

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Janusz Uklejewski

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This Oral History Interview of **Janusz Uklejewski (JU)** took place on July 29, 2010.

The **Interviewer was: Patrycja Bukalska (PB)**.

The Translation and Summary from Polish into English was provided by **Lucien Weisbrod (LW)**.

PB asks **JU** to introduce himself.

JU was born on May 21, 1925 in Grudziądz, near the Polish sea coast.

[**PB** had visited **JU** a few months earlier when they discussed **JU**'s recollection of the war days. Now she returned to videotape that conversation.]

PB: Can you tell us where you were during the war?

JU lived in Dęblin. When **JU** turned 2, his parents moved to an aeronautic center that came into existence there, after Poland regained independence. His father worked in the aviation industry. He lived there until 1945. Before the war, **JU** attended school until the secondary level. In 1940 he started his studies as photographer. He attended the Photographic Institute named after Anna Żłotnicka, in Dęblin on Warszawska (Warsaw) Street. After 3 years of study, **JU** took a test in Lublin, administered by Mr. Hartwig.

PB: During the war years, while you lived in Dęblin might you have witnessed acts of repression and persecution by the Germans towards the civilian population?

JU: Very much so. As someone who worked in a photoshop, the Germans brought to us many photos which they took themselves in the Dęblin Fortress. The fortress was built in the tsarist days. It housed a military unit. During the war between Germany and the Soviet Union (World War II), Soviet prisoners of war were held there. It was known as Stalag 307. Nearly 100,000 prisoners of war perished there. In this photoshop **JU** worked with a woman photo editor who was Jewish. It was under her instructions that he learned basic photographic skills. Then there was another Jew who worked at the photoshop. He came from Slovakia. **JU** learned a lot from him about portrait photography.

PB: What happened to that Slovak Jew? You said that he worked with you only a few months.

JU: First, Jews to be deported from Dęblin were deported in May 1942. Some 2,000—3,000 Jews were deported then. In their place some 2,000—3,000 Jews were brought from Prešov, Slovakia. Among them was the photographer who ended up working at the photoshop. His name was Bloch. He ended up in the second deportation of Jews that took place in October, 1942. This time they were Slovak Jews. **JU** witnesses how these Jews were being herded to the

train station in Dęblin past the photostop. He was especially moved by scenes of mothers abandoning their swaddled babies because they couldn't keep pace with the column on account of their infants. Strangers would come out onto the streets and would pick up these abandoned Jewish infants.

PB: In the course of this deportation of Slovak Jews, might you have witnessed the murder of some of these deportees by the Germans?

JU: Yes, I have. There was the case of an older Jew who lost his shoe in the rush. He turned around to retrieve it. Probably his granddaughter ran up to help him. Meanwhile, a German gendarme shot him as he was bending down to get his shoe. A moment later he also shot his young granddaughter. This happened some 30 meters away from JU. JU even recalls the two Volksdeutsche gendarmes who escorted this column of evacuees. One was Peterson. The other one was Edek.

PB: How long did you stand and observe this column of people who were being led to their deportation to Treblinka?

JU: About half an hour.

LW: At this point, **PB** would have liked to learn whether **JU** also witnessed the earlier evacuation of the Dęblin Jews? Instead of answering, JU asks permission to describe a commotion that he witnessed at an earlier point, in 1941, in the Jewish Ghetto in Dęblin, when Jews were being gathered into a labor detail. **JU:** On his way to work, our interviewee was crossing the Dęblin Market. There he spots a large gathering of Jews and some sort of commotion. The Jewish Police was assembling a labor detail. At that point, JU took a picture of the Jewish Policeman as he was about to strike one of the laborers with a whip. Later, after the war, JU learned that that particular photo and many others ended up in a book in Tel Aviv in a book about Dęblin.

PB redirects JU to the evacuation of the Dęblin Jews in May 1942. Was that also a column that was marched to the railroad station? Did you recognize anyone among them?

JU: Yes, it was. I didn't recognize anyone among them. But as in October, the less fortunate and disabled Jews were transported by horse drawn carts. Almost immediately JU digressed to a recollection of a few photos that he had that were made by Germans. They were of the column when it reached the railroad station. These two photos JU donated to the Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw. They can be seen there now.

PB: When you witnessed the deportation of the Dęblin Jews, might you have witnessed criminal acts or murders committed by these Germans?

JU: After the deportation of these Jews, on his way to work, JU encountered a number of Jews that were murdered in the street on the way to the train station. Those scenes JU photographed. Those photos he also shared with the Museum in Warsaw after the war.

PB: During our previous conversation you told us that Jews from Ryki were also marched to the Dęblin train station before they were deported to Treblinka. Could you tell us about this?

JU: Ryki is 14 km. from Dęblin. Those Jews covered this distance on foot. Horse drawn carts were also used to transport some of the Jews.

PB: What happened to the Jewish woman who worked as a photo editor in the photoshop?

JU: She was deported in the first evacuation of Jews.

PB: At the very beginning of our conversation today, you mentioned that in the photoshop in which you worked, Germans brought you rolls of film that they wanted you to develop. What sort of scenes did they contain?

JU: As already mentioned, in Dęblin there was a large Soviet POW camp. Some .5 million Soviet POWs passed through it according to JU. A coal car could hold some 80 to 100 people. A train could consist of 50 to 60 cars. That meant that one train transport could hold 5,000-6,000 people. The Germans liked to photograph themselves, especially in the POW camp that was located in the fortress. They would take pictures of corpses, the removal of corpses, pictures of those who died of starvation. These sorts of photos were taken in the course of 4-5 months. Afterwards they were forbidden, because these photos appeared abroad. However, many Germans kept old negatives and they would come into their photoshop and ordered 100 or 200 copies of certain frames. Such was the case of a negative that captured an image of a prisoner who was being buried alive.

PB: Why did they need so many copies of such photos?

JU: To share with other Germans, as souvenirs. After the war they claimed that they had no such evidence. They concealed all these "souvenirs." In the process of generating these photos, JU would always keep one copy for himself. He would take them home still wet and finish drying them at home. When the Russians arrived in Dęblin as liberators, JU showed them his collection of photos. The Soviets were shocked that such photos were taken while the POW camp was under normal operation.

PB: What compelled you to develop such photos and to retain a copy of each one?

JU: I assumed that the war would end eventually and that I would be able to show the crimes that the Germans committed. They would serve as evidence of their crimes. There were photos

of horse drawn carts that carried 100 murdered POWs; or a photo of naked POW being tossed dead by other POWs onto a cart. There were photos of POWs being tossed out of the fortress, and then they would be picked up and carted off to the cemetery.

PB: Did you see any of these atrocities with your own eyes or only in the photos?

JU: Only in the photos. However, we did hear the victims' screams. The fortress was some 2-3 km from the center of town. Given the number of people that were kept outdoors at one time, it was unavoidable to hear their voices and their yelling. JU visited the fortress only after July 1944, after the Soviet army liberated this part of Poland and JU shared the photos with the Soviet Procurator who accompanied them.

JU had photos taken in the warehouse that was filled with feed for chickens. This feed was used for baking bread for the POWs. During this visit with Soviet Procurator, JU visited the camp's infirmary. In it was a bed with a corpse that the German doctor certified that he had been dead for 3 months already.

JU: The fortress in Dęblin also held Italian POWs. Most of them were high ranking officers. They were kept under the bare sky with minimal food. Many lived on plant roots that they dug out in the nearby woods. Later these prisoners were moved and they disappeared. Fifty years after the war, an Italian book was published that told the story of these prisoners. A search for their bodies was renewed and in the course of the search, the parking lot next to the military cemetery that adjoined the fortress was excavated. In the soil beneath this parking lot, many human bones were unearthed. It was determined that these were the remains of the murdered Italian prisoners of war. It was estimated that some 14,000 of them were buried there.

PB: Can you estimate how many abandoned children did you witness when the Slovak Jews were being deported?

JU: Perhaps 5 or 6.

PB: In our previous conversation, you mentioned that those Jews who were unwilling to join the march from the Ghetto to the railroad station tried to hide. But when they were caught by the gendarmes, they were summarily shot.

JU: I took pictures of them on my way to work. I found them under a fence, here and there. These were Jews killed in the Ghetto who refused to leave it. Those photos can be found now in the Warsaw Museum.