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Zbigniew Stefan Kuligowski

Interview August 25, 2004
with Ina Navazelskis

Summary

Mr. Kuligowski came to the attention of the USHMM Oral History Branch after he visited the Museum sometime in the summer of 2004 and said that he would like to tell his story. He said that he had witnessed the deportations of Jews to Treblinka. As he lived in London and was in Washington for just a short time, it was decided that the Dept. would take advantage of his stay here. His interview was recorded on audio at the Museum itself on August 25, 2004.

Mr. Kuligowski is a gentile Pole who was in Warsaw throughout almost the whole duration of the war -- from the invasion by the Germans in 1939 up until the end of the failed Warsaw Uprising in 1944. He was born in 1924 in Warsaw, the younger of two sons. His brother was three years older.

Mr. Kuligowski's father was very wealthy and rather prominent. He was the director of the largest chemical factory in Poland, named "Solwei", which was part of a Belgian concern. However, Mr. Kuligowski said that despite this prominence, their home was only "middle class", as his father was very very miserly and did not spend any more money on their home or expenses for it than the bare minimum. The family was not religious, although probably nominally Roman Catholic.

Mr. Kuligowski's childhood and home life were anything but happy. When he was six or seven years old, his mother left the family, running out of the house in a hurry. He did not see her again for another seven or eight years -- that is, until after the war started. His father, he said, was a brute who beat him as a child for no reason and with little or no provocation. Neither was he close to his older brother, who also was a participant in this family torment.

Mr. Kuligowski described himself as an outsider from his own Polish countrymen, and a cosmopolitan. He said that he is not part of the rather large Polish community in the UK, where he has lived for the past fifty plus years.

When the Germans invaded Poland, and the war broke out, Mr. Kuligowski was 16 years old. Soon after the Germans arrived in Warsaw, an German overseer was appointed to the chemical factory, but Mr. Kuligowski's father remained its director. Mr. Kuligowski surmises that the overseer provided some protection to

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his father throughout the war. They remained in the same flat for up until the Warsaw Uprising and always had enough to eat, although no surpluses of any kind.

The same protection however, did not extend to the older brother. Nineteen when the war broke out, the brother was attending Polish officers' school. That school of course ceased operation, but some of his classmates and he began to talk of forming a resistance unit. Nothing ever came of this -- no underground resistance was actually formed. But one of these students was captured by the Gestapo, and under torture, gave names and addresses of the others. Several months after the occupation, Mr. Kuligowski's brother was arrested one night, imprisoned and tortured for several months, and finally shot. After the war, Mr. Kuligowski's mother was able to find the place her son was buried, have him unearthed and recognize his skeleton amongst the others by the sheepskin jacket that he wore.

Before his brother was arrested, however, Mr. Kuligowski related one incident which revealed to him the beginning of the fate of the Jews in Warsaw. It involved a woman named Maria, who had been his father's secretary, and after his mother ran away -- his father's mistress. This relationship continued for several years, ending just shortly before the war began. After this happened, Maria moved to a villa in a rather well-to-do suburb of Warsaw.

Maria was a Jew. A few months after the Germans occupied Poland, she called her former lover's home to speak with the two sons. She asked them to come help her move -- as she was being moved to a newly created Jewish community in Warsaw. Mr. Kuligowski recalls that she was very optimistic and even enthusiastic about this move. She said that for centuries, the Jews in Poland had lived scattered -- now they would be together in one place. She needed the boys to come help her with her luggage -- there were seven suitcases, and she needed them to find a cart to take them to this new quarter. Mr. Kuligowski described the contrast he saw between the villa where he picked her up and the one room she had rented in this new Jewish quarter, wherein there were six other people -- never mind the rest of the flat which housed entire families. He and his brother brought Maria there.

They didn't hear from her for quite a few months, when one day she phoned them again, and crying, asked that they bring her a loaf of bread to a certain place and time, and throw it over a barbed wire fence -- she would be standing there waiting for it. When they asked their father for the money to buy the bread -- it was only available on the black market -- he replied "Half a loaf is enough." That is what the boys brought her. They saw her at a distance standing with

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other people. They threw the bread over the fence, saw her catch it, and immediately disappear inbetween a sea of legs.

They never saw or heard from Maria again. Mr. Kuligowski is 100% sure that her ashes are somewhere in Treblinka.

After the arrest of his brother, Mr. Kuligowski was scared to spend his days at home. He feared that the Gestapo would come for him too, being that he was a 16 year old teenager and could be suspicious to them. So he left the flat every morning and would wander the city, returning only to sleep at night. This became his routine for the duration of the German occupation, until the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising -- in other words, for five years.

It was during one of these times -- a day he left his flat around noon that he witnessed the deportations of Jews to Treblinka. He lived within walking distance of the ghetto -- only about ten minutes away. That day, he said, he came to Zelazna street (spelling?) where he saw about 80,000 -- 100,000 people, walking eight in a row, heading for the Warsaw West train station. Together with other Poles, he stood and watched them walk by, and said that he was overcome by a horrible feeling, like he couldn't breathe, like he needed to do something. He said that it was obvious that everyone watching knew what was going to happen to those Jews. Within 20 minutes of arrival at Treblinka, they would be dead.

He felt he had to do something. He ran to see how well -- or how poorly -- guarded the crowd was, whether there were any places en route to the station where someone could escape. He found a few bends in the road where this was so and decided to risk talking to one of the Jews in the crowd. He ran up to him, and blurted that the man should run, should leave, should tell as many as he could to do so as well, because they were all going to their deaths. The man turned on him, cursed him out, called him an anti-Semite for saying so, and that if he didn't disappear, he would tell the German guard about him. They (the Jews) were being resettled at a camp in the East.

Mr. Kuligowski tried one more time and approached another person in the crowd, and got a similar response. Thereafter, he ran from that place, angry at the rebuff and upset that he had risked his life (if he had been caught, he could have been shot) and been cursed at. He vowed from then on to concentrate only on his own safety.

The only other time he came close to the Ghetto was during the ghetto uprising, when he saw a woman jump from a burning building holding something (presumably a baby) in her arms.

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Mr. Kuligowski emphasized at many points in the interview that he held many of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto responsible themselves for what happened to them, because they refused to save themselves during the few opportunities when they could. He said that many gave over to optimistic positive thinking, which he hated (and still hates) when the circumstances do not warrant such optimism. As a counterpoint, he said he had the utmost respect for the fighters during the ghetto uprising in 1943, saying, "I respect Aniliewicz (one of the leaders of the uprising) more than my own parents." Mr. Kuligowski contended that one had to fight for one's life, rather than allow oneself to be led like a sheep to slaughter.

When the Warsaw Uprising itself started in 1944, Mr. Kuligowski came home to an empty flat one day -- his father had left with his new wife to Krakow, without saying good-bye, without a note -- and most importantly to Mr. Kuligowski, without leaving any food. Mr. Kuligowski then went to join the Home Army, was soon wounded and spent the rest of the uprising in convalescence. Upon its defeat, he surrendered with his unit to the Germans and was sent to a prisoner of war camp to Austria. There he was starving and escaped twice -- the second time successfully. He was liberated near Munich by the Americans, decided not to return to Poland, but instead joined General Anders' army in Italy. From there, he emigrated to the UK, where he has lived ever since.

The interview was recorded on audio and lasted almost two hours.

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