stella got scared and ran back home. Mr. and Ms. Medwit were concerned if nobody noticed which house she walked into. Apart from that one time Stella never left the house, but nights she would go upstairs to Ms. Medwit's mother's apartment. When Stella fell sick they got her a Ukrainian doctor whose wife was Jewish. The only people then who knew about Stella were the doctor, the priest and that friend of the Medwits who already passed away. That friend also did not help them either financially or in any other way. Ms. Medwit's husband decided to take care of Stella because he was fond of children (*which they did not have at the time, or at least this is what Ms. Medwit seems to be saying*). He thought it would be possible to baptize the girl but the priest said that this would require her consent, which she was too young to give still. The Medwits did not try to convince the

priest to make an exception and baptize her anyway; Ms. Medwit thinks the decision not to pursue the baptism plan was mainly a factor of being scared. Ms. Medwit recalls that the fear was so overwhelming that it negatively affected her pregnancy. Her daughter was born disabled and has remained paralyzed. She is now fifty. Ms. Medwit is not sure, given the choice, whether she would make the same decision again – save the life of somebody else's child for the price of her own child's health. Her husband was more courageous and he felt less fear. Ms. Medwit calls herself a coward. She recalls how one time her husband pointed out to Kaminski that he should not be buying papers in German since people know he doesn't speak the language. Ultimately though nobody found out the Szetners were in the basement and Ms. Medwit recalls how after the war was over they went outside, started hugging and kissing each other. During the occupation Ms. Medwit used to see them from her window when they were getting some air at night. She did not want to reveal her presence for fear of scaring them. They would hide on a porch under a balcony. Only Ms. Medwit was able to see them from her window. They would not go out too often and never further than the porch. In the basement they had this deeper hole in the ground where they would hide in case of an emergency. Ms. Medwit recollects that many Ukrainians were harboring Jews. Ms. Medwit gave the addressed (*probably of Jews that had been hidden during the war*) to a friend who went to Canada to work for them. She doesn't remember these names anymore though. Ms. Medwit cannot recall any Poles harboring Jews in the neighborhood. She remembers a Ukrainian called Ryszko (*last name*) who worked as an administrator and was hiding three families in his house in the countryside. All of them survived the war. There were also those who denounced others. There was a tenant house on Sikorski Street destroyed by bombs. About 15 Jews found a hiding place in the rubble. Someone saw and denounced them. Ms. Medwit doesn't know who that person was but Germans executed all of these Jews. She did not go to see this because she was afraid.

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The Medwits were honored with a medal for hiding Stella (*later displayed by Ms. Medwit into the camera*). Her husband attended the festivities in Rzeszow. She did not go but has a book at home with the pictures of her and her husband in it. Ms. Medwit excuses herself for not speaking more coherently and in more detail because of being nervous. She says it was dangerous all the time. Ms. Medwit recalls how one time she left the church. There were Gestapo officers sitting on a sort of a balustrade outside the school. Ms. Medwit's husband noticed them and thought someone had informed on them. He went outside to meet Ms. Medwit halfway and told her about the Gestapo officers sitting nearby their house. Ms. Medwit recalls that she thought they were there to get them and that it was all over. She was petrified. She also recollects how close Stella and her husband were. He would dance with her and sing her songs. Ms. Medwit did not have time for this and she was scared all of the time. They would always speak Polish with Stella. (*It seems like here someone paused the recording for a while because the topic changes very abruptly.)* A lot of Jews were killed in Przemysl. Ms. Medwit recalls a scene when she saw carts filled with bodies covered in blood. She doesn't remember the exact date but she thinks it was warm outside. She watched that scene from a window in Slowacki Street. At that time she didn't use to live in the house where they were hiding Stella and where she now lives. She saw the bodies moving from side to side and the blood that was covering them. The carts (probably six of them) were full – the bodies were stacked one on the other. Ms. Medwit didn't know

whether the bodies were moving because the road was bumpy or because some of the people were still alive. She knew they were Jews because all the people around were saying that. When she moved into the house where she now lives there a very decent Jew living there. From her window Ms. Medwit saw a policeman shoot this Jewish neighbor as he was walking out of the front gate. It seems to her they had some unfinished business. The body was quickly removed. Ms. Medwit cannot recall his name. This event must have taken place at the beginning of the German occupation when people were frequently caught in the street and shot. There was a big ghetto in Przemysl during the war over the stone bridge. Ms. Medwit never went there because she was afraid. The Jew who was shot at the front gate was a friend of Ms. Medwit's brother, but she herself does not remember his name. The policeman was from the 'navy blue police', hence Polish or Ukrainian.

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Ms. Medwit does not remember the liquidation of the Przemysl ghetto; she did not go there to watch. However, she heard what was going on there: people were being transported to other places, and others came to loot what they had left behind. The tenant house in which Ms. Medwit now lives and the one next door belonged to Jews before the war. The one next door was sold. Jews that survived the war would sometimes go back there. When Ms. Medwit's house was about to be completely renovated, the court was trying to find Mr. Torba/Torbe (*Ms. Medwit cannot recall the name exactly*) who was an engineer and a colonel in the Polish army who was the righteous owner of the building. The man was said to have fled to Opole where he got married and baptized. The court was trying to find him to give him back his property but allegedly he was not interested. There were quite many Jews left in Przemysl after the war. Ms. Medwit, who was a seamstress, used to make clothes for them. She also had German customers during the war – that was a boom period for her business because Germans would steal furs that belonged to Jews and have them adjusted before sending them to Germany.