

**RG-50.488.0314**

**Oral History with Kazimierz Piechowski, July 30, 2010**

**Summary**

*Simultaneous Translation from Polish*

*Note: Interview apparently follows previous discussion between Piechowski and the interviewer.*

**Part 1 of 4**

Kazimierz Piechowski, born in 1919 in Poland. Asked about his presentations, discussions, and reactions to his experiences by various youth groups, Piechowski says: this depends on the group's nationality and on how Auschwitz is described by others such as Primo Levi; e.g., when addressing Germans and telling them five thousand people per day were sent to the crematoria, one person might say this is impossible, to which Kazimierz responds by showing German documents to this effect; it being impossible for the youth to understand his experiences because they are not well versed in the history of the Second World War; it being nevertheless valuable for them to hear his account; the experience affecting survivors differently; he, himself, fainting when returning to Auschwitz for the first time after thirty years; this being followed by nightmares; shortly after the war began, Germans executing people in his town, mostly intellectuals and others who would oppose them; many of Piechowski's friends being executed; being sent to Auschwitz in June 1940 after being held in several prisons; everyone being shocked at conditions in Auschwitz; thinking it was the end, but "unfortunately" it was not; at first, experimental killings being carried out, and then construction of the gas chambers for mass killings; asked about his most difficult moments prior to his escape, Piechowski describes coming to the realization that to survive one must struggle and look for advantages; those not used to hard physical work, such as middle-aged intellectuals, having no chance of survival; those relatively young men used to hard physical activity possibly surviving; asked if his attitudes toward the value of life changed, Piechowski says the one constant was determination to survive; describes removing corpses to crematorium number one and an example of the brutality of the Nazis killing an entire family; some prisoners stealing from others and being murdered in response;

**Part 2 of 4**

within barracks, an elder prisoner being in charge of a de facto jury to deal with incidents such as theft (particularly of food) and the procedures followed by the jury; not himself participating in executions but knowing some of those executed; these incidents being relatively rare; there being also episodes of kindness, such as a German kapo who helped him, saving his life; Piechowski's number, 918, and having been in the second transport to Auschwitz; Jews and Catholics being treated especially badly and destined for extermination; early experimental killings prior to the mass executions; illness being the most trying times among the prisoners, particularly because sick prisoners were often executed; the importance of active resistance movements in the camps; great courage shown by these groups; Jews undertaking the least desirable jobs because many lives depended on it; the camp resistance being organized in a wise way by forming in groups of five to minimize exposure to the Nazis; the importance of I.G. Farben being close to the camp and facilitating the executions; having the sole objective of not

drawing attention to himself; being told by a Ukrainian prisoner and future co-escapee that he was on the list of those to be executed but that escape was possible; thinking about the problems that would have to be overcome to escape; discovering a warehouse of German vehicles, uniforms, and weapons but having to get through the main (Arbeit Macht Frei) gate to the labor camp, where the warehouse was located;

#### **Part 3 of 4**

Saturday being the only day possible to attempt escape, which he and five others accomplished on June 20, 1942; having four problems to overcome, the most difficult being the Nazi policy of ten-for-one revenge killings of inmates if they were successful; devising a plan to prevent the revenge killings; the group of escapees expanding to six; preparing to steal a car from the warehouse; deciding to commit suicide if the plan failed; stealing the car, SS uniforms, and weapons, and driving away; returning a "Heil Hitler" to a German soldier; approaching the final gate and Piechowski pointing to his SS rank and cursing the gate guards' slowness to open it; the guards responding "Jawoll" and "Heil Hitler"; having a close encounter with an SS patrol; walking all night after abandoning the car; encountering another patrol and engaging in a firefight; being outnumbered but the Germans giving up; taking refuge in a church; wanting to return to Warsaw;

#### **Part 4 of 4**

joining with Polish partisans; learning that the Germans in Auschwitz were so angered by the escape that they sent several SS members and guards to the Russian front; after the war, trying to find work as soon as possible; amid Polish communist events, being denounced; being sentenced to ten years in prison for his activities with the partisan Polish Home Army; there being no difference between the German and communist forms of totalitarianism; (asked to compare treatment in prison by the two systems), saying for criminals they were similar but political prisoners were treated more harshly; the Auschwitz experience being the responsibility of the entire German nation; (asked if his life experience made him an optimist or pessimist) saying he is a confirmed optimist because the human race has been able to surmount the worst of its history.