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ZACHCZYŃSKA, Jadwiga
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust
Polish
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This is an interview with Joanna Zachczyńska, maiden name Perelman, a Polish Jewish woman from Warsaw. She talks about her work as a nurse in a hospital in Białystok and her journey east with the Chkalov brigade. She describes her work in a POW camp for Russians near Minsk and the organization of a hospital in the local ghetto. She recounts German anti-Jewish activities and focuses on the biggest pogrom. She also talks about her collaboration with Soviet partisans. She looks back on post-war events, mainly on the meeting with her former chief officer Gavrikov which shed light on certain anti-Jewish activities undertaken by the Soviet partisans.

Tape 1

[01:] 00:30:18 – [01:] 08:57:17
00:33 – 09:21

The interviewee introduces herself as Jadwiga Zachczyńska, maiden name Perelman, born on November 18, 1917 in the city of Warsaw on Widok Street 14; talks about pre-war life in a comfortable apartment with her mother suffering from tuberculosis and her grandmother who cared for her; mentions her mother's treatments in Otwock and other resorts, and states that giving birth to two children weakened her mother significantly; remembers her grandmother being diagnosed with cancer in the Sołowiejczyk clinic and the resulting amputation of one leg which was performed without her grandmother's consent; talks about her grandmother's death one week after the operation and her family leaving for Palestine after doctors had decided that its climate was most beneficial for her sick mother; describes selling their Polish apartment, shares of "Nowy Przegląd," and buying equipment in order to set up a printing shop in Palestine; remembers her father's leaving for the USA because of the delayed delivery of the machines; says that it was in Palestine where she first experienced what persecution meant: Jewish children called her names and threw stones at her; talks about her return to Poland and living with different people—namely her aunt, and her mother's brother and his wife who died later with their two children; remembers the first war months spent in Warsaw and crossing the Bug (River) at night; describes her work in a hospital in Białystok with Russian doctors until the outbreak of the German-Soviet war; says that she knew what was happening on the border and delivered this information to party members; tells about joining a military column and escaping to the east; describes air-raid warnings and her work as a nurse during the escape; remembers that in one place she had to stay for a few days since the injured did not want to let her go.

[01:] 08:57:18 – [01:] 12:50:09
09:22 – 13:24

She talks about her arrival in Minsk and her desire to find something to eat and drink; remembers that people did not trust each other and theft was an everyday occurrence; mentions a meeting with a German officer who offered her some soup; highlights her astonishment since even people who were close did not want to share anything; describes the

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first evening in Minsk when she went to a few hospitals to find work; tells about a big and bombed hospital where she was offered a job on condition that she would organize an operation room; remembers working there for quite a long time and says she was aware that this job was only a temporary one; relates an incident when people were asked to submit cards with their personal data to the director and remembers the reaction of the Jewish head of the hospital who knew that this was a means to prepare a list of people who would be sent to the ghetto; says that the head was not aware of her being Jewish and wanted to confirm her Polish identity; talks about leaving the hospital and beginning to work in a POW camp for Russians, however, she does not remember how she moved to the camp.

[01:] 12:50:10 – [01:] 19:40:08
13:25 – 20:31

She talks about events in the POW camp for Russians; describes how the prisoners were tortured: four people held the limbs of the prisoner while two other people beat him; stresses that she can still hear the cries of the prisoners in her dreams; comments on the bad beds in the camp which were hard, made of straw, and full of lice; says that the prisoners were fed with unpeeled millet which caused them terrible pain; states that she lived in good conditions because every evening she and a Jewish translator from the ghetto were allowed to return home to sleep and once per week to take as much food home as they were able to carry; says that she used it to feed the people with whom she shared an apartment in the ghetto: a married couple of doctors and Dr. Boris Aronovich **Peskin** with whom she worked in the POW camp; describes the conditions in which they lived together; talks about **Peskin**, describing him as a true professional who worked in a dissecting hall before the war; talks about an Austrian corpsman (member of military medical unit; medic) regarded by everyone as a German who brought Russian POWs from the battle fields; remembers long talks between the corpsman and **Peskin** and the corpsman stating that the war would end with the German defeat since there were conflicts and disagreement among the Germans; discusses their dire living conditions and **Peskin**'s apartment in Minsk where a Byelorussian family had moved in; recalls that they were reluctant to deliver **Peskin**'s personal goods; remembers that the Byelorussian family denounced **Peskin** as a commissar whereas he was politically neutral; describes a successful attempt to retrieve **Peskin**'s goods with the corpsman providing an escort; states that she does not know what happened to him later; says that she worked with **Peskin** for a long time and learned much from him; says that she is confused and her memory fails; states that after working in the POW camp she was not able to sleep at night and one day she decided not to return to the POW camp; says that her surname was not known in the POW camp and that is why she was able to hide in the ghetto.

[01:] 19:40:09 – [01:] 26:27:17
20:32 – 27:35

She discusses her work in a ghetto hospital which was built on the highest spot in the city with a kindergarten nearby; talks about creating a bandage and operation station in a spacious glazed gymnasium; says that she slept in a little storage room for balls and other sports equipment; relates German actions seen at night through the windows of the gymnasium; explains that the Germans drove to the houses, rounded up the people and shot them in the back of their heads; *[highlights that she possesses photographs of such houses]*; describes an incident in which a German asked some people in the hospital to help carry a half-dead woman who had to live; states that the German actions happened almost every night and that she observed them from her hiding place in the gymnasium, from a distance of about 10 meters, being positioned higher than the Germans; remembers that the ghetto was surrounded

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by a barbed wire fence; tells about the bad situation of the Jews living close to the fence – they were murdered and robbed by Byelorussians climbing over the fence; when asked if she witnessed this harassment directly, she answers in the negative but says she talked to victims asking for help in the hospital; states that harassment was frequent, however, not as frequent as the German actions at night; tells about the lack of light and heating; recalls burning wood and operations performed under poor light; remembers operations under local anesthesia and preparing the anaesthetic in an old pot; speaks about a woman who was diagnosed with cancer and decided to be operated by **Peskin**, and her frequent visits after the operation until she became a victim of an action.

[01:] 26:27:18 – [01:] 30:56:09
27:36 – 32:15

She remembers pogroms; tells about round-ups on Umschlagplatz and vans called “duszogubki” [*Translator note: term in Russian is „дымозыбку”; translates in English as “soul annihilators”*]; says she saw with her own eyes how they transported the people to burrows; [*wants to show photographs of the burrows but does not do it*]; remembers a little girl who came out of a burrow with seven bullet wounds and reached the hospital; says that she advocated for the girl to stay in the hospital but she was taken to the kindergarten for a few days because of an epidemic; recalls an incident in which Germans came to round up Jews and made a bet: how many children could be shot with one bullet; says that she was not able to save the little girl who disappeared.

Commented [AZ1]: I am not sure what she is referring to here.
A review of the original TCN might shed light on this.

[01:] 30:56:10 – [01:] 36:17:22
32:16 – 37:50

She says that there was no consistent anti-Hitler organization and everyone fought in his own way because no one could trust each other; remembers the doctors **Taich** [**Talich**, **Gaich**, **Galich**] and **Menzmann** [**Melzmann**] who also created anti-Hitler centers around themselves; talks about her acquaintance with **Grisha Smolar’s** father, who represented the (Communist) party in the ghetto, as well as about her propaganda activities, including distribution of flyers, collection of materials for the partisans, and collaboration with the contact person of the partisans; remembers that she was allowed to go to the partisans only after the biggest pogrom because she was indispensable in the hospital; says that she took 19 people from the ghetto; talks about the Jewish contact person who helped them enter the forest where **Smolar** was; [*wants to show pictures of the contact person and her family but does not do it*]; remembers that after the war she was notified about **Smolar’s** death and says that she talked to her family; comments on many bad Jews in Minsk who received financial aid and distributed it unevenly thinking only about their own fate; remembers the Jewish contact person who did not receive financial aid and her court trial; says that finally the court granted her aid for the 7 days which she spent in the ghetto; relates her unsuccessful attempts to draw the attention of Holocaust Museum employees to this issue [*seems to be confused, loses the plot*].

Tape 2

[02:] 00:30:11 – [02:] 09:11:05
00:23 – 09:24

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She remembers Dr. **Peskin's** death and the biggest pogrom when the Germans surrounded the ghetto and demanded 6000 people to be surrendered; talks about those people who knew that the pogrom would happen (e.g. the Jewish police) and who prepared themselves by looking for work in the city; recalls **Peskin's** decision to stay in the ghetto and how she prepared a hiding place for him in the closet in the room which he shared with **Menzmann**; speaks about **Peskin's** reluctance to hide and that he walked in the streets where Germans were shooting people; explains how she experienced the pogrom in Minsk; remembers a cupboard with medical tools behind which she wanted to hide, however, others followed her example and the cupboard started to move; recalls the chaos in the gymnasium as a result of people awaiting the end of the pogrom, and her next attempt to hide behind the cupboard; remembers Ukrainians entering the gymnasium with a boy who had had his arm amputated in the hospital and shooting him; says that the same Ukrainians became interested in the ethyl alcohol located in the cupboard and shot at it because they had no key; remembers that she did not cry out but she was afraid to leave her hiding place for two days; talks about people leaving their hiding places; remembers the arrival of the Germans who demanded that the corpses be put on trucks and transported to the Jewish cemetery which was close to the hospital; relates burying her friend's child on the cemetery and the difficulties connected with the burial.

[02:] 09:11:06 – [02:] 12:59:16
09:25 – 13:23

She talks about the people who went to work in the city before the pogrom and returned in a cheerful mood; remembers an incident in which a group—probably drunk Germans—started shooting at the returning crowd; says that she did not observe this incident but she heard the returning crowd very clearly, as well as the shots lasting for about half an hour; mentions the high number of dead and injured who were delivered to the hospital; asked about entering the forest with the Jewish contact person she states that she does not remember her name and starts talking about a blind masseur from Łódź whose interventions replaced operations at times; raises the issue of moral dilemmas, giving as an example the masseur who asked for a portion of “saved” bread and how others criticizing him sharply; recalls an incident in which a seven year old boy who had been shot in both eyes by the Germans was delivered to the hospital; highlights **Peskin's** frayed nerves; says he started to beat the boy because he could not bear his cries; states that she does not know whether the boy was saved because shortly afterwards there was another German action; states that one lived from action to action in those times.

[02:] 12:59:17 – [02:] 22:30:10
13:24 – 23:18

She talks about entering Puszcza Iwieniecka and her first military activities with Soviet partisans [*has difficulty recalling details*]; mentions two slightly injured persons who were transported to the camp [*has increasing difficulties and loses her train of thought*]; says that there were Jews from the ghetto in Minsk and other cities among the partisans but the partisans did not like them; remembers a partisan commissar, a Cossack from the Chkalov brigade, who was riding across the forest and yelling „Bij zhidov, spasaj Rossiju” [*Translator note: in Russian „Бий жидов, спасай Россию” which translates to “Beat the Jews, Save Russia” in English*]; remembers another forest and another commissar [*loses the plot again*]; remembers incidents when Jews met the partisans and wanted to join them; says that Jews were accepted provided that they submitted all their personal goods, however, later they were shot by the partisans; says that she did not see such incidents but people were talking about it;

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she also says that it is not known who spread such rumors and in what way; remembers her visit to Minsk a few years ago and a meeting with her former chief officer who mentioned that he transported a sack of gold to Moscow on a plane; recalls that the chief officer stated that the gold was taken away from the Jews; claims that the chief officer knew that she was a Jewish woman but he regarded her as a Pole since he remembered her from Bialystok; says she cannot recall the chief officer's name; mentions documents containing the officer's name; remembers that there were also other Jews in the partisan group but says refugees from the ghetto were usually not accepted; talks about a friend who escaped from the ghetto to join the partisans and was shot the next day; states that, notwithstanding this, people wanted to join the partisans because it was hard to survive on one's own in the forest, and they wanted to take revenge on the Germans.

[02:]22:30:11 – [02:] 28:45:16
23:19 – 29:48

She says that the chief officer did not mention murdering the Jews but only recalled transporting the gold to Moscow; claims that those were not orders from Moscow but from other people; states that she wants to talk about many things, however, she forgot much *[becomes irritated by the light]*; remembers that the chief officer of the Ponomarenko troop of the Chkalov brigade was called **Gavrikov**; talks about the brigade's arrival in Bialystok and the journey to Minsk where the highest officers found a good place to stay whereas others returned to their hometowns; when asked about other murders and harassment connected with Jews she mentions loading Jews who had been murdered during German actions on trucks and transporting them to the cemetery; mentions a memorial in the cemetery erected by wealthy German Jews; mentions a visit of a certain health minister whose wife was with the interviewee in the ghetto and his desire to find details concerning his son's death; describes the impossible burial because of the frozen earth and the fact that the mother kept her son's body on the porch; talks about the unsuccessful attempts to find the son's grave in the cemetery; *[Adds that she had a bad day, got up at six o'clock and waited in the canteen for a meal. At the same moment a voice is heard asking in English for a repetition of the chief officer's name]*.