

INTERVIEW WITH IZAAK HALBER (SIEDLCE, 1992) - TRANSCRIPT

Explanation:

- text in bold – questions and remarks by the interviewer Edward Kopówka,
- text in square brackets – comments made by transcribers

[00:00]

You said that during occupation you worked at a military airport.

Yes, in the Nowe Siedlce neighborhood.

As a forced laborer?

In a labor camp.

In a labor camp?

Yes, in a... After the ghetto had been liquidated, they took younger people to work for them. They selected some people to have a labor force.

This was after the liquidation?

They sent people away. Before that I had worked in other camps. There was a company Reckmann. There was a "Bauzug" on the railroad. There was a gravel pit. We worked there. They gave out these cards. They assigned people various jobs.

But you managed to escape? Somehow.

My brother [Abram - MH] worked as a mechanic for the Criminal Police. This was on Floriańska Street. They had workshops near Prus High School. And he worked there. When they issued... They told people under, say, 40 to line up. If you had an Ausweis, some papers... My brother showed them the Ausweis from the Criminal Police. They told him to move aside to the right. If you were told to move to the left... They beat my older brother badly in front of me. So much blood... [Jakub, died in Treblinka – M.H.] I can't speak about it anymore. So you see, they left us near... The Red Cross. On 1st May Street.

1st May Street?

The emergency service.

Right.

During occupation, it was a Jewish hospital. So they left us there. Then, in the evening... In the morning they already got me to work. They assigned me to... to... To Nowe Siedlce, to the airport. There was a barrack. All of us entered the barrack. Later I heard that my brother was... I heard that my brother was taken back to the Criminal Police. They took my brother back for work. An agent brought him there. He slept in a garage, in a car for a couple of nights. Then the commander used his contacts and got him...

An Ausweis.

Yes. And he was assigned to Sienkiewicz Street, near the cinema. There was a cinema there.

I know.

A small room. They allowed some people who worked for the Germans to stay there, you see. We did all kinds of jobs at the airport. That evening, as we came there... Goldman was also in this camp. You see... Fabisch. Have you heard of Fabisch? He was the mayor of Siedlce.

Right.

They killed him. He entered... The Gendarmerie, the Gestapo... He was drunk. They ordered... There were long bunks with straw on them. They said to give them everything: watches, money. If you don't, they will kill you. People were scared, everyone obeyed. I hid my watch in the straw. I didn't know if they would check it. They collected an entire basket of items. Money, watches. People I knew gave up their belongings. I don't know if others hid anything.

There was a woman working in the kitchen who had been a maid at our house. There was a judge and she was his maid. She worked in the kitchen. When she saw me, she would always give me thicker broth. Those in line behind me complained they were given water and I was given thick soup. So I shared it with them. I would share the thick soup. But later, after about two weeks, I'm not sure, as we woke up, we saw our barrack had been fenced. It had not been fenced before and now there was a gate. How many people were given jobs by the Germans? 10 people, 15. I was given a job too. Poles also worked at this airport. I met an acquaintance once who... It was my neighbour. He said: "I will tell the German to give you a job." They would give me different kinds of jobs. He worked in the barrack. There was furniture there and everything. He said: "Lie down and rest." I said: "I have a favor to ask." Ratajczak was his name. I see him now from time to time. I said: "Could you go to the workshop of the Criminal Police? Tell my brother to get me out of here. They will be liquidating this place, it has been fenced." He went there and told my brother that. My brother started pestering the commander. He told him the truth. And he was in the SS. Commander of the Criminal Police, his name was [Karl – M.H.] Zulauf. My brother cried in front of him. He said he only had one brother and would like to bring him there. And this was when... A car broke down. This thing snapped. What is it called? In a car... When you drive...

Leaf springs.

A leaf spring snapped. He told him I was also... It wasn't true. He told him I was also a mechanic. „Get him to help me, I won't manage to lift it by myself." He called the commander in the Luftwaffe. He told him his people would be coming to get me, I would be going away for a hearing for a couple of days, that I had stolen something. To a hearing. It was all a ruse. I knew nothing about that. And then a guy comes to the workplace. A Volksdeutch. A Pole who went over to the German side. A scoundrel. Later, he had a case brought against him. I was there. He said... They approached me and he shouted. And the German shouted too: "You verfluchter Jude! Thief!" and so on. As I stood there... They grabbed me like this. There was a barrier gate, they let me through. In the car, I saw a guy I knew, a guy from the Criminal Police. They took me. He came and let me in the workshop. I slept there for two nights. Later the commander obtained a pass for me from the Arbeitsamt. And we were there together with my brother.

There were two more people. Plus me and my brother - four people. You see... You have to do something. The woman who worked there, a cleaning lady... [Agnieszka Budna, "Jadzia" – M.H.] In the morning, I would always bring her coal to the second floor. I polished the floors. Just to do something. They gave us bicycles [to fix – M.H.]. I took part in races before the war. It was... She felt sorry for us. She would come to our room, you know, and we talked. As she realized the situation was getting worse, she said: "I could hide you all, just find a small apartment" We lived on May 1st Street [no 46 – M.H.], Ms. Sikorska has a bakery there. This is where we lived before the war.

[10:00]

As we looked around, the entire ghetto was empty. She could get an apartment wherever she wanted. She lived on Formiński Street. My brother looked at apartments with her. We entered... At the corner of May 1st Street [no 43 – M.H.], where they sell vodka now. You know, upstairs. She went to see the commander. So... A woman. She said that she would like to get a different apartment because her current one is no good. He made a phone call and said: "A lady will come. Give her whichever apartment she wants." And she got the apartment. Me and my brother would go there. We fixed it up and so on. Then a hideout was built. We had to bring clay and other things. Nobody was home so we built the hideout. There was still a ghetto in Gęsi Borek suburb. My brother [Mejlach – M.H.] and my father [Fizel Froim – M.H.] were there [the mother, Sura Gitla Celnik, was shot dead in the ghetto earlier – M.H.]. The commander once called my brother in. I never came in, my brother handled everything. I will show you a photograph of my brother.

He helped to get you out of...

He got me out. He was older than me. I was the youngest.

And the small photo?

His wife, his widow [Chana Appel – M.H.].

His wife?

She is friend of my wife. [Maria Międzyrzecka – M.H.]

So when you were done, after you built the hideout...

We brought an axe and other things there, just in case. She stole guns. If somebody forgot their gun, she would steal it and bring it secretly. We took it upstairs. She moved here from Formiński Street.

Anyway, the commander called my brother in. My brother told me this... I didn't go there. He said... He paced back and forth with his arms behind his back, like this. He paced back and forth. He liked my brother very much. When he went to Łosice to get supplies, he would take my brother as driver. He never took anyone else from the Criminal Police, only my brother. When he went to Łosice... The commander went inside, he ate, drank, took this or that... And he said to the village elder or the mayor. The village elder. He said: "There's a chauffeur there. Give him some food." The village elder said to the commander: "He's Jude!" He shouted back to him: "He's my chauffeur!" He told him to wear an armband. He wasn't allowed to drive without it. He

told him to sit at the table and ordered some food for him. And he also gave him supplies for the road. He liked my brother. I don't know, they just got along. I will tell you later how and why they took him. And he says to my brother...

The commander was in the SS?

In the SS, yes. He wore a skull symbol. A tall man, red in the face. And he said... He was pacing around the room. My brother saw his anxiety. And he said... It was 10 AM. And he told my brother... That at 3 PM he is ordered to bring us, two brothers, to the Gestapo. Gestapo meant death. He didn't want to send us to death. He said: "Run away." The commander took a big risk. He told my brother we should escape. My brother asked: "And go where?" My brother said he had been offered to be transported to Italy, along with the wounded from the front line. The commander said: "That would be good, but it's cheating. It would be good for you to get there." My brother said: "What about Gęsi Borek?" He muttered that we shouldn't go there because it was about to be liquidated in a matter of days. It was November 27th [1942 – M.H.]. We took bicycles and rode to Gęsi Borek, where our father and brother were held. We told our brother where to find us if all goes wrong. We couldn't take our father as he had bad health [he died in Treblinka – M.H.]. Our father knew something was not right. We said to some young people: "Listen..." There was no fence yet. "Run away. The ghetto is about to be liquidated." It was November 27th. And in the first days of December, they took them to Treblinka. And from Treblinka... We came to the apartment on the 27th, at night. Before 3 PM we came inside. There were four of us. You could not go alone, because if you leave somebody out, they could give us away. It was not an easy thing. And she... She said: "Let all of them come here. Come what may." My brother did not write down the address. In case of an emergency, he knew where it was. My father walked us back to the road and said: "Something is off." "Yes, you know how it is..." We went to Gęsi Borek every day to share news and so on. Some escaped. They waited a couple of days, saw that nothing was going on and returned. And some escaped for good, you see. We climbed upstairs. After the ghetto in Gęsi Borek had been liquidated, we were sure my brother was dead, because he was taken to Treblinka. But my brother and others, they opened the railway car. There was a bolt there. He had... He had pliers. Or maybe it was somebody else. They turned and turned... They managed to open the car. But Ukrainians were keeping watch on the train's steps. They opened the car and started jumping off the train. This was at night. One went that way, another one went another way... My brother jumped out in Borki. Have you heard of this village? On the way to Sokołów.

Yes, on the way to Sokołów.

He jumped off the train and got to the woods. As soon as he got there, the peasants searched him and took whatever he had on him. He had more things hidden behind his belt. They took his wallet with a couple of zloty. They let him go. Did him no harm, just robbed him. It was frosty in the beginning of December, not like nowadays. He walked and walked until he saw some huts . I don't share this with anyone, you know. He came inside the hut. The peasant greets him and all... And he says: "Right, you sold vodka!" We had a shop near where the florist is now [on Piłsudski Street – M.H.], near Kochanowski Street. We had a shop there. I will show you a photo. "Have something to eat, please." He offered him food and so on. My brother saw a man from Siedlce in the hut . He jumped off the train and got to the hut too.

[20:00]

They talked about who jumped off and so on. And he stayed there for the entire night and day. He asked the peasant to get him to town. He wanted to get home to us. He gave the peasant some money. And he rode with him through the woods. He asked: "Why aren't we going..." My brother knew the roads. The peasant answered: "The Germans and the Gendarmerie are there. It's not a good road. We will ride through the woods." They rode through the woods. He saw there was snow and a ditch had been dug out. They dug out a ditch to kill him. He started moving his head and behind him... There was a father and a son. He was sitting in the middle. They hit him on the head with a rod. Blood started trickling down... He tried to run, so they hit him again. He got hit on the head again, came to, jumped off the wagon and started running. And right there... What is the name of the river?

Liwiec?

I guess it's Liwiec. He ran. Didn't even know where to go. He took a step forward on the river ice. And he fell straight through. They shouted: "Stop! Stop!" And he fell in the river. It broke because it was thin.

The ice.

The ice was not thick enough and he fell through. They stopped. My brother dived... Even though he could not swim! They said: "He's dead." And went back. But he crawled out on the other side. I don't know how. He was soaked through and cold. He walked... Where should he go? He saw a light in a house on the other side. He knocked on the door. An old man opened. "Your head is all bloody!" And he said to my brother: "It must have been this scoundrel. He already killed some people." He took off his clothes and dried it. He stayed two or three days with the peasant. The peasant said: "You know... Say whatever you want to do, I won't be able to hide you, there are a lot of searches now." My brother asked him to get him to the cathedral in Siedlce and leave him there. He gave the peasant some money. "If you could you give me some money for lard." My brother gave him some money. You know, one peasant, another peasant ... And he rode with the man to the cathedral. He knew where to go next, it was not far from the cathedral. And he went upstairs, to the second floor. There was an attic to the right. There was no door. He stood at the wall and waited for someone to open the door and let him inside. My brother heard a cough through the wall of the room. He asked the woman: "Mrs. Jadzia, go and check that, please." The woman was scared, she was to be at work in the morning. But she pulled herself together. Nobody was living in this house. She comes inside and sees his bloody head. The peasant put a cloth around his head. And he says: "I'm a brother of the Halbers." She brought him to the room. She hid us. But he was sick for weeks, for months with a wounded head! We could not call for a doctor or do anything.

This woman was a devout Catholic. There was a small table next to the window. She had a picture of St. Anthony or of another saint. She prayed before going to bed. On Sunday we gave her some money, whatever we could, for church collection. And so it was.

After liberation he told me... There was a translator, a Jew hiding his identity, working for the Criminal Police. But we didn't know that. And we... When his bicycle broke down he gave us a sausage or a couple of zloty to fix it. We were quite surprised. It was an easy thing to do. Right

after liberation we heard that he was in Łódź and we went to visit him. It was his wife's name day. It had been a year. He invited the commander and some men from the Criminal Police. The commander got drunk and said: "The Halber brothers are alive." How did he know that? Because during all that time he was told of every caught person. They were surprised to hear him say the Halber brothers were alive.

Did I show you a photo of the woman who hid us?

No.

Her husband. She married the...

She married one of those men she had been hiding?

First she married a man she had been hiding [Motl Galicki – M.H.]. After the war and liberation she left. She was from Gdynia. She went to Gdynia. The husband died of a pulmonary disease there. She married again and the second husband [Izrael Widerszal – M.H.] went to Israel.

But her first husband was a man she had been hiding?

Yes.

This picture is from a newspaper.

Yes. This is the Ausweis, you see.

It's them? Is it her?

Yes, she was... This was first...

With her first husband?

No, with the one who...

That's him?

It's from a newspaper. She sent me the photo.

This one is her at a younger age.

Younger, yes. She is one of the Righteous.

She was awarded the Yad Vashem medal?

She gets help from the state. The state financed the renovation of her apartment and she has a pension supplement. Everyone needed this. If you were caught...

Right.

This is not important. A monument.

Did your brother live in Siedlce or did he leave afterwards?

After the liberation we lived up there.

Here?

Then my older brother got married. They left after the liberation. My first brother, the oldest one [Mejlach – M.H.], went to France. He married a woman from Siedlce [Ida Gursztejn – M.H.]. She had also been in hiding during the war. They left...

What about the other brother?

The other brother [Abram – M.H.] went to Paris and then to Israel. This was in the ghetto.

A picture from the ghetto? This is you?

Yes.

1941. This one here...

This is me.

1942.

[30:00]

You know the Hetman hotel. The river near the mill.

This is the mill? The building in the background?

No, this was a kind of... pavilion near the water. Right, a...

This was during occupation?

No.

Before the war?

Yes.

You were a cyclist.

I even took part in bicycle races. See what kind of a bicycle that is? A cross country, racing bicycle. I reached the Russian border on this bicycle.

What year was that?

In 1939, when the Germans entered, I escaped. I reached the Russian border on this bicycle. Równe, Zdołbunów.

And then you cycled back here?

It's a different story. I heard on the radio that Siedlce was occupied, so I turned back... Stop. It was impossible to go.

This is the vodka shop?

Yes.

That's you in the doorway?

Yes.

What year is that?

Before the war. Maybe... And here's....

Right. 1937. It's 1937. There are... That's your brother?

Brother.

Your brother.

Yes.

His name was Abram?

Yes. This brother was... The Germans... This brother worked in Białystok before the war. There's a village called Jasionówka near Białystok. In the Białystok Voivodship. He worked in a tannery there. Before the war, he had been in the military. First in the 22nd Regiment in Siedlce. An officer selected him to go with his wife to the market square to help... He said no, he was there to serve in the army, not to carry a basket. You understand? He was arrested for seven days. [laughter – U.B.] They told him to sweep the street near the stadium. Then he was transferred to Brześć. He was an athlete, he cycled, played football. He was given the rank of corporal there. In Brześć he was given the rank of corporal. Later, he got a job in the tannery in Białystok. There was a family, they had a tannery and he... I don't even know. I went there before the war. He was staying at some woman's place. He had a BMW motorcycle. A BMW 350... I'm not sure. He was an athlete, you know. My brother had been mobilized before war broke out. You understand?

Uhm.

And here, not far from... not far from Międzyrzec or Łuków he was taken prisoner. Because he was leading a convoy. He was taken captive. Some people had been killed, so he became leader of a motorized column. They distributed food I think. And he was taken captive here. He was in German captivity. But he was registered in Białystok and there was an agreement with the Russians there would be an exchange of prisoners. As I was coming back here, I passed through Siemiatycze. I waited to cross the river Bug. He was on a train passing through Brześć and shouted through the window at a train station: "I'm Halber Abram from Siedlce! If you know my family, tell them I'm back from captivity!" There were people from Siedlce at the station who heard this. As I was going to Siemiatycze on my way back, they told me: "Your brother is back from captivity and he's going home." When I came back, I went to see my brother. You understand? I stayed there for a while. He told me: "Go home and bring our parents here. We will stay here together." I went back. I left my bicycle with my brother. I was given a lift by various cars to get there. I'm telling you this because...

When the Russians entered, a Russian was the tannery director. They cavorted with women in hotels etc. As they were coming back from the party, my brother said to the Russian director: "These are German planes. I remember them from the war." And the director responded: "*Khorosho*, it's manoeuvres. These are ours." They entered the village and there were Germans

there. They kicked the Russian director out. He was gone. They told my brother to work in the tannery. He worked there for a while. There was a roundup. They took him. Some people from an organization were also taken. I don't know who they were. They put him in a car and drove away to execute him. On the way there, the car was attacked. This was near the village of Małkinia. There was a river crossing there. They put my brother in a car and drove away to execute him. They attacked the car, killed the Germans and took everybody. They brought them all to Warsaw, including my brother. He stayed in Warsaw for a month maybe. He didn't know who these people were. They said: "We need to split." They said they were an organization. He didn't know what kind of an organization. They brought him to the railway station in Siedlce. That's how my brother got here. And he... There was a gate at the entrance, the Gendarmerie stood guard there. All of them had guns. My brother got a gun too. He still didn't know who they were. And as they went near the bridge... There's a bridge there. They told him to go there. He had no idea who they were and what was going on. He walked out onto Kiliński Street. A man had a vodka shop on the left. His name was Wróblewski, he was disabled. They had revoked our liquor licence. Jews were not allowed a liquor licence. The National Democracy... Our parents rented the licence from this Wróblewski guy. We paid 100 zloty per month. His name was on the signboard and he was paid 100 zloty a month. He saw the signboard with the name Wróblewski. He thought it might be the same guy. It was evening. He entered the shop. The disabled man was from Radom. There was a bed at the back of the shop behind a curtain where he slept.

My brother entered...

[40:00]

And saw a guy buying some vodka. He waited until the guy left. The owner came up to him: "Abram! How did you get here?!" He took my brother behind the curtain and told him to stay there. He closed up the shop and stopped selling. He said: "What do I do with you now? You don't even have an armband." "An armband?" My brother knew nothing about that. He asked somebody to go... Or maybe he went to the wire fence himself. He asked for someone from the Halber family. He called me.

You talked through the fence?

Yes. "What happened?" He said: "Abram is staying with me. In the shop." How do we bring him inside? We looked for a guy who was allowed to get people out to work and back. We agreed the guy would lead the group back from work through the shop, and my brother would join them. That's how my brother came home. During roundups, he hid in the attic. But how do we register him? Without a permanent registration... He was not registered. There was a man, Bittner. A registration officer. Before the war and during the occupation also. And we paid to have my brother registered. But you also needed a Kennkarte, like the one I had. There was a... There were laborers who worked for the Germans at the railroad. They carried railroad tracks. They had a way to register my brother at the Arbeitsamt. He went to work with these laborers and worked very hard on the railroad, you know.

Dr. [Henryk – M.H.] Loebel was the head of the Jewish Community. Have you heard of him? He lived in that house before the war. On the other side. He knew our parents. My father went to see him and said: "I have this problem. What do I do?" Dr. Loebel said: "Let him work there for

now, and later we'll see. If we find a better job for him, he will be assigned there." The Germans obtained laborers through the Jewish Council, the Judenrat. They said: "I need a carpenter, I need a locksmith, I need a mechanic." And the Judenrat had to find them. The Criminal Police searched a village and found a motorcycle with a sidecar. I don't know what brand. Anyway, they took this motorcycle with a sidecar to a garage of the Criminal Police. A man called Dr. Loebel to find him a mechanic to start the motorcycle. When Dr. Loebel heard that, he told my father to send his son Abram. My brother said he needed to see the motorcycle, to inspect it. Next day, an agent was sent to bring my brother to see the machine. The motorcycle was kept in a car body shop on Pułaski Street. He inspected the motorcycle and said that he would be able to fix it. They took my brother to the commander of the Criminal Police. He asked: "How long will it take?" My brother said: "Ten days." He said: "I give you twenty. If it's not done by then, you're dead." Instead of finishing it in 10 days, it took my brother 12 or 15 days to fix the motorcycle. The agent took my brother to the workshop every day, and then back to the ghetto. This went on each day. After my brother fixed the motorcycle, he went... The agent got inside the sidecar... He drove to the Criminal Police. The commander came out and told him to drive in circles for a while, then sat in the sidecar himself. And he said to my brother: „Du bleibst Arbeiter bei mir." This means: "You will stay here and work for us. You will keep an eye on the motorcycle, fix cars etc." My brother was satisfied, it was important for him. It was a good cover.

Imagine that... a Jew reported to the Gestapo that a communist came from Russia and is working at the Criminal Police. My brother heard about that and went to see Dr. Loebel, to think of what to say when he is summoned to the Gestapo.

This was a denunciation?

Yes.

By a Jew?

A Jew, that's right. It was known that he... My brother agreed with Dr. Loebel that he would say that he worked... He will testify this before the Gestapo. That he worked in a German army unit in a workshop, fixing motorcycles etc. That's what he told him to say. The commander came along with my brother to the Gestapo, you know. And my brother testified that he worked for a German unit. The unit headed towards Warsaw and he asked: "Will you take me to Siedlce? My family is there." They took him because they had worked in a workshop together. Some Germans were quite decent people. He was passing near Małkinia. He said: "Let's get closer to Siedlce." Sokołów, Węgrów, I don't know. And my brother got off there. That's what my brother said, in case they would ask. So the commander drove him to the Gestapo. "Are you here illegally?" He said: "I don't know. I worked for the Germans there. A German unit was passing near Warsaw, they gave me a ride and I got off here. I have a family here. I am registered here." They let him go. And the commander said that the Jew will be... That they will kill him because he also reported the commander of the Criminal Police. My brother was about to go home and he said: "Watch out near Sądowa Street." There was a wire fence there. "Watch out, today at midnight he will be executed." The one who... The...

Snitch.

And that was true. The police called the Jewish Council at midnight to pick-up the body of the scoundrel in. They took him in the morning.

But who shot him?

The Gestapo or the Gendarmerie. I don't know who. And my brother stayed there to work for him. Because of the motorcycle. That's the story. It sounds like it was so easy.

There was this neighbour and her son worked... On Świerczewski Street, there was a pharmacy up some steps. And there was a stationery shop for Germans. Where Dube was killed, chief of the local Gestapo. Her son worked there. He wore a red armband. And she lived one floor below the woman who was hiding us. She was carrying something up the stairs. "Miss, what are you carrying?" She was so damn curious. Something had to be done about her. As I lay down and put my ear to the floor, I could hear what's going on below. We were afraid she would report that someone was staying there. She said to Jadzia once: "Miss, I hear footsteps above." We wrapped our feet in rags to be able to walk around.

[50:00]

"I can hear footsteps." So she bought rabbits. She bought five rabbits and the rabbits were hopping around. So that's that. We survived, thank God. Thanks to this brother.

Right. Thank you...

I told you everything about how we survived. You saw the pictures and everything.

You told me the story finally. You've never told it before.

I started talking and I couldn't stop. I showed you the documents and everything...

[Transcribers – Michael Halber, Urszula Butkiewicz, translator – Agnieszka Nowak,
January 2023]