

Translation/Analysis of Oral history interview with Aleksander Pitula

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Aleksander Pitula was born on April 6, 1935 in Lwów (now L'viv, Ukraine) on Janowska Street, directly behind a restaurant. The restaurant was burned down in 1939, when the Russians were entering Lwów. Aleksander and his mother were left with nothing. He saw his father for the last time for a number of years to come, at the railroad station as he was going off to war. He promptly ended up a prisoner of war of the Germans. The Soviet Army attacked Poland on September 17, 1939. That same day they entered Lwów.

Aleksander's father was soon freed from the German POW camp. He made his way to Kraków, where his mother's family lived. However, since now the border between the Soviet Union and Germany (and Poland ceased to exist) was now along the Bug River, he was under German occupation, while his wife, (Aleksander's mother) was under Soviet occupation. They had no contact with one another for some two years, after the Germans entered Lwów.

Aleksander and his mother were joined in Lwów by her brother—a judge by profession—and his family, from Bydgoszcz. He was fleeing from the Germans. Since he was too proud to go to work, he, his wife and two children were among the first to be deported by the Russians to Siberia. Within a year, the judge dies of hunger in Siberia, while his wife and two children return to Lwów.

[16 minutes into the interview, Aleksander mentions that he had a brother who was 8 years older than he.]

The interviewer sought an answer from Aleksander about the allegations that Jews collaborated with the Soviets once they returned to Lwów and the Germans retreated. Except for the prominence of Jewish names, like Berman, in the new Polish government, Aleksander hadn't heard anything on the subject. He also had no recall of any relations with Jewish neighbors or Jewish shop keepers in the neighborhood?

Aleksander is unambiguous that residents of Lwów were very glad when the Germans arrived. They were fed up with the deportation and purges of people by the Soviets.

The father shows up in Lwów a few months after the Germans expelled the Russians. He goes on to work as a waiter in the family's restaurant on Bajki Street in Lwów. That restaurant was exclusively for Germans. The restaurant was run by Aleksander's uncle (his father's brother). It should be noted that even during the first Soviet occupation, the uncle had links to the Polish Armia Krajowa (AK) [Home Army]. (This was a clandestine military organization loyal to the Polish Government in Exile) [L.W.] By running the restaurant for German patrons only, the restaurant was a good source of information for the AK. For this role, when the Soviets

returned for the second time, the uncle was deported to Kolyma—a Soviet labor camp in Siberia.

From one of his trips to Kraków, Aleksander's father returns with a family friend or distant relative, Józef Kwaśniewski. He lodges him with a Genia Rajchert. Later, Józef's wife Helena joins him there. Their son, Marian was cared for by someone else. That caretaker spoke German fluently and lived at one time in Austria. There was some suspicion that Józef, Helena and Marian were Jewish. Aleksander would on occasion go and play with Marian.

One day, when Aleksander came to play with Marian, on the staircase landing he meets a man in a striking fedora and speaking perfect Polish. When he found out that he was there to play with Marian, he demanded that Aleksander show him his personal document (it was a reference to his penis), in order to see whether he was circumcised or not. Since Aleksander was not circumcised, this mysterious man started to ask about the whereabouts of Marian and his parents. Being a naïve 7-year old, Aleksander led him to Genia Rajchert's place, where Marian's parents lived. And although he didn't enter Genia Rajchert's place, he took Aleksander to his parents flat, on Szymon Street 1.

Aleksander speculates that the Polish speaking man in the fedora was not a German policeman, but rather a "szmalcownik"—a "fixer" who preys on people who have something to hide and can be easily extorted. He further supposes that his parents paid him off to hush up Aleksander's naïve indiscretion. Aleksander's relationship with Marian comes to an end.

When the Russians re-enter Lwów, Aleksander's mother is working in a snack-bar. The Kwaśniewskis survived the war. Marian attended the Polytechnic in Kraków. Some 10 to 12 years after the war, Aleksander remembers reading in the paper that Marian Kwaśniewski and his wife came for a visit from Canada.

During the second half of the tape, the interviewer peppers Aleksander with a wide range of questions. Aleksander's doesn't have any awareness of the existence of a ghetto on Janowska Street, in Lwów or being witness to any displays of mistreatment of Jews by the Germans.

Aleksander went to school for the first time after the second occupation of Lwów by Russians. He remembers having to learn Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. He also remembers being forced to learn history which did not relate to him. His mother worked as a dishwasher in a snack bar. In 1944, Aleksander's father was drafted into the Soviet Army. His older brother was drafted around the same time but into the Polish Army. His mother arrived in Kraków around Easter 1945. Soon thereafter, she was notified that her husband was killed. Two months later, she learned that her older son was wounded as his unit was fording the River Nysa. He spent some time recovering first in Poznań then in Kraków. Subsequently he developed tuberculosis and he died in 1952.

The interviewer asks Aleksander what led his mother to leave Lwów. Apparently, a Russian or Ukrainian procurator developed an interest in Aleksander's mother. It was he who advised her to leave for Poland the first moment that an opportunity arose. Kraków was liberated by the

Soviet Army on January 15, 1945. Aleksander and his mother made it to Kraków around Easter (April) 1945. The trip took them 7 days.

A few loose ends: 1. Aleksander's mother's sister and her two children (the ones who were deported to Siberia for 1 year), left Lwów for Kraków together with Aleksander and his mother. 2. In the course of their searches for an apartment, Aleksander and his mother ended up living together with Genia Rajchert. 3. Aleksander's mother's sister and her two children went back to live in their pre-war apartment in Bydgoszcz. 4. Aleksander's father may have been somewhat clairvoyant, but he didn't like what was happening in Lwów. For that reason, he arranged in 1944 for all their possession to be moved to Wielopole Skrzynskie, a village near Rzeszów, where Aleksander's mother was born.