

KRYSIAK, Leszek  
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project  
Polish  
RG-50.488\*0176

TAPE 1

In this interview, Leszek Krysiak, born May 10, 1931 and a life-long resident of Kalisz, Poland, describes the formation of the Kalisz ghetto and the deportation of Jews from that ghetto. He explains how early deportations were conducted with trains and later deportations completed using specially constructed sealed vans, which the witness believes were used to poison the Jews while they were driven to unknown locations. The witness describes the van and the location where the Jews were forcibly loaded into them. A portion of the interview is filmed at the site where Krysiak observed the local Jews being loaded into vans and taken away.

[01:] 01:00:17 – [01:] 13:07:00

Leszek states that after two or three days following German occupation of Kalisz in September of 1939, the displacement of Jews from their apartments began; says that across the street from where he lived there was an apartment of a Jewish cap-maker; remembers the cap-maker asking his family to keep an eye on his apartment while his family was gone, believing he would return to his apartment; says the displaced Jews were moved into a camp that was formed in the hall of the covered Kalisz marketplace; points out that Polish prisoners of war were also placed in the same covered hall; notes that the Germans began to deport the Jews by train after about a month, but does not know what their destination was; recalls that as some of the Jews were being deported, new ones would arrive at the marketplace; explains that his family was evicted from their **Parkowa** Street apartment and moved into an apartment on **Zlota** Street where they remained until 1943; says his old house on **Parkowa** Street was demolished; describes the ghetto, noting it was formed on **Zlota** Street and consisted of two buildings, each across the street from the other; says one was a long building and the other was a larger building and that access to the buildings was prohibited; says the buildings were watched by Jewish policemen who made sure that the Jews remained in the buildings, but were armed only with sticks; explains that since he is Polish he could walk along **Zlota** Street; says because of that he observed workshops in the long building, including one where tailors would sew coats; says in the other building there were shops that appeared to be of a more technical nature; indicates he knows this because on the second floor there was a dental office where a Jewish dentist once pulled his tooth; remembers he was able to visit the dentist by sneaking into the building; says Jews were not allowed in the streets except to cross from one building to the other and under the guard of the Jewish policeman; remembers that in the mornings, groups of Jews carrying shovels marched to work in formations and were guarded by a German gendarme while forced to sing a song in Polish with a lyric, "our golden Hitler taught us how to work..."; does not know where the Jews worked; describes an event in which the Germans used a Jewish work brigade to clean up blood from a sidewalk after the Germans executed a local Polish priest; says he witnessed the execution, which happened in October or November of 1939; says that although people were

allowed to watch executions, he did not witness any other; remembers that the Jewish work brigades were also used to clean up snow in the winter.

**[01:] 13:07:01 – [01:] 23:18:08**

He says that in one of the tailoring shops, Jewish tailors made him a suit for his communion—his father made the arrangement for the suit with the master tailor; mentions that the Jewish police wore a yellow Star of David in addition to a red armband; thinks the Jewish police did not have any privileges except that they were not forced to work at hard labor; says that Jews and Poles were forced to bow to German gendarmes; remembers seeing the gendarmes beat Jews for any infraction, but most often for not bowing; says the beatings usually happened in the ghetto's backyard adjacent to the long building; describes the deportation of Jews from the ghetto in specially constructed large black vans; says the Jews were chased from the buildings into the ghetto courtyard, and a large box-like van approached the yard; believes the box of the van was made of wood covered entirely by black painted metal sheet; describes the van as having a small window in the rear door and no other openings; says the window was constructed of two screens, one on the inside of the door, the other on the outside, and that between the two screens there was a glass pane which made the van hermetic; says Jews were forced into the van and told they were going to work; notes that he witnessed the van return empty after about two or three hours and that the van made two trips like this almost every day; believes that the people inside the van were being gassed during the drive, and while he does not know where they were taken, says the vans traveled in the direction of Warszówka.; explains the van typically arrived at ten in the morning to take its cargo, then returned empty between noon and one in the afternoon for the next group of people.

**[01:] 23:18:09 – [01:] 32:22:24**

He explains that nobody knew where the people were taken or what happened to them, in addition, no gravesites were found nearby; estimates up to 20 people at a time were forced into the vans, all standing up; says the height of the van was such that people could stand up; notes that Poles could walk by and watch how the Jews were loaded; counts watching the loading of Jews into the van about five times; remembers that the use of vans as a means of deportation lasted for about one year; emphasizes that all of the vans were the same construction, and that the driver was typically a gendarme or a uniformed soldier; says the Jews who were loaded into the van were not allowed to take any belongings with them; remembers that after some time, the remaining Jews in the ghetto were trying to hide in the buildings but were forced to come out and be loaded into the van; says that on one occasion he saw a Jew who was the master tailor talking to a gendarme during the loading, and that just before being pushed into the van, the German allowed him to return to the building; says the Jew emerged carrying a cap filled with gold rings and bracelets, which the gendarme took and allowed the Jew to return to the building; presumes the Jew felt he was spared; recalls that when the van returned the next day the Jew was forced into it; says he witnessed this incident from a distance of about 12 feet from the van; says that during the loading the van parked in the driveway near a building and was guarded by two gendarmes standing on the sidewalk; notes that he is not sure if Jewish police assisted the Germans in forcing people into the van; remembers that those who resisted were beaten with sticks and forced in; says the glass pane on the door of the van could not be opened from inside

and that the van had an appearance of an armored car—it was covered with a continuous metal sheet surrounding it on all sides.

[01:] 32:22:25 – [01:] 35:57:00

Krysiak says that once the Jews were evacuated, their homes stood vacant; says that after some time, Poles took over the vacant houses; notes that his family also took over a Jewish home on **Złota** Street; says after the war he was employed as an apprentice in a Jewish-run shoe-making cooperative (he calls it a Jewish cooperative because it was organized by Jews returning from the war); remembers some of the names of the organizers: **Rotsztejn, Heder, Hirszorn**, and **Jaruszewski**; says two of the organizers lived in Kalisz before the war; mentions that the cooperative closed in 1953.

Tape 2

[02:] 01:00:22 – [02:] 11:43:25

He mentions that the Jews who organized the cooperative were not shoemakers by trade; says approximately 300 people were employed in the cooperative, most of them were Polish shoemakers; remembers that in 1953 the president of the cooperative took another job and Polish workers took over the management of the cooperative; says that **Heder**, who was a kapo in Auschwitz and a janitor in the cooperative, left for Israel; says he does not recall any disturbing events in Kalisz that were associated with building 15 on the town square, even though Jews and Poles lived as neighbors in that building; says there were rumors about the existence of a casino and some Poles voiced complaints about the Jews, but he does not know more about it; says that Jews were members of the NKVD (Soviet secret police); mentions that his father had a small shoemaking shop at his house, but that such activities were illegal; says a Jewish member of the NKVD found out about this shop and visited his father; remembers that his father made custom shoes with uppers for the Jew, then bribed him with vodka.

[02:] 11:44:00 – [02:] 22:47:10

*[This section of the interview is conducted on a street in Kalisz]*

The witness shows where he was standing when he observed Jews being loaded into the hermetic vans; locates the spot where the vans were parked during loading; shows the building where the Jews were taken out to be loaded into the vans; compares a nearby parked van to the hermetic van; says the shape of the van was that of a big box, taller than the typical modern eight-passenger van; reiterates there were no windows other than the screened small window in the back door, and that the top of the van was higher than the driver's cab; describes the scene in which the Jewish master tailor tried to bribe the gendarme; notes that he knew the master tailor, since the tailor ran the shop when his communion suit was made; says the man was about 50 years old; says that beyond the building where Jews were kept was a river which the Germans were trying to block with sand, using French and British soldiers as slave laborers; says that after

the doors to the van were shut (after loading was completed), there was no sound emanating from the inside of the van; shows the approximate location of the small window which consisted of a glass pane between two screens by using a nearby parked modern van; thinks that about 20 Jews were forced into the van on each trip; describes the cobblestones of the road and the concrete slabs of the sidewalk.

Time coded notes provided by Sam Ponczak