

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Władysław Szepelak

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Part 1

Interviewer: Patrycja Bukalska. (PB): Thank you for being willing to meet with us. When we met with you previously, we began to speak with you about your wartime memories. This time we've come back to ask you about them again and to record them. Could you please introduce yourself and tell us where and when you were born?

Władysław Szepelak (WS) was born on December 10, 1924 in Zakopane. At the present time he resides in a village named Bielanka.

(SB): How do you recall the beginning of war in this area?

The Germans arrived in Czarny Dunajec and in Pieniążkowice on September 1, 1939. A patrol reached Bielanka only that night but then retreated. Since along the ridge of Mt. Żeleźnica up to Buczynek the Polish Army had dug trenches, there was some opposition to the Germans in Żeleźnica. The Germans, however, wanted to occupy Mount Wysoka. And it was there that the Poles displayed real opposition. They destroyed three German tanks using their anti-panzer cannon. They also destroyed three tanks on Mount Łysa that were coming from the direction of the Orava River (?), from the direction of Podwilk. Otherwise, on the first day of war WS and his step brother climbed the mountain behind their house. There, from above, the Germans fired a few shots in their direction. WS returned home. His step brother went through the woods in the direction of Jamne (Mt. or town?). He crossed the Sieniawa and on the way to Jamne he was caught by Germans, who stamped his passport with a triangular stamp. Afterwards, his step brother returned home.

The following day, WS, his mother and younger brother, fled to Bór to their aunt, Rozalia Szewczyk where half the population from Bielanka had gathered. During the night heavy bombardment began on Mt. Wysoka, and the Polish forces were forced to retreat. The Polish positions around Wysoka were burned to the ground. After spending the night at his aunt's, WS and his mother thought it wise to go back home to check in on her mother in Bielanka. There, WS had a minor encounter with a German tank driver, who with his tank destroyed a beehive and the bees started to sting him when he poked his head out of the turret and stepped out of the tank. The driver threw his helmet in the direction of the bees and ran away. Seeing WS, the tank driver asked WS to approach him and to go get his helmet. This upset WS since it was the first order given to him by a German that he was obliged to obey. Some 300 m. away WS sees two women who were being followed by two Germans. All around on all the ridges and hills WS could see outlines of antiaircraft artillery and tanks. As the two women walked by him, they alerted WS that the Germans were detaining all the men from Bielanka and were holding them fenced in by the chapel. When WS approached the chapel he noticed that, indeed, there were

some 20 men held there. WS could have been detained there as well, had a plane not appeared on the horizon, drawing intense fire from the German AA positions.

When WS got home, his grandmother reported that she was visited three times by the Germans and that they brought her some bread and otherwise, all was well. But apparently when these Germans found a nearby unoccupied house, they burned it down. Before doing so, they did confiscate all the traditional Górale's attire. After doing some chores, WS left.

Later, all the detained men from Bielanka would be taken to Austria to Stalag C. In this Stalag, the Germans rounded up some 4,000 men from the area of Poland known as Podhale. Slovaks, who previously lived in Oravia and Spiš, reported to the Germans and started to lay claims to property that was given to Poland after World War I. These Slovak residents were released from their detention so that they could reclaim their patrimony from the Poles. The Poles in Stalag C were kept there for seven months and were not released until Easter. Many of them returned ill and malnourished due to the harsh conditions that they had to endure. Some of the sick, after returning succumbed to their illness.

(PB): Later, when the Germans were more firmly installed as occupiers, did you witness any cases of persecution of the civilian population by the Germans?

WS is most acutely aware of those 20 or so men from Bielanka and one from Pieniędzykowice who were imprisoned in Austria for seven months, because right now none of them are remembered, even by those who were close to them. WS knew them all. At that time, the village of Bielanka numbered 60 residents. Everyone knew everyone else. WS could list them all. Moreover, they are listed in the book that WS gave the Interviewer. WS mentions that he funded a plaque carved into African granite, with all the names of those who were detained in Austria. This plaque is now displayed in the chapel in Bielanka near the spot where they were held before they were deported. There is another plaque nearby that lists 10 people who died at the hands of the Germans in the course of the war, like Władysław Pałasz. Then, there were these two beggars (names not provided). The plaque includes Bolesław Lachowski, pseudonym "Tor," a member in WS's partisan unit, who died near WS's house in Bielanka. The plaque also included the name of WS's father, who refused to surrender and died 3-4 minutes after Bolesław Lachowski. Before dying he lunged at a German with a pitchfork. The name of WS's grandmother who was cut down in the garden underneath the apple tree by a fusillade of bullets is also on this plaque as are the names of WS's mother and his uncle, both of whom died in Auschwitz. At this point, WS brings up an odd coincidence, namely that his uncle had a concentration camp number that was one digit higher than WS's own 168061. Since his mother was taken to the women's camp in Auschwitz, her tattooed number was completely different.

In addition to the two above mentioned plaques, WS takes credit for a third plaque, dedicated to the memory of Cardinal Wojtyła who held a Holy Mass a year before he left for Rome to

become Pope Paul II. Furthermore, in the Bucznik Forest, where WS's partisan detachment of ZWZ: [Związek Walki Zbrojnej/Union of Armed Struggle--an underground army formed in Poland following the German invasion in September 1939]; and where they had spent the greatest amount of time engaged in clandestine activity, WS funded an obelisk to memorialize the spot where the partisans pledged their oath of loyalty. Later in the course of the war, this detachment fell under the jurisdiction of the AK (Armja Krajowa). This obelisk commemorates the 16 names of those who remained loyal to the cause to the end. It omits the names of two who turned out to be traitors and of two Kraków residents who swore their oath in a house before it became traditional to do so in the Bucznik Forest. One of them was Mieczysław Bitner, nicknamed "Thor." The other one was Mieciu Kaczmarek or Kaczmarczyk. He was a Jew who was executed by the Gestapo in Zakopane.

(PB): You started to speak about the death of your father and grandmother. Could you tell us more about this event? [Timestamp: 00:19:33]

(WS): Some 3-4 km from WS's house was the village Odrowąż. In that village lived a person named Wojciech Dusza. He was born in 1912. His father's name was Michał Dusza. Wojciech's, nickname was "Szarota". "Szarota" did not want to study to be a priest. Instead he went to a naval academy and became a river sailor. He captained the river boats "Rusalka" and "Wawel". He scuttled this Pinsk flotilla on the River Bug with the belief that they would quickly salvage them, after England and France entered the war and forced Germany to capitulate. Unfortunately, the situation turned out quite differently when on September 17, the Soviet Army entered Poland and ended up salvaging these boats, only to have them taken away when the Germans launched a war against the Soviet Union.

Wojciech Dusza settled in Puławy. There he married the wife of his friend, the widow Julia Mokrzycka. When "Szarota" returned from serving in the defeated Polish army, he became involved in forming the beginnings of the underground army a.k.a. ZWZ. However, since the Germans were constantly on his heels, he moved to Podhale and decided to live in Bielanka and here he organized the first detachment of ZWZ. To this detachment belonged WS, his father, and WS's friend Jasiak Kaleczak. For a time, "Szarota" lived in Kaleczak's house. But because it was too close to the road he hid out near the chapel where during summer, evening divine prayers were held. These evening services are still ongoing, except instead of being held in that small chapel they now take place in a newly built church, which WS himself managed as a builder.

(PB): Did your father die because he belonged to the underground Army? What happened?

WS's father belonged to the underground army. He was second in command of "Szarota's" detachment. His father's *nom de guerre* was "Kasprowy." The detachment had a rule not to keep any arms at home. [Timestamp: 00:24:09].

Mieciu Kaczmarek and Mieczysław Bitner “Thor,” were captured by the Gestapo in Zakopane in early May. As previously mentioned, Kaczmarek, a Jew, was assumed to have been promptly executed by the Gestapo. Bitner however was tortured by the Gestapo from the beginning of May until September 8. On September 8 Bitner came to visit the Szepelaks. He informed them that he fled from the Gestapo with 25 others who were armed with automatic rifles, ready to fight the Gestapo. He came accompanied by two guys—one resembling a Romani, wearing a local mountain man’s hat, otherwise dressed in civilian clothes. WS was unable to recall the other one. He remembers the Romani because later on he conducted many interrogations of WS.

They started asking WS’s father about the whereabouts of “Szarota.” His father said that he might be near Gubałówka, since he planned on attending a wedding there. Wacek Krzeptowski (?) was supposed to be there as well.

At that time, “Szarota’s” main task was to deal with informers among the Górale folk. The usual punishment was whipping or beating with a stick. Those that were incorrigible would lose their life. In “Szarota’s” partisan unit there were two Czechs who handled the so called ‘wet affairs’ for the ZWZ and killed Górale-informers either with a bayonet or a knife.

WS’s father missed some disturbing details about the Romani who was asking him about “Szarota.” He seemed to know that WS’s father had a number of people from “Szarota’s” unit at his disposal. In fact, at that time, there were four members of the unit with him in Bucznik. Suddenly, without any explanation, Bitner pulled off his shirt and turned with his back towards WS’s father. His back displayed festering wounds, blood and black and blue marks. He was incredibly beaten. Bitner offered another clue that he must have cut a deal with the Gestapo. On the way to the bathroom, Bitner whispered to WS’s mother: “The ground is burning under my feet.” But his mother did not know what that was supposed to mean. Had he said “Betrayal” or “Trap” she would have understood.

For some reason, the questioning turned to the whereabouts of WS and two other guys who might have been in Bucznik. Instead it turned out the three of them were on an assignment in Slovakia to obtain some arms that were periodically parachuted into Slovakia by the British or Americans. The weapons were either French or Russian. They also received \$20US gold coins. Such a coin was used by WS on this assignment to use as a bribe of those who knew where and how to obtain these weapons in Slovakia. However, WS and his cohorts returned from this assignment emptyhanded. There was some kind of unexpected complication and his Slovak contact only offered to explain everything to WS’s father, when he came to see him in person later. [Timestamp: 00:30:54]

(PB): So. When “Thor” [Bitner] came to see your father, you were not there, correct?

WS: That is correct. WS's contact, Andrzej Felek was supposed to have brought the weapons across the Slovak-Polish border. Instead, when WS returned from Slovakia, WS's father apparently knew already that there were some problems with that delivery of the weapons. But before they could re-focus on their clandestine operations, they had to finish their farm chores and bring in the sheep for the night. WS claims that by evening his father was quite suspect about the story told by Bitner during his earlier visit with the two suspicious characters. According to WS, that was the reason why his father did not share that night's password with members of the unit who had returned with WS from Slovakia. So that when Bolesław Lachowski nicknamed "Kos" was returning in the evening to meet with WS and called out: Password! No one answered. He only heard the clanging of metal locks. So, he fired his gun in the direction from where he heard the noise. Unbeknownst to him, by then WS's house was surrounded by Germans. In response, they opened fire on "Kos" and killed him on the spot. His body rolled down from a ridge into a roadside ditch.

When WS's father heard the gunfire, he ran into the breezeway of the house, while the Germans ran out of the house. His father reached for the pitchfork that was behind the door and must have wounded a German, but not before the German he managed to shoot WS's father under the shoulder blade. The bullet went through his heart, killing him. At that time, WS was hiding in the attic with a friend who had hoped to join the partisans. His name was Smard [Sp.?], Józek. WS was going to introduce him to "Szarota" if he came by. [The narrative at this point is extremely complicated and twisted beyond any ability to make sense of it. The confusion is noted by the interviewer. The events of different days are being co-mingled]. [Timestamp: 00:35:55]

[PB]: Could we return to your house when gunfire was heard outside, when "Kos" was being shot, was it then that you realized that that the Germans surrounded the house or was it earlier?

WS: It was earlier because the Germans already started to beat his mother and grandmother, demanding to know where the son Władek (WS) was. At that point there was also another woman in the house. She was from Kraków. She was someone who used to regularly visit to buy food stuff from them. WS suggests that it might have been she who tipped off the Germans that WS was hiding in the attic, but he's not certain of that.

Some 15 minutes earlier Józek Smarda heard a conversation between WS's father and Andrzej Felek, the Slovak gun smuggler. It was fortunate that he wasn't caught in the house. The car with the Germans arrived moments after Felek left.

(PB): So, if I understand it correctly, you were in the attic and the Germans were below beating your mother and grandmother? And your father was also below?

WS: Yes, that is correct. Father was also below but he was no longer alive. That's when the Germans ran up to the attic, asking: "Which one is Szepelak?" Both WS and Józek were grabbed by their arms and the Germans began to demand to know where he hid the machine gun? WS denied any knowledge of a machine gun. Yes, he had been to Slovakia, but he only went to get food. The Germans started to question WS as to who were the two guys who went with him to Slovakia. They started to beat him. WS got hit on the temple with a revolver handle. But that seemed to make him more courageous and indifferent towards suffering. The German pulled a knife and threatened to eviscerate him. He started to shred his cotton shirt and to draw blood from the skin on his chest.

(PB): Did you know this German interrogator?

(WS): Later WS recognized him. His father told him that he was there with Bitner earlier. Once the Germans got WS down from the attic they continued to beat him. As the beating continued, his mother started to faint. WS was now being beaten with a hoe. Meanwhile the Gestapo signaled to the window so that WS's grandmother would start running away. Later WS will recall the conversation he overheard between the Gestapo officer Krupmanek (the same one that ended up killing his father) and the Romani that accompanied Bitner to the house earlier. They agreed to kill the grandmother, since she was excess baggage and it would be easier if they got rid of her than brought her along. Only later, WS would hear the shots that would mark the moment when his grandmother was tricked into running away, when in fact she was intentionally being killed in the garden under the apple tree. [Timestamp: 00:43:05]. WS didn't really learn definitively about his grandmother's death for more than two weeks from his uncle when they were being transferred from the Gestapo in Zakopane to the Montelupich Prison in Krakow. He told WS that on that day he dropped by the house in Bielanka, when WS's father was being buried in the woods near the house instead of in the cemetery. According to the uncle, three people were buried there: his father, his grandmother and his partisan friend. Two weeks later they killed another partisan, Jan Drąg at whose place "Szarota" stayed. Drąg's wife was also supposed to be killed, but she managed to escape from the house and hid in the woods for two years. She survived the war and lived until 90 years of age.

(PB): When you were arrested at home, you were taken cuffed with your friend Józek who was hiding with you in the attic, your mother, and the woman from Kraków who allegedly came to buy some food?

(WS): That is all correct. The uncle had been arrested later. He was with the partisans and knew about everything and at that time he lived in Zakopane.

(PB): Were there many Germans at your house?

(WS): Counted some 30 to 35. At least that's how many walked with him. They walked in the direction of Czarny Dunajec. A few feet down the road, Bolek Lachowski was pointed out to WS.

He had been shot earlier by the Gestapo and was still lying in the ditch. He was shy of turning 20 years old. They were led to the first buildings in Pieniądkowice. There, an order was given to one of WS's relatives to harness some horses to a cart. The convoy continued to Czarny Dunajec. Part of the escort, some 30 Germans separated from the detail in Pieniądkowice and continued towards Odrowąż. On the cart remained two armed Germans, WS, Józek Smarda, WS's 8-year old brother, his mother and the woman from Kraków. In front of the Gestapo building in Pieniądkowice, local farmers armed with sticks stood guard. Such measures were taken to protect the Germans from possible attacks by the partisans. Once the jail keeper was located they were taken from the cart into the jail.

As WS learned later, these Germans who headed for Odrowąż ultimately made their way to "Szarota's" father's place and searched the entire house. They came again the following day as the Duszys were harvesting their field. WS learned all these details after the war from a woman laborer who worked for the Dusza family. That day they were taken to the house and were beaten all day and by evening they were brought to the prison in Czarny Dunajec. In the evening a number of cars arrived at the prison and different prisoners were quickly assigned into each one. The first car held Germans with an automatic rifle. The second car held "Szarota's" father and his brother. The third car held "Szarota's" mother and sister. The fourth car held WS's mother and the woman from Kraków. In the fifth car were WS and Józek, both of them with arms and legs securely tied and with their heads covered with blankets. The departure of the convoy was disrupted by the shouting by WS's 8-year-old brother who was pleading to be allowed to go with his mother. The convoy departed with the brother left standing in the rain on the road. In addition to two prisoners per car, each car had a driver and a guard. They drove via Nowy Targ to the prison in Zakopane, where, once they arrived, they were transferred to prison cells.

End of Part 1

Part 2

Interviewer: Patrycja Bukalska. (PB): I would like to return to the moment when you were telling us how you were transferred to Zakopane. How long were you there and were you interrogated?

Władysław Szepelak (WS) (SB): He was there from September 10 until November 1. The main interrogation took place on Tuesday September 14. The Gestapo Krupanek was his main interrogator. When WS refused to confess, he was told to grab the chair with his hands and extend his buttocks. If he failed to last five strikes with the whip, he would get 10. WS did not last more than three strikes, and let go of the chair. At that point the head of the Gestapo, Arnold Semish and Krupanek fell upon him and started to beat him all over with the whip. Then they repeated the routine by beating him until he started talking. If he didn't start they would beat him to death. This time WS lasted until the count of seven and the two Gestapo started knocking him and beating him around the room. Then they tied his hands and stuck a stick between his elbows and his knees and suspended him between two desks. This time they started to beat his bare feet, his heels, and his head and to tickle the soles of his feet. After they released him the questions started again. They started to pound his head against the wall. In the course of this beating, WS knocked off from the wall a photograph of Adolf Hitler and a small painting of sunflowers. Eventually all his clothing was shredded as a result of the beating and all the buttons were torn off. The ragged remains of his clothing dragged behind him. Eventually WS remained totally naked. Two more Gestapos joined WS's beating. WS continued to refuse to confess and now the Gestapo threatened to hang him. They strung a noose over his head, and pulled it tightly so that WS lost all sense of where he was. He was lowered and doused with water so that he regained consciousness. WS's torturers tried hanging him three times and each time revived him. Finally, he was suspended by his hands that were tied behind his back from the back of the door so that he could not reach the floor with his feet. The pain that this evoked was excruciating. Meanwhile, Krupanek took a piece of the broken glass and started to etch the bare soles of his feet. Somewhere in the course of this ordeal, WS heard Bitner "Thor" enter and ask: "Did he confess?" Krupanek answered: "No." Bitner: "Given how much we gave his mother and she didn't give up anything, it's doubtful that he knows anything." Bitner offered a possible clarification by reminding Krupanek that there were two Władeks, and the second one, from Kraków could have gotten the automatic rifle (in Slovakia). When this interrogation came to an end, WS was in no shape to even stand up. He managed to get to his knees, push off from the wall with his head and got up. After making his way down the stairs he came to a stop in front of a jail cell. Inside was a man with a gray beard that hadn't shaved for at least two weeks. He was chained to the wall by his leg. It was he who was ordered to handcuff WS to the wall. Krupanek left instructions that WS was to be left without food or water for six days. And if he didn't confess by then he would be left to die. WS learned that his

cellmate was Rejczag, Józek from Waksmund. His wife was taken to a camp in Jasła. Józek was so viciously beaten in Zakopane that he started to confess to that which he didn't commit.

On the third night, Józek gave him a crust of bread. After six days WS got food and water. He also got a stool so that he could sit. WS mentions that on the 4th day WS's mother was brought in so she could see WS's condition. She was told that if she didn't start talking, WS would die. This encounter only gave WS some encouragement that his mother was still alive. He feared that she was killed.

(P.B.): Where were you transferred from Zakopane?

(W.S.): To Montelupich Prison in Kraków, along with 21 men and a number of women. WS travelled with his uncle. He had been in prison in Zakopane when the entire Dusza family was executed by the Germans. [Timestamp: 00:18:12]. WS provides some vivid details about this event. WS stayed in Montelupich from October 1, until December 14. There he was not interrogated. On 13 September, WS was taken to a so-called Crooked Cell. There were 21 men in it. WS recalls some of them: Średniawski, Jerzy from Kraków—an intellectual. There was a Hoi [sp?] from Kraków; Małachowski, a priest from Kraków. There was a Krzemiński from Kraków. There was a Jaworski, a Ruthenian, who had a big scar from a biopsy on his stomach. There were two Ukrainians—one from Leszek, near Lvov, Sarachman, Theodor. The other one was Ziemba, Józef. Both of them were arrested because, when Germans went to visit some Poles, and Sarachman and Ziemba [Timestamp: 00:22:29] did not like these Poles, they went up to that house and tossed a few grenades inside. Both of them were in the German army, in the ranks of the Ukrainian police. As a result of their terrorist action, some Germans were wounded. To avoid creating the impression that Germans execute Ukrainians, especially those serving as soldiers for the Germans, they were deported to Auschwitz, knowing that they probably wouldn't survive.

There was also Jasiek Kierzy [sp?] from Podhale. He was picked up while he was digging potatoes in the field. He was still dressed in traditional mountain people's clothing. And there was also WS's uncle.

(P.B.): Were these 21 men in that cell were all sent to Auschwitz?

(WS): Yes. WS only apologizes, if he left out someone from that cell. The next day, while undergoing disinfection, prior to being transferred to Auschwitz, many of the men found out that their wives were in the Zakopane prison as well and that they were being sent to Auschwitz with them. The men were chained in four, while the women were not chained. Upon arrival, the men and women were separated. WS did not have a chance to say good-bye to his mother. They did not see one another again. She died in spring on April 17 (year?). The official cause of death was given as a heart attack. From women who lived with her and survived the camp, WS learned that his mother died because of typhus.

(P.B.): What happened to you in the first moments after you entered Auschwitz?

(W.S.): Again, they underwent disinfection. Their civilian clothing was confiscated. (Somehow, WS managed to smuggle through a prayer book that his mother had given him during their trip from Zakopane. That booklet made it with him to Mauthausen.) They had to wash with a gray ointment. All body hair was shaved, including eyebrows and eyelids. Then they had to draw handfuls of soap and enter the showers where they were subjected to alternate sprays of hot and cold water. Then they were chased outside to get their clothing. It was December 14, freezing, around 14 degrees Celsius. They were given wooden clogs with leather to cover only their toes. The clothing was randomly sized. People swapped clothing for sizes that would fit better later. Afterwards they were whipped to hurry up in order to get to Barrack #8. They lived in this barrack approximately two weeks. The head of the Block was a Czech Jew named Rad. In this barrack WS came down with meningitis. Only by changing his plank bed for morning reveille did he avoid being sent to the gas chambers. He also managed to muster enough strength when the entire barrack was sent again to the baths. It was then that they were issued striped concentration camp clothing and numbers that had to be sewn on. They were being prepared for being shipped to another camp. WS left Auschwitz on February 2nd. 2,000 prisoners were boarded onto one freight train. Every prisoner was issued a paper sack to put on. Each car was outfitted with a barrel of drinking water and a barrel for excrements. [Timestamp: 00:40:58]. They were transported 2-3 days. There was a layover in Vienna and then they reached Mauthausen. Conditions for sleeping in Mauthausen were terrible. They were packed like sardines.

Once again, they went through the washroom routine. New tin plates with new numbers were attached to their hands using combination locks and wire. [Timestamp: 00:45:33]. On their pants and jackets they were given new numbers. In Auschwitz, WS had a tattooed number: 168061. Here in Mauthausen he was issued number: 52496. The reason why he recalls such details is because they were given one day to memorize this number in German. This was their entire and only ID.

(P.B.): How long did you stay in Mauthausen?

(W.S.): Less than a week. They were then sent to Ebensee. They were becoming hopeful because they were placed in a passenger train with benches for seats. Also, on the horizon they started seeing snow covered Alps. This made sense, since this was February. WS started thinking hopefully of running away to Switzerland. After going through some lengthy tunnels, and after a day's long journey, they pulled into the station Ebensee. But they arrived as a detail of 1,500 prisoners instead of the original 2,000. The Germans took away a group of those who were older than 30 and sent them to the quarries in Gusen. At Ebensee, WS was assigned to Barrack 3. At the time there were only three barracks. This camp was started in October. WS

stayed in Ebensee for 16 months. WS singles out the scribe of this barrack as a very good person. He was a priest who was later taken to Dachau [N.B. no name was provided].

(P.B.): When did you first go to work? And what sort of work was it?

(W.S): His first work assignment was on Abladin 1, and it started the day after arrival in Ebensee. Below there were some tunnels already dug and into the open area trains with equipment, machines and drilling compressors kept arriving all day. WS's Kapo was Neuman from Poznań. After an accident with his finger, WS was assigned to a detail where he dug the RotKanal next to the camp. On this project he could dig with a shovel without bending his finger.

All of WS's friends in Auschwitz received packages from home. During his stay there, WS received only one tiny package. Besides some edible items it contained a note informing WS that Jan Drąg as well as Franciszek Bielak perished together with his daughter Bronka. Bronka was apparently Jan Drąg's wife. WS had particular problems accepting her execution by the Germans. She wasn't involved with the partisans and shouldn't have been killed.

End of Part 2

Part 3

Interviewer: Patrycja Bukalska. (PB): I wanted to ask you a few questions pertaining to your arrival at Ebensee. You mentioned that when you arrived there were Germans on the train with black 'winkels'/'windows'/patches+. What were they doing?

Władysław Szepelak (WS): They were primarily *Kapos*, who were German criminal prisoners. Occasionally they may have included political prisoners. But most frequently these political prisoners were viewed by the professional criminals as saboteurs. According to WS they were the cruelest to other prisoners in camps. But there were a few exceptions. For example, at Ebensee, there was a unit called 'potato processing detail', to which WS belonged for 2 months. The Kapo who was second in command of this detail seemed better. When he was assigned to watch WS and another prisoner from Warsaw, while they were tasked with selection of turnips that would be suitable for a salad that would be prepared for Germans—work that was unbearable due to the cold temperature and dampness, while your hands were constantly covered with wet remains of turnips—he would allow WS and his buddy to stand for brief moments to pat one another on their backs and shoulders to stay warm. When that Kapo was alone with them, he just looked out to make sure that his superior wasn't about to come in. That Kapo did not stop them from trying to stay warm. One time, while they working, WS's co-worker had asked aloud: It's interesting if this Kapo believes in God, because he is better than all the others? That German Kapo immediately asked WS as to what his co-worker had asked? WS, who knew enough German by then, translated: "Do you believe in God, because you are better than the others? The Kapo answered: "No, but, I have no issues with those who do."
[Timestamp: 00:03:31]

(P.B.): You mentioned that the detail of 2,000 people that went to Mauthausen from Auschwitz was reduced by 500 people and that all Jews and those under 30 years of age went on to Ebensee, and those 500 went to Gusen. Were the Jews treated differently in Ebensee?

(W.S.): In Ebensee everyone was treated the same. Everyone in Ebensee was an enemy of the Germans. They sought revenge on us as much as they could.

(P.B.): Since you were in Ebensee for quite a while do you have some vivid recollections of atrocities perpetrated against the prisoners?

(W.S.): Yes, public hanging in front of the kitchen, especially of those who tried to escape. WS remembers quite vividly a certain Russian Major. Since he was missing for three days, all the prisoners were kept awake and standing in the roll-call square for that length of time. Once found, he would be brutally beaten straddling a barrel with his upper body bent over the rim. But when this Major was found, he was brought back. His hands were left untied, but his eyes were covered. A noose was looped around his neck. When the step stool was pulled out from under him, he still had a brief moment to grab the rope before it fully tightened around his

neck and shouted in Russian: "Guys, don't try to run away from here. You'll never make it alive. Long live!..." He never finished. Those inmates who fell during the prolonged wait for the escapee's recovery had to be held up by the others. Many however keeled over dead. So, from time to time a moment was granted to stack the dead in a pile to the side.

Afterwards, the corpses were burned in the crematorium. However, towards the end of the war, the ovens could not keep up with volume of corpses that needed to be burned, so in the rear of the camp from the southern side, deep ditches were dug and bodies would be dropped in them in layers. Each layer was thinly covered with lime. About 1 meter from the top, diggers would compress the pit and fill it with soil to the brim so that the pit would end up flush.

(P.B.): What was happening in the camp? Why couldn't the crematoria keep up with the arriving corpses?

(W.S.): In April, (1945) the greatest number of people died from starvation and beatings. Out of some 18,000 prisoners, 8,500 died. To burn that many people there would have to be 2 or 3 crematoria. The one crematorium could not handle more than 200 corpses per day.

(P.B.): Ebensee was known as a difficult place to work. Could you tell us about the work you did there?

(W.S.): The 'potato processing detail' was supposed to be a lifesaver for WS. This detail offered a better job from the point of food. The food rations were better. And when the Kapos weren't looking then one could eat a raw turnip or carrot. Here WS provides a detailed description as of the degrees to which the various vegetables were processed and worked over to render every remnant for different purpose of food preparation for the different populations of the camp. [Timestamp: 00:14:47]. WS was transferred from this detail around Christmas time. His fingers and toes were rotting from this work. And since WS's Kapo hated him for his proud disposition and attitude, he was happy to get rid of him. This condition with his extremities wasn't cured until the Americans arrived and liberated them. WS describes the steps that the Americans took to cure WS of this condition.

(P.B.): To what work detail were you assigned next?

(W.S.): Strassenbauen 1/Road Construction Detail #1. The Kapo of this detail was Tadek Richlig, from Jordanów in Podhale. He was taken by the Germans from his studies in Warsaw. WS remembers him for refusing to beat his charges. He was always willing to give all the food that was not eaten by the Germans to prisoners in his detail. He survived the war. He became a professor at the Agrarian University in Warsaw. WS also recalls a Kapo from Rot Kanal. His name was: Julian Drabik. He was from Katowice. He was known for creating a raucous and a lot of noise with his whip. However, whenever he used it, his victim never felt any pain. He offered another example of someone who did not want to beat his underlings. This Kapo's name was

Old Franto. Later on, after liberation many prisoners in this detail filed a report with the Americans that Old Franto was always compassionate in his treatment of prisoners.

(P.B.): In Ebensee many people worked in mine shafts. Did you work there?

(W.S.): Yes, This was the most unpleasant kind of work. At first, when WS started working there, only 2 people were needed to push the cart with the stone output from the mine. By the end, in April or May, even 8 people couldn't manage. This was a result of starvation. There was another hazard in the mine shaft. The ceilings were prone to rock fall in response to the drilling. If a rock fell while a person was pushing the cart and killed one person that was good. But if it just broke some legs or arms, then the Kapo had to finish the job and put the prisoner out of his misery. But what if the rock fell right in the middle of all eight pushers, breaking their legs and decapitating a few of the pushers? That was a tragedy. [Timestamp: 00:27:21]. At this point WS describes the operation of the crematorium; how corpses were delivered by wagonettes designed for tipping so that the corpse would slide into the oven. If for some reason it didn't, there was a hook that could have been used for pulling the corpse into the oven by the crotch.

(P.B.): You mentioned that hanging was normal punishment for attempts to escape from the camp. Were there other punishments doled out for other transgressions?

(W.S.): There was, for theft. Until this day, in Poznań lives a Janek Wolski who was hung by his hands. He and another prisoner were suspected of stealing a watch that belonged to the second in command of the camp. In the morning they were hung by their hands that were first tied behind their backs. They weren't lowered until the end of the work day. Then it turned out that someone else stole the watch. The offense could have been minor, like theft of a slice of bread by a prisoner from another prisoner. That would result in the same punishment kind of punishment.

During the summer, those who escaped from camp would have been brought back to the roll-call square and be left lying in the sun all day. Their bodies would turn black and swollen and their faces looked like balloons—all from the sun. All the camp prisoners had to walk past these souls to see what would happen to anyone, who dared to escape.

Without any segue, WS narrates a story that pertains to lice. The camp was so overrun by lice that the Germans had no place to sit down without becoming infested. To rid the camp of the problem, they launched a major de-licing campaign. Half the inmates were made to undress and give up their clothes and stand for two days and two nights on the roll-call square. This was organized in mid-May around the time that Poles celebrate Zielone Świątki (Green Week). In the alpine terrain of Ebensee it was still quite cold at night. Many mountain peaks were still covered with snow. Still, everyone was happy that they were rid of the lice and they were given new clothes. However, things turned out for the worse. Now the Gestapo felt more confident about coming into the barracks and they resumed the beatings of the prisoners. They even

came around during the night to beat people. They would simulate hunting games and conducted target practice on the prisoners when they would venture out to the latrine.

(P.B.): Earlier you mentioned about a 'Judgement Night'. What was that?

(W.S.): This was an event that occurred when the camp was about to be liberated. The German authorities set dynamite charges inside all the mine shafts and planned to kill everyone in them before abandoning the camp. The prisoners learned that the Germans did not bring into the mine shafts food provisions but dynamite. They understood that if they went there, they would be blown up and remain there forever without a trace. The intentions of the camp commander were betrayed by the 3rd ranking deputy commander. He informed a cook named Piotr, in the kitchen. Thanks to that the prisoners were forewarned and prepared some responses to the camp administration's ruse. A meeting was convened on the camp's roll call square, where the head commander addressed the prisoners through a team of multilingual translators. The commander implied that the Germans took measures to protect the inmates from the approaching front and that they would be spared any fighting between the armed forces by going down into the mine shaft where food provisions were stored in anticipation. The Poles, who were the largest contingent in the camp, responded in unison: "We are not going!!!" Other ethnic groups followed. Instead of going to the mine shafts, the prisoners went back to the barracks. At that point the SS-men fled. All security outposts were taken over by the Wehrmacht, most of whom were Austrians. They struck a deal with the prisoners that if they wouldn't try to get out of camp, they won't be compelled to shoot anyone. However during that night, the inmates settled the scores with a number of the Kapos. WS provides a very detailed description of how one of the most sadistic Kapos was cornered, stoned and shoved into the oven still alive. But he had a track record for bestiality and cruelty. He was personally responsible for killing hundreds of Jews and other prisoners who worked under him. Then there was a Willie who worked in the infirmary and injected death inducing shots into prisoners. WS heard from the Czech doctors who worked there, that Willie was caught by the prisoners and they stripped his neck of all skin and then bandaged up his exposed veins and bones and released him knowing that he was done for. He apparently committed suicide shortly afterwards.

(P.B.): Have you even been to the infirmary?

(W.S.): Once, to have a tooth extracted. Instead, they pulled two different ones.

Eventually, the prisoners started running away from camp. But the Austrian guards did not open fire. Instead they had their own 'Judgement Night.' They blew up the dynamite that hadn't made it to the mine shafts. There were also barrels filled with gasoline. They went up with the dynamite.

(P.B.): When was the camp liberated?

(W.S.): WS has it recorded as May 5. On that day, two American tanks rolled through the gate of the camp. The prisoners who were milling about the gate picked up the weapons that the Austrians threw away and threw them into a huge pile. As the first tank rolled in, the prisoners carrying various national flags climbed onto the tanks and unfurled those standards. At that point WS got all choked up. Up to that point he was tough and stoic. This time he broke into tears. There were many who ended up in tears.

Those Americans did one thing wrong. They gave food to the prisoners that were greeting them. At least two ate too much too quickly and died.

[A historic footnote: WS and a number of American soldiers who were first to enter Ebensee camp on May 5, 1945 met at a 50th Year Reunion to reminisce.]

(P.B.): I would like to return for a moment to the time before your arrest and time in concentration and labor camps. Did any Jews live here in Bielanka? If so, what happened to them during the occupation?

(W.S.): One Jew stands out in WS's recollection. That was Mojek Lankst. The family lived not too far in Raba Wyżna. They had a shop there. They were relatively poor. When the war broke out Mojek was serving in the Polish army. When he returned from the army he returned to Raba Wyżna and found a safe haven among the local farmers. He didn't look like a Jew. Ultimately, when he was discovered by the Gestapo they took him as a laborer to their office in Rabka. He lasted as a worker for the Gestapo through the entire occupation. He was highly liked by everyone and could have easily escaped had he wanted to do that, but he didn't. He ate at the same table as the Germans. When the last day arrived, the head of the Gestapo office took him outside and shot him. That was really inhuman—to befriend someone and then to kill him. The entire Lank family perished—his sister Golda and his father Wicek, his mother and brother-in-law. WS did not learn how and where they died.

Another Jew, Zbukhvirek [sp?], lived by the church. His last name was made up, because his name in Polish had a rude meaning. People called him Lewka.

WS was aware of other Jews from his area, but their histories were second hand stories that were told to him by friends and relatives. Tape III comes to an end with one incident that WS did witness in Nowy Targ, when the Germans just entered the town and Jews were still there:

A German soldier was hitting a Jewess about the face. Another Jewess, her daughter ran up to a German officer and told him in fluent German that this German soldier was hitting her mother. As soon as this officer glanced at this private, the private stopped. How he recognized that that woman was Jewish, WS did not know. But clearly, at that time, Jews were not required yet to wear the Star of David and Jews were free to sell their wares in public. These must have been the very beginnings of the regimen that would soon evolve throughout all occupied Poland, when persecution of Jews became blatant and overt.

End of Part 3

Part 4

Interviewer: Patrycja Bukalska. (PB): I wanted to ask you about the period prior to your arrest. You mentioned that you helped smuggle Jews to the Slovak side. How did this take place?

Władysław Szepelak (WS): We had people on the Slovak side who were prepared to meet our people. We had no last names, but we suspect that they were the Smutkov brothers from Jablonka.

(PB): And what was your function?

(WS): I escorted them to the designated place.

(PB): From where did you take this person?

(WS): He would be sent from Kraków to the Sieniawy RR Station. At the station there was a railroad man who would bring him to us. And I would take it from there.

(PB): Did you know who organized this?

(WS): No, I did not know.

(PB): And the route across which you smuggled people, were these used for individuals or groups?

(WS): It was rather for individuals.

(PB): How many times did you lead people across, approximately?

(WS): Three or four.

(PB): Did you speak with them along the way? Did you learn anything about them?

(WS): We walked along trails which were used by the *Grenzschutzpolizei*/**border police**. If there was any communication, it was done in whispers and not to create too much of a rustle.

(PB): Were these men or women as well?

(WS): Men.

(PB): How did you know that these were Jews?

(WS): I assumed, because they must have gotten our address from our neighbor Langst. My father had some sort of cell set up with him. My father would visit those Jews and spoke with them quite often. They were the nearest Jews to live to us. I remember that when my brother was born, my father wanted to get something for his Christening, so he went to this Langst (who owned a shop nearby). Langst told him that he couldn't do anything because it was 'Shabbat.' But he did let my father into the store. My father helped himself. He weighed everything and left the money that he owed on the counter and left the store.

(PB): Were these Jews sent by this Langst?

(WS): Very tight secrecy bound us to all of this activity.

WS offers an example of the conspiratorial nature of their work. There was a member of the partisans whom the guys called Turk, because he had long mustache on the sides of his mouth and looked like a Turk. He would appear at their house unpredictably and no one knew from where he had come and then where he would disappear. That was the kind of secrecy under which they operated.

(PB): What happened to your brother who was so abruptly pulled away from your mother and was left standing in the rain, crying on the side of the road in Pieniędzykowiec?

(WS): He returned to Bielanka and lived in the family house with these two 'aunties' who took over responsibility for the farm. There wasn't enough to eat and vermin infested their storage. So, their cousin Marysia, whose sister and father were executed by the Germans, took him in. While there, he grazed their livestock. This cousin lived on the farm with her mother. However, after her husband was killed, she started to lose her mind. She functioned like a 'lost sheep.' And although they lived together to the end of the war in terrible poverty, until this day, his brother recalls that they were wonderful people. Whatever they ate he would eat as well. He lacked clothes. He even lacked patches because they lacked thread to sew them on. It was only once WS returned that he managed to get some mended garments for him.

(PB): Just to assure myself, when you were in Auschwitz, were you in Auschwitz or Birkenau?

(WS): I was in the part of Auschwitz that was made of brick, in Barrack #8. The Death Cell was in #11. The wall of Barrack # 10 was also used for executions.

(PB): During your stay in Auschwitz, in or near your barrack did you see people dying?

(WS): I would say no. I was quarantined. I was not with people who were going to work where they might have been driven to extermination. WS knew what was going on in there because friends would tell him.

(PB): During your stay in Auschwitz were you witness of executions of prisoners?

(WS): No.

(PB): I just wanted to assure myself. You mentioned that towards the end of Ebensee's existence, there were so many deaths that the crematorium could not keep up. What was the cause of their death?

(WS): Mostly hunger. And then billy clubs, when prisoners started staggering and couldn't keep up. They would be used by the Kapos to finish them off.

(PB): What happened with you after you were liberated by the Americans? When did you get home?

(WS): On the 2nd or 5th July we left Austria. The Americans took us with their convoy to Tabor, Prague and Dziedzice. There we were turned over to our authorities. We were given train passes so that anyone who could not find their family, they could ride the trains for free for two weeks or a month. Since WS was not sure of his mother's fate he chose to go to Bielanka via Kraków and Chabówka. The train didn't go any further, because the station was totally bombed out. The remaining 14 km he started to cover on foot. Not having eaten anything since Kraków, he was advised to first find a Red Cross facility to get some food. He was fortunate enough to find one open in Chabówka. The woman attendant asked him to sit down, while she went across the street to a house and got two eggs, came back, scrambled them and made him a sandwich with two thin slices of bread that she brought for her own lunch. WS ate it with a cup of tea that she made for him. And then he went on. But he will never forget her kindness.

Half way to Bielanka he saw someone with a horse and cart that he recognized from Sieniawy and asked him for a ride. He took him to the fork in the road between Bielanka, Raba Wyżna and Sieniawy. He went in the direction of Sieniawy while WS resumed his trek on foot. WS was not wearing his prison garb because they were infested with lice. After getting washed, while still in Austria, he and some former prisoners from Ebensee broke into a German warehouse where WS found a pilot's uniform which he put on. He took a second pilot's uniform and an overcoat and packed both in a backpack. He had more stuff which he put in a suitcase. He carried this extra baggage as far as Prague, but by then his feet swelled so much that he couldn't move. So, he left the extra stuff in Prague at the train station.

Approaching Bielanka he saw a woman tending to her potatoes. As they exchange greeting in mountain folk style, she recognized him as a descendant of the Szepelaks. Here WS interjects that on route from Kraków to Chabówka, a woman from Raba Wyżna already told him that a letter came from Auschwitz informing them that his mother died of a heart attack. But he also learned that his brother was alive, so he had to continue. By the chapel where now there are two plaques, thanks to WS's efforts, from the house nearby came out Anielka, the sister of WS's friend Jasiek, *nom de guerre* Romek, who was in the partisans. She was two years older than WS. She was very excited to see him. She tells him that Jasiek now works for the police in Orava. [Because Jasiek was connected with an underground Polish organization, he didn't work long for the official police and soon went into hiding in the woods again]. Anielka accompanied WS to Marysia, with whom his brother had been living as a shepherd.

While Marysia was happy to see him, his brother was reluctant to approach WS because there were various rumors that he did not survive the war. That he tried to escape and was shot. None of WS's letters reached him. But then WS realized that at least one letter must have reached them because that could have been the only explanation why WS received a package

when he was in Auschwitz. This bought up another conundrum, but before it could be clarified, the interviewer redirected the narrative with the following question:

(PB): That pertained to a later period after the war. I wanted to ask you about one thing right after the war. What happened to the people who were suspected of collaborating with the Germans?

(WS): All of them were exiled to Siberia. They were arrested by the Urząd Bezpieczeństwa (UB)/Polish Secret Police, serving the Polish Ministry of Interior). They would then hand them over to the Soviet secret police (NKVD). Had WS not had the cover that he was in concentration camp, he would have been also arrested and accused of serving in the AK and he would have been exiled to Siberia.

But returning to this..., in the UB in Nowy Targ, after the war, worked a colleague of WS's father. He was among the original five that belonged to the secret cell. Three were captured (WS's father was killed), but this one went to work for the UB. WS went to see him and told him that his house in Bielanka was robbed clean. What was he supposed to do now? He answered: If you give me the names of the people you suspect, they will be deported to Siberia. WS declined the offer. He didn't want to be responsible for anyone's deportation to Siberia. He advised WS to go away and find work in the lands that Poland recovered after the war from Germany. Otherwise he would be constantly suspected of having connections with the AK. After 2-3 years, everything will calm down and he'd be able to come back.

And that's what WS did. He moved to western Poland and would have still been there, working on a farm, because things were going well for him, if the government hadn't started organizing cooperatives by force. Since WS saw this as another type of concentration camp, he had no intentions of staying on. So, he returned to Podhale to work in a rock quarry and in a gravel pit. During that time, he also slaved away in a lumber camp as a lumberjack, in the forest in Cisna where the famous and highly controversial Polish hero and a general of three armies, General Świerczewski, was suspiciously killed. In 1952, WS went to Nowa Huta and since then he's been a builder.

(PB): Speaking of people who collaborated with the Germans, I wanted to ask you whether you know what happened with the man "Tor" who betrayed you and brought the Germans to your house.

(WS): He died of typhus in Montelupich Prison in Kraków. He continued to be kept in prison. WS was told about him by Marian Polaczyk, who for many years was President of Political Prisoners in Zakopane. Bitner, *nom de guerre* Tor was transferred to Montelupich together with WS and his cohort. In Montelupich he sought preferential treatment for his contribution to the German cause, but instead he was struck with rifle butt by a guard. As for the prisoner who was chained by his leg in the cell that WS and he shared, he had a dream about Mother Mary

carrying two lambs to heaven and the next day he was taken away at 10:00 o'clock by the Gestapo Kwieciński, (who before the war was a border guard in Czarny Dunajec), and executed him in a cemetery.

End of Interview

[**Translator's Note:** Władysław Szepelak after the war was an avid local historian who stayed involved in recording actions of local people during the occupation and in observing the anniversaries of significant events during the war. Anytime he is unable to recall a name, he refers the interviewer to the book that he had written (and must have been published, since he had given her a copy). It apparently contains more details and more names of actors in WS's life during the war years. L.W.]