

Translation/Summary of Oral History Interview with Kazimierz Michej and Zofia Lakatus

Oral History | Accession Number: 2006.2.2 | RG-50.576.0002

By Lucien Weisbrod

[**N.B.:** This interview is conducted with numerous background noises, people talking, a child crying, a dog barking, and it includes cameo appearances by unidentified individuals.]

Kazimierz Michej (**KM**) was born in 1932 and Zofia Lakatus, née Michej (**ZL**) was born in 1931. As children before the war they travelled with a Gypsy encampment numbering 50—60 carts. Their extended family consisted of some 180 people. KM earned a living as a boilermaker.

They were in Warsaw when the war broke out. In 1944 they were taken by the Germans to Gross Rosen concentration camp to dig trenches. The transport to Gross Rosen consisted of Jews, Poles and Gypsies. These people were taken from prisons on the territory of Poland. (Further into the narrative) it becomes clear how KM and ZL ended up in this transport. In a later document, KM's arrival in Gross Rosen is given as December 14, 1944. [At Timestamp 04:02, a question is posed in English by a member of the interview team]

In the camp they were treated terribly. They lived in barracks segregated by gender and nationalities. They regularly witnessed people being shot and beaten. KM's parents were hanged in front of his eyes. After Gross Rosen they were taken to Mauthausen. They were also in Buchenwald and Dor.

Interviewer Daniel Riesenfeld (DR): What were your sleeping arrangements in camp?

KM and ZL: We had 3-tiered bunk beds

DR: Did you have your own clothing?

KM and ZL: No. We wore camp issued striped uniforms.

DR: What are your most vivid recollections of life in concentration camp?

KM and ZL try to answer together. [Their words are co-mingled and undecipherable] KM: Terrible. I was already taken to the crematorium to be burned. And only thanks to some medical exams that were made by the doctors at the crematorium, I was moved to the side and I was spared.

Before ending up in Warsaw, KM and ZL were taken by the Germans to a concentration camp in Lwów. [Here the original chronology of their narrative is contradicted and leads in some confusion among the members of the interview team.] The best that can be discerned is that KM's and ZL's extended family, which were Romanian Gypsies and had travelled to Poland on Romanian documents, had a set of documents issued in KM's and ZL's names. It was with these documents that KM and ZL were taken to Warsaw. [Timestamp: 08:27]

[More English conversation among the interviewers ensues.]

KJ and ZL did not spend much time in the camp in Lwów. Apropos of no particular reason ZL provides a gruesome recollection from the Lwów camp:

At the time ZL was 12 years old. She remembered that at the gates to the camp, the Germans had wooden posts dug into the ground. On them they hanged Jews by binding their arms and legs. Above these poles were observation boxes, from which the Germans would shoot at these Jews.

DR: Were you treated in any way differently from the Jews?

KM and ZL: In no way.

DR: Were you allowed to play any music or sing songs in camp?

KM and ZL: No.

DR: What did liberation from camp look like?

KM: We were liberated by the English and Americans from Dora. But since there was no transport from Germany to Poland, we joined the infantry that was headed east and slowly made progress to Poland on foot.

DR: How did your family survive the war?

KM: They didn't. They were all killed.

DR: Did you find any relatives when you returned to Warsaw?

KM: No, not a one.

Both, KM and ZL lapse into a tirade about how poorly they were fed in concentration camp and had to resort to sifting through refuse for something to eat. On account of their undernourishment they came down with typhus and ended up in the hospital. ZL claims that she is now seriously ill because of her war experiences in concentration camp. She suffered two heart attacks and has high blood pressure. She lost two brothers. KM's mother died. First she had a mental breakdown when KM was taken away and then she was shot. They were tortured

DR: What was life like in concentration camp?

ZL: Such a life you don't even want to recall. People were thin like twigs. They looked like monkeys. If you fell down at work you didn't get up again. You were shot. People were unrecognizable. Women didn't look like women. Children did not look like children. Children were killed by being swung by their feet and having their heads smashed against the wall. What ZL witnessed shouldn't be seen by any human eyes. She still can't understand how they managed to survive their ordeal.

KM: We worked in rock quarries. We carried stones on our backs. We built barracks. We were beaten and tortured. We didn't have enough food. We lived in misery. People sat in winter outside for an hour and a half just to get a ½ liter of soup.

DR: Were you in a camp just for Gypsies?

ZL: [Indignantly] No way. We were with Jews, with Jewish children, with Poles, with Russians, with German Gypsies. KM and ZL: We only lived in separate barracks from them.

KM lost 8 brothers to the gas chamber.

[Timestamp: 17:04. More chatter in English in response to ZL's emotional outburst. Meanwhile, ZL reaches for another Marlboro.]

DR: How did you manage to survive without being arrested until 1944?

KM: We were hidden by different Poles in different places.

DR: How were you caught?

ZL and KM: The Germans conducted a raid on the neighborhood where we were hidden. They arrested some 35 people, including women. Of this group, 8 people survived the war and returned to Poland. The others died in the gas chamber.

[Timestamp: 20:09. Here there seems to be another contradiction regarding KM's and ZL's documents. They claim that throughout they travelled with Polish documents.]

Before their arrest, they could not go to work. They were supported by the people who kept them hidden. Occasionally they would give their hosts money to do some food shopping for them, since they could not appear in public.

KM apparently has received all his papers from Germany and he's quite willing to have his interviewers read through them. [Interviewing team goes into a huddle to determine what is to be done with those documents. A member of the interview team proceeds to read KM's documents in halting English aloud.] [Timestamp: 23:28] [It should be noted that in this document, KM's birth is listed as June 5, 1928. Place of birth is listed as Łódź. His nationality is given as Romanian.]

After their liberation, they were cared for by Americans for six months. Had they been imprisoned for another week, ZL is convinced that they would have died.

[Start of Part 2] The main part of the narrative on this tape is devoted to reiterating KM's and ZL's suffering during their German imprisonment. In closing they go on record that Jews and Gypsies would be justified, if they decided to exterminate all living Germans, even those who made it to the U.S. and Canada after the war. [KM and ZL light another cigarette while a member of the interviewing team translates their highly emotional closing remarks into English.]

KM and ZL don't know what happened to the Poles who protected and sheltered them during the war. They never met up with any of them again.

[From this point of this nine-minute taped segment, the interviewers translate the remainder of the interview into English.]