

GRABOWSKI, Roman  
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project  
Polish  
RG-50.488\*0218

Box 1, Tape 1

In this interview, Roman Grabowski talks about his observations of mistreatment and liquidation of Jews in the Chełmno killing center, which he witnessed as a teenage herdsman. He describes the transportation of Jews in sealed gas vans from the palace in Chełmno to the killing center in the nearby forest.

**[01:] 00:31:20 – [01:] 10:14:29**

He describes that while working as a herdsman in 1942, he observed how Jews were transported to a camp in the forest near Chełmno; he made these observations from a pasture that was near a bridge in Przybyłów; that year he saw trucks transporting Jews into a nearby forest and trucks coming out of the forest; he saw that the road to the forest was littered with torn currency bills; usually three or four gendarmes were sitting in the back of the truck; he also saw Jews on the grounds of the palace in Chełmno and witnessed how they were loaded into the trucks to be taken to the forest; he was familiar with the palace in Chełmno since he worked there for over one year before 1942; the Germans gave his uncle the responsibility for managing the palace; it served as a storage warehouse for vegetables, fruit, and other foodstuff; the Germans used to arrive with their trucks to collect the food about two or three times a week; his job was to guard the food from being stolen; to do that, he lived and worked in the palace; after about one year, the Germans took over the palace; it was emptied of all food, and everyone working there was let go; the palace and the grounds were surrounded by a wire mesh and a bigger entrance gate was constructed; there was a sentry at the gate, and the population was told to stay away from the palace; people were afraid to even look at the palace; after he left, he became a herdsman responsible for a herd of cows on a pasture in Chruścin, near the palace; from that pasture, across a river he could see Jews on the grounds of the palace; he observed how they were forced into the trucks; he heard screams and noises on the grounds; those who resisted were stabbed with the bayonets and forced to climb into the trucks; he heard screams of Jews as they were loaded; he states that everyone in town was aware of the existence of the gas chambers in the Chełmno forest camp, but he himself had not seen them at the time; when asked by the interviewer what evidence he had about the existence of the crematoria at that time, he answered

“it was that awful stench in the air”; he says that the stench was particularly strong near the forest in the vicinity of Przybyłów.

[01:] 10:14:30 – [01:] 21:39:59

He states that the stench was extremely strong; there also was a haze in the air that made his eyes tear up, while the stench was choking him; he says that even the cows in his charge could not tolerate the stench and tried to run away from the pasture; he understood that the stench was from the burning of the bodies of the poisoned Jews; he complained to the owner of the herd, a German of Polish origin called **Pyde**, and asked him to relieve him from his job; **Pyde** let him go; after a few days he received a notice to show up at the labor office (Arbeitsamt); he recalls that soon after that, he and a group of Polish men and women were sent to work in Poznań; he says that the maltreatment of Jews started long before the Chelmno camp was organized; for example in **Okulne [Okunie; Okoly; Okole]**, Jews were confined to their homes; he and others used to bring fish that they caught in the river to the Jewish homes; he recalls his good Jewish friend **Muniek**, who was trading in foodstuffs between the Poles and the Jews; **Muniek** was caught because trading with the Jews was illegal; eventually he was shot and killed; Grabowski recalls an incident that happened about two weeks after the Germans entered the town; on that day, he and his father were riding on their wagon filled with vegetables for sale at the market; Jews who were forced to work along this road mobbed their wagon begging his father for some food; he allowed them to take some until a gendarme saw what was going on; he started to whip them in a most cruel way; Grabowski said that at that time the “Landratsamt” (Municipality) of Koło had to provide 40 Jews daily to pull the German trucks up a steep incline of a bridge and hold them from crashing down on the other side of the bridge; another 40 Jews were doing same work on the other bridge span.

[01:] 21:40:00 – [01:] 28:19:59

While he and his father were at the market, they heard that an accident happened on the bridge and a truck with soldiers got stuck in a ditch; when passing the accident area on their way home, he saw that the Jews were punished by being forced to crawl on their knees while their hands were tied behind their backs; they were forced to crawl on their knees on a stubble field of mowed rye and collect loose stubble with their mouth into little heaps; he saw that one of the Jews fell down on his side and could not get up; other Jews came to his rescue by crawling next to him and trying to pull him up using their teeth and pulling on his clothes; he saw about six gendarmes whipping the Jews who tried to save the one that fell; he does not know how the incident ended because his wagon got too far from the scene of the incident.

[01:] 28:20:00 – [01:] 39:59:59

He says that when the Koło ghetto was being liquidated, the Jews were being shipped to Łódź and from Łódź back to Koło; he says that before the ghetto was liquidated, he and a group of Polish men and women were locked in the “men’s synagogue” in Koło; after a two-week confinement the group was sent by train to a village near Gorlice; he was not in Koło when the ghetto was liquidated; after two months he returned to Koło.

**[01:] 40:00:00 – [01:] 47:49:59**

After arriving from Łódź to Koło, the Jews were transported by trucks, by narrow-gage railway or by foot to the palace in Chełmno; he observed this traffic daily since he was in charge of a herd of cows on a pasture that was near the road from Koło to Chełmno; most of the transportation was done by trucks covered with tarpaulins; when Jews were forced to march to the palace on foot, he often heard women scream, children cry, and the barking of the dogs; he saw Jews on the grounds of the palace and heard their voices; he describes that he saw hermetically sealed vans traveling from the Chełmno palace to the forest; these vans were returning within a short time from the forest back to the palace; he assumes that there were three or four such vans; these vans were continuously commuting between the palace and the forest; he is convinced that these vans were used to kill the Jews that were being transported; he did not see dead bodies, but frequently heard groans and hoarse screams of people choking inside the vans as they passed by; when the vans were returning from the forest back to the palace, he smelt a terrible stench emanating from these vans; he did not witness how the Jews were loaded into these vans.

**[01:] 47:50:00 – [01:] 57:19:59**

He recalls that immediately after the war ended, he talked to three Jewish men who escaped from the palace in Chełmno; they described to him how just before the end of the war, the Germans were killing the remaining Jews in the palace; they were taking out ten people at a time, forced them to lie face down on the ground and killed them with one bullet in the back of their heads; the escapees told him that when the Jews who were still locked in their cells realized what was going to happen to them, they revolted and were able to pull one of the gendarmes into the cell, grabbed his gun and started shooting; when the outside guards heard the shots they rushed to help their comrades inside the palace; in the commotion, three of the young Jews escaped; one of them was shot, but only wounded.

**[01:] 57:20:00 – [02:] 11:04:00**

He recollects that German soldiers used to come to his uncle’s house to eat and to drink; on occasions they would bring with them young women whom they selected from the trucks; the Germans used to have sex with these women in the courtyard; on one occasion, one woman had

to use the outhouse; when the German soldier went inside the house to wait for her, he approached the outhouse and told the woman to run away; he knew that she was Jewish because she thanked him in Polish with a Jewish accent; he told her which way to run; he does not know what happened to her; he did not know if anyone ever escaped from the transportation trucks.

Time coded notes provided by Sam Ponczak