

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Jacek Makles

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Jacek Makles was born on August 2, 1929 in the village of Torzeniec. His father was a teacher there. The village is situated on the left bank of the River Prosna, in the proximity of Wieruszów and Ostrzeszów. It's a locality in the midst of forests. It was inhabited by 190 farming households—approximately 500 people. At no point in time did any Jews live there (in Torzeniec). On the left bank of the Prosna River, Jews only lived in Kępno. Some 2,500 to 3,000 Jews lived in Wieruszów.

Since Jacek's grandfather had a tavern in Torzeniec, for provisions he could go to Wieruszów to a wholesale warehouse owned by Mr. Pankoski or to Ostrzeszów. Since they were able to get all their provisions from Mr. Pankoski, they became friends, so much so, that Mr. Pankoski and his wife attended Jacek father's wedding. Mr. Pankoski was a Jew, who during the occupation headed the Judenräte (Jewish council) that was established by the Germans. He was a wealthy Jew who owned a warehouse and an apartment building.

During the summer, when school was not in session, Jacek and his father would travel for provisions to Mr. Pankoski once a week. Otherwise, during the rest of the year he would go only a few times.

During those trips for provisions for the tavern, Jacek became friends with Mr. Pankoski's son, whose diminutive name was Jureczek. He also had a sister, named Miriam, who was two years younger than he.

(I): Please describe Mr. Pankoski's appearance. Did he dress and appear like a Hassidic Jew?

Jacek: In that respect, Mr. Pankoski was totally European—no attire that would distinguish him as a Jew—no payot, kaften, tzitzit or shtreimel, that was more typical of the Hassidic Jews (a.k.a. Polish Jews) that lived in Wieruszów, on the left bank of the River Prosna. And they were quite different in appearance than the Ashkenazi Jews that lived in Kępno. And these two groupings of Jews were not well known for their collaboration.

(I): I am aware that war reached Torzeniec on September 1, 1939. Do you recall that?

Jacek: Yes. I was a 10-year-old boy, when around 8:00 AM; the first motorized unit came through the Torzeniec courtyard via Bitou Road. Whereas via the road that ran the length of the village they started to march after noon. At around 5:00/6:00 PM a unit that came from the south, decided to take a break at a distance of some 100 m. behind Jacek's house. It was a unit

that on its hat wore skull and bones. Only later, Jacek learned that this was a formation of the 2nd battalion of Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler (LAH), which served as Hitler's personal army and later became a division in the Waffen-SS. This unit was assigned the task of 'cleansing' the entire area from Torzeniec to Bolesławiec.

At 10:00 PM, the unit formed in twos and after a signal from an officer's pistol, fired three salvos in the direction of the forest and at a gallop headed east. In the process they began throwing grenades and setting houses on fire. Anyone who tried to run out of a burning house was shot. Thus, the entire part of Biała Noga district of Torzeniec was violently 'pacified', including women, children and the elderly. In that action, 16 people died, including a 2-year old child, and Jacek's classmate. Another friend who worked as a shepherd was so ruthlessly massacred that his corpse was left decapitated.

(I): Why such a 'pacification?'

Jacek: I theorized and later my theory was confirmed by a statement made by German officers on three occasions during the actual 'pacification': "Resisting German forces will result in the village being 'pacified'. Here I must add that in 1919, when the Wielkopolski Uprising erupted, the last maneuver of the *Heimatschutz* [?]/Homeland security [?] (L.W.) depended on moving in a south-easterly direction, in order to reach Ostrzeszów and snuff out the uprising at its source. Unfortunately, in this village of Torzeniec, the residents organized in opposition to this maneuver. They had 5 rifles and one gun and prevented this half of a battalion of an artillery battery to pass. And that was the reason why this village was punished in this way some 20 years later.

Next, those who were not initially killed or burned were rounded up and brought to the center of the village. From the other side of the river, from Bolesławiec came the German detachment P16. An officer, as if reading a trial verdict to the assembled population, declared that: "Resisting German forces will result in the village being "pacified." In this case, as punishment, every other adult male in the village will be shot. And within minutes of the announcement, by the wall of Mr. Boślak's pigsty, 18 men were executed in front of their children, their wives and their parents. If there was any saving grace in this tragedy it was that all the young people fled from the village, before this SS detachment had arrived.

After the pacification of Torzeniec the unit retreated south, burning Mszanów, killing 16 people. At that point, this detachment reached Podzamcze. There they killed a few Jews who had come from Wieruszów bearing flowers to greet the Germans.

Jacek dismisses any allegations that people in Wieruszów planned to blow up the bridge there. The actions of the Germans were clearly consistent with Hitler's wishes that he expressed at a

celebratory event on August 23, 1939, in Salzburg, by revealing the special assignments that those special SS units had upon entering Poland.

(I): What were the subsequent losses suffered by you personally and by the village? Did the German units leave and move on?

Jacek: In Kępno, in the Middle School, the German 8th Army established the initial framework for administering the occupied territory. Jacek isn't able to recall precisely whether the occupied lands were under military administration for a month or two. Later on they developed a different structure. However, at the outset, the army decided everything. For examples, it was they who decided to bring the remains of the victims of the "pacification," for a proper burial under a chapel opposite the school and then they made an effort to transfer all the victims to the local cemetery on the 23rd of September. They also decided to leave intact the wall under which the men were executed. Now, this wall serves as a memorial wall, where every September 1 it is a site for bringing commemorative wreaths.

(I): What were the first months of occupation like in Torzeniec?

Jacek: I'm sorry to say that during the first period under German military occupation, the Germans conducted purges. They arrested teachers, the intelligentsia, and more affluent peasants and land holders. Although Jacek did not witness this, he was told that when the German gendarmes would come to arrest these people, they would be accompanied by Jews from Wieruszów, who would identify those to be arrested, to perhaps settle accounts they might have had with those individuals. That did not endear the Jews to the local population. When the ghetto was created in Wieruszów, local Poles actually helped to build it. When the third period came, this was a period of good will. They provided material help and relations were much more humane; whereas during the first period, until January/February 1940 the relations were very hostile.

(I): Did the Germans come to your parent's house as well?

Jacek: My father, in 1939 was in the 60th infantry regiment in Warsaw and in the vicinity of Warsaw he ended up being taken prisoner. He saw the end of the war in Oldenburg, Germany, in a prisoner of war camp.

Germans did not come to my grandfather's house. Instead, we were visited by Mr. Pankoski, the Rabbi, (about whom I had spoken earlier) and other representatives of the Judenräte. And because the house served as a conspiratorial meeting place for representatives of the Polish opposition in Ostrów, they would come as well. After those visits, Jacek would ride his bike to Podzamcze. There he would cross the Proсна River to go to the store to deliver clandestine information from the meetings. Just in case he was stopped, as a cover for his visit, he had with

him a list of things that he was supposed to buy. This took all place between 1940 and 1942. Otherwise, at the beginning, except for the punitive attack, no one was arrested in Torzeniec. Jacek thinks that the Germans actually felt embarrassed by this “pacification.”

During the first phase of the occupation, Jacek would make his way to Podzamcze and cross the river to go to Wieruszów, where his uncle, Mr. Gałkiewicz had a forge. And there he would bring information from organizations that were planning acts of resistance against the Germans.

[End of Tape 1 of 4]

Mr. Pankoski, as previously indicated, was a friend of Jacek’s family. His son, Jureczek, was Jacek’s age and his best friend. Jacek would bring messages for Mr. Pankoski either in a sock that he wore in his shoes or concealed inside the upright post beneath his bike seat. Then Mr. Pankoski would come to Torzeniec, to Jacek’s grandfather, since this was a meeting place for representatives of the opposition movement with the ghetto. There had to be some contact between the two. The ghetto in Wieruszów had contacts with the ghetto in Wieluń and the ghetto in Lututów.

Now Jacek proceeds to describe the set-up of a clandestine shelter, a quasi-guard house that protected important people like Mr. Pankoski. He also had two bodyguards who accompanied him whenever he would even walk through Wieruszów or through the ghetto.

Jacek attests that at the outset, the ghetto in Wieruszów was open. With permission, people could enter and leave. It was also well supplied with produce. Gradually, movement became restricted and Jews from other parts of Wieruszów were deported to the northern part of town. This happened during the winter of 1939 and 1940. Then the area was enclosed by poles and concertina wire. Later when Jacek couldn’t get in and out freely, he came up with a clever system for delivery and pick-up of confidential correspondence.

(I): Since you’ve been in the ghetto, could you describe how it looked?

Jacek: What was depressing is that fewer than half of the buildings in Wieruszów constituted the ghetto but almost the entire population of 2,000—3,000 people was squeezed into those few buildings. The overpopulation was terrible. Of course, the town’s officials were allowed more space. The Pankoskis always had at least a kitchen and a bedroom to the very end.

(I): What did the ghetto consist of? How many streets?

Jacek: The entire northern part of town. It consisted of some 30-40 houses north of the market—some 40 to 50 hectares [1 hectare = 2.47 acres. (L.W.)], keeping in mind that each house had some land attached to it as a garden.

(I): How many gates to the ghetto were there?

Jacek: I seem to recall three. And here, Jacek describes how with changing times, his visits to the ghetto had to be adjusted. One must keep in mind that besides the politico-conspiratorial objectives, they had to organize deliveries of food. In conjunction with that, Jacek would bring information where provisions were being stored for pick-up by people living in the ghetto. Most of the time, it was in places in Podzamcze, on the left bank of the Prosna R. One of the pick-up places was the forge of Jacek's uncle. Once information of a drop-off was delivered, the residents of the ghetto would arrive surreptitiously at the designated place and would carry away these goods to the ghetto during the night. Jacek reiterates that he was exclusively a carrier of oral or written messages. He never delivered goods or money.

Even though Jacek was witness to the meetings and discussions that would take place late at night in his grandfather's house, he swore to the Rabbi, who attended one of those gatherings, that he would never reveal what transpired during those meetings. He feels obligated to keep this promise even now, some sixty years later. Nevertheless, he hints at the fact that this house, which was actually in Miechnica (3 km from Torzeniec), was a nexus for quite elaborate exchange of important underground information. Some of the information came from German radio broadcast, other from surrounding ghettos and other directly from Ostrzeszów. Another unusual source was Jacek's mother, who was fluent in German and who befriended the wife of a Captain Hartman, a deputy to Adolf Eichmann. By coincidence, this deputy had sent his wife and child from Berlin to live in Miechnica, in a house owned by a settled German. While Jacek would play with the 2-year old Wolfgang (nicknamed Mousie), the two women would gossip. Every two-three weeks, Captain Hartman would come to visit his wife in Miechnica. At this point, Jacek mentions that occasionally a representative of Żegota --the Polish Council to Aid Jews. (L.W.)], would attend these gatherings. He only went under the name of Mr. Oleg.

Toward the end of 1940, Jacek's family was required to vacate the school in Miechnica, (of which Jacek's father was the director until the start of the war). They (he and his mother) moved to his grandfather's house in Torzeniec.

Tape 2 ends with an account by Jacek, how he was stopped by a gendarme on horseback during his last clandestine message delivery run to Podzamcze, when the ghetto was dying. At that point, the Rabbi was dead as was Mr. Pankoski; while Jacek was grieving the death of his best friend Jureczek. He was brought by the gendarme to the local police station, where he was locked in the basement. He stayed there until someone came along and paid a ransom for him.

[The above account by Jacek might seem confusing and chronologically misplaced, but in fact, becomes quite relevant in the context of the next tape, which otherwise has no particular natural segue. (L.W.)]

End of Tape 2 of 4.

[Some narrative seems to have been omitted or deleted from the start of Tape 3.] Jacek begins his narrative from the day that the ghetto in Wieruszów ceased to exist and his messaging activities came to an end as well. Later on, Jacek learned that the rest of the people in the ghetto, who were mostly the Jude polizei (Jewish ghetto police) were taken to Wieluń. The groups that exchanged information in Jacek grandfather's house, ceased to function. This was sometime during the summer of 1943. At that time, Jacek was under 14 years of age. It was a time that Jacek was only interested in getting Jureczek Pankoski out of the ghetto.

By then, false documents for Jureczek and his sister Miriam were bought. The sister was supposed to be in the forest at the forester Piontkowski's place. Jacek's family was supposed to take care of Jureczek under the title of cowherd, and he had an alibi as to how and why he made his sudden appearance in Torzeniec. However, at the last moment, the Pankoskis did not agree to this arrangement. Although then Jacek did not understand Mr. Pankoski's reasons, he recalls him saying that: "Our children must die with us, since upon our remains, the State of Israel will be built." This was said by Mr. Pankoski at the last or next to last meeting of the representatives of the various underground organizations. Jacek then proceeds to explain how the process for obtaining false German documents worked in those days. [Tape 3. Time stop: 4:28]. Jacek saw Jureczek for the last time in the spring of 1943.

(I) asks Jacek from a written text: What did you mean that the bodies of the deceased were gathered for 3 nights and each night you'd get the tally from your uncle Mr. Gałkiewicz, who owned the forge in Podzamcze and then you'd deliver the message to Ostrzeszów?

Jacek: The events that led to the demise of the Wieruszów ghetto can be characterized as "collective suicide by some 2,000+ Jews." From this point, Jacek is visibly moved and has difficulty describing the events leading up to this tragedy, without tearing up. They died with the aid of a crampon—a device used in the slaughter of farm animals. It's a device that is spring loaded and placed across the head of an animal.

(I): This means that the decision was made by people like the Rabbi and Mr. Pankoski?

Jacek: Yes and after the decision, allegedly, for a period of 8 days prior, the ghetto was in tears.

(I): And did the Germans do the killing?

Jacek: I only know one thing. There was a police outpost in Wieruszów and in Podzamcze. The total of these policemen was 15. During those days, all the German policemen were transferred from Wieruszów to Podzamcze and word has it that they only drank vodka.

(I): What time of year was this?

Jacek: It was either June or July.

(I): Is it possible that these people were sent to another concentration camp?

Jacek: I know that Jews from Kępnno came to Wieruszów. After a period of time, they went on to Wieluń. And at the end, on the last day, the Germans provided a number of trucks and the Jude polizei went to Wieluń.

After the liquidation of the ghetto, for a period of time came some German commissions. After that, the Germans were selling some things, like furniture and they tried to settle people in the houses, so that by the end of the war in January 1945, the ghetto was re-settled by residents of nearby villages. But during that time, Jacek didn't visit the territory of the ghetto. Of course, after the war he would come and reminisce as to where various places were.

Tape 3. Stop time: 12:52. The interviewer reverts to questioning Jacek about the visits by Mr. Pankoski and the Rabbi to the house in Torzeniec, to elicit some details about their appearance. However, in his reply Jacek provides some procedural details about how these suicides took place and how he ended up swearing to Mr. Rabbi that he wouldn't divulge anything about what transpired during these meetings.

(I): Did any survivors of the ghetto ever return to Wieruszów after the war?

Jacek: There was some talk about someone who came to discuss with a stone mason the possibility of putting up a memorial plaque at the cemetery. However, for Jacek this was no more than hearsay.

From this point, Jacek speaks about the flow of events in his personal life after the war.

At Tape 3. Stop time 21:16, the interview as if comes to the end of the interview, when another voice interrupts the good-byes and pleads with Jacek to renege on his oath in light of his unique experiences and his obligation to history as a witness of such unusual happenings. Jacek is unrelenting, despite the promise that this part of his narrative would not be made public until after Jacek's death, Jacek holds a grudge against all those who allowed for this mass suicide to take place came to an agreement with Mr. Pankoski and the Rabbi to have a free hand in staging this without any interference from anyone. He mentions a witness to this massacre—a Volksdeutscher, Władysław Pawlak, who was assigned guard duty, to prevent anyone from entering this part of the ghetto in Wieruszów during those 3 nights. And it was he, who provided Jacek with eyewitness details of events of those 3 nights. [Still, even in his refusal, Jacek provides some interesting details surrounding this liquidation. For those details, you are encouraged to seek a literal translation of the last 15 minutes of this tape. (L.W.)]

Start of Tape 4.

Tape 4 is tightly scripted by the interviewer who sat in on the tail end of Jacek Makles' interview on Tape 3. He seems to be intent on breaking through Makles' oath and to expand on the details surrounding the 3 nights that the residents of the Wieruszów ghetto subjected themselves to self-annihilation.

He first gets Jacek to establish that the source of his information is a family related to his grandmother who lived at that time on the Wieruszów Market. They told Jacek that during the 3 night in question, residents of Wieruszów were ordered to remain indoors during the night hours or risk being shot on sight for violating the curfew. This served as a signal for the non-ghetto residents of Wieruszów that something was afoot in the ghetto. That made them more curious. The day after the liquidation, the Germans provided tarpaulin covered trucks, into which the Jude polizei got in and drove away to Wieluń.

Jacek is once again compelled to remind the interviewer that on the territory of the ghetto, during those 3 nights, there was total absence of any German authorities. There were only about 15 Volksdeutscher who on a rotating basis encircled the territory of the ghetto to keep out any intruders. Among those guards was Władysław Pawlak.

Interviewer (I): Were they uniformed?

Jacek: No. They had armbands and they were given rifles.

(I): Were they all from Wieruszów?

Jacek: No. They were mostly dragged in from the Ostrzeszów area, since there were very few Volksdeutscher in Wieruszów.

(I): From where was Pawlak?

Jacek: From Kobyla Góra

(I): And Pawlak was in the midst of it all?

Jacek: Pawlak was one of the guards. But they didn't get permanent assignments. Each night they might be assigned to different outposts around the site.

Jacek proceeds to describe the relationship of the River Prosna and the site of the slaughter, since intermittently, the site of the slaughter needed to be rinsed with the water from the river in order to wash away the accumulation of blood, vomit and fecal matter.

(I): Why the proximity to the water?

Jacek: That allowed them to set up a bucket brigade. That area was more tightly guarded. Further away, the guards were placed further apart.

(I): And did Pawlak look inside the slaughter area?

Jacek: Yes. He said that he saw it. However, his stomach did not survive what he saw. He became very ill.

(I): And what did he have to say about what he witnessed?

Jacek: What he saw was something terrible. And he began to tell how all of this transpired. [For details, one would have to proceed to Tape 4: Timestamp: 00:05:45]

(I): When you'd bike to your uncle's in Podzamcze, was it known to them how the ghetto was being liquidated? That they were killing themselves?

Jacek: Yes, because they announced it. At the last meeting [in Torzeniec], where I had to pledge my oath of silence, the ghetto stated: "We, ourselves want for our bones to lie next to those of our ancestors." But they did not describe the method via which they planned to achieve their goals.

(I): Did the other conspirators from Ostrzeszów or Ostrów, who were present, did they try to dissuade them from this plan?

Jacek: And how? You cannot imagine. They wanted at least to save the children; to save the witnesses. But they wouldn't consider it.

(I): Who was the main speaker advocating this, the Rabbi or Mr. Pankoski?

Jacek: The Rabbi was the official speaker on this topic. It was he who, as if, was providing the final blessing for this. It was the Rabbi who articulated most clearly that they wanted to do this themselves.

(I): And what about Pankoski?

Jacek: He was essentially saying the same thing. Jacek admits that at this point he started crying and begged Mr. Pankoski to relent and at least allow Jureczek to be spared this fate. At the time, he didn't understand the motivation or the logic for such a decision. Now, he understands it much better. Here Jacek provides a kernel of new information. He states that the reason for this were not from within the ghetto. They came from without. Jacek reiterates that were he to reveal more about this decision, "many graves would open up."

(I): Did someone order them to commit suicide?

Jacek: (Nods his head affirmatively).

(I): Were these Jewish authorities who ordered them to commit suicide?

Jacek: Yes, indeed. Here, in Wieruszów there was only an involuntary mob. They had no choice but to do what they were told. Jacek is unable to trace the origin of this message that he's certain came from outside the ghetto. Jacek also posits that this decision must have been made much earlier and that it wasn't a German decision, since already in the fall of 1942, the Germans in Wieruszów started to grieve that so many people would perish. Here he is referring to the Łabecki family, since they were in his social circle. There was their son Walter, and his sister Truda, who was a student of Jacek's father. He also refers to an organization that went under the acronym NSDAP and that these grieving Germans belonged to it. Meanwhile, the older daughters, Keita and Herta did not belong to the NSDAP. [**Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei**, a.k.a. the Nazi Party. (L.W.)] According to Jacek, these people were not ardent supporters of this party. As supporting evidence, he recalls that the older daughters, who ran a mill, would always donate extra sacks of milled grain to support the ghetto, no questions asked.

(I): You spoke about a Mrs. Hartman and that your mother obtained information from her. What kind of information was she able to get?

Jacek: She was able to find out from Gerta Hartman where the Germans planned to build ghettos. She would find out about different activities that the Germans planned. She would hear about the German's difficulties in funding or profitability of certain operations. This information would precede by a month or even a half year their actual implementation or revelation.

Here Jacek tries to explain the changing financial fortunes of the German Reich. How income from certain operations declined. Which sectors of the German economy brought the Reich considerable revenue from exports on the world market. He refers to collaboration with Sweden and the U.S. [These details warrant some fact checking. (L.W.)]

Based on Jacek's information, already since the fall of 1942, the Germans apparently knew that they lost the war.

The last information that Jacek's mother heard about and which made the Germans cry was that negotiations concerning the Jews were terminated. Jacek is not able to elaborate as to the parties that were having these negotiations.

In the last few minutes of his narrative, Jacek delves into the relationship and animosity that existed between the Polish (Hassidic) Jews and the Ashkenazi (European) Jews.

Despite the interviewer's persistence and intense questioning, Jacek neither changes his version of how the Wieruszów ghetto was liquidated nor reveals the information that he kept under oath. The taping session was ended, once the clock struck noon. Jacek had to go home. And at that point in time, he lived in Okięcie.