

Translation/Analysis of Oral History Interview with Bolesław Kołodziej

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Bolesław Kołodziej was born on November 15, 1924 in the territory of Majdanek, where he lived until November 1942.

He describes in detail how the Majdanek concentration camp came into existence. It started with a meeting that was held by the Germans in the summer of 1941 for all the villagers of the village of Majdanek. All of them were instructed to harvest their lands, but not plant anything new. In November 1941, construction of the concentration camp began. Prefabricated materials for barrack were delivered by train then by carts to the construction site, where these materials were assembled by civilian, local building trades people. All unskilled labor was provided by prisoners. The first prisoners arrived in Majdanek in December 1941. These were German prisoners, who weren't even dressed in the traditional striped camp uniforms. They wore red pants and navy-blue jackets. In January began the digging of a huge pit not far from the crematorium. The pit was approximately 35' X 70' and 15' deep. It turned out that this pit was dug for murdered people.

In March 1942 a transport of Czech Jews arrived in Majdanek. The barracks still lacked basic amenities such as toilets or water. They were only outfitted with triple-decker plank bunkbeds.

Bolesław worked at the camp as a cart driver who delivered building materials to various construction projects at the camp. He was hired as one of those civilian laborers. There were some 30 people like he, employed at the camp while it was being built. There were some 500 civilian building trade people, who arrived for work at the camp daily, on foot.

[Tape 1; timestamp: 00:07:27] Bolesław describes his typical daily routines. The dispatcher for all the cart drivers was a Czech Jew by the name of Marmelstein and a Polish Jew named Josek. Bolesław is then asked to describe the lay out of the camp. Just as he was getting into answering this question, the interviewer re-directs the narrative by asking Bolesław to describe the various camp guards that he got to know. Bolesław mentions that all the SS-men were up for wheeling and dealing in food, alcoholic beverages, clothing and anything of value on the open market. In other words, they were easily corruptible.

Bolesław also traded with prisoners. Many of them had money, including US dollars and precious metal.

After bragging a bit about his freedom of movement about the camp, he produces his hand-drawn map of Majdanek. He then takes the viewer/listener on a mini-tour around the camp's territory and its structural highlights.

The next inquiry by the interviewer deals with the gas chamber. It turns out that gassing took place exclusively at night. When Bolesław arrived for work in the morning he would quickly find

out from which barracks prisoners were taken to the gas chamber. The gas chamber was about 7.2' high (2.2 m.) and about 30' X 30' (10 m X10 m) square in area. The prisoners were ordered to undress in the adjoining bathroom before being ordered into the gas chamber. Since the crematorium didn't have adequate capacity to burn all those who were gassed, the undressed corpses would be neatly stacked and covered on carts pulled by horses and then taken to pits in the forest near the camp. The burning of the bodies was done by camp prisoners. The Germans only supervised the process. The crematorium was barely adequate to burn the bodies of those who died overnight in the camp and they were brought to the crematorium following the morning roll call.

Even in 1943, after having killed so many thousands of Jews, those who were subsequently gassed would not be burned in the crematorium. Instead they would be stacked in the pits on truck palates and on abandoned truck platform frames, sprayed with chlorine and burned in the woods in the open. When bodies were burning (which was often day and night), the stench was unbearable. All of this, Bolesław saw with his own eyes, from a distance less than 100 feet (30 m.). He also witnessed mass shootings from a distance of 200 meters; when he stayed at his sister's place in Majdanek, which bordered the camp's territorial limits.

End of Tape 1 of 2.

[This tape has a quasi-folksy and chattier quality, and it lacks the focus present in tape 1. (LW)]

Both social and commercial happenings in the camp were characterized by Bolesław as quite normal and totally within norms of human relations, differing very little from life among people living as prisoners and those living in society at large. Only in some instances they differed in the degree of cruelty and the suddenness with which that they came to an end.

The interviewer asks Bolesław to start by talking about the massacre of Jews in 1943. These were primarily Polish Jews who served in the Polish army. They became POWs and were initially sent to labor camp. Many of the Jews who may have had special skills or a trade, such as tailors or shoemakers, were put to work to produce goods for the German war economy. But during the massacre, both the Jews who came to Majdanek explicitly to be exterminated and those who were in German labor camps were gathered in Majdanek for liquidation. They were all shot and killed in pre-dug pits just outside the limits of the camp, near the crematorium. When Bolesław came to work on the morning following the massacre, some prisoners who were witness to it, estimated that some 12,000 were killed. After this mass killing there remained merely 200 Jews in camp—120 men and 80 women. They were taken to one barrack, located on Field number 5, where they lived until about Christmas and then disappeared without a trace. His friend Marmelstein, the dispatcher of the cart drivers perished in the massacre. The next day, a Pole was at the gate in Marmelstein's place.

The interviewer asks about crimes and punishments in the camp. Although Bolesław hadn't witnessed one personally, it was well publicized that attempted escape was punishable by hanging. There were numerous places where poles were mounted in open fields throughout the camp at the ready to mete out such punishment. Bolesław is distracted by the interviewer who asks him whether he remembers especially cruel Kapos. One in particular, who was huge

and came from Silesia and hated Jews with a passion came to mind. He used to make bets that he could kill a Jew by hitting him with a gloved open hand to the temple. Bolesław provides a detailed description of this form of gambling. [Tape 2; timestamp: 00:06:30.] This Kapo was coincidentally placed in charge of a work details consisting of prisoners from the Warsaw Ghetto. It wasn't unusual for him to return with 10 people in his detail dead, i.e., carried back by other prisoners, from their work shift. Also, at this point, Bolesław provides a good description how Kapos had to account for all the prisoners that left on a detail and how many returned. Those who died in the course of the day had to be carried back. A corpse had to be carried back by four prisoners that left and therefore had to return in easily countable formation of five. It allowed the camp guards at the gates to keep accurate attendance.

Bolesław becomes particularly animated when he is asked about his smuggling skills. He itemizes all sorts of food items that were traded and sold and the way that he managed to modify his cart to get these items into the camp. He compares the trade in the camp as being as extensive as that at an open-air market and that the service it rendered was very much needed and it was an act of kindness and human compassion. Bolesław claims that over time they learned who in camp could afford to buy what. The trade, however, did not extend to the SS-men. According to Bolesław, they had nothing to offer for trade. [A contradiction of a statement he made on the previous tape. (L.W.)]

The interviewer asks Bolesław to spend some time talking about the treatment of Russian prisoners of war, especially after spring 1943, when there were virtually no Jews left in Majdanek.

According to Bolesław, all killing of Russian prisoners stopped after the Germans were defeat in the battle for Stalingrad. Their physical condition didn't matter. They were all kept alive in their uniforms and allowed to work to care for their own needs. BTW: A large break from Majdanek by Russians took place during the summer of 1942. Apparently, a whole unit decided to flee. It was quite an event. Most of the escaping prisoners were shot or captured in nearby fields.

Towards the end of the second tape, before adjourning, colleagues of the interviewer claim to have a few additional questions for Bolesław:

The primitive crematorium behind the gas chamber, could you describe it? And where about was it?

Bolesław: The ovens were very primitive, made of steel. They looked like boiler room ovens, fueled by coke.

The next question had to do with burning of bodies in open pits. This was described by previously and Bolesław doesn't add anything meaningful.

Bolesław reconfirms his willingness to be a courier for people outside who needed to send a message to a relative or a loved one inside the camp. He discusses further his openness to chat with prisoners when a safe opportunity arose and to share his cigarettes, especially with Russian prisoners of war.