

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Maria Zaborowska

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Maria Zaborowska was born in Warsaw on April 5, 1922. Her father worked in a publishing house. Mother did not work. She had one sister. She is actually a child of the Śródmieście District of Warsaw, near Krakowskie Przedmieście on Bednarska Street, where the family lived until 1938. She attended a good school in Warsaw. She attended middle school on Trzech Krzyżów Square for 4 years. The last stage of her middle school education which earned her a high school diploma took place during the war years in a secret system of education.

In response to the interviewer's question about the multi-ethnic nature of Warsaw before the war, Maria draws on an incident from school, when she was in 5th or 6th grade, when her class was preparing a Christmas performance. The program would include some Christmas carols and one of them was to be played on the piano by 4 children. One of those children was Jewish. One of the girls in the class asked the teacher why a Jew was playing carols. The teacher almost instantly asked that girl to imagine the setting for the performance, with a Christmas tree on the stage and Jesus Christ were in the audience in the back of the auditorium. "Would he have asked the Jewish boy to stop playing with the other three children and leave? Unanimously, the class answered: No! That was the end of that discussion. It was an accurate reflection of the spirit that reigned in her school.

On September 1, 1939, when air raid sirens went off, Maria believed that this was another test of the system. By then, the family lived on Mokotów (district of Warsaw). Within a few days the family was called by the property owner to notify them that that everyone had to evacuate, because the area was expected to become a battlefield. Everyone grabbed whatever they could and made their way to Nowy Świat (district of Warsaw). Maria traces her various moves around Warsaw after Poland's capitulation, until April 22, 1942, when she was arrested.

If Maria's story seems uneven and jagged, it is because the interviewer is imposing his agenda and his preferred sequence for Maria's account of her oral history. The interviewer wants to redirect the conversation to the time when the Warsaw Ghetto was started. Maria begins by recalling taking Tram #1 that traversed the ghetto. For the duration of the journey through that segment of the trip, soldiers were stationed on the steps of the tram and Maria seems to think that looking out the windows was forbidden. Nonetheless, she recalls seeing misery, withered and hungry people. The interviewer sets the date for that tram ride as October 1, 1941. Maria seems to accept that date.

Maria digresses briefly to discuss the dilemma and the contradiction that people faced with the issue of hiding Jews, providing assistance to the Jews in the Ghetto and the lucrative commerce that some people conducted delivering food illegally to Jews in the Ghetto. All of those stories were second-hand, hear-say.

The dialog turns now to Maria's conspiratorial work which led to her arrest.

During the war, after Poland's capitulation, there were many Poles who as officers and soldiers in the Polish army were captured and sent to stalags or were deported to Germany to forced labor camps. Three secret Polish organizations were involved in staying in touch with these prisoners. Maria's former teacher turned to Maria, asking her to be willing to allow her home address to be used for the delivery of correspondence from Poles kept in Germany. One of these correspondents made it out of Germany and arrived in Warsaw. He was immediately sought by others who wanted to find out how other Poles coped in Germany. He was followed by the Gestapo to one of these informational gatherings. Once arrested, under Gestapo interrogation he gave up the names and addresses of people with whom he corresponded from Germany. Among those name and address was Maria's.

This unfortunate indiscretion ultimately resulted in the liquidation of this informant by the Polish underground, even before the end of the war. Of the two adult women who were arrested in that raid, one committed suicide after two brutal interrogations in the Pawiak Prison. The other one was murdered by the Gestapo and her remains were never released. And four arrested female students, including Maria, were sent to concentration camp.

(Maria offers an interesting footnote to the moment of her arrest. She was arrested by a uniformed Gestapo officer and a man in civilian attire, who was the actual snitch.)

The entire story surrounding this incident can be found in a book entitled, Słownik Uczestniczek/Kobiet w Okresie Okupacji. [Dictionary of Women Participants During the Occupation] [L.W.]

Maria and he school girlfriends were sent Auschwitz in October, 1942, after having spent 7 months in the Pawiak Prison. During that time, Maria worked in the prison's laundry.

Maria mentions another book that deals with the war period in the Pawiak Prison that may be of interest: Za Murami Pawiaka [Behind the Walls of Pawiak] [L.W.]

Maria proceeds to tell stories of her days in the Pawiak. First, she describes the transitional cell on the ground floor, where she was brought, once she was arrested. A model of this room can be seen in the Pawiak museum.

A more bizarre recollection follows: There was a commandant Burkl [sp] who had a habit of coming around to prisoners' cells with an enormous German shepherd. He ordered the female warden to open all the women cells. He would also bring with him a group of drunken Jews who were instructed to trash the cells, throwing everything, including the dusty, old straw mattresses and all small personal belongings and food items into the hallway. He then ordered one of the Jews to climb on top of the pile of stuff and start singing an opera aria. Since this happened on a number of occasions, Maria remembers when one of the Jews sang an aria from the opera Rigoletto.

[BTW: Maria states that she submitted a description of this incident at the Pawiak as testimony to the Commission on the Study of Nazi Crimes in Warsaw.]

Pawiak was primarily a men's prison. When an extension was built for women, it became known as Serbiak. Maria describes a ritual that had a cruel twist to it that took place in the courtyard between the Pawiak and the Serbiak. It deals with what was known as an illegal garbage dump. Trash from the women's cells was deposited in baskets. When the baskets became full, 2 women from each floor would carry out the trash bin, under an escort, the length of the courtyard. This was an important task, since entire families were arrested and kept imprisoned in Pawiak and Serbiak. So, this trash convoy gave a chance for some men prisoners to spot a family member and to wave to them discretely. Because of this opportunity, being on the trash detail had a waiting list.

The courtyard of the Pawiak was covered with furnace slag. One day, a load of this slag was dumped in the courtyard. It hadn't had time to cool yet. A few Jews had sacks thrown over their heads and were ordered to walk barefoot along this hot slag. Maria saw them strangely jump and screaming. From that day on, Maria was no longer interested in being on the trash detail. For her it was enough when working in the laundry, when they would receive garments that came from different departments, especially men's, since before being thrown into the cauldron, these garments had to be sorted. At that point Maria saw clothing stained red by dried blood. In addition, since these garments had to undergo disinfection before being laundered, even clothing that may have been laundered 10 times retained traces from the vicious beating that people wearing them received

[End of Tape 1 of 4]

[Start of Tape 2 of 4]

The commentary of Tape 2 is devoted to Maria's transfer from the Pawiak to Auschwitz. She recalls that in July from their cell's window they could hear children's voices playing in the Ghetto. Then one day, during that July of 1942 those voices fell silent. This coincided with the depopulation of the Ghetto. The residential buildings next to the Pawiak became empty. And it

could be seen that people were forced to vacate the buildings in a great hurry, since nothing was secured. Windows were left open; curtains were blowing in the wind.

The investigation of Maria's case was being expedited. She didn't need to be transported from the Pawiak to Alleje Sucha—the Gestapo headquarters. The interrogation took place directly in the Pawiak. Maria recalls that their deportation to Auschwitz took place just a few days after October 11, 1942, since she recalls how her cellmates marked the date of their national holiday. The next day they were prepared for deportation. First, they were taken by truck to the train station. There, they were loaded onto a women's prison car. Here Maria provides a detailed contrast of the women's prison train car and the one used to transport men. [Tape stop: 12:05].

Maria also provides detailed insight into the rituals that were observed when people were being dispatched to concentration camp. During the trip they tried to figure out where they were being taken. By overhearing the sequence of stations where the trains would stop they could figure out the route. Upon arrival, Maria provides a detailed sequence of how the newly arrived prisoners were processed. Maria, however, spied through a broken window a column of men returning from their day's work. They were marched in formation of five men and after each group there were men carrying bodies on provisional stretchers. She figured out that those who were carried must have been men who either died at work that day or didn't have any energy left to return to the barracks on their own and were slated for extermination.

Once processed, Maria was assigned to stay in Block 7. Again, Maria provides a very vivid description of her first impression of her accommodations in Auschwitz. [Tape stop: 19:44]. She then explains how they were first assigned numbers that would be sewn on their prison blouses and why the Germans subsequently switched to tattooing these numbers onto the prisoners' arms. The last portion of this tape, Maria devotes to the work that she ended up doing in Auschwitz. And from the outset she stresses that she landed a good job, because it was work done under a roof. Her unit was responsible for meeting new arrivals to Auschwitz, but not those who were marked for immediate extermination. While these women were undressed and were showering, their clothes were gathered for disinfection in the gas chamber (a routine alternate function of the gas chambers and Zyclon B gas), sorted and eventually shipped these garments to Germany as a form of social assistance.

If the women were destined for the gas chamber, Maria's unit would inspect the clothing they left behind in order to look for any valuables that they might have had sewn into them. Also, she noticed that the quality of the clothing would vary based on the place of origin of each transport.

[End of Tape 2 of 4]

Maria's unit numbered 40-50 people. It included, Polish women, a few Czech Jews, and a few Slovak women. From December, 1942 until mid-January, 1943, Maria was ill with typhus. After a bout of typhus, a person felt that he had feet made of cotton. And while she was listed as fit for work, it was a terrible time. Around the end of February or in March, a general roll call was announced. All the women from Block A1A in Birkenau was forced out of their barracks and lined up in fives and then required to run across a certain distance. If one couldn't do it, she would be sent to Block 25 and from there, the road led only to the crematorium. Maria's turn was coming up and she already saw herself in Block 25, when suddenly a new order arrived, calling all the women back to work. In that moment her life was spared.

Later that year, there was another roll call; this one was in June 1943. At that time, Maria's legs were very swollen. And once again she was lucky to pass the medical inspection.

At this point, the interviewer redirects Maria's narrative to her work with sorting clothing of people who were being sent to the gas chambers. Maria worked there until June 1943. At that point their work consisted of disinfecting straw filled mattresses. By overfilling the area with these mattresses and Zyklon-B gas, a fire broke out which destroyed Maria's work place. Since the fire was not their fault, the only punishment her work unit received was that they needed to work in the field. However, since this was summer, this wasn't too difficult.

In conjunction with modifications being made in the camp's accommodations for both men and women, a new kitchen was being installed. Maria's work detail was selected for taking on the work in that kitchen. This work really proved very difficult since it involved lifting of very heavy pots and pans.

During the summer of 1944 there were very intensive transports to the crematoria of Jews from Hungary. So much so, that there was a shortfall in the oven capacity for burning human remains. To accommodate the demand, a deep pit was dug. Layers of human remains were thrown in, which were then topped with a layer of wood that was soaked and this pile would burn day and night. The arrival of these Hungarian Jews, gave Maria a chance to meet with some Hungarian women who were brought into the kitchen to help them feed this influx of some 40,000 people.

Now Maria decides to tell what happened during the summer of 1944. [Tape stop of tape 3: 23:10]. It deals with the total extermination of the Gypsy sector of the camp in July. The Gypsy sector was organized totally differently than the other sectors in Auschwitz. They were quartered in entire families, attired in their traditional clothing. They even had little children with them. One July night, all the camp's cars were used by the camp authorities to deliver them all to the gas chambers. All the barracks were locked, but Maria says that everyone could hear the screaming.

It was also the time that Germans became increasingly aware that the Russian troops were approaching from East, and the Germans started to deport the camps' prisoners deeper into the German heartland. But first, the Germans dispatched transports of the Hungarian children to the crematoria.

Maria also tries to set the record straight about certain amenities that were introduced in the various barracks at different times so that visitors would not be led to believe that these improvements were there from the date that these barracks were built.

[End of Tape 3 of 4]

The camp started to be depopulated. On September 18, 1945, orders were given to evacuate the camp. Everyone was issued an entire loaf of bread for the road. And the prisoners were driven on foot for 200 km. Maria describes the nightmare that this march was. She was once again lucky, since after slipping on snow and spraining her ankle, she managed to get a ride on a horse pulled cart. Most people who were unable to make the walk were abandoned and left by the roadside to be killed by the retreating Germans. In her narrative she graphically describes the changing disposition of prisoners and their escorts towards one another. Gradually they lost interest in one another.

This march lasted through March and April. On May 2, 1945, 2 American Jeeps arrived in their camp in Ravensbruck, at approximately 3:00 PM and the camp was opened. However, within 24 hours, the Americans retreated to Łąby, to the demarcation point. From that moment, the inmates realized that no one cared about them. They did not know to whom to turn for some food. They got by plundering and scavenging for food. On the 8th of May, they decided to return to Poland. Maria made it back to Łódź.

The tape ends abruptly, but not before the interviewer manages to get some answers to his questions about relations among the women of different nationalities that cohabited with Maria and getting a description of a typical day's routines for Maria while in Auschwitz. The interviewer also acknowledged Maria Zaborowska for her work on the Main Łódź Commission Investigating German Crimes and her contribution to the publication in 1946 of a booklet entitled: Obóz Straceń w Chełmnie nad Nerem [Camp of Losses in Chełmno on the Ner River] [trans. L.W.]