

## **Translation/Analysis of Oral history interview with Jerzy Kowalczyk**

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The interview took place at the University of Science and Metallurgy in Kraków, at the Institute of Applied Geophysics. Jerzy Kowalczyk is Professor Emeritus at this Institute. He was born in Kulików, a town near Lwów (L'viv, Ukraine) in 1926, in a family of judges. Prof. Kowalczyk was forced to leave Lwów in 1946; 72 years ago, after the changes in Poland's borders were decided at the Yalta Conference in 1945 and Lwów ceased to be part of Poland.

Jerzy was born into a family of a judge. Judge Edward Kowalczyk was the head of the district court in Kulików. A few years later, the family, including his mother father and brother who was 2 years older than Jerzy, moved to Żółkiew—a town some 30 km from Lwów. There, Jerzy's father headed the Gródek district court. The town of Żółkiew was multinational with Poles being in the majority. There were also Jews and Ukrainians, who were then called Ruthenians. Jerzy and his family lived there until 1938, when they moved to Lwów, where they took up residence in his grandfather's villa, on Potocki Street 96.

Jerzy's grandfather was a professor at the Lwów Polytechnic, an architect, and an art historian. However, since he passed away soon after Jerzy's family move, the entire villa became at their disposal. This move also marks the start of the war period, since World War II broke out in September 1, 1939. On that very day, Jerzy was awakened by the sound of German bombers on bombing raids over Lwów. This was a traumatic and unexpected event for Jerzy who was then 13 years old.

The German troops actually reached the outskirts of the city, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was activated, under which the city of Lwów in its entirety was supposed to become part of the Soviet state, as part of the Ukrainian SSR. During this limited military action, many residents of Lwów lost their lives, especially in proximity of the Main Railroad Station.

The next shock for the local population occurred on September 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> when Soviet troops entered Lwów. In accordance with the Pact, all of Eastern Poland became occupied by the Soviet Union. The new border between the German Reich and the USSR became the Curzon Line that was drawn up as part of the agreement that ended World War I.

[At this juncture, one of the interviewers poses a question]

**Do you recall the town of Żółkiew? Since you started school there, do you remember your classmates?**

Since Jerzy lived there from 1932 until 1938, these were his boyhood years. There he attended elementary school, where he made outstanding friends who were Poles, Jews, Ruthenians and Germans. (After his narrative, Jerzy promises the two interviewers to leave with them some

books and historical materials that should be of help to them as visual aids and references for his narrative.) His father, thanks to his professional status, commanded considerable social respect and authority.

Żółkiew was a historical town. It had numerous historical landmarks and monuments. It was founded by Stanisław Żółkiewski and was subsequently held by prominent Polish noble families like the Sobieskis, Daniłowiczes and Radziwills. The Kowalczuk family lived in a castle there, since the Gródek district court was housed in that castle.

After retiring in 1935, Jerzy's father held numerous positions in a prominent social organization called Sokół (Falcon)—an organization that dates back to the 1860's and continues its existence. [timestamp, 00:15:21]

### **Do you remember Jews from Żółkiew?**

Jerzy offers a class photo where Jews are seated at desks with them. Jerzy proceeds to name the ones who were his good friends. He then mentions the shopkeeper Ablumcio, who provided Jerzy's family with food products. They didn't even have to go to the store to get the produce. It sufficed that he knew what they needed and he would deliver the food products to their home.

Jerzy also remembers a Mrs. Gottersman, who outfitted Jerzy's mother with her clothing. The Jews of Żółkiew were primarily merchants and bakers. Jerzy's father had a few work colleagues who were Jewish. The family's physician, Dr. Rauchleish [sp?] was Jewish. Because of its diversity, Żółkiew was nicknamed Little Florence.

Żółkiew had a population of approximately 10,000 inhabitants. Poles and Jews made up a majority of that population. Prior to the German occupation there was a neighborhood predominantly inhabited by Jews. Unfortunately, most of them perished in camps like Bełżec. This neighborhood wasn't especially prosperous. While there were some intellectuals and professional people among them, the majority were shopkeepers and tradesmen.

Jerzy seems to have a very vivid recall of the Jews' observance of Sukkot. [timestamp, 00:30:16]

To a question posed by the interviewer on the subject, Jerzy avers very strongly that his Jewish classmates were treated very equally, even those who maintained their Orthodox physical appearance. Jerzy attributes this to a great degree to his parents' tolerance of people of various nationalities. Jerzy can't recall any teachers in elementary or middle school to have displayed any excesses in treatment of any students on the basis of nationality. Although, he voices the possibility that during German occupation, some Poles may have taken advantage of the Germans' intolerance of Jews, to display their dislike of Jews.

He does recall one incident in Żółkiew that at the time he found quite upsetting. Some young people posted fliers with a very negative disposition towards Jews. The fliers stated: "Beat the Jews!"

Jerzy considers his family's move to Lwów in 1938 as the beginning of their struggle with forces of occupation; first Soviet, then German and then the second Soviet occupation which ended with their forced repatriation to Poland in 1946. And Jerzy considers this a real struggle with the occupiers, since his brother and his 2 cousins from 1943 until 1946 were active members of a conspiratorial underground organization that was anti-German and anti-Soviet. The move was also a major life changing event for him, since he left a small village for a large city. This was an intellectual change for Jerzy. It is in Lwów that he begins his studies at the gymnasium.

Education was organized differently in Lwów. Gymnasia were single sex, for either boys or girls. Furthermore, the schools were segregated by nationality. In Lwów there were 11 gymnasia with instruction in Polish; 2 gymnasia for population which sought instructions in Russian or Ukrainian; and gymnasia for the German population. Somehow, Jerzy does not delineate clearly the existence of Jewish gymnasia for the Jewish population of Lwów. [timestamp, 00:48:29]

The direction of the narrative takes a new course when the interviewer asks Jerzy to describe Jewish Lwów. According to Jerzy, Jews in Lwów were concentrated in the Żółkiew neighborhood. That district, under the German occupation became the Lwów Ghetto.

Jerzy was not impressed by the Soviets when they first arrived in 1939. They were primitively dressed and arrived in primitive military vehicles. A lot of the equipment was pulled by horses. Jerzy characterizes it as an impoverished army. They dominated simply by their numbers and treated Poles as an oppressive force. Poles also became victims of Ukrainians who initially collaborated with the Soviets and then with the Germans, when they arrived in June 1941.

Residents of Lwów were not very aware of Soviet troops when they came as occupiers. It was the Soviet police, known as the NKVD who made their presence known to city residents. It was they who organized the deportation of Poles to Kazakhstan and to Siberia. According to Jerzy, the Soviets that came to occupy the eastern portion of Poland were responsible for deportation of anywhere from 1.5 to 2.0 million Poles. Jerzy became personally aware of these deportations through the sudden disappearance of some classmates and teachers from his gymnasium, after December 1939. [timestamp, 01:00:03]

Jerzy recalls seeing his neighbors the Bizancóws being deported. A Soviet truck with a detachment of NKVD agents and a commander pulled up next to their building. After a few minutes, the truck would be loaded with people's personal belongings as well as its owners and they would be driven to one of the nearby railroad stations. There they were loaded into unheated freight cars to begin a journey that would take a few weeks. Many of these deportees died during this journey.

Although the Kowalczyk family was not among those deported by the Soviets to the Soviet hinterlands, as members of the intelligentsia, they were sent out of Lwów to a small Polish village called Davidów, some 20 km outside the city. The Russians requisitioned the Kowalczyk's villa in Lwów. The positive result of this expulsion was that it was easier for them to obtain food products in the countryside.

Once the Soviets were replaced by the Germans in June 1941, deportation no longer threatened the Kowalczyk family. They were able to return to their grandfather's villa. However, they were impacted by German restrictions, especially when it came to obtaining food. To make ends meet, his parents sought to trade some attractive household items for produce with people who came to Lwów from the surrounding villages.

It was at this moment of transfer of power that a number of atrocities were perpetrated by both sides. One of these atrocities was the murder of 44 university professors. The Germans were assisted in this by Ukrainians.

During the Soviet occupation, the Kowalczyk family was required to quarter a Russian officer's family in their villa. During the German occupation, the Kowalczyks had to vacate their villa, since the Germans designated the area surrounding the villa as an official residential and administrative district for the SS and the German police. The Kowalczyks were assigned a two-room apartment on King Jan Leszczyński Street, which previously was occupied by a Jewish family. They lived in that apartment until 1946. [timestamp, 01:16:44].

Now, Jerzy wants to speak briefly about the German occupation. The Germans' attack against the Russians took place on June 22, 1941 along the entire border between Germany and the Soviet Union as it was defined by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Kowalczyks lived at that time in Davidów. The units that came to the village consisted of Austrian troops.

**Interviewer: Can you speak to how the German treated Jews? What sort of mistreatment did you witness with you own eyes?**

When the Germans entered Lwów, they first used Jews to clean up after the massacre of prisoners perpetrated by the Soviets in 3 prisons that were located in the city. The next event that comes to mind is the establishment of the Ghetto in the districts of Żółkiewska and Zamarynowska—two neighborhoods populated by Jews. Jerzy recalls one visit to these neighborhoods, in 1943 (?), via a tram, when the Ghetto was being liquidated by the Germans and with the assistance of Ukrainian police. He saw quite a few corpses in the street. These were Jews who tried to escape and they were killed by the Ukrainian policemen that surrounded the Ghetto during its liquidation. Although the Ghetto was not set on fire, from the tram Jerzy could see buildings with broken windows and doors, making it evident that something quite violent occurred during the night. The liquidation didn't take very long. Those Jews, who were not murdered in the course of that one night, were deported to the Bełżec

extermination camp. Jerzy did not witness the deportation of the Ghetto survivors. He still suffers from visions of those ghetto streets strewn with the corpses. The scenes were clear evidence of the genocide that occurred there.

Over time, the territory of the Ghetto kept getting smaller, as Jews died due to starvation or disease. Jerzy admits that he and other Poles didn't visit the Ghetto districts. In general, they avoided visiting various neighborhoods during the German occupation due to random raids that the Germans conducted with the assistance of the Ukrainian police.

Jerzy recalls during the first days of the German occupation, Jews could be seen in different parts of Lwów wearing armbands with the Star of David. Also, since there was a concentration camp in the vicinity of Janowska Street, transports with Jews being taken to forced labor establishments could be seen around town. The freedom of movement of Jews didn't become more restricted until later in the period of occupation.

On the whole, Jerzy did not have direct, personal exposure to brutality displayed by the Germans or the Ukrainians towards Jews or Poles; he had no doubt of their existence. He certainly heard about them through conversations of other people.

**Interviewer: You mentioned that your family was involved in the distribution of clandestine notices. Could you tell us some more about this?**

Jerzy: In 1944, after the Germans' retreat from Lwów, the Soviets once again become the occupying forces. During this transition, until 1946, Jerzy, his brother and two cousins form a team that prints an underground brochure entitled "Słowo Polskie" ("The Polish Word"), an undertaking that gave them considerable satisfaction and a sense of pride. Their team managed to safely issue this publication once or twice a week in 2,000 to 3,000 copies over a course of many months, using a mimeograph. They would deliver all printed issues to another group that was responsible for distribution of them throughout Lwów. This was a rather well-known publication that sustained the morale of Poles. The subject matter of each issue was someone else's responsibility. Jerzy's team only reproduced whatever was delivered to them. The last issue came out in May 1946, when Poles were still in Lwów. Copies of this publication can be found on microfilm at the Jagellonian University Library in Kraków [timestamp, 01:55:40]. The riskiest parts of their conspiratorial work were the relocation of the mimeograph machine prior to each issue's duplication and then the delivery of the printed leaflets to the distribution point. On a number of occasions, they were nearly caught performing these tasks by both, the Germans and then by the Soviets.

**Interviewer: How were you drawn into the printing of "Słowo Polskie?"**

Jerzy: Initially all four of them were enlisted into the AK (Armia Krajowa) and they were asked to perform this task. Others in the AK were asked to perform military tasks. Unbeknownst to Jerzy at the time, his father, as a judge during the German and Soviet occupation, issued

sentences in the name of the Polish government in exile in London. These sentences were issued against Polish collaborators.

During the period 1945-46 the Soviet authorities exerted a lot of pressure on the Polish community to leave Lwów. Jerzy reports that his family had a conversation with someone from the NKVD who made it clear that if the Kowalczuks don't leave Lwów and vacate their apartment of their own free will, they would be deported to the Soviet Union.

When the Kowalczuk family left Lwów for Kraków, they left all their valuables and property behind without any compensation. The journey to Kraków took place in freight cars over a course of a few days. They were fortunate in that Jerzy's mother had family in Kraków and they were able to extend some help and provide them with a roof over their heads during the initial days in Kraków. Jerzy's father died in 1952. His brother died in 1964 and his mother died around 1984.