

Janina Stefańczyk
Polish Witnesses to the Holocaust Project
Polish
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Janina Stefańczyk was born in 1931 in Międzyrzec Podlaski to a farming family. She talks about life in Międzyrzec Podlaski after the outbreak of the Second World War; remembers the persecution of Jews and Poles and describes the scenes of establishing and liquidation of the ghetto as seen through the eyes of a child. She mentions that her father was involved in the razing of the ghetto as a forced laborer; she talks about the locals looting the amassed pile of Jewish belongings. As a child, Janina found looting an adventure; she mentions that her mother forbade collecting any Jewish goods after she brought home a small plate she found in the rubble. Janina remembers that her mother refused to help a Jewish family named **Bruha** with whom she was previously on friendly terms; Janina speculates that another Jewish family was denounced to the Germans by local Polish profiteers.

File 1 of 1

[01:] 00:40:22 - [01:] 23:04:02

[01:] 00:40:22 - [01:] 04:09:23
00:21 – 03:50

Q: Good day.

A: Good day.

Q: Please introduce yourself.

A: Janina Stefańczuk.

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born on January 2, 1931 in Międzyrzec Podlaski.

Q: We visited with you a few months ago and we talked about your wartime experiences. Now we have returned to videotape our conversation. I would like to ask how, how do you remember the beginning of the war, the moment when Germans invaded Międzyrzec.

A: I remember the bombing of the city and in particular the bombing of our train tracks, because it [possibly: tracks, bombing] ran from east to west. And our parents took us to the country. It was a little bit quieter in the country since it was a few kilometers away from Międzyrzec. Mom stayed here and my father went to war so it was really my mom and my oldest brother who took us there. And mom stayed here the whole time when we were in the country. When it got a bit quieter we came back. The house wasn't burnt but a part of the street where we lived had been bombed and burned and destroyed. About three families lived together in our apartment. And I have very unpleasant and very painful memories from that time during the war. Later the Germans invaded and we were all afraid. What else? Everybody was moved by that. My father came back from the war. Luckily our family was together and we started to live under occupation.

Q: After the Germans had invaded, when the Germans were already in Międzyrzec, were you ever a witness to their use of force and repressions against people in Międzyrzec?

A: Yes, because even we, the Poles would experience it. I remember when I was a little girl and I was going to school and a—the gendarmes took over a palace and you had to walk past where they were. And there was a man named **Schläger [Szejger]**, and he was a very mean German. He used to persecute whomever he didn't like. Also myself—when I was a little girl. He snatched my beret from my head and he tossed it into the street. Then he said: “Go and get it.”—something like that... Later I was constantly afraid of him. And it was also said that the Germans were treating Jews really badly right from the start.

Q: Did you perhaps see a situation when the Jews were treated poorly?

[01:] 04:09:23 - [01:] 07:37:09

03:50 – 07:18

A: Personally I didn't, but I saw a German treat my mom very badly. Jews used to come to our street because it was strictly a farming street. Only farmers lived there and [the Jews] were coming there to get milk and other agricultural products. And, among others, there was that Jewish woman who was once walking down the street when she spotted a German. Germans were entering the street from the opposite end and the Jewish woman walked in our back yard. Then she ran somewhere between the pig sties and she managed to get through to the other side of the street. A German then walked up to my mom and

he started to hit her. He was whipping her so hard that he cut her legs, the skin on her legs; that's how hard he was beating her. And the Jewish woman was lucky to escape the whipping.

Q: Was the German who was beating your mom saying something, or explaining something?

A: [He said] that a Jew came in here.

Q: And how did you know that that woman was Jewish?

A: Because mom saw her before. She said: "Run away!" She knew her, we knew them. Here, we really knew the entire population – both Polish and Jewish. We knew them and she [mom] knew very well that she [the woman] was Jewish.

Q: Did you also know her?

A: No I didn't. No, I didn't.

Q: Did you have any other similar contacts with the Jews throughout the war?

A: No, I don't remember.

Q: During our previous conversation you were talking about what happened to the family named **Bruha** [**Brucha**], [what happened] to the woman named **Bruha**.

A: Yes, right. And I would also like to mention that we were going together with Jewish girls to elementary school. Jews and Poles at the same time. And I was good friends with a Jewish girl. I even used to go to her house and she was coming to mine, to mine. And opposite from us lived a Jewish woman, whose family lived in the United States. Miss **Pola** knew Polish very well and she had a beautiful daughter. All the Polish boys who were her age were coming here and they were dating her. And later after the raid against the Jews had started, somebody—I don't know [*she seems disgusted*]*—*apparently someone was paid for that, because both of them disappeared. We assumed that someone would take care of them, that they would avoid the disaster. But it turned out that somebody apparently killed them.

Q: What do you mean it turn out?

A: Because there was no trace of them left. Nobody knew anything and somebody said that they were killed.

Q: And what happened to **Bruha**?

[01:] 07:37:09 - [01:] 12:02:00

07:18 – 11:42

A: And she—unfortunately they took her to the ghetto and she apparently died as well.

Q: Could you tell us about her. Who was **Bruha**?

A: She was—they had a very nice textile store. I know that my parents always used to buy from them. My father used to buy [fabric] for a good suit. Fabric from Bilesko. My parents used to tell me about her and they said that she was always very human [*compassionate*]. When my parents had no money she would extend them credit: “Janowa [*wife of Jan*], we are on good terms so you can pay me back whenever you will get the money.” – just like that.

Q: And when we were reminiscing last time you told me that **Bruha** came once to your mother. Do you remember that situation? Could you tell us about it?

A: My mom was telling us. My mom was telling us that she came once and she was asking: “Janowa, save my life and the life of my family! We won’t count gold by pieces but we will count it by weight [unclear: likely she would pay them a lot for it]” And my mom said: “You know, here is the situation and ...” My mom didn’t help her. She didn’t.

Q: And do you remember the moment when the ghetto was established, for example in Międzyrzec?

A: I remember that moment and it was very cold. It was probably a Sunday because I was going to church together with my brothers. And when I entered the town square—the town square was entirely different from what it is today—I saw a great number of people sitting there. And all—because it was raining—were covered with some cloths or blankets. Whether it was because they were cold or because of the rain—And when we saw that, we got terribly scared and we started to run back home. That was all I saw.

Q: And was it obvious that they were Jews or...?

A: Yes it was.

Q: Why was it obvious? Were you able to tell?

A: Because the word was already getting around that they were taking the Jews and they were deporting them to Treblinka. And every citizen in Miedzyrzec knew that they were taking them out of here and they would then be deported.

Q: And when you saw that situation—how close did you approach the people who were sitting there?

A: I was about 20 meters [away], 20-30 meters.

Q: Did you perhaps recognize anybody you knew?

A: No. They were all turned away to face the street—towards our statue there and then the other side of the street. They were all bent over [*she imitates how*].

Q: Did you perhaps hear any conversations or screams?

A: No, completely nothing, because my brothers and I immediately ran away.

Q: And was anybody guarding these people who were sitting in the square?

A: I have a feeling that it was so. I believe so, because even...For sure, because ...Since they ...

Q: Did you then see any soldiers nearby?

A: It is hard for me to remember.

Q: And when you were...when you walked out—when you went to the town square again—did you go out to the town square after that incident?

A: No, I don't remember. Because the deportation of Jews had started already. They were escorted by fours or fives to the station, to the platform. I am not sure exactly—they were walking in a row. And when we saw it we started to watch it. Everyone was trying to get away because everyone was scared. The Poles were scared should they be added to the group of those escorted to the train.

Q: Could you describe the situation when you saw the Jews running by fours to the train station...

[01:] 12:02:00 - [01:] 14: 57: 19

11:42 – 14:38

Q: ...how it happened, all right?

A: I didn't see the first moment—that is, the head, where the first people were walking. Apparently somebody told us about it though. Since we were children we were running around and playing and then suddenly we saw that they were escorted [she implies that they were already outside and when somebody passed them the news they ran to see what was going on]. My brothers, friends and girl-friends, we all said: "Look, they are taking the Jews to the train station." So at first we were looking but later we hid. And then I went together with my brothers—there was a tree. By the main street, by **Partyzantów** Street, there was a chapel and a tree, about 30 meters [the tree was either 30 meters tall or 30 meters away]. And...And we climbed that tree and from there we were able to watch. You couldn't see us and we were watching. And suddenly... I could see very well that men in uniforms, the gendarmes were following on both sides. It seems that Ukrainians were helping them with the escorting. And the first four—the first row could walk by itself, from what I could see. But then the end was approaching and I saw the following situation: older—younger people ... An older woman was walking supported by the shoulders [she imitates how]—she was leaning on their shoulders [likely: shoulders of younger people] and they were simply dragging her. At one point, a guard, one of the escorts, walked up to her and he shot her. When we sa— [saw it]... She fell down. When we saw it, we ran down from that tree and I didn't watch anymore. No more—I was so afraid. Even now I can picture it and I can feel the fear. This is all. I don't know any more.

Q: What was the distance between the tree where you were and the woman—and the road—the road she and other Jews were on?

A: Maybe about... 50 meters. There is a firehouse nearby. It was a little stretch from that firehouse.

Q: You said that the Germans and probably also the Ukrainians were escorting the Jews.

A: They said [people said] that they [the Ukrainians] were helping.

Q: Did the Ukrainians have different uniforms?

[01:] 14: 57: 19 - [01:] 20: 51: 03

14:38 – 20:31

- A: Oh... Probably different. They probably had, but I cannot say that 100 percent.
- Q: So you really couldn't tell what nationality they were.
- A: No, I couldn't but it was said that the Ukrainians were helping. My parents...
- Q: And did you maybe see any Jewish police?
- A: Personally I didn't, but when they were liquidating the ghetto and my father had to do **szarwaki** duty [POLISH: likely regional expression—horse and cart service provided for the occupant]—you had to come with horses and carts and then you transported things—and my father said that the Jews were giving him orders then.
- Q: I still wanted to come back to the moment when you saw the Jews taken to the train station. How long were you watching it? How long did it last?
- A: It took some time—longer—because they were walking and walking and finally—I don't know if it was the beginning or the middle [unclear meaning: likely she doesn't know whether they started to watch from the beginning]. In any case, we were watching the Jews walk. And then came the end and I saw it personally.
- Q: Did it last perhaps half a day, a day or so?
- A: No, no, it didn't. It seemed to have been an hour or perhaps less than an hour...I am not sure.
- Q: Were you...? How were you able to tell that these people were Jewish?
- A: Because everybody learned that they [the Germans] were escorting the Jews from Międzyrzec to take them somewhere else.
- Q: Were they perhaps dressed in any characteristic way?
- A: I don't think so. I don't think so. They were simply carrying small luggage with them. Yes—that I could see. Besides, they were mostly covered up with something.
- Q: Did the march go on peacefully or were the Jews for example—
- A: It was peaceful, very peaceful. They were marching peacefully without causing any disturbance.

Q: Did you hear any other shots besides that one shot fired at the woman?

A: They were most likely shooting along the way.

Q: But did you hear these shots?

A: No, no, I didn't. After I heard the first one we ran away and then I didn't....I was simply afraid.

Q: And did you see the road after—

A: No, only my parents told me that there were—that there were dead bodies on the road.

Q: Ummm. But you didn't see it?

A: No, I didn't. But we frequently heard of the German killings. A Jew was walking [for example] and they killed him for no reason, without any certificate [she likely means justification].

Q: Please tell us about the Germans or perhaps the Ukrainians who were guarding the column. Were they walking together with the column or were they standing on both sides of the road?

A: They were standing on both sides.

Q: And were they just standing or were they also walking?

A: They were walking together with the column on both sides [*she uses her hands to show two rows*] and the Jews were in the middle.

Q: Were there many of them?

A: Yes, they were quite thick, and you could constantly see green uniforms. I saw that and I know that. I remember the hats and the green uniforms.

Q: Were there perhaps other occasions—before or afterwards—when you saw driving [unclear]... For example you mentioned that your father was sent to do work, it was called **szalwerk**, correct?

A: **Szalwark, szalwark.**

Q: Aha, and was he then working in the ghetto or...

A: Because they [the Germans] were taking farmers, those who had horses and carts and they were liquidating it all.

Q: And what...?

A: They were razing...I remember there was a very nice—I remember it very well. You walked from where that that little street used to be and then you walked straight, right here where we nowadays have a co-op—where we have high-rises and there was...I don't know, perhaps it was called a synagogue. It was so pretty, I remember I went there once and I wanted to see it on the inside but they wouldn't let me in. It was closed and I didn't see it.

Q: Did your father tell you what work he had to do in the ghetto?

A: They were mainly supposed to tear down, to raze the houses. And whatever they found in the apartments was taken to a pile. They were taking it all out and leaving there [on the pile].

Q: And what happened with it later?

A: I very well remember that everybody kept running there to find something. I also ran there [*she is laughing*] to see what was there and I brought back home a small plate. I don't know whether it was real china or not. But my mom chased me out with it [*she is laughing*]. That's all I remember. Some people were bringing back many things they found there.

Q: I und— [understand]... As you said your father had to... They were razing the houses and taking... emptying... That means there were no more Jews in the ghetto.

[01:] 20: 51: 03 - [01:] 23:04:02

20:31 - 22:45

A: There were only a few. There were some Jews, but not many. They were bringing in the Jews from many neighboring towns to Międzyrzec.

Q: Did you perhaps see such situations—a Jewish transport that arrived to Międzyrzec?

A: No.

Q: Were they taken to the ghetto?

A: No. My parents told me that they were bringing them in.

Q: Very well. I'd like to take a short break, all right?

A: All right.

Q: During the break we were talking about the situation you saw when the Jews were escorted to the train station. You recalled that they had characteristic Jewish markings on their clothing. What was it? Could you describe how they looked?

A: They were covered with some kerchiefs or something else and [they had] Jewish stars. Every Jew regardless of...

Q: And where were the Jewish stars?

A: Over here on your arm [*she points to her arm*].

Q: Could you try to recall more details about their appearance? Were they...? Did they look...?

A: They looked very poor, very poor. They were walking and they seemed all scared and intimidated. We were scared too, especially since we were children and later... You remember such things and I remember it until today. When my brothers come for a visit we get together and we talk about these things.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Is that all?

Q: I think so.

[*Another person*]

Q: I think so, but let's wait until we are sure....

[*Interviewer*]

Q: For sure...

[Previous person]

Q: ...that Nathan...

A: Thank you.

[01:] 23:04:02

22:45

Conclusion of the interview.

No restrictions.

Translated by Agnieszka McClure on 21/06/2011